

Homosexuality and Comradeship: Destabilizing the Hegemonic Masculine Ideal in Nazi Germany

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ABSTRACT. This article looks at the experiences and perspectives of homosexual men in Nazi Germany—in particular, at homosexual veterans of World War I. How did homosexual men perceive “hegemonic masculinity” and ideals of comradeship during the Third Reich? The central argument is that the Nazi regime’s emphasis on heterosexuality as an essential masculine trait was contested by homosexual veterans, who attempted to exert agency by actively defining notions of “masculinity,” the nature of their homosexuality, as well as their status in the *Volksgemeinschaft* (people’s community). The ways in which homosexual men perceived homosexuality in relation to hegemonic masculine norms were diverse: whereas some tried to argue for the compatibility of homosexuality and martial masculinity, those who were arrested often distanced themselves from their homosexual identity. The testimonies of veterans, available in Gestapo police interrogation records, suggest how subjective constructions of sexual identity both undermined and reinforced hegemonic masculine ideals.

Der vorliegende Aufsatz handelt von den Erfahrungen und Perspektiven homosexueller Männer im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland, insbesondere denen von homosexuellen Veteranen des Ersten Weltkrieges. Wie haben homosexuelle Männer während des Dritten Reiches “hegemoniale Männlichkeit” sowie das Ideal des Kameradschaftlichen wahrgenommen? In der Tat stellten homosexuelle Veteranen die unter dem NS-Regime übliche Hervorhebung der Heterosexualität als wesentliches Merkmal von Männlichkeit in Frage. Sie versuchten aktiv ihren Handlungsspielraum zu bewahren, indem sie Vorstellungen über “Männlichkeit”, das Wesen ihrer Homosexualität sowie ihren Status innerhalb der Volksgemeinschaft selbst definierten. Wie homosexuelle Männer dabei Homosexualität in Bezug auf hegemoniale Männlichkeitsnormen wahrnahmen, war ganz unterschiedlich: einige machten sich für die Kompatibilität von Homosexualität und martialischer Männlichkeit stark, wohingegen diejenigen, die inhaftiert wurden, sich oft von ihrer Homosexualität distanzieren. Die in den Akten der Gestapo verfügbaren Verhöre zeigen somit, dass solche subjektiven Konstruktionen von sexueller Identität hegemoniale Männlichkeitsideale sowohl unterhöhlen als auch bekräftigen konnten.

THE ideal of “comradeship” was central to myths of masculinity that emerged out of World War I, and it became a centerpiece of the National Socialist regime’s hegemonic masculine image.¹ The Nazis sanctified “comradeship” as a key element of

I would like to thank Thomas Kühne for his insightful advice, which helped with revisions of this article. I am also grateful for feedback from Laurie Marhoefer, Michael Geheran, and Grace Coolidge, who offered their expertise and provided vital critical analysis, as well as from Karen Hagemann, who generously gave a thought-provoking critique of my arguments at a conference presentation on this topic. I am in debt to Daniel Brandl-Beck, a selfless colleague, for bringing my attention to the police files in the Landesarchiv Berlin, and to archivist Gisela Erler for her generous help there. My gratitude also goes to the anonymous peer reviewers for helping me to expand on and improve the article.

¹Thomas Kühne, *The Rise and Fall of Comradeship: Hitler’s Soldiers, Male Bonding and Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

masculine identity, but emotional and physical love between men generated considerable anxiety. The Nazis targeted homosexual men, including homosexual veterans of the war, as “effeminate” and “contagious” outsiders who threatened the racial fitness of the “people’s community” (*Volksgemeinschaft*).²

This article uncovers the experiences and perspectives of homosexual men in Nazi Germany, in particular veterans of World War I. How did the Nazi regime conceptualize “comradeship” and homosexuality? How did homosexual men in Nazi Germany perceive “hegemonic masculinity” and ideals of comradeship? In order to reconstruct the history of masculinity in the Third Reich, historians must consider not only state policy toward homosexuality, but also the ways in which homosexual men perceived hegemonic masculine norms. The following discussion explores perceptions of homosexual veterans on two levels. It analyzes the writings of cultural elites who believed that homosexuality was compatible with martial masculinity. At the same time, it reveals homosexual men’s voices at a different level: those of World War I veterans arrested under the Nazi regime for violating Paragraph 175, the law that had prohibited “unnatural sexual acts” (*widernatürliche Unzucht*) since the adoption of the Prussian Penal Code of 1871.

The central argument here is that the Nazi regime’s emphasis on heterosexuality as an essential masculine trait was contested by homosexual veterans who attempted to exert agency by actively defining notions of “masculinity,” the nature of their homosexuality, and their status in the *Volksgemeinschaft*. The ways in which homosexual men perceived homosexuality in relation to hegemonic masculine norms were diverse. Whereas some tried to argue for the compatibility of homosexuality and martial masculinity, those who were arrested often distanced themselves from their homosexual identity. Under interrogation, veterans of the Great War tried to escape arrest by testifying that they were not homosexual, but had been changed by the brutalizing experience of the war. Or, if they admitted to being intrinsically homosexual, they tried to neutralize their sexuality by claiming that they had it under control, or that it was irrelevant in determining their status in the *Volksgemeinschaft*. In the eyes of the Gestapo and the criminal police (*Kriminalpolizei*, or Kripo), however, men with a history of homosexual behavior, whether as a result of so-called situational factors or innate desire, were ostracized as dangers to the “national body” (*Volkskörper*), regardless of their previous history of military service and their practice of “comradely” ideals.

The historiography of homosexuality and militarized masculinity in the Third Reich has focused primarily on the Stormtroopers (*Sturmabteilung*, or SA) and its *Männerbund* (male associational) culture. SA-leader Ernst Röhm was the ultimate example of a homosexual man who made the case that homosexuality was compatible with ideals of comradeship. Envisioning an elite, homosexual, male-led society based on the hypermasculine warrior ideal consecrated during the war, the *völkisch*-nationalist homosexual rights advocate Adolf Brand similarly celebrated the homoerotic element of “comradeship.” The purging of homosexuals in the SA, and the Nazi regime’s attempts to define the boundaries between acceptable comradeship—as opposed to the erotic dimensions of male bonding—reflected the regime’s struggle to deal with conflicted forms of sexuality in their all-male, militarized,

²The growing survey literature includes Burkhard Jellonnek, *Homosexuelle unter dem Hakenkreuz. Die Verfolgung von Homosexuellen im Dritten Reich* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1990); Clayton J. Whisnant, *Queer Identities and Politics in Germany: A History, 1880–1945* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2016), 204–41; Richard Plant, *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War against Homosexuals* (New York: Henry Holt, 1986).

masculine culture.³ With an emphasis on racial hygiene and homosexuality as a “disease,” Nazi leaders expanded their attacks on homosexuals, constructing them as degenerates who corrupted “comradeship” and the sacred memory of the war.⁴

The perspectives of cultural elites like Adolf Brand and paramilitary leaders like Ernst Röhm offer only a partial glimpse into the experiences of homosexual men in the Third Reich. It is also important to examine the voices of ordinary homosexual veterans arrested and tortured after 1934, because their rhetoric about homosexuality was often different from that found in the writings of elites. One can find the voices of homosexual veterans in Gestapo and criminal police files held in the Landesarchiv Berlin, which holds over two thousand case studies of arrests that took place under Paragraph 175.⁵ No longer able to insist that homosexuality was an essential component of martial masculinity, these men instead tried, under interrogation, to “neutralize” their homosexual behavior by claiming that it was inconsequential. They compartmentalized their homosexuality and emphasized that they had met all expectations with regard to manliness, military service, and sacrifice—social values they had learned since 1914, regardless of their sexual histories.

Those interrogated by the police sometimes reinforced prevailing prejudices by arguing that their “deviant” homosexual behavior was only temporary, something they had “caught.” It was not an inherent part of their identity, they claimed, but rooted in the deprivations and trauma of the front experience. Moreover, they had since become “rehabilitated” as productive members of Nazi society. These cases reinforced prevailing stereotypes of homosexuality as a “contagion,” of course. Yet, by identifying the stresses of the war as the cause of their homosexual inclinations, they problematized the Nazis’ faith in the sacred memory of the war experience as a healthy cornerstone of male identity. Their narratives thus contradicted the hegemonic narrative of war as a healing agent.

