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The Enemy Within: Homosexuality in the Third Reich, 1933-1945

Abstract

From 1933 to 1945, the Nazi regime in Germany ruthlessly targeted homosexuals, particularly men, as enemies of the state. While Nazi doctrine officially repudiated same-sex romance, actual policy toward homosexuals in the Third Reich was by no means consistent. This paper examines the components of Nazi racial doctrines and the subtle ways in which the hyper-masculine ethos of the regime in fact encouraged male bonding and homosexual behavior. The differing views of prominent Nazi leaders on the issue of homosexuality are also discussed. The paper concludes by comparing the punishment of homosexual behavior among German soldiers in the Schutzstaffel (SS), and homosexuals unaffiliated with the Nazi party.

Keywords

Homosexuality, Nazism, Adolph Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, Schutzstaffel, Volk, Mannerbund, Pink Triangle

The Enemy Within: Homosexuality in the Third Reich, 1933-1945

Eliot Boden

From 1933 to 1945, the Nazi regime in Germany targeted homosexuals, particularly men, as enemies of the state. Homoerotic lifestyles fundamentally contravened Nazi ideals of racial and social purity. Same-sex relationships were considered intolerable because they subverted Adolph Hitler's utopian vision of a unified Aryan society based on German tradition, Christian morality, and unwavering dedication to the Nazi party-state. Even though German psychologists disagreed on the root causes of same-sex attraction, the top echelons of the Nazi civil and military command widely viewed homosexuality as a social affliction and a political threat. Homosexuals were an extensively persecuted minority in the Third Reich, although Nazi ideology and policy regarding homoerotic intimacy were by no means consistent or clear.

The eradication of same-sex behavior was an essential component of Nazi efforts to achieve the racial purification of Germany, defined by historian Rüdiger Lautman as "an attempt to keep the Fatherland free from taint."¹ Repression of homosexuality was necessary to protect a "fit and healthy social organism, the racial community, a *Volksgemeinschaft*," or *Volk* – the pinnacle of Nazi social organization.² The role of the racially-pure *Volk* was to uphold German traditions and disseminate Nazi ideals at the most basic level of German society, the family. In the words of Nazi propagandist Ludwig Leonhardt, the German family "embraces everything that existed spiritually and psychically as a living patrimony" and must be passed on from parents to children in order to "push our heritage ever forward, so that a German Volk may emerge out of an ever-repeated interlacing of families."³ Nazi doctrine envisioned a strictly hierarchical society with the nuclear family at its core. Established gender roles and a strict division of labor between the sexes within the family reinforced patriarchal authority and engendered loyalty to the Führer and the state. In his 1934 essay "Marriage, Morality, and Property," Nazi ideologue Hermann Paull emphasized the family as an "important instrument of eugenics" that is intrinsically tied to Christian morality, "which rests upon the twin pillars of 'premarital chastity' and 'conjugal fidelity.'"⁴ Homosexual love not only weakened German virtue, it threatened the ascendancy of German culture. Since homoerotic intimacy did not serve a reproductive purpose, homosexuals were, by definition, incapable of propagating the *Volk*. Unable to fulfill the social duties prescribed by their gender, homosexuals were vilified as social pariahs.

Homosexuality not only flouted established social norms, it also defied the command structure of government and military institutions, particularly when practiced by men. Many high-ranking Nazi officials feared that homosexual companionship among men encouraged intense personal devotion that could supersede loyalty to the party-state. This view was explicitly stated by Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler during a meeting of top Nazi leaders at Bad Tölz in 1937. In a long diatribe against the social and political ills of homosexuality, Himmler warned that "for homosexuals, love of the erotic replaces emphasis upon individual

¹ Rüdiger Lautman, "The Pink Triangle: The Persecution of Homosexual Males in Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany," in *Historical Perspectives on Homosexuality*, ed. Salvatore J. Licata (New York, Haworth, 1981): 144.

² Robert G. Waite, "Teenage Sexuality in Nazi Germany," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 8 (1998): 436.

³ Ludwig Leonhardt, "The German Volk is an Interlacing of Families," in *Nazi Culture: Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life in the Third Reich*, ed. George L. Mosse (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1966): 34.

