

An Examination of the Differences in Persecution for Same-Sex Sexual Activity: The
Importance of Gender Roles in Nazi Germany

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Abstract: The goal of this research is to examine the patriarchal gender roles that were embedded in the Nazi regime and how this may have played into the persecution of same-sex sexual activity. I postulate that the importance of gender roles prescribed by the Nazi regime played a key role in the persecution of some same-sex sexual activity, while other same-sex sexual activity was overlooked. Specifically, male homosexuality was punishable by death because of the importance placed on the masculinity of men; in this regime, men were expected to be hypermasculine warriors whose main goals were to protect the homeland and ensure the advancement of the Aryan race, which was arguably the most important role that anyone could play in Nazi Germany. Contrarily, lesbian sexual activity was often overlooked or persecuted to a lesser extent, because even though women had the important role of procreation, this role was deemed less than that of an Aryan man. This is demonstrated in the fact that gay men were seen as emasculated and unable to fulfill their social role, while women who participated in lesbian sexual activity could still have sex with men in the future and fulfill their roles as mothers.

During the Nazi regime, millions of people who did not fit into the Nazi's ideal of the perfect Aryan were persecuted and killed. One such group that was targeted by the regime was people who participated in same-sex activities or who were suspected of same-sex relationships. If one looks deeper into who was persecuted for engaging in same-sex acts, it is easy to see the gender difference that existed - homosexual men were jailed and sent to concentration camps at disproportionate rates compared to homosexual women.¹ I propose the key difference in Nazi's persecution of same-sex activity lies in the gender roles that were prescribed to men and women during the regime.

Fascism itself was a masculine ideology. In order for fascism to thrive, it needed a strong, dynamic man to embody the Fatherland. It is doubtless that fascism would have thrived in Germany had it not been for Hitler.² Because Hitler was a man and embodied the ideals of action that fascism was built upon, it follows that the Nazi regime would privilege masculinity. Specifically, Nazi men were given the essential role of protector of the nation and father of the superior race. Homosexuality threatened this notion of masculinity, because it challenged the definition of the male gender role that was so necessary to the Nazi regime. How could someone who engaged in same-sex behavior create future soldiers of the superior race and protect the Fatherland? Conversely, women were not as important to the regime. The usefulness of women was their reproductive potential and nothing more. The result of this dichotomy of importance given to women and men's roles in the regime led to the prosecution of male homosexual behaviors and not female same-sex behaviors. Understanding the importance of gender roles to

¹ United States Memorial Holocaust Museum. "Persecution of Homosexuals in the Third Reich." Accessed December 9, 2020. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/persecution-of-homosexuals-in-the-third-reich>.

² Kershaw, Ian. *The "Hitler Myth": Image and Reality in the Third Reich*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

the regime and the privileging of masculinity is the key to understanding the difference in persecution of some same-sex behaviors and not others.

To understand the importance of the role of masculinity to the regime, it is necessary to understand how masculinity was threatened during the Weimar Era. Although Germany was no exception in trying to cling to patriarchal gender roles, challenges to traditional gender roles arose during the Weimar Republic. Most notably, the role of the “new woman” that had emerged in the 19th century gained popularity during the inter-war period throughout Europe and most importantly, in Berlin. During World War I, women were allowed unprecedented levels of autonomy. Because men were deployed across Europe, women joined the work force and took the reins of weaponry production.³ Joining the workforce changed how women perceived their roles in their nations, because it allowed them to possess roles that were not centered around homemaking and bearing children. In 1918, more than 11 million women were working, which accounted for 38% of the workforce.⁴

Another shift in the traditional female gender role was women gaining the vote in Germany. On November 30, 1918, women were officially given the right to vote by the newly established Weimar Republic.⁵ The right to vote introduced a new political autonomy for women along with public confirmation that women were allowed roles outside of the home. Although suffrage was instrumental in ensuring women’s voices were heard in the nation, it combined with changing feminine aesthetics brought about a new concern over women embracing more masculine roles. One scholar, Richard McCormick argues that these anxieties about the New

³ Peterson, Brian. "The Politics of Working-Class Women in the Weimar Republic." *Central European History* 10, no. 2 (1977): 87-111. Accessed November 29, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4545793>.

⁴ Evans, Richard J. *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 127.

