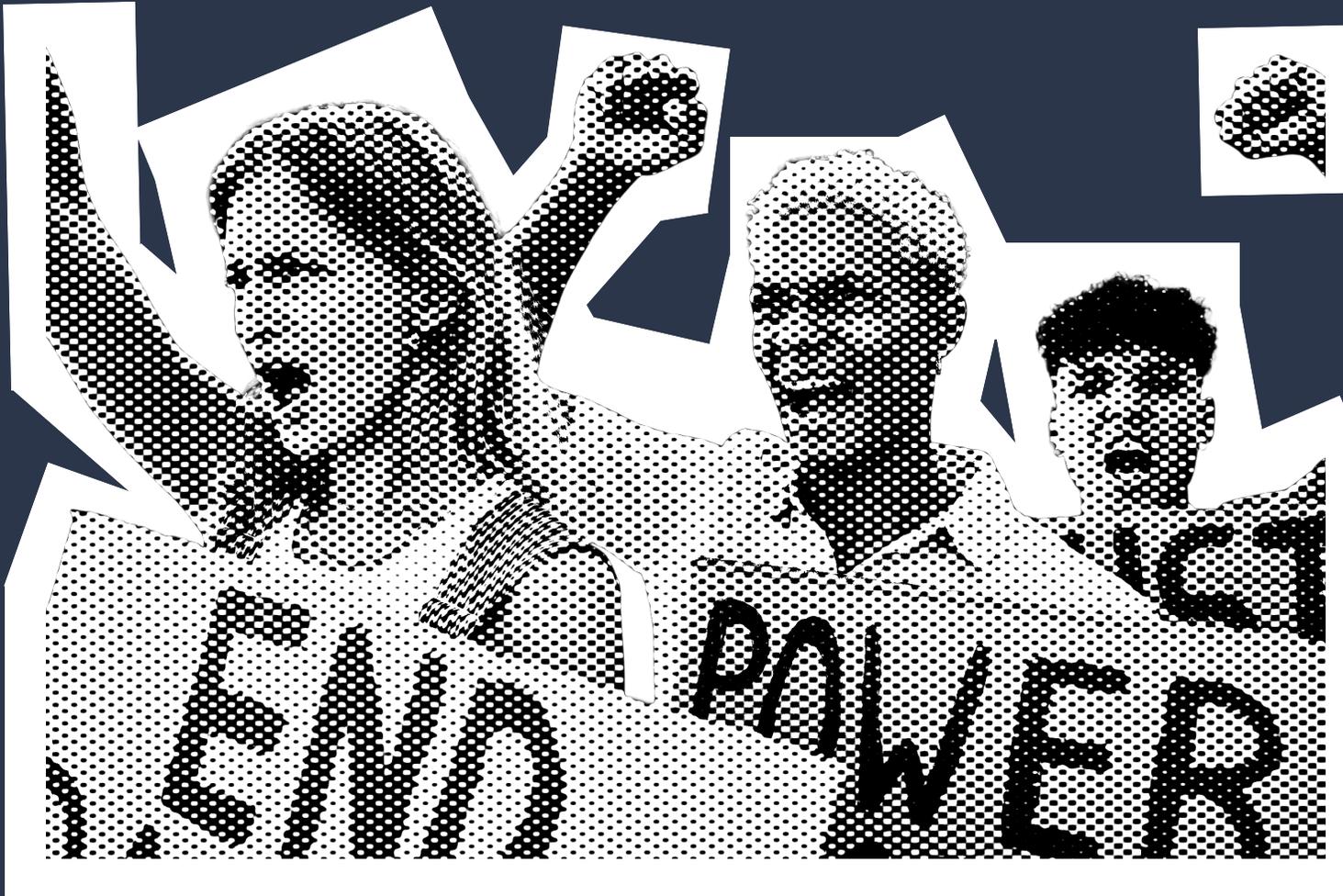




Sexual  
Violence  
Prevention  
Association



# SORVO

Systemic Oppression Reverse Victim & Offender



# Abstract

**H**istorically and contemporarily, oppressive groups have justified acts of sexual violence and the systemic oppression of other groups. This report introduces a new global framework – Systemic Oppression, Reverse Victim, and Offender (SORVO) – to describe how oppressive groups employ strategies of narrative manipulation to justify systemic oppression. By introducing this framework, SORVO can be identified in action, rendered ineffective, and prevented in the future. Identification, paired with policy changes to prevent SORVO, would combat sexual violence and systemic oppression.

Through a series of case studies, this paper demonstrates how oppressive groups use SORVO to justify their repressive acts. Data sources include academic journals, reports, first-hand accounts, and historical archives. The case studies consist of close examinations of SORVO during the Holocaust in German-occupied Europe, the Jim Crow era in the United States, the oppression of LGBTQ+ individuals worldwide, and the conditions under Apartheid in South Africa.

This report identifies eight narrative manipulation tools oppressive groups use to execute SORVO. Specifically, oppressive groups deny, omit, erase, and de-define their acts of sexual violence while sensationalizing, exaggerating, falsifying, and re-defining the actions of the groups they oppress. In doing so, oppressive groups position themselves as “victims” and the population(s) they oppress as “offenders”. Thus increasing support for repressive acts including genocide, settler colonialism, segregation, and systemic sexual violence.

The development of the SORVO framework contributes to the field of systemic sexual violence prevention. This report discusses how the framework has ongoing applications globally and potential implications in legal scholarship, journalistic integrity studies, and progressive policy. The report concludes by describing how SORVO's living nature makes it a prime avenue for future research to prevent sexual violence and systemic oppression.



# Authors

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## About the Sexual Violence Prevention Association

The Sexual Violence Prevention Association (SVPA) is a national nonprofit dedicated to preventing sexual violence systemically. Through advocacy, education, and community engagement, we strive to create a world where everyone can live free from the threat of sexual violence. We believe that by challenging harmful attitudes and behaviors, and advocating for policies that prioritize safety and respect for all, we can prevent sexual violence systemically and create a safer, more equitable society.

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## Content Warning

**T**his report contains content that may be distressing or disturbing for some readers. It heavily discusses sexual violence in reference to various historical and contemporary contexts, including descriptions of systemic, institutional, and individual acts of sexual violence. It discusses sexual violence committed by several oppressive groups against oppressed groups, including acts of denial, omission, erasure, and re-defining of such acts by oppressive groups. Passing over sections that may be triggering and reading the remaining studies will still provide readers with an accurate understanding of SORVO as a framework.

The SORVO (*Reverse Victim and Offender: Exaggerate, Sensationalize, Falsify, Redefine*) section involves detailed discussion of sexual violence. It also addresses the phenomenon of wartime rape propaganda and atrocity propaganda in the context of SORVO. It is referenced in relation to various conflicts, including the Israel-Palestine conflict.

The section *Case Study: Holocaust* includes mentions of genocide during the Holocaust and the oppression of Jewish people. This involves discussions of historical and ongoing antisemitism against Jewish people, and other acts of ethnic cleansing, genocide, and instances of sexual violence.

The section *Case Study: Jim Crow* discusses the systemic oppression of Black people in the United States, particularly during the Jim Crow era, including acts of sexual violence. This section discusses harmful stereotypes and racially motivated violence, including lynching and other forms of racial terror, as well as other forms of racial discrimination and segregation. This also includes a quote that contains racial slurs and graphic descriptions of violence in the context of the murder of Emmett Till.

The section *Case Study: Anti-LGBTQ+ Oppression* discusses the oppression and violence faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in the context of sexual violence. This includes reference to instances of homophobia, transphobia, systemic violence against the community, and suicide. It discusses a history of homosexuality being falsely linked with pedophilia as a tactic to criminalize and oppress LGBTQ+ populations. This section also contains imagery and quotes that have been used to propagate anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments.

The section *Case Study: Apartheid* section discusses systemic sexual violence against Black South Africans, including coerced or involuntary sterilization as part of the genocidal Project Coast. This case study also includes references to racist state-sanctioned violence including capital punishment, segregation, police brutality, and imprisonment.



## Content Warning

This report contains discussion, imagery, propaganda, and quotes that were circulated during the time periods of the given events. If at any point you feel overwhelmed, consider taking a break, seeking support from trusted individuals, or referring to the following resources:

### Non-Exhaustive List of Resources for Support and Assistance:

- [Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network \(RAINN\)](#): Offers support for all survivors of sexual violence.
- [Resources for Holocaust Survivors](#): The Holocaust Memorial Museum has put together resources for survivors and their families.
- [Helpline for Jewish Survivors](#): Mount Sinai provides a helpline for all survivors of sexual violence. Call 888-613-1613.
- [Resources for Black Women Survivors](#): Ujima offers support for Black women survivors of violence.
- [Resources for Black Men](#): Black Men Heal offers mental health resources for Black men, including survivors.
- [Support for Black Survivors](#): We As Ourselves offers support and advocacy for Black survivors of sexual violence.
- [National Indigenous Women's Resource Center](#): NIWRC offers support for Indigenous survivors of violence.
- [Resources for Immigrant Survivors](#): ASISTA offers assistance and resources for immigrant survivors of violence.
- [Support for LGBTQ+ Survivors](#): Anti-Violence Project offers support for LGBTQ+ survivors of violence.
- [Help Center for LGBTQ+ People](#): The LGBT National Help Center offers support for LGBTQ+ individuals, including survivors.
- [Resources for Trans/Non-Binary People](#): FORGE offers support for trans and non-binary people, including survivors.
- [LGBTQ+ Support Line](#): The Trevor Project offers support for LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly young people.
- [UN Office for Sexual Violence In Conflict](#): The UN offers research, insights, and resources on sexual violence in conflict.

# Definition of Sexual Violence

A robust understanding of the definition of sexual violence is foundational to the SORVO framework.

Sexual violence includes all forms of rape, sexual assault, harassment, and abuse. Sexual violence is both the result of existing power imbalances and a tool used to gain and maintain power, control, and oppression. This can be on an individual, institutional, or systemic level or a combination thereof.

## Systemic



The source of power is systemic oppression and marginalization of victims.

### Source of Power

Societal power to act without accountability or to create systems to act with impunity while removing resources and support for victims or exploiting the lack thereof.

### Example

For example, a white cis man committing sexual violence against a Black trans woman because he knows she won't be believed or supported. Thus, he can get away with it.

## Institutional



The source of power is from an institutional position or material control.

### Source of Power

Position of power as a superior within an institution or other form of control over someone's career, financial situation, housing, food, or quality of life.

### Example

For example, a supervisor exploiting their power over an employee's career to commit sexual violence. Another example is a landlord exploiting their power over a tenant.

## Individual



The source of power is a characteristic, attribute, or weapon.

### Source of Power

Physical capabilities, mental abilities, intoxication, weapons, or other individual characteristics, states of being, or possessions.

### Example

For example, a perpetrator who uses their physical strength or a weapon to commit sexual violence. Also, a perpetrator lacing their victim's drink or an adult targeting a young child.

**SORVO**

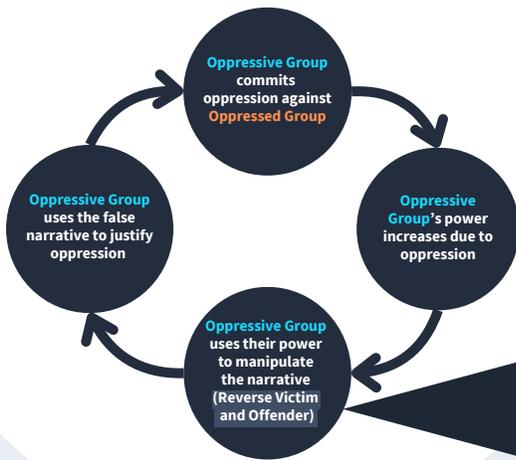
Systemic  
Oppression  
Reverse  
Victim &  
Offender



# SORVO Infographic

SORVO is a framework identifying how sexual violence, and accusations thereof, are weaponized to justify oppression.

## Systemic Oppression



## Reverse Victim & Offender

### Reality



### Narrative Manipulation

The **Oppressive Group** shifts the narrative using the following tactics:



### False Narrative



## Narrative Manipulation Tactics

**Deny**  
Oppressive Group denies committing sexual violence against Oppressed Group.



**Exaggerate**  
Oppressed Group's acts of sexual violence against Oppressive Group are overblown, inflated, or outsized.

**Omit**  
Oppressive Group controls the narrative and omits their sexual violence against Oppressed Group.



**Sensationalize**  
Oppressed Group's acts of sexual violence against Oppressive Group are portrayed emotionally, vividly, and covered frequently.

**Erase**  
Oppressive Group erases evidence of their sexual violence against Oppressed Group by destroying evidence, killing witnesses, silencing reporters, and discrediting reports.



**Falsify**  
Oppressed Group's acts of sexual violence against Oppressive Group are fabricated, vague, and baseless.

**De-Define**  
Oppressive Group's acts of sexual violence against Oppressed Group are not defined as sexual violence.



**Re-Define**  
Oppressed Group's non-sexual acts or consensual sexual acts are redefined as sexual violence.

# SORVO Explained

**S**ystemic Oppression Reverse Victim and Offender, or SORVO, is a tactic employed by an **oppressive group** to justify their oppression of another group, including the perpetration of sexual violence upon them. The **oppressive group** maintains or strengthens their control by falsely claiming the **oppressed group** commits disproportionately high rates of sexual violence. SORVO is a tool used by **oppressive groups** globally and throughout history.

For the purpose of articulating the framework, this report will refer to the two groups as “**oppressive group**” (the oppressor) and “**oppressed group**” (the oppressed). In the context of SORVO, the **oppressive group** claims that the **oppressed group** commits high rates of sexual violence against the **oppressive group**. The **oppressive group** then uses this claim as justification to oppress (e.g. control, surveil, imprison, commit genocide against, or occupy the land of) the **oppressed group**. The **oppressive group**’s actions also include sexual violence on the individual, institutional, and systemic levels. This multi-level action on behalf of the **oppressive group** demonstrates the *Systemic Oppression* aspect of SORVO.

The *Reverse Victim and Offender* component of SORVO is a propaganda campaign. The **oppressive group** controls the public narrative, and thus, they hold the power to influence public perception. There are two parts of the reverse-victim-and-offender propaganda campaign. The first part pertains to the sexual violence perpetrated by the **oppressive group** against the **oppressed group**. The **oppressive group** denies, omits, erases, and/or de-defines their acts of sexual

violence against the **oppressed group**. In other words, the **oppressive group** has the power to deny committing any acts of sexual violence, omit any instances from becoming public knowledge, and/or erase evidence by destroying it, killing witnesses, silencing reporters, and/or discrediting reports.

The **oppressive group** also de-define the sexual violence they commit. This means they commit sexual violence but they manipulate the narrative so it is not defined as sexual violence. Typically, this tactic is used for sexual violence at the institutional or systemic level. An example of this is strip searches of prisoners.

Overall, the **oppressive group** uses these tactics to obscure their acts of sexual violence against the **oppressed group**, making it seem rare or nonexistent. In reality, the **oppressive group**’s acts of sexual violence against the **oppressed group** are frequent and common. These acts are perpetrated at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels. The **oppressive group** is able to commit these acts of sexual violence and manipulate the narrative because they hold the power and control (see page 7 and 9).

The second part of the *Reverse Victim and Offender* component of SORVO refers to how the **oppressive group** describes the **oppressed group**’s acts of sexual violence against them. The **oppressive group** exaggerates, sensationalizes, and falsifies any acts of sexual violence committed by the **oppressed group** while redefining consensual or non-sexual acts as sexual violence. Because of the institutional power that the **oppressive group** holds, including in the press, they can control

# SORVO Explained

the narrative. The **oppressive group** often exaggerates or inflates any instances of sexual violence committed by the **oppressed group**.

Acts of sexual violence perpetrated by the **oppressed group** are also portrayed emotionally, vividly, and frequently in the media. The **oppressive group** may also fabricate baseless stories or include vague references to sexual violence committed by the **oppressed group**. In reality, the **oppressed group's** acts of sexual violence against the **oppressive group** are nonexistent or rare. Given that the **oppressive group** holds power and control at the institutional and systemic levels, acts of sexual violence perpetrated by the **oppressed group** can only occur at the individual level (see page 6).

## Relationship to Existing Frameworks

SORVO is built upon and exists alongside many other frameworks and theories. The following are foundational concepts for this research.

### DARVO

SORVO builds upon Dr. Jennifer Freyd's 1997 concept of DARVO, a term commonly associated with narcissism and interpersonal violence.<sup>1</sup> DARVO stands for Deny, Attack, and Reverse

Victim and Offender. This framework articulates how perpetrators of interpersonal violence deflect blame and responsibility for their abusive actions. They accomplish this by denying any wrongdoing, attacking the victim's credibility, and then reversing the roles of victim and offender, making it appear as if the perpetrator is the one who suffers or is mistreated in the situation. Furthermore, this tactic is a form of gaslighting, often resulting in the victim feeling a sense of self-blame.<sup>2</sup> DARVO is a widely accepted concept in psychology, sociology, and philosophy.

