

THE PERSECUTION OF HOMOSEXUALS IN NAZI GERMANY

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On May 6, 1933, a group of students from the College of Physical Education in Berlin arrived early in the morning to raid the office headquarters of the Institute for Sexual Research in Berlin. According to a contemporary anonymous report, the invading students “took up a military-style position in front of the house and then forced their way inside, with musical accompaniment... [and then] they smashed down the doors.”¹ Once inside, the same group commenced to ransack the place: they “emptied inkwells, pouring ink onto various papers and carpets, and then set about the private bookcases” and then “took with them what struck them as suspicious, keeping mainly to the so-called black list.”² Later that day, after the students had left “large piles of ruined pictures and broken glass” in their wake, a contingent of Storm Troopers arrived to complete the operation by confiscating nearly ten thousand books that they subsequently burned three days later.³ This raid was part of an overall campaign to purge “books with an un-German spirit from Berlin libraries,” undertaken early in the regime of the Third Reich. T.,

contributed to the Institute's selection as a target.⁶ However, Nazi officials initially left the offices of other sexology researchers undisturbed despite censuring the publication of their work. Albert Moll, a fellow German sexologist and also a Jew, was among Hirschfeld's colleagues initially spared from Nazi violence. The distinguishing factor between Hirschfeld and many of his colleagues thus appears to have been his own open homosexual orientation as well as the dedication of his Institute's research and advocacy to issues affecting homosexuals; Hirschfeld even drew criticism from his colleagues on this account.⁷ Ultimately, the selective targeting of a prominent public figure who had dedicated his career to advancing the rights of homosexuals and increasing the public's understanding of this community reveals an often neglected but central component of Nazi racial and social ideology: the persecution of German homosexuals. Related efforts to promote a higher birthrate among alleged ethnically pure Germans by idealizing the image of the fertile domestic woman in addition to the associated campaign against abortion among ethnic Germans represent one side of Nazi policy aimed at realizing their vaunted goal of propagating the German race. The campaign against homosexuality in Germany was a complementary manifestation of these population policies stemming from a social ideology that employed contemporary scientific understandings of human sexuality in its service. This campaign led to the destruction of a burgeoning, progressive, and strikingly modern culture of sexuality that is often associated with the era of the Weimar Republic. In fact, this culture had roots reaching much farther back into German history, including many of the pioneers of modern sexual research and reform, causing the Nazi campaign to stand in yet starker relief. Ultimately, this little-known episode of persecution culminated in the deaths of thousands of suspected

⁶ Erwin J. Haeberle, "Swastika, Pink Triangle and Yellow Star – The Destruction of Sexology and the Persecution of Homosexuals in Nazi Germany," *The Journal of Sex Research* 17, no. 3 (1981): 276.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 271-276.

the Weimar period that threatened the traditional order of society and the future health of the German state.²² Commentators on the Right laid the blame for this social degeneracy squarely on the prevalence of “radical socialism and radical individualism, both encapsulated in the republic.”²³ In response, one Protestant leader argued that “the recovery of the German people can occur only if there is a strengthening and renewal of marriage and family life.”²⁴

At the same time that traditional factions in German society were protesting the perceived anti-German liberalism of the Weimar Republic, the gradual rise of the National Socialist German Worker’s Party on the political far Right began to tap into popular fears and discontent surrounding the rapidly changing society. With regard to the cultural sphere of sexuality, as with others, the Nazi Party adopted the rhetoric of traditional conservatives that “resonated with large segments of the population because of the series of crises that battered the republic.”²⁵

According to Weitz, “the words and phrases” that the Nazis used in their appeals “were by no means Hitler’s private invention. They constituted the common language of the Right, established and radical, of the Weimar period.”²⁶ In addition to their rhetoric, the party’s developing ideology drew upon allegedly ancient Germanic tradition that condemned homosexuality as a form of un-masculine cowardice. For example, SS *Untersturmführer* Karl Eckhardt argued in 1935 that, “in southern and northern ancient Germanic sources of justice alike, homosexuality and cowardliness are seen in the same light and assigned equal value.”²⁷ The unifying theme of Eckhardt’s disdain for homosexuality, connected in his commentary to

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 325

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 334.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Karl Eckhardt, “Sexually Indecent Abominations against Nature Are Punishable by Death,” (1935) in *The Third Reich Sourcebook*

other examples of perceived racial degeneracy, was an overarching ideology of the purity and superiority of the “Nordic-German” people. Eckhardt cast interracial marriage and the emancipation of European Jewry after the French Revolution in the same light as “the scourge of racial annihilation presented by the degenerate profile of the homosexual.”²⁸ His remarks are representative of elements within the Nazi party that drew upon this dubious body of folklore and culture to create a cult dedicated to Germanic purity and superiority – a notion fundamental to the central Nazi concept of the German *Volk*.