⁵ Evans, Richard J. "German Social Democracy and Women's Suffrage 1891-1918." *Journal of Contemporary History* 15, no. 3 (1980): 533-57. Accessed November 28, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/260417>.

Women are best seen in film during the Weimar Republic in which men project a “discourse of castration” in order to detail their fears about their perceived loss of social autonomy.⁶ Not only were men concerned that women were stealing their employment opportunities, but they also had reservations about women neglecting their roles as mothers and home makers. Women’s desire to stay in the workforce and become politically involved seemingly confirmed these fears.

The gender roles that men were expected to uphold also changed as a result of World War I. Germany’s defeat was the ultimate act of emasculation of Germany’s men. Ernst Kirchner’s *Self-Portrait as a Soldier* painted in 1915 was a prime example of the war’s detrimental effects on the soldiers’ masculinity. In the portrait (depicted in Fig.1), the soldier is pictured at the forefront of the painting with the injury of a severed hand, while a nude model is shown in the background. While injuries were a common result of the war, this depiction does not show a physical injury, but instead a metaphorical castration that was felt by men as a result of the war.⁷

⁶ McCormick, Richard W. "Private Anxieties/Public Projections: "New Objectivity," Male Subjectivity, and Weimar Cinema." *Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies in German Literature & Culture* 10 (1995): 1-18. [doi:10.1353/wgy.1995.0036](https://doi.org/10.1353/wgy.1995.0036).

⁷ Grubin, David dir. *Degenerate Art*. 1993; Los Angeles, CA: PBS Home Video.



Figure 1. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*, 1915, oil on canvas, 69 x 61 cm (Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College)

Another factor that played into the emasculation of men in Germany after the war the publicity of Lesbianism. For many, it was no longer was it a taboo topic, but now it could be discussed openly. Nowhere was the idea of female homosexuality more public in Germany than Berlin. Berlin was home to many scientists known as sexologists who had devoted their lives to understanding the broad category of sexual desire and its origins. These scientists questioned whether homosexuality was a perversion of normal sexual desire that so many believed and argued against sodomy laws. The existence of such scientists had a role in normalizing lesbian sexual behavior and sexual behavior that wasn't focused around men.⁸ Magazines also depicted a homosexual lifestyle and catered to the female homosexual gaze. A prominent lesbian magazine, *Die Freundin*, was published from 1928 to 1933 in Berlin and highlighted the existence of Lesbian women and the necessity for political recognition of sexuality that was not centered

⁸ Beachy, R. (2010). The German Invention of Homosexuality. *The Journal of Modern History*, 82(4), 801-838. doi:10.1086/656077

around the male gaze.⁹ Along with the emasculation that men felt as a result of the war and dominance of lesbianism in Berlin culture, the war also killed many German men leading to a more female dominated nation in regards to population.¹⁰ The low male population combined with the emasculation that Germany's men felt were sufficient reasoning for men to search for another form of leadership which prized traditional gender roles.

The Nazi Party played on the concern over women gaining more important roles politically and socially, and the effort to revert to men as dominate sex was partially what made the Nazi Party so successful in their campaigning. The Nazis promised a return to traditional values, and as such, they adopted the stance of moral crusaders who saw the return of traditional gender roles as necessary for the health and goodness of the nation. In their view, traditional gender roles could best be defined through the lens of women as mothers and men as warriors or the breadwinners of the family. In this context, masculinity was especially prized within the regime as Nazi leaders needed strong men in order to spread Nazi ideology and protect the Fatherland.

Most importantly, the promise of the return of traditional gender roles included the promise of the return of power to men. German men felt weakened after their defeat in World War I, and Hitler promised to return them to their empowered, superior state that had been achieved before the equality of women. Not only would they be empowered again, but they would also be shaped into a "New Fascist Man." This New Fascist Man created by Hitler was

⁹ Espinaco-Virseda, Angeles. (2004). "I feel that I belong to you" - Subculture, Die Freundin and Lesbian Identities in Weimar Germany". *Spaces of identity: tradition, cultural boundaries & identity formation in Central Europe*. Edmonton: Univ. of Alberta. pp. 83–100.