Freyd has also described DARVO in an institutional context. Institutional DARVO can occur when committed intentionally by members of an institution and in a passive context with institutional complicity. When an institution tasked with protecting people mistreats someone, it is known as "institutional betrayal".<sup>3</sup> As reported in psychological research, institutional DARVO is related to measurable mental and physical harm for those who experience it.

An example of this type of betrayal is when police charge a rape victim with lying.<sup>4</sup> Institutional DARVO occurs when a survivor reports a sexual assault to law enforcement, yet the police convince themselves that the victim is not being truthful. In this case, law enforcement can file an application for criminal complaint *against* the victim for filing a false police report. For survivors of sexual violence, this betrayal derives from the very institution that they seek out for safety and

<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Freyd, "Violations of Power, Adaptive Blindness and Betrayal Trauma Theory," *Feminism & Psychology* 7, no. 1 (1997): 29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353597071004>.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Harsey and Jennifer J. Freyd, "Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender (DARVO): What Is the Influence on Perceived Perpetrator and Victim Credibility?" *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 29, no. 8 (2020): 897, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2020.1774695>.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Freyd and Carly Parnitzke Smith "Institutional Betrayal," *American Psychologist*, 69, no. 6 (2014): 575, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037564>

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Harsey and Jennifer J. Freyd, "Deny, Attack, Blame: The Prosecution of Women Reporting Rape," *Ms. Magazine*, November 28, 2022, <https://msmagazine.com/2022/11/28/darvo-deny-attack-blame-prosecution-women-report-rape/>.

# SORVO Explained

protection. Freyd refers to this phenomenon as a betrayal by the whole of the criminal justice system and writes explicitly about the problems this causes in eroding trust in existing institutions.<sup>5</sup>

SORVO moves beyond interpersonal violence, individual narcissism, and institutional betrayal. This framework explores how systems and existing power structures use the *Reverse Victim and Offender* tactic. For example, white supremacists have repeatedly employed SORVO to justify oppressing people of color. During Jim Crow, white leadership developed the false stereotype that Black men were a sexual threat to white women. White leadership then used this narrative to justify the oppression of Black people on a massive scale. This example demonstrates how oppressive groups can manipulate the narrative to reverse the roles of victim and offender on a systemic level, particularly through the use of propaganda surrounding sexual violence.

Narrative manipulation is also possible due to existing power dynamics, which stipulate that the oppressive group has the most influence over media, political representation, and capital, allowing them to disproportionately control public discourse. This structural dynamic takes DARVO from the individual and institutional levels and applies it to systems.

Furthermore, while DARVO is a reactionary tactic, SORVO is offensive. The oppressive

group uses SORVO as a preemptive measure to justify their oppression of another group.

SORVO is a strategy that works within systems of oppression to perpetuate that oppression, whereas DARVO is a responsive strategy used by the accused. Individual perpetrators of interpersonal violence employ DARVO as a defensive tactic to absolve themselves of guilt and to put blame on their victim(s).<sup>6</sup> Systemic oppressive forces create an entire narrative using SORVO, laying the groundwork to rationalize carrying out oppression.

## Systemic Gaslighting and X-Washing

SORVO also contains components of the phenomenon known as “systemic gaslighting”.<sup>7</sup> Gaslighting is a manipulation tactic used by abusers to cause someone to question their feelings, thoughts, and sanity.<sup>8</sup> When applied to a system or power structure, gaslighting is described as “x-washing”. For example, “pinkwashing”, or “rainbow washing”, is commonly used to describe an effort to appeal to LGBTQ+ rights or women’s rights to deflect attention from widespread abuses of power.<sup>9</sup>

Many governments, companies, and corporations use LGBTQ+ and feminist language or imagery to position themselves as progressive while simultaneously undertaking harmful practices. For example, in 2023, Walmart released a series of rainbow pet costumes using the hashtag #TakePride to

<sup>5</sup> Freyd and Smith, “Institutional Betrayal,” 575-587.

<sup>6</sup> Freyd, “Violations of Power, Adaptive Blindness and Betrayal Trauma Theory,” 29.

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Isaiah Cho, “Systemic Gaslighting, Systemic DARVO,” Medium, June 24, 2023, <https://timothyisaiahcho.medium.com/systemic-gaslighting-systemic-darvo-12c0bfea9c88>

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Isaiah Cho, “Systemic Gaslighting, Systemic DARVO,” Medium, June 24, 2023, <https://timothyisaiahcho.medium.com/systemic-gaslighting-systemic-darvo-12c0bfea9c88>.

<sup>9</sup> Corinne E Blackmer, “Pinkwashing,” *Israel Studies* 24, no. 2 (2019): 171, <https://doi.org/10.2979/israelstudies.24.2.14>.

# SORVO Explained

signal support for the LGBTQ+ community. In reality, Walmart has a history of anti-LGBTQ+ practices and none of the profits from this campaign were allocated to the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>10</sup> This feigned support is misleading to consumers and does not meaningfully contribute to LGBTQ+ rights.

The harms of x-washing can range from false advertising to exploitative labor policies or even forms of corporate violence, but their progressive verbiage distracts from this reality. Many entities also financially support causes directly in conflict with the interests they market to the public. Therefore, the truth is manipulated by those in power, leading the public to believe a false narrative.

SORVO takes this form of systemic gaslighting further and addresses it in the context of sexual violence. Oppressive groups position themselves as necessarily punitive rather than as progressive. In this established narrative, they are both in the moral right and victims of a perceived wrong. Sexual violence is the crux upon which this narrative is built. Oppressive groups claim outsized victimization of sexual violence by the oppressed group, which in turn further justifies their own actions of oppression against that group.

## Wartime Rape Propaganda

The phenomenon of wartime rape propaganda describes the ways that settler colonial powers weaponize stories of sexual violence

to justify retaliation.<sup>11</sup> This strategy includes the use of sensationalized imagery and exploitative reporting by patriarchal imperialist forces to justify military harm done to civilians. Oppressive groups use this tactic during conflict to garner public support for “collective punishment on oppressed peoples’ bodies.”<sup>12</sup> The *Heart to Grow* organization has put forward extensive research on the subject with a particular focus on the Israel-Palestine conflict:



*“[Wartime Rape Propaganda] pulls on toxic values surrounding gender, purity, and sex to both humiliate people who are victims of this assault as well as manipulate audiences into various emotional states, such as anger and grief...It is not intended to uplift survivor voices, but rather it is intended to create harm and justify violence toward the perpetrator and the perpetrator’s community.”<sup>13</sup>*



This research is critical to understanding the use of media manipulation surrounding sexual assault narratives during conflict, emphasizing its roots in imperialism and settler colonialism. Wartime rape propaganda, as described by the researchers at *Heart to Grow*, is a crucial element of the application of SORVO as it relates to military violence, media manipulation, and the use of force by oppressive groups.

<sup>10</sup> Jody Oetzel, “Rainbow-Washing: Corporate Co-Optation and Hashtag Activism,” Policy Brief, no. 165 (2023): 8. [https://toda.org/assets/files/resources/policy-briefs/t-pb-165\\_rainbow-washing\\_oetzel.pdf](https://toda.org/assets/files/resources/policy-briefs/t-pb-165_rainbow-washing_oetzel.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Nadia Khansa, No Perfect Victim: Who Gets Believed & Unpacking Wartime Rape Propaganda (*Heart to Grow*, 2024), 4. <https://hearttogrow.org/resources/no-perfect-victim-who-gets-believed-unpacking-wartime-rape-propaganda/#>

<sup>12</sup> Khansa, No Perfect Victim, 4-6.

<sup>13</sup> Khansa, No Perfect Victim, 6.

# SORVO Explained

## Atrocity Propaganda

Atrocity propaganda is a more generalized description of an oppressive power spreading disinformation to demonize an enemy. This tactic includes the invention or exaggeration of individual atrocities to incite an emotional response from the public, creating the collective agreement that they must defend themselves from an aggressive or murderous enemy.<sup>14</sup> Atrocity propaganda has been present in nearly every conflict, first documented during the Crusades when Urban II justified the war against Islam by claiming that the enemy "had ravaged the churches of God in the Eastern provinces, circumcised Christian men, violated women, and carried out the most unspeakable torture before killing them."<sup>15</sup> This report will describe how atrocity propaganda, particularly in the context of sexual violence, is a tool used in SORVO by oppressive groups to demonize the oppressed.

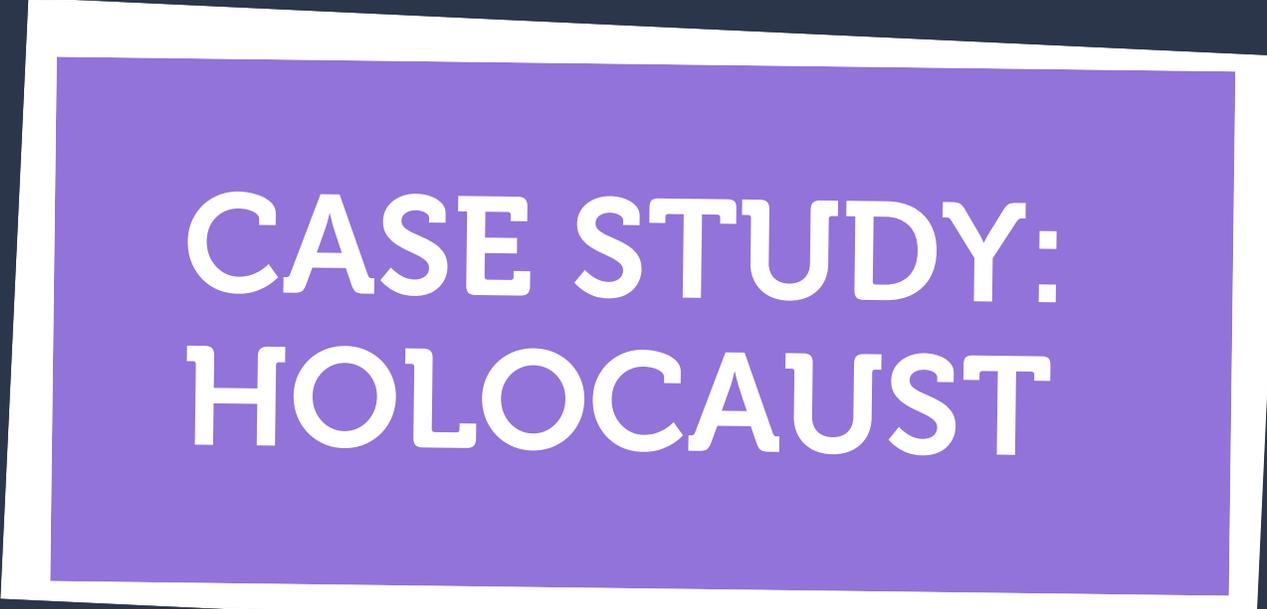
<sup>15</sup> David Welch, "Atrocity Propaganda," in *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion: A Historical Encyclopedia, 1500 to the Present*, (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 24, [https://sipa.jlu.edu.cn/\\_local/6/6D/1E/232A61C0C90220A56BDF0D19829\\_C3ECAFC7\\_5FC175.pdf](https://sipa.jlu.edu.cn/_local/6/6D/1E/232A61C0C90220A56BDF0D19829_C3ECAFC7_5FC175.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> David Culbert, "Public Diplomacy and The International History of Mass Media: The USIA, The Kennedy Assassination, and The World," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 30, no. 3 (2010): 421-32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2010.505041>.



# Case Studies

The following sections include case studies demonstrating SORVO in a global and historical context. These case studies are structured following the SORVO model. The case studies' introduction begins by analyzing the power dynamics at play. This step will identify the **oppressive groups** and **oppressed groups**. Next, the studies will disentangle the methods of “exaggerating, sensationalizing, redefining, falsifying” and “denying, omitting, erasing, de-defining” for *Reversing Victim and Offender*. The dissection of these case studies aims to apply SORVO in a historical practice, making the theory less abstract.



# CASE STUDY: HOLOCAUST



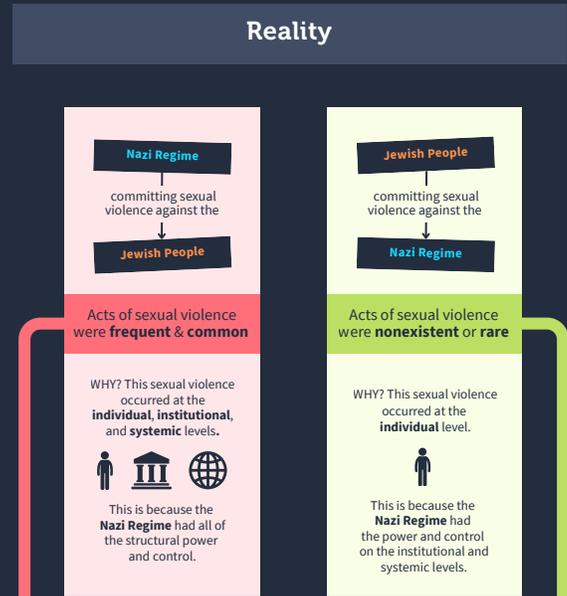
# CASE STUDY: HOLOCAUST

Please note, the language in this infographic has been simplified. While the core information is presented accurately, some content may have been condensed or reworded for brevity.

## Systemic Oppression



## Reverse Victim & Offender



## Narrative Manipulation Tactics



# CASE STUDY: HOLOCAUST

**T**he Nazi regime used SORVO during the Holocaust to justify the systemic oppression, including genocide, of Jewish people from 1933 to 1945. This oppression included multiple forms of sexual violence perpetrated against Jewish people on the individual, institutional, and systemic levels by the Nazis. Nazi propaganda inaccurately claimed that Jewish people committed high rates of sexual violence; this was used as a means to justify their oppression and genocide.

From 1933 to 1945, the state executed the genocide of 11 million people, the majority of whom were Jewish, by convincing the German public that it was a vindicated, proportional response to an existing threat. Demonstrating the SORVO framework in this historical context is best understood in three parts. The first part will examine the Systemic Oppression itself. This investigation includes the sexual violence under the Nazi regime and the narrative put forward to justify it. The second piece will explain the propaganda campaign put forward claiming outsized instances of sexual violence perpetrated by Jewish people. The third section will explore the individual, institutional, and systemic sexual violence perpetrated by the Nazis against the Jewish people. The second two parts of this explanation demonstrate the Reverse Victim and Offender aspect of SORVO.

## Systemic Oppression

The Nazi regime first sought to demonize Jewish people in the eyes of the German



Figure 1. Illustration from a Nazi children's book "Trust No Fox on His Green Heath and No Jew on His Oath". Figure 2, (Karthik Narayanaswami, "Analysis of Nazi Propaganda: A Behavioral Study," (Harvard University, 2011), 5, Artifact 28

public to justify their ultimate goal of oppression and genocide. Much of this conspiracy was effective due to existing national tensions following Germany's loss in World War I. The Nazis demonized Jewish people by developing and inflating existing stereotypes; the regime claimed that Jewish people were taking over businesses and the economy, moving into Germany to enact a race war, and "polluting" non-Jewish bloodlines. A form of atrocity propaganda also began to take hold: that Jewish people were committing high levels of sexual violence.

These claims against the Jewish population were deeply intertwined with racism and the idea of a "pure Aryan race"<sup>16</sup>. The Nazi regime reframed interracial relationships as a Jewish conspiracy to pollute the 'Aryan' bloodlines. Media sources depicted Jewish men in political cartoons as conniving and predatory to 'Aryan' women (see Figure 1)<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Charu Gupta, "Politics of Gender: Women in Nazi Germany," *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 17 (1991): WS41, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/439798>.

<sup>17</sup> Karthik Narayanaswami, "Analysis of Nazi Propaganda: A Behavioral Study," (Harvard University, 2011), 3-5, <https://archive.blogs.harvard.edu/karthik/files/2011/04/HIST-1572-Analysis-of-Nazi-Propaganda-KNarayanaswami.pdf>.

