

## Book Review

***Stormtrooper Families: Homosexuality and Community in the Early Nazi Movement.* By Andrew Wackerfuss. New York: Harrington Park Press. 2015. vii + 384 pp. £24.00 (paperback).**

Andrew Wackerfuss's study on the stormtrooper (SA) movement from its origins to its demise, using an array of archival material, sheds light on the way the movement grew in Hamburg. Using sources such as memoirs, autobiographies, newspapers and letters, the author brings together a tightly focused study on the community created by the SA in Hamburg, highlighting the movement's local autonomy beyond Munich or Berlin. Overall, his work argues for the need to uncover the 'truth' of the connection between sexuality and Nazism, which he achieves by studying the SA movement as a political, social and local collective. Although his work is meant to cover 'human sexuality' (p. x), the main focus is on homosexuality and its role in the SA movement.

The book is divided into eight chapters, and provides a chronological history of the Hamburg SA movement. Wackerfuss focused this microhistory on the city of Hamburg because of its internationalism and unique political culture, which did not openly reject homosexuality and encouraged mercantilism. In addition, the Hamburg sense of entitlement to enjoy empire, economic growth and success led Hamburg's SA men to violence, as these ideals were not fulfilled in the interwar period. Using this backdrop, Wackerfuss unravels the history of Germany after the First World War to tell the story of the young men who would eventually become members of the SA. The first part focuses on the way homosexuality almost inevitably became a part of the SA, as the homoerotic fantasies projected by men from the Front created a 'fantasy of malehood' (p. 48). The dominance of the 'band of men' (*Männerbund*) concept within this male group became a motivator in creating a male sphere of influence in politics. The *Männerbund* was heavily linked with the fantasy of male dominance, which influenced concepts of masculinity in these men. The second part of the book explores how the presence of homosexuality within the SA proved to be a burden in the late 1920s and early 1930s, as political rivals attempted to discredit the movement through political propaganda directed at homosexual tendencies within the SA, which in turn led to mass violence and the decline of the SA in 1934.

A strong aspect of the book is Wackerfuss's analysis of the impact the Great Depression in creating cohesion within the Hamburg SA. As the economy collapsed, the SA hostels (*Heime*) offered solace to unemployed men by offering them 'legal aid, health insurance, food, and lodging' (p. 149). He weaves a captivating discussion of the participation of women in the SA and of the way the SA created community homes for SA men who were unemployed and on the fringes of society. The attitude of the Nazis towards sexuality was less lenient than that of the KPD or SPD, but the SA was much more lax in allowing women to cohabit with young men. The choice of including women was two-fold: first, the jobs given to women volunteering at SA shelters were traditional ones, such as cooking and washing uniforms; second, the inclusion of women strengthened and expanded the voter base. Arguably, women's participation within the Nazi party made it easier for their propaganda to create a link between 'martyrdom and men seeking fatherhood' (p. 169). This provided a contrasting image to that of the homosexual stormtrooper, and the SA used this to deflect

accusations of homosexual activity. As Wackerfuss states, 'if a homosexual stormtrooper wanted to stay within the movement, he had to remain hidden' (p. 185).

While the majority of the work is well constructed and written in an accessible manner, there are some incongruous elements. In three ways identified here, the book fails to be appropriate for its intended audience, the first two of which concern the format. First, the structure of the introduction is unusual: its multiple sub-headings detailing terminology make the text unnecessarily disjointed. The introduction seems to be aimed at a general readership, but its impractical structure may deter because it provides little context. As a result of this choice, the historiography is placed in the conclusion. A brief outline of SA historiography would have been a welcome addition earlier on. Second, the main chapters of the book occasionally use specialist terminology, and describe events in a manner that requires some specialist knowledge (pp. 36ff, 49), and this makes the work less accessible to a general audience. Third, while the author clearly argues, with thorough evidence, that opposing political parties were publishing propaganda linking the SA with homosexuality during the 1920s, his claim to find the 'truth behind the connection between sexuality and Nazism' is a bold statement. His discussion of the link between sexuality and Nazism is primarily through homosexuality in Nazism. It is therefore problematic to claim that he covers all aspects of sexuality, since the rest of the work does not reflect this.

A further concern is the lack of discussion of the extent of homophobia in Germany in the early twentieth century. Wackerfuss uses Eve Sedgwick's 1985 study to argue that male bonding from the nineteenth century onwards was a way to 'manipulate relationships among ostensibly heterosexual men', thus avoiding the necessity to prosecute those who were homosexuals (p. 106). The homophobic tendencies of the SA, he argues, were a ploy by political opponents and their sensationalist press to sway voters through their portrayal of homosexuality in the SA; he implies that these propagandized attacks were not necessarily homophobic. The study could have expanded on the nature and the extent of homophobia during the 1920s, beyond citing the evidence of Paragraph 175 on criminalizing homosexuality. Furthermore, it would have been interesting to know how the SA men themselves viewed the homosexuality within the party and what their views on their sexuality were.

Wackerfuss provides a welcome addition to our understanding of the early SA movement, and a thoughtful commentary on postwar notions of Nazi sexuality and homoeroticism in his conclusion. By exploring the communal nature of the SA as a reaction to the economic woes of the Great Depression and the end of the First World War, he critically assesses the nature of the anti-homosexual political propaganda of the period and how it led to violence against political enemies. His argument focuses more on homosexuality than on human sexuality, and to have explored this distinction would have strengthened the work. His conclusions provide commentary on neo-Nazism, which within this context will hopefully lead to further discussion of the interpretation of the history of Nazi sexuality.

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