

Persecution of Homosexuals under the Dictatorships of the Twentieth Century
by Dennis Browne

The major totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, both of the left and of the right, displayed considerable antagonism to homosexuality, and subjected homosexuals to persecution and ostracism. Nazi Germany provides the most extreme example and the most abundant evidence of the anti-gay agenda, but the determination to take measures against homosexuality was a characteristic of the Soviet Union under Stalin, and to a less dramatic extent in Fascist Italy and Vichy France. At times, the measures taken against homosexuals reflected a commitment to enforcing moral standards which were based on rigid views of sexual identity, family life, and social conformity. At other times, they reflected a determination to identify gay people among those groups that were stigmatized as outsiders, and a fear of homosexuals as threats to the stability of the regimes. It is true that legalized and institutionalized hostility to gay people has been a reality in many nations, whether democracies or dictatorships. But the major dictatorships of the twentieth century have made use of the instruments of repression to make what one historian of the Soviet experience has called “a living hell” for gay people, and especially gay men.¹

The sources for a full understanding of the persecution of gays in Germany and other dictatorships are limited. By comparison with the campaign of extermination against the Jews of Europe, the nature of the actions taken against homosexuals, and the numbers of victims, have often seemed to suggest that this was a relatively trivial episode, hardly comparable with the Holocaust. In the years immediately following the Second World War, an atmosphere of continuing prejudice and criminalization of homosexual acts in most Western nations was not conducive to sympathetic inquiry into the situation of gay people under the dictatorships. In Germany, where the worst persecution took place, it was not until the 1970s that a “shared memory” of the experience developed in an environment

¹Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 352 n. 2.

of increased political consciousness and of a free gay and lesbian press.² Until the 1980s, when George Mosse and Richard Plant published ground-breaking books on the subject, few historians had demonstrated much interest in this aspect of the crimes of these regimes. Earlier histories of Nazi Germany made little more than a passing reference to the fact that gay people were victims of persecution, although recent general histories (such as those of Michael Burleigh and Richard Evans) have paid considerable attention to this aspect of the regime's repression. Only in the past three decades have researchers attempted to come to terms with the nature and dimensions of the persecution of homosexuals. The availability of reliable information has been further limited by the fact that gay men and women, at least until quite recently, have been reluctant to speak about their identities and their experiences. By the year 2000, when Jeffrey Friedman and Rob Epstein made their important documentary, *Paragraph 175*, few people who had lived through the experience were alive to give testimony. In the case of the Soviet Union, there has been little willingness to probe this aspect of the nation's history, and Dan Healey's work, which makes use of state and court archives to the extent that they are available, is one of the few serious works on the subject. Treatments of the experience of gay people in France, Italy, and Franco's Spain are far less abundant.

Apart from Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union under Stalin provides the most dramatic example of the singling out of homosexuals for persecution. The first Soviet Russian criminal code, issued in 1922, had decriminalized homosexual acts (for which the word used was *muzhelozhstvo*, which translates as "sodomy" but evidently refers to a much broader range of activity than sodomy itself).³ But in 1933, OGPU deputy chief Iagoda urged Stalin to adopt legislation re-establishing the criminal status of homosexuality. Iagoda argued primarily on grounds of state security. He insisted that gay men were "establishing networks" which were likely to become "outright espionage cells," and he argued that these "castelike" groups were working for "plainly counterrevolutionary aims," that they were

²Erik N. Jensen, "The Pink Triangle and Political Consciousness: Gays, Lesbians, and the memory of Nazi Persecution," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11 (2002), 321.

³Healey, *Homosexual Desire*, 115, 185.

demoralizing young men, and that they were attempting to infiltrate the armed forces.”⁴ It is interesting to find Iagoda suggesting that the danger posed by gay men was that they were likely to form groups, and that groups were inimical to the state. This was also, as will become evident, a major preoccupation of Nazi leadership.