As Edward Ross Dickinson has emphasized, the history of gender and sexuality in modern Germany needs to be considered as an ever-changing process full of complexity and contradiction, the result of struggles between institutions of power and individual subjectivities.⁶ The veteran testimonies available in Gestapo police interrogation records illuminate those very subjectivities. As opposed to SA leaders and cultural elites like Adolf Brand, veterans who were arrested under Paragraph 175 did not directly contend that

³For an expert exploration of these tensions, see Geoffrey Giles, “The Institutionalization of Homosexual Panic in the Third Reich,” in *Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany*, ed. Robert Gellately and Nathan Stoltzfus (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 233–355; on the culture of the SA, see Eleanor Hancock, *Ernst Röhm: Hitler’s SA Chief of Staff* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Andrew Wackerfuss, *Stormtrooper Families: Homosexuality and Community in the Early Nazi Movement* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2015).

⁴See, e.g., Stefan Micheler, “Homophobic Propaganda and the Denunciation of Same-Sex-Desiring Men under National Socialism,” in *Sexuality and German Fascism*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (New York: Berghahn, 2005), 95–130; Geoffrey J. Giles, “Legislating Homophobia in the Third Reich: The Radicalization of Prosecution against Homosexuality by the Legal Profession,” *German History* 23, no. 3 (2005): 339–54; Burkhard Jellonnek, “Medicine, Male Bonding and Homosexuality in Nazi Germany,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 32, no. 2 (1997): 187–205.

⁵These files are also explored (though without analysis of the arrestees’ military-service background) in Andreas Pretzel and Gabriele Roßbach, eds., *Wegen der zu erwartenden hohen Strafe: Homosexuellenverfolgung in Berlin 1933–1945* (Berlin: Verlag Rosa Winkel, 2000).

⁶Edward Ross Dickinson, “Complexity, Contingency, and Coherence in the History of Sexuality in Modern Germany: Some Theoretical and Interpretive Reflections,” in *Central European History (CEH)* 49, no. 1 (2016): 93–116.

homosexuality was reconcilable with hegemonic masculine ideals. But they did insist that their history of homosexuality in the traumatic environment of the Great War was the result of individual struggles with sexuality, not symptoms of “degeneracy.” Whereas they saw themselves as “good comrades” who had sacrificed for the Fatherland, the regime ignored their service records and instead defined them as “enemies of the nation.”

The impact of World War I on constructions of homosexuality (and on homosexual veterans’ perceptions of themselves) requires further exploration, and, with that in mind, these veterans’ narratives reveal deeper layers of complexity about how ordinary men internalized, contested, and constructed hegemonic masculine ideals. In the eyes of men who survived the Great War, performing “comradeship” solidified their status as “real” men. However, under the Nazi regime, one could no longer achieve this status simply through the past performance of comradely ideals and self-sacrifice in combat. Veterans arrested under Paragraph 175 during the Third Reich found themselves referring to a touchstone of masculinity—namely, comradeship—that had, by then, been supplanted by fears of the “disease” of homosexuality.

“Hegemonic Masculinity” and the Impact of the Great War on Homosexual Men

World War I witnessed the culmination of a century-long process in which masculinity had become inextricably interlinked with military values and the soldierly image.⁷ The hegemonic masculine ideal emphasized emotional discipline, self-control, and loyalty to the nation, expressed through military service. The Prussian tradition, in particular, emphasized *Manneszucht* (“male discipline” or “self-control”) as essential to preserving military obedience and order.⁸ Homosexuality, stereotyped as essentially effeminate, was perceived as degenerate and as symptomatic of a lack of emotional control—and thus as a threat to the German family and nation.⁹ When the war broke out, many hoped that the male warrior image and the front experience would counteract the trend toward “degeneracy” by healing weak men through the discipline and obedience required by complete devotion to the Fatherland.¹⁰

It is difficult to determine whether the majority of men really embraced the hegemonic masculine ideal. Sociologist R. W. Connell has argued that dominant masculine ideals may pervade a culture and put pressure on men to conform, yet, ordinary men’s perceptions of these masculine norms are elusive; moreover, the hegemonic ideal is often contested and unstable.¹¹ Ordinary front soldiers’ conceptions of “comradeship” are a key site of such complicated masculine ideals. “Comradeship” was all-pervasive in their letters, diaries, and memoirs, but it was defined in different ways, thus revealing a broad spectrum of masculine ideals and behaviors. As Thomas Kühne has demonstrated, “comradeship” fused traditional

⁷Karen Hagemann, “Of ‘Manly Valor’ and ‘German Honor’: Nation, War, and Masculinity in the Age of the Prussian Uprising against Napoleon,” *CEH* 30, no. 2 (1997): 187–220; Ute Frevert, “Soldaten, Staatsbürger: Überlegungen zur historischen Konstruktion von Männlichkeit,” in *Männergeschichte—Geschlechtergeschichte: Männlichkeit im Wandel der Moderne*, ed. Thomas Kühne (Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag, 1996), 82–85.

⁸David Raub Snyder, *Sex Crimes in the Wehrmacht* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 22.

⁹George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 79–80.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 110–11.

¹¹R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 3.

masculine emotions of self-sacrifice and self-control with what had traditionally been considered “feminine” emotions like nurturing and love, which many men found necessary for survival under the stress of front-line combat. “Feminine” characteristics were integrated into the masculine ideal, since being a “good comrade” required familial feelings of compassion and male bonding that were celebrated after the war.¹² Comradeship thus included feelings of love between men that, at least on an emotional level, veterans across the political spectrum not only deemed acceptable, but also even sanctified.

Many homosexual veterans also appropriated and embraced the concept of “comradeship.” According to Magnus Hirschfeld, the famous sexologist and cofounder in 1897 of the first homosexual rights organization, the *Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee* (Scientific-Humanitarian Committee), homosexual men seemed perfectly suited for the front environment. Before the war, Hirschfeld had argued that homosexual men embodied a “third sex” that mixed feminine and masculine emotions. Comradeship, which incorporated “feminine” emotions, was thus an ideal blanket under which homosexual men could more confidently assert their desires.¹³ Homosexual veterans also idealized “comradeship” as a hypermasculine experience for homosexual men. Adolf Brand, who, in 1903, cofounded the *Gemeinschaft der Eigene* (Community of Unique Ones), bolstered this image of homosexuals as hypermasculine warriors. A veteran of the Great War who espoused nationalistic rhetoric, Brand was obsessed with the idea of total freedom of the individual from the state and from traditional institutions. In his periodical *Der Eigene* (*The Unique One*), Brand and other veterans celebrated male “friendship” and *Freundesliebe* (“love of friends”), which, they claimed, had both spiritually and physically erotic dimensions that revived ancient Greek warrior virtues, including worship of the male body and mind.¹⁴ Brand sharply attacked what he saw as Hirschfeld’s “effeminate” classification of homosexuals, arguing instead that homosexuals were ultramasculine, patriarchal, and culturally superior to heterosexuals.¹⁵

In the decade before the Nazis came to power, Brand and other veterans worked tirelessly to combat stereotypes of homosexual men as effeminate and weak. In a 1930 article in *Der Eigene* titled “Defense and Attack,” Brand argued that homophobia reflected society’s failure to understand homosexuality. He claimed that, despite the efforts of his socially progressive rival Magnus Hirschfeld to educate the public, little progress had been made, and the image of homosexuals as effeminate persisted.¹⁶ Citing Hirschfeld’s alleged failure, Brand and his acolytes insisted that democracy and equal rights for all citizens were not the path to national regeneration. Brand attacked Hirschfeld’s liberal-progressive agenda, and he characterized the new democracy as degenerate. The Weimar Republic, one of Brand’s colleagues argued, weakened society because of its emphasis on equality for women and the working classes; because this

¹²Kühne, *Rise and Fall of Comradeship*, 30–31; see also idem, “Comradeship: Gender Confusion and the Gender Order in the German Military, 1918–1945,” in *Home/Front: The Military, War and Gender in Twentieth-Century Germany*, ed. Karen Hagemann and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 233–54.

¹³Magnus Hirschfeld, ed., *Sittengeschichte des Weltkrieges*, vol. I (Leipzig: Verlag für Sexualwissenschaft, Schneider & Co., 1930), 288.

¹⁴Harry Oosterhuis and Hubert Kennedy, eds., *Homosexuality and Male Bonding in Pre-Nazi Germany* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1991), 2–4.

¹⁵James Steakley, *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany* (Salem, MA: Ayer, 1991), 61.