⁴ Hermann Paull, "Marriage, Morality, and Property," in *Nazi Culture: Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life in the Third Reich*, ed. George L. Mosse (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1966): 36.

ability and accomplishment.”⁵ Dutch psychologist Harry Oosterhuis explains Himmler’s fear that “homosexuals were dangerous...because they created cliques and thereby undermined the hierarchical relationships” of the Nazi party-state.⁶ It was widely believed among Nazi leaders that romantic love could jeopardize citizens’ obligation to the war effort and soldiers’ duty to their commanders. Many felt that homosexuals were obsessed with the selfish pursuit of sexual gratification and could not be relied upon to carry out the orders of civil or military authorities. Even more alarming was the difficulty the Nazi bureaucracy faced in controlling emotions, which “were virtually impossible to regulate, which is why the regime tried to eliminate the private sphere.”⁷ The Nazi social order – founded on the cohesion of the *Volk* – demanded obedience to state authorities. The Nazis could not condone, much less tolerate, allegiances that could possibly undermine its supreme power over all aspects of life in the Third Reich.

Although homosexual behavior outwardly appeared to be incompatible with Nazi ideology, core principles of the Nazi movement in fact aroused homoerotic tendencies. Ironically, many homosexual men were initially attracted to Nazism, which emphasized virility, strength, and comradeship to forge a strong national polity. The excessive masculinity of the Third Reich was based on the philosophical concept of the *Mannerbund*, a male-dominated elite united by devotion to a shared goal.⁸ Under the Nazi regime, the patriarchal hierarchy established by the *Mannerbund* was mirrored throughout German society – in the family, in the workplace, at school, and especially in the military. The Wehrmacht specifically recognized the insidious allure of male bonding, and adopted measures to punish incidents of sexual contact between soldiers. Official army directives emphasized that “the danger of homosexual activity is especially acute when healthy, youthful, and virile men live together in close physical and emotional comradeship, and have no opportunity to have sexual relations with women.”⁹ Isolated from women by the realities of war, young soldiers often vented their pent-up sexual energies on each other. As Geoffrey J. Giles notes, “Nonsexual snuggling seems to have been unexceptional” in the *Schutzstaffel* (SS), and most soldiers did not view further sexual exploration, such as groping or fondling, as “especially reprehensible or anything more than mildly indecent.”¹⁰ Even in situations in which heterosexual outlets for sexual desire were available, Nazi rhetoric exacerbated homosexual tendencies. Robert G. Waite notes that Nazi dogma, by “denigrating females, encouraged the maturing adolescent to focus on the beauty of male personality and body.”¹¹ Misogyny thus reinforced homoeroticism in the Wehrmacht. While many German soldiers did not see their sexual predilections and political beliefs as fundamentally incongruous, the state was nevertheless incapable of accepting their abnormality.

Homosexuals in the Third Reich were frequently disparaged as maladjusted deviants, but there was not a scientific consensus on the origins of their pathology to justify these claims. Homosexual men were typecast as exhibiting female characteristics, a flagrant challenge to

⁵ George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985): 168.

⁶ Harry Oosterhuis, “Medicine, Male Bonding and Homosexuality in Nazi Germany,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 32 (1997): 194.

⁷ Geoffrey J. Giles, “The Denial of Homosexuality: Same-Sex Incidents in Himmler's SS and Police,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11 (2002): 260.

⁸ Elizabeth D. Heineman, “Sexuality and Nazism: The Doubly Unspeakable?” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11 (2002): 42.

⁹ Oosterhuis, 196-7.

¹⁰ Giles, 270, 282.

¹¹ Waite, 474.

German masculinity. Manliness “meant normalcy; it emphasized that self-control and harmony of body and mind which society prized so much.”¹² Lacking “normal” masculine virtues, homosexuals were often derided as weak, effeminate, and degenerate. Albert Moll was one of many psychiatrists whose theories influenced Nazi understandings of homosexual behavior. Writing in 1905, Moll attributed homosexual desires to mental illness.¹³ Although the pseudoscience of Imperial Germany and the Weimar Republic persisted well into the Third Reich, “the medical opinion that homosexuals belonged in the biological category of degenerates was controversial,” according to contemporary German psychologist Johannes Schultz.¹⁴ Same-sex attraction was, at best, poorly understood when the Nazis began to prosecute homosexuals.

