

INTRODUCTION

Why Study Queer German History?

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Queer Identities and Politics in Germany: A History, 1880–1945 offers a useful and readable account of the history of homosexuality in Germany between the end of the nineteenth century and 1945, and a short epilogue suggests the ways that the long history of LGBTQ life and politics in Germany continued to be felt after 1945. It looks not only at the individuals, events, and movements of the era, but also briefly surveys some of the scholarly debates that have defined the historical literature.

OVERVIEW

Queer German history has a great deal of relevance for any reader interested in LGBTQ issues. Unfortunately for English-language readers, though, much of the recent work has been written in German and is therefore inaccessible to those who do not read this language. Even looking for primary sources can be hard. Many historians still find themselves regularly citing James Steakley's *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany*—a pathbreaking book, but one published in 1975, at the very beginning of research into German LGBTQ history. Robert Beachy's recent work, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity*, very good in so many ways, focuses only on Berlin, largely neglects lesbian life, and stops at the beginning of the Nazi era.

Queer Identities and Politics in Germany: A History, 1880–1945 offers a useful and readable account of the history of homosexuality in Germany between the end of the nineteenth century, when the homosexual movement formed, and 1945, when the Allies finally defeated the Nazi state. The conclusion looks forward to the present, suggesting the ways that the long history of LGBTQ life and politics in Germany continued to be felt after 1945: in the gay scenes that reemerged after the war, in the various political movements that eventually reappeared, in the scientific theories of sexuality that continued to evolve, and in the different sexual identities that LGBTQ individuals have adopted. *Queer Identities and Politics in Germany* not only looks at the individuals, events, and movements of the era, but also briefly surveys some of the scholarly debates that have defined the historical literature. This book offers opportunities to consider important issues still facing lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender individuals, and others within the larger queer community—issues of identity, language, community building, and political strategizing.

KEY TERMS

German gay history; queer German history; German gay political history; Foucault in gay German history

Whisnant, Clayton J.

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FIGURE 1 TRANSVESTITES IN THE ELDORADO CLUB, 1929

Cross-dressing acts became popular attractions in Berlin and many other major European cities in the era between the two world wars, certainly in some of the best-known gay clubs, but also in cabarets, which attracted a mixed gay and straight audience. Source: Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-1976-141-25.

Photograph by Herbert Hoffmann

Tracing the history of the contemporary lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community can take you in many directions.¹ The Stonewall Riots on the streets of New York City on June 28, 1969, obviously looms large in LGBTQ consciousness, as evidenced by the many pride events that take place worldwide in June. Popular films such as *Milk* (2008) and the *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013) help maintain an awareness of important moments in 1970s gay politics and the 1980s AIDS crisis. For those willing to dig deeper, there are now good histories of gay and lesbian life in major cities around the world, major accounts of the prejudices against homosexuality and modern efforts to regulate sexuality, and important examinations of the roles that same-sex relations could play in ancient and non-Western cultures.² For men and women who identify as transgender, many of these studies offer glimpses of their own history for the simple reason that gender transgression has so often been linked in people's mind with sexual transgression. For those who want a more focused study, there is a fascinating history of transsexuality in the United States as well as a couple of surveys of transgender (or queer, broadly defined) history.³

So many of these lines of inquiry will take you to Germany if you follow them long enough. The first homosexual activists were German; the first writer to coin the term *homosexual* was a German-speaking Hungarian who moved from one German city to another for much of his adult life. Berlin's gay life became internationally renowned (or infamous, depending on your point of view) by the 1920s (Figure 1). The first periodicals addressed to gay men, lesbians, and transgender people were all German. A German scientist coined the term *transvestism*, paving the way for the distinction that we make between homosexual and transgender. The first step toward something like rights for cross-dressers came when the Berlin police agreed to issue "transvestite passes." The first sex reassignment operation was done by a German doctor in 1920. And, of course, the pink triangle attached to the inmate uniforms of homosexual men in the Nazi concentration camps has been transformed since the 1970s into one of the internationally recognized symbols of LGBTQ politics.