“Sodomy” became once again a criminal offense with the adoption of legislation in March and April 1934. The law prescribed “deprivation of liberty” of 3 – 5 years for sexual intercourse between men, and 3 – 8 years for sodomy “committed with the use of force or with the use of the dependent situation of the victim” (RSFSR Criminal Code 154-a).⁵ The language of the law was not terribly specific as to which acts were covered by “sodomy,” but an opinion of the Moscow municipal court, delivered in March 1935, made it clear how extensive the law’s reach was by interpreting it as “directed against sodomy not in the narrow meaning of the term, but against sodomy as an antisocial system . . . of sexual liaisons between men in whatever form they may take and especially when they occur among groups of persons organized on that basis.”⁶ When he was made aware of the negative impact that this re-criminalization of male homosexuality might have on the opinions of the Western European left, Stalin enlisted Maxim Gorky to speak for the regime. Gorky’s articles in Pravda and Izvestiia put the issue in terms of the struggle between fascism and communism. Whereas in the over-civilized, decadent, demoralized world of capitalism and fascism, homosexuality, one of its most “revolting” features, was “practiced freely and with impunity,” in the USSR the rule of the proletariat ensured the purity and health of the nation by punishing a force that threatened to corrupt the young. Gorky came up with the astounding slogan, “Destroy the homosexuals—Fascism will disappear.”⁷ In reality, the number of convictions of gay men rose dramatically in 1933-34, but then diminished, so that the total number of gay men convicted in the 1930s and 1940s appears to have been less than 500. However, in later years, beginning in the 1960s, more vigorous pursuit of homosexuals resulted in far larger

⁴Healey, *Homosexual Desire*, 184.

⁵Healey, *Homosexual Desire*, 330 n. 20.

⁶Healey, *Homosexual Desire*, 192.

⁷Healey, *Homosexual Desire*, 189.

numbers of raids, trials, and convictions. Healey suggests that, during the life of the criminalization law (1934-1993), some 25-26,000 men were convicted in Soviet and Russian courts.⁸

Other totalitarian states looked disapprovingly upon homosexual behavior, but the measures which they took against it were less severe and more sporadic. In Vichy France, the Pétain regime placed the traditional family and sexual morality at the center of its program of national renewal. The idealization of heterosexuality within marriage, as Miranda Pollard suggests, required stigmatizing homosexuality as its “dark opposite,” and the law of August 6, 1942, amending the penal code, criminalized the acts of those who “to satisfy their own lust commit an act or acts [that are] shameful or against nature with a minor of their own sex aged twenty-one or less.”⁹ It is worth noting that, while the law did not criminalize all homosexual activity, it also did not distinguish between male and female homosexual acts. Antony Copley suggests that Vichy's measures against pederasty formed part of its program for the “regeneration of youth.”¹⁰ Meanwhile, gay men and women living in occupied France, as in other Nazi-occupied territories throughout Europe, seem to have escaped serious harassment. It is striking that, as Copley points out, while “the elimination of homosexuality constituted a major part in Nazi fantasies of a new society,” Nazis showed little interest in persecuting homosexuals in occupied countries. Himmler even “argued that Germany's interests lay in encouraging the degenerating consequences of homosexuality amongst the subject peoples, hence accelerating their decline.”¹¹

In Italy, official actions against homosexuality took place, but they were relatively limited. Mussolini's regime aggressively promoted an image of the new Fascist man, and masculinity was defined by “youthfulness, virility, athleticism, and military prowess.”¹² Fascist propaganda projected the image of the virile man who was always prepared for war (while the image of women was based on a model of subservience and submissiveness to the aggressive and dominant male). The male

⁸Healey, *Homosexual Desire*, 261-3.

⁹Miranda Pollard, *Reign of Virtue: Mobilizing Gender in Vichy France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 69.

¹⁰Antony Copley, *Sexual Moralities in France, 1780 – 1980* (London: Routledge, 1989), 203.

¹¹Copley, *Sexual Moralities in France*, 153.

¹²Lorenzo Benadusi, “Private Life and Public Morals: Fascism and the 'Problem' of Homosexuality,” *Totalitarian Regimes and Political Religions* 5 (2004), 188.

homosexual was “a dangerous disturbance to national order,” who questioned the fundamental values of the new moral order, corrupted others, endangered the nation by refusing the basic duty to procreate, and “undermined the country's internal unity by mixing sexual roles.” But Italian fascism seems to have been more concerned with the appearance of homosexuality as a deviation from this image than with the reality of homosexual activity. Active homosexuals whose behavior appeared to be “normal” and conformed to the image were unlikely to be bothered. Those whose physical appearance seemed to match the stereotype of the effeminate homosexual were far more likely to be targeted. How completely the fascist regime's attitude was shaped by preoccupation with image rather than with the reality may be suggested by Mussolini's refusal to accept accusations that Domenico Bagnasco, a deputy, was homosexual. The Duce insisted that, “given Bagnasco's profile, masculine features and full beard, the rumour [sic] could have no basis in truth.”¹³ Italian Fascist policies towards homosexuality were inherently ambiguous. A proposal to include language in the penal code categorizing homosexual relationships as because crimes was rejected “because, to Italy's pride and fortune, this dreadful practice is not widespread enough among us to merit the intervention of the law,” and because aberrant acts were covered by other provisions of the law.¹⁴ The preferred way of dealing with behavior seen as deviant was to isolate those who failed to conform to the model. This was how authorities dealt with a group of 46 gay men rounded up in Catania and sent to the Tremiti islands.¹⁵

