Berlin, December 1948: With German cities in ruins after World War II and the country's male population decimated, it fell to the women to clean up the rubble. The so-called "trummerfrauen," or "rubble women," worked with their bare hands and whatever tools they could find.

The Trummerfrauen phenomenon was launched by Allied orders requiring women between the ages of 15 and 50 to report for duty. A law passed by the military government allowing local authorities to employ women in clearing rubble. Here, a woman sifts sand in bombed out Berlin in 1948.

Up to 80 percent of the historic centers of German cities were destroyed by Allied bombs during the war. Once the violence ceased, unsafe buildings were torn down. Bricks and other materials were carefully sorted so they could be used again.

The Trummerfrauen would form human chains to pass usable bricks to a collection point where they were cleaned and stacked. Here, women clean up in Dresden in 1946 in the shadow of the wrecked Roman Catholic cathedral.

Makeshift tracks were laid on the streets to speed up rubble removal. In West Germany alone, some 400 million cubic meters of rubble was piled up after the war.

Once the old bricks were collected, they had to be meticulously cleaned and sorted so they could be reused. The work done by the Trümmerfrauen kicked off decades of reconstruction in Germany, not all of which has been terribly successful.
At one stage, the Berlin politician in charge of rubble processing estimated that it would take 25 years to clear the city of rubble, with 42,000 workers continuously at work.

http://www.spiegel.de/fotostrecke/fotostrecke-56829-8.html
image-107473-galleryV9-efvz.jpg
It took years to clear German cities of rubble. Munich, Kiel and Stuttgart were the fastest. By 1949, Munich had cleared 80 percent of its rubble. By 1952 Stuttgart had cleared 88 percent

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The post-war blockade of Berlin by the Soviets meant that not as much construction material could get through to the city. As a result, a higher number of workers had to turn to rubble clearance.

http://www.spiegel.de/fotostrecke/fotostrecke-56829-10.html
image-107472-galleryV9-xrsq.jpg
In addition to their valuable contribution to cleaning up Germany after the war, the Trümmerfrauen also went a long way toward changing attitudes about gender roles. Until then, manual labor had been performed almost exclusively by men.

http://www.spiegel.de/fotostrecke/fotostrecke-56829-11.html
image-107468-galleryV9-tgll.jpg
Trümmerfrauen were honored for their contribution to post-war Germany and several cities have monuments to their work.

http://www.spiegel.de/fotostrecke/fotostrecke-56829-12.html
image-107467-galleryV9-vgms.jpg
Günter Grass immortalized th Trümmerfrauen in a poem. One of the stanzas reads: "Berlin lies strewn about, Dust blows up, then a lull again, The great rubble woman will be canonized."

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