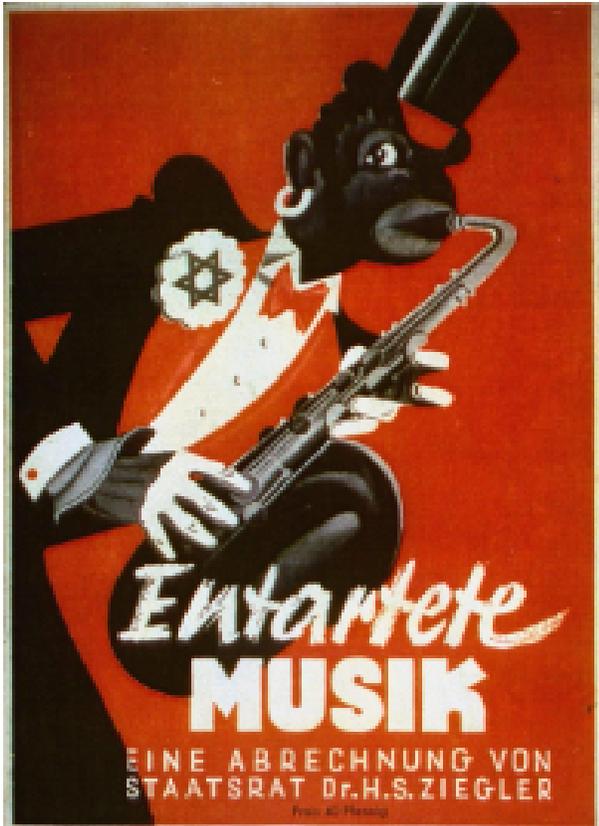


Figure 2, Poster showing a caricatured Black Jazz musician wearing a Star of David. The poster reads “Degenerate Music”. (Karthik Narayanaswami, “Analysis of Nazi Propaganda: A Behavioral Study,” (Harvard University, 2011), 5, Artifact 28.

Jewish women were portrayed as passive, deceitful, and temptresses.<sup>18</sup> Other racial groups historically stereotyped as sexually aggressive were also included in this propaganda and aligned with Judaism. For example, many posters put forward by the Nazis depicted Black men or gay men wearing the Star of David (see Figure 2). This portrayal furthered the notion that racism and anti-Semitism were entangled and fueled by a fear campaign alleging sexual violence.

The Nuremberg Race Laws of 1935 were the first official antisegregation laws in Nazi Germany, which demonstrated the beginnings of the idea of “racial pollution”. The Law to Protect German Blood and Honor prohibited marital and sexual relationships between Jewish people and non-Jewish people.<sup>19</sup> The Nazi party described these relationships using the term “Rassenschande”, which translates to “race shame”. As with any segregationist policy, the language of “protecting” one group from another was inherently provocative. This rhetoric not only suggested that racial purity is a reality that ought to be preserved by society, but it positioned Jewish people as the threatening force.

This idea, paired with the law prohibiting sexual relations, created the undercurrent notion that Jewish people are intent on committing sexual violence. Before the passage of the Nuremberg Race Laws, a propaganda campaign laid the groundwork for this narrative. There was a strong focus on public swimming pools, for example, as locations at risk for “Jewish pollution”.<sup>20</sup> Cultural institutions, such as museums, also began to carry incorrect and harmful stereotypes of Jewish people (see Figure 3).

Cinema and filmmaking played a significant role in the propaganda campaign. The Eternal Jew was released in 1940 by Fritz Hippler.<sup>21</sup> This provocative motion picture portrayed Jewish people as wandering parasites consumed by sex and money. A common theme in various films was the “unmasking” or revealing of Jewish people living amongst

<sup>18</sup> “Antisemitism and Sexuality Reconsidered.” German Historical Institute DC, 2021, <https://www.ghi-dc.org/events/event/date/antisemitism-and-sexuality-reconsidered>.

<sup>19</sup> “Nuremberg Race Laws,” Holocaust Encyclopedia. United States Historical Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/timeline-event/holocaust/1933-1938/nuremberg-race-laws>

<sup>20</sup> “Defining the Enemy,” Holocaust Encyclopedia. United States Historical Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-propaganda>.

<sup>21</sup> “Nazi Propaganda,” Holocaust Encyclopedia. United States Historical Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-propaganda>.



Figure 3. Photograph of museum patrons in Munich in 1937 viewing the “Degenerate Art” exhibit - a collection of stolen artwork by Jewish artists. The exhibit was part of a project by Joseph Goebbels, Nazi Propaganda Minister, to show art deemed unacceptable by the Nazi regime. (“‘Degenerate’ Art,” Holocaust Encyclopedia. United States Historical Memorial Museum,

Aryans’ without public knowledge of their Jewish descent. This depiction created a culture of hyper-vigilance and ultimately justified a surveillance state by the Nazis.

The period leading up to the systematic genocide of Jewish people during the Holocaust demonstrates the strategy of slowly shifting public opinion against a group of people to justify their oppression. Demonizing Jewish people and positioning the ‘Aryan’ race as superior occurred over time. When the Nazi regime began its efforts to commit an all-out genocide, it led much of the German public to believe that it was a necessary step in self-defense against a “conniving”, “dirty”, and “sexually violent” group of people.

The groundwork laid through this propaganda led to the creation of concentration camps and the genocide of six million Jewish people

and five million members of other oppressed groups.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the Nazi oppression of Jewish people included sexual violence on the individual, institutional, and systemic levels. This manifested in individual instances of rape, institutional sexual violence such as strip-searching in concentration camps, and systemic forms of sexual violence through reproductive control and forced sterilizations of Jewish people.

## Reverse Victim and Offender

### Exaggerate, Sensationalize, Falsify, Redefine

The Nazi regime implemented a calculated campaign to propagate the false narrative that Jewish people were offenders rather than the victims they indeed were. First, any instances of sexual violence perpetrated by Jewish people against non-Jewish individuals were exaggerated, sensationalized, redefined, or outright falsified by the Nazi regime. This type of disinformation is known as atrocity propaganda<sup>23</sup>. Its sole purpose is to elicit an emotional response, which the oppressive group can manipulate to justify actions of oppression masked as a defense. In the case of Nazi Germany, the regime articulated the narrative as the Final Solution to the Jewish “problem”.

The Nuremberg anti-miscegenation laws passed in 1935 demonstrate the “redefine”

<sup>22</sup> “How Many People Did The Nazis Murder?,” Holocaust Encyclopedia. United States Historical Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/documenting-numbers-of-victims-of-the-holocaust-and-nazi-persecution>

<sup>23</sup> Paul Morrow, “A Theory of Atrocity Propaganda,” *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 9, no. 1 (2018): 45, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hum.2018.0002>.

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aspect of SORVO. The Nazi regime had an interest in redefining consensual sexual relationships between Jewish people and non-Jewish people as inherently violent. Lawmakers modeled this legislation after anti-miscegenation policies in the United States in the early 20th Century. A year before passing the first anti-miscegenation statutes in Nazi Germany, leadership gathered to study the American policies that outlawed interracial relationships.<sup>24</sup> Similarly to US law, the Nazi regime sought to punish these relationships to maintain “racial purity”.

The first part of the Nuremberg Race Laws was the Reich Citizenship section.<sup>25</sup> This law described Jewish people as non-citizens of Germany, positioning them as an outside force within their own country. The anti-miscegenation section of the law translates into “The Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor”.<sup>26</sup> The use of the words “protection” and “honor” describes a clear example of redefining sexual violence. The country no longer considered Jewish people as part of the German nationality, implying that Germans were under threat and needed “protection”. Additionally, “honor” is commonly used as a term to describe sexual purity, particularly in the context of white women.<sup>27</sup> The very title of this law is wrought with terminology that implies a threat of violence, while the law itself outlaws consensual relationships and marriage. This law shifts the narrative to redefine nonviolent sexual contact as sexual violence.

Much of the atrocity propaganda put forward by the Nazi regime in the interest of exaggerating or sensationalizing sexual violence came in the form of racial stereotyping and fear tactics. There is little evidence of any instances of sexual assault perpetrated on the individual level by a Jewish person against a non-Jewish person. Of course, this is not to say that it did not happen. The Nazi party was less focused on dramatizing individual stories than on creating a narrative of a broad, existential threat.

Since the goal was to describe Jewish people as a collective, conspiratorial force, it was more effective to detail a plot to overtake “Aryan bloodlines” as a sexual threat. Therefore, the oppressive group exaggerated reports of sexual violence perpetrated by Jewish people against non-Jewish people. Accounts described mass violence committed in a calculated manner. For example, on April 15, 1945, Adolf Hitler gave a speech regarding the Eastern Front of the war, which included this message:



*“For the last time our deadly enemies the Jewish Bolsheviks have launched their massive forces to the attack. Their aim is to reduce Germany to ruins and to exterminate our people. Many of you soldiers in the East already know the fate which threatens, above all, German women, girls, and children. While the old men and children will be murdered, the women and girls will be reduced to barrack-room whores. The remainder will be marched off to Siberia.”*<sup>28</sup>



<sup>24</sup> James Q. Whitman, “Op-Ed: When the Nazis Wrote the Nuremberg Laws, They Looked to Racist American Statutes,” Los Angeles Times, February 22, 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-whitman-hitler-american-race-laws-20170222-story.html>.

<sup>25</sup> “The Nuremberg Race Laws,” Holocaust Encyclopedia. United States Historical Memorial Museum, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-nuremberg-race-laws>.

<sup>26</sup> “The Nuremberg Race Laws,” Holocaust Encyclopedia.

<sup>27</sup> Madison Natarajan et al., “Decolonizing Purity Culture: Gendered Racism and White Idealization in Evangelical Christianity,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2022): 316-36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03616843221091116>.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Edwards, *The Eastern Front: The Germans and Soviets at War in World War II* (Stackpole Books, 2018), 85.



"Ci rivolgiamo alle Nazioni che pretendono sfuggire alle persecuzioni: noi che siamo sempre stati i più implacabili persecutori" - L'ebreo Samuel Roth (da "American Gentile").

Figure 4. Propaganda depicting a Jewish communist flogging a woman tied to a Star of David as if it were a crucifix. The quote below the illustration reads, "We address the nations that claim to escape persecution: we have always been implacable persecutors" - the Jew Samuel Roth." (Originally found in Italian Fascist magazine "La Difesa della Razza" ["The Defense of Race"], published May 9, 1938).

The oppressive group designed the claim that ("Aryan") women and girls would be targets of sexual violence by the Jewish Bolsheviks to elicit a response. This assertion exemplifies atrocity propaganda because it correlates Jewish identity with perpetrators of sexual violence. Furthermore, it situated non-Jewish German women as victims in need of protection (see Figure 4). Hitler's word choice in this speech effectively illustrates the tactic of reversing victim and offender. While Germany was expanding its territory and acting as the aggressor on the Eastern Front, the Nazi regime painted itself as the victim, as seen in the message: "Jewish Bolsheviks have launched their... attack".<sup>29</sup> The context of German, non-Jewish women as potential victims of sexual violence paired with the messaging strategy shifts the narrative to reverse victim and offender.

Propaganda campaigns stereotyping Jewish women falsified sexual violence perpetrated by Jewish

people against non-Jewish people. Although never described as the aggressor, the depiction of the "Jewess", or seductive Jewish woman, was used to further the notion that Jewish people were a threat to "Aryans" living in Germany.<sup>30</sup> The oppressive group depicted Jewish women in Nazi Germany as conspiratorial and sexually promiscuous, intent upon manipulating non-Jewish people with their seduction. While this did not characterize them as sexually violent, it still worked to twist the narrative. Non-Jewish individuals began to view their role as protectors from the "devious Jewish woman".<sup>31</sup> Once again, narrative manipulation effectuated the reversal of victim and offender.

In reality, there is no evidence to support the notion that Jewish people perpetrated sexual violence at a disproportionately high rate. Furthermore, any instances of sexual violence that did occur were only possible at the individual level because Jewish people did not hold any institutional or systemic power in Nazi Germany. However, these false narratives that described Jewish people as a particularly sexually violent and devious group were widespread and effective.

Public opinion in Germany shifted to align with Nazi disinformation. While the Jewish people were the oppressed group, the reversal of victim and offender made their oppression seem justified - that this was a necessary response to a threat.

## Deny, Omit, Erase, De-define

The disinformation campaign continued in the discourse surrounding sexual violence perpetrated by Nazis against Jewish people. The Nazi

<sup>29</sup> Robert Edwards, *The Eastern Front: The Germans and Soviets at War in World War II* (Stackpole Books, 2018), 85.

<sup>30</sup> "Antisemitism and Sexuality Reconsidered." German Historical Institute DC, 2021.

<sup>31</sup> "Antisemitism and Sexuality Reconsidered." German Historical Institute DC, 2021.



Figure 5. Poster showing a smiling German soldier with three young children. The text translates to “Abandoned populations, trust the German soldier!” (Nazi propaganda poster by Theo Matejko, “Abandoned Populations, Trust the German Soldier!,” 1940).

propaganda machine denied, omitted, erased, and de-defined their acts of sexual violence. This tactic is significant because reversing the victim and offender in a narrative also requires erasing the notion of any wrongdoing on the part of the oppressor. The Nazis committed high levels of sexual violence during the Holocaust on individual, institutional, and systemic levels. However, due to their institutional power, they also could control the narrative and, thus, were able to falsify and fabricate it for the public. These strategies—deny, omit, erase, and de-define—were just a few of the tactics used by the Nazi regime to reverse their identity from sexual offender to victim.

One step in denying sexual violence in the Nazi propaganda campaign was to construct the public image of a German soldier. The archetype was well-known and articulated carefully. Propaganda described German (non-Jewish) soldiers as young, able-bodied, handsome family men with impeccable morals. As in any war, home countries revered the soldiers as heroes (see figures 5 & 6). Furthermore, this set the standard for all men in Germany. With such a massive event as the Holocaust, any “Aryan” man was a part of the war effort to expand Germany’s territory and to enact the genocide of Jewish people domestically. Of course, with the reversal of victim and offender, these actions were framed as heroic defenses against a threat.

The Nazi regime tactfully extended the reverence given to German soldiers to all “Aryan” German men. Part of the reason for the reverence of German soldiers was to paint the idea in public discourse that they would never commit a crime as egregious as rape. German soldiers were known for being sexually abstinent during the war, and SS Officers were described as committing some “necessary atrocities”, but sexual violence was not one of them.<sup>32</sup>

The denial of sexual violence on behalf of German soldiers provided some comfort in the public imagination while simultaneously retaining the image of the perfect “Aryan” man. Due to this groundwork, the Nazis easily denied instances of sexual assault perpetrated by German soldiers and SS Officers. The masses already had an idealized image of who the men were and would not believe such accusations.

One of the most widespread tools used to maintain this image was simply omitting instances of sexual violence from the narrative altogether.

<sup>32</sup> Ayse Gul Altinay and Andrea Peto, *Gendered Wars, Gendered Memories: Feminist Conversations on War, Genocide, and Political Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 30.

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The Nazi regime successfully executed one of the most pervasive propaganda campaigns in modern history.<sup>33</sup> In this instance, the oppressive group effectively manipulated the narrative through the leadership's extremely calculated efforts.

Sexual violence—particularly individual instances such as rape and assault— is generally viewed by the public as an uncrossable line. No situation can warrant such an act. The inherent immorality and shock value of sexual violence made it an effective tool to drum up fear by exaggerating the idea that Jewish people were a sexually violent group intent on harming non-Jewish individuals. Simultaneously, there was no value for the Nazis in admitting or including reports of sexual violence perpetrated against Jewish people by non-Jewish people. Therefore, the oppressive group simply omitted these instances from the discourse and records.

Omitting the accounts of sexual violence perpetrated by “Aryan” men, German soldiers, and SS officers was not a complicated feat as the Nazis controlled the media.<sup>34</sup> Jewish victims could only report a rape to the authorities, who were also Nazis. The Nazis were also executing mass killings of Jewish people, silencing any victims (and, therefore, witnesses). It is now well known that sexual violence occurred pervasively within concentration camps, but the nature of confinement meant that the Nazi regime suppressed reports of these abuses during the Holocaust.<sup>35</sup>

The Nazi regime actively erased sexual violence from the record if simple omission was not possible. This strategy was perhaps the most vital

tool in the use of sexual violence as a tactic for oppression. Once the state began completely erasing these occurrences, the message to the public was clear: sexual violence against Jewish people was essentially permitted and would be covered up if it did occur. This notice simultaneously implied to Jewish people that the oppressive group would not take their reports seriously. The power and control established by the Nazi regime inevitably exacerbated the problem of underreporting.



Figure 6. Postage stamp produced during World War II showing a soldier standing before Nazi flags. It reads “Victory will be ours!” (“Nazi Propaganda,” The Holocaust Explained. The Wiener Holocaust Library, n.d.).

<sup>33</sup> “Terror and Persuasion: Goebbels and the Ministry of Propaganda,” Bitesize. BBC News, 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zpb9fcw/revision/2>.

<sup>34</sup> Corey Ross, “Political Control and Commercial Concentration Under the Nazis,” in *Media and the Making of Modern Germany: Mass Communications, Society, and Politics from the Empire of the Third Reich* (Oxford, 2008), 270, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199278213.003.0009>.

<sup>35</sup> Regina Mühlhäuser, “The Historicity of Denial: Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the War of Annihilation, 1941-1945,” in *Expanding Perspectives on the Holocaust in a Changing World* (Evanston, 2014), 32.