It was in Nazi Germany that stigmatization and persecution of homosexuals was most persistent and most completely institutionalized. Because the materials are more abundant for Nazi Germany than for other dictatorships, and because the assault on gay men in that society took such extreme forms, it is possible to give a fairly full picture of the nature of the assault on homosexuals in this society. The primary sources, including official documents and personal accounts of the experience of persecution, are available in Günter Grau's *Hidden Holocaust?*, first published in German in 1993 and issued in

¹³Benadusi, “Private Life and Public Morals,” 186-7.

¹⁴Benadusi, “Private Life and Public Morals,” 176.

¹⁵Benadusi, “Private Life and Public Morals,” 178.

English translation in 1995. A number of Anglophone scholars—most prominently Geoffrey Giles, have studied various aspects of the ways in which the Reich implemented the mechanism of repression.

The Nazis were certainly not the first to initiate measures against homosexuals in Germany. The well-know Paragraph 175 derived from Prussian law, which was more restrictive than that of other German states (including Bavaria, which had decriminalized homosexuality in 1813), and was enacted as part of the Reich Criminal Code in 1871. This legislation decreed that “criminally indecent activity” between two males was punishable by imprisonment, and made an exception if one of the males was under the age of twenty-one.¹⁶ The law did not specify which acts fell under this heading, and the reality was that imperial German courts usually prosecuted only cases of homosexual behavior that resembled “coital acts.”¹⁷

The Weimar years are most often thought of as a period of tolerance for various forms of sexual expression. The reality was less idyllic than the myth, but certainly Berlin in the 1920s was a popular destination for gay men and women from Germany and elsewhere who sought the opportunity to live without oppressive constraints. There were as many as twenty gay-oriented periodicals published between 1919 and 1933, and some of these reached circulations of more than 100,000.¹⁸ But Weimar was also the scene of an emerging culture war between proponents of greater freedom and forces determined to end this freedom. The most prominent figure on the side of greater freedom was Magnus Hirschfeld, who campaigned tirelessly for the repeal of Paragraph 175. In 1919, Hirschfeld established the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin, housing a library, a center for research and teaching, a museum and archive, and a clinic for people in search of advice on sexual concerns, including abortion, birth control, and venereal diseases. Christopher Isherwood, who was a frequent visitor, described Hirschfeld affectionately and admiringly as “the silly solemn old professor with his doggy moustache,

¹⁶Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, *The Racial State: Germany 1933 – 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 184.

¹⁷Richard Plant, *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals* (New York: Holt, 1986), 207.

¹⁸Stefan Micheler, “Homophobic Propaganda and the Denunciation of Same-Sex-Desiring Men under Nationalism,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11 (2002), 102.

thick peering spectacles and clumsy German-Jewish boots” and as one of the “heroic leaders of his tribe.” From the first days of his career, Hirschfeld was targeted by gangs of opponents, who disrupted his lectures and, on several occasions, beat him severely. Hirschfeld's campaign for repeal of Paragraph 175 came closest to success in 1929, when a committee of the Reichstag agreed to put a bill for its repeal up for a vote. However, this came just at the time when the Nazis—who attacked Hirschfeld as a Jew and a homosexual whom they characterized as favoring “sexual relations between siblings, men and animals, and men on men”—became a serious force in the parliament, winning 107 seats in the November elections. Hopes for repeal were dead.¹⁹