This historical background suggests that queer German history has a great deal of relevance for American readers. Much of this work has been written in German, however, and is therefore inaccessible to those who do not read this language. Even looking for primary sources can be hard. Slowly, some of the key works have been translated, thanks to the tireless work of Michael Lombardi-Nash and Hubert Kennedy. Nevertheless, there are many others that are still available only in German. What overviews are available are very old at this point. Many of us still find ourselves regularly citing James

Steakley's *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement*, a pathbreaking book no doubt, but one published in 1975, at the very beginning of research into German LGBTQ history. Richard Plant's *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War against Homosexuals* came out in 1986 and is not considered entirely reliable by professional historians. More recent overviews tend to be short chapters in larger collections, and most often focus on Nazi persecution, ignoring the turn-of-the-century movement entirely. Robert Beachy's recent book, very good in so many ways, focuses only on Berlin, largely neglects lesbian life, and stops at the beginning of the Nazi era. On the other hand, Laurie Marhoefer's recent book offers several important new perspectives on the Weimar and Nazi eras but does not highlight the many continuities that link the Weimar period with the late nineteenth century that are important for readers to understand.⁴

In this book I offer what I hope is a useful and readable account of the history of homosexuality in Germany between the end of the nineteenth century, when the homosexual movement formed, and 1945, when the Nazi state was finally defeated by the Allies. My intention is to reach a general audience interested in LGBTQ history or the history of sexuality more broadly. Consequently, I will try to steer clear of a lot of the jargon and theory that, despite often giving important insights, can make a study of sexuality difficult to appreciate for the average reader. Instead, I focus on the people, organizations, political philosophies, and events of the period. I certainly do not ignore key academic debates—for example, debates about the role of science in shaping conceptions of sexuality at the turn of the century, or research into the motives behind Nazi persecution. I do try to introduce them in a quick and accessible way so that they can easily be read and used as the basis for discussion and perhaps further research.

The material presented in this book should offer opportunities to consider important issues still facing lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender individuals, and others within the larger queer community, including:

- gender and sexual identity
- defining the nature of LGBTQ relationships
- the roots of social and political persecution
- the social conditions that allow real progress to be made
- building institutions to serve the LGBTQ community
- political strategies for winning political rights, gaining social acceptance, and contributing toward larger social change
- the significance of which language we choose to work with for queer politics
- the role of commercialization in gay life and politics.

A QUICK SURVEY OF QUEER GERMAN HISTORY

The study of Germany's queer history has come a long way since its meager beginnings in the 1970s. Drawing vitality from the gay and lesbian liberation movement that sprang to life in West Germany at the beginning of the 1970s, the study of LGBTQ history was driven forward by a relatively small cadre of devoted historians. Some of them were academically trained, but most were admirably self-taught. A group of women connected with the autonomous feminist movement founded the Spinnboden archive as a location dedicated to "the Discovery and Protection of Women's Love" in 1973.⁵ In 1985 Manfred Baumgardt, Manfred Herzer, Andreas Sternweiler, and Wolfgang Theis opened the Gay Museum (*Schwules Museum*) in Berlin. Since then, as one visitor noted, "the museum has produced fabulous exhibitions and publications of the highest aesthetic and intellectual quality, without ever neglecting witty and erotic content."⁶ Over the years, the two institutions have nurtured scholars interested in German gay and lesbian history, both by providing central locations for pursuing and sharing ideas and by compiling large archives and libraries. Berlin, not surprisingly, has been the center for much of the work, but scholars elsewhere have made their own invaluable contributions: Wolfgang Voigt and Hans-Georg Stümke in Hamburg, Rüdiger Lautmann at the University of Bremen, Rainer Hoffschmidt in Hannover, Burkhard Jellonnek in Saarbrücken, and Günter Grau at the University of Bremen, to name but a few. Scholars from outside Germany have also made significant contributions: the U.S. historians James Steakley, Geoffrey Giles, and John Fout, for example, as well as Harry Oosterhuis, from the Netherlands.

