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Homosexuality During the Transition from Weimar Republic to Third Reich

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Abstract

Homosexual communities successfully formed prominent subcultures during the Weimar Republic for a multitude of reasons: scientific research and educational outreach to the public about the inborn nature of homosexuality, less strict media censorship laws, and a vague anti-sodomy law that was difficult to enforce led police to often prefer tolerance over prosecution. The Third Reich brought about a deep cultural shift that would prove incredibly harmful to the homosexual communities. While at first, homosexuals had not been a targeted group largely thanks to Hitler's personal friendship with a gay Nazi named Ernst Röhm, the latter's sexuality became the center of a targeted media attack against the Nazis and Röhm was eventually killed. After that, it became convenient for the Nazis to scapegoat homosexuals and use their prosecution and persecution to appease the Nazis' morally conservative supporters. Furthermore, Heinrich Himmler's personal agenda against homosexuals aligned with Hitler's vision of a homogenous society.

Keywords

Homosexuality, Weimar Republic, Third Reich, Germany, Gay rights

Disciplines

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | History | History of Gender | Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Social History

Comments

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Homosexuality During the Transition from Weimar Republic to Third Reich

Abigail Minzer

Homosexual communities successfully formed prominent subcultures during the Weimar Republic for a multitude of reasons: scientific research and educational outreach to the public about the inborn nature of homosexuality, less strict media censorship laws, and a vague anti-sodomy law that was difficult to enforce led police to often prefer tolerance over prosecution. The Third Reich brought about a deep cultural shift that would prove incredibly harmful to the homosexual communities. While at first, homosexuality had not been a targeted group largely thanks to Hitler's personal friendship with a gay Nazi named Ernst Röhm, the latter's sexuality became the center of a targeted media attack against the Nazis and Röhm was eventually killed. After that, it became convenient for the Nazis to scapegoat homosexuals and use their prosecution and persecution to appease the Nazis' morally conservative supporters. Furthermore, Heinrich Himmler's personal agenda against homosexuals aligned with Hitler's vision of a homogenous society.

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Professor William Bowman

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Leading up to the 1930s and particularly during the Weimar Republic, Germany had a thriving homosexual subculture, particularly in urban areas like Berlin. There was even some legislation under discussion that was intended to decrease the level of persecution and prosecution against the homosexual community. However, this legislation never came to pass because the Weimar Republic fell to the Third Reich. During the Nazi regime, the governmental leniency that had allowed for thriving homosexual subcultures shattered as the Nazis enacted legislation that further persecuted and prosecuted the community and even took more brutal actions to ostracize and eliminate its members. How and why did this sudden change happen? Essentially, the Nazi regime was built on a foundation of their commitment to upholding “traditional” values and creating a homogenous national community. People such as homosexuals, who did not behave in ways that fit the social norms, were the kind of internal enemies that Nazis such as Heinrich Himmler used as scapegoats to explain Germany’s historic struggles, the removal of which they claimed would allow Germany to prosper going forward.

One reason that urban homosexual subcultures were able to thrive during the Weimar Republic was changing attitudes towards homosexuality. Specifically, increased scientific research played a large role in causing those changes, a process which largely began with the work of lawyer Karl Heinrich Ulrichs.¹ He was one of the first people to openly acknowledge his homosexuality and helped to propagate the idea that same-sex attraction is a natural, rather than sinful, phenomenon. By speaking frequently about homosexuality, he established the first modern terminology to refer to different sexual identities. His most lasting contribution was his establishment of the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, which was the world’s first homosexual rights organization led by Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld.

¹ Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York: Knopf, 2014), chap. 1, Ebook.