¹⁰ FacingHistory.org. "Casualties of World War I." Accessed December 8, 2020. <https://www.facinghistory.org/weimar-republic-fragility-democracy/politics/casualties-world-war-i-country-politics-world-war-i>.

not emasculated by the World War I as the self-portrait by Kirchner had suggested, but instead was shaped by the feelings of sacrifice and strength that the war experience provided. The war allowed for the men to embrace the traits of discipline and self-control that all Nazis were required to embody and at the same time unleash the manly aggression and energy through violence. In his study on the New Fascist Man, George Mosse stated that “the needs and hopes of contemporary society as it perceived itself were reflected in the very construction of the male stereotype symbolizing both a dynamic and a restfulness... for it brought into sharp relief the warrior elements of masculinity, even while it attempted to direct and channel manly aggression and energy.”¹¹ The New Fascist Man embodied all elements that a perfect German man should strive toward. Above all, the New Fascist Man must be willing to sacrifice himself for the ideals of the regime. Thus, the New Fascist Man had the true warrior qualities that were needed to encapsulate the concept of manliness and fulfill men’s gender role.

The Nazis also utilized the idea of trenchocracy to establish the dominance of men and masculine values. Trenchocracy emerged after World War I and was based on the idea that something transformative occurred in the trenches of the war.¹² Remembering the war as a uniting experience allowed for soldiers to establish fraternity, as well as, their superiority that they felt as a result of protecting their nation. Men who survived the war were seen as the epitome of manly men who would sacrifice everything for the good of Germany. In this sense, masculinity in the Nazi regime played on the emotions of German men and their actions in WWI to establish the dominance of the male gender role.

¹¹ Mosse, George L. *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*. Studies in the History of Sexuality. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

¹² Morgan, Philip. *Fascism in Europe, 1919-1945*. London: Routledge, 2007.

One role of men that was seen as necessary, but existed in contention with their hypermasculine role was their existence as fathers. Men were essential in helping procreate the superior race, but their role of father contrasted with the warrior aspect of their identity. On one hand, men were needed outside of the home to conquer lands and people, and on the other, fatherhood assumed that men would be needed in the home to teach their sons.¹³ One of the ways that this contention was seen in Nazi life was through the 1945 propaganda film *Kolberg* directed by Viet Harlan. In the film, a German officer battles with choosing between an idealistic girl or the masculine life of fighting for the regime.¹⁴ Ultimately, he chooses to fight for the Fatherland and stay in the masculine environment of war. An alternative balance is offered by George Mosse who states “this tension could be resolved by subordinating women and children to the dominance of the male: women and children had their predetermined place in family life, and the man as activist was filled with a dynamic that, in the service of a higher cause, could not easily be defined to the home.”¹⁵ The delicate balance that was struck was that the father was necessary in contributing to the expansion of the Aryan race, but it was the mother’s role exclusively in the home in which the children would be taught and raised. This balance was possible, because although women were necessary in the pronatalist ideology, they were not needed for the most important cause of protecting the homeland and furthering the spread of Nazi ideology. Thus, the New Fascist man used procreation as a way of fulfilling a masculine role with the caveat that the only role they would play as fathers would be to teach children the ways of the Nazi regime.

¹³ Mosse, George L. *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*. Studies in the History of Sexuality. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

¹⁴ Harlan, Viet dir. *Kolberg*. 1945; Nazi Germany: UFA - Filmkunst GmbH (Herstellungsgruppe).

¹⁵ Mosse, George L. *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*. Studies in the History of Sexuality. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

The profile of Hitler was a prime example of what men should aspire to be as citizens of the Nazi regime. Hitler was a World War I veteran who seemingly fearlessly eradicated threats within Nazi Germany. Events like the Röhm purge established the lengths that Hitler would go to protect the regime.¹⁶ Further, Hitler embodied the spirit of “renewal” and was aggressive in breaking the terms of the Versailles Treaty for the good of the German people.¹⁷ He was seen as selfless for the good of the German citizens, aggressive toward enemies, and held a spirit of promise for the future. Each of these traits were representative of the New Fascist Man, trenchocracy, and the action that a man must take to ensure his manliness and the future of the regime. Additionally, propaganda posters of Hitler often reinforced the image of Hitler as the epitome of masculine Nazi ideology. Heinrich Hoffmann was a photographer and friend of Hitler who often took pictures of Hitler in order to portray a fearless, stoic, manly leader. The picture featured in Figure 2 shows how Hoffmann captured the embodiment of masculine ideals of the regime in Hitler’s posture and expression. Hitler’s attentive gaze looks into the distance as if deep in thought about the future of Germany. As he gazes into the future, Hitler remains stoic and his posture remains upright and manly. His attire denotes an air of business and authority. In such photographs used for propaganda, Hitler embodied the New Fascist Man.