¹⁶Adolf Brand, “Abwehr und Angriff. Gustav Neumann ‘Schweineerei’ und anderes,” *Eros—Zeitschrift für Freundschaft und Freiheit, Liebe und Lebenskunst* 3 (1930): 21. This source is available in the Schwules Archiv-Museum, Berlin (SAB).

inflicted “deep biological damage” on the nation’s racial fitness, it necessitated the overthrow of the republic and the installation of an all-male, warrior-based leadership.¹⁷

Homosexuality and Ideals of “Comradeship” in the SA

Similar to the model defined by Adolf Brand, the SA sanctified the idea that comradely emotional bonds between men were the backbone of a militarized, united, and powerful society.¹⁸ This form of comradeship had a homoerotic dimension for many stormtroopers. One of the inspirations for the SA’s masculine ideal was Hans Blüher’s 1917 *Die Rolle der Erotik in der männlichen Gesellschaft* (*The Role of Eroticism in Male Society*), which posited that erotic bonds among men generated stronger social and political stability than the traditional heterosexual family did.¹⁹ While acknowledging sexual relations with women as a necessary part of the patriarchal and reproductive order, the SA nevertheless idealized bonds among men as essential to building fighting strength and the defense of the nation.²⁰

The embodiment of the SA’s hypermasculine warrior ideal was Ernst Röhm, the leader of the Stormtroopers. Röhm patronized homosexual rights theorists like Nazi Party member Dr. Karl-Günther Heimsoth, whose 1924 dissertation *Heterophilia und Homophilia* built on Hans Blüher’s concept of the *Männerbund* as the cornerstone of a new society. In 1925, Heimsoth published his studies of homoerotic friendships in rightwing paramilitary groups, such as the *Freikorps* (Free Corps), in Brand’s journal, *Der Eigene*. Heimsoth had served as an officer on the Western Front, and, after the war, he developed a theory that the men of the *Freikorps* preserved not only the heroic spirit of comradeship in the trenches, but also homoerotic bonds that strengthened the military’s fighting power. Similar to Brand, Heimsoth believed that homoerotic relationships among hypermasculine, battle-ready front veterans were the backbone of the nation’s defense against its enemies.²¹ As revealed in a 1932 exposé published by Hirschfeld’s Scientific Humanitarian Committee about their relationship, Heimsoth and Röhm had corresponded about their mutual admiration for the hypermasculine warrior.²² They shared a hatred for the image of the “effeminate” homosexual, whom they associated with Weimar degeneracy, feminism, and the weakened patriarchal order.²³

¹⁷Dr. Eduard von Mayer, “Versailles und der §175. Thesen zur deutschen Katastrophe,” *Freundschaft und Freiheit* 8 (March 1921): 1–3 (available in the SAB).

¹⁸Claudia Bruns, *Politik des Eros. Der Männerbund in Wissenschaft, Politik und Jugendkultur, 1880-1934* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2008), 388–403.

¹⁹Hans Blüher, *Die Rolle der Erotik in der männlichen Gesellschaft* (Jena: E. Diederichs, 1917).

²⁰Wackerfuss, *Stormtrooper Families*, 51; for more on Hans Blüher and Adolf Brand’s perspectives about the masculine image of the homosexual, the warrior ideal, and criticisms of “feminization” and women’s rights, see Jason Crouthamel, *An Intimate History of the Front: Masculinity, Sexuality and German Soldiers in the First World War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 130–41.

²¹Karl Günther Heimsoth, “Von Kampf und Ziel,” *Der Eigene* (1925): 527. Klaus Theweleit suggests, in his classic study, that the misogyny, violence, and homoeroticism found in the memoirs and writings of *Freikorps* members revealed universal male psychological tendencies. See Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vols. 1 and 2, trans. Stephen Conway (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). I would argue instead that *Freikorps* obsessions with “comradeship,” violence, and the containing of “floods” all emerged out of the experience of trench warfare.

²²For examples of their correspondence, see Herbert Heinersdorf, “Akten zum Falle” Röhm (II. Teil),” *Mitteilungen des Wissenschaftlich-humanitären Komitees* 33 (April/August 1932): 391.

²³See also Wackerfuss, *Stormtrooper Families*, 178; Eleanor Hancock, “‘Only the Real, the True, the Masculine Held Its Value’: Ernst Röhm, Masculinity and Male Homosexuality,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 8, no. 4 (1998): 616–41.

The often overlooked memoir by Ernst Röhm, published in 1928, affords an illuminating, if carefully constructed, glimpse into the SA leader's conceptions of comradeship, masculinity, and homosexual identity. Though he did not deny his homosexuality publicly, his life was carefully compartmentalized between family members, who did not accept his sexuality; political colleagues, who were ambivalent at best; and his circle of accepting homosexual friends.²⁴ Trying to avoid prosecution under Paragraph 175, he did not directly state in his memoir that he was homosexual, but several passages were widely recognized by friends in the SA and in the homosexual rights movement to be revelations about his sexual identity and his desire to remove what he called "the mask."²⁵ Attacking Paragraph 175 and what he considered to be bourgeois moral hypocrisy, Röhm repeatedly stressed that a human being's character in battle, not his sexual instincts, determined his value. Bitterly attacking even rightwing cultural critics who had never served at the front, Röhm wrote:

Nothing is more phony than the so-called morality of society. The term shelters every kind of loose conduct. I want to state straight away that I am no goody-goody and I do not wish to be considered as such, and neither am I "morally upright," for in my experience the morals of the morally upright are not so far removed from looseness. Those who drip morality outwardly are either secretly immoral or would very much like to be if only the opportunity would present itself ... Most of them never served in the field and experienced the war from a "safe haven." The battle for "culture" and "morality" is far and away more comfortable and less dangerous than the murderous battlefield, where from time to time one can get shot at.²⁶

Röhm sought to replace what he saw as hollow moral preaching with a new paradigm for judging a man. In Röhm's estimation, the supreme criteria that determined one's masculinity was performance in combat: "The soldier turns away from this kind of false morality in disgust. What mattered to me in the field was not whether a soldier measured up to society's morals, but only whether he was a dependable man or not."²⁷

Röhm's conception of masculinity as rooted in ideals of comradeship and front-line discipline—regardless of whether one was homosexual—became even more explicit when he lamented the suicide of young men who were condemned as "degenerates." In the following passage, Röhm denounces the law that drove such young men into despair, expressing his hope that they could be free to fight for the nation without fear of persecution:

In truth these tragedies are the result of a social order which replaces healthy recognition of natural processes and understanding with hypocrisy, lies, deceit, prudery and misplaced indignation.

If the state thinks it can regulate human instincts or divert them along other channels by the force of law, that seems to me so amateurish and inappropriate that it does not surprise me to find that the lawmakers of this state are also the defenders of the social order ... I shall conclude by saying: the battle against hypocrisy, deceit and the falseness of this society of today must begin with one's very own natural instincts from the cradle, as it were. Only then can the battle be pursued successfully for all.²⁸

²⁴Hancock, *Ernst Röhm*, 88–89.

²⁵See Eleanor Hancock's introduction to Ernst Röhm, *The Memoirs of Ernst Röhm*, trans. Geoffrey Brooks (London: Frontline Books, 2012), xi. The 1928 German original was published under the title *Die Geschichte eines Hochverrätters*.

²⁶Röhm, *Memoirs*, 170.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., 171.

Here Röhm linked one's ability to fight effectively for the nation to the "natural instincts from the cradle." When bourgeois hypocrisy and laws shackled these "instincts," the youths who defended the nation were unable to engage in the requisite battle against what Röhm saw as Germany's real enemies, namely, communists and Jews.

More than just arguing that homosexuality was irrelevant to battle fitness, Röhm suggested that homosexual men were actually ideal warriors for the nation. Similar to Adolf Brand, Röhm saw the emotional component of comradeship—love for other men—as a key element of martial masculinity. This comradeship, he argued further, was fueled by a synthesis of "hatred" for the enemy and "love" for one's comrades, which he characterized as essentially masculine and, even if suppressed, as an antidote to "effeminate" culture: "Thus the soldier stands above all distinctions of class, social position and politics. Comradeship, cast in blood, may slumber, but never be torn from the heart or eradicated ... Germans have learnt to hate, but manly hate has been replaced by effeminate griping. He who cannot hate cannot love. The flame of freedom glows in the fire of fanatical hate and passionate love."²⁹ In Röhm's worldview, comradeship—including feelings of love between men—was not only "masculine" but also instrumental to Germany's survival.

