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Gabriel Klapholz

Yale University

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From “Pseudowomen” to the “Third Sex:”
Situating Antisemitism and Homophobia in Nazi Germany

Gabriel Klapholz

Yale University

Abstract

In this article, I examine how Nazi antisemitism and homophobia built upon one another, employing parallel narratives about femininity, foreignness, and threats to the nation state. I explore how early historiography of the Nazi period links the two phenomena as part of a single project, variations on the same theme of Nazi hatred. Ultimately, however, I work to challenge the earlier historiographical narrative and illuminate the ways in which Nazism treated Jews and gays very differently. In order to do so, I examine the two main strands of German sexology at the time, that of Magnus Hirschfeld and that of Adolf Brand and his intellectual society, the Gemeinschaft der Eigenen. I argue that because the Nazis responded to Brand’s homosocial ‘masculinist’ approach rather than Hirschfeld’s theory of the ‘third sex,’ they conceived of homosexuality as a contagious plague rather than an inherent racial defect like Jewishness.

Magnus Hirschfeld was a pioneering German sexologist and advocate for “homosexual rights” in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. As the Nazis rose to power in Weimar Germany, Hirschfeld came to symbolize everything the Nazis despised: He was a leftist, queer, an urban intellectual, and a Jew. Hirschfeld was beaten in the streets after a lecture in Munich, excluded from the academic world, and eventually the target of government vandalism when the Nazis destroyed his Institute for Sexology in Berlin in May 1933, three months after Hitler became Chancellor (Haeberle 270-273). He provides an example of the overlapping phenomena of antisemitism and homophobia that characterized the culture and politics of Nazi Germany. These two forces worked in unison, relying on interconnected and mutually reinforcing historical and sociological tropes. And yet, the story is more complicated. In many ways, the antisemitism-homophobia analogy is insufficient, and Nazi attitudes towards queers diverged sharply from their attitudes towards Jews.

In pre-World War II Germany, antisemitism and homophobia shared a network of tropes that allowed the idealized image of the blond, muscular, Aryan Nazi to solidify its cultural and political hegemony. In much of the early historiography, the narratives of effeminacy, foreignness, and danger to the state that antisemitism and homophobia shared led historians to the understanding that in Nazi Germany, “antisemitism and homophobia were part of the same program” (Haeberle 273).

Antisemitism had long rooted itself in the conception that Jewish men were “pseudowomen,” relying on the notion that Jewish tradition inverted gender roles (Boyarin 156). The “ideal male” was a “Torah scholar” whose power resided in the “House of Study” (Boyarin 156, 161). Meanwhile, the woman’s rightful realm was “the estate of getting and spending,” the locus of power in bourgeois society (Boyarin 161). Even as the “‘modernizing’ Jews of central Europe” worked to reverse the gender dynamics and impose secular
notions of masculinity and femininity (Boyarin 184-185), the stereotype continued. The early historiography of Nazi homophobia documents a similar narrative of effeminacy. Gays were depicted as weak and emasculated, the antithesis of “might makes right” — a motto that served as the National Socialist Party’s response to a gay rights organization’s request for a statement on homosexuality during an early election campaign (Haeberle 280).

Another central overlapping trope in Nazi antisemitism and homophobia was the foreignness of Jews and gays, their position as external to the nation state. As early as the Middle Ages, Western Europeans enshrined the idea of the “Wandering Jew,” embodied best in the peddler, who was expelled from his home and made to suffer as part of his punishment for not recognizing the “true Messiah” (Curtis 323). Jonathan Freedman looks at “the Jew” as a social type whose central characteristic was his indecipherability, his inability to fit into any of the “emerging nineteenth-century categories” such as nationality (Freedman 336). In European antisemitic culture of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Jews were perceived as a “self-enclosed ‘colony,’” or a “nation within a nation,” and were thus inherently guilty of treason (Freedman 339).

