

MEDICINE, MALE BONDING, AND THE PERSECUTION OF HOMOSEXUAL MEN IN THE THIRD REICH

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Current explanations of the persecution of homosexuals in the Third Reich focus on National Socialist racial hygiene and arguments on population policies that were used to justify the Nazi regulations in the field of sexuality. The appearance and spread of homosexuality had to be fought because, in the Nazi view, it would result in larger numbers of Germans no longer procreating children. So, many scholars argue that the persecution of this minority was inevitable and massive, because in the Third Reich, sexuality served above all propagation and racial purity. This argument corresponds with the view that the ideal of racial purity and biological health is essential for any definition of Nazism; some medical historians have thus characterized the Nazi regime as a 'biocracy'.¹ A biocracy because major social and political issues like the so-called 'Jewish question', ethnicity, gender, crime, 'asocial' behavior and sexual deviance, were transformed into and reduced to biomedical problems. In the comprehensive biomedical worldview of the Nazis, the German people was threatened with deadly diseases. Their 'cure' was racial purification that would progress from coercive sterilization, euthanasia, segregation, and concentration for supposedly 'hygienic' reasons, to direct medical killing and genocide. From the notion that this biopolitical vision of a 'total cure' dictated the Nazi treatment of homosexuality, it was only a small step toward the enumeration of homosexuals in the same breath with Jews, ethnic minorities, the Sinti and Roma, and psychiatric patients and hereditary ill people as principal victims of the Nazi regime.

However plausible this explanation may sound, it is, in my opinion, not entirely convincing nor complete. Focusing on the widely divergent ways in which medicine dealt with homosexuality in Nazi-Germany, I will first indicate why it is not, and then

¹ See: Robert J. Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors. Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (1986); Robert Proctor, *Racial Hygiene. Medicine under the Nazis* (1988); Paul Weindling, *Health, race and German politics between national unification and Nazism, 1870-1945* (1989); Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Ippermann, *The Racial State: Germany 1933-1945* (1991).

attempt to give an alternative explanation. In my view, 'homophobia' was not part and parcel of a coherent Nazi ideology. Instead, the different and changing attitudes of Nazi leaders were the result of contradictions between divergent doctrines and practices in Nazism. Especially the central role of male bonding (the so-called *Männerbund*) in the Third Reich, is of major importance. I believe that in the Nazi-view, homosexuality was not so much an infringement on their ideal of racial purity, as a threat to the social and political cohesion of their own movement that was based on male bonding.

Although a large number of male homosexuals² - between 5,000 and 15,000 it has been estimated - found their way into the concentration camps, in contrast to the 'Holocaust' of the Jews and some other groups, the persecution of homosexuals was neither wholesale nor systematic. Not all homosexual men convicted by law-courts and registered by the Nazi regime were sent to concentration camps. The measures taken by the Nazis against homosexuality were highly differentiated. In addition to punishment, Nazi authorities promoted medical, psychiatric and educational therapies. The intensity of persecution was characterized by local variation and the severity of the punishment depended on several factors such as the seriousness of the offence, the role one had played and the number and the age of the sexual partners. On the whole, the Nazi regime was not aiming at total extermination of all homosexuals and they did not become an important object of national socialist eugenic and racial policies or of a unified biomedical approach.

The way the Nazi leaders regarded homosexuality was not unanimous. While it is true that they passed negative judgments, they did not all consider it uniformly dangerous. Sometimes the charge of homosexuality was primarily used as a means to eliminate political opponents, both inside the party and out. One notorious example is the liquidation of Ernst Röhm and other SA-leaders in 1934. Especially prior to, but also after 1934, Nazi policy toward homosexuality was characterized by inconsistency. The lack of consensus among the Nazi leadership seems evident from the facts that Röhm was not the only homosexual in the Nazi movement and that before his liquidation homosexuality seems to have been tolerated tacitly. Before 1934 the Nazi movement may even have had an attraction for some homosexual men, because of its supposedly anti-bourgeois doctrines, the male comradeship and the glorification of masculinity, youth and physical strength and beauty.