The National Socialist party made no secret of its hatred for homosexuality. During the 1928 election campaign, a gay rights organization asked each political party for a formal statement of its position. The Nazi statement left no room for doubt: “Those who are considering love between men or between women are our enemies.” It went on to proclaim the party's rejection of anything that “emasculates our people” and weakens the nation, and to reject “all immorality, especially love between men.”²⁰ Immediately after coming to power, the Nazi regime took steps to combat homosexuality. Within the first month, on February 23, 1933, an ordinance proscribed all organizations that defended homosexuals or promoted their rights. In Prussia, bars and other gay-friendly gathering places were shut down, although in other urban parts of Germany they remained open until 1936.²¹ One of the earliest actions taken by the Third Reich against homosexuals was the destruction, on May 6, 1933, of Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science. Students and SA men, accompanied by a brass band, ransacked the building, removing and burning as many as 10,000 books—including the works of “the dirty Jew Freud” and “the swine Havelock Ellis,” as well as those of Proust, Wilde and Gide—and ceremonially hanged the bust of the institute's founder (who was, and remained, abroad) before

¹⁹Norman Page, Auden and Isherwood: The Berlin Years (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 104-12. Isherwood's description is found in *Christopher and His Kind, 1922 – 1939* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1976).

²⁰Erwin J. Haeberle, “Swastika, Pink Triangle and Yellow Star—The Destruction of Sexology and the Persecution of Homosexuals in Nazi Germany,” *Journal of Sex Research* 17 (1981), 280.

²¹Stefan Micheler, “Homophobic Propaganda and the Denunciation of Same-Sex-Desiring Men under Nationalism,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11 (2002), 95-6.

throwing it onto the bonfire.²² The speed with which the new regime targeted the Institute for destruction made some wonder about the motivation for this action. Ludwig Lenz, a gynecologist who had worked at the Institute, speculated that so many Nazi leaders had come there for treatment of sexual issues—and sometimes for severe and potentially embarrassing dysfunctions—that they had good reason to want to seize or destroy the Institute's files. In Lenz's words, the reason for the action was “simple and straightforward enough—we knew too much.”²³ Obviously, this must remain a matter of speculation.

As the government took over the German press and publishing houses, homophobic propaganda reinforced the image of homosexuality as a threat to the new order. The entry on “homosexuality” in the indispensable Meyers Lexikon, which in its Weimar edition had relied largely on Hirschfeld's point of view, was revised in the 8th edition (1936) to impugn him as an “infamous 'sex researcher',” and described homosexuality as “a threat to the Volk community, since homosexuals exhibit a tendency to form cliques, seduce the young, and, above all, undermine the natural will to life by propagating an aversion to marriage and the family.”²⁴ As the campaign of suppression intensified, the state controlled press supported it by propagating stories about purported homosexual cliques that threatened to seduce German youth and “feminize the Männerstaat,” and by urging more drastic measures to uproot these corrupting influences.²⁵ Lurid accounts of crimes committed by homosexuals gave the press opportunities to suggest that groups of gay men were congregating in secret places for the purpose of corrupting boys. Because of the frequency with which articles assailing homosexual behavior appeared, Stefan Micheler argues that “Nearly all Germans came into contact with Nazi homophobic propaganda.”²⁶

²²Günter Grau, ed., *Hidden Holocaust? Gay and Lesbian Persecution in Germany 1933 – 1945*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Cassell, 1995), 31-3.

²³Erwin J. Haeberle, “Swastika, Pink Triangle and Yellow Star—The Destruction of Sexology and the Persecution of Homosexuals in Nazi Germany,” *Journal of Sex Research* 17 (1981), 273-4.

²⁴Micheler, “Homophobic Propaganda,” 103.

²⁵Micheler, “Homophobic Propaganda,” 110.

²⁶Micheler, “Homophobic Propaganda,” 116.

The propaganda campaign in the press was to reach a peak during the trials of Catholic priests in 1937. These trials of priests and other members of male religious orders for having “unnatural sexual relations” and for luring children into sexual acts (and sometimes for having seduced adult women) played a significant role in the Nazi attempt to discredit the churches, and particularly the Roman Catholic Church. After the issuance of the encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge* (March 21, 1937), in which Pius XI denounced the Nazi regime's “annihilatory struggle” against the Church, Goebbels' Propaganda Ministry launched a campaign against individual priests and institutions for alleged acts of pederasty. Large numbers of priests were put on trial, and these “cloister trials” received immense publicity, in which monasteries and religious houses were depicted as “breeding grounds of a repulsive epidemic.” Press accounts luxuriated in details about the activities of the “devils clad in cassocks,” and the discovery of, as one headline put it, “Bottomless Depravity in the Monastery.”²⁷ As Richard Evans suggests, in this campaign of propaganda and prosecution, Nazi hatred of homosexuality served a useful purpose in undermining the moral authority of an institution which continued to hold the loyalty of many Germans.²⁸