As the Nazis gained electoral ground during the Great Depression, Brand was inspired by Röhm, whom he saw as a masculine fighter for "national resurrection," and he argued that Röhm should be accepted as a homosexual man, which had no bearing on his abilities as a political leader.³⁰ After the Nazis came to power in 1933, Brand continued to espouse his admiration for the new regime's glorification of martial masculinity. He even expressed his support for the March 1933 round-up of male prostitutes, whom he considered to be "ugly excesses of the movement." He rationalized this as follows: "These were police actions which, in the interests of cleanliness and of the movement's reputation, were nothing but welcome."³¹ However, in a November 1933 letter to the Community of the Unique Ones, he also expressed shock at and protested the regime's decision to shut down Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Research—even though he continued to denounce Hirschfeld's theories, "which demoted the most virile men in world history to semi-women and servants." Consistent with his obsession with individualism and self-autonomy, Brand defended Hirschfeld's right to free speech and "personal liberty," criticizing the Nazis' intrusion on private property as "inimical to freedom and dangerous to the community."³²

This letter, written at the end of 1933, was Brand's last public declaration of his ideals. In it, he announced the dissolution of the Community of the Unique Ones, expressing intense bitterness that the new regime would not only attack all homosexuals, but also conflate his organization with his political opponents in the homosexual movement who, with their "dumb sensuality and lack of literary taste of plebian homosexuals," had tarnished Brand's vision of an elitist, cultured, and patriarchal movement.³³ Police detectives arrived at Brand's home in September 1933 and confiscated three thousand copies of his journal, effectively shutting down his livelihood. Brand eluded imprisonment and was spared personal

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 236.

³⁰ Adolf Brand, "Politische Galgenvogel. Ein Wort zum Fall Röhm," *Eros—Extrapost des Eigenen* 2 (1931): 1-3 (available at the SAB).

³¹ Letter from Adolf Brand of Nov. 20, 1933, in *Hidden Holocaust?—Gay and Lesbian Persecution in Germany, 1933-45*, ed. Günter Grau, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Cassell, 1995), 34-35.

³² *Ibid.*, 35-36.

³³ *Ibid.*, 35.

attack, perhaps because he had confidants in the Nazi party and was married to a nurse he had met during the Great War. Whatever the reasons, Brand died in an Allied bombing raid in 1945.³⁴

By 1934, the Nazis had begun to ramp up their attacks on homosexuals. It was the perception of a political threat to the party's alliances with the military and business leaders that triggered a purge of the SA, as well as Röhm's murder, during the so-called Night of the Long Knives that June. His political enemies within the party nevertheless used his assassination as an opportunity to denounce any lingering notions that homosexuality was consistent with hegemonic masculinity.³⁵ In public statements after the Röhm murder, Joseph Goebbels described the event as the "purging of degenerate elements," and Adolf Hitler gave a speech in which he described the SA as "sharing a common orientation," explaining that he had given "the order to cauterize down to the raw flesh the ulcers poisoning the wells of our domestic life."³⁶ As Geoffrey Giles has argued, the Röhm purge not only marked the regime's denunciation of the erotic element of the *Männerbünde*, but was also an attempt to draw clear boundaries between emotional "comradeship" and homosexual bonds.³⁷ At the same time, the Röhm murder signaled another major turn: the widely held marker of hegemonic masculinity—the performance of comradeship on the front in the Great War—no longer held primary status as an expression of manliness. Instead, men's sexual histories now superseded the primacy of the front experience.

Nazi Arrests of Great War Veterans under Paragraph 175

Paragraph 175 specifically prohibited "unnatural sexual intercourse, whether perpetrated between persons of the male sex or between men and animals . . ."³⁸ Enforcement of the law had nevertheless been inconsistent since the *Kaiserreich*. As Robert Beachy has documented, Berlin police practiced, since the late nineteenth century, a "tacit forbearance" of consensual homosexual sex.³⁹ The threat of blackmail was always present, of course, but the enforcement of Paragraph 175 during the Weimar era was relatively light.⁴⁰ After 1933, however, the Nazis adopted a policy of aggressive enforcement of the law, and, in the wake of Röhm's murder, a series of amendments were added to Paragraph 175 in June 1935. The goal of the regime was to shift focus from simply annihilating "the homosexual," to extinguishing all homosexual behavior, including the most subtle hint of

³⁴Oosterhuis and Kennedy, *Homosexuality and Male Bonding in Pre-Nazi Germany*, 7.

³⁵Hancock, *Ernst Röhm*, 145–47; Susanne zur Neiden, "Aufstieg und Fall des virilen Männerhelden. Der Skandal um Ernst Röhm und seine Ermordung," *Homosexualität und Staatsräson*, ed. Susanne zur Neiden (Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag, 2005), 147–92.

³⁶Wackerfuss, *Stormtrooper Families*, 302–4.

³⁷Geoffrey Giles, "The Institutionalization of Homosexual Panic in the Third Reich," *Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany*, 238; see also idem, "Männerbund mit Homo-Panik: Die Angst der Nazis vor der Rolle der Erotik," in *Nationalsozialistischer Terror gegen Homosexuelle. Verdrängt und ungesühnt*, ed. Burkhard Jellonek and Rüdiger Lautmann (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002), 105–18.

³⁸Florence Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe*, vol. II (New York: Algora Publishing, 2004), 285.

³⁹Robert Beachy, "To Police and Protect: The Surveillance of Homosexuality in Imperial Berlin," in *After the History of Sexuality: German Genealogies with and Beyond Foucault*, ed. Scott Spector, Helmut Puff, and Dagmar Herzog (New York: Berghahn, 2012), 115–20.

⁴⁰Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 38–40.

“effeminate” homosexual traits. As Burkhard Jellonnek has pointed out, the result was essentially the same, but this also meant that the regime put much more focus on uncovering and eradicating all homosexual behavior, with less attention to the question of whether the accused was predisposed toward homosexuality.⁴¹

The original law was specifically interpreted to prohibit sexual intercourse, but the new version of 1935 punished “severe lewdness,” which was more broadly defined.⁴² This could include any kind of touch, or even a look or gesture, that was judged to be “with sexual intent.”⁴³ Even before the amendments to Paragraph 175 came into effect in September, the number of arrested homosexual men expanded drastically. In sweeps coordinated by the Gestapo and the Kripo, homosexual men were interrogated and tortured in an attempt to make them identify other homosexuals, whose names were then carefully recorded in a so-called *Homokartei* (registry of homosexuals). In addition, police received many anonymous letters from neighbors, who took the initiative of denouncing suspected homosexuals.⁴⁴ These waves of arrests in 1934–1935 elicited impassioned responses from gay men, who wrote to authorities protesting their persecution. For example, Reich Bishop Ludwig Müller, the leader of the evangelical German Christian Church, received an anonymous letter from a man who “suffer[ed] greatly in the present situation.” This individual described in detail the round-up of homosexuals in Berlin, highlighting the brutality of SS guards at the Gestapo headquarters and at the Kolumbia House on Prinz-Albert-Strasse, where men were beaten and psychologically tortured before being sent to concentration camps.⁴⁵ Most of the letter appealed to the Reich Bishop’s sense of human compassion, but, toward the end, the writer also invoked the memory of the war. Perhaps trying to remind Müller, a former military chaplain for the imperial navy, of the spirit of comradeship, he praised the bishop as “our highest evangelical priest whom we as soldiers especially revere.”⁴⁶

Such attacks stung gay veterans, who, recalling their sacrifice in the war, perceived them as a betrayal of their past loyalty to the Fatherland. In letters and testimonies protesting their persecution under the Nazi regime, they frequently referred to the ideal of “comradeship,” where loyalty to the nation transcended social background. In June 1935, for example, three homosexual men anonymously wrote to Wilhelm Keitel, at the time a major general in the OKW (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*) who would later be appointed supreme commander of the armed forces. Appealing to his respect for front veterans, the letter writers invoked their status as soldiers to argue that their persecution was unjust, suggesting that they and other gay men were otherwise supporters of Hitler but were now being alienated: “We implore you because every day these tortures are creating new enemies of the state. If you are able to, inform the Führer without delay. The Führer wishes for justice and love of one’s neighbor

⁴¹Burkhard Jellonnek, “Medicine, Male Bonding and Homosexuality in Nazi Germany”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 32, no. 2 (1997): 187–205.

⁴²Whisnant, *Queer Identities*, 215.

⁴³Grau, *Hidden Holocaust*, 65.

⁴⁴On anonymous denunciations, see Andreas Pretzel, “Als Homosexueller in Erscheinung getreten—Anzeigen und Denunciationen”; idem, “Erst dadurch wird eine wirksame Bekämpfung ermöglicht—Polizeiliche Ermittlungen,” in Pretzel and Roßbach, *Wegen der zu erwartenden hohen Strafe*, 23–25, 43–73.

⁴⁵Anonymous letter to the Reich Bishop Ludwig Müller, June 1935, in Grau, *Hidden Holocaust*, 57.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

... With sincere respect three old soldiers greet you with Heil Hitler!"⁴⁷ Their conviction that Hitler would have put an end to this persecution of "old soldiers," had he only known about it, dramatically reflects what Ian Kershaw has called "the Hitler Myth," a widespread belief that the Führer was a savior-like figure who defended the interests of all Germans.⁴⁸ In this case, homosexual men believed that Hitler, an old soldier like Keitel, would take their side, had he been aware of SS and police brutality against patriotic comrades.