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Members of the oppressive group had license to commit rape and other atrocities without fear of the public knowing or fear of accountability. In many ways, the actions of the Nazi regime condoned sexual violence against Jewish people. Furthermore, due to the erasure campaign, the world may never know the full extent of the atrocities committed during the Holocaust. The tactic of erasure was a powerful tool of oppression throughout this time period and has lasting effects today.

The final method by which the Nazi disinformation project maintained its image as morally superior was through de-defining sexual violence itself. In other words, sexual violence was not labeled as sexual violence. De-defining sexual violence is most effectively employed on institutional and systemic levels.

Institutional sexual violence was pervasive during the Holocaust, particularly within concentration camps. Strip searches, public humiliation, sexual medical experimentation, and forcing prisoners to have sex with each other are all forms of institutional sexual violence.<sup>36</sup>

Systemic sexual violence occurred through reproductive control measures (such as forced sterilizations), the genocide of LGBTQ+ individuals, and wartime mass “punishments” of civilians of other nations.<sup>37</sup> While many of these atrocities would be impossible to erase or shield from the public entirely, they were also not clearly defined as sexual violence. Instead, the government described these actions as necessary measures to protect the German “Aryan” way of life.

In reality, the sexual violence perpetrated by the Nazis against Jewish people was frequent, common, and occurred at high rates because they held all of the structural power and control as the oppressive entity. Therefore, the Nazis committed sexual violence at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels.

The oppressive group subjected Jewish people held in concentration camps to regular strip searches, genital inspection, and shaving.

Many Jewish women were forced to have abortions, sterilized, or put through medical experiments.<sup>38</sup> Forced prostitution, coerced sexual activities, and entitlement rape (sex for survival) were widespread.<sup>39</sup> In many cases, rape was a part of SS raids on Jewish households as a method of terror and torture.<sup>40</sup>

One survivor of the Stepan ghetto in Ukraine writes:

“

*“At night, policemen would bring Germans, and they would grab young women and rape them. They really brutalized them... They took [the women] away, and then brought them back and left them half dead.”<sup>41</sup>*

”

<sup>36</sup> Mühlhäuser, “The Historicity of Denial,” 40.

<sup>37</sup> Marta Havryshko, “Sexual Violence in the Holocaust: Perspectives from Ghettos and Camps in Ukraine,” Heinrich Boll Foundation, May 18, 2020, <https://ua.boell.org/en/2020/05/18/sexual-violence-holocaust-perspectives-ghettos-and-camps-ukraine>.

<sup>38</sup> Havryshko, “Sexual Violence in the Holocaust.”

<sup>39</sup> Jessie Williams, “Sexual Violence Against Women during the Holocaust: Inside and Outside of Extermination Camps,” *History in the Making* 14, no. 6 (2021): 86, <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1233&context=history-in-the-making>.

<sup>40</sup> Havryshko, “Sexual Violence in the Holocaust.”

<sup>41</sup> Havryshko, “Sexual Violence in the Holocaust.”

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A survivor of Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Germany tells his account after being branded a homosexual:

“

*“I was given a pink triangle... It all went very quickly. After I had been bathed and shaved I was straight away placed on the slaughter table... At 14.45 I woke up and found myself in bed with a sack under my knees and also on my stomach. A member of the SS was sitting by the bed, but for once a sensible one. Then, after I had woken up properly, I asked him what they'd done to me. He said: 'castrated.’”<sup>42</sup>*

”

These descriptions of sexual violence perpetrated by Nazi Germans were mainly recounted in the years after the Holocaust when the campaign to deny, omit, erase, and de-define sexual violence had come to an end. Notably, the widespread and structural nature of sexual violence rendered it a means of systemic oppression. The disinformation campaign worked to reverse the victim and the offender. Although Jewish people were the victims, the Nazis effectively positioned themselves as victims in this narrative. Simultaneously, the Nazi regime committed disproportionately high rates of sexual violence on individual, institutional, and systemic levels against Jewish people.

The Nazi regime effectively used SORVO during the Holocaust to justify the oppression of Jewish people and other marginalized groups. From 1933 to 1945, the state carried out the genocide of 11 million people, the majority of whom were Jewish, by convincing the German public that it was a justified, proportional response to an existing threat. This tactic took years of disinformation, racial stereotyping, and baseless claims that included the idea that Jewish people posed a threat of sexual violence. In turn, the victim was rewritten as the offender in the eyes of the masses, and systemic oppression ensued. Importantly, these racist themes continue in anti-Semitic discourse today.

<sup>42</sup> “Homosexual Prisoners,” The Nazi Concentration Camps. Birkbeck University of London, n.d., <http://www.camps.bbk.ac.uk/documents/050-homosexual-prisoners.html>.

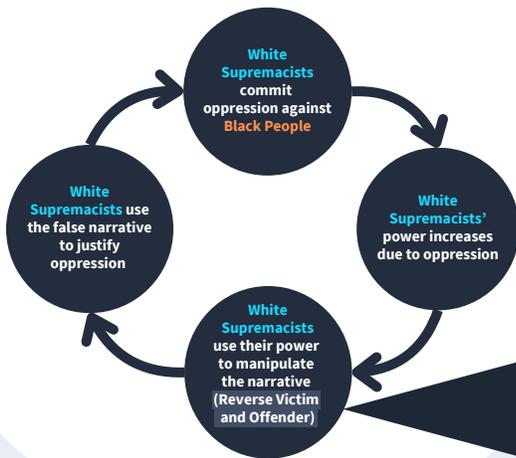
# CASE STUDY: JIM CROW



# CASE STUDY: JIM CROW

Please note, the language in this infographic has been simplified. While the core information is presented accurately, some content may have been condensed or reworded for brevity.

## Systemic Oppression



## Reverse Victim & Offender

### Reality

**White Supremacists** committing sexual violence against the **Black People**

Acts of sexual violence are **frequent & common**

WHY? This sexual violence occurs at the **individual, institutional, and systemic** levels.

This is because the **White Supremacists** had all of the structural power and control.

**Black People** committing sexual violence against the **White Supremacists**

Acts of sexual violence are **nonexistent or rare**

WHY? This sexual violence occurs at the **individual** level.

This is because the **White Supremacists** had the power and control on the institutional and systemic levels.

### Narrative Manipulation

The **White Supremacists** shifts the narrative using the following tactics:



### False Narrative

**White Supremacists** committing sexual violence against the **Black People**

Acts of sexual violence are **nonexistent or rare**

**Black People** committing sexual violence against the **White Supremacists**

Acts of sexual violence are **frequent & common**

## Narrative Manipulation Tactics

**Deny**  
Oppressive Group denies committing sexual violence against Oppressed Group.



**Exaggerate**  
Oppressed Group's acts of sexual violence against Oppressive Group are overblown, inflated, or outsized.



**Omit**  
Oppressive Group controls the narrative and omits their sexual violence against Oppressed Group.



**Sensationalize**  
Oppressed Group's acts of sexual violence against Oppressive Group are portrayed emotionally, vividly, and covered frequently.



**Erase**  
Oppressive Group erases evidence of their sexual violence against Oppressed Group by destroying evidence, killing witnesses, silencing reporters, and discrediting reports.



**Falsify**  
Oppressed Group's acts of sexual violence against Oppressive Group are fabricated, vague, and baseless.



**De-Define**  
Oppressive Group's acts of sexual violence against Oppressed Group are not defined as sexual violence.



**Re-Define**  
Oppressed Group's non-sexual acts or consensual sexual acts are redefined as sexual violence.



**J**im Crow was a strategy employed by white Americans beginning during the Reconstruction era and lasting through 1965 to maintain the systemic oppression of Black people. This tactic was largely a response to the emancipation of enslaved people in 1865, and it consisted of segregationist and racist legislation, economic exploitation, and tactical policies put forward to keep Black people oppressed in the United States. In the context of SORVO, this included sexual violence perpetrated against Black people at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels by white people. Furthermore, Jim Crow put forth the false stereotype that Black men were sexually dangerous to justify the widespread violence committed during this era.

To systematically oppress Black people, the white leadership in the US used the SORVO framework to reverse victim and offender-positioning *themselves* as the victims during this time. Employing SORVO in this way created a public narrative that Black people were a threat that white people needed protection against. This inaccurate and harmful propaganda led to thousands of lynchings, the expansion of police brutality and surveillance, and widespread systemic, institutional, and individual sexual violence committed against Black Americans by the white majority.<sup>43</sup>

## Systemic Oppression

Under Jim Crow, the oppressive group was white political leadership and its allies, and Black people were the oppressed group. To

justify the oppressive policies of Jim Crow, white people needed to establish Black people as a threat. One of the most effective ways of doing this was to claim that Black men commit (or have a driving desire to commit) high rates of sexual violence. During slavery, white leadership portrayed Black people as childlike, ignorant, relatively harmless, easily subjugated, and therefore needing a “paternalistic institution”, or enslavement, to protect them and keep them in line.<sup>44</sup> After emancipation, white people claimed that without slavery, Black people were giving in to their “animalistic tendencies” and “reverting to criminal savagery”.<sup>45</sup> Anti-Black propaganda, books, films, and baseless reports spread the stereotype of the Black rapist (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. Cartoon of a white man hitting a caricatured Black man with a crowbar for attacking a white woman. The text says, “Let’s face it! Rampant black crime is bringing this nation to it’s knees...If you care about the future of your home, your family and your race...IT’S TIME TO STRIKE BACK!” (“Brute Stereotype Image Gallery,” Jim Crow Museum.

<sup>43</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror* (Montgomery, AL: Equal Justice Initiative, 2017), <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>.

<sup>44</sup> David Pilgrim, “The Brute Caricature,” Jim Crow Museum, November, 2000, <https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/brute/homepage.htm>.

<sup>45</sup> Pilgrim, “The Brute Caricature.”

# CASE STUDY: JIM CROW

Films such as *Birth of a Nation*, which debuted in 1915, depicted scenes of predatory Black men and helpless white women. Notably, the heroes of the film were the Ku Klux Klan (see Figure 8).<sup>46</sup> White leadership publically rationalized the segregation, abuse, and lynching of Black people by claiming that Black men were raping white women in large numbers. Accusations were generally made with little to no corroborating evidence, often resulting in the murder of the accused. Notably, many claims were recanted after white vigilantes took action and murdered the Black men.<sup>47</sup>



Figure 8. A still from “Birth of a Nation”. The film depicted the Ku Klux Klan as heroes defending white women from Black men. (*Birth of a Nation*, directed by D. W. Griffith (1915), film still.

One of the most evident examples of the power of this rhetoric came during the congressional floor fight over the Dyer Bill. This bill was an anti-lynching measure introduced to the House of Representatives by Missouri Congressman Leonidas Dyer in 1921.<sup>48</sup> The bill would reaffirm that each individual had equal protection under the law, and it would punish the crime of lynching.<sup>49</sup> It was killed in the Senate through

filibuster in part because southern congressmen claimed that the bill was unconstitutional and would effectively make rape, specifically of white southern women by Black men, legal.<sup>50</sup>

The congressmen argued that nothing should or could stop lynchings save for the end of rapes. This logic is significant because it operates under the assumption that sexual violence committed by Black men against white women was not only pervasive and inevitable, but that lynching was the justified solution.

Congressman Hatton W. Sumners, in response to the Dyer Bill, said:

“

*“Suppose this other thing happens - and you can do it under this bill - suppose that a black man takes a little white child and drags her off into seclusion where no voice can hear and no hand can help, and the father of that child and the brothers of the child come up on him, and the Federal Government takes them away in the face of public sentiment and places them in the Federal penitentiary, and then has a tax of \$10,000 levied against the county for the benefit of the culprit's family, a part of which sum might go to buy that family an automobile to ride by the home of the innocent victim, do you think, as a matter of common sense, with such a policy you could long prevent a condition [in] that country...?”<sup>51</sup>*

”

The floor fight over the Dyer Bill demonstrates the systemic nature of SORVO.

<sup>46</sup>NPR Staff, “100 Years Later, What’s the Legacy of ‘Birth of a Nation’?,” NPR, February 8, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/02/08/383279630/100-years-later-whats-the-legacy-of-birth-of-a-nation>.

<sup>47</sup> “Timeline of the History of Sexual Violence in the U.S.,” Tulane University, n.d., <https://allin.tulane.edu/content/timeline-history-sexual-violence-us>.

<sup>48</sup> William B. Hixson, “Moorfield Storey and the Defense of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill,” *The New England Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (1969): 73. <https://doi.org/10.2307/363500>.

<sup>49</sup> “Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill,” NAACP, n.d., <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/legislative-milestones/dyer-anti-lynching-bill>.

<sup>50</sup> Hixson, “Moorfield Storey and the Defense of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill,” 70.

<sup>51</sup> “Anti-Lynching Legislation Debated in Congress: The Congressional Digest, 1922,” *Old Magazine Articles*, n.d., [http://www.oldmagazinearticles.com/Dyer\\_Anti-Lynching\\_Bill\\_Debated\\_in\\_Congress\\_1922](http://www.oldmagazinearticles.com/Dyer_Anti-Lynching_Bill_Debated_in_Congress_1922).

# CASE STUDY: JIM CROW

By falsely claiming inflated rates of individual sexual violence by an oppressed group, the representatives justified oppression, framing it as necessary for the preservation of white people. The oppression condoned by white leadership led to widespread violence against Black people.

Emmett Till was fourteen when he was killed in 1955. The young Black boy was accused of whistling at and making sexual advances toward a white woman. He was abducted by the woman's husband and brother-in-law, brutally beaten, shot, and thrown into the river.<sup>52</sup> The two white offenders were acquitted of Till's murder by an all-white jury. A year later, one of the perpetrators gave this quote:



*"Well, what else could we do? He was hopeless. I'm no bully; I never hurt a n\*\*\*\*\* in my life. I like n\*\*\*\*\*s—in their place—I know how to work 'em. But I just decided it was time a few people got put on notice. As long as I live and can do anything about it, n\*\*\*\*\*s are gonna stay in their place. N\*\*\*\*\*s ain't gonna vote where I live. If they did, they'd control the government. They ain't gonna go to school with my kids. And when a n\*\*\*\*\* gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he's tired o' livin'. I'm likely to kill him. Me and my folks fought for this country, and we got some rights. I stood there in that shed and listened to that n\*\*\*\*\* throw that poison at me, and I just made up my mind. 'Chicago boy,' I said, 'I'm tired of 'em sending your kind down here to stir up trouble. Goddam you, I'm going to make an example of you—just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand.'"<sup>53</sup> - J. W. Milam, *Look Magazine*, 1956*



This hateful speech demonstrates the power of a long propaganda campaign and SORVO. The narrative of the sexually violent Black man was so pervasive in the minds of white America that an accusation of impropriety resulted in a backlash so visceral that a young boy violently and needlessly lost his life. Furthermore, the white jury was either convinced of the white men's innocence or believed that their murder of Emmett Till did not constitute a crime.

During Jim Crow, any sexual violence that Black people perpetrated was only at the individual level because they did not hold any institutional or systemic power. There is no evidence that Black people committed sexual violence at disproportionately high rates, nor that it was more prevalent against white women. Sexual violence perpetrated against Black people during Jim Crow, however, was disproportionately high. These instances occurred at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels. Furthermore, Black people under Jim Crow did not have the same legal or political power to defend themselves against sexual violence, so it is likely that many of these cases were not reported and occurred without consequence.



## Reverse Victim and Offender

### Exaggerate, Sensationalize, Falsify, Redefine

White American leadership put forward a strong and calculated campaign to cast Black

<sup>52</sup> "The Murder of Emmett Till," Library of Congress, n.d., <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/articles-and-essays/murder-of-emmett-till/>.

<sup>53</sup> "Emmett Till Murderers Make Magazine Confession," This Day in History, History, n.d., <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/emmett-till-murderers-make-magazine-confession>.

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people as the offenders during Jim Crow, effectively creating the narrative that white people themselves were the true victims. Therefore, they cast the oppression and segregation of Black people as a necessary tool for protection. Stories of sexual violence, or even the notion that there was a threat of sexual violence, was an effective tool for reversing victim and offender.

The white establishment exaggerated, sensationalized, redefined, or falsified any instances of sexual violence perpetrated by Black people. Using sexual violence as the crux of these narratives was effective due to its shock effect. People generally agree that this individual-level form of violence crosses the line. Therefore, those who perceive themselves as wronged adopt an in-group, out-group mentality, creating a strong rallying cry. In this case, the narrative fell along racial lines. White people used the shock value of sexual violence (often outright falsifying accounts) perpetrated by Black people to unite their base on the notion that oppressing Black people was necessary. This tactic inspired not only racist state policies and punitive police practices but also vigilante violence perpetrated by white civilians.

The public discourse surrounding sexual violence under Jim Crow was exaggerated through the baseless claim that Black men were a threat to white women. Importantly, this exaggeration required no actual instances of sexual violence but rather a propaganda campaign casting Black men in a particular way. Political cartoons give some insight into this intentional stereotyping.