However, some leading Nazis considered homosexuality a grave danger and therefore advocated strict regulations. At their instigation Paragraph 175 was tightened in 1935: unnatural vice now referred not only to sodomy or so-called

² Although some women were imprisoned because of homosexuality, it is clear that the Nazis considered male homosexuality much more dangerous than female homosexuality. In contrast to male homosexuality, same-sex behavior of women was never criminalized. This difference is undoubtedly related to the Nazis' traditional view of sexuality and role division between man and woman: the latter was supposed only to perform the passive role. Moreover, in a state which extolled manly, martial toughness, lesbians were less of a threat to the regime than men who infringed on its ideals of masculinity.

'beischlafähnliche Handlungen', as it had before, but to all forms of physical contact which were 'lustful in intent' and even to expressions of feeling. The Nazis employed a very broad definition of homosexuality which could cover mere expressions of friendly affection. The argument for amending the law was that this behaviour was contagious, that all German men were exposed to seduction and homosexuality threatened to spread like an epidemic, even within the Nazi movement itself. Homosexuality was not so much defined in terms of biological degeneration of a minority; instead, several leading Nazis saw it mainly as a contagious behavioural disease that in principle could affect every German man.

What is striking here is that, although Nazi rhetoric was full of medical terms, and it often suggested that racial impurity was the cause of homosexuality, most of the leading Nazis apparently did not regard it in general as a biological feature of a distinctive group, and neither did a lot of scientists who were considered experts on this subject. Although several physicians conducted research into the biological causes of homosexuality and some advocated and practised castration and hormonal treatments as 'cures', such medical interferences did not become an important subject for the Nazi program of racial hygiene. To be true, in Nazi Germany an unknown number of convicted homosexuals have been castrated - by subjecting themselves to this operation it was possible to receive a partial amnesty. However, operations like castration and hormone treatments certainly were no medical routine for dealing with homosexual offenders.

The Nazi endeavour to organize society according to biological and racial criteria cannot form an explanation for the regulations against homosexuality. From within the Nazi movement criticism was brought against the assertion that it was an inborn and immutable trait; since the end of the 19th century such a biological view had been advocated by leading medical scientists as well as by the homosexual emancipation movement under the leadership of Magnus Hirschfeld. According to some Nazis, only a small minority of the men found guilty of homosexual acts should be considered as a distinct biological category. The vast majority of these offenders had acquired this behaviour.

This Nazi view was in itself not in contradiction with current scientific explanations. In the Third Reich physicians, psychiatrists and psychologists sought out the causes of homosexual behavior, as they had done before (and of course they continue to do until this very day). Until the end of the Third Reich, the causes and cure, and the distinction between various 'types' of homosexuality remained a subject of controversial debate among scientists. I want to emphasize that, on the whole their research did not differ from scientific notions about homosexuality before and after the Third Reich. It is also important to notice that biological explanations did not necessarily prevail; as before (and after), scientists usually distinguished between constitutional and acquired forms of homosexuality. Even leading experts on heredity acknowledged that it was not only rooted in a biological constitution, but that there were also psychological and social causes. The nature-nurture debate in medicine and psychiatry continued in Nazi Germany and my impression is that the nurture side in the debate became even leading. Although psychoanalysis was

rejected as a Jewish science, it is striking that the Freudian approach still found a lot of echoes among psychiatrists. In this manner some prominent psychiatrists and psychotherapists advanced the claim that homosexuality was caused by traumatic childhood experiences, a developmental imbalance or by seduction during adolescence, and that acquired leanings could consequently be cured by means of psychological methods such as re-education and psychotherapy. Some psychiatrists took an explicit stand in opposition to scientists who claimed that homosexuality was hormonally or genetically determined. The theory of a hereditary determined homosexuality held only good for a small number of cases and did not apply to the majority of people who behaved in a homosexual manner.