Gay and lesbian history in Germany, as elsewhere, initially pursued two major themes: one tragic and the second heroic. For the first generation of gay and lesbian activists, an important part of confronting hostility to homosexuality in the contemporary world was uncovering its roots in the past. This research could take them deep into the Middle Ages to uncover the origins of social prejudice and legal persecution against same-sex desire.⁷ The bulk of the scholarship, though, quickly became focused on the fate of homosexuals under Hitler's regime. This research has grown quite large since it began in the early 1970s, taking on an increasingly local character in the past decade or so.⁸ The second theme at the center of much research has been writing the history of the first homosexual rights movement, from its origins with mid-nineteenth-century writers such as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs to its flourishing in the Weimar Republic and ultimate demise at the hands of the Nazis in 1933.⁹ Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld and his Scientific-Humanitarian Committee (*Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee*, hereafter cited as WhK) has garnered

much attention; so too has Hirschfeld's chief rival, Adolf Brand—publisher of the world's first gay periodical, *The Special One* (*Der Eigene*), and founder of his own group, the Community of the Special (*Die Gemeinschaft der Eigenen*, hereafter cited as GdE).¹⁰

In the course of the 1980s new research directions emerged. One strand of study, very much influenced by the social history that had grown in strength during the previous two decades, examined the homosexual milieu that surfaced at the end of the nineteenth century in several large cities and would survive until today, despite a severe contraction during the Nazi era and World War II. With concepts and research strategies borrowed from anthropology and the subcultural school of sociology, these researchers were able to map out city areas that served as locations for gay men to meet and have sex. They also traced a range of linguistic, symbolic, and material strategies that provided gay men and women with ways to resist the hegemony of the dominant heterosexual culture.¹¹

The other direction, often closely connected with previous efforts to research the early homosexual movement, was greatly influenced by Michel Foucault's work. This body of scholarship set Hirschfeld's efforts as a scientist and activist into a much larger context of writers, doctors, psychologists, and scientists who at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth debated the nature of same-sex desire.¹² The scholars involved interrogated the very idea of the homosexual identity instead of seeing it as a given; they asked questions about its formation and its implications for the politics of same-sex desire. Unlike the first generation of scholars of the 1970s, they were more likely to approach Hirschfeld's hopes for scientific enlightenment with a heavy dose of skepticism.¹³ Indeed, scholars began at this stage to see continuity between fin-de-siècle research into homosexuality and the Nazis' later misuse of science to "purify" the German race of homosexuality.¹⁴ Furthermore, lesbian scholars were likely to view the obsessive classifications pursued by nineteenth-century sexology as rooted at least in part in the male desire to control female sexuality.¹⁵

The effect of Foucault on the practice of gay and lesbian history has gradually opened this field up to the "discursive turn." Although it took longer for the discursive turn to come to the historical profession in Germany than it did in the Anglo-American world, when its influence did become noticeable in the 1990s, gay and lesbian history was exposed to a range of methods and ideas stemming from psychoanalysis, literary and film studies, anthropology, queer theory, and gender studies.¹⁶ One effect has been to move away from focusing specifically on notions of homosexual identity and toward talking about how these identities formed in relation to the category of "the het-

erosexual.” Under the influence of gender history, which itself experienced a major burst of activity in the 1980s and 1990s, historians of sexuality have increasingly asked questions about the gendered aspects of homosexuality as well as the relationship between homosexuality and the gender norms established by the dominant culture.¹⁷ In this way, they have reconnected gay men and lesbians with their heterosexual counterparts. Queer theory of the 1990s also played no small part here in blurring the division between gay and straight.¹⁸ Queer theory, along with the seminal works of George Mosse, served to widen gay and lesbian scholarship’s gaze away from focusing specifically on same-sex-desiring individuals (and the groups they formed) and toward analyzing and critiquing the broader culture and society of Germany.¹⁹