Figure 9 depicts a Black man, described as a “beast”, infatuated with a white woman.



Figure 9. Cover of the book *How Sleeps the Beast* by Don Tracy. (David Pilgrim, “The Brute Caricature,” Jim Crow Museum, November, 2000.)

The quote at the top of the image, “The man: Negro. The girl: white. The payoff: lynch!” describes the sentiment that Black men were not only intent upon having sex with white women but that such actions were punishable by lynching. Furthermore, this image does not suggest sexual violence but instead equates any sexual contact between Black men and white women as aggression by the Black man. This portrayal is a clear propaganda tactic. There is no basis for this depiction; rather, it is a method to flip the narrative surrounding who the victim is and who the offender is. Casting Black men as offenders while they lived under Jim Crow segregationist oppression justified that oppression in the minds of white America.

Importantly, this exaggeration and stereotyping also impacted white Americans' perceptions of Black women. The oppressive group intentionally constructed the "Jezebel" caricature to portray Black women as sexually promiscuous (see Figure 10). This depiction was considered a sexual threat against white American values and purity. Because white supremacy works closely with heteropatriarchy, sexual deviance is a threat to very carefully articulated sexual standards.

propaganda widely circulated the idea that Black women carried sexually transmitted diseases at disproportionately high rates and that they could spread these diseases through contact with toilet seats and sinks in bathrooms.<sup>54</sup> This fear led to the justification of segregating bathrooms by race. The initial part of this "threat," however, occurred by disseminating the falsehood that Black women were more likely to be carriers of STDs because they were more sexually active.



Figure 10. A poster with the image of a Black woman titled "Black Hooker: What would you do if your mother was a hooker?" (David Pilgrim, "The Jezebel Stereotype," Jim Crow Museum, July, 2002).

Oversexualized imagery cast Black women as dirty and offensive to the prevailing standards. One such repercussion of this depiction was the justification of segregated bathrooms. False

This narrative cast Black women as the offenders and white Americans as the victims who were simply trying to live out a Puritan existence. Under these Puritan values, White women were cast as fragile and inherently in need of protection, especially in contrast to Black women. This storyline is significant because it demonstrates that while Black men were specifically considered a threat to white women, there was a coordinated and syndicated effort to suppress Black women by casting them as offenders as well. This narrative worked to justify oppression strictly along race lines.

Sexual violence perpetrated by Black people was only possible at the individual level because Black people did not hold any institutional or systemic power under Jim Crow. The news media added shock value to instances of individual-level assault by sensationalizing stories. This portrayal furthered the racist ideas that Black men, in particular, were inherently violent. This trend grew in prevalence over time, and the murder of Emmet Till represents the culmination of this white fear and resentment. There is no evidence that Till acted inappropriately toward a white woman, and her account of

<sup>54</sup> Tynslei Spence-Mitchell, "Restroom Restrictions: How Race and Sexuality Have Affected Bathroom Legislation," *Gender, Work & Organization* 28, no. S1 (2020): 14-20, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12545>.

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the event is that the young boy “whistled” at her and grabbed her hand. Years later, she partially recanted her statement. When asked if Till grabbed her, she responded, “That part’s not true.”<sup>55</sup>

The original claim prompted such a visceral reaction by two white men that they violently murdered Till, suggesting that the false discourse of the sexually aggressive Black man had taken hold and become sensationalized in the eyes of white America. It is also evident from the statement by one of the white offenders—



*“and when a n\*\*\*\*r gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he’s tired o’ livin’. I’m likely to kill him”<sup>56</sup>*



-- that the men viewed any sexual contact between Black men and white women as inherently sexually violent. This example is a clear illustration of reversing victim and offender through falsification (the white woman’s accusation), sensationalization of the events, and redefining interracial contact as sexual violence. Till’s young age also suggested that Black people under Jim Crow were not entitled to childhood and were painted as criminals early on in their lives due to their race. White people perceived Till’s alleged actions as an attack and used this perception of their own victimhood to rationalize their response. Redefining consensual sexual acts as sexual violence is a common strategy in the implementation of SORVO. Under Jim Crow, any relationship between racial groups was

considered threatening, in particular to white people and white racial “purity”. Anti-miscegenation laws were common in the United States at this time, including the 1924 Virginia law that prohibited white people from marrying anyone with “a single drop of Negro blood”.<sup>57</sup>

White women were considered pivotal in the advancement of the white race as wives and mothers. Still, white men controlled them through legal, financial, and societal means. This possessiveness meant that Black men’s access to white women was without the consent of white men, who viewed themselves as the wronged party. This viewpoint created a narrative that interracial relationships were violent or non-consensual, taking agency away from both Black men and white women. Every anti-miscegenation law was written by white men.<sup>58</sup>

Importantly, this assumption of violence was not present in cases of white men and Black women. Racist ideas about Black women’s (lack of) rights to bodily autonomy paired with white men’s power and entitlement created a culture of widespread sexual violence perpetrated against Black women with relatively little consequence.<sup>59</sup> Importantly, redefining consensual sexual acts as violence and de-defining true acts of sexual violence are tactics explicitly employed to benefit the oppressive group in power. The dynamics under Jim Crow created a situation that harmed Black men and Black women through these tactics of oppression.

The most obvious method by which white people under Jim Crow reversed the narrative of who is the victim and who is the offender is through outright falsifying accounts of sexual violence.

<sup>55</sup> Dianne Gallagher, Sara Smart and Emma Tucker, “Woman Whose Accusation Led to the Lynching of Emmett Till has Died at 88, Coroner Says,” CNN, April 28, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/27/us/carolyn-bryant-donham-emmett-till/index.html#>.

<sup>56</sup> “Emmett Till Murderers Make Magazine Confession,” This Day in History.

<sup>57</sup> Bárbara Cruz and Michael Berson, “The American Melting Pot? Miscegenation Laws in the United States,” OAH Magazine of History 15, no. 4 (2001): 81, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25163474>.

<sup>58</sup> Cruz and Berson, “The American Melting Pot? Miscegenation Laws in the United States,” 80-84.

<sup>59</sup> “Timeline of the History of Sexual Violence in the U.S.,” Tulane University, n.d.

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Sexual violence perpetrated by Black men did occur at the individual level, but there is no evidence to suggest these instances occurred at disproportionately high rates. However, the disproportionate and often inaccurate media coverage surrounding Black men would suggest that this was a widespread issue.

In the year leading up to the Atlanta Race Massacre of 1906, the *Atlanta Georgian* and the *Atlanta News* carried uncorroborated stories of alleged assaults by Black men of white women, provoking anger and fear in white communities.<sup>60</sup> On the afternoon of September 22, 1906, four alleged sexual assaults by Black men against white women were reported by the Atlanta newspapers; the newspaper did not substantiate any of the accounts of sexual assault. However, violence ensued in the following days, and white mobs killed up to twenty-five Black people. This tragedy would come to be known as the Atlanta Race Massacre of 1906, and the unsubstantiated accounts peddled by the newspapers played a direct part in sparking this violence. Thousands of Black-owned businesses and places of residence were set on fire, and there were widespread reports of Black people being assaulted on the streets and on public transit.<sup>61</sup> These violent acts serve as evidence of the power of shifting the narrative. Newspapers validated existing fears and stereotypes by printing uncorroborated stories of white people victimized by Black men. In this example, the role of victim and offender was effectively reversed by the oppressive group, resulting in an assault on the Black community in Atlanta.

## Deny, Omit, Erase, De-define

Acts of sexual violence perpetrated *against* Black people by white people during the Jim Crow era were frequent and common. This is in part because sexual violence perpetrated within this racial dynamic occurred at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels, as white people held systemic and institutional power over Black people. Notably, while this case study specifically focuses on the Jim Crow era, this problem persists today.

The narrative shifted to reverse the roles of victim and offender to absolve white people of wrongdoing. White people denied, omitted, erased, and de-defined their acts of sexual violence against Black people in the public discourse. One of the most apparent examples of white people denying that they committed sexual violence against Black people was in the execution of the law. Although Black people were granted personhood following the emancipation of slavery, there was little to no practical protection for Black victims of sexual violence. Courts allowed prosecutors to use peremptory strikes to restrict the number of Black people on a jury until well into the 20th century, and racial bias in jury selection remains a problem today.<sup>62</sup>

Sentencing was also routinely racially biased with harsher sentences carried out against Black perpetrators and leniency granted to perpetrators of sexual violence against Black victims. Black people were not allowed to testify in court against white perpetrators.<sup>63</sup> There was a noticeable lack of protections for Black victims of individual sexual violence cases in the judicial system. This gap, paired with harmful stereotypes

<sup>60</sup>Clifford Kuhn and Gregory Mixon, "Atlanta Race Massacre of 1906," New Georgia Encyclopedia, last modified November 14, 2022, <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/atlanta-race-massacre-of-1906/>.

<sup>61</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, s.v. "Atlanta Race Riot of 1906," <https://www.britannica.com/event/Atlanta-Riot-of-1906>.

<sup>62</sup>Equal Justice Initiative, "Race and the Jury: Illegal Racial Discrimination in Jury Selection" (2021), <https://eji.org/report/race-and-the-jury/>.

<sup>63</sup>Ruth Thompson-Miller and Leslie H. Picca, "'There Were Rapes!': Sexual Assaults of African American Women and Children in Jim Crow," *Violence Against Women* 23, no. 8 (2017): 936, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801216654016>.

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of Black women (suggesting they were somehow responsible for the violence perpetrated against them), resulted in white people denying committing any sexual assaults against the Black community altogether. This action is a powerful tactic; it is a form of systemic gaslighting integral to the employment of SORVO. It fits into the strategy of reversing victim and offender by denying that the offender is responsible for wrongdoing.

Media coverage and other drivers of public discourse during Jim Crow largely omitted instances of sexual violence perpetrated by white offenders against the Black community. This decision was intentional, and the media further dramatized the omissions by exaggerating coverage of sexual violence perpetrated by Black offenders. Sexual violence accounts were omitted disproportionately in cases with men as the victims, and when they occurred at the institutional and systemic levels. Black lynching victims, who were primarily men, frequently experienced sexual violence at the hands of white men during the assault.<sup>64</sup> Lynching campaigns were racialized and organized, escalating this form of sexual violence to a systemic level.

By its very nature, the amount of erasure in the narrative of the sexual violence perpetrated against Black people under Jim Crow is impossible to quantify fully. Black people who did report incidents were often retaliated against, resulting in underreporting.<sup>65</sup> The threat of retaliation, combined with a deliberate effort to reduce

publicity, resulted in the calculated attempt to downplay the extent of sexual violence inflicted on Black people during this period. The media did not cover violence perpetrated against Black women nearly to the same extent as white women, and there are virtually no accounts by white journalists of sexual violence against Black men.

White leadership under Jim Crow de-defined sexual violence to implement SORVO, twisting realities of violence into a narrative of more palatable, normalized acts. For example, cases of institutional violence through the implementation of strip searches in federal prisons or the so-called “Tuskegee Project” in which six hundred Black men were used in syphilis experimentation beginning in 1932, were not defined as sexual violence.<sup>66</sup>

**White leadership under Jim Crow de-defined sexual violence to implement SORVO, twisting realities of violence into a narrative of more palatable, normalized acts.**

Other examples of de-defining sexual violence include individual rapes that occurred due to inherent power disparities. Additionally, places of employment did not accurately define workplace intimidation or coercion between white employers and Black employees as sexual violence.

Systemic violence through economic deprivation and racist policies to keep Black people in poverty led to increased numbers of Black people forced

<sup>64</sup>Thompson-Miller and Picca, 936.

<sup>65</sup>Thompson-Miller and Picca, 936.

<sup>66</sup> “About the USPHS Syphilis Study,” Tuskegee University, n.d., <https://www.tuskegee.edu/about-us/centers-of-excellence/bioethics-center/about-the-usphs-syphilis-study>.

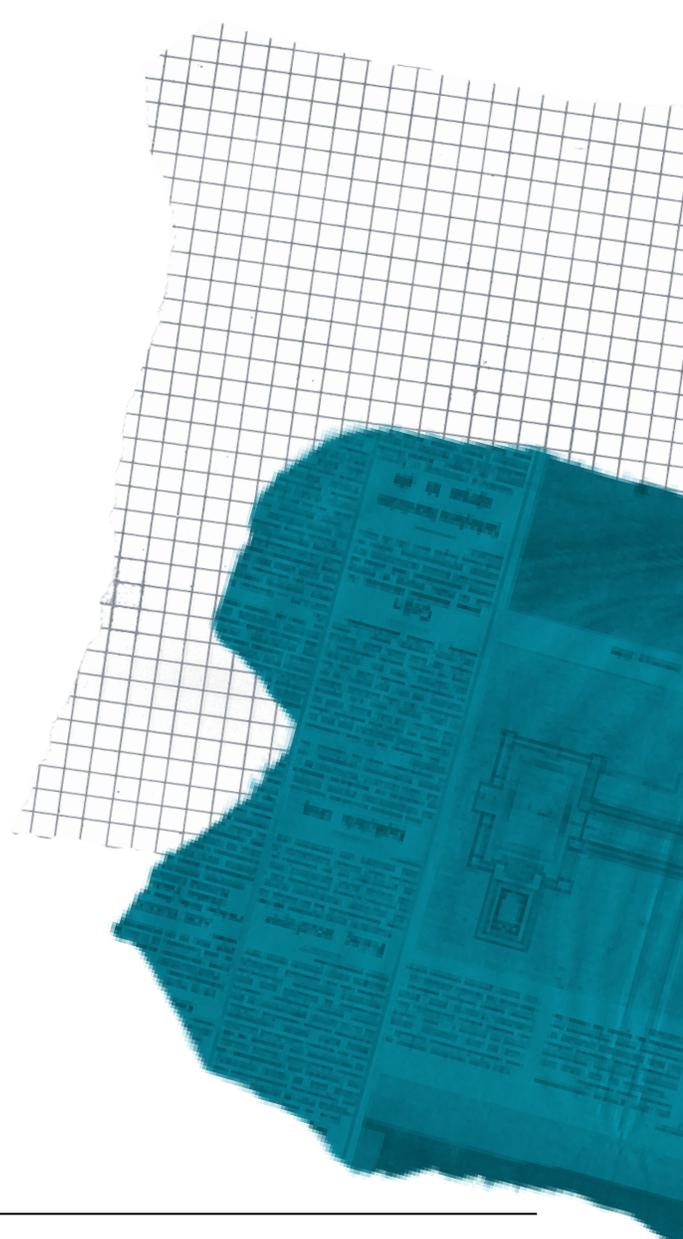
<sup>67</sup>Christen Price, “The Centuries-Long Racism of the Sexual Exploitation Marketplace,” National Center on Sexual Exploitation, June 12, 2020, <https://endsexualexploitation.org/articles/the-long-racism-of-the-sex-industry/>.

into survival sex work. The public did not define this compulsory work as sexual violence. Red light districts were disproportionately located in Black neighborhoods, which white men consistently frequented despite segregation laws.<sup>67</sup> The power in de-defining these cases, or not referring to them as sexual violence, lies in changing the narrative about Jim Crow and the true dynamics of sexual violence in public perception.

By denying, omitting, erasing, and de-defining sexual violence perpetrated against Black people, white Americans could absolve themselves of any wrongdoing and perpetuate the narrative that Black people were the true aggressors. Reversing victim and offender required both inflating the accounts of violence perpetrated by Black people and denying the reality that white people were perpetrating the majority of the sexual violence. White people's acts of sexual violence under Jim Crow were frequent and common due to existing power disparities and because they occurred at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels.

It is important to note that while this case study focuses specifically on SORVO in the Jim Crow era (Reconstruction through 1965), its legacy continues today. The stereotypes of Black men as sexually aggressive and Black women as promiscuous are still common. There are ongoing racial disparities in rape sentencing, and sex trafficking disproportionately involves Black victims.<sup>68</sup> SORVO was a specific and concerted tactic

used during Jim Crow to justify the oppression of Black people, including the perpetration of sexual violence against them. Notably, the racialized and sexualized discourse created for this purpose remains a crucial tenant in the oppression of Black people today.



<sup>68</sup> Price, "The Centuries-Long Racism of the Sexual Exploitation Marketplace."