Similar to other minorities under attack, including Jews, older homosexual men often cited their military service as evidence of their status as respectable members of the front and national communities.⁴⁹ The more than two thousand arrest records of men in the capital city, held in the Landesarchiv Berlin, indicate that 26 percent were old enough to have been veterans of the Great War.⁵⁰ Not all of them born before 1900 had served in the war, of course, and those who had served did not always comment on their war experiences. Still, a sample of a hundred born before 1900 indicates that nearly half had served in the years 1914 to 1918. The files of these men often include testimonies about their war experience and its impact on their sexual behavior. Homosexual men tried to defend themselves by drawing on the memory of the war, which they used in at least two different ways. In some cases, they pointed to war service as evidence of their adherence to the hegemonic masculine ideal of comradeship and sacrifice. At the same time, many referred to the deprivation and abnormal conditions of the war experience to explain why they engaged in homosexual behavior. They cited the strain, separation from women, and, in some cases, coercion as the main causes of their sexual behavior. In both forms of defense, homosexual experiences were thus compartmentalized and characterized as inconsequential for their masculine status. In contrast to Röhm and Brand, who had asserted that homosexuality was consistent with hegemonic masculine norms, the arrested men often agreed that their homosexual behavior was problematic. In so doing, they both reinforced and contradicted prevailing National Socialist conceptions of masculinity and homosexuality. They characterized homosexuality as deviant and shameful, but they also blamed it on the war experience sanctified by the Nazis, which these men remembered as brutalizing rather than as an ennobling, sacred foundation on which hegemonic masculinity was built.

Because homosexual men were trying to evade imprisonment, their testimonies must be examined in the knowledge that they were often being tortured at the time they provided these narratives.⁵¹ Their accounts of their sexual histories seem to have been strategically constructed, no surprise given the violence they faced at the hands of the police. The arrest records of homosexuals nevertheless reveal their attempts to take control of the narrative governing their identities and behavior, often characterizing their behavior as, paradoxically, the result of circumstances and conditions outside their control. For example, Fritz H., a veteran and bank employee accused in 1937 of violating Paragraph 175, told the police that he had tried to curb his homosexual inclinations, but that the war experience had

⁴⁷ Anonymous letter to General Wilhelm Keitel, June 1935, in *ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁸ Ian Kershaw, *The "Hitler Myth": Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁴⁹ For an excellent study of a Jewish veteran's crisis under the Nazi regime, see David Clay Large, *And the World Closed its Doors: The Story of One Family Abandoned to the Holocaust* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

⁵⁰ Pretzel, "Als Homosexueller in Erscheinung getreten," 19.

⁵¹ This is emphasized in Pretzel, "Erst dadurch wird eine wirksame Bekämpfung ermöglicht," 43–73.

eroded his ability to control his desires. While under police interrogation, Fritz H. indicated that he had had his first homosexual experience at the front in 1917. He was “predisposed to be homosexual,” he confessed, but it was the war experience that had “kindled” his uncontrollable sexual desires for other men. He described one instance during the war in which he had engaged in mutual masturbation with a fellow soldier; this led to further experiences, he claimed, and made his homosexual desires seem normal: “I remember that I was seduced by [my] comrades. Subsequently, I started to get used to same-sex intercourse and kept doing it until 1918.”⁵²

Fritz H. then added that, when the war ended and he was no longer in constant proximity to other men, he was able to reign in his predisposed homosexual desires, and was able to do so for a decade after the war. He was not at all interested in and never had sex with women during or after the war, noting that he only engaged in masturbation until 1928, when his homosexual desires were once again “rekindled.” Clearly trying to avoid being categorized under the specific prohibition of male–male intercourse outlined in Paragraph 175—at least in its pre-1935 form (it is not clear whether he understood that the Nazis had amended the law)—Fritz H. emphasized that, since 1928, he had pursued only “light sexual intercourse” (*leichtgeschlechtlichen Verkehr*).⁵³ He was nevertheless sentenced to ten months in prison, and the Berlin office of the Honor and Disciplinary Court of the German Workers’ Front subsequently issued a report about his incarceration that included an interview transcript of Fritz H.’s testimony: “My homosexual tendencies, I argue, stem from hereditary transmission [Vererbung]. My homosexual activities, I give for the record, began during the world war when I was a front soldier.” He concluded by requesting that the court consider this in their judgment.⁵⁴ Contrary to the hegemonic masculine image of a front fighter whose sexual desires were subsumed into self-sacrificial energies, Fritz H. claimed that the war experience had made it impossible for him to resist temptation and that it had even triggered his “criminal” desires.

By contrast, other veterans arrested under Paragraph 175 portrayed the war experience as one that distorted their normal desires and disrupted their otherwise heterosexual inclinations. As Dagmar Herzog has shown, total war created an environment outside traditional monitoring systems and control, one that allowed for sexual experiences that were both pleasurable and horrifying.⁵⁵ Memories of these sexual experiences could be confusing for men persecuted as criminals in Nazi Germany, as illustrated in the case of Herbert K., who was arrested for violating Paragraph 175 and sentenced to two years imprisonment in 1936. Taking detailed notes on his sexual history, his interrogators provoked him into revealing his first experiences with homosexuality. In his narrative, he nevertheless characterized himself as a man with “normal” predispositions who was not homosexual at all. His sexual instincts, he claimed, had been derailed by privation, isolation, and coercion:

⁵²Landesarchiv Berlin (LAB), A. Pr. Br. Rep. 030-02-05, Nr. 116, Gestapo report on Fritz H., Polizeipräsidium zu Berlin, Oct. 27, 1937.

⁵³LAB, A. Pr. Br. Rep. 030-02-05, Nr. 116, Gestapo report on Fritz H., Polizeipräsidium zu Berlin, Oct. 27, 1937.

⁵⁴LAB, A. Pr. Br. Rep. 030-02-05, Nr. 116, letter from the Ehren- und Disziplinärgericht der Deutschen Arbeitsfront, Gau Berlin, to the Polizeipräsidium Berlin, Oct. 14, 1938.

⁵⁵See the introduction to Dagmar Herzog, ed., *Brutality and Desire: War and Sexuality in Europe’s Twentieth Century* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 5.

I developed my tendencies as a result of my imprisonment as a POW in Egypt [from September 1918 to November 1919]. Masturbation was my only means of relieving [my] sexual deprivation [Not]. I found myself there in a really tropical English camp. The climate had an especially stimulating sexual effect on us. The possibility of seduction was often present. An older comrade in a drunken state ... wanted to have immoral sexual relations [unzüchtige Handlungen] with me. However, I resisted with my last bit of strength and fled the tent. And I never spoke with him again.⁵⁶

At the conclusion of his testimony, Herbert K. added that he had become a religious married man, and that this had helped him curb his “weakness”—thus suggesting that he felt that homosexuality was not necessarily inborn. Rather, these were “tendencies” that were “developed” and could therefore be avoided and controlled through will power.⁵⁷

Herbert K. thus portrayed himself as a victim of circumstances, and suggested that he would otherwise have been “normal” had it not been for the deprivation he had experienced in the POW camp. He characterized homosexual behavior there as coercive, driven by power relations within the ranks. Turkish and German officers attempted to have sex with him, he claimed, but he resisted their pressures and “in no case ... did I do something inappropriate with comrades or subordinates”—thus suggesting that he wanted his interrogators to know that he was not a seducer and that he had not taken advantage of his position to exert power over other men in his unit.⁵⁸ Though he characterized himself as having resisted external pressures to engage in homosexual behavior during the war, Herbert K. also told police that his wartime experiences had put him on a path, against his will, toward homosexual tendencies. In other words, homosexuality was something—a disease of sorts—he had caught in the POW camp. He also confessed that he had had homosexual experiences with several men after the war, e.g., with men in the *Wandervogel* movement in the 1920s, but he blamed the war for having placed him on a path that he could no longer resist.⁵⁹ By condemning homosexuality as degenerate, Herbert K. offered a narrative that was largely consistent with Nazi ideology.