But Freedman also reads this conception of Jewishness as interlinked with notions of sexual perversion, namely in the writings of Marcel Proust, who in his famous À la Recherche de Temps Perdu, “shuttled the taint of degeneracy between two out-groups as a way of distancing [himself],” responding to the fear that he was “contained by either one, if not both” (Freedman 340). Both the Jew and the queer formed “communities within communities” that in turn threatened the edifice of mainstream national culture (Freedman 340). They both then found themselves in a closet, “constantly on guard at having their identities named in public,” and — as a result — ridiculed for their supposed secrecy and mystery (Freedman 347).

Ultimately, because “the state was an exclusively masculine domain,” a “homosexual man” was perpetually situated outside of the nation (Bruns 88-89). Homosexuality and “national belonging” in Germany in particular were incompatible (Bruns 98). German fears reared their head in 1934 with the overthrow of SA leader Ernst Röhm, who was condemned for mobilizing his “homosexual cliques” to take over the Nazi regime (Micheler 97).

This narrative of national threat was a third point of overlap between antisemitism and homophobia. Jews and gays were not just separate from the state, but spelled its destruction. Namely, both groups represented a biological threat to Germany’s procreative capacity. For Jews, this threat operated both in the racial danger they posed to Aryan Germany — the Nuremberg laws outlawed marriage between Jews and gentiles (Herzog 17) — and also in the ideas they supposedly propagated within German society. Das schwarze Korps, one of the most popular weeklies in the Third Reich, insisted that Nazism was protecting marriage and the family against Jewish “attacks” (Herzog 10-11). Jews were seen as advocates for familial collapse. Jewish men were commonly associated with “masturbating women,” and the ritual of circumcision was seen as a form of “castration.” They were the polar opposite of the procreative virility that the Nazis wanted in their men (Garber 32).

A parallel trope developed around homosexual men. One of the central problems the Reich had with gay men was that they undermined the “ideology of reproduction at all costs” (Haeberle 281). The Nazis created a special office called the “Reichs-Center for the Fight Against Homosexuality and Abortion,” both of which posed the same problem. These reproductive anxieties also played into the age-old conflation of homosexuality and pedophilia: gays were a threat to the very German children they could not produce. In 1934, Hitler wrote to the new SA chief of staff Viktor Lutze: “I want every mother to be able to send her son to the SA, the party, and [the
Hitler Youth] without fearing that he might there be debased in his manners or morals,” referring to the prospect of a pedophilic encounter (Micheler 107).

In the face of all of this overlap, scholars have often seen homophobia and antisemitism of the Nazi era as a single category, as part of a broad Nazi contempt for everything that threatened their fascist vision. After all, the Nazis considered the field of sexology, a center of queer intellectualism and advocacy, to be “Jewish science” (Haeberle 276). And sexological work was shut down in part “because it was largely conducted by Jews” (Haeberle 273). Moreover, antisemitism and homophobia produced very similar forms of state-sanctioned terror. In 1935, the Nazis decided to send “race [defilers]” — Jews or non-Jews who slept with one another — to concentration camps while simultaneously instituting Paragraph 175 to criminalize homosexual activity (Haeberle 275). The ensuing witch-hunts to find Jewish-gentile couples were strikingly similar to those conducted to root out homosexuals (Herzog 17). Ultimately, both Jews and queers would fall victim to the final solution, their emaciated bodies would be differentiated by nothing more than a yellow star or a pink triangle.

And so, the tall task remains: how can Nazi antisemitism and homophobia be disentangled? As Janet Jakobsen asks, “Do Jewish and queer become the same simply because both are different?” (Jakobsen 64).

Jakobsen calls for an alternative reading of history. She explains that the problem with all analogies is that the first term must always be “less known” than the second, “which must structure the analogy” (Jakobsen 69). For example, when we compare homophobia to antisemitism, homophobia relies on the fixity of antisemitism in order to make more sense through the comparison. We rely on having an “object of the discourse called the thème,” here homophobia, and a second term called the “phore,” here antisemitism, that allows for the “[metaphoric] transfer [of meaning].” When we create an equivalence through an analogy, the thème is only understood relative to the phore, demanding that the phore remain static to ground the thème (Jakobsen 69-70). Thus, Jakobsen argues, analogies are insufficient analytical tools, necessarily flattening the second term, the phore, and preventing both concepts from being understood in their full and shifting complexity at the same time.

