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## How Gay Were the Nazis?

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*How the myth of homosexual influence within the Nazi party ranks took hold.*

February 16, 2016

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*(Stormtrooper gymnastics training as depicted in SA publication Der SA Mann)*

In the decades after 1945, Nazi stormtroopers [Sturmabteilung, or SA] continued to represent a prototypical image of National Socialism, a vision that loomed especially large in eras fascinated by a mix of sex and violence. Given the cultural sensitivities of the early postwar era, the topic of homosexuality was at first only on the margins of respectable historical works, an unfit subject for a scholar. On these margins, however, pop historians of the 1950s and 1960s alluded to dark deeds in order to titillate readers and vilify fascism. Many hinted that the presence of a homosexual faction in the SA leadership had determined the SA's particularly malignant influence on Nazi politics. Stormtrooper homosexuality, writers hinted, had shaped organizational structure, set political goals, and enhanced an affinity for violence. While it is true that the SA embodied the most violent tendencies of the movement during its rise to power, the connection between homosexuality and violence remained unexplained, except as a reflection of old tropes of sinfulness and depravity. Fortunately, the era's distaste for the subject of homosexuality prevented any emphasis on homosexual Nazism from taking hold.

Popular culture had no such qualms. Hollywood films focused particularly on fascist sexuality as an antithesis of American democratic values, arguing that family arrangements and sexual life that departed too far from approved heteronormative forms created warped

masculinity in young men, who then lashed out in political violence and embraced fascist politics. Homosexual Nazis thus became a popular image of an “ideal nemesis” for democratic societies, part of a larger argument connecting the personal and the political in postwar America.

As the scholarly prohibition on studying sexuality eroded in the 1970s, several published works did formally discuss Nazi sexuality, as well as the treatment of homosexuals under National Socialism. The latter category proved essential in documenting Nazi persecution of homosexuals that previously had been ignored or minimized, and it established the number of gay men who died in concentration camps as somewhere between 10,000 and 15,000. Through this work, gay and lesbian activists also reclaimed the pink triangle as a symbol of triumph over oppression, making fascist homophobia a powerful argument for why democratic societies should reject anti-gay attitudes.

Other popular cultural depictions of fascist sexual history focused less on the victims and more on the perpetrators. Films and pulp books featuring Nazi sexuality often behaved irresponsibly, looking to history for titillation rather than liberation. The figure of the gay Nazi returned with a vengeance, and the public became fixated on scandalous images of Nazi sexuality as never before.

In [Italian director Lucino Visconte’s] *The Damned*, the death of the patriarch on the day of the Nazi takeover triggered a scramble for dynastic succession, which the stormtrooper uncle (an Ernst Röhm archetype) initially won. He soon met his end, however, in a 20-minute Night of the Long Knives sequence that showed the stormtrooper resort party of June 1934 as progressing from shooting to skinny dipping, drinking to drag shows, and implied gay orgy to machine-gun massacre.

However, just as with the 1934 urban legend of Hitler interrupting Ernst Röhm’s champagne party in Hamburg’s Hotel Atlantik, the lurid version of the massacre gained currency because it mythologized the massacre’s underlying political meaning. The cliquish, overly emotional, and appetite-driven homosexuals who had supposedly made up the stormtroopers had grown too confident in their immunity to law and morality, and had thus brought on their own destruction by the Nazi beast they had helped to create. As with the Eulenberg affair in the imperial period, the homosexual militarist came to represent the internal dynamics of self-destructive nationalist politics in far more dramatic and compelling ways than the far larger number of heterosexual comrades ever could. The legend, not the reality, became remembered.

*Excerpted from Andrew Wackerfuss, PhD’s [Stormtrooper Families: Homosexuality and Community in the Early Nazi Movement](http://harringtonparkpress.com/stormtrooper-families/) (<http://harringtonparkpress.com/stormtrooper-families/>). (Harrington Park Press/distributed by Columbia University Press).*

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