Homophobia in German Politics, 1900–1945

It is no real surprise by now that homophobia had tremendous significance for German politics during the first half of the twentieth century. Much good historical work has been done on the "homosexual panic" set off by the Eulenberg scandal towards the end of the Kaiserreich.[1] Even better known is the importance of homophobia in justifying the arrest and execution of Ernst Röhm during the "Night of Long Knives." This event quickly set in motion a rapidly escalating state repression of homosexuality in the National Socialist party and in German society in general, leading to the arrest and eventual deaths of thousands of gay men in the 1930s and 1940s.[2] Homophobia was not absent on the other side of the political spectrum, as has been demonstrated by several important works on the use of a homophobic politics by leftist activists who tried to undermine the Nazis during their rise to power and, later, to carry on criticisms of the regime from exile after 1933.[3] What has been lacking is a narrative that would draw these different instances of homophobic politics together into a coherent whole. This is the accomplishment of the essays in Susanne zur Nieden’s edited collection. As Nieden writes in her introduction, these events, along with the debates they engendered and other contributing discourses of the first half of the century, helped to establish "a homophobic consensus shared by National Socialists and their opponents and which survived for decades after the Third Reich" (p. 8).

Claudia Bruns’s essay on the 1907 Eulenburg scandal suggests the key role this event played in creating an enduring stereotype of the homosexual “enemy of the state” (Staatsfeind). Her essay is one of the best contextualizations of this scandal I have read. Highlighting the growing importance of the sensationalist press in shaping the political culture around the turn of the century, Bruns not only connects this scandal with the Oscar Wilde trial of 1895, which was widely reported in the German press. She also shows how the instigator of the scandal—the journalist and publisher Maximilian Harden—reproduced in his articles several prominent themes of the era: medical discourses that defined homosexuality as “abnormal” and “unhealthy”; associations made by sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld and others between homosexuality and femininity; misogynist and ant-feminist rhetoric common in much political discussion of the day; and, finally, a bourgeois worldview that looked suspiciously on the political power of the aristocracy as well as the ethos of the “late Romantic friendship culture” that held sway in certain subcultures of late-nineteenth-century Germany.

Nieden’s two essays in the collection connect this earlier scandal with a later one, namely the uproar that erupted around the Nazi leader Ernst Röhm in the early 1930s, during the rise of the Nazis to power, as his sexuality became more widely known. Her analysis of the Röhm scandal puts a slightly new spin on the relationship between Röhm’s homosexuality and his eventual arrest and murder during the “Night of Long Knives.” The consensus among most historians is that Röhm’s sexual activities were used by Hitler and the rest of the regime only as a convenient pretext for the coup against the SA,
which itself was motivated more by the need to consolidate the Nazi hold on the government by mollifying the German army and by bringing some order to the unruly violence of the SA.\[4\] Nieden’s essay “Aufstieg und Fall des virilen Männerhelden”—besides giving a very interesting and close analysis of the context and conditions in which the scandal of 1931-2 played out—suggests that Röhm’s homosexuality might have played a bigger part in his arrest than is generally recognized. By 1932, in the midst of the presidential elections, many party leaders saw Röhm’s sexuality as a dangerous liability; resentment began to build up as Hitler refused to do anything but support Röhm. Such feelings did not disappear, and clearly played a key role in the thinking of leaders like Goebbels and Himmler, who began to maneuver against Röhm two years later.

Anson Rabinbach’s essay examines a last key event in the establishment of a political consensus around the image of the homosexual “enemy of the state,” namely the use of homophobic rhetoric by leftist parties to attack the Nazis. Rabinbach focuses on the series of publications and events orchestrated by the leftist press in exile shortly after the burning of the Reichstag building. Well known is the press’s central propaganda claim that the Nazis themselves were responsible for the fire; much less known is the importance of homosexuality for justifying this claim. As the author writes, “At the heart of this myth was the sensational claim that a homosexual conspiracy lay behind the Reichstag fire, revealing at the same time the essential characteristic of the entire Nazi regime” (p. 194). The rest of the chapter documents how Leftists uncritically accepted fabricated accusations that the arsonist, the Dutch socialist Marinus van der Lubbe, had an illicit relationship with Röhm, which the latter had used to manipulate Lubbe into setting the fire.