¹⁶ Kershaw, Ian. *The "Hitler Myth": Image and Reality in the Third Reich*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

¹⁷ Kershaw, Ian. *The "Hitler Myth": Image and Reality in the Third Reich*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.



Figure 2. Heinrich Hoffmann, *Profile of Adolf Hitler*, 1935, 62 x 49 cm. (Third Reich Collection; Library of Congress).

Hitler reinforced the necessity of male's gender role by embedding them in the young boys of Nazi Germany through the Hitler Youth. This organization was established by the government and was committed to teaching German boys Nazi ideals. All young Aryan boys were required to join the organization at 10 years-old, and the Hitler Youth focused on fostering the sense of fraternity that was necessary to create masculine soldiers, while emphasizing their necessity to the regime. The *Handbuch für die Schulungsarbeit in der HJ* or the *Handbook for the Schooling of the Hitler Youth* conditioned Aryan boys to believe that they were superior to other races and genders as well as essential to the Nazi cause of ridding the world of the unworthy and creatin the Aryan future. This textbook was translated from German to English in 1938 to show how the Nazis were educating the youth in Nazi ideals. As the preface in the textbook by a former German ambassador, William Dodd stated the book was to teach boys

“how sacred was their Aryan race, how great their ancestors had been and how much of Europe properly belonged to the Führer and his followers.”¹⁸

Because the boys were in the organization to learn masculine Nazi ideals, one of the goals of the Hitler Youth was to make boys in the regime more similar to Hitler. One example of the necessity of youth being more like Hitler can be seen in propaganda posters that recruited the youth. One such poster from 1939 depicts a child in the forefront of the picture looking stoically in the distance, while Hitler is pictured in the background as an overseer of the child (see Fig. 3). The boy seemingly mimics Hitler’s posture and facial expression as the poster’s captions urges “Youth Serve the Leader: All 10-Year-Olds into the Hitler Youth.” Consequently, Hitler Youth found their belonging in traditionally masculine roles of warrior and protector of the regime.



Figure 3. Unknown artist, "Youth Serves the Leader: All 10-Year-Olds into the [Hitler Youth]," 1939. (Library of Congress).

¹⁸ Brennecke, Fritz. *Handbuch für die Schulungsarbeit in der HJ*, trans. Harwood L. Childs, in *The Nazi Primer*, commentary by William E. Dodd (NY: Harper, 1938).

Since manliness was essential to fascist ideology and the regime's goal, challenges to masculinity were prosecuted fiercely. Men who engaged in homosexual acts or who were accused of homosexual acts were branded cowardly and effeminate, so men who engaged in same-sex acts were not able to fulfill their gender role of embodying masculinity and serving as soldiers.¹⁹ The homosexual man was also "useless for normal sexual intercourse," so they were not able to fulfill their role of increasing the birthrate.²⁰ In the Nazi view, a homosexual man was useless for and a threat to the regime, and as such, they were harshly detained and killed.

According to the U.S. Holocaust Museum, 5,000 to 15,000 gay men were interned in concentration camps and branded with a pink triangle.²¹ As seen in Figure 4, the pink triangle had differing levels of severity of persecution; however, even being branded with a simple pink triangle was a death sentence in the camps. Survivor accounts have shown that they were among the most abused groups in the camps and were subjected to "extermination through work" in which they were essentially worked to death. Richard Plant, a German refugee, detailed some of the survival stories of homosexual men that he had encountered in his book *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals*. The horrors of the concentration camps were unparalleled. In addition to beatings, castrations, and public humiliation, Plant even records that "SS physicians carried out pseudo-medical experiments on inmates without their consent and, it should be added, without proper scientific supervision. None of these tests ever brought results of any worth either to medicine or to war technology."²² Gay men in the camps were subjected to

¹⁹ Oosterhuis, Harry. "Medicine, Male Bonding and Homosexuality in Nazi Germany." *Journal of Contemporary History* 32, no. 2 (1997): 187–205.

²⁰ Meisinger, Josef. "Combating Abortion and Homosexuality as a Political Task" April 5-6, 1937. http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1558

²¹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Nazi Persecution of Homosexuals." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed November 26, 2020. <https://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/online-exhibitions/special-focus/nazi-persecution-of-homosexuals>.