The purge of Ernst Röhm and the leadership of the SA marked the shift from a primarily rhetorical and campaign to one that took a legal and institutional form. Röhm's homosexuality was no secret, and the fact that a gay man held such a high place in the Nazi hierarchy suggested to many that the regime was unlikely to take serious action against them. Hitler's public comments after the Night of the Long Knives, in which he indicated that he “would especially like every mother to be able to offer her son to the SA, the Party, or the Hitler Youth without the fear that he might become morally or sexually depraved,” caused a wave of panic in the gay community, and a number of arrests took place throughout the country.²⁹ Using information acquired by interrogating the arrested men, the Gestapo began compiling lists of “all persons (males) who have been homosexually active in any way” and

²⁷Micheler, “Homophobic Propaganda,” 113-4.

²⁸Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power 1933 – 1939* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 243-5.

²⁹Geoffrey J. Giles, “The Institutionalization of Homosexual Panic in the Third Reich,” in Robert Gellately and Nathan Stoltzfus, eds., *Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 236.

developed a system of registration to monitor their activity.³⁰

The campaign against homosexuals intensified greatly in 1935, with the amendment of Paragraph 175 of the Criminal Code by 175a, which decreed prison terms of 3 – 10 years for men guilty of certain homosexual offenses. As in all European civil law traditions, the law itself was formulated at a high level of abstraction, and needs to be amplified by reference to official and semi-official commentaries. The meaning of “indecent” remained undefined, ostensibly because Ministry of Justice officials feared that a clearer explanation of what acts were prohibited would entice boys and young men to experiment with such acts. In the interpretation of Leopold Schäfer, an official at the Reich Ministry of Justice, the “essential defect” of the original Paragraph 175 was that it was, or was interpreted to be, limited to “intercourse-like acts,” and that “the police could not proceed against evidently homosexual practices unless they were able to prove such acts.” The new legislation was meant to remedy this defect, “so that any offence [sic] between males renders them liable to imprisonment.”³¹ Such offenses could include kissing, touching, inappropriate glances, or even expressions of feeling. The law was sufficiently broad to allow convictions for masturbation, homosexual advances, and even expressions of friendly affection between two men.³² One university professor fell afoul of the law when he was charged with tickling a hotel page-boy, and although he “confined his tickling to areas above the waist,” Gestapo interrogators persuaded him to sign an agreement to be castrated, and the University of Freiburg stripped him of his doctorate.³³ As in many cases, the professor was targeted because, although an enthusiastic Nazi, he had made enemies in the Party, and his sexual proclivities became a pretext for his humiliation. In another abuse of justice, Nazi courts applied the new version of the law retroactively, prosecuting men (sexual activities between women were not included in the law) for acts committed earlier, when these acts had not been

³⁰“Telegram from the Gestapo Berlin, 1 November 1934,” in Grau, ed., *Hidden Holocaust?*, 46.

³¹Grau, ed., *Hidden Holocaust?*, 66.

³²Harry Oosterhuis, “Medicine, Male Bonding and Homosexuality in Nazi Germany,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 32 (1997), 190.

³³Geoffrey J. Giles, “The Most Unkindest Cut of All: Castration, Homosexuality and Nazi Justice,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 27 (1992), 43.

punishable.³⁴

Most crucially, the assault on homosexuals fell under the direction of Heinrich Himmler. Homophobia was not, as Geoffrey Giles has observed, one of Hitler's obsessions. But it did obsess Himmler. Himmler's disgust with pederasty, traceable to his student days, seems to have developed into a conviction that all homosexuals are pederasts, and his ability to suggest that homosexuals posed a threat to children had the advantage of enlisting popular support for the "blanket marginalization [of gay men] as outsiders deserving of contempt."³⁵ On October 10, 1936, Himmler issued a secret directive aimed at intensifying and centralizing legal actions against gay men. The directive gave local police the authority to prosecute offenses under Paragraph 175, and required that all legal proceedings and even suspected violations be reported upward to the newly established Reichszentrale zur Bekämpfung der Homosexualität und der Abtreibung (Reich Central Agency for Combating Homosexuality and Abortion), a special unit within the criminal police, charged specifically with the task of combating what Himmler saw as twin threats to the moral order of the Reich.³⁶ In Günter Grau's words, Himmler's action "opened the flood-gates for an unprecedented wave of public denunciations and for arbitrary actions" by the criminal police and the Gestapo.³⁷

