

**Book review:**  
**Stormtrooper Families:**  
**Homosexuality and**  
**Community in the Early**  
**Nazi Movement**

By C. Todd White

The French have a saying, that to understand is to forgive. Of course in America, we have a saying of our own: to every rule is an exception. History has shown us the limits of cultural relativism, and the line was no more clearly delineated than during the Nazi holocaust and war — which, by the summer of 1943, left Hamburg devastated, and Germany once again in rubble.

To understand the Nazi rise to power, one must understand the history of a paramilitary brigade that allied itself with the Party early on, in 1923, under the guise of an athletic club. At the outset, these “Stormtroopers,” as they called themselves, were a ragtag group of young men in poverty growing up in a nation crushed and impoverished after the war. The original Sturmabteilung, or storm battalion/divisions (SA), were responsible for the offensive shock factor of the German infantry during World War I. In appropriating the name, the SA attempted to ally itself with disgraced Veterans of the war and a lost nationalism that the Nazis sought to revitalize — and embraced a military metaphor taken very much to heart.

In the early 1920s, Germany was hit rampant post-war inflation due to its war debt, which quickly devoured any residual savings of the populace. This period was known as the Kampfzeit, the time of struggle, where Germany was torn between three factions: social democrats [SDP], who were leading the Weimar republic; the Communists [KPD]; and the National Socialists Workers Party [NDSAP], otherwise known as the Nazis. The SA was created to serve as a unit of men who would act to protect the SDSAP

from attack by the KPD, which had a Red Front Fighting Brigade of its own. These men would police the pubs where Party meetings would convene, and at night would paste up posters promoting Party politics and its leader, Adolf Hitler.

In all of this, a post-war homosexual brand of masculinity took hold of the German republic, giving rise to and then fueled by Magnus Hirschfeld in Berlin and his Scientific Humanitarian Committee. The Committee argued that homosexuals in the military often became “the most capable servicemen,” for “they tended to care more for the general social welfare than men who headed their own families, provided more dedication to their comrades because of their emotional attachment to them, and fought more fiercely due to a psychological need to prove themselves to a society that often challenged their patriotism.”

The founding figure of the SA was a war veteran and party hero named Ernst Röhm. Röhm was a known homosexual and misogynist who believed with Hirschfeld that homosexual soldiers under patriarchic systems formed formidable fighting corps. The SA started on February 12, 1923, by five men inspired by Röhm. These men and their recruits allied themselves with the Nazi Party as protectors, but to many they more resembled thugs.

With Röhm as figurehead, the SA was constantly berated by the media, and the KPD, as a haven for homosexuals, calling them Röhmlinge: Röhm boys. The Nazis, though, had a powerful propaganda machine working to orchestrate the restless energy of the SA while defending their honor. When violence broke out, the Nazi media immediately spun the event to make the SA the patriotic victims standing up against Communists. The SA were portrayed as patriots and family men, models of heterosexual virtue and masculinity.

After Hitler and the Nazis won control of the Germany, in March of 1933, the SA



became a problem. Attempts to integrate them into the police force failed miserably. Only some had the true makings of a soldier. So Hitler neutralized the SA on June 30, 1934, when Röhm was imprisoned and later murdered. Hitler and his SS corps rooted out, imprisoned, or killed SA leaders under charge of treason. This Night of the Long Knives marked the end of any political or military influence the SA would ever have within the Nazi Party.

Because, as author Andrew Wackerfuss puts it, “members of all political factions had long believed that the heart of the Nazis’ militant nationalist politics lay in the sinister schemes of decadent homosexual criminals, whose immoral personal lives encouraged them to collaborate in political crime,” it was easy for Hitler’s propagandists to cite homosexuality as part of the reason for the purging. Those SA who endured were now compelled to live up to the values they had originally espoused — yet flouted.

Wackerfuss concludes his history by saying that we need to “understand the Nazis so we can understand ourselves.” While some of this work illustrates how similar to the Nazis we can be — in our use of the media for social manipulation and ongoing collusion between sycophant politicians and religious leaders — we are worlds apart from them in other ways. Though we play with “Nazi drag” in ritual — think Tom of Finland or Sex Pistols — our restless youth don’t seem to be all that interested in aligning themselves with political factions. Still, the holocaust happened, and Stormtrooper Families reminds us that it was the young men of Germany, loaded with energy and motivated by ambition yet unable to channel their energy in constructive streams, who provided the fuel for the bonfires — conflagrations that grew to consume even those same people who’d built the pyres, and then lit the match.

*Stormtrooper Families: Homosexuality and Community in the Early Nazi Movement* by Andrew Wackerfuss. Published by Harrington Park Press, August 15, 2015