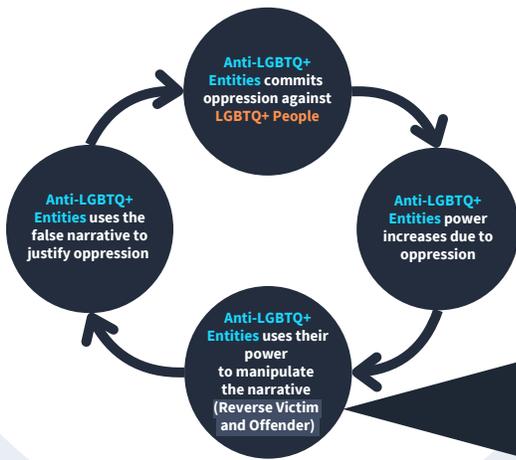
# CASE STUDY: Anti-LGBTQ+



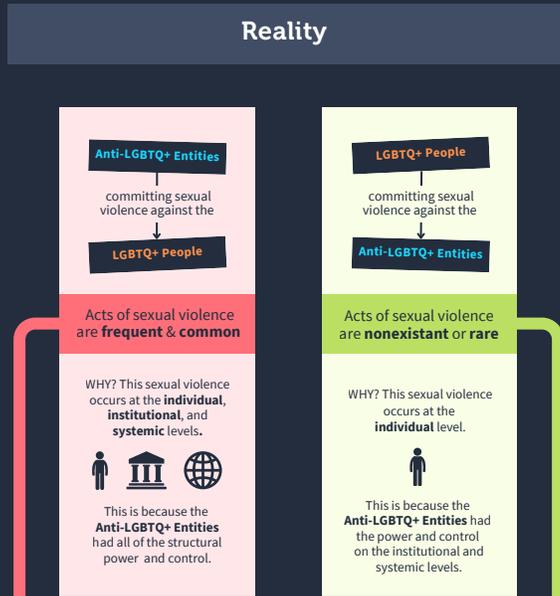
# CASE STUDY: ANTI-LGBTQ+

Please note, the language in this infographic has been simplified. While the core information is presented accurately, some content may have been condensed or reworded for brevity.

## Systemic Oppression



## Reverse Victim & Offender



## Narrative Manipulation Tactics

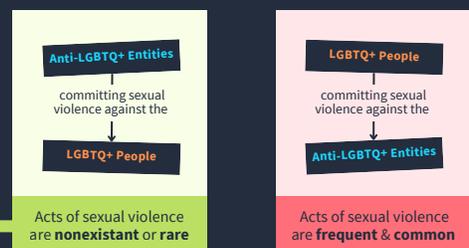


## Narrative Manipulation

The **Anti-LGBTQ+ Entities** shifts the narrative using the following tactics:



## False Narrative



Oppressive groups have used the strategy of SORVO to justify the prolonged cruel and unjust treatment of LGBTQ+ people globally. Harmful rhetoric surrounding sexuality and gender identity is consistent with the agenda of systemic oppression and reversing victim and offender, creating an inaccurate depiction of power. This case study focuses on these dynamics as a legacy of colonialism, examining the pattern of SORVO worldwide with a focus on the UK and former UK colonies to explore this strategy used as a tactic to uphold heteropatriarchy and oppress LGBTQ+ people.<sup>69</sup>

The introduction of anti-LGBTQ+ ideology occurred during colonization. Settler colonialism is not an event in the past, but rather a structure in place today with introduced ideas of heteronormativity, the nuclear family, and patriarchy.<sup>70</sup> The legacy of this introduction includes homophobia and transphobia at high rates in settler-colonial countries.

Anti-LGBTQ+ groups employed SORVO through propaganda to justify oppression of the LGBTQ+ community, including sexual violence against them, by inaccurately claiming that LGBTQ+ people commit disproportionately high rates of sexual violence. Anti-LGBTQ+ entities have used claims of sexual violence as justification to oppress in consistent contexts spanning several centuries and across multiple nations.

There has also been widespread sexual violence at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels perpetrated against LGBTQ+ people due to these claims of sexual violence. This case study explores the use of SORVO in the UK and former

UK colonies as a legacy of colonization. Sample countries include England, India, the United States, Canada, and Australia. These nations will be referred to as “settler-states” when discussed collectively for clarity purposes.

## Systemic Oppression

The first narrative that anti-LGBTQ+ forces establish to implement SORVO tactics is the claim that LGBTQ+ people commit high rates of sexual violence. Demonizing LGBTQ+ people for sexual impropriety is already a common tactic of homophobia and transphobia because sexuality and gender are built into the identities of the oppressed. Those outside the heterosexual and cisgender identity norm of heteropatriarchy are already considered deviant under this structure. Therefore, anti-LGBTQ+ entities can easily manipulate the narrative to connect sexual “deviance” with sexual aggression.

In India, the masses widely consider the *hijras* to be representatives of transgender and gender nonconforming identity. Prior to British colonization, they were highly regarded members of society, recognized as bridges between men and women.<sup>71</sup> However, in 1871, the anti-LGBTQ+ colonial government established the Criminal Tribes Act classifying *hijras* as inherently immoral and a threat to the natural order. This law created a legacy of transphobia that lasts in India today.<sup>72</sup>

Most recently, in the United States, baseless accusations began circling with renewed vigor in

<sup>69</sup> Ben Westcott, “The Homophobic Legacy of the British Empire,” CNN, September 12, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/11/asia/british-empire-lgbt-rights-section-377-intl/index.html>.

<sup>70</sup> Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Narrative,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 388, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>.

<sup>71</sup> Zoya Sameen, “Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra c. 1850-1900,” *Journal of Social History* 54, no. 3 (2021), 982.

<sup>72</sup> Onni Gust, “Hyperbole and Horror: Hijras and the British Imperial State in India,” *Notches* (blog), January 6, 2014, <https://notchesblog.com/2014/01/06/hyperbole-and-horror-hijras-and-the-british-imperial-state-in-india/>.

2021 that LGBTQ+ people are pedophiles who are “grooming” children. Conservative pundits Christopher Rufo and James Lindsay firmly pushed these claims to justify the oppressive “Don’t Say Gay” bill put forward in Florida at the time.<sup>73</sup>

So-called “anti-sodomy” laws are perhaps the most explicit example of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and inherently accompany rhetoric that demonizes members of this community through baseless, sexualized fear-mongering. Of the 71 countries around the world in which same-sex relations remain illegal, more than half derive from former British colonies or protectorates.<sup>74</sup> In most of these countries, legislation outlawing consensual gay sex was inherited from British rule and left in place following independence. This legacy demonstrates the global reach of anti-LGBTQ+ narratives, which are effective in part due to the false claims that LGBTQ+ people are a sexual threat to society.

Anti-LGBTQ+ entities use this propaganda to justify the oppression of LGBTQ+ people through avenues of control, surveillance, imprisonment, and other violent acts. Controlling members of this group is often done through legislation. Anti-LGBTQ+ legislation occurs globally regarding marriage, adoption, healthcare, and cohabitation. Repercussions of these laws and the culture they create result in surveillance and policing of LGBTQ+ life in public spaces. For example, a 2017 Stonewall survey found that 38% of LGBTQ+ people in the UK avoided holding hands

in public for fear of violence. This number rose to 58% among respondents who identified as gay men.<sup>75</sup> This fear is due to increased scrutiny by the broader public on LGBTQ+ individuals and their subsequent inability to show affection safely. Importantly, this surveillance is a violation of privacy in relationships and gender expression.

In the United States, members of the LGBTQ+ community are incarcerated at a rate three times higher than that of the total adult population.<sup>76</sup> This disproportionality is significant because gay marriage and varying degrees of gender expression are currently legal, but there exists a legacy of criminalization of this group. Members of marginalized groups tend to experience more police contact and violence due to existing stereotypes that categorize non-normative identities as criminal. People with these vulnerable identities are also less likely to be believed when reporting instances of police abuse and misconduct, which perpetuates a cycle of underreporting.<sup>77</sup>

Discrimination through individual prejudice, structural homophobia, and transphobia has had devastating consequences. In the United States, a 2013 survey conducted by the American Psychiatric Association found that 82% of transgender youth have considered death by suicide and 40% have attempted it.<sup>78</sup> Individuals who identify as gay or lesbian are twice as likely to be victims of violent crime than heterosexual people.<sup>79</sup> Since the beginning of the AIDS epidemic in 1981, which has disproportionately

<sup>73</sup> Center on Extremism, “What Is ‘Grooming?’ The Truth Behind the Dangerous, Bigoted Lie Targeting the LGBTQ+ Community,” ADL (blog), September 16, 2022, <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/what-grooming-truth-behind-dangerous-bigoted-lie-targeting-lgbtq-community>.

<sup>74</sup> Westcott, “The Homophobic Legacy of the British Empire.”

<sup>75</sup> Alexander Maine, “Perceptions of Violence and the Self-Regulation of Identity for LGBTQ People in the UK,” *The Journal of Criminal Law* 86, no. 2 (2022): 61, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220183221086384>.

<sup>76</sup> Alexi Jones, “Visualizing the Unequal Treatment of LGBTQ People in the Criminal Justice System,” Prison Policy Initiative, March 2, 2021, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/03/02/lgbtq/>.

<sup>77</sup> Tia Sherée Gaynor and Brandi Blessett, “Predatory Policing, Intersectional Subjection, and the Experiences of LGBTQ People of Color in New Orleans,” *Urban Affairs Review* 58, no. 5 (2021): 1307, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10780874211017289>.

<sup>78</sup> Ashley Austin, et al, “Suicidality Among Transgender Youth: Elucidating the Role of Interpersonal Risk Factors,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37, no. 5-6 (2020): NP2697, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520915554>.

<sup>79</sup> Jennifer L. Morgan and Rachel E. Truman, “Violent Victimization by Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, 2017–2020,” Bureau of Justice Statistics, June, 2022, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/violent-victimization-sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-2017-2020>.

affected LGBTQ+ individuals, an estimated 40.4 million people have died from the disease globally.<sup>80</sup>

Acts of sexual violence perpetrated against LGBTQ+ people occur at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels because the heteronormative population holds the power. This vulnerability compounds the potential for violence, ranging from instances of rape and sexual assault to legislation banning gender-affirming care and so-called “anti-sodomy” laws. The sheer volume of actions considered sexual violence constitutes systemic oppression.



## Reverse Victim and Offender

### Exaggerate, Sensationalize, Falsify, Redefine

SORVO is employed by anti-LGBTQ+ society through, among other strategies, a campaign of atrocity propaganda. The tactic of reversing who is the victim and who is the offender in the context of sexual violence and LGBTQ+ people requires the false narrative that LGBTQ+ people are excessive perpetrators of sexual violence. Anti-LGBTQ+ entities accomplish this by exaggerating, sensationalizing, redefining, and/or falsifying accounts of sexual violence by LGBTQ+ people. It is effective because the public is motivated by fear and anger when the reporting is intentionally shocking in nature.

Using SORVO, settler-states have formulated

atrocity propaganda surrounding LGBTQ+ people on a global scale. In particular, depicting this population as sexually violent has proved an effective method for justifying their oppression in the gaze of broader society. This narrative also essentially reverses the plight of LGBTQ+ people, casting them as aggressors in public discourse.

One method of creating atrocity propaganda is to exaggerate the rates of sexual violence perpetrated by LGBTQ+ people and to identify all LGBTQ+ people as collectively responsible for sexual violence. Although individual instances do occur, there is no evidence to suggest that members of this group commit higher levels of sexual violence than those outside it. However, anti-LGBTQ+ entities put forward a concerted effort to create a narrative that this is the case.

Gay and lesbian individuals are  
**2X** as likely to be victims  
of violent crime than  
heterosexual people.

At the height of the Cold War, the Canadian government began a campaign that would later be known as the “purge”. The government put a series of policies in place to remove LGBTQ+ individuals from public service jobs, including the military, under widespread accusations that they were “perverts” and “suffered a character weakness and were therefore a major security threat”.<sup>81</sup> This is a form of exaggeration that paints LGBTQ+ people as morally weak. While not a direct accusation of sexual violence, it still implies that the non-LGBTQ+ members of the

<sup>80</sup> “Global HIV & AIDS Statistics - Fact Sheet,” UNAIDS, n.d., <https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/fact-sheet>.

<sup>81</sup> Jillian Kestler-D'Amours, “Canada Apologizes for Historical LGBT ‘Purge,’” Al Jazeera, November 28, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/28/canada-apologises-for-historical-lgbt-purge>.

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public are in danger simply by being in proximity to LGBTQ+ individuals. Positioning the entire LGBTQ+ community as a collective threat would lead to thousands of people losing their jobs and Canada's federal police force putting thousands more LGBTQ+ people under surveillance. When a discharged soldier died by suicide as a result of this policy, his sister stated:

“

*“He was traumatized... They (the Canadian military) made him believe that he was a pervert ... That he could never be trusted with anything or anyone.”<sup>82</sup>*

”

Exaggerating the likelihood of LGBTQ+ people committing sexual violence or being a public threat leads to collective blame and scapegoating. In this case, the Canadian government did not put forward any evidence that LGBTQ+ people were a threat to national security but used the false stereotypes surrounding them to justify their oppression.

Opponents of LGBTQ+ rights also make a concerted effort to sensationalize any acts of sexual violence perpetrated by LGBTQ+ people, portraying the acts emotionally, vividly, and frequently. Hypersexualization and fetishization of LGBTQ+ people are common, which often reduces individuals to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, effectively dehumanizing them. This tactic effectively shapes public discourse by pushing the narrative that LGBTQ+ people are sexually deviant; by associating them solely with sex, society disregards their humanity. This vilification makes the project of denying their victimhood more palatable.



Figure 11. Photograph of Anita Bryant at a press conference for her campaign Save Our Children. She argued that LGBTQ+ people were promiscuous, that LGBTQ+ rights corrupted children, and made unsubstantiated accusations that gay men committed child sexual abuse. (“Anti LGBTQ+ Activism,” Women & the American Story, 2024).

Anti-LGBTQ+ entities employ SORVO by redefining consensual sexual acts or acts that are not sexual at all as sexual violence. For example, oppressive forces consistently push forward the narrative that LGBTQ+ people are a sexual threat to children, the nuclear family, and heterosexual, cisgender women. In the US, falsely and maliciously linking homosexuality with pedophilia is a modern trope that has existed since colonization.

In the 1970s, singer Anita Byrant furthered her anti-gay activist campaign with her “Save Our Children” initiative (see Figure 11).<sup>83</sup> Implying a link between homosexuality and pedophilia was an intentional effort to criminalize homosexuality,

<sup>82</sup> Kestler-D'Amours, “Canada Apologizes for Historical LGBT ‘Purge’.”

<sup>83</sup> Melissa Block, “Accusations of ‘Grooming’ Are the Latest Political Attack — With Homophobic Origins,” NPR, May 11, 2022, <sup>82</sup> Kestler-D'Amours, “Canada Apologizes for Historical LGBT ‘Purge’.”

and to justify the oppression of gay people, by baselessly accusing them of heinous crimes. Bryant's campaign also led directly to a California ballot initiative in 1978 to ban gay people from teaching in public schools.<sup>84</sup>

These ideas continue today, with renewed interest in banning drag shows, books with LGBTQ+ themes, and gender studies programs— a cascade of events that was set off, in part, by Anita Bryant's utilization of SORVO tactics. The rhetoric reflects the same atrocity propaganda and “moral panic” of LGBTQ+ sexuality, falsely equating it to sexual violence and predatory tendencies against children. Much of the discourse surrounding this issue uses the term “grooming” to describe interactions between LGBTQ+ people and children. Grooming refers to adults taking advantage of children's vulnerability and coercing them into sexual acts.<sup>85</sup> Accusing LGBTQ+ people of this behavior is harmful, malicious, and almost always untrue. It effectively positions LGBTQ+ as offenders and non-LGBTQ+ people as victims, which is a false narrative.

Many of the accounts of sexual violence perpetrated by LGBTQ+ people are outright falsehoods peddled to demonize them and make them the “offenders” in the SORVO effort. One such example is the baseless suggestion that transgender women are a sexual threat to cisgender women in public bathrooms. The storyline is that transgender women are not, in fact, women but men who are intent on praying upon women in bathrooms (see Figure 12).

Despite the lack of evidence to support it, this narrative has taken hold and become a tool for

spreading fear of transgender individuals, resulting in oppressive actions against the transgender community. Measures range from anti-transgender bathroom legislation to interpersonal acts of violence against transgender women. This example demonstrates that transphobic propaganda has been used to justify serious harm despite the false and baseless nature of the threats.



Figure 12. Photograph of a man standing in a campaign t-shirt, holding a campaign sign - both read “NO Men in Women's Bathrooms: Vote NO on Houston's Prop #1” referring to an ordinance that would protect transgender people's ability to use the bathroom consistent with their gender identity. (“Houston ‘Bathroom Bill’: Voters Reject LGBT Ordinance,” BBC News, November 4, 2015).

The reality is there is no evidence to suggest that members of the LGBTQ+ community are more likely to be perpetrators of sexual violence. Moreover, any sexual violence that does occur is perpetrated at the individual level only because LGBTQ+ people do not hold institutional or systemic power in heteronormative societies. However, spreading disinformation and creating a narrative that this group is dangerous (in particular, a threat of sexual violence) shifts the public perspective and positions LGBTQ+ people

<sup>84</sup> Block, “Accusations of ‘Grooming’ Are the Latest Political Attack — With Homophobic Origins.”