Himmler's speech to a meeting of SS Gruppenführer at Bad Tölz on February 18, 1937 offers a fascinating insight into the homophobic attitude of this Nazi leader. Himmler calculated that, since the 1914/18 war had taken the lives of two million German men, and there said to be two million homosexual men in the current population, Germany faced a deficit of about "four million men capable of having sex" with women and procreating. This disruption of the "sexual balance sheet" was bound to result in a catastrophe for the country. He therefore wished to offered the SS leadership a "couple of ideas . . . on the question of homosexuality." One of these was that, whereas some believed that sexual

³⁴Geoffrey J. Giles, *Why Bother About Homosexuals? Homophobia and Sexual Politics in Nazi Germany* (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2001), 8-9.

³⁵Geoffrey J. Giles, "The Institutionalization of Homosexual Panic in the Third Reich," in Robert Gellately and Nathan Stoltzfus, eds., *Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 233-6.

³⁶Grau, ed., *Hidden Holocaust?*, 103-6.

³⁷Grau, ed., *Hidden Holocaust?*, 87.

preference was a purely private concern, “all things which take place in the sexual sphere are not the private affair of the individual, but signify the life and death of the nation, signify world power or 'swissification'.” Toleration of the sexual imbalance that was depriving Germany's population of a healthy replenishment was merely ensuring the nation's “insignificance in fifty or a hundred years, . . . burial in two hundred and fifty years.”

In these circumstances, Himmler argued that it was imperative to combat homosexuality, in the nation and certainly within the SS. He regretted that it was no longer possible to deal with homosexuals in the way that early Germanic tribes had done it, by drowning them in peat-bogs. This, he claimed, “wasn't a punishment, but simply the extinguishing of abnormal life. It had to be got rid of, just as we pull out weeds, throw them on a heap, and burn them.” Members of the SS who committed homosexual acts would have to be treated in a less dramatic fashion: admitting that, among this elite corps, there were about eight to ten cases of homosexual acts each year, Himmler indicated that the perpetrators were to be publicly degraded, expelled, handed over to the courts, convicted, imprisoned, and in due course sent to a concentration camp, where they would be shot “while attempting to escape.” This policy within the SS would not, admittedly, solve the problem facing the nation, but in a not yet perfect world, it would have to do. At least by expelling the occasional homosexual found within the SS, “the good blood, which we have in the SS, and the increasingly healthy blood which we are cultivating for Germany, will be kept pure.”³⁸ In Himmler's logic, the best way to deal with men who were not interested in having children was evidently to prosecute, imprison, and eventually kill them—pour encourager les autres?

The immediate result of Himmler's involvement in the persecution campaign was the dramatic increase in the number of prosecutions under Paragraph 175. Prosecutions resulting in conviction and imprisonment rose from 766 in 1934 to over 4,000 in 1936 and over 8,000 in 1938.³⁹ Coordinated

³⁸The partial text of Himmler's speech is found in Burleigh and Wippermann, *Racial State*, 192-3.

³⁹Burleigh and Wippermann, *Racial State*, 192.

“cleansing operations” rounded up male prostitutes in known areas of solicitation, patrons of “traffic pubs,” and students and faculty at boarding schools, especially those conducted by Catholic religious orders.⁴⁰ At Himmler's direction, raids were suspended during the 1936 Olympics, and the police were told not to detain or interrogate foreigners who committed offenses, but police action resumed shortly after the games ended. As the prosecutions became public, the press egged on the campaign to rid the nation of degenerates. As the *Hamburger Anzeiger* put it, “the new Germany has no use for criminals and weaklings, perverts and inverts, but requires instead straightforward and manly souls, and so we must combat homosexuality with the means available to us—education, observation, the law, the police, and the courts.”⁴¹ At the peak of the campaign (1937 - 39), some 90,000 arrests on charges of homosexuality took place.⁴²

As the round-ups and prosecutions grew in intensity, penalties became more severe. In June 1935, a revision of the Hereditary Disease Law permitted the voluntary castration of men who had committed a crime “resulting from a degenerate sex drive.” The word “voluntary,” of course, was interpreted broadly, and many men were persuaded under interrogation to sign documents agreeing to their own castration. In the bizarre world of Nazi justice, prison doctors were allowed to make arrangements for castration before the prisoner had faced trial, even though normally a final recommendation was to be made “after completion of due process.” An accused man's acceptance of castration often served as grounds for requests for leniency.⁴³ In 1943, the regime considered removing the camouflage of “voluntary” acceptance, and drafted a bill that would have allowed judges to order the castration of any man convicted of homosexual activity or who succumbed “to an inclination toward homosexual acts.” The bill was postponed for the duration of the war, but it suggests the direction in which the anti-gay policy was moving.⁴⁴

⁴⁰Grau, ed., *Hidden Holocaust?*, 131-3.

