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Stormtrooper Families: homosexuality and community in the early Nazi movement

Harry Oosterhuis

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field is heading, scholars and students will still relish this enticing queer smorgasbord of London over the last two centuries.

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Stormtrooper Families: homosexuality and community in the early Nazi movement, by Andrew Wackerfuss, New York and York, Harrington Park Press, 2015, 384 pp., \$35.00/£27.95 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-93959-405-1

Scholars in gender and gay studies have recently drawn attention to the complex relation between manliness and homosexuality in late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German politics. At that time, many right-wing, nationalist movements strongly identified with hyper-masculine militarism, male bonding and exclusion of women. In the same period, sexual issues were widely debated among physicians, sexologists and lawyers, as well as among social reformers, politicians and writers. In this context, it is significant that the modern idea of homosexuality in terms of an innate identity was largely articulated in central Europe, while the German homosexual rights movement, established around 1900, was in fact the first in the world. These two trends – masculine nationalism and sexual modernism – resulted in a thorny mixture of homoeroticism and homophobia, and, in the Third Reich, disastrous consequences for homosexual men.

The ambivalent relation between the celebration of manliness and homoerotic sensibilities is the leitmotif in Andrew Wackerfuss' *Stormtrooper Families* about the SA (*Sturmabteilung*), the national-socialist paramilitary organization. Examining (auto) biographical writings, correspondence, personnel files, and legal and police records from Hamburg, Wackerfuss throws light on the social backgrounds and motivations of the young men who joined the SA. Their discontent and rancour were rooted not only in poverty and unemployment, low self-esteem and a lack of confidence in the generation of their fathers and the bourgeois elite, but also in a dislike of the social and political modernity of the democratic Weimar Republic, in particular women's emancipation and also capitalism. The similarities between backgrounds and attitudes among SA members and those of their main opponents in the communist Red Fighting Brigades are striking. Driven by an excess of testosterone, mutual collective rabble-rousing and, in some instances, criminal antecedents, both parties used provocation, intimidation and violence as political strategy.

What attracted young men to the SA was not so much the Nazi ideology in itself, but rather its communal organization, shared ethos and political style. The small-scale and locally organized units usually originated in neighbourhood connections and friendship ties, and they fraternized in local pubs. These gangs not only fulfilled their emotional need for belonging and reassurance; the SA also provided material support such as soup kitchens and shelter. Harking back to the experience of soldiers during the First World War and the fight against socialists and communists in its wake, the militancy of the SA-men was continuously fuelled by the suggestion that they were surrounded by enemies and traitors. Stressing aggressive masculinity, comradeship, heroism, self-sacrifice and unconditional loyalty, the SA embodied vigorous militarism, but at the

same time its brigades were far from disciplined. Impulsive and coarse behaviour, drunkenness, sudden outbursts of violence leading to casualties and deaths, intimidation of civilians and rude treatment of women were common. Stirring up disorder and fear was the stormtroopers' forte, whereas middle-class respectability and family values – propagated by the Nazi party – were of no concern to them. Most of them were unmarried, not only because they lacked the means to support a wife and children, but also because family life did not accord with the dedication and fellowship the SA demanded from its members.

However, such close attachments between men raised the suspicion that they were of an erotic or even sexual nature, the more so because in Weimar Germany homosexuality was a public issue and the gay movement and subculture were rather visible. Although the SA, following the official party line, strongly denounced homosexuality, also to ward off any association with it in their own circles, it was difficult to refute the suggestion that intense male bonding attracted homosexual men and was a cover for homosexual behaviour. These allegations became acute in 1931 and 1932 when antifascist media and politicians tried to discredit Nazism by exposing the homosexual proclivities of the national SA-leader Ernst Röhm and some other prominent stormtroopers. The picture of SA-circles as homosexual cliques marked by favouritism and sexual abuse of innocent youngsters became widespread and embarrassed the Nazi party.