<sup>85</sup> Helen Whittle, Catherine Hamilton-Giachritsis, Anthony Beech, and Guy Collings, “A Review of Online Grooming: Characteristics and Concerns,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 18, no. 1, (2013): 62. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1359178912001097>

as the enemy. This frame sets up non-LGBTQ+ society as the “victim”, defending itself from an outside threat; ultimately, this positioning justifies the oppression of LGBTQ+ individuals.

## Deny, Omit, Erase, De-define

Anti-LGBTQ+ entities have an interest in minimizing the public’s understanding of the sexual violence perpetrated against the LGBTQ+ community. To do this, they deny, omit, erase, or de-define their acts of sexual violence. This strategy is significant because sexual violence is perpetrated at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels against members of the LGBTQ+ community, constituting systemic oppression. However, rendering these instances invisible or insignificant advances the anti-LGBTQ+ agenda to establish itself as the innocent party defending itself against LGBTQ+ people. This demonstration shows how anti-LGBTQ+ entities use SORVO to perpetuate the reversal of victim and offender in this context.

Australia has a long history of conflict between police and members of the LGBTQ+ community. This discord is compounded by denial on behalf of law enforcement to the extent of the problem. In 1978, members of the Gay Solidarity Group marched in Sydney on Mardi Gras, the ninth anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising in the United States, a resistance led by Black trans women against police brutality in the US in the 1960’s.<sup>86,87</sup> The police blockaded the march and arrested participants, resulting in numerous accounts of police brutality. Since then, the police have marched annually with the Mardi Gras

parade as a gesture of solidarity and apology to the LGBTQ+ community.

However, many LGBTQ+ people have been calling out for years that there is continued abuse in their communities by law enforcement agencies. Reports suggest a particular lack of attention to gay hate crimes and continued incidents of police misconduct at the annual Mardi Gras parades.<sup>88</sup> In early 2024, a police officer was arrested for the murder of a gay couple after allegedly stalking them for weeks, sparking renewed outrage in the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>89</sup>

Leaders in LGBTQ+ rights organizations have called for the police not to march in the parade and to focus on addressing the harm done to the community. However, Australian police still insist on their presence at Mardi Gras. This is one example of denial in the execution of SORVO. By denying the true nature of the problem—negligence and outright abuses perpetrated by police against LGBTQ+ people—law enforcement can continue their surveillance and unwanted presence in the parade. This performative action depicts them as the innocent party, which absolves themselves of the abuses they commit.

The media, policy makers, and data-collection entities in settler-states often omit acts of sexual violence against LGBTQ+ people. The omission of these instances has rippling effects, including a lack of funding to combat these problems and gaps in legal protections. For example, in India, there is currently no law to protect transgender people from sexual harassment in the workplace.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>86</sup> “A Civil Rights Milestone,” Australia’s Defining Moments Digital Classroom, n.d., <https://digital-classroom.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/first-gay-mardi-gras>.

<sup>87</sup> Library of Congress, “1969: The Stonewall Uprising—LGBTQIA+ Studies: A Resource Guide,” Research Guides at the Library of Congress, <https://guides.loc.gov/lgbtq-studies/stonewall-era>.

<sup>88</sup> Jordyn Beazley and Luca Ittimani, “A Lot of Hurt and Anger”: How the Queer Community Feels Let Down by NSW Police,” The Guardian, February 27, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/feb/27/a-lot-of-hurt-and-anger-how-the-queer-community-feels-let-down-by-nsw-police>.

<sup>89</sup> Beazley and Ittimani, “A Lot of Hurt and Anger.”

<sup>90</sup> Ankush Kumar, “Indian Supreme Court Declines to Include LGBTQ People in Sexual Harassment Law,” Washington Blade, November 27, 2023, <https://www.washingtonblade.com/2023/11/27/indian-supreme-court-declines-to-include-lgbtq-people-in-sexual-harassment-law/>.

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As a result, 56% of LGBTQ+ people reported discrimination in white-collar jobs. Forty percent of survey respondents from an Indian LGBT Workplace Climate Survey in 2016 said they experienced harassment at work. In particular, transgender individuals reported high levels of discrimination, with 92% reporting being denied a position by employers due to their gender identity.

**92%**

of transgender individuals reported job denial due to gender identity.<sup>91</sup>

Importantly, these exclusions and the omission of legal workplace protections for LGBTQ+ individuals affect India's standing in the world. Not only does it alienate the country politically from partnerships with more progressive nations, but its exclusion of LGBTQ+ people from the workforce causes an estimated 1-1.7% loss of GDP.<sup>92</sup> In the context of SORVO, these omissions contribute to reframing the narrative. Keeping LGBTQ+ people out of the workforce is a form of systemic oppression, but simply omitting them from legal protections (rather than explicitly outlining suppressive policies) allows India's leadership deniability. Those in power must maintain the appearance of innocence to simultaneously depict themselves as the "victims" of a so-called LGBTQ+ agenda.

The method of anti-LGBTQ+ forces erasing evidence of their sexual violence against LGBTQ+

people is, by its very nature, impossible to quantify. However, mainstream education has largely erased the history of conversion therapy in the United States, and reports on its continued practice today are scarce. Many, if not all, of the tactics used in this practice can be considered forms of sexual violence.

Conversion therapy has a long history, but it became popularized in mainstream society following Sigmund Freud's interest in homosexuality early in the 20th century. His theory— that everyone is born bisexual and socialization leads to either homosexuality or heterosexuality—led to a longstanding practice of attempting to "cure" homosexual people and turn them heterosexual.<sup>93</sup>

Throughout the twentieth century in the United States, conversion therapy exacted sexual violence under medical or religious pretense. Conduct included electroconvulsive treatment, lobotomies, forcible chemical ingestion, and forced sexual contact.<sup>94</sup> Although the most extreme of these practices are now illegal, contemporary conversion therapy still contains methods such as exposure to sexually explicit materials and imposing various levels of "discomfort", such as fasting, on participants. It is important to note that many minors are forced into so-called conversion therapy against their will by their parents or religious leaders.<sup>95</sup>

Only thirteen states have outlawed conversion therapy, and its ongoing practice is broadly erased from the national conversation.<sup>96</sup> This erasure is significant because it is a form of sexual violence that many anti-LGBTQ+ leaders support but are

<sup>91</sup> Ankush Kumar, "Indian Supreme Court Declines to Include LGBTQ People in Sexual Harassment Law."

<sup>92</sup> Ankush Kumar, "Indian Supreme Court Declines to Include LGBTQ People in Sexual Harassment Law."

<sup>93</sup> Erin Blakemore, "Gay Conversion Therapy's Disturbing 19th-Century Origins," History, last modified August 23, 2023, <https://www.history.com/news/gay-conversion-therapy-origins-19th-century>.

<sup>94</sup> Blakemore, "Gay Conversion Therapy's Disturbing 19th-Century Origins."

<sup>95</sup> "GLAAD Media Reference Guide - In Focus: "Conversion Therapy", GLAAD, n.d., <https://glaad.org/reference/conversion-therapy/>.

<sup>96</sup> Blakemore, "Gay Conversion Therapy's Disturbing 19th-Century Origins."

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not held accountable for. Erasing this practice results in the settler-state enjoying the benefits of appearing innocent of wrongdoing. Therefore, when painting LGBTQ+ people as a threat to society, reports of sexual violence perpetrated against LGBTQ+ individuals are minimized.

The final method anti-LGBTQ+ entities use to appear as the innocent victims of LGBTQ+ encroachment or violence is to de-define their own actions, meaning they do not define their actions of sexual violence as such. The removal of the sexual violence label is often the case when violence occurs at the institutional or systemic levels.

For example, legislation banning gender-affirming care for transgender and nonbinary individuals is a form of systemic sexual violence. However, it is rarely described in these terms. Cisgender individuals pass laws that deny healthcare in this manner, and these actions have lasting effects on members of the transgender community. De-defining this, or reframing the practice as something other than sexual violence, is a method for absolving legislators of their oppressive actions. Furthermore, anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric often describes the banning of gender-affirming care as “protecting children”. This verbiage clearly reverses victim and offender, creating a false scenario in which transgender identity is the threat, and cisgender individuals are potential victims.

In reality, anti-LGBTQ+ states globally perpetrate sexual violence against LGBTQ+ people at high rates. This occurrence is partly due to the nature of sexual orientation and gender identity as particularly aligned with sex. Since society ties identities to sexuality and gender, violence

against LGBTQ+ groups is often sexual in nature. Furthermore, members of the LGBTQ+ community hold no institutional or systemic power. Therefore, LGBTQ+ individuals cannot commit sexual violence at institutional and systemic levels—only at the individual level. However, sexual violence perpetrated against them happens at all levels – systemic, institutional, and individual.

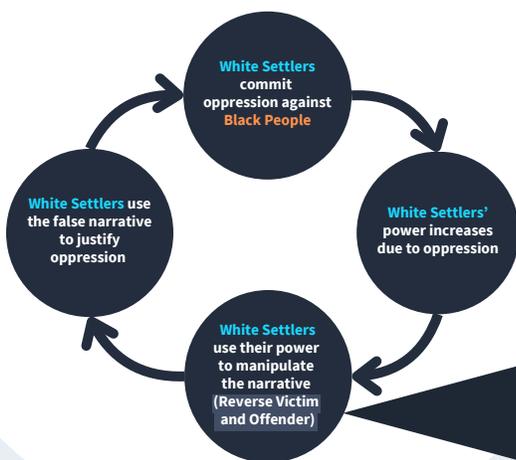
# CASE STUDY: APARTHEID



# CASE STUDY: APARTHEID

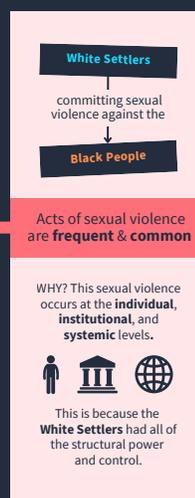
Please note, the language in this infographic has been simplified. While the core information is presented accurately, some content may have been condensed or reworded for brevity.

## Systemic Oppression



## Reverse Victim & Offender

### Reality



### Narrative Manipulation

The **White Settlers** shifts the narrative using the following tactics:



### False Narrative



## Narrative Manipulation Tactics

**Deny**  
Oppressive Group denies committing sexual violence against Oppressed Group.



**Exaggerate**  
Oppressed Group's acts of sexual violence against Oppressive Group are overblown, inflated, or outsized.



**Omit**  
Oppressive Group controls the narrative and omits their sexual violence against Oppressed Group.



**Sensationalize**  
Oppressed Group's acts of sexual violence against Oppressive Group are portrayed emotionally, vividly, and covered frequently.



**Erase**  
Oppressive Group erases evidence of their sexual violence against Oppressed Group by destroying evidence, killing witnesses, silencing reporters, and discrediting reports.



**Falsify**  
Oppressed Group's acts of sexual violence against Oppressive Group are fabricated, vague, and baseless.



**De-Define**  
Oppressive Group's acts of sexual violence against Oppressed Group are not defined as sexual violence.



**Re-Define**  
Oppressed Group's non-sexual acts or consensual sexual acts are redefined as sexual violence.



**A**partheid is a system of legalized segregation and deprivation of civil and political rights based on race. First conceptualized in South Africa during the 20th century, apartheid aimed to separate the minority white population from the majority Black population.<sup>97</sup> The justification of apartheid was on racial and settler-colonial grounds, with the white claim to authority being their European heritage. The apartheid system relied on patriarchal domination and aggression by the white minority to subject and control Black people.

Sexual assault in apartheid South Africa was common for both white and Black women; however, sexual violence against white women was the only offense prosecuted under the law. Violence against Black women was so common that it was understood to be a fact of life. This section will explore the application of SORVO in apartheid South Africa to dissect these dynamics of sexual violence and others as methods to justify oppression.



## Systemic Oppression

Under apartheid, white people claimed that Black people committed high rates of sexual violence. White people then used this falsehood to justify the oppressive conditions of apartheid, including policies to control, surveil, imprison, and remove Black people from their land. This oppression also included sexual violence at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels perpetrated by white people against Black people. Notably, the oppressions that occurred under apartheid

were both conditions of vigilante racist violence committed by the public and legal policies of subjugation. These motivations – control, surveillance, imprisonment, and removal – were deeply rooted in racism and fear stoked by settler colonialism.

Organizing a society by race in a hierarchical manner where white people are in the highest positions of power is a distinctly colonial project for economic and political gain. In the case of apartheid South Africa, segregation was a method of carrying out systemic oppression through control of the populations based on race (see Figure 13).



Figure 13. Poster titled “Anyone disobeying these laws will be imprisoned, fined, and/or whipped” issued by the Anti-Apartheid Movement in London, England in 1971. (Poster by the Anti-Apartheid Movement, London, 1971).

<sup>97</sup>“Apartheid,” Legal Information Institute. Cornell Law School, n.d., <https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/apartheid>.

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The conditions of apartheid began following the abolition of slavery in South Africa in 1863. This period coincided with the discovery of diamonds and gold within the country. White settlers sought opportunities to make a profit from these resources and found loopholes in the abolition laws to employ Black workers for little to no money. Mining companies relied on intimidation and discrimination to maintain order, as well as a set of laws known as “pass laws”.<sup>98</sup> These laws required people of color in the country to carry identification papers at all times and restricted their movements to certain areas, including where they could settle. These practices forced Black people to reside in places where their labor would benefit white settlers.<sup>99</sup>

After South Africa gained its sovereignty within the British empire in 1934, Afrikaaner nationalist groups slowly took control of the country, spreading their white supremacy ideology further into the mainstream. This transition of power and the official reign of apartheid as it is known today began, and the center point of this movement was an increase in surveillance of Black populations. “Pass laws” were expanded, communities actualized strict segregation through identification papers, and police presence increased in Black communities (see Figure 14). This history is vital to understanding how white society came to accept apartheid in South Africa. It was gradual and accompanied by a long-standing campaign of disinformation about the violence of Black people and the need for their surveillance and suppression.



Figure 14. Photograph of a woman holding her “interior passport” required to enter Cape Town during work hours. (Photograph by Alain Nogue, September 1984, Guguletu, South Africa,

The myth of the sexually aggressive Black man was tantamount to the success of this propaganda; the notion that Black people were a threat justified oppression repeatedly for decades, leading to the codification of apartheid into law in the 20th century.

The white political leaders during apartheid put forward a propaganda campaign to establish a narrative portraying Black people as sexually aggressive. Though this stereotype was baseless, it worked

<sup>98</sup> Blakemore, “The Harsh Reality of Life Under Apartheid in South Africa.”

<sup>99</sup> Blakemore, “The Harsh Reality of Life Under Apartheid in South Africa.”

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effectively to garner fear among the white population. Leadership then used this fear as justification to further oppress Black South Africans through methods of control, surveillance, imprisonment, and removal from their land. Although the claim that Black people were a sexual threat was false, the response of the government was significant, punitive, and legally codified. The government enacted laws with clear racialized boundaries that benefited the white population and subordinated people of color.

Between 1947 and 1969, the government under apartheid convicted 844 Black people of raping white individuals and executed 108 of them. During the same period, zero of the 288 white people convicted of rape of Black individuals were executed.<sup>100</sup> This disparity demonstrates that the racial attitudes resulted in not only indirect punishments of Black people, such as increased police surveillance but also their imprisonment and state execution at higher rates. The legacy of disparate sentencing and imprisonment rates amongst Black South Africans continues today, as Black prisoners constitute the overwhelming majority of prison populations in the country.<sup>101</sup>

As a method of control, the criminal justice system under apartheid only prosecuted the rape of white women.<sup>102</sup> This legal reality led to the social normalization of the rape of Black women as well as the appearance that white women were consistently and disproportionately targeted for sexual

assault. This portrayal also created a system that put different values on not only victims of rape but also on offenders. Under apartheid, authorities did not hang any white men for rape and executed only Black men convicted of raping white women.<sup>103</sup> This disparity points to the racialization of sex crimes and the power of the discourse surrounding sexual violence as disproportionately punishable when committed by Black men and happening to white women. This racism was both preemptively established in South African discourse and indicative of public reaction to events as they unfolded.

The criminal justice system under apartheid only prosecuted the rape of white women.<sup>102</sup>

It is imperative to understand that SORVO is not a reactionary response but rather a strategy employed to suppress a group of people. Therefore, the propaganda campaign in South Africa during apartheid surrounding sexual violence was the first step in an active process. Establishing a narrative that Black people were sexually aggressive was intentional in order to justify apartheid's oppressive conditions.

The propaganda campaign put forward by white political leaders in the country led to an increase in police surveillance in Black communities.<sup>104</sup> The rise of police presence paired with Black resistance and protesters advocated for their civil rights and an end to

<sup>100</sup> Charles J. Ogletree, "From Pretoria to Philadelphia: Judge Hgginbotham's Racial Justice Jurisprudence on South Africa and the United States," *Yale Law and Policy Review* 20, no. 2 (2002): 390, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40239585?seq=8>.

