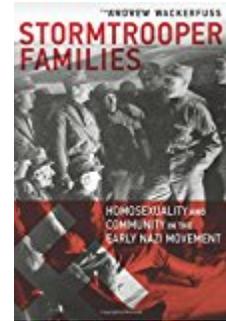


Andrew Wackerfuss. *Stormtrooper Families: Homosexuality and Community in the Early Nazi Movement*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 2015. 352 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-939594-05-1; \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-939594-04-4.

Reviewed by Alex Burkhardt (University of St Andrews)

Published on H-German (October, 2016)

Commissioned by Nathan N. Orgill



## Soup Kitchens and Street Fighting: The Brownshirts in Hamburg

There is a long tradition of scholarly inquiry into the Nazi *Sturmabteilung* (SA), the brown-shirted paramilitary wing of the National Socialist movement that was in no small part responsible for the mayhem that descended upon the streets of Weimar Germany in its last fraught years. Pioneering work in the 1980s by historians, such as Conan Fischer (*Stormtroopers: A Social, Economic, and Ideological Analysis, 1929-35* [1983]), Richard Bessel (*Political Violence and the Rise of Nazism: The Storm Troopers in Eastern Germany, 1925-1934* [1984]), and Peter Longerich (*Die Braunen Bataillone: Geschichte Der SA* [1989]), furnished a strong empirical base on the social background, ideological leanings, and propagandistic provenance of the Stormtroopers. More recent studies by the likes of Sven Reichardt (*Faschistische Kampfbünde: Gewalt und Gemeinschaft im italienischen Squadristum und in der deutschen SA* [2002]), Daniel Siemens (*Horst Wessel: Tod und Verklärung Eines Nationalsozialisten* [2009]), and Dirk Schumann (*Political Violence in the Weimar Republic, 1918-1933: Fight for the Streets and Fear of Civil War* [2009]) have brought the tools of cultural history to bear on Nazi paramilitarism, offering further insights into the value systems and “organisational cultures” that underpinned it. In *Stormtrooper Families*, Andrew Wackerfuss, a historian with the United States Air Force, makes a further contribution to this already extensive body of literature with a local study of the Hamburg branch of the SA.

*Stormtrooper Families* is structured into nine chapters

that proceed chronologically, and it might be possible to discreetly divide the book into three sections, which deal in turn with the background, course, and aftermath of the crucial period from 1929 to 1933, when the Hamburg SA was in its heyday. The first three chapters explore the organization’s prewar origins and its difficult fledgling years in the 1920s. Wackerfuss first provides a brief history of Hamburg, focusing particularly on the years before the First World War, which, he argues, were critical to the later psychological and political development of the SA. In chapters 2 and 3, he shows that the city’s first Brownshirts were mainly ex-soldiers disenchanted with the Weimar Republic, but also that, before 1929, the Hamburg SA remained a vocal but numerically quite negligible factor in local politics.

In the elections of September 1930, however, the Nazi share of the vote skyrocketed, and Adolf Hitler’s party became a major player in national politics, signaling the beginning of the end of Germany’s interwar experiment with democracy. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 focus on these last volatile years of the Weimar Republic, when the SA was at its zenith and was key to the Nazi campaign to seize power. The Hamburg SA expanded propitiously during this period, waging constant and bloody war on the streets against its political opponents, mainly the Communists. This enormous propensity for political violence is the focal point in chapters 4 and 6, which concentrate not only on the chronic, low-level conflict that was a constant feature of the SA’s (and Hamburg’s) makeup but

also on two set pieces, the Battle of Sternschanze and the Altona Bloody Sunday, when the SA, along with the police and Communists, managed to bring virtual civil war conditions to parts of the city. Chapter 5, meanwhile, focuses more on what Wackerfuss calls “the caring side” of the SA (p. xv)—the vast social support network of soup kitchens, health-insurance schemes, and barrack-style “SA Homes” that the paramilitary organization established in the city and used to both attract and integrate members.

The final three chapters focus on the decline of the Stormtroopers after Hitler became chancellor in January 1933. Though the Hamburg SA was initially in a triumphant mood and unleashed a wave of violence against its enemies in the months after the Nazi “seizure of power,” it soon became a problem in itself for the wider Nazi movement, which was now looking to consolidate power and had less need of an unruly paramilitary organization. The liquidation of a large part of the SA leadership in the Night of the Long Knives and its gradual fading into insignificance thereafter are the focal points of chapter 8 and the epilogue.

This book, then, is ultimately a local study of a single organization. But it is not a typical social history, being relatively free of tables or statistics that show, for example, the occupational background of members of the Hamburg SA. Instead, this is a broader “cultural history” of the Brownshirts in the city, focusing more on the content of the SA’s newspaper, the relationships between its key figures and its recruits, the social networks it established in and around Hamburg, the nature and provenance of its violence, and, crucially, the role played—and tensions inaugurated—by homosexuality within its ranks.

