

Child Bride calls on us to search for better ways to protect children from child marriage, abusive parents, and a host of other domestic dangers.

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Stormtrooper Families: Homosexuality and Community in the Early Nazi Movement. By ANDREW WACKERFUSS. New York: Harrington Park Press, 2015. Pp. 393. \$90.00 (cloth); \$35.00 (paper).

“Because the role of homosexuality in fascism is very ambiguous and complicated and has been subject to all kinds of homophobic projection,” observes the influential queer theorist Judith Halberstam in a recent essay, “we often prefer to talk about the persecution of gays by Nazis, leaving aside the question of their collaboration in the regime.”¹ This is one of the central questions that the historian Andrew Wackerfuss takes on in his book *Stormtrooper Families*, a fascinating local study of the Nazi SA in the northern city of Hamburg. The book goes a long way in explaining the appeal of the Nazi Party for young Germans during the 1920s and early 1930s. As Wackerfuss puts it, “Nazi sexuality combined with political forms connected to larger structures of family, locality, and society that crossed all sexual and political orientations” (x). In demonstrating these connections, the book will be of interest not only to anyone interested in German sexuality in the early twentieth century but more widely to students and scholars of German society and the Nazi movement.

Who exactly joined the SA? The social composition of the Stormtroopers was a topic that provoked much debate in the 1970s and 1980s. Relying heavily on memoirs and other books eventually published by SA members, Wackerfuss’s study leans toward depicting the SA as an embodiment of frustrated middle-class ideals, though he does acknowledge that many more working-class men joined as the Great Depression set in after 1929. He focuses on men like Alfred Conn, the son of a Hamburg merchant and veteran of World War I, who eventually came to head the local SA organization. Returning to a city that in 1918 and 1919 was in the hands of revolutionaries, Conn was angry at the revolutionary workers for ruining a place that had once, in his memory anyway, been strong and prosperous. Yet he also harbored anger at his father’s generation for abandoning the city to its so-called pillagers. Such “young men,” Wackerfuss writes, “demonstrated a toxic combination of resentment, alienation, and testosterone that fueled SA recruitment. Disillusion, depression, and a sense of anxiety about the future dominated their thoughts” (59–60).

¹ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 148.

Wackerfuss joins the historian Richard Bessel and others in suggesting the important role that violence played in creating personal bonds within the SA, in defining a sense of self for the individual Stormtroopers, and in shaping what Nazism eventually meant to those outside of the party.² A product of the combative politics of an era characterized by tavern brawls and neighborhood turf battles, the SA attracted men who saw themselves as soldiers willing to fight to defend their family, their city, and their fatherland. Throughout the 1920s, the city's liberal elite was skeptical of this group of young radicals, who frequently demonstrated tendencies toward public drunkenness, vandalism, and slovenliness. However, in the early 1930s, in response to the political radicalization that followed in the wake of the Great Depression, the city's liberal press often ended up siding with the Nazis against the Communists. Using the press coverage given to such notorious riots as "the Battle of Sternschanze" in September 1930, Wackerfuss shows that the mainstream press ended up "swallow[ing] many Nazi tropes," including the Nazis' tendencies to define themselves as victims of Communist violence and martyrs for the national cause (150).

The theme of sexuality runs throughout the entire book, coming up in the author's discussion of the homoerotic aspects of German military life, in the homophobic protest organized by the Hamburg SA against the performance in 1928 of Ferdinand Brückner's play *The Criminal*, and in the outing of a local Stormtrooper named Gerhold. Wackerfuss naturally goes into detail about the case of Ernst Röhm, the founder of the SA, who was outed in 1932 and who was eventually murdered in Hitler's purge of the organization in 1936. Wackerfuss's most sustained treatment of the topic, though, can be found in his discussion of the role of community in the SA. He notes the powerful and productive tension between two different models of community in the Weimar era SA. At its center was a kind of bachelor sociability that combined masculine belligerence and homoerotic bonding as methods to integrate members. "It loudly and publicly denied that this emotional stance made it attractive to homosexuals," Wackerfuss writes, "even while it simultaneously incorporated talented homosexuals whose devotion to a group of comrades might prove extremely useful" (75). On the other hand, there were also efforts to build connections between the SA and the wider German society. Stormtroopers established soup kitchens, worked with local churches and neighborhood associations, and relied on a small network of women "who helped to keep the men dressed and fed, and who comforted them when sick" (191). The tension between two modes of community was only resolved with Röhm's murder, after which the sexually adventurous aspects of SA culture were systematically expunged.

My biggest complaint with the book is that it is torn between two different stories—one a local history, the second a more thematic exploration of

² Richard Bessel, *Political Violence and the Rise of Nazism: The Storm Troopers in Eastern Germany, 1925–1934* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984).

sexuality in the SA. Readers interested in the latter will find more discussion of Hamburg's local history than they probably wish to know. An audience looking for a microhistory of Hamburg's SA, on the other hand, will no doubt see the analysis of the Röhm affair and the homophobic propaganda of the Communist Party as tangential and distracting. Nevertheless, in a publishing environment in which we scholars must attract as many audiences as possible, it is a flaw with which it is easy to be sympathetic. Whatever kind of reader picks up this book will certainly be pleased with its overall analysis of the sources; with the attention paid to the case histories, writings, and emotions of specific men within the SA; and with an ultimately convincing story about one aspect of the eventual success of Nazism in Germany.

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