²² Plant, Richard. *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals*. New York, NY: H. Holt, 1988.

horrors beyond comprehension as a punishment for being homosexual (or being accused of being homosexual).

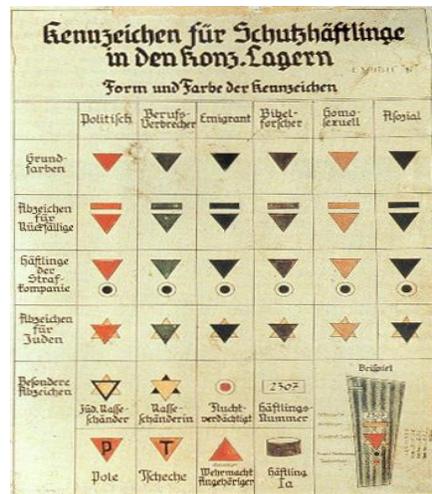


Figure 4. A chart of prisoner markings used in German concentration camps. Dachau, Germany, 1938-1942, (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).

Although males in same-sex relationships were persecuted and killed at concentration camps, it is important to note that this was typically seen as a last resort. Because of the Nazi belief that German Aryan men were the ideal, superior human and possessed such a privileged role in Nazi Germany, it was essential for German leaders to salvage these men from what many doctors at the time saw as a supposed socially-induced and curable disease of homosexuality.

Another form of torture, perhaps less deadly than concentration camps, was reeducation of supposed male homosexuals. Prominent researchers at the time believed that homosexuality could be caused socially, and was thus, curable. One such researcher was Kraft von Ebbing, an Austrian psychiatrist who was instrumental in providing credible (or credible at the time) research in order to describe the origins of homosexuality. His views during the regime are

succinctly described in his book, *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Von Ebbing detailed case studies that took place during the reign of Nazi Germany and proposed that there were different forms of homosexuality, some innate and some which were caused socially; however, despite the different origins of homosexuality, he held the view that homosexuality was curable.²³ Von Ebbing's view was widely shared by scientists in the Nazi regime. Otmar von Verschuer, a prominent German scientist on heredity who was trusted by regime officials, even remarked that homosexuality could be caused by biology or "seduction, imitation, and habit."²⁴ The reason that this view was so endorsed by the Nazi regime was because a cure to homosexuality would mean that these perfect German men were salvageable. This view detailed that homosexuals Germans were often seduced by others and as such, majority of homosexual men only needed to be reeducated.²⁵

Some German officials took issue with this broadened definition of homosexuality and sought to eliminate homosexual relationships and acts as they posed a threat to the regime. Criminal police inspector and SS-member Josef Meisinger, branded homosexuals as enemies of the state. In one speech given on April 5, 1937, entitled "Combating Abortion and Homosexuality as a Political Task," Meisinger detailed to civil servants in Berlin why homosexuality was a public health crisis and treacherous to the state. He stated, "since as we know, homosexuals are useless for normal sexual intercourse, homosexuality also has an effect on young blood and will eventually lead to a drop in the birth rate. The result is a general weakening of the nation's strength of the kind that threatens not least a nation's military

²³ Krafft-Ebing, R. von. *Psychopathia Sexualis: A Medico-Forensic Study*. 1st unexpurgated ed. in English. New York: Putnam, 1965.

²⁴ Oosterhuis, Harry. "Medicine, Male Bonding and Homosexuality in Nazi Germany." *Journal of Contemporary History* 32, no. 2 (1997): 187–205.

²⁵ "Oosterhuis, Harry. "Medicine, Male Bonding, and Homosexuality in the Nazi Regime" 192.

capacity.”²⁶ Men who participated in same-sex activity were thus seen as feminized and unable to carry out their duty of creating a nation full of fascist men. Delineating homosexual men as enemies of the state had various influences through the entire Nazi regime. One deadly example of this delineation was the Röhm purge on June 30, 1934, in which Hitler ordered the execution of his perceived enemies. Perhaps the most notable victim was the chief of staff of the SA – Ernst Röhm. Röhm was a known homosexual, and to justify the murders to the German people, Hitler cited the fact that he had moral reasons to protect the people from “sexual deviants.”²⁷

Punishment for homosexuals only escalated from reeducation and a singular purge of enemies of the state. One year after the Röhm purge, Germany adopted paragraph 175 of the Criminal code in which homosexuality was officially punishable by prison.²⁸ The code stipulates that “a man who commits indecency with another man, or allows himself to be misused indecently, will be punished with prison” and offers further subsections on the punishment of men who seduce other men into committing indecent acts. A key element paragraph of 175 was that the regime’s persecution of homosexuals only applied to men.

