

Discrepant Oppression: Lesbian Women's Existence during the National Socialist Period in Germany

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Abstract:

This research focuses on the oppression and existence of lesbian women during the National Socialist period of German history. This research also places emphasis on the importance of incorporating a lens of gender and sexuality to the study of history. This research primarily draws upon the life stories of lesbian women collected by Claudia Schoppmann, a historian of German women. This research also draws upon National Socialist propaganda and government documents. Most prior scholarship on gender and sexuality under National Socialism and the Holocaust does not include the experiences and persecution of lesbian women at all. This lack of inclusion undermines the scholarship on gender and sexuality under National Socialism and the Holocaust and also contributes to the delegitimization and erasure of the existence and memory of lesbian women in history.

Introduction

The late nineteenth century brought a wave of developments to scientific research and sexology in Germany, particularly male homosexuality. Since its unification in 1871, the German Empire had had a law criminalizing sexual encounters between two men. This law, called Paragraph 175, was contested from the end of the nineteenth century until the end of the Weimar Period in the early twentieth century. According to Edward Ross Dickinson, author of *Sex, Freedom, and Power in Imperial Germany, 1880-1914*, a variety of social and scientific developments contributed to the rise of the homosexual emancipation movement in Germany.¹ Various scientists, doctors, psychiatrists, researchers, and organizers helped lay these foundations. The movement gained further momentum after the First World War, as Germany's first democracy

ushered in a period of sexual liberation, particularly in Berlin.

However, once the National Socialist regime came into power, much of the social prosperity of the Weimar Republic disappeared. Homosexual legal emancipation was ended. Gay men and lesbian women lost their vital social connections as well as their ability to organize and form resistance. The National Socialist Regime spoke out against degenerate and lewd sexuality and enacted restrictive policies, such as adding harsher penalties for gay men in Paragraph 175. The National Socialist Regime's focus was primarily on gay men, while lesbian women's identities and sexual practices were invalidated on the basis that they were not seen as a particular threat. Policies like Paragraph 175 may not have singled out lesbian women in the same way it did gay men, but lesbian women indeed suffered because of their identity.

¹ Edward Ross Dickinson, "Homosexual Rights." In *Sex, Freedom, and Power in Imperial Germany: 1880 - 1914* (New York:

Cambridge U, 2014), 152.

This research primarily seeks to place women, specifically lesbian women, into the narrative of sexuality in German history as a whole. This research is unique because recent scholarship on homosexuality during the National Socialist Period, and German history in general, focuses primarily on gay men. The scholarly literature that exists includes works by Geoffrey Giles and the recent and popular *Gay Berlin* by Robert Beachy. These works completely ignore female homosexuality in the context of the Weimar period and the National Socialist period. Claudia Schoppmann is among the few scholars who focus on lesbian existence, and her work is integral to understanding the position of lesbian sexuality during the National Socialist period. However, my research seeks to place lesbian women in the context of sexuality in German history from the Weimar period up until the National Socialist period. Unlike previous scholarship, my research focuses on the effects and targeting of lesbian women. My research also incorporates the effect that lesbian women's other identities, like race, religion, and class status, had on their experiences. This research seeks to explain why gay men and lesbian women were targeted differently under National Socialist policy. This research also seeks to illuminate how lesbian identity might have affected women's lives during the National Socialist period.

Sexuality, Vocabulary, and Oral History

In her groundbreaking 1984 essay, *Thinking Sex*, Gayle Rubin seeks to explore and revise our understandings of sexuality in the context of history. Following in the footsteps of Michel Foucault and Judith Walkowitz, Rubin argues against essentialist views of sexuality. Sexual

essentialism asserts that sex is a natural, biological force that exists before social interaction and social life, and that shapes and governs institutions. This view argues that sex is static and unchanging, existing inherently in a person's psychology or biology. Rubin argues that sexuality is constituted in social terms, not biologically or psychologically. Rubin writes that sexual politics in history are "as much a human product as are diets, methods of transportation, systems of etiquette, forms of labor, types of entertainment, processes of production, and modes of oppression."² Rubin's argument is key to understanding sexuality in German history because of Germany's exceptionality in the area of sexual politics. Germany is hailed as the birthplace of the homosexual emancipation movement because of the government's relatively relaxed censorship laws under the Weimar government. Policies existed that allowed gay men and lesbian women to come together, organize, and establish a community.³

Germany is also unique because it was one of the first places to have an emerging sexual vocabulary. As early as 1862, a man named Karl Heinrich Ulrichs coined several words and phrases in order to define different sexual orientations.⁴ His research was based in biology and sexology, and was used as a significant basis in the study of psychiatry and sexology, by people like Magnus Hirschfeld. However, this emerging vocabulary evolved and words like "homosexual," "homoerotic," "invert," and more, emerged and were used by gay men to define themselves.⁵ Continuing on the topic of vocabulary, Laurie Marhoefer, author of *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis*, says that it is important to use only the terms that

² Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality." In *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge, 1984), 277.

³ Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 85.

⁴ Beachy, 18.

⁵ Beachy, 18.

historical actors used to define themselves, “in order to avoid making unwarranted assumptions about their self-conceptions.”⁶ I have chosen to use the word “lesbian” when referring to women and “gay” when referring to men, because they are the closest English translations to what historical actors used and because homosexual has more of a pejorative meaning today than it did back then. Of course, no translation is perfect. Marhoefer also comments “there is no vocabulary that can relieve a historian of the conflict between making the past legible for one’s readers and not obscuring the meanings that prevailed in the past.”⁷

Similarly, I have chosen to use the term National Socialist instead of Nazi because Nazi evokes a strong emotional response, not conducive to historical inquiry. The word Nazi can therefore be categorized as a form of “loaded language” because it harbors an emotional response, intended to direct views one way or another without providing further information. It is important not to pass moral judgment when investigating historical events because it trivializes experiences of people who lived at time and draws away from the study of the events.

Incorporating studies of gender and sexuality is meant to develop our current understandings and consciousness of the inception, functions, and impacts of the National Socialist Regime in Germany. It is important to understand that not only normative men were victims, bystanders, collaborators, and, perpetrators, but women are also conscious actors in history, as well as other expressions of gender and sexual identity. The experiences of lesbian women in the National Socialist Period are all very different. While they all experienced

persecution on the basis of their lesbian identities, their fates also depended on their other identities, such as race or political involvement.

Furthermore, lesbian existence during the National Socialist Period cannot be looked at under the same lens as we look at gay men’s existence. Women’s history, especially Queer women’s history, is consistently overlooked in historical research and methodology. Traditional research methods do not explore diversity in sexual and gender identity, rather, they adhere to heterosexual and gender normativity. In other words, historical actors are always assumed to be straight and cisgender, unless proven otherwise. Oral histories, which Claudia Schoppmann does an excellent job of capturing and compiling, are important to forming our understanding of the lived experiences of lesbian women during the Third Reich. In his book *Die Grenzen des Sagbaren (The Limits of the Sayable)*, Michael Pollak says:

Despite all the distortions, the gaps in the recollections and the tendency inherent in biographical narratives to improve upon one’s self-portrait, a life story can often tell so much more by the way of its vivid language, can testify more about the past through nuances, that is, details and diversity, than, for example, comprehensive series of statistics, the heuristic value of which is not disputed here. It is the experience, this involvement with the problem, which oral histories trigger in the listener or reader that often makes possible to clearly convey tragic events that can otherwise too easily fall victim

⁶ Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 220.

⁷ Marhoefer, 220.

to the prevailing tendency to be forgotten and repressed.⁸

Oral history allows people to capture and articulate their own narratives in their own voices. Historians not only gain historical information, we catch a glimpse of the lived experience and personal voices of the people we are studying. They are able to reclaim their own histories, which in some cases can be ultimately life saving. Lutz van Dijk once said, “Someone who does not have access to his own history—biographically and historically—has a much harder time consciously and self-assuredly building his present. Many minorities have been stripped of their history, more than that, their existence has been denied as well.”⁹

Antecedents: The Weimar Republic, Homosexual Emancipation, and Paragraph 175

In the aftermath of World War I and the German Revolution, extending to the later years of the Weimar Republic, German politics and society were undergoing a massive, progressive change. The Weimar Republic brought the first democracy to Germany. German citizens enjoyed rights they had never had before, like freedom of press and universal suffrage. Along with new political changes, many social changes occurred. The Weimar Republic experienced a surge of involvement and visibility of a variety of thriving subcultures. Some of these included homosexual men, lesbian women, transvestites, nudists, as well as a rise in prostitution and circulation of pornography.