There were other ways in which homosexual men reinforced the regime’s views on sexual behavior, namely, in their preoccupation with racial hygiene—a topic that infused many of their narratives. Herbert K. noted, for example, that he would have preferred to have had sex with women during his service in Turkey, i.e., before being captured by the British and sent to the POW camp. But it had been “in no way possible” to have sex with Turkish women, he averred, because of fears about venereal disease (VD). Anxiety about VD frequently surfaced, in fact, in many narratives about the war experience.⁶⁰ Goerd von der G., who was arrested in 1937 for violating Paragraph 175, testified to the Gestapo that, during the war, his comrades had bragged about their conquests with “prostitutes” (*Freudenmädchen*), but he had abstained because of fears about contracting disease.⁶¹ Explaining their abstention from heterosexual sex, veterans thus tried to construct a narrative that portrayed themselves as conforming to prevailing sexual hygiene standards—and, as the case of Herbert K. suggests, to racial hygiene policies and the 1935 Nuremberg Laws’ prohibition of miscegenation that were in place at the time of arrest.

⁵⁶LAB, A. Pr. Br. Rep. 030-02-05, Nr. 58, Stapo Ins. VII, report on Herbert K., March 17, 1936.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Crouthamel, *An Intimate History of the Front*, 15-40.

⁶¹LAB, A. Pr. Br. Rep. 030-02-05, Nr. 95, Gestapo report on Goerd von der G., Dec. 1, 1937.

Narratives constructed by veterans about the effects of the war—whether they reinforced or contradicted Nazi ideology—largely fell on deaf ears. In none of the available summary reports did criminal police refer explicitly to testimonial narratives that posited linkages between sexuality and the war, suggesting that they did not accept claims that these men had been “victims” of a traumatic environment. Not surprisingly, then, Herbert K.’s testimony that the war had been the main cause of his homosexuality had little effect on his captors, and he was imprisoned.

Despite the ineffectiveness of their claims that they were sexually normal men who had merely been changed by the war, this image of the war experience as one that had derailed their heterosexual tendencies was a recurring element in their testimonies. Refuting the notion that war was the ideal environment for inculcating hegemonic masculine norms, many arrested men asserted that wartime conditions had instead broken or changed them. For example, Karl L., who was arrested by the Gestapo in 1936, similarly testified under interrogation that he had been heterosexual until his sexual inclinations were altered by his experiences during the war. Denounced by his neighbors, who told the Gestapo that he had been cavorting with young men during boat parties on the Havel River in Berlin, he had been arrested before the Nazi era for physical assault, with neighbors reporting that Karl L. was “well known here since 1926 as a homosexual and as a sadist.” He told the police that he was heterosexual, in fact. But, like Herbert K., he insisted that sexual deprivation and stress during wartime had “distorted” his desire for women:

I am disposed [veranlagt] toward bisexuality and am normally inclined toward sexual intercourse with women. Occasionally, when there is no opportunity for sex with women, I become very excitable sexually, which leads to frequent masturbation. In order to satisfy this [urge], when I’m drunk I lean toward sex with men ... Before the war I had [had] no bisexual tendencies. At the age of nineteen, I was already engaged to the woman ... whom I married in a wartime wedding ceremony [Kriegstrauung] in 1915. For the entire four years of the war, I was in the field and, during that time, had only three short leaves. In addition, I was wounded three times, and, in one instance, it was a severe injury. I believe that these unfortunate tendencies originated during the war years and [were] the result of a state of chronic abstinence during my youth. These tendencies might have also occurred because of the injuries [I sustained], which made it impossible for me to defend myself against them.⁶²

Karl L. similarly claimed that, before the war, he had been pursuing a conventional, heterosexual life as a young soldier engaged to be married. Yet, separation from his wife became too much for him to handle. He also pointed to his physical injuries and to the ensuing emotional stress as factors that had disrupted his heterosexual inclinations. The stress of the war caused him to seek other forms of sexual relief, and he characterized himself as powerless to resist the “tendencies” that had now brought him into police custody. Characterizing him as a seducer of young men, authorities ignored his claims and sentenced Karl L. to five years in prison, “in order to preserve the health of the German people and protect them from a dangerous sex criminal.”⁶³ The police were not interested in his alleged innate sexual inclinations, or in the alleged effects of the war on his homosexuality, which were not mentioned in their summary report. Instead, they focused on his behavior in 1936.

Homosexual men had little success, then, in persuading the regime that they were not innately homosexual, or that they had been rehabilitated. Veterans arrested by the Nazis

⁶²LAB, A. Pr. Br. Rep. 030-02-05, Nr. 529, Stapo Ins. VII report on Karl L., July 21, 1936.

⁶³Ibid.

under Paragraph 175 often provided detailed narratives in which they tried to demonstrate that, despite their sexual histories, they had become productive members of the national community through war service and work. For example, Albert H., who was arrested in November 1939 for cruising for male sexual partners in a working-class district in Berlin, admitted that he had had one homosexual experience during World War I, but claimed that this was an aberration:

I must protest the punishment against me. My sexual predisposition is entirely normal. Despite this, I must confess that I have had same-sex intercourse. This occurred many years ago. Today I can't remember which year it took place. As far as I can recall, it was in 1915 or 1916. At that time I was a soldier in the garrison in Wittenberg, with Infantry Regiment Nr. 20. It's no longer possible for me to recall the name of my partner at the time. He was also a soldier.⁶⁴

It is interesting that, in contrast to other arrested veterans, Albert H. did not point to any particular psychological or physical strains that had supposedly prompted his homosexual experience. Rather, he left it as a matter-of-fact but irrelevant episode in his personal history. Shortly after reaching the front, he was captured and spent the rest of the war in a POW camp, where he learned the art of tattooing from a sailor. This became his profession after his return to Germany, and he claimed that it was the reason he “cruised” working-class bars: he was trying to earn a living by advertising his skills and finding men who wanted a tattoo. Neighbors denounced him after seeing him drinking beer with numerous young men and taking them to his apartment, but he insisted this was only to apply tattoos, never for sex. Despite having had “normal sexual relations with women,” he complained that it was difficult for him to find a wife because his tattooed body repelled many women.⁶⁵

Histories of war service, including ones that involved medals for bravery and claims about comradely disposition, did little to sway investigators. The primary question that interested the Gestapo was, instead, whether there was evidence of homosexual behavior—as in the case of Paul von B., a disabled, unemployed senior lieutenant (*Oberleutnant*) and recipient of the Iron Cross First Class, whose record of sacrifice and invocation of the spirit of comradeship during the Great War had no effect on the regime's perception of him. Von B. was arrested in 1935 when, reportedly drunk and acting disorderly at the Berlin Zoo train station, he approached a young, uniformed SS *Oberscharführer*, Kurt W., who turned out to be a member of Hitler's elite bodyguard unit, the *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*. According to Kurt W., von B. approached him and said, “Hello comrade, why don't you come over here!” When W. asked him what he wanted, von B. allegedly replied, “Come on, let's go fuck.”⁶⁶ Claiming he was just ribbing the young uniformed SS officer, von B. insisted he was not homosexual, but rather “very comradely” (*kameradschaftlich*), and had merely “thought that I had met a comrade in the SS man.” He claimed that he had only approached Kurt W. in a spirit of comradeship, but that when he was drunk, his jokes tended toward “swinish” sexual innuendo. He swore that his old comrades from the war, and even his comrades in the Nazi party (he claimed to be a member since 1919), understood the benign nature of his sexual humor, which surfaced, when he was “free and without

⁶⁴LAB, A. Pr. Br. Rep. 030-02-05, Nr. 125, Stapo C 3 Berlin report on Albert H., Nov. 27, 1939.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶“... sprach mich der beschuldigte von B[.] mit den Worten an: ‘Hallo Kamerad, komm doch mal her!’ Ich fragte ihn, was denn los sei. Er antwortete mir: ‘Komm, wir wollen ficken gehen.’” See LAB, A Pr. Br. Rep. 030-02-05, Nr. 18, Stapo VII/H, report on Paul von B., Nov. 11, 1935.

pressure,” in a “soldierly way” among comrades.⁶⁷ His file includes a letter (signed “Heil Hitler”) from one of his friends, who observed that von B. was not homosexual, but that he just lost control when he got drunk.⁶⁸

The Gestapo reported that they had placed von B. under surveillance and discovered that he was married and had a child, and that he appeared to be entirely “normal.” Though not found to be in violation of Paragraph 175, he was fined 300 Reichmark (RM) for having insulted the SS *Oberscharführer*. Von B. nevertheless caught the attention of the Gestapo several more times in 1937 for drunk and disorderly conduct, including further episodes at the Berlin Zoo train station, where he allegedly insulted SS men with vulgar sexual jokes. The Gestapo reported that he may not have committed a homosexual act, but that his sexual jokes revealed “abnormal tendencies” that required him to be punished under Paragraph 175; he received a nine-month prison sentence.⁶⁹ At his trial, von B. presented his Iron Cross as evidence of his meritorious war record, and once again reiterated that he had only approached the SS officers in a bawdy but “comradely” way. The Gestapo did not take lightly what they saw as the besmirching of an SS man’s honor. Fulfilling the old masculine ideal, symbolized by an Iron Cross and claims to comradeship, was apparently no longer sufficient to gain access to the “national community.” It had been displaced by the regime’s careful protection of the young SS officer’s heterosexual image. Paul von B. claimed that he was only expressing “comradeship,” but he encountered a regime eager to stamp out such subjective constructions of comradely behavior. That is to say, the Gestapo ignored any attempts by these men to define their own individualized conceptions of masculinity and sexuality. Moreover, the image of homosexual men as sexually and emotionally unstable predators who endangered the fitness of young soldiers had become solidified. Protecting the heterosexual status of the next generation against the perceived threats of homosexual men had clearly become a priority for the regime as it prepared for the next war.