Another reason that male homosexuality was such a threat to the regime was that it undermined the male-bonding experience that was necessary to create a tight-knit nation of soldiers. In fact, the threat of homosexuality in the SS and police was substantial enough for Hitler to decree an alternative punishment to homosexuals in those services – death. On November 15, 1941, Hitler ordered the deaths of “any member of the SS and Police who

²⁶ Meisinger, Josef. “Combating Abortion and Homosexuality as a Political Task” April 5-6, 1937. http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1558

²⁷ Koonz, Claudia. *The Nazi Conscience*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003.

²⁸ From *Reich Ministry of the Interior*, Reichgesetzblatt, Part I (1935). Germany Criminal Code Paragraph 175. US Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection. <https://www.ushmm.org/information/press/press-kits/traveling-exhibitions/nazi-persecution-of-homosexuals/article-6-indecency-between-men>

commits unnatural acts with another man or lets himself be abused for unnatural acts.”²⁹ The threat to masculinity and to the unity of soldiers was evidence enough to condemn men in service positions to death. This decree only escalated further and led to the imprisonment and death of those in concentration camps.

In contrast to the privileging of masculinity that existed within the regime, German women held a less important role. Numerous speeches throughout Adolph Hitler’s reign showcased the importance of making sure women embodied a subservient role to men and the necessity of privileging masculinity over femineity. High-ranking Nazi Joseph Goebbels who was the Reich Minister of Propaganda delivered one such speech entitled “German Women.” This speech was given at an exhibition on women’s role in Nazi Germany a short six weeks after Hitler took power in 1933. The essence of the exhibit and the necessity of reversion of women back to a subservient role is captured in the speech. Goebbels stated that “those things that belong to the man must remain his. This includes politics and the military” and that “the best place for women to serve her people is in her marriage, in the family, in motherhood.”³⁰ In Goebbels’ view, women’s political gains during the Weimar Republic were a sign of immorality, because German men were the only ones capable of making political decisions. Publicly, the return of women to home-making would prevent the decline of morality in Germany that resulted from liberal values and the masculinization of women that occurred during the Weimar Era with the “New Woman.” The real goal of the regime rested in the advancement in the birthrate, which was necessary create more boy children who could fight for the regime and advance the superior

²⁹ German National Order. November 15, 1941. <https://alphahistory.com/nazigermany/hitler-orders-death-sentences-for-homosexuals/>

³⁰ Goebbels, Josef. “German Women.” German History Documents, 1933. <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb55.htm>.

German race. Hitler himself prescribed the role of motherhood to women and nothing more. On September 18, 1934, in a speech given to the National Socialist Women's League, also known as the women's wing of the Nazi party, he stated, "the program of our National Socialist Women's movement has in reality but one single point, and that point is the child..."³¹ Increasing the birthrate was women's sole role in the regime, and as such, the role of the woman was less important than men's dynamic masculine role.

These speeches endorsing the return to traditional gender roles were not only given by Nazi leaders, but also by Nazi women themselves. Erna Günther, a Nazi woman, penned an article, titled "We Women in the Struggle for Germany's Renewal" that was featured in the magazine *Frauen Warte* in 1934. The purpose of the article was to establish women's role in the regime, and as such, Günther argued that women took positions that belonged to men based on "false ambition" and must return to their natural duties of motherhood and raising children.³² Women's return to this traditional role was important, because it ensured the renewal of German spirit and morality through the creation of a role for women in which they did not impinge on the importance of masculinity in the regime. As a Nazi woman, Günther understood that masculinity was prized more than femininity and women's roles.