It was during the Weimar Period, in 1919, that Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld opened the *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* (IFS; Institute for

Sexology/Sexual Science) in Berlin. Hirschfeld, a prominent doctor and sexologist, was one of the primary advocates and founders of the homosexual rights movement in Germany throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In regards to research on sexuality, Hirschfeld outlined three central themes in an 1896 pamphlet called *Sappho and Socrates*, which he cited for years to come. The first was the idea of sexual identity being an intrinsic part of an individual, and that sexual preferences were “rooted in the entire personality” of an individual.¹⁰ Second was the “fundamental hermaphroditism” of all people; he says that people are not necessarily men and women, but are defined as either “primarily masculine or primarily feminine.” This concept is complicated because Hirschfeld also expresses doubt as to how masculinity and femininity are even defined.¹¹ Third, he emphasized the possibility of “endless variety” of sexual variants. He even calculated the possible combinations of sexual variants at 43,046,721; he says, “Love is as varied as people are.”¹² Hirschfeld is also significant because he was a major political and legal advocate for homosexual emancipation, and because he had significant knowledge and access to the developing homosexual subculture in Berlin. He started and led the *Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee* (WhK; Scientific Humanitarian Committee), which was highly important in connecting gay men and lesbian women, as well as the committees’ political and legal advocacy. Along with Hirschfeld, many other prominent psychiatrists and doctors advocated for homosexual emancipation, mostly on the grounds that sexuality was innate and that Paragraph 175 was unjust and immoral. These

⁸ Michael Pollack, *Die Grenzen Des Sagbaren: Lebensgeschichten Von KZ-Überlebenden Als Augenzeugenberichte und als Identitätsarbeit* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus-Verlag 1988), 8.

⁹ Lutz van Dijk. “*Ein erfülltes Leben—trotzdem: Erinnerungen Homosexueller*” 1933-1945 (Hamburg: Rohwoldt, 1992), 139.

¹⁰ Edward Ross Dickinson, “Homosexual Rights.” In *Sex, Freedom, and Power in Imperial Germany: 1880 - 1914* (New York: Cambridge U, 2014), 158.

¹¹ Dickinson, 158-159.

¹² Dickinson, 159.

include Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1860s), Richard von Krafft Ebing (1860s), and Albert Moll (1890s).¹³

The homosexual emancipation movement in the Weimar Period allowed for a freer and more open expression of gender and sexuality. Gay and lesbian organizations, bars, clubs, and publications became more active and visible during the Weimar period.¹⁴ This was due, in part, to lax censorship laws during the Weimar period. In Weimar Germany in the 1920s, achievements in democracy and women's suffrage also gave rise to organized movements of gay men and lesbian women. Clubs and organizations were formed, such as the *Bund für Menschenrechte* (BFM; Human Rights League) in 1923 for both gay men and lesbian women. Ruth Margarete Roellig, author of *Berlins lesbische Frauen* (*Berlin's Lesbian Women*), a pamphlet published in 1928, knew and understood that there were certain places in Berlin for lesbians. In an interview with Claudia Schoppmann, author of *Days of Masquerade: Life Stories of Lesbians During the Third Reich*, Roellig remarked, "Maybe that's why Berlin's Lesbian community only frequents certain places—those in which the women can spend a few hours 'among themselves,' free from social or career considerations."¹⁵ According to Roellig, these bars and clubs were places women could go to "flee the unloved sphere of the bourgeois norm."¹⁶ As seen in the attached photograph, the "Eldorado" Transvestite Bar on Motzstraße in Berlin was a popular German bar and nightclub that catered specifically to gays, lesbians, transvestites, and transsexuals. Gertrude Sandmann, a lesbian artist living in

Berlin during the Third Reich, reminisces about her youth in the 1930s:

The clubs, the 'subculture' so maligned today, represented the first step back then, the first and only and very much appreciated chance to come together with women like yourself and be freed from isolation—such an important beginning . . . It was a great liberating experience to see that there are really so many women like yourself. You walked into the club as if you were 'coming home'—this is where you belonged.¹⁷

Many of these clubs were organized to offer support and entertainment with social and cultural events. Hilde Radusch, a young lesbian woman living in Berlin, recalled memories of the Toppkeller club she frequented, by saying "It was so exciting that women from all walks of life came, even actresses. It was all always so crowded, and on Fridays you could hardly get in at all."¹⁸ Some also organized for political action, specifically to work against Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code, which outlawed certain illicit behaviors between men. In 1919, Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, mentioned above, founded the Institute for Sexual Research in Berlin. Dr. Hirschfeld's work