Over time, there has been a noticeable tendency of many historians of sexuality to distance themselves from various aspects of Foucault’s argument. Beginning with some early efforts in the 1980s to revise Foucault’s choice of 1870 as the date when the “modern homosexual” was born, the trend gathered momentum after George Chauncey’s suggestion that “sexual inversion” (based on a notion of gender reversal) should be more carefully distinguished from modern homosexuality (based on an independent sexual orientation).²⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and other queer theorists gradually made us aware of the problems of talking about a single “modern homosexual” identity at all.²¹ And since roughly 2000, historians of medieval and early modern Europe, as well as scholars working on premodern Asia, Latin America, and Africa, have raised questions about whether we can safely draw a clear line between modern and premodern sexualities. As Helmut Puff writes, “If deployed indiscriminately, the premodern-modern divide . . . risks flattening the complexities of so-called traditional and modern societies alike.”²²

Others have raised fundamental problems with even writing queer history. In slightly different ways, many scholars have asked about our ability to legitimately connect past configurations of gender, sexual desire, and identity with our own. Judith Halberstam’s *Female Masculinities* drew our attention to the “perverse presentism” of much contemporary lesbian history: “Many contemporary lesbian historians cannot extricate themselves from contemporary understandings of lesbian identity long enough to interpret the vagaries of early same-sex desire.”²³ David Halperin wrestled with a similar problem in *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*. As a kind of solution to the issues of “continuity and discontinuity, identity and difference,” he suggested a kind of “genealogical approach” that tears apart various notions connected with modern homosexuality and traces their history.²⁴ Laura Doan’s *Disturbing Practices* highlights even more fundamental disciplinary differences with regard to standards and expectations between historians of sexuality and many queer

theorists. Instead of despairing, though, Doan proposes a kind of productive dialogue between the two fields, one that encourages a kind of “hybrid practice” that can produce insights for both fields.²⁵

Historians of sexuality have responded in different ways to these many challenges, as the essays collected recently in the anthology *After the History of Sexuality: German Genealogies with and Beyond Foucault* suggest.²⁶ Many grew less antagonistic toward science as they became aware of the multiple ways that it can be read and used. Others turned away from the “heterosexual/homosexual binary as a tool for understanding erotic cultures and identities in the past,” in the words of Marti Lybeck, an approach that has the advantage for historians of allowing them to “consider a wider range of voices, choices, and meanings.”²⁷ A few have taken a “detour to other kinds of thinking about sexuality and subjects, including particularly psychoanalysis, critical theory, and Marxism,” or they have gone back to reread Foucault, being attentive to the ways that he might have been misunderstood in the past or might have offered insights that have been neglected.²⁸

PURPOSE AND GUIDING QUESTIONS

Besides offering a useful survey of German LGBTQ history, this book should also serve as an easy reference for those people who want to dig deeper into the debates on their own. With this in mind, I generally cite English translations of German works when they are available. In the text, I chose to translate German titles of book, journals, magazines, and films, since I know from my experience as a teacher of undergraduate students that those who do not read German will remember scarcely anything that is presented in a foreign language. This may be frustrating for teachers and scholars, however, so I offer the original titles in parentheses for easy reference.

In the following chapters, I examine several guiding questions that have been important for LGBTQ historians of German history:

- How did German gays and lesbians look for love and relationships in an era in which homosexuality was suppressed socially and legally?
- Why did the world’s first homosexual rights movement appear in Germany?
- Why is 1920s Berlin still remembered as such an amazing place for LGBTQ persons?
- Why did the Nazis throw homosexuals and many whom we would identify as transgender men and women into concentration camps

along with Jews, prostitutes, communists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Gypsies, and other asocials?

- What happened to those gay men and lesbians who eluded the SS and police or in other ways survived Nazi persecution?
- How have men and women who desired to have sex with members of the same sex understood themselves and their sexuality?

The theme of identity runs through the entire book. The first chapter introduces two distinct versions of this identity, one put forward by homosexuals influenced by scientific debate about sexuality, another influenced more by classical imagery and texts. The second considers several turn-of-the-century scandals that in many ways hinged on the issue of identity. The third chapter examines the gay scenes that, many historians have argued, were important social spaces for helping such identities coalesce. Cruising the streets, public parks, and the hallways of train stations, men at some level began to habitually sort other men into those interested in same-sex encounters and those who were not. In the gay and lesbian nightclubs, bars, and social organizations of Berlin, men and women interested in such relationships acquired a sense of belonging and were given an opportunity to perform their identities through the clothes they wore, the language they spoke, the stories they told, the songs they sang, and the people with whom they danced.