Jakobsen instead calls for a “relational reading” of history that demands that both “terms remain present” at all times and in an “active relationship” (Jakobsen 80). In order to do this, one must “think of ‘Jews’ and ‘homosexuals’ as twins, as different persons with historical ties that enable them to stand in for one another but also to choose whether or not to act in concert” (Jakobsen 80). Through this conceptualization, each group retains not only its respective complexity, but also its autonomy: its ability to choose to act with the other group, or not.

By examining the ways that Jewish sexologists treated — that is, related to — queerness and non-Jewish queer sexologists treated — or related to — Jewishness, I hope to both carry out Jakobsen’s “relational reading” as well as give back autonomy to the actors within the drama of history. This methodology can help disentangle the categories of homophobia and antisemitism, of queer and of Jew, and explain why Nazi Germany ultimately treated these two groups so differently.

There were two main strands of German sexology in the early 20th Century, that of Hirschfeld and that of Adolf Brand. Hirschfeld defined homosexuality as an inherent identity characteristic of a distinct minority that could not ‘transmit’ its same-sex attraction to straight society (Oosterhuis 246). He posited that homosexuality could only be found in a biological “third sex,” one that contained a mixture of “manliness and femininity” (Oosterhuis 245).

For Hirschfeld, this theory was emancipatory. He insisted that because gays were a well-defined minority, they
deserved equal rights as such (Oosterhuis 245). Committed to the idea of “per scientiam ad justiam” (through science to justice), Hirschfeld believed that scientific and psychological research about the queer as a category would guarantee tolerance from straight society, legitimizing queer identity (Oosterhuis 246).

Hirschfeld was far from what we would call a gay rights activist today. He became obsessed with his own scientific approach to understanding queerness, and even applauded Viennese doctor E. Steinach when he tried to ‘cure’ homosexual men via castration in 1920. For Hirschfeld, the research seemed to confirm his biological “third sex” theory (Oosterhuis 247). And yet, Hirschfeld still had serious political understanding: He feared that any social, non-biological conception of homosexuality would alienate potential (male) heterosexual allies, convincing them that they could ‘catch’ homosexuality. Hirschfeld made clear that friendship and sexual love between men were two very different things (Oosterhuis 245-246).

Scholars have debated the degree to which Hirschfeld’s Jewishness impacted his study of sexuality. Within a Nazi intellectual climate rooted in notions of Aryan biological superiority over a distinct Jewish minority (Longerich 30), Jewish political organizing in the 1930s abandoned earlier “integrationist aspirations” (Kaplan 12). As early as September 1933, Jewish organizations banded together to form the Central Organization of German Jews (Rtichsvertretung der deutschen Juden) to protect the interests of the community as a singular ethnic whole (Kaplan 16-17). Hirschfeld’s views on biological gay minority status and his call to accept queers as such bear marked similarities to liberal Jewish minority organizing. In this sense, Hirschfeld’s “was a classic liberal stance” that “linked the interests of minority groups” in attempt to portray difference as a universal, natural, and harmless feature of human life (Mancini xiv).

But the timeline of Hirschfeld’s life reveals that German racial theory had a much more complicated and shifting influence on his conceptions of sexuality. In 1914, Hirschfeld published a 1,000-page work Male and Female Homosexuality and made only a single mention of “Judentum,” or Jewry (Bauer 244). But after the destruction of his Institute in 1933, Hirschfeld turned his attention towards authoring Racism, his final work that — according to the Oxford English Dictionary — helped introduce the term into the English language (Bauer 245). In Racism, Hirschfeld approached race very differently to how he approached sexuality. For Hirschfeld, the biological nature of sexuality and the existence of the “universal homosexual” across different racial groups proved that the concept of race was nothing more than “custom or convention” and was entirely non-biological (Bauer 246). In other words, Hirschfeld used the biological minority status of queers to “jettison” the idea that Jews and Aryans were in any way distinct (Bauer 245).