Wackerfuss brings a very perceptive eye to his subject. His analysis is augmented by insights from social psychology and cultural theory, and some of his conclusions are highly thought provoking. In the first chapter, for example, he lays bare the central significance that an imaginary idea of prewar Hamburg—a gleaming “city on the hill” (p. 16)—had for the young Stormtroopers and, even more important, the role of their fathers in conveying this image. Stormtroopers, Wackerfuss suggests, wanted to honor their fathers and assume their rightful place in this tradition of success, but the loss of the war and the German Revolution of November 1918 prevented this. Thus, the central motivation of their lives (and the factor that drew them to the SA) was a desire to restore Hamburg to its (perceived) prewar state, which of course

meant destroying the hated Weimar Republic. However, as Wackerfuss compellingly shows, the Stormtroopers, unlike their fathers, were prepared to accomplish this with violence; that is, they sought to uphold the bourgeois order through practices that were (ostensibly) contradictory to that very order. Joining the SA, then, was an act of both conformity and rebellion.

This was not the only contradiction at the heart of the Hamburg SA, however. As Wackerfuss repeatedly shows, many of its members joined the organization because they viewed it as a force for order and “moral authority” that would support the traditional family (p. 60). However, it also drew them into an exclusively male universe in which homosexual relationships could and did flourish. The SA’s enemies on the left, despite their ostensibly “progressive” politics, showed no compunction about using this in an attempt to discredit the Nazi paramilitaries. But Wackerfuss also argues that this dynamic of ambiguous sexuality—in an environment of increasingly uncertain gender relations—was one of the key factors that drove the SA to violence. The desire to prove their putative “masculinity” through involvement in a violent male fighting league was, he suggests, one of the main reasons people became involved in it at all.

Along with these unstable dynamics around sexuality and identity, SA violence was also driven by a remarkably paranoid narrative that ran throughout its press. In a detailed analysis of the Brownshirt newspaper, Wackerfuss shows that Stormtroopers consistently presented themselves as victims of enemy violence and as constantly on the defensive, which meant that subsequent SA aggression was understood by its practitioners as retaliatory and retributive. Similar narratives, he argues, are observable in the local Communist press. This mutual paranoia and sense of victimhood produced a spiraling dynamic of almost sectarian violence that was perceived as “defensive” by both sides, though it was frequently anything but.

But the marked instability evinced by the Hamburg SA in the domains of both sexual identity and violence were to prove its undoing after Hitler became chancellor in January 1933, as the very practices and internal tensions that had made it such an effective unit for winning power were precisely those that made it an embarrassing liability in a National Socialist state. The result was the Night of the Long Knives. In Hamburg itself, where the SA purge claimed eleven lives, this unmistakably indicated the decline of the Nazi paramilitary group, demonstrated by, for example, the local Nazi Party’s decision

to stop compiling reports on the causes of Stormtrooper suicides. The SA had fulfilled its purpose and the party was, to some degree, past caring about it.

Despite the insightfulness of some of Wackerfuss's analysis, there are a few issues with the overall focus of this volume. In the introduction, he promises "the truth about the connection between sexuality and Nazism," a claim the book does not deliver on (p. x). Indeed, its weakest sections are those that stray from its central subject: the Hamburg *Sturmabteilung*. For example, chapter 7 contains a section about the Reichstag Fire and how Communists portrayed this as the result of a homosexual "conspiracy" within the Nazi movement, while the final chapter concludes with some reflections on the pernicious stereotype of "the gay Nazi" and how certain contemporary figures have used this in the service of a homophobic agenda. These aspects of the book are not uninteresting, but they dilute its focus and detract from what is, ultimately, its main task—to present a comprehensive sociocultural history of the Hamburg SA. Indeed, homosexuality plays an important role in Wackerfuss's analysis of the *Sturmabteilung* in Hamburg, but it is ar-

guably not the central factor treated here. The occasional divergences into the wider links between Nazism and homosexuality thus add little to the account, and the book might have been stronger had it understood itself in more limited terms as a sociocultural history of the Hamburg SA (and the place of homosexuality within it).

If, however, we do indeed view the book in these less ambitious but still worthy terms, then it can comfortably be judged a great success. Wackerfuss scores a lot of points in two basic aspects of the historian's craft: style and archival work. He has done the latter extensively, and he conveys his findings with considerable and unusual flair. Above all, as already mentioned, he imparts some striking insights into the group and individual psychology of SA men that are not to be found in more drily empirical studies. Academic readers will find his contribution to our knowledge of the SA, and especially his perceptive analysis of the psychology of some of its members, immensely useful, while more casual readers will surely find his account, quite simply, very enjoyable to read.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Alex Burkhardt. Review of Wackerfuss, Andrew, *Stormtrooper Families: Homosexuality and Community in the Early Nazi Movement*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. October, 2016.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=45189>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.