Defining Acceptable “Comradeship” in the *Wehrmacht*

Homosexual men were defined as intrinsically incapable of possessing the *Manneszucht* required to be good comrades. They were seen as sexual predators who disrupted military cohesion and morale. However, with the outbreak of World War II, and especially under the stress of manpower shortages—which forced the army also to accept sexually “deviant” men—there was pressure to separate those who were intrinsically homosexual, and thus perceived to be pathological, from allegedly “normal” but “failed” ones who had broken down under the strain of the front. The head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, consequently insisted that many who had succumbed to homosexual behavior had been “seduced” by such pathological men and could therefore potentially be “rehabilitated” through torturous “medical cures” in concentration camps. The “seducers,” by contrast, faced capital punishment, though the death penalty was only inconsistently pursued.⁷⁰

⁶⁷LAB, A.Pr. Br. Rep. 030-02-05, Nr. 18, Stapo B3 report on Paul von B., Nov. 4, 1936

⁶⁸LAB, A.Pr. Br. Rep. 030-02-05, Nr. 18, letter from F. N. to SS-Oberscharführer Kurt W., Dec. 24, 1935.

⁶⁹LAB, A.Pr. Br. Rep. 030-02-05, Nr. 18, Beglaubigte Abschrift (603) 73. Ms. 59/37. He was arrested again for similar behavior in 1940; see Stapo C4 a-B.376/40, report, Sept. 21, 1940.

⁷⁰Himmler oscillated on this, allowing convicted men to be sent to the front later in the war; see Geoffrey J. Giles, “The Denial of Homosexuality: Same-Sex Incidents in Himmler’s SS and Police,” in Herzog, *Sexuality and German Fascism*, 257.

The military tried to implement Himmler's perception of homosexuality as a "contagion" that had to be contained before it weakened the fighting strength of the *Wehrmacht*. Even after the turning points of Stalingrad in 1943 and D-Day in 1944 had brought the army's resources to the brink of collapse, officers and medical personnel set up stringent guidelines aimed at prohibiting the "spread" of homosexual behavior by such "seducers"—especially in situations where men, weakened by stress (as in the trenches of World War I), sought sexual outlets with other men. On June 6, 1944, for example, the *Luftwaffe* issued regulations stipulating that "incorrigible" homosexual repeat offenders who lacked self-control should be most strictly punished, whereas "those who have become homosexuals should essentially be regarded as curable" and given psychotherapy. Medical personnel received detailed instructions for preventing homosexual acts from taking place in communal quarters at the front; officers, for their part, were instructed to keep an eye out for sexual horseplay, nude swimming, and "an overheated sexual atmosphere," where sexual jokes, songs, and stories, though acknowledged as an integral part of comradely bonding, were not to degenerate into "homosexual aberrations."⁷¹

The leadership of the *Wehrmacht* also differentiated between what it saw as "innate" homosexuals, who were considered more threatening, and those who were too weak to maintain sexual control while fighting on the front. To that end, General Keitel issued guidelines in May 1943 from the Führer's headquarters, titled "For the Handling of Criminal Cases Involving Unnatural Sexual Acts," which made a distinction between men who were predisposed to homosexuality and those who "strayed on only one occasion," with lighter treatment prescribed for the latter.⁷² Because the regime stereotyped "incorrigible" homosexual men as "seducers," younger men were often seen as victims who could be rehabilitated and then return to their masculine roles as front fighters. In this view, older homosexual men who were veterans of World War I were seen as corrupters of the next generation of heroes. The case of Leopold O., a Jewish veteran of World War I arrested in 1934 for "corrupting" a younger man, Albrecht Becker, in Würzburg, offers a concrete example of such practices. As a Jew and as a homosexual, Leopold O. faced persecution as a racial and social outsider, and was murdered in Mauthausen in 1943.⁷³ By contrast, Albrecht Becker, defined as an "Aryan" under Nazi racial laws, was "rehabilitated" after serving three years in prison. He subsequently volunteered for the army.

According to David Raub Snyder, Albrecht Becker's experience was typical, since most men arrested under Paragraph 175 were later reintegrated into the military. The courts of the *Wehrmacht* assumed that most were not innate homosexuals, but instead men who had temporarily broken down in an environment of sexual deprivation.⁷⁴ Only 6.4 percent of the case files that Snyder investigated indicate that such men were dismissed from the military, and most of them returned to service after only a few months in prison. As Snyder emphasizes, this does not mean that the military was more "compassionate" toward homosexual men, but rather, especially after heavy losses in 1941–1942, eager to retain human resources

⁷¹See the instructions issued to medical officers for assessing homosexual acts by the head of the *Luftwaffe*, Medical Corps, June 6, 1944, in Grau, *Hidden Holocaust?*, 181–85.

⁷²See the report by Chief of the Wehrmacht High Command (OKW) General Keitel, May 19, 1943, in *ibid.*, 176.

⁷³Staatsarchiv Würzburg, Gestapoakt, Leopold O., file 8873. I would like to thank Michael Geheran for generously sharing this source.

⁷⁴Snyder, *Sex Crimes*, 106–7.

in an increasingly decimated army. Even if they had been arrested under Paragraph 175 and worn the pink triangle in a concentration camp, men could return to a *Wehrmacht* uniform if they promised to remain abstinent.⁷⁵ Emphasizing the Prussian tradition of *Manneszucht* rather than Nazi ideology about biology and sexual hygiene, the reintegration of homosexual men suggested, especially under the pressures of total war, that men who had engaged in homosexuality could still serve the Fatherland, as long as they were willing to sacrifice for the nation.⁷⁶ Homosexual men could thus potentially be “rehabilitated” and later reclaim the “manly discipline” essential to martial masculinity.

Homosexual men serving in World War II, like veterans of the Great War, believed that they possessed the characteristic of *Manneszucht* essential to military culture. The voices of homosexual men in the *Wehrmacht* are scarce, however, and the narratives set forth in arrest records focus more on the particulars of whether their specific sexual behavior had violated Paragraph 175, rather than on their perceptions of comradeship and masculine ideals.⁷⁷ Yet, their postwar testimonies offer a glimpse into how they perceived their homosexuality, as well as their self-image in the *Wehrmacht*.⁷⁸ Interviewed in the year 2000 for the documentary film *Paragraph 175*, Albrecht Becker recalled why he had been so enthusiastic about joining the *Wehrmacht* after being released from prison. Recounting his enthusiasm for comradeship and his ability to make friends quickly in the army, he observed that he had “only joined the army because I wanted to be with men! The military was honor, dignity, and justice. What the Nazis would change it into, you didn’t know before. You were always a little bit proud of this militarism, even if you were gay [schwul].”⁷⁹

The experiences of homosexual German soldiers, when placed in a broader comparative context, were not exceptional. Many homosexuals serving in the American and British armies during World War II felt integrated and accepted if they embraced military discipline, something that Emma Vickers discovered in her interviews with gay British veterans. Decades later, these men felt more open about discussing their experiences in the military, especially after the decriminalization and, to some degree, the destigmatization of homosexuality. They recalled that, even during the war, their skills as soldiers were recognized as more important than their homosexuality, and that they were accepted as “good fellows”—as long as they assimilated into the military culture of manly discipline, sacrifice, and effective

⁷⁵Ibid., 109–10.

⁷⁶Ibid., 130. Snyder describes the *Wehrmacht*’s treatment of homosexuals, as well as the management of its military culture, as driven more by Prussian traditions than by Nazi ideology. See also Geoffrey J. Giles, “A Gray Zone Among the Field Gray Men: Confusion in the Discrimination against Homosexuals in the *Wehrmacht*,” in *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, ed. Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth (New York: Berghahn, 2005), 127–46. The centrality of enforcing male self-control in the *Wehrmacht*’s prosecution of sexual crimes is also emphasized in Birgit Beck, “Sexual Violence and its Prosecution by the *Wehrmacht*,” in *A World at Total War: Global Conflict and the Politics of Destruction, 1937–1945*, ed. Roger Chickering, Stig Förster, and Bernd Greiner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 320.