Why was this opinion shared not only by a large number of professional experts, but by the Nazis as well? Why did the latter attach such great importance to the distinction between inborn and acquired homosexuality, as is evident for example from the directives which applied in the German army and in Nazi organizations? Military judges and doctors were expected to review similar acts differently; they should distinguish between constitutional homosexuals and apparently 'normal' men who were temporarily derailed as the result of more or less accidental, environmental factors. My explanation for this is that the distinction between various types of homosexuality was valuable for the Nazis. Since it was impossible to deny that most homosexuals offenders were 'Aryans', racial purity appeared to be no guarantee against such behavior. Within the Nazi movement even SS officers who had passed through rigorous selection processes and therefore, in the eyes of the Nazis, simply could not have some unalterable racial flaw, were involved in cases of homosexuality. These realities more or less compelled them to amplify biological theories with psychological explanations. Psychology and psychotherapy were useful for the Nazis to distinguish mental disorders and neurotic conflicts that were correctable, from organic, congenital degeneracy. In this way the belief in the racial delusion that inborn perversions and genetic psychic disorders were not a part of the pure essence of the German national character was to be left undisturbed.

Although biology and medicine occupied a privileged place among the sciences in the Third Reich, at the same time psychology and psychotherapy were tolerated and even fostered. Behind the biologicistic facade of racism, was hidden a more 'sociopsychological' view of man, that emphasized the possibility of psychological repair for mental dysfunction. Their concern about homosexuality - which was as much a problem within the Nazi movement as a perceived threat from without - did lead to the engagement of psychotherapists. Homosexual Nazis, members of the *Hitlerjugend* and the army were sent to the German Institute for psychological research and psychotherapy in Berlin to be treated, cured, and sent back into the community as 'normal' and productive members of society.

According to the Nazis, homosexuals were dangerous not only because they seduced heterosexual men, but also because they created cliques and thereby undermined the hierarchical relationships and the unity of their own movement. The danger of the 'homosexual conspiracy' was given a great deal of attention in Nazi

propaganda after the liquidation of Röhm and others in 1934, when the legal persecution of homosexuals intensified. In consequence of the Röhm affair, some Nazi leaders became virtually obsessed with the danger of homosexuality. It is remarkable that they should have regarded all German males as susceptible to homosexual seduction to a powerful degree. In fact, the consideration forced itself on them that their own movement, which was based on male bonding, might evoke homosexuality, and that it, as a fertile soil for a secret state within the state, could undermine the National Socialist movement from within. The question I want to raise now is whether the homophobia of the Nazi regime and its persecution of homosexual men can, at least partly, be explained by the threat of homosexuality perceived by some important Nazi leaders, in their all-male military organizations.

Posing as the heirs of the fraternity of the trenches in the First World War, the Nazis adopted the nationalist ideal of the *Männerbund*, dating from the 19th century. The strict segregation between the sexes into distinct male and female spheres was considered as the natural foundation for the fascist social order. In fact, the Nazi movement was a militant men's community that excluded women from the most important organizations and, to whatever extent possible, from public and political life. Next to the family, the *Männerbund* was the cornerstone of fascist society. While the Nazis glorified the family as a nursery for a great many children, they undermined it as a private sphere. Not only did eugenic policies intrude on the privacy of the spouses, also from the men a great deal of time and loyalty was demanded for the benefit of the movement and the army. Close emotional ties with the family were not conducive to the role which the male in close alliance with other men was obliged to fulfill in the Nazi state. To a certain extent, firm ties between men were considered desirable and various Nazi spokesmen drew attention to the political importance of male solidarity and comradeship. They assumed that male bonding and not the family was the organizing principle of the state. Just as man and woman completed each other in the family, so too family and *Männerbund* completed each other at the level of society. Self-sacrifice was expected of the woman for the benefit of the family, so that the man could dedicate himself to political and military tasks exclusively among men. The Nazi lawyer Rudolf Klare even stated that the severe penalties he proposed for homosexuality should not become a hindrance to spiritual love for members of one's own sex on the basis of ancient Greek love of youths.