Through his own clinical research, Hirschfield also came to the conclusion that homosexuality is biological and convinced many others in the scientific and medical fields to share his conviction.³ He also believed that sexuality and gender exist on a spectrum. These changing beliefs about homosexuality began to trickle into the general public after Hirschfield opened his Institute for Sexual Science.⁴ The institute publicly showcased the natural variations that occur in human sexual desire through its “museum of sexuality,” which attracted international attention. Hirschfield even took advantage of the educational opportunities provided by the film industry: he created a film that educated the public about Paragraph 175, the penal code that criminalized sodomy, and its tragic consequences for born-homosexuals.⁵

Beyond these outreach efforts from the scientific field, the public was also being exposed to more positive portrayals of homosexuality in other popular mediums such as Klaus Mann’s brazen depictions of same-sex romances in his plays.⁶ By creating vibrant and lifelike characters and giving them gay love stories reminiscent of those written about heterosexual couples for centuries, Mann attempted to humanize homosexuals in a way that the general public might understand more personally.

Furthermore, a series of high-level homosexual scandals made their way to various courts systems, from Oscar Wilde in England to the Krupp affair in Germany, which garnered a great deal of public fascination.⁷ Not only did this increase in attention given to the homosexual population as a result of research, media portrayals, and high-level scandals contribute to shifting

³ Beachy., chap. 3.

⁴ Beachy, chap. 6.

⁵ Javier Samper Vendrell, *The Seduction of Youth: Print Culture and Homosexual Rights in the Weimar Republic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 3-4.

⁶ Samuel Clowes Huneke, “The Reception of Homosexuality in Klaus Mann’s Weimar Era Works,” *Monatshefte* 105 (April 2013): 93-7.

⁷ Peter Morgan, “Coming Out in Weimar: Crisis and Homosexuality in the Weimar Republic,” *Thesis Eleven* 111, (August 2012): 51.

public attitudes towards the homosexual community, it also unified homosexual individuals into more of a community than they had ever been previously. This sudden influx of homosexual media occurred due to the laxation of censorship laws that had previously prevented this type of content from being published.⁸ Interestingly, the Weimar Republic loosened the strictness of its media censorship laws because of the changing attitudes about sexuality that had already occurred largely due to Hirschfeld's public education efforts up to that point, and then this newfound media freedom only served to further enlighten the public's attitude towards homosexuality. Thus, Hirschfeld's educational film would never have been possible to make were it not for the success of his previous efforts to advocate for homosexual rights.

The changing attitudes and loosened censorship laws allowed gay and lesbian communities to form and strengthen during the Weimar Republic. Homosexual communities formed as the production, distribution, and consumption of gay and lesbian magazines such as *The Friendship Paper* and *Women Love* became possible in cities like Munich and Berlin.⁹ Many homosexual veterans who had survived the trenches of World War I were eager to engage in these new homosexual communities. They were instrumental in campaigning for equality, often serving as founding members of the friendship leagues that sprang up across Germany as a way for homosexuals to organize in a singular mass movement with the goal of utilizing the system of democracy to legitimize their demands for equal treatment.

The homosexual subculture of Berlin also consisted of a successful theatre movement. Homosexuals wrote their own plays, starred in them, and attended them as audience members.¹⁰

⁸ Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 31-42, Ebook.

⁹ Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 38-42.

¹⁰ Laurence Senelick, "The Homosexual Theatre Movement in the Weimar Republic," *Theatre Survey* 49 (May 2008): 13-15.

Thus, not only were homosexuals creating a shared intellectual culture through publications such as magazines, they were actually able to create physical gathering spaces where they could share unique experiences. During the Weimar Republic, Berlin became a European mecca for homosexuals.¹¹ Certain meeting places for the community became famed throughout Europe, such as the popular nightclub Eldorado or the celebrity-frequented Silhouette. Each club or bar had a different purpose and personality: some were tasteful and elite, others emphasized discretion, and still others were flamboyant and evocative.

The lesbian subculture was generally separate but equally renowned for its own often elegant establishments. Their masked balls were a highlight of the Berlin scene.¹² All in all, these gathering places allowed strong homosexual subcultures to form, but they were only possible due to efforts by people like Ulrichs, Hirschfeld, and war veterans who managed to shift public opinion on homosexuality to be more tolerant and relax policies such as the media censorship laws.

