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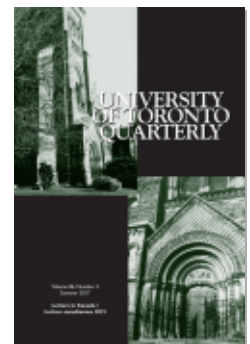
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*Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation  
and the Rise of the Nazis* by Laurie Marhoefer (review)

Harry Oosterhuis

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A short review cannot do justice to the rich and erudite engagement of theory, belief, and praxis that this volume embodies. In this contested area of human interaction it will not satisfy everyone, but as an attempt to move discussion and debate beyond the redoubts that so often constitute the barriers to further movement and respectful engagement between these cultures, it is inspired, as well as being both informative and readable. That litigation that will soon be before the Supreme Court of Canada involving a clash between the proscriptive claims of a Christian university to religious freedom in deciding who enters its portals, and the values of the legal profession and legal education in Canada, that involving approval of the Trinity Western University law degree proposal, helps buttress the relevance of the analysis and discussion that this impressive book contains.

JOHN McLAREN,  
Faculty of Law,  
University of Victoria

Laurie Marhoefer. *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis*. University of Toronto Press. xvi, 342. \$32.95

Since the Second World War, the sense of national identity among Germans has largely been burdened with embarrassment and guilt about the Nazi past. For the last decade or so, however, Germans have found reasons to be proud of their country again. A major contributing factor, apart from the achievements of the national soccer team, is Berlin's reputation for open-mindedness, permissiveness, and alternative lifestyles. Another factor, according to liberal progressives at least, is the history of liberal sexual politics. They point to the fact that the German homosexual rights movement, which emerged already before 1900, was the first and leading one in the western world. Sexual reform in the Weimar Republic, they also argue, was based on principles that from the 1960s on would basically become the model for sexual liberation across the western world, in particular among gays, lesbians, and transgender people. Such adoption of a "usable past," however, is not without problems, as the American historian Laurie Marhoefer amply demonstrates in her book about sexual politics in the Weimar Republic.

At a first glance, Marhoefer's study vindicates the view that the roots of modern sexual emancipation can be found in the democratic constellation of the Weimar Republic, which drew strength from a fairly open society. A coalition of feminists, homosexual rights activists, social democratic and communist politicians, and reformist doctors and other enlightened professionals effectively pressured more conservative groups to

compromises with regard to the management of supposedly non-normative sexualities and gender identities, pornography, birth control, abortion, and divorce. Censorship was relaxed, albeit not abolished; the homosexual rights movement could grow into a mass movement; gay, lesbian, and transgender subcultures and media were able to flourish; decriminalization of all forms of homosexual intercourse between consenting adults was on the agenda; and a pragmatic welfare approach of prostitution and venereal disease was implemented. A secular trust in rationality and scientific expertise as well as a liberal-democratic view of individual civil rights pushed back traditional religious morality and the legal imperatives of the state.

At the same time Marhoefer makes clear that sexual reform in the Weimar Republic was not unconditional and had its downsides. It was based on drawing clear boundaries between, on the one hand, tolerable sexual behaviour of consenting adults in private or in limited subcultural spaces, and, on the other, improper sexual expressions in the wider public sphere, such as female and male prostitution. Also, in order to counter the assumed danger of the seduction and moral corruption of youths, sex between adults and minors was increasingly subjected to sanctions. Granting sexual liberties to discreet and law-abiding citizens, including “decent” gays and lesbians, went together with the marginalization and intensified control of particular groups, such as female and male prostitutes, promiscuous individuals, lower-class venereal patients, and extravagant transgender people. Branded as irresponsible, asocial, and mentally inferior, these groups were subjected to police surveillance as well as coercive medical and welfare interventions. This was the essence of what Marhoefer characterizes as the “Weimar settlement on sexual politics” on which moderate progressives and conservatives could agree. It was grounded in the conviction that the rights of democratic citizenship were intrinsically connected to duties, responsibilities, and individual self-regulation. Homosexuality and alternative gender identities could be tolerated only as the innate and inevitable features of a well-defined minority of adults and as long as they were not expressed in public and did not spread to the mainstream. In that sense, Marhoefer’s analysis is still relevant for present-day discussions about sexual politics. For example, the success of gay emancipation in many parts of the western world has been criticized by more radical “queer” activists in terms “homonormativity” and adaptive assimilation, which undermine the variety of sexual and gender identities and lifestyles.

The only major flaw of this study concerns the author’s suggestion that the German homosexual movement was situated at the liberal-democratic end of the political spectrum and that its main opponents were conservative Christians and Nazis. But this view seems to underestimate the

multifarious and internally divided character of this movement. Apart from organizations that relied on scientific insights and enlightened and liberal values, there were also strong currents that overlapped with anti-modernistic and anti-democratic trends. Some exclusive groups of homosexual men drew on an elitist, Nietzschean anarchism as well as nationalist ideals of male bonding, which implied misogyny, militarism, and racism. Germany's gay past, in other words, is even more fraught with contradictions and ambivalences than Marhoefer acknowledges.

HARRY OOSTERHUIS,  
Department of History,  
Maastricht University

Patryk Polec. *Hurrah Revolutionaries: The Polish Canadian Communist Movement, 1918–1948*. McGill-Queen's University Press. xxxiv, 302. \$34.95

As a monograph in the McGill-Queen's Studies in Ethnic History Series, this book will be of interest to individuals who study Canadian immigration, ethnicity, and labour history. Polec notes that in the past, radicalism was often viewed as movement of the working class and at times depicted through a Stalinist lens to elicit a "foreign Red Scare." Scholars rarely demonstrate that radicalism was an outcome from members of the working class who attempted to promote their progressive ideology. Similarly in Canada, communism is rarely thought of as a movement that sought to eliminate social, economic, and political discrimination, injustice, and unemployment among immigrants. Polec uses historian Ian McKay's "reconnaissance" strategy to analyze how the Polish Canadian communist movement interacted with the Polish community in Canada by placing relations between them within a broader Canadian context. He also contextualizes the Polish communist movement's relationship with Canadian officials, the Communist Party of Canada, and other ethnic communists including Ukrainians and Polish Jews.

There is a lack of sufficient archival material to determine the number of Polish communists in Canada. Polec suggests that there were between 1,000 and 5,000 members. Unlike the Ukrainian, Finnish, and Jewish communists who constituted close to 95 percent of the Canadian Communist Party's membership, Polish communists were a small minority within the movement. They were soon aware that their "hurrah revolutionism" which stressed ideology over ethnicity would hinder their cause. The movement's success depended on its support for ethnicity since most Polish immigrants remained skeptical of atheism, class struggle, and internationalism, and held onto their ethnocultural heritage.