Propaganda played a large role in making the image of a mother tending to her child concrete and establishing the father as a protector of the nation and the family. Figure 5 shows a 1936 recruitment poster created by the NSDAP and depicts an idealized German family with the mother caring for one of her many children and the protective masculine arms of the father

³¹ Hitler's Speech to the National Socialist Women's League. September 8, 1934. http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=2330

³² Erna Günther, "Wir Frauen im Kampf um Deutschlands Erneuerung," *NS Frauen Warte*, (2), #17 (25 February 1934), p. 507. <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/fw2-17.htm>

surrounding the family. The caption states “The NSDAP [Nazi Party] protects the people. Your fellow comrades need your advice and help, so join the local party organization.” This caption urges support of the Nazi Party, from men in particular, in order to keep Germany protected and Aryan.³³ The family depicted was to be seen as the German ideal – strong father, attentive mother, and the existence of multiple children. The father’s arms wrapped around the family showcase the masculine, protective role that the father played in the family. In contrast, the mother shows her role as caretaker.

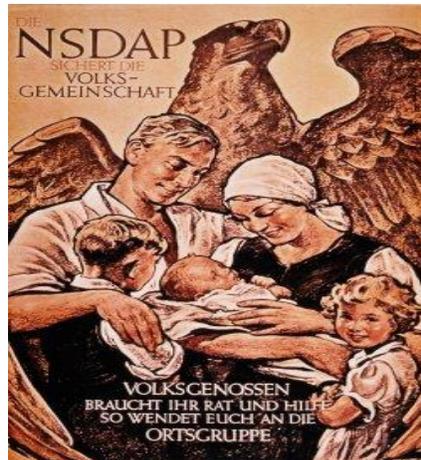


Figure 5. Nazi recruitment Poster, 1936. (facinghistory.org)

If women needed an incentive other than their national duty, Hitler also offered national recognition of the women who fulfilled their patriotic duty. One such recognition was the “Cross of Honor for the German Mother” (see Fig. 6). The medal was awarded by the NSDAP in Hitler’s name for the first time in 1939 on Mother’s Day to deserving mothers across Germany.³⁴ Awarded participants were mothers who were recommended by the Nazi party of government

³³ Unknown Artist. Nazi Propaganda Poster from 1936. <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/gallery/propaganda-posters>

³⁴ “The Cross of Honor for the German Mother’: Three-Tiered Medal for Mothers with Four or More Children.” German History Documents, 1939. http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=2044.

officials. In 1939, around 3 million women qualified for the honor by having four or more children. The Cross of Honor was divided into three tiers to incentivize bearing more children: level three (bronze medal) was awarded to women with four or five children, level two (silver medal) was awarded for six or seven children, and level one (gold medal) was awarded for eight or more children.³⁵ This award for the German mother was further proof that women were only necessary in their role for reproduction, and as such, they were to be subservient to masculine ideals.



Figure 6. Gold Cross of Honor for the German Mother. Awarded by the Nazi Regime, 1939, (germanhistorydocs.org).

Because women's roles were less important than men's, there was less enforcement of women's gender roles. While the Hitler Youth was mandatory, institutes such as the Reich Brides' and Housewives' School at Husbäke, existed solely to inform women of their places as

³⁵ “The Cross of Honor for the German Mother’: Three-Tiered Medal for Mothers with Four or More Children.” German History Documents, 1939. http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=2044.

wives and homemakers, and attendance was voluntary but encouraged. A report from the school in the 1940 magazine for women *Frauen Warte* showed how these schools sought to educate women. Women who once had jobs went through the schooling for brides and housewives and subsequently, realized the importance of satisfying their husbands and ensuring that their homes were taken care of properly. As the magazine stated, “the future families they would have as wives and mothers were always at the center of the program.”³⁶ Not only did the magazine highlight the importance of women staying home and tending to their duties, the report also makes sure to mention how the housework women are taught at the camp was a nice break from the “strenuous jobs” that they once held.³⁷ Aryan women were held up on a pedestal as being pure, while Aryan men were doing the necessary and unpleasant work outside of the home. Thus, the school for brides and housewives reinforced the traditional attribution that women should reside in the home and be subservient to their husband.

Because masculinity was privileged during the regime, and femineity was largely disregarded, the persecution of female same-sex activity was far less severe. Contrary to the way men in same-sex relationships were treated within the Nazi regime, women were somewhat given leniency around their same-sex attraction. In the same speech that Meisinger branded homosexuals an enemy of the state, Meisinger stated that “to our view the danger [of lesbianism] to the nation’s survival is here not at all as great as in the case of homosexual men.”³⁸ He later went on to detail that “girls who are active as lesbians are far from the being abnormally inclined. If such girls later have the opportunity to assume the purpose given them by nature,

³⁶ “An Illustrated Report from the Reich Brides’ and Housewives’ School at Husbäke in Oldenburg,” *NS Frauen Warte*, 1940. <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/fw8-22b.htm> (accessed September 16, 2020).