The perceived threat of homosexuality to this idealized German *Volk* is evident in the statements of several leading Nazis. In a 1937 speech to leaders of the *Schutzstaffe* (SS), SS director Himmler expressed alarm at the fact that state investigations suggested that “there may be between two and four million homosexuals in Germany.”²⁹ The significance of these figures for Himmler was that with a substantial minority of the population of ethnic German men engaging in inter-

of the ideological tenets of the National Socialist worldview as well as homosexual activities on the part of a not insignificant segment of the population.³²

Another SS official, *Untersturmführer* Josef Meisinger, exposed similar aspects of Nazi thought surrounding homosexuality in a 1937 speech with the revealing title, “Combating Abortion and Homosexuality as a Political Task.”³³ In his remarks, Meisinger expressed a view of homosexuality that characterized it as a pathological gateway to a life of crime and a potential contagion that threatened to spread through the population. Homosexuality was “now so enormously widespread, it has actually developed into a phenomenon of the most far-reaching consequence for the survival of the nation ii

“Moral Right,” with whom the Nazi Party had already allied itself during the Weimar Republic...³⁹

Thus, much like the party rhetoric, one of the regime’s first anti-homosexual actions coopted conservative outrage over the perceived sexual excesses of the Weimar years to achieve an essentially political end. However, highlighting the often incongruous nature of policy and leadership in the Third Reich, some elements in the new administration had already started at this point to implement a policy of pursuing suspected homosexuals.

Richard Plant, a homosexual Jew living in Frankfurt at the time, recounted his memories of the mounting persecution of the homosexual community and his flight from Germany to Switzerland in one of the earliest English studies of the topic, *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals*. Plant avoided the Nazi violence in the relative safety of Basel, but many of his friends were not so fortunate. One acquaintance, Robbi, was arrested in 1935 along with his father (a prominent Social Democrat and trade unionist) by the Gestapo on charges of “homosexual indecencies.”⁴⁰ After receiving summary justice, the Gestapo held Robbi in prison until a bribe secured his release; Robbi then fled to Switzerland in 1936 to take re

denunciations received from informers who often possessed a personal grudge against the accused person; Robbi told Plant that he suspected that this was true in his case.⁴² Such summary justice was enabled by changes to Germany's penal code in 1935 that broadened the scope of Paragraph 175 to facilitate the indictment of as many suspected homosexuals as possible. Previously, the courts had required a relatively high burden of proof: only observed anal intercourse between men was considered a violation of the statute.⁴³ After the Nazi revision, however, "very minor sexual intimacies were landing men in concentration camps... In fact, in some cases it was, as a legal commentator of 1944 put it, 'not necessary that a physical contact has taken place or is even just intended.'"⁴⁴ The experience of a young gay soldier on leave in Breslau illustrates the Nazi strategy well:

One evening I met up with a nice civilian. At least he made a nice impression. The ritual game began. He kept circling round me, I brushed against him lightly, and suddenly he bellowed at me: 'You're under arrest!' Out came his ID card, and he turned out to be an SS agent. 'I am arresting you under Paragraph 175. You made an indecent assault upon me.' I said: 'All I did was weichtactyandi0Alf amda3i0anienclt8cSt a4amda3i0aniftacty3n4-14.66 -1.12(

transferred to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in 1940; he wrote in this regard that, “on the day that my six months were up, and I should have been released, I was informed that the Central Security Department had demanded that I remain in custody. I was again transferred to the ‘Liesl’, for transit to a concentration camp.”⁴⁷ In the concentration camps, homosexual inmates received a pink triangle which was, reportedly, “about 2 or 3 centimeters larger than the others, so that we could be clearly recognized from a distance.”⁴⁸ According to this same anonymous victim, homosexual inmates often received the worst treatment, both from concentration camp guards and fellow prisoners. While he stated that

mortality rate for homosexuals in the concentration camp was higher than that for other groups, ultimately leading to tens of thousands of deaths, although an exact figure is uncertain.⁵⁴

Homosexuals in Nazi Germany clearly fell victim to the ideology of creating a pure *Volksgemeinschaft* along with other groups that fell outside of the racially-biologically defined People's Community. While most of these homosexual men were "pure" ethnic Germans, members of the Nazi regime viewed their orientation as a biological disorder that threatened the future of the German race and thereby warranted efforts to purge it from society. In this way, the Nazi regime justified the extermination of thousands of ethnic German homosexuals on premises similar to those employed in their early euthanasia campaign against the population of disabled Germans. Furthermore, the Nazi regime, as with other aspects of their 'racial science,' coopted the same school of thought that during the Weimar period and before was used to advocate for legal reform and greater social tolerance for homosexuality. The efforts of reformers like Magnus Hirschfeld and others to define homosexuality as an innate, natural "third sex," that therefore did not warrant classification as a form of social pathology thus paradoxically allowed the Third Reich to classify homosexuality as a biological condition that could, in their view, potentially be inherited or transmitted throughout society. Heinrich Himmler's alarm at the perceived homosexual problem in Germany, his special commitment to rootins 1 7H(, (s 1 2(t to)2(7ia)6(15f-

While these Nazi policies rightfully invite moral indignation, “instating barbarism as the central conceptual tool for understanding the Third Reich is to mistake moral condemnation for thought.”⁵⁶ The racial notions promulgated by Nazi ideologues like Karl Eckhardt clearly appealed to pre-modern notions of “blood and soil” and drew upon an intense hatred for perceived “social outsiders.”⁵⁷ However, Nazi appropriation of the same contemporary scientific theories that prompted Hirschfeld and others to advocate for the homosexual community

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