Although public opinion of homosexuals in Weimar Germany had become more positive than before, it was still hardly warm and enthusiastic. Instead, homosexuality was largely allowed to flourish because the anti-sodomy law was relatively vague and difficult to enforce. Police in Berlin knew about many of the homosexual community's gathering places and generally followed a policy of toleration, allowing them to continue their operations without police intervention "so long as there [were] no public disturbances."¹³ This lack of intense policing during the Weimar Republic and even in the years leading up to it also fostered an increased feeling of community as homosexuals around Berlin were able to gather consistently

¹¹ Florence Tamagne and Alice Seberry, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe, Berlin, London, Paris 1919-1939* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2007), 50-61, Ebook.

¹² Tamagne and Seberry, 56-57.

¹³ Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, chap. 2.

without feeling imminently threatened. Beyond even just turning a blind eye to most homosexual activities, the police even sanctioned some of their community events: one masked ball, for example, even received a special permit from the police giving it express permission to take place.¹⁴ During this same time period, the notorious Paragraph 175 that criminalized sodomy did not apply to female same-sex acts, and there was no other law criminalizing lesbian activity.¹⁵ Thus, their community could gather and enjoy themselves with even less fear of repercussions than gay men.

By mid-Weimar, public perception of homosexuality was a spectrum, with the social elite on the most conservative end, insisting that same-sex attraction was a sinful perversion, while the working class was at the other end, finding no real problems with homosexuality.¹⁶ This became important during the legal battle that occurred when the homosexual community finally felt ready to take on Paragraph 175 and attempt to legalize sodomy completely. The movement was led by Hirschfeld starting in 1919.¹⁷ He signed, and encouraged others to sign, a petition asking for the repeal of Paragraph 175. Hirschfeld delivered the petition to the Reichstag in March of 1922 with signatures from well-known public figures such as Albert Einstein and Thomas Mann. Nothing came of this petition right away because the working-class, left-wing supporters of the decriminalization of sodomy did not have the necessary majority in the Reichstag to pass a vote so strongly opposed by the right-wing elite. This initial roadblock only further motivated the homosexual community to band together through various branches of the German Friendship Association. By October of 1929, a Reichstag vote to eliminate Paragraph 175 from the Weimar

¹⁴ Tamagne and Seberry, *A History of Homosexuality*, 57.

¹⁵ Richard Plant, *The Pink Triangle: the Nazi War Against Homosexuals* (New York: H. Holt, 1986), 27.

¹⁶ Edward Ross Dickinson, "Complexity, Contingency, and Coherence in the History of Sexuality in Modern Germany: Some Theoretical and Interpretive Reflections." *Central European History* (Cambridge University Press / UK) 49 (March 2016): 108–110.

¹⁷ Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, chap. 8.

penal code passed 15-13. But instead of marking a momentous beginning to a new era of freedom for the homosexual community, this vote is instead very closely associated with the end of what was an era of freedom compared to the ensuing homosexual experiences during the Third Reich.

When the Nazis came into power, the elimination of Paragraph 175 had yet to come into effect, and under Nazi rule, it never would. Instead, during a revision of the entire German penal code, they strengthened Paragraph 175 under the motto “no crime without punishment.”¹⁸ While anal intercourse between two men was the only criminalized same-sex act during the Weimar Republic, the Nazis expanded the scope of what Paragraph 175 covered so that any act with even a hint of homosexuality, such as two men kissing or masturbating side-by-side without touching one another, were equally punishable with concentration-camp sentences.¹⁹

The complete change in treatment of homosexuals from the Weimar Republic to the Third Reich can be traced to a number of reasons. Homosexuality first came to the spotlight in the Nazi administration because of the Röhm scandal.²⁰ Ernst Röhm was a homosexual who had risen high enough in the ranks of the Nazi Party to serve as head of their paramilitary force, the SA. Röhm was also a personal friend of Hitler. Röhm’s sexuality was a kind of open secret within the NSDAP, with Hitler implying that regardless of the party’s official stance against homosexuality, he was willing to overlook his friend’s lifestyle as long as Röhm was discreet. A series of indiscretions on Röhm’s part resulted in the rumors of his liaisons with men becoming front page news in much of 1931 and early 1932.