While the first half of the book outlines the manner in which the image of the homosexual “enemy of the state” worked its way into German public discourse by the early 1930s, the second part of the book largely focuses on the ramifications of this consensus—namely the escalating persecution of homosexuals under the Nazi regime from 1934 on. The essays included here provide contributions to a rapidly growing body of literature. Wolfgang Dierker looks at the role that homosexuality played in the Nazis’ struggle against the Christian churches. Armin Nolzen’s essay, though it gets bogged down in details, still provides a rare look at the Nazi effort to monitor homosexuality in the ranks of the Hitler Youth. Andreas Pretzel’s essay, one of the best pieces in the book, offers an extremely detailed examination of the interplay between the various police institutions and court systems in Berlin; it suggests that the growing frustrations with pursuing “justice” against homosexuals through the court system drove the Nazi government’s search for “extraordinary” methods to combat the “problem” (as they defined it). Last, Bernward Dörner’s essay looks at a previously unexamined, but extremely interesting, problem, namely the difficulty that the Nazi state had in controlling rumors about the sexuality of important Nazi leaders, including Hitler himself.

A few of the essays relate only tangentially to the theme of the book, although each in its own way addresses some aspect of the relationship between homosexuality, masculinity and politics. Claudia Bruns’s second essay considers an interesting and influential discourse that ran counter to the rhetoric of the homosexual “enemy of the state”—namely the effort by Hans Blüher and other members of “masculinist” wing of the homosexual movement during the 1920s to connect homosexuality with politics in general. Harry Oosterhuis’s essay compares the “life and work” of Thomas Mann and his son Klaus Mann, who are traditionally contrasted in both their political choices and their attitudes towards their own sexuality. Oosterhuis demonstrates that by the end of their lives, they ended up sharing a lot more ground than is generally recognized. Last, Marita Keilson-Lauritz makes an extremely provocative argument that will no doubt have an impact on how scholars in the future write about the early homosexual movement. In considering the two wings of the movement (the community of activists associated with Magnus Hirschfeld and his scientifically grounded notion of gender inversion—which in turn is commonly contrasted in the strongest terms with the more artistic- and culture-minded men who revolved around Adolf Brand), she argues that the struggle between them should be seen not as a fierce fight for control of the movement, but as a passionate conversation between them. In other words, the two wings of the movement were not divided by the disagreement, but rather brought together in an ultimately productive manner.

The inclusion of these essays, though interesting in their own right, undermines the focus of the collection somewhat. All in all, though, Nieden’s collection will be of significant interest to anyone concerned with issues of male homosexuality or masculinity in Germany during the first half of the twentieth century. Besides providing a useful overview of the construction of the homosexual Staatsfeind, the book’s biggest contribution is providing an in-depth look at several events that are sometimes
covered only cursorily in other literature—especially the Röhm scandal and the political campaign carried on by exiles after the Reichstag burning.

Notes


[2]. The works here are too numerous to list in full. Two important discussions of the Night of Long Knives include Burkhard Jellonnek, Homosexuelle unter dem Hakenkreuz. Die Verfolgung von Homosexuellen im Dritten Reich (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1990) and Eleanor Hancock, "‘Only the Real, the True, the Masculine Held Its Value’: Ernst Röhm, Masculinity and Homosexuality," Journal of History of Sexuality 8 (1998): pp. 616-641. Richard Plant’s The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1986) remains a classic on the Nazi persecution of homosexuals, although by now our knowledge has been deepened by a large list of very good works, some of a theoretical nature and others providing local studies.


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