Hirschfeld’s views on homosexuality stood in stark contrast to those of Adolf Brand and his contemporaries, Benedict Friedlaender and Hans Blüher. These German sexologists formulated the so-called ‘masculinist’ approach, positing a fluid culture of male homosociality that would strengthen masculinity through same-sex relationships. Brand sharply disagreed with Hirschfeld’s commitment to the Enlightenment ideals of rationalism and humanism, instead focusing on the romantic concept of Kultur: the unique “aesthetic and spiritual values…rooted in the German soul” (Oosterhuis 242). Brand latched onto the German sociological category of Gemeinschaft, natural close-knit communities, in opposition to Gesellschaft, lonely urban industrial life like that of Berlin-based Hirschfeld (Oosterhuis 242). But Brand’s associates soon pushed the masculinist movement away from this anarchist vision and into a more overtly nationalist one.

The masculinists drew heavily from a 19th Century German nationalism that already “radiated homoeroticism” —
with the nation embodied in the “powerfully built, well-proportioned nude male” — and that would continue to play a central role in the Nazi era (Oosterhuis 243). The Nazis had long faced accusations that the upper echelons of the party were made up of homosexuals. This had been the subject of a leftist propaganda campaign by German exiles after Hitler seized power in 1933 (Pursell 113). The accusations rested in part on the fact that the Nazis believed in the ideal of the Männerbund (“alliance of men”), an all-male network of German leaders and statesmen. They also used “strong and healthy male physiques to symbolize national strength,” obsessing over Richard Wagner’s depiction of “male comradeship as the essence of national vigor” (Pursell 127).

Nazi art and propaganda did not focus on family and heterosexual reproduction as much as it did on the man himself. Because “fatherhood was not a primary image,” heterosexual activity was rare in Nazi aesthetics. The male nude thus became the “Achilles heel in Nazi rhetoric about the body,” as the party was in a constant effort to fend off suspicion (Pursell 130).

Brand’s organization, Gemeinschaft der Eigenen (“The Society of the Self-Determined”), not only drew from a German nationalism that was deeply masculine and homoerotic, but also helped shape this very perspective, serving as instrumental figures in the nationalist movement (Oosterhuis 243). They had been the ones to conceive of the idea of the Männerbund, which was strongest when its members were bound together in mind and body (Bruns 93). The Männerbund was intended to supersede the bourgeois investment in family, encouraging men to be less emotionally connected to their homes — and to their wives who were forced to remain there (Oosterhuis 244). Perhaps most importantly, Brand rejected Hirschfeld’s biological conception of homosexuality: He saw homosexuality as a form of social expression rather than an inherited characteristic — it could be shared, developed, and promoted among men (Oosterhuis 246).

But Gemeinschaft der Eigenen’s theories soon developed an overtly racial tone, too. Ironically, it was the Jewish sexologist Benedict Friedländer who first argued that “homosexuals were indispensable for the survival and progress of the race” (Bruns 91). But Hans Blüher took Friedländer’s ideas even further. Credited with coining the term Männerbund, Blüher associated the ‘weak’ and ‘effeminate’ homosexuals with “the Jewish race” (Bruns 93). Facing accusations that he himself was a Jew due to his ties with Sigmund Freud and Hirschfeld, Blüher insisted on his own “racial purity and [that of] certain types of [masculine] homosexuals” (Bruns 93). He saw the effeminate man as racially broken, the product of “Jewish-liberal degeneration” (Bruns 95). Despite Hirschfeld’s protest, Blüher’s ideology of masculine homosexuality would make room for later characters such as SA leader Ernst Röhm, perhaps the archetypal gay Nazi (Bruns 96). It was not a homosexual’s homosexuality that made him effeminate, but rather something else that was racially degenerate, or Jewish. In this sense, Blüher claimed that homosexuality could be used and shared to enhance the race and distance it from the womanliness of the Jews.

These two strands of sexology offer insight into how Jews and queers related to one another in the lead-up to Nazism. While Hirschfeld made room for parallels between Jews and queers as minorities, the masculinists became overtly antisemitic, weaponizing German homosociality against Jews in the process. In fact, it was one’s status as gay — and thus supremely masculine — that made one not Jewish.