Identity is most explicitly dealt with in chapter 4, where it is treated alongside other popular representations of same-sex-desiring men and women. By treating identities and representations together, I do not mean to conflate the two. Popular representations were never easily or uncritically absorbed by gay men and lesbians as they formulated understandings about their sexuality. I also hope, however, to demonstrate that the two things cannot be entirely distinguished from one another. Forming an identity is inevitably a social process and so necessarily involves some interaction with the wider culture. In this chapter I show the ways that scholars, under the influence of queer theory, have gradually been moving away from the dual-model approach that was put forward in the 1980s and 1990s. Gay men and lesbians living in Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries cannot be so easily divided into those who accepted a model of same-sex desire that was based on scientific theories of gender inversion and those who did not. There were many individuals who liked some aspects of the theory but not others. And as they worked through this problem, they had other cultural traditions to draw from—not simply the classical images of Greek and Rome, but also late nineteenth-century Romanticism and more novel images of modern life in the city.

I hope to highlight the range of identities by opening each chapter with a brief introduction to a different person. Each individual will be important for the topic of that chapter, of course, but each one also has his or her own approach to what it means to be homosexual. About the issue of gender, the poet and philosopher Denise Riley once wrote, "Any attention to the life of a woman, if traced out carefully, must admit the degree to which the effects of lived gender are at least sometimes unpredictable, and fleeting."²⁹ The same can be said about sexuality, I think.

TERMINOLOGY

A quick note about terminology is needed. I use the term *scene* instead of *subculture*, which is more prevalent in academic scholarship.³⁰ I think *subculture*—which was developed by the Birmingham School to think about a particular subset of a class—does not apply very well to the networks of gays and lesbians that have developed in modern cities. I also prefer *scene* since it tends to foreground the importance of space, thereby avoiding a certain ambiguity of *subculture*. The latter is often used to denote specific locations (gay bars, parks, public bathrooms, and so on), but also could suggest the distinct symbolic interactions that take place between gay men or lesbians. *Subculture* might also imply that the rest of the heterosexual culture is a monolithic whole, although few historians would see it that way today. The problem is that once you start chipping off other pieces—a working-class subculture, various ethnic subcultures, a youth subculture, and the like—it is not always clear what you have left. Finally, *scene* emphasizes the importance of a central interest in drawing men and women together into a series of social interactions. In the twentieth century, a number of scenes have emerged over time, yielding the complex, ever-changing landscape of the modern world. Like the individuals who gathered together to enjoy jazz in the 1920s or drugs in the 1960s, gay men and lesbians created distinct locations and interactions to facilitate a common love.³¹

I generally use the terms *homosexual*, *gay*, and *lesbian* to refer to men and women who experience sexual desire for members of the same sex to some considerable degree. I also regularly apply these terms to the relationships, associations, social networks, and institutions that they built in the course of the period covered by this book. No scholar of LGBTQ history today can use such language without some misgivings. I certainly accept the arguments made by queer studies that sexuality is fluid and sexual identities are inherently unstable. As we will see, there were indeed many debates in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries about the nature of sexual desire

and the proper language to apply to same-sex desire. There is an argument to be made, however, for the pragmatic use of language. Both *homosexual* and *lesbian* were used frequently by Germans at the time in a way that is not too different from the way that I employ them. *Gay* or, rather, its German equivalent, *schwul*, is more problematic because it was a deeply pejorative slang term that would never have been employed by homosexual men at that time to refer to themselves. Its meaning was transformed in the course of the 1970s, however, and today it is used proudly by many. The largest problem with *homosexual*, *lesbian*, and *gay* is that these terms often blur together sexual and gender transgression. Many people at the time whom today we would identify as transgender were grouped with homosexual men and lesbians, both by the emerging gay and lesbian community and by society at large. It is a weakness that readers will need to be mindful of as they move forward.