³⁷ “An Illustrated Report from the Reich Brides’ and Housewives’ School at Husbäke in Oldenburg,” *NS Frauen Warte*, 1940. <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/fw8-22b.htm> (accessed September 16, 2020).

³⁸ Meisinger, Josef. “Combating Abortion and Homosexuality as a Political Task” April 5-6, 1937. http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1558

they will certainly not decline.”³⁹ Lesbianism was thus the product of societal creation, because of the lack of available men after the first World War, lack of male acquaintances and stern upbringings. An women’s issue much more salient to Meisinger was the combating of abortion because of its detrimental effects on the birthrate. Thus, women were seen in terms of their reproductive ability, and since lesbianism did not affect a woman’s reproductive ability, it was not seen as a threat.

Further confirmation of dismissal of female same sex activity is seen in Samuel Huneke’s 2019 essay on Lesbian existence in Berlin, “the Duplicity of Tolerance.” He proposed that lesbian existence was invalidated by the regime because it wasn’t seen as a real sexuality, but rather a deviance that could be fixed by introducing the “lesbian” to more men. “Because women could still fulfill their relationship with their gender role (i.e. having children), their same-sex sexuality was not perceived as a threat”⁴⁰ to the pronatalist policies that Nazi leaders espoused as the primary role for women. However, lesbianism was perceived as a threat to the purity or the morality of the regime, which led to Gestapo visits and threats, but no further persecution. This argument builds on previous research and presents new information regarding how female sexuality in the Nazi regime has been viewed. One of the major additions he proposed was that invalidation itself was a form of persecution. Although not physical, invalidation of one’s sexuality was able to cause mental anguish and discredit those in female same-sex relationships’ feelings. So, while female same-sex behavior was subject to Gestapo visits and invalidation, it

³⁹ Meisinger, Josef. “Combating Abortion and Homosexuality as a Political Task” April 5-6, 1937. http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1558

⁴⁰ Huneke S.C. “The Duplicity of Tolerance: Lesbian Experiences in Nazi Berlin.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 54, no. 1 (2019): 30–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009417690596>.

did not require the harsh persecution of concentration camps and death that male-same sex behavior elicited.

Laurie Marhoefer also offers an exploration of traditional gender roles in the regime and the privileging of masculinity. She investigates a microhistory of one individual who challenged the traditional role of women through cross-dressing and lesbianism in her essay “Lesbianism, transvestitism, and the Nazi State.” In her investigation, she singled out the life of Ilse Totzke who regularly dressed as a man and had female lovers.⁴¹ Interestingly, Totzke’s cross-dressing was the subject of numerous denunciations from their neighbors, but the Gestapo did not further their investigations in Totzke’s sexuality or cross-dressing and instead focused on any connections to Jewish people that Totzke might have had. Ultimately, Totzke was prosecuted for their connections to Jewish women and not for their sexuality or gender although it was considered deviant. This exploration of Totzke’s gender identity shows that masculinity was privileged by the regime, and if Totzke could successfully transform into a man, they were able to live relatively freely in public. Because masculinity was so important to Nazis and femininity was largely disregarded, their transgression of a traditional female role was not worth the time or resources of the regime.

Because Nazism was a primarily masculine ideology, masculinity was prized within the regime. Males were given the role of soldier for the homeland, protector of the family, and everything that being in the public sphere encompassed. In contrast, women were largely ignored within the regime and their only role was procreation of the master race. Since masculinity played such an important role in Nazi Germany, deviation from masculine ideals through male

⁴¹ Marhoefer, Laurie. “Lesbianism, Transvestitism, and the Nazi State: A Microhistory of a Gestapo Investigation, 1939-1943.” *The American Historical Review* 121 (2016): 1167–95.

homosexual behavior was punished severely. Conversely, since women occupied a smaller role in the regime, female same-sex behavior was largely ignored and invalidated by Nazi officials. Thus, the privileging of masculinity was deadly for homosexual men under the Nazi regime, while women who engaged in same-sex behavior were given leniency. By looking at the differing importance of gender roles within the regime, we can see a glimpse of why male homosexual behavior was so threatening to the regime, and as such, we can begin to understand the different persecution that male homosexuals and female homosexuals faced.