However, the *Männerbund* was problematic for the Nazis, because since the end of the nineteenth century it had acquired in certain circles a distinctly homoerotic tenor. In discussions concerning the nature, scope, and explanation of male homosexuality, it had repeatedly been associated with friendship and male bonding. Moreover, the glorification of male physical beauty in nationalism, also adopted by the Nazis, radiated homoeroticism. Some of the Nazi functionaries were painfully aware of the association of the *Männerbund* and homosexuality: repeated reference was made to Hans Blüher's work for example, to warn that homosexuality, as a fertile soil for a secret state within the state, could undermine the National Socialist movement from inside out. The Nazis paid great attention to the factors which were

supposedly significant in the origin and spread of homosexuality in men's groups. Youth leaders and army doctors for example, received extensive instructions in possible preventive regulations.

In this context one of the most revealing Nazi statements on homosexuality was a (non-public) speech by Heinrich Himmler before high-ranking SS officers in 1937. He stated forthrightly that the National Socialist movement facilitated homosexuality because of its, in his words, too powerful masculinization and militarization. Since in the Nazi *Männerbünde* males had too little opportunity to associate with the other sex, organizations like the SS and the Hitlerjugend could become hothouses for homosexuality, thus Himmler warned, referring extensively to Hans Blüher. However, in spite of the grave dangers he was calling attention to, Himmler was a firm protagonist of male bonding. Of the Nazi leaders, Himmler declared his position most explicitly in favor of introducing severe penalties for homosexual contacts between men, especially within the Nazi organizations and in the army, and for civilians who had 'seduced' others. In the same speech in which he warned against the homosexual tendencies of the Nazi *Männerbund*, he also imparted that members of the SS who were found guilty of unnatural lewdness, after completing their sentence of confinement in a concentration camp, should be put to death. The persecution of homosexuals was intensified at the end of the 1930s, especially within the Nazi movement itself and later also in the army.

The strict sexual segregation in Nazism, especially during the war, is of major importance in understanding the persecution of homosexuals. The fear that the male comradeship necessary for the cohesion of military organizations would degenerate into homosexuality contributed powerfully to the preoccupation with same-sex behaviour. In the course of the war, at the instigation of the Nazi authorities, the regulations grew stricter. (In 1940 the death penalty was introduced for members of the SS and the police forces. In the same year it was stipulated that all convicted homosexuals who had 'seduced' more than one partner or who were considered 'incurable', would be deported to a concentration camp after having sat out their prison-sentence.) A medical vocabulary was used to justify the fierce procedures, but in fact biomedical principles had little to do with them. Severe penalties were introduced, mainly because the Nazis believed that homosexuality was a social problem. The severe penalties were supposed to have a deterrent effect: they served primarily to guarantee the discipline in the National Socialist *Männerbund*.

To come to a conclusion: although biology and medicine indeed played a central role in Nazism, and the willingness of the German medical profession to embrace the National Socialist cause was substantial, in my view a logical connection between Nazi 'biocracy' and the persecution of homosexuals can hardly be established. Such a logical connection simply has been assumed because it is believed that the biomedical worldview of the Nazis was all-comprehensive and that therefore politicians as well as scientists only used biological explanations to account for homosexual behavior. I doubt that a unified biomedical ideology, rooted in an exclusionary racism, explains the persecution of homosexuals, and nor do I support

the claim that biomedical science unequivocally contributed to that persecution. There was no one-dimensional connection between the Nazis politics of persecution and biomedical interference with homosexuality. Instead, the Nazis used rather pragmatically different scientific explanations to cope with what they considered as an internal problem, which was not so much of a biological or racial as of a social nature. The 'homosocial' organization of Nazism is of major importance in understanding the Nazi persecution homosexuals. Some Nazi leaders were aware of the fact that in Wilhelminian and Weimar Germany the ideal of the *Männerbund* had been employed to advocate homoeroticism, and in consequence of both the Röhm affair and accusations from the left in the early 1930s, they became virtually obsessed with the danger of homosexuality within their own movement. The fear that the pure male comradeship necessary for the cohesion of military organizations would degenerate into homosexuality contributed powerfully to the preoccupation of some Nazi officials with same-sex behavior and the diversity of remedies against it. One of the aims of the severe penalties was deterrence to guarantee the purity of, and discipline in the National Socialist *Männerbund*.