

Andrew Wackerfuss,

*Stormtrooper Families: Homosexuality and Community in the Early Nazi Movement*, Harrington Park Press: New York, 2015; 384 pp.: ISBN 9781939594051, US\$35.00 (pbk)

**Reviewed by:** Patrick Mthombeni, *Ghent University, Belgium*

### **Keywords**

Families, homosexuality, military sociology, Nazism, Stormtroopers

Originating from *Sturmabteilung* and sharing commonalities both ideological and tactical with the Nazi war veterans, the Stormtroopers' (SA) goals as a Nazi military force were to protect the fascist elite and build a political army. The personalities of the Stormtroopers were young men who were unhappy and essentially felt humiliated by their government and were unemployed. These were young men who were prepared to do anything and admired those who were already part of the Brown Shirts. By 1932, the

SA numbered 600,000 Stormtroopers; the attractiveness of the SA was displayed by the disciplined elaboration of street marches, which attracted other young men who were in a socially dissolute state. Their strengths lay, first, in the intimidation of any opposition party, which benefited Adolf Hitler in his dealings with the Communist Party. Second, their inclinations to appear as paramilitaries, autonomous and flaunting their strength over the Army, became a concern for Hitler.

The SA's orientation to Nazi ideology may be traced to the burning structural economic problems experienced, in particular, by desperate young men in Germany. With this as one of the ideological standpoints for the SA, it experienced conflict with the larger Nazi Party on the tactical details of inflicting violence. However, the SA had better social networks for its members. These social networks provided bonding and emotional stability to strengthen the association between the personal life and the political life.

In the midst of maintaining power, Hitler wanted to capitalize on the anxiety, fear, and violence created by the SA in Hamburg, and simultaneously have full control over the organization. To achieve the kind of fascism he wanted to portray to the world, Hitler had three problems. First, it was how the SA violently carried themselves against their enemies that posed a threat to other Nazi leaders. Second, there was their decadent self-indulgence coupled with rumored homosexuality, including their leader, Ernst Röhm. Finally, it was the lack of discipline they displayed, which at times Hitler could not control. The SA had developed a certain character: the unconscious habit of combining the personal with the public in order to achieve the group's goals.

In the book's eight chapters, Wackerfuss highlights the crisscrosses of the political sphere with individual self-identification, and how these informed each other. The exposition of the Stormtroopers' daily activities and violent battles reveal more than just 'brotherhood,' 'manhood,' and/or 'genosse' (sharing the same belligerent comradeship), but men whose acts and social behavior became questionable and transcended heteronormative conceptions of society within the right-wing nationalist movement in Germany.

Wackerfuss shows the reader how the Nazis subdued the SA in three ways: no more spontaneous violence, no more revolutionary attitudes, and lastly their social networks had to shift their focus from the personal to the universal so that the Nazis could create a unified German identity. The unified German identity for Hitler was based on his public position and the dominant perceptions, thus the accusations of homosexual 'acts' leveled against some SA members and the change in the ideological focus of the Nazis contributed to the downfall of the SA. This combination gave Hitler ammunition to extinguish the leaders of the SA.

Within a year and a half, Hitler began to feel threatened by the SA. The 'night of the long knives' (30 June 1934) cemented Hitler's position as the only dominant figure in the pyramid of leadership, and he eliminated all the SA leaders (*Kolibri*) who were seen as a threat. This included Ernst Röhm, who was born in Munich and was seen to be wanting a reward after helping Hitler to power. The *Kolibri* mission was carried out by three of Hitler's best men: Heinrich Himmler (head of the SS), Hermann Göring (head of the Gestapo [*Geheime Staatspolizei*]), and Reinhard Heydrich (leader of the Führer's bodyguards). Heinrich Himmler was at the forefront of accusing Röhm of homosexual behavior in the SA. Röhm was seen as a powerful leader of the SA, and his power was based on his ability to put the communists in their place, a trait that Hitler liked. The

condemnation of Röhm as an aggressive homosexual became far more serious when he was accused of appointing gay friends into the high ranks of the SA. The obliteration of the SA was seen as a triumph of killing enemies and traitors within the Nazi regime. Hitler publicly endorsed the assassinations of the SA leaders, and it moved some Nazi leaders up the hierarchy.

The interesting part is that the book raises critical interrogations on the overall nature of homosexual identity, sexuality, and sexual acts among right-wing nationalists. Thus, Wackerfuss takes the reader on a journey through a Stormtrooper's life and reveals the conscious collective acquaintanceship of men experiencing life at a point of political, economic, social, sexual, and cultural conjuncture. As the book progresses, the reader is involved in a reflective dialogue on various issues: (1) the deep-seated nature of political and homosocial citizenship; (2) the impact of war and disappointment with social-psychological durability; (3) the political movement as a safe habitation for those who are ideologically depleted and vulnerable; (4) identity politics and conceptions of sexual acts denoting sexual orientation; and (5) the casuist within the traditional Nazi movement.

The book could have revealed and interrogated more than just the homosexual acts within the SA, but also the extent to which social-sexual labels are used for political gratification, which is inherent in many right-wing nationalist groups. Hence, political homophobia and personal disagreements among the Nazis regarding the SA might cast light on the bigotry of the Nazi leaders and their attempt to police 'sexual morality' and impose strict policies as a way to keep the right-wing discourse admissible. Wackerfuss provides a compelling argument about the role played by the SA and how its members tried to restore a 'good' ancient imagination of their society. Overall, the book showcases the social blending of identity and sexuality, and the gray areas between.

### **Author biography**

Patrick Mthombeni is a PhD candidate and research staff member at Ghent University. He is also a doctoral visiting scholar at Newcastle University, England. He is currently investigating the social identity formation in aging sexual minorities in the northeast of England. *Address:* Ghent University, Korte Meer 5, 9000 Ghent, Belgium. Email: PatrickBongani.Mthombeni@UGent.be