⁴¹Micheler, “Homophobic Propaganda,” 115-6.

⁴²Giles, *Why Bother About Homosexuals?*, 10.

⁴³Geoffrey J. Giles, “The Most Unkindest Cut of All”, 45-6.

⁴⁴Geoffrey J. Giles, “The Most Unkindest Cut of All”, 54-5.

After the decree of December 14, 1937, gay men who were deemed to be “professional and habitual” offenders—those who had completed a term of imprisonment—could expect to be sent to “preventive police detention” in a concentration camp.⁴⁵ In 1940, Himmler directed that any convicted homosexual who had seduced more than one partner should be sent to concentration camps immediately upon completion of his prison sentence, a “completely illegal subterfuge” which, as Giles puts it, “effectively turned the prison sentence into a death sentence for many.”⁴⁶ It is widely acknowledged that those gay men who were sent to concentration camps experienced particularly harsh treatment. A letter to Himmler from the Reich Minister of Justice (Franz Gürtner) suggested that, because of the danger that they would infect other prisoners, the optimum placement for gay men was solitary confinement. Because this was not ordinarily possible in a concentration camp, Gürtner indicated other ways of treating this special class of prisoners: segregation from other prisoners at night in barracks with single cells, or, where these were not available, acting according to the “dilution principle,” which consisted in “distributing homosexuals so that everywhere they are faced with a great majority of non-perverts who keep them, as well as each other, under control, out of a healthy abhorrence of homosexuality that is very widespread among prisoners.” When working, homosexuals were to be under constant supervision. Gürtner argued that keeping them in groups, isolated from other prisoners, would run “the risk that a 'homosexual atmosphere' will take shape which drags the individual still deeper into homosexuality.”⁴⁷ But the approach to the treatment of gay prisoners was not uniform: Rudolf Hoess appears to have suspected that homosexuals were of above average intelligence, and that they might lure other prisoners into groups of anti-Nazi subversives, so that segregation would be the best way to keep them from interacting with other prisoners.⁴⁸ The practical consequence of the directives on the treatment of gay men in concentration camps was that they were frequently singled out for especially abusive treatment by camp guards and by other prisoners. Many

⁴⁵Grau, ed., *Hidden Holocaust?*, 140-5.

⁴⁶Giles, “The Institutionalization of Homosexual Panic,” 248.

⁴⁷Grau, ed., *Hidden Holocaust?*, 152-3.

⁴⁸Plant, *The Pink Triangle*, 165.

were sent to work at the most exhausting forms of labor, as at Buchenwald, where gay prisoners were routinely assigned punishment battalions in the quarries. There is some evidence that most gay prisoners at Buchenwald were castrated.⁴⁹ Others were subjected to gruesome experiments with typhus and with hormonal implants, which were designed to test the possibility of “curing” homosexuality, and which apparently engaged Himmler's special interest.⁵⁰

For all of the organizational intensity of the Nazi campaign against homosexuals, it is not entirely clear how many men were prosecuted and convicted. Statistics maintained by different offices give conflicting figures. Gestapo files show that, between 1931 and 1940, 38,956 homosexual men were convicted, but the Reich Central Office records indicate that, in the years 1936 – 1939 alone—when the Gestapo figures indicate 29,797 convictions—there were 42,919. For the war years, East German archives indicate that between 1941 and 1944, 11,916 men were convicted, while a secret memorandum in armed forces files records 4,967 convictions.⁵¹ The total number, then, would fall somewhere between 50,000 and 70,000 convictions. Richard Evans has made the point that the number of gay men who were prosecuted under the Third Reich is hardly exceptional when compared with the 100,000 who were prosecuted by the Bundesrepublik between 1953 and 1965, or the numbers of prosecutions of homosexual acts in Britain in the 1950s. The difference, he argues, is that a large number of those who were prosecuted and convicted, and who were released after serving time in prison, were then immediately rearrested and sent to concentration camps, where their rate of survival was about 50%, considerably lower than that of political prisoners and Jehovah's Witnesses. There was, Evans argues, “no parallel to this deliberately murderous policy in other countries, however severe discrimination may have been.”⁵²

The measures taken against homosexuals in Germany provide some interesting insights into the preoccupations and anxieties of Nazi leaders. The study of sexuality did not end with the destruction of

⁴⁹Grau, ed., *Hidden Holocaust?*, 264-5.