⁷⁷See Snyder, *Sex Crimes*, 112–17; Giles, “The Denial of Homosexuality,” 256–90.

⁷⁸On the significance of postwar interviews in documentary films, see Klaus Müller, “Totgeschlagen, totgeschwiegen? Das autobiographische Zeugnis homosexueller Überlebenden,” in Jellonek and Lautmann, *Nationalsozialistischer Terror*, 397–418.

⁷⁹Becker was interviewed by Klaus Müller for the documentary *Paragraph 175* (produced and directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, Telling Pictures, 2000).

performance.⁸⁰ In their eyes, and in the eyes of some comrades, homosexuality in no way contradicted the image of martial masculinity.⁸¹

At the same time, as in the German military, American and British homosexual men who were perceived as lacking in discipline—in particular, those who were considered sexually out of control or effeminate—were targeted as dangerous to military cohesion.⁸² But, like their counterparts in the *Wehrmacht* and *Luftwaffe*, medical specialists in the Allied armies provided nuanced definitions of homosexuals to create what they saw as a more rational system, and thus avoid manpower shortages. American psychiatrists, for example, differentiated men who were deemed to be “sexual psychopaths” or “emotionally unstable” from those who were evaluated as being not inherently homosexual but merely “first time offenders” as a result of a stressful environment, or as just pretending to be homosexual in the hope of being removed from combat duty.⁸³ In addition, though homosexuality was officially pathologized, the subjective views of doctors about homosexuality, which ranged from condemnation to sympathy, influenced their categorization of soldiers. The compiling of sexual histories of their patients, in which they had to label behavior as “normal” or “abnormal,” led to contradictory conclusions about soldiers’ fitness for service.⁸⁴ As Mary Louise Roberts has demonstrated, by 1944, the American military officially denied and condemned homosexuality in the ranks, but privately acknowledged that male-male sexual desire existed at the front as a result of constitutional homosexuality, as well as of deprivation and stress. General Charles Gerhardt, leader of the US Twenty-Ninth Infantry Division in France, responded in this way to increasing reports of homosexual behavior on the front lines: “It is our duty to advise against [sexual intercourse], but you still have the question of human beings ... It is my business to not quarrel with life.”⁸⁵

General Gerhardt’s recognition that “life” took its course regardless of military policy reflected the fact that there was a space in the US army where homosexual men could at least be tolerated. In a memoir published in 2010 after his death, James Lord detailed his own experiences as a closeted homosexual man who had volunteered for the US Army in 1942. Lord’s memoir reveals his pride about being a soldier, despite endemic homophobia in the military, which forced him to keep his desires hidden. He recalled that, when he confessed his love to his friend Keith, with whom he worked as an army clerk, the latter was repulsed, refused his advances, and spit out the usual homophobic comments. But Keith decided not to denounce Lord to the police: “You go your way, I’ll go mine—even if we are in the same office. You do your job, and I’ll do mine. We won’t talk about this ... Truth is I’ve known worse than you, and I don’t want to hear about it. Just do your work, you hear

⁸⁰Emma Vickers, “The ‘Good Fellow’: Negotiation, Remembrance and Recollection—Homosexuality in the British Armed Forces, 1939–1945,” in Herzog, *Brutality and Desire*, 120.

⁸¹For example, Stephen Bourne discovered in an interview in the 1980s with his heterosexual father that the latter knew of a sergeant in the 1950s Royal Air Force who was homosexual, “but it didn’t bother anyone because he was liked and respected.” See Stephen Bourne, *Fighting Proud: The Untold Story of the Gay Men Who Served in Two World Wars* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), xiv–xv.

⁸²Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 128–48.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 151–59.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 161–62.

⁸⁵Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 175.

me, and don't be late. Don't ever be late."⁸⁶ Lord's experience with Keith was typical of his years in the army. Even the most homophobic comrades were willing to accept him, as long as he did his job well and conformed to army discipline—and not let his sexual desires get in the way of doing his soldierly duty.

The foregoing comparison of the experiences of homosexual veterans in different countries brings to light interesting similarities. Similar to their counterparts in the German army, American and British soldiers believed that they would be accepted if they performed masculine ideals of self-sacrifice and good comradeship. At the same time, military authorities, pressured by manpower shortages, largely disregarded what they considered to be temporary behavior stemming from stress and deprivation. The Nazi regime was nevertheless exceptional in the level of violence it inflicted on those who were innately homosexual—and thus perceived as pathological.

Conclusion

Scholars have referred to Nazi “biopolitics,” i.e., the project undertaken by scientific and political elites to theorize and regulate the *Volkskörper*, as a useful framework for analyzing the policies of the Third Reich. Biopolitical aims shaped everyday culture and social behavior more broadly, as policymakers found popular support for the management and regulation of the “national body.”⁸⁷ Yet, historians have recently criticized the focus on “biopolitics” for ignoring differences and dissent in the responses of ordinary individuals to various social policies.⁸⁸ In studying the plight of homosexuals persecuted in the Third Reich, it is clear that men had to negotiate the regime's biopolitical approach to gender roles and its perceptions of homosexual behavior as a contagious disease. At the same time, individuals' ideals of masculinity also reflected more complex, subjective, and dissonant experiences and memories that are often more difficult to reconstruct. In particular, homosexual veterans of the Great War struggled in the Third Reich to square their memories of the masculine ideal, namely, the spirit of comradeship and sacrifice, with the regime's increasing emphasis on racial hygiene, reproductive aims, and fears of hereditary “degeneracy.”

As Geoffrey Cocks has argued, the Nazi medical agenda was driven by attempts to restrict and control subjective spaces in which individuals could assert a sense of self.⁸⁹ In narrating and explaining their sexual histories, homosexual men, interrogated and threatened with imprisonment, often had to engage with and even accept prevailing homophobic stereotypes about homosexual acts as a regrettable “contagion,” a “deviant” behavior that needed to be overcome. But their conceptions of masculinity and sexuality were not entirely driven by

⁸⁶James Lord, *My Queer War* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010), 36.

⁸⁷For expert critical analysis of “biopolitics” as a dominant historical narrative, see Edward Ross Dickinson, “Biopolitics, Fascism, Democracy: Some Reflections on our Discourse about ‘Modernity,’” *CEH* 37, no.1 (2004): 1–48.

⁸⁸This criticism was originally presented at a conference organized by Mark Roseman and Richard Wetzell, titled “Beyond the Racial State: Rethinking Nazi Germany,” Indiana University, Oct. 23–25, 2009 (http://www.ghi-dc.org/fileadmin/user_upload/GHI_Washington/Publications/Bulletin46/163.pdf); see also David O. Pendas, Mark Roseman, and Richard F. Wetzell, eds., *Beyond the Racial State: Rethinking Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 6–11.

⁸⁹Geoffrey Cocks, “Sick Heil: Self and Illness in Nazi Germany,” in Greg Eghigian, Andreas Killen, and Christine Leuenberger, eds., *The Self as Project—Politics and the Human Sciences* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 95.

prevailing prejudices, as these men often tried to assert the subjectivity of sexuality and identity formation. For homosexual veterans, the memories of the war experience and its psychological and physical stresses continued to shape their perceptions of the masculine ideal and of sexual identities. This placed many men, whether innately homosexual or not, in a bind. They recalled the front experience, revered and sanctified by Nazi propaganda as a healing agent and cornerstone of the masculine image, as a trauma that had somehow damaged them and distorted their sexuality. If they saw themselves as somehow “victimized” by the deprivations of war, they were not “real” men. But even if they celebrated wartime “comradeship” and tried to appropriate its hypermasculine image, their sexual behavior trumped their record of national sacrifice, and they were still seen as “effeminate” and as biological degenerates in the eyes of the regime.

The memory of the hegemonic masculine ideal—comradeship in the Great War—had become somewhat obsolete by 1935. Though the image of steel-nerved comradeship was still a centerpiece of the Nazis’ propaganda image of masculinity, the performance of this ideal no longer entirely sufficed to make one a “real” man. Moreover, the autonomy to define one’s own masculine image had been completely stripped away. Similar to other persecuted minorities, including Jewish veterans, homosexual men who claimed to be real men based on their prior performance during the sacred front experience of 1914–1918 confronted a new model for defining manhood and human value. The regime used unprecedented violence to control and eradicate “deviant” men, yet their victims’ complex constructions of masculinity revealed the degree to which hegemonic masculinity continued to be unstable, subjective, and contested.

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