<sup>101</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Different Treatment Based On Race," in *Prison Conditions in South Africa* (1994), <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1994/southafrica/5.htm>.

<sup>102</sup> Sue Armstrong, "Rape in South Africa: An Invisible Part of Apartheid's Legacy," *Gender & Development* 2, no. 2 (2007): 35-39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09682869308520009>.

<sup>103</sup> Rebecca Davis, "How Rape Became South Africa's Enduring Nightmare," *The Guardian*, September 29, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/29/south-africa-rape-nightmare-crime-stats>.

<sup>104</sup> Erin Blakemore, "The Harsh Reality of Life Under Apartheid in South Africa," *History*, last modified August 1, 2023, <https://www.history.com/news/apartheid-policies-photos-nelson-mandela>.

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apartheid. Each of these forces continued to escalate in violence as police cracked down on protesters and protesters fought back. However, outside of this dynamic, slanted reporting told the white public across the country only of the rise of violence in Black communities. This misrepresentation stoked fears and affirmed the response of more policing.

The narrative established in South Africa under apartheid that Black people (and Black men in particular) were a sexual threat, could also be found in segregationist language surrounding miscegenation laws. The Mixed Marriage Act of 1949 was considered the first official law of South Africa's apartheid regime.<sup>105</sup> This law criminalized interracial marriage. The fact that the first law in the official context of apartheid regarded sexual conduct suggests that there was a concerted effort to lay the groundwork for establishing this threat.

The anti-miscegenation laws made it illegal for a Black man to engage with a white woman, removing the consideration of consent altogether. Therefore, any relationship between the two could be interpreted as sexual violence and prosecuted as a crime under the law. Furthermore, the Mixed Marriage Act deepened the collective understanding of segregation. While the movement, settlement, and access Black people had to certain public spaces had become commonly regulated, this law was about controlling *behavior* in private spaces. This is a natural escalation for oppressive entities to execute SORVO because systemic oppression based on false claims of sexual

violence is often reflected in the oppressor's access to the victims' private lives.

The oppression of Black people under apartheid in South Africa included sexual violence upon them at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels. This victimization is reflected in individual instances of rape of Black victims, institutional policies that led to disproportionate sentencing and imprisonment of Black people, and state surveillance of Black communities, including the regulation of their sexual behavior.



## Reverse Victim and Offender

### Exaggerate, Sensationalize, Falsify, Redefine

Under apartheid, white political leaders and media exaggerated, sensationalized, redefined, or outright falsified any instances of sexual violence perpetrated by Black South Africans upon the white population. This portrayal amplified the existing fears among white people that Black South Africans were a threat to them. By establishing this narrative, white people could view themselves as the victim, reversing the role of victim and offender.

The colonizing group, holding all of the political power, twisted the reality using (often falsified) cases of sexual violence as their justification. Moreover, because Black

<sup>105</sup> Laura Moutinho, "Condemned by Desire: Miscegenation, Gender, and Eroticism in South Africa's Immorality Act," *Social Dynamics* 49, no. 1 (2023): 130, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2023.2195216>.

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people had no political power under apartheid, any instances of sexual violence that did occur were at the individual level. In contrast, sexual violence was perpetrated upon them at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels.

In 1912, George Webb Hardy wrote *Black Peril*, a propaganda-filled novel that described the importance of anti-miscegenation policies to preserve white purity. This book became an essential piece of literature stoking the fear of Black men raping white women, primarily adopted by white men.<sup>106</sup> In time, the novel's title became synonymous with this unfounded fear. In reality, "Black Peril" likely reflected tensions within white settler-colonial society surrounding economics and gender more so than any actual increase in sexual violence.<sup>107</sup> The importance of white men in this narrative cannot be overstated. As members of the top of the social, political, and economic hierarchy, white men in South Africa controlled the public discourse. They had the power to oppress all others in accordance with this narrative.



Figure 15. Photograph taken in Apartheid South Africa of two South Africans walking past a sign that reads "Caution Beware of Natives." (Erin Blakemore, "The Harsh Reality of Life Under Apartheid in South Africa," *History*, last modified August 1, 2023).

Another SORVO tool in painting Black men as sexual predators was sensationalizing any instances of sexual violence that did occur to stoke fears and spread panic through white South Africa. Sexual violence perpetrated by Black people was portrayed emotionally, vividly, and covered frequently. White readership papers mainly reported rape involving white women and Black men.

This emphasis simultaneously erased Black women as victims and white men as perpetrators, positioning them each in distinct lights. The lack of attention to Black women increased their risk of victimhood and devalued them further. The erasure of white men from rape reporting positioned them in a positive light— not men who could carry out sexual assaults. This one-dimensional reporting led the white public to believe that the most significant threat was Black assailants who violated white women.

Furthermore, coverage of these individual rapes included standard features: graphic reporting, excessive violent descriptions, and voyeuristic language.<sup>108</sup> This approach fed into atrocity propaganda, or adding shock value to incidents to inflate the emotional response of the readers. The increase in fear among white South Africans positioned them as the victims and convinced the white public that Black people should be disenfranchised, policed, and oppressed in order to keep them from assaulting white women. Atrocity propaganda is a powerful tool because public panic spreads quickly and is difficult to quell. White leadership, particularly white men, used this to justify apartheid's oppressive policies.

<sup>106</sup> Gareth Cornwell, "George Webb Hardy's *The Black Peril* and the Social Meaning of 'Black Peril' in Early Twentieth-Century South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 22, no. 3 (1996): 441, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057079608708504>

<sup>107</sup> Cornwell, "George Webb Hardy's *The Black Peril* and the Social Meaning of 'Black Peril' in Early Twentieth-Century South Africa."

<sup>108</sup> Emily Bridger and Erin Hazan, "Surfeit and Silence: Sexual Violence in the Apartheid Archive," *African Studies* 81, no. 3-4 (2022): 290, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00020184.2023.2212606>.

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A case involving an affair between a white military officer and a Black doctor in 1969 was allegedly discovered by government agencies when four police officers saw them through the window of their home. Both parties were prosecuted under “Immorality Laws”, effectively criminalizing a consensual act and justifying police surveillance of citizens’ private lives. The white military officer was quoted in the newspaper article (see Figure 16) criticizing apartheid:

“

“We have been made to look like criminals for what is not a crime in any other country.”<sup>109</sup>

”

Redefining consensual relationships as sexual violence or morally threatening to broader society is an effective tool used by oppressive groups to position themselves as inherently superior and the oppressed as a threat to that order.

Throughout apartheid, sexual violence perpetrated by Black people was not only exaggerated, sensationalized, and redefined, but white-run media entities and political leaders often outright fabricated these stories to further their agenda. Many claims have since been tagged as vague or completely baseless.

Hardy’s *Black Peril* actively sought to vindicate a set of ideas about sexual assaults by Black men on white women in the real world, amplifying the discussion of “fear of potential rape” in South Africa. The novel was

entirely fictional, but existing fears led to public panic, and the use of this work as validation for such panic. In reality, the claim that there was an increase in or disproportionate number of sexual assaults by Black men on white women was baseless, as there are no reputable statistics to support it.



Figure 16. A newspaper clipping from the San Francisco Chronicle discussing the immorality act in South Africa during apartheid: “The immorality act bans sex across the color line.” (Newspaper clip from the San Francisco Chronicle, “Immorality’ in South Africa,” April 10, 1969).

Since SORVO describes a systemic project, it is noteworthy that Black people held no systemic power under apartheid. Therefore, any sexual violence that did occur was only at the individual level. In contrast, white South

<sup>109</sup> “Immorality’ in South Africa,” San Francisco Chronicle, April 10, 1969, [https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/BUBEDX614938589/WMNS?u=rau\\_itw&sid=bookmark-WMNS&xid=45d8d310&pg=1](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/BUBEDX614938589/WMNS?u=rau_itw&sid=bookmark-WMNS&xid=45d8d310&pg=1).

# CASE STUDY: APARTHEID



Africans committed sexual violence against Black people at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels.

## Deny, Omit, Erase, De-define

Although there were widespread occurrences of sexual violence perpetrated against Black people under apartheid, white South African media and political leaders denied, omitted, erased, and de-defined their acts of sexual violence. The power held by media companies and political leaders demonstrated their ease in reversing victim and offender. Using SORVO as a tool for justifying oppression, the oppressive group maintained deniability as the aggressor. The power of SORVO then resulted in such a profound reversal that the oppressive group depicted themselves as the oppressed. Absolving themselves of any wrongdoing and minimizing the coverage of sexual violence perpetrated was one method employed to achieve the desired narrative.

Under apartheid, the propaganda stating Black men were predatory (and white men were not) became widely believed; white women were likely victims, and Black women were either deemed responsible for their own assaults or left out of discourse altogether. While oversimplified and overstressed in its brevity, it is vital to understand that the public narrative among white South Africans reflected this general dynamic. While there is little evidence of white men denying committing sexual violence, their standing in the social hierarchy would have put them in a position to do so effectively. Furthermore, the social perception of rape in South Africa

in the early 20th century was defined differently by colonists than in modern South Africa. The public considered a man forcing himself on a woman (regardless of either party's race) as more commonplace and acceptable since women generally had fewer rights to bodily autonomy than men.<sup>110</sup>

As established, media manipulation is a key component of oppression, and white colonists controlled the media under apartheid. It is impossible to quantify just how many instances of sexual violence perpetrated upon Black people were omitted from the accounts. Notably, this issue has still received little academic attention to correct the record.<sup>111</sup> Without enough information, the public may never know the total number of sexual assaults committed against Black people during apartheid. This lack of knowledge is a powerful tool in media manipulation and reversing the roles of victim and offender, with repercussions extending to today.

The public may never know the total number of sexual assaults committed against Black people during apartheid.

Apartheid in South Africa saw an outsized amount of power delegated to police, who were responsible for enforcing segregationist laws. The South African Police Service, known colloquially as SAPS, was notorious for dehumanizing and abusing Black

<sup>110</sup> Emily Bridger, "Apartheid's 'Rape Crisis': Understanding and Addressing Sexual Violence in South Africa, 1970s-1990s," *Women's History Review* 33, no. 2 (2024): 268, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2023.2219535>.

<sup>111</sup> Bridger and Hazan, "Surfeit and Silence: Sexual Violence in the Apartheid Archive," 289.

<sup>112</sup> D Singh, "'Violators and Victims': A Historical Review of Policing in South Africa After a Decade of Democracy," *Acta Criminologica* 17, no. 3 (2004): 86-98, <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/violators-and-victims-historical-review-policing-south-africa-after>.

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citizens.<sup>112</sup> Included in police abuses of power was the use of sexual violence by officers and the dismissal of sexual violence complaints brought forward by Black women. Police stations were known for being flagrantly hostile to Black women and outright ignoring their claims of sexual assault or domestic violence. There are also multiple accounts of law enforcement assaulting women, which would constitute institutional sexual violence.<sup>113</sup> Police used their authority or racial privilege to violate women— a form of power only available because of existing power imbalances under apartheid conditions. Notably, Black South Africans (who were not members of the police force) did not hold the political power to participate in institutional or systemic sexual violence during this time. Given the substantial nature of the SAPS entity, its power regularly went unchecked. This deficiency allowed the agency to act virtually unimpeded as they ignored complaints of sexual violence or perpetrated it themselves. In the context of SORVO, this is a form of erasure.

Following this logic, white South Africans erased evidence of their complicity in sexual violence as well as their outright participation. Without a clear record of police involvement in this problem, the white leadership in South Africa could continue to cast themselves and the SAPS as pure forces for good. This depiction is vital for setting up the “reverse victim and offender” position. Keeping SAPS’ image in good standing with the public allowed the agency to appear as the innocent victim of Black South African aggression.

White South African entities under apartheid could perpetrate institutional and systemic sexual violence because they held the structural power and control. Sexual violence at institutional and systemic levels is often misidentified and not accurately referred to as sexual violence in any situation. Still, oppressive groups actively de-define this violence as a tool to exercise SORVO in the interest of reversing victim and offender. Under apartheid, sexual violence occurred at the hands of the police (institutional sexual violence) as well as at the systemic level through racist laws and practices. Beyond the “racial purity” claims that led to anti-miscegenation legislation, white political leadership in South Africa regularly executed systemic sexual violence through racially motivated reproductive control. The public did not label these instances as sexual violence, but rather as necessary measures to protect white South Africans.

**White South African entities under apartheid could perpetrate institutional and systemic sexual violence because they held the structural power and control.**

Coerced or involuntary sterilization of Black women was carried out through misinformation surrounding family planning programs. While this was widespread and a relatively hidden wave of abuse, a much more concrete effort to enforce reproductive control on the Black population came about

<sup>113</sup> Bridger and Hazan, “Surfeit and Silence: Sexual Violence in the Apartheid Archive,” 287.

<sup>114</sup> “What Happened in South Africa?,” PBS, n.d., <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/plague/sa/>.

<sup>115</sup> Miles Jackson, “A Conspiracy to Commit Genocide: Anti-Fertility Research in Apartheid’s Chemical and Biological Weapons Programme,” *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 13, no. 5 (2015): 945-946, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jicj/mgv060>.

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in the 1980s. Project Coast was South Africa's top secret chemical and biological weapons program, created by the government for national security.<sup>114</sup> However, the government executed the project in a manner that would later result in calls for charges of "conspiracy to commit genocide".<sup>115</sup> The program was held responsible for disseminating toxic, chemical weapons upon Black populations. Furthermore, striking allegations of reproductive control have come forward since the project's inception. The leaders of Project Coast have been charged with using Black South Africans in "anti-fertility research". This assertion includes the secret and widespread use of a biological weapon containing an infertility toxin deployed into Black communities.<sup>116</sup> The public may never know the total number of Black South Africans sterilized under this project. This undertaking was a form of systemic sexual violence and a clear genocidal act. Furthermore, the white perpetrators of Project Coast justified this violence by citing the 1982 census, which concluded the Black population was around 45 million people. Dr. Goosen, one of the scientists on Project Coast, testified under accusations of genocide:

“

*“And the government decided that it is not feasible to make known to the public that there was 45 million Blacks. It was just too many. And this was mainly one of our big threats.”<sup>117</sup>*

”

The scientist claimed responsibility for curtailing the Black population because of the threat it posed to the “public” (understood to be the white public). This example is a clear model of SORVO. Systemic oppression, through systemic sexual violence, is justified by reversing the victim and offender. Casting Black people as a threat to white people, despite the existing oppressive entities, is a powerful tool for legitimizing genocide.

The conditions that led to the use of SORVO in South Africa under apartheid are not simply relics of the past. While apartheid has ended, existing stereotypes and consistent issues of sexual violence at all levels continue in the country. SORVO is powerful and difficult to dismantle without being clearly defined and combated by the public, the media, and political leadership.

<sup>116</sup> “What Happened in South Africa?,” PBS.

<sup>117</sup> Jackson, “A Conspiracy to Commit Genocide: Anti-Fertility Research in Apartheid’s Chemical and Biological Weapons Programme,” 936.

# Conclusion



# Conclusion

**S**ystemic Oppression, Reverse Victim and Offender, or **SORVO**, is a global framework that describes the ways in which oppressive groups use narrative manipulation to justify their oppressive actions. This is accomplished by reversing the victim and offender of sexual violence in the eyes of key stakeholders or the public at large. Oppressive groups hold power and control over the people they oppress at the systemic and institutional levels, leading to high rates of sexual violence perpetrated by oppressive groups against their oppressed targets. The oppressors obfuscate the narrative to position themselves as “victims” and the population(s) they oppress as “offenders”. In doing so, oppressive groups gain support for their acts of oppression including genocide, settler colonialism, segregation, and systemic sexual violence.

There are eight narrative manipulation tools oppressive groups use to execute **SORVO**. They deny, omit, erase, and de-define their acts of sexual violence while sensationalizing, exaggerating, falsifying, and re-defining the actions of the groups they oppress. This narrative manipulation reverses the victim and offender, thus increasing support for the oppressive group’s actions.

This paper describes the use of **SORVO** in historical and worldly contexts, including close examinations of **SORVO** during the Holocaust in German-occupied Europe, the Jim Crow era in the United States, the oppression of **LGBTQ+** individuals worldwide, and the conditions under Apartheid in South Africa.

**SORVO** is intended to be built upon for future research globally. The framework has potential applications for public policy, education, international and domestic law, and in the fields of psychology, political science, and gender studies.

Potential future projects include close examinations of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the ongoing suppression of **LGBTQ+** rights in the United States, and the response to immigration at the US-Mexico border. The purpose of this project is to introduce the **SORVO** framework so it can be identified in action and prevented in the future. This identification, paired with policy changes to prevent **SORVO**, would ultimately work to combat oppression and sexual violence at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels.



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