⁵⁰Grau, ed., *Hidden Holocaust?*, 281.

⁵¹Plant, *The Pink Triangle*, 230-2.

⁵²Evans, *Third Reich in Power*, 533-6.

Hirschfeld's Institute—instead, it continued under the aegis of Nazism, and served the purposes of the Reich. Nazi-era psychologists and psychiatrists continued to debate the origins and causes of homosexuality, and whether it was a biological condition or the result of social interaction and environmental causes. Generally, the authorities preferred a therapeutic view, which suggested that homosexuality—at least among Germans—was a condition that could be “fixed.” As Harry Oosterhuis has suggested, this approach allowed the Nazi leadership to “distinguish sexual disorders among 'Aryans' that were supposedly correctable, from the organic, congenital degeneracy of 'inferior' races.” It was important to hold that even gay Aryans were not congenitally degenerate, and therefore to hold that, in the nature/nurture debate, nurture held the upper hand. There was great fear in the Nazi hierarchy that homosexuality was a contagious social disease, to which “all men, including nazis themselves, could succumb.”⁵³ There was also a strange and persistent obsession with the idea that gay men had a tendency to form cliques, which tended to threaten authority and uniformity, and that gay men were perpetually organizing such groups with the intention of seizing power.

It seems even to have dawned on some of the more sharp-witted of the Nazi leaders that the movement itself, with its glorification of youth, male comradeship, and the military life, and its obsessive projection of virile images of the ideal Nazi, might have had something to do with the contagion of homosexuality, not just in German society, but even in the organizations most completely dedicated to advancing the New Order.⁵⁴ It was Himmler himself who warned that organizations like the SS and the Hitler Youth “could become hothouses for homosexuality,” and criticized the overemphasis on exaggerated masculinity and militarization. He even criticized Nazis “who held women in contempt and who ridiculed other men because they conducted themselves in a polite manner toward women,” and suggested that this misogynistic attitude was an unhealthy legacy of the Catholic Church, which had always been an “erotic Männerbund.” In order to avoid the pernicious

⁵³Oosterhuis, “Medicine, Male Bonding and Homosexuality,” 193-4.

⁵⁴As Tim Pursell notes, “The Third Reich attacked homosexuality, yet the art it endorsed was filled with images of male bonding and muscled bodies.” “Queer Eyes and Wagnerian Guys: Homoeroticism in the Art of the Third Reich,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17 (2008), 134.

influence of homosexuality in the SS, Himmler suggested that young men should have opportunities to associate comfortably with the opposite sex, and encouraged prostitution as a remedy against homosexuality.⁵⁵

The Nazi persecution of homosexuals was clearly the most extreme form of anti-gay policy and practice. But it was also part of a pattern of stigmatization of gay people that characterized the major dictatorships of modern Europe. In all of these regimes, the ruling party projected an image of the ideal person and marked homosexuality as a sign of decadence, and of the immorality of the society that it had supplanted. In Vichy France, the ideal was based on a highly traditional vision of family, and in Mussolini's Italy it was based on an exaggerated, militaristic ideal of masculinity, coupled with an expectation of submissiveness on the part of women. But there is little evidence that either of these regimes went very much further than stigmatization and occasional prosecution. In the Soviet Union and Germany, official antagonism towards gay men went further, largely because of a suspicion that they tended to form groups which were potentially subversive. It is also worth noting that in both of these regimes, there were voices calling for extending sanctions on homosexual behavior to include women, although official policy confined itself to dealing with gay men. Nazism, with its obsessions about racial purity and the need to perpetuate the master race, framed homosexuality partly as a betrayal of men's duty to the new society. Only in Germany did the hatred of homosexuals take the extreme form of imposing long sentences in prisons and concentration camps. But it is worth remembering that the extreme measures taken by Nazism had their foundation in an intolerance that was widely shared in the dictatorships of the twentieth century, as well as in western democracies.

⁵⁵Oosterhuis, "Medicine, Male Bonding and Homosexuality," 201.