¹⁸ Geoffrey J. Giles, “Legislating Homophobia in the Third Reich: The Radicalization of Prosecution Against Homosexuality by the Legal Profession,” *German History* 23 (August 2005): 340-43.

¹⁹ Giles, 351.

²⁰ Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 150-60.

The other political parties, such as the SPD, took advantage of the scandal to attribute Röhm's sexuality to the Nazi Party as a whole so as to portray them as weak and incapable of leading the country. Hitler was running for president in 1932, so this ongoing scandal was something the other parties latched on to viciously. The newspapers obtained copies of a series of letters that Röhm had exchanged with a friend confirming his homosexuality and discussing it at length. Hitler mostly supported Röhm throughout this scandal, which angered many other Nazis. Some members of the party planned but failed to execute an assassination attempt on Röhm, which was leaked to the press and again offered their political adversaries an opportunity to mock their weakness. Although Hitler did not win the presidency in 1932, the NSDAP did receive more votes in the election than it had ever before garnered.

Regardless, pressure built for Hitler to get rid of Röhm and the embarrassing attacks from the press that he had brought the party.²¹ This culminated in Hitler using Röhm's flaunted homosexuality as the excuse for why he had the man murdered during the Night of the Long Knives in 1934. In addition, Hitler's personal goal was to centralize his leadership and eliminate the unruly SA. But the precedent for violence against homosexuals in the era of the Third Reich had been set and it would be followed.

Thereafter, it was easy and convenient for the Nazis to include more direct persecution of homosexuals in their policies. The election of 1932 had shown Hitler that while the Nazis' supporters were growing in number, they still needed to build more support from the conservatives.²² By publicizing their persecution of the homosexual community, the Nazis had the double opportunity to both atone for their previous tolerance of Röhm and prove to the conservatives that the Nazis could and would follow through on their promises to return

²¹ Plant, *The Pink Triangle*, 66-9.

²² Giles, "Legislating Homophobia," 352-3.

Germany to the “morality” of the pre-Weimar Republic days. Thus, they immediately began reinstating harsh censorship laws, shutting down gay bars and clubs, and strengthening Paragraph 175.

Once staples of the homosexual communities in Berlin, *Girlfriend* and *Friendship* were forced out of print, the nudist movement ended, and harsh punishments were put into place for male and female prostitutes, including ten-year prison sentences for men caught selling sex.²³ Furthermore, the Gestapo hunted gay men and sent thousands to die in concentration camps. Individuals like Adolf Sellmann, head of the Protestant West German Morality League praised these actions and thanked the Nazis for cleaning the “filth and trash” from Germany’s streets.²⁴ Now that Hitler no longer had personal homosexual friends like Röhm to hold him back from using homosexuals as yet another scapegoat in the Nazis’ campaign, he was free to allow his party to vilify them as was convenient.

While Hitler had made it clear that unlike his antisemitism, the pursuit of homosexuals was not personal to him, he did care deeply about creating a uniform and easily controlled society. This was made evident when the Nazis took over all social organizations almost immediately when they came into power, and one of their very first targets was Magnus Hirschfield’s Institute for Sexual Science.²⁵ His ideas about gender and sexualities existing on spectrums threatened the Nazis’ core goal that society could be normalized and controlled if the outcasts were simply eliminated and unable to reproduce. Thus, the Nazis destroyed his institute rather than merely converting it to serve their own purpose as they did with many other social organizations that had already existed before the Third Reich. After burning Hirschfield’s work

²³ Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 175.

²⁴ Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 175-176.