Not surprisingly, the Nazi leadership was divided over the seriousness of the perceived threat of homosexuality. The head of the SS, Himmler, was one of the most rabid advocates of the complete extermination of homosexuals. He fiercely believed that homosexuality was a contagion that endangered the unity of the German nation and posed a unique threat to his police forces. In his infamous speech at Bad Tölz, Himmler lamented that draconian punishments for homosexuality had long been discontinued and that homosexuals were no longer simply tied up and drowned in swamps, as in pre-modern Germany.¹⁵ Hitler’s views on the appropriate treatment of homosexuals were more ambiguous. Hitler was fully aware of the homosexuality of one of his closest subordinates, *Sturmabteilung* (SA) chief of staff Ernst Rohm, and was unconcerned by it. As long as the “brownshirts” continued to be a useful paramilitary force, Hitler was of the opinion that Rohm’s “private life was his own affair as long as he used some discretion.”¹⁶ Hitler’s opinion evidently changed after the purge of the SA in 1934 and the onset of war six years later. In 1941, Hitler ordered the purge of any homosexual elements in the SS, and that “police officers who committed lewdness with another man or permitted themselves to be misused were to be given the death sentence.”¹⁷ Thus, although Hitler was initially tolerant of homosexuality, he later demanded the most severe punishment for offenders.

Persecution of homosexuals was an indispensable component of the Nazi regime’s plans to rid the German population of “undesirable” elements. Homosexuals were apprehended and imprisoned alongside political dissenters, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Gypsies, Jews, and various “asocials,” such as alcoholics and prostitutes. In total, between 5,000 and 15,000 homosexuals were detained in concentration camps throughout Germany, where they received brutal treatment.¹⁸ In many camps, like Dachau and Sachsenhausen, homosexual prisoners were restricted to separate barracks. Segregation did not protect homosexual detainees from excessive punishment. In fact, homosexual inmates, “once grouped together, could be subject to special repressions in addition to the already generally fearful conditions in the camps.”¹⁹ Special markings sewn onto camp uniforms of prisoners, “both justified their imprisonment and indicated the nature of their offenses.”²⁰ Homosexuals were forced to wear large, easily-recognizable pink triangles on their arms and legs. Physical and visual isolation confirmed

¹² Mosse, 143.

¹³ Ibid., 136.

¹⁴ Oosterhuis, 193.

¹⁵ Mosse, 169.

¹⁶ Ibid., 158.

¹⁷ Oosterhuis, 203.

¹⁸ Lautman, “The Pink Triangle,” 146.

¹⁹ Ibid., 148.

²⁰ Erwin J. Haeberle, “‘Stigmata of Degeneration’: Prisoner Markings in Nazi Concentration Camps,” in *Historical Perspectives on Homosexuality*, ed. Salvatore J. Licata (New York, Haworth, 1981): 137.

homosexuals' outsider status and made them easy targets of homophobic bigotry and "longstanding general prejudice."²¹ Consequently, homosexual inmates were regularly assigned to the most arduous labor groups, where the vast majority died from undernourishment and overwork. While exact data is not available, Lautman emphasizes that homosexual inmates were over two-thirds more likely to perish than their heterosexual associates.²² Uncertainty about the biological or psychological origin of homosexuality and the apparent conflicting viewpoints among the Nazi leadership did not prevent the state from carrying out racial purification by imprisoning and murdering homosexuals.

Despite the barbaric conditions in the concentration camps, homosexuals were not always prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law when instances of same-sex encounters involved youth or military personnel. For young offenders, the death penalty was the exception rather than the rule. Identification of homosexual behavior among German youth typically led to "reeducation" or characteristically short prison terms. It was widely believed that wayward youth could be "scared straight" and that revealing the "seriousness of their deeds was sufficient to deter them from such behavior in the future."²³ For the most part, Hitler's 1941 order that homosexuals in the SS be given the death penalty was rigorously obeyed, although appeals to Himmler – the final arbiter of justice within the SS – could occasionally secure a reduced sentence or a pardon. This was especially true as the war drew to a close, since Himmler "needed men who would give their all in order to redeem their good names."²⁴ Concerns over manpower and the sustained ability to defend Germany took precedence as the war grew more desperate. While many homosexuals received the death penalty for their sexual transgressions, youthful inexperience or military usefulness could, in some rare cases, mitigate punishment.

The Nazi regime was unquestionably opposed to homosexuality. For party leaders, same-sex romance posed an intolerable challenge to the notion of the inherent superiority of the Teutonic race and German culture, and therefore had to be swiftly and mercilessly eliminated. Relentless discrimination against homosexuals suppressed the discomfiting fact that many loyal Nazis, inundated with propaganda venerating the beauty of the masculine form, themselves concealed homoerotic desires. In spite of inflammatory homophobic rhetoric, psychologists and ideologues alike were often confounded by the supposed deviant nature of homosexuality. In part due to contradictory and inconsistent attitudes, homosexuals were a rigorously, but inconsistently persecuted minority in the Third Reich.

²¹ Ibid., 139.

²² Lautman, "The Pink Triangle," 154.

²³ Waite, 465.

²⁴ Giles, 287.