From the beginning of Hitler’s political career, Nazi antisemitism sought to move beyond emotion and instead establish “an antisemitism of reason” — in Hitler’s words — and place the hatred of Jews on “racial, scientific footing” (Steinweis 8). Nazi intellectuals funneled ideas down into both
Educated German society through books and periodicals and uneducated Germany society through anti-Jewish propaganda films and speeches (Steinweis 14-15). Ultimately, the focus on Jewish blood and the immutable racial characteristics that made Jews both physically and morally abhorrent served as the bedrock of Nazi ideology and later policy, as “the basic aim of the Nazi movement was a racially homogenous national community (Volksgemeinschaft)” (Longerich 5). Not only did Jews inspire all of the ideologies that Hitler and the Nazis detested — communism, socialism, pluralism, liberalism, and democracy — but they also were “locked in a life-and-death struggle” with Germany that could only end in one side’s total annihilation (Kaplan 16).

The “relational reading” of Hirschfeld, Brand, Friedlaender, and Blüher clarifies how Nazi homophobia was in fact very different from this antisemitism. The Nazis responding most directly to the masculinist narrative, seeing it as a greater threat to Nazism than Hirschfeld in that it essentially diagnosed the culture of homosociality that already dominated the party. In a vigorous effort to defend their version of the Männerbund — the exclusively male social circle that made up the basis of Nazi life from the Hitler Youth to the SS — the Nazis attacked Brand’s glorified homoeroticism, namely because it was so frighteningly close to the Germany they already built. Ultimately, because the masculinists distinguished between the categories of Jew and gay — the racially effeminate and the homosocial masculine — Nazi antisemitism had very different characteristics from the regime’s homophobia. Writers like Brand and Blüher “in…their idolization of virile masculinity” may have “helped to create even more homophobic panic” (Pursell 137). Masculine homosexuals were more dangerous to the Nazis because they were “more elusive,” endangering “the entire social construction of sexual difference” (Pursell 137).

Nazi antisemitism was a zero-sum game of racial conflict that culminated — for reasons historians disagree on — in the state project of extermination. But in choosing to respond to Brand’s narrative, the Nazis did not conceive of homosexuality as an inherent or fixed characteristic like Jewishness. Rather, they saw it as a disease or plague that could be spread. Hitler believed that ancient Greece had collapsed because of the “infectious activity” of homosexuality, which could reach even “the best and most masculine natures.” The result of this perspective was that Nazi officials believed that men could be cured of their homosexuality, that is, “re-educat[ed].” Only two percent of the men the regime found guilty of homosexual acts were considered “incorrigible.” The rest were “seduced” (Oosterhuis 249).

Johannes Heinrich Schultz, the premier Nazi psychiatrist on homosexuality, declared that the “theory of hereditarily determined homosexuality” — Hirschfeld’s theory — did not apply to at least “four-fifths” of homosexuals. Because the Nazis feared the potential explosion of a “homosexual epidemic,” they targeted men suspected of being gay without hesitation (Oosterhuis 250). Thus, homophobia was not racial and blood-related in the same way that antisemitism was. The state could ‘cure’ you of being gay but it could not ‘cure’ you of being a Jew. Jewishness pertained to a race that needed to be eliminated, while gayness was a disease that even the most Aryan of men could catch.
In this paper, I have explored the deep similarities running through antisemitic and homophobic Nazi discourses. This overlap has led scholars to blur the two phenomena and to perceive them as manifestations of a single, flat Nazi ideology: hatred of the “Other,” the “queer,” the “Jew.” In detaching my own reading of the history from this model, and instead looking at how Jews related to queerness and how queers related to Jewishness, I aimed to expose the differences in how Nazis conceptualized Jews and queers. Nazi homophobia operated as a direct response to antisemitic queer sexologists who, as independent and autonomous historical actors, chose not to act in concert with Jews.

ENDNOTES


Kaplan, Marion A. *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany*. Oxford University Press, 1998.