²⁵ Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, epilogue.

and driving him out of the country so that he could no longer easily argue otherwise with his years of documented research, the Nazis were also free to propagate the idea that homosexuality was a contagious “epidemic” that the Nazis were morally responsible for stopping.²⁶

Heinrich Himmler also played a unique role in the Nazis’ persecution of homosexuals. His agenda against the homosexuals was much more personal and comparable to Hitler’s strong antisemitism.²⁷ He felt that Germany needed a “National Sexual Budget” to replace the one million lives the nation had lost to World War I. When Himmler discovered that the post-war fertility rate in the Weimar Republic had continued to decline, he looked to the homosexual community for a scapegoat. He claimed that homosexuality had left millions of German women husbandless and that the already existing homosexual men were spreading it to even more men, constantly exacerbating the problem. Himmler fretted that homosexuality would bring about Germany’s ruin and thus had to be eliminated.

After the Night of the Long Knives resulted in Röhm’s death, Himmler’s methods for carrying out his homophobic agenda were able to become increasingly radical.²⁸ Because sexual topics were not discussed in detail with the public and therefore public understanding of the Nazis’ exact agenda against the homosexual community was limited, Himmler was therefore able to take advantage of the uncertainty to utilize fully the secrecy of the concentration camps to which his officials in the police and SS had access. His increasing obsession with the cause ensured that homosexuals were not forgotten about despite the increasing focus on the persecution of the Jewish community.²⁹

²⁶ Günter Grau and Claudia Schoppmann, *Hidden Holocaust? : Gay and Lesbian Persecution in Germany 1933-45* (London: Cassell, 1995), 18-22

²⁷ Plant, *The Pink Triangle*, 88-92.

²⁸ Giles, “Legislating Homophobia,” 353-4.

²⁹ Plant, *The Pink Triangle*, 80, 101.

After examining the nature of the homosexual subculture in the Weimar Republic and how it came to exist despite the anti-sodomy laws in existence, it is clear that the homosexual rights movement gained traction in tandem with the increased research into sexuality, as both were spear-headed by Dr. Magnus Hirschfield. As more homosexual media material became more widely available, this helped to create a more unified homosexual community and allow them to portray themselves in more positive ways. Furthermore, the ability of gay and lesbian communities to gather in places like clubs and bars with relatively little fear of serious repercussions from a somewhat tolerant police force allowed the gay and lesbian subcultures to become more visible than ever before, with Berlin in particular attracting international attention for the vibrancy of its homosexual subculture.

When the Nazi regime took over, the Röhm scandal made it impossible for them to ignore homosexuality. The more personal vendetta of Himmler also contributed to the increased severity of punishments and crimes that could be assigned under Paragraph 175. Because the Nazis were an alt-Right regime, they appealed to their conservative base by taking strong stances against the homosexual community. Furthermore, it is important to consider that homosexuals became more severely targeted victims of the Nazis over time rather than a pre-determined and consistently persecuted group the way that the Jews were. This was because the Nazi Party had not decided to embrace an anti-homosexuality agenda until after the assassination of Ernst Röhm. With Hitler's only gay friend dead, he allowed the enthused Heinrich Himmler to carry out his anti-homosexuality plans, which resulted in the deaths of at least 50,000 men.³⁰ Partly because homosexuals were not largely accepted and offered equal rights until over fifty years after the Holocaust and partly because they made up a small fraction of the total Nazi

³⁰ Günter Grau and Claudia Schoppmann, *Hidden Holocaust*, 131.

exterminations, research into the persecution endured by homosexuals during the Nazi regime is significantly lacking in comparison to other victims of the Nazis. Furthermore, because the stricter penal code revisions regarding punishments for homosexuality remained unchanged in West Germany, these victims in particular found little to no public sympathy after the war ended and in fact continued to be legally prosecuted until 1969.³¹ Although the pain endured by the homosexuality community during the Third Reich and history at large cannot be undone, public acknowledgement of these tragedies through research such as this can ideally ease the wounds and inform the public conversation about what improvements can still be made to ensure that true equality is a reality.

³¹ Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, epilogue.

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