Regardless of the ongoing tension between the rather unruly SA-troops and the party leadership, worsened by the public charges of homosexuality, the SA was largely given a free hand as long as the stormtroopers, who fought socialists and communists in the streets, played a crucial role in the seizure of power. After the Nazi takeover, however, the unpredictable and social-revolutionary SA, which counted 4.5 million armed members and which demanded a central role in the new regime, began to be considered a serious threat by the party leadership. In order to placate the bourgeoisie as well as the military establishment and big business, the Nazi government began to promote an image of lawfulness and stability. The leftist accusations were now adopted by Hitler, Himmler and other Nazi-leaders as an effective pretext for a drastic purge and subjugation of the SA. In 1934, during the so-called Night of the Long Knives, Röhm and other SA officers, as well as other prominent opponents of Nazism, were assassinated. The Nazi propaganda made much of having prevented a 'homosexual coup', while Hitler, who had never cared much about the sexual preference of Röhm and other prominent Nazis, now posed as a defender of a 'healthy' sexual morality. Homosexuals were branded as enemies of the state and the German people, and both within and outside of the Nazi movement they were increasingly persecuted. The fear that all-male Nazi organizations – not only the SA but also the SS, the *Hitlerjugend* and the German army – could degenerate into hotbeds of homosexuality was an incentive to introduce severe punishments and strict surveillance of all men who were supposed to serve the Third Reich in close alliance with each other.

Overall, Wackerfuss' narrative is convincing, but some of its details are insufficiently supported by factual data. For example, he is not clear at all about the extent to which homosexual men were actually drawn towards the SA (and possibly other Nazi organizations as well) or the size of their number among the stormtroopers. He suggests rather vaguely that it was growing until 1934 (94) and that in general homosexual men were welcomed because of their strong commitment to their comrades (51). Although the author refers to some occasional examples on the basis of sources available in Hamburg, he does not provide more substantial and systematic empirical proof on this, let alone with regard to the part played by homosexuals in the Nazi movement on the national scale. It might well be that not so much their real overrepresentation in the SA was a decisive

factor, but rather the fabricated image of this organization as a homosexual one. This qualification does not alter the fact that the tension between homosexuality and male bonding is crucial indeed for a better understanding of how the persecution of gay men in the Third Reich is closely related to Nazism as a masculine movement.

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Harmful and Undesirable: book censorship in Nazi Germany, by Guenter Lewy, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2016, xi + 268 pp., £19.99 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-19027-528-0

For many scholars of Nazi Germany, book censorship is a hazy topic. Beyond the iconic book burning, which has received a good deal of attention, basic questions about Nazi censorship abound: what books were censored, and why? Who decided what Germans under Hitler should read? How were such decisions enforced?

Lewy addresses these questions in the four sections of his book: the emergence of censorship; the agencies of control; the practice of censorship; and the impact of censorship. Whereas the first part provides historical context by examining censorship in the Weimar Republic, the second and third parts serve as the primary pillars of Lewy's overarching argument about the chaotic nature of Hitler's government. Part four deals with the agonizing choices writers faced in deciding whether or not to pursue their craft under Hitler.

In his brief discussion of the Weimar Republic, Lewy explains how authorities used the Weimar constitution's Article 122, which called for protection of youth from corrupting influences, to censor books and films. With this eye to continuity in German history, Lewy affirms one of the many brilliant observations of the great Raul Hilberg: the Nazis were seldom inventors. Nevertheless, the Nazis frequently manipulated earlier ideas into a grotesque modern form. Such was the case on 10 May 1933, when the Nazis, who had come to power a scant 13 weeks earlier, orchestrated the most visible of their book censorship activities. Book burnings took place at major university towns throughout Germany, including Bonn, Braunschweig and fabled Göttingen, but they did not rival the massive pyre in Berlin, which was the result of students and professors marching books from the library of today's Humboldt University across the road to the plaza in front of St Hedwig's church, now Bebelplatz. There, 40,000 spectators watched as books by Emil Ludwig, Sigmund Freud, Bertolt Brecht, Erich Maria Remarque and many other literary luminaries went up in flames. Although the complicity of wide sections of the German population in the Nazi regime has been well established in the literature, the eager participation of the professoriate and university administrations in the Nazi book burning still shocks.

Scholarly debates about the polycratic nature of Hitler's government have tended to be framed within the context of genocide, due, understandably, to the magnitude of the Holocaust. In Lewy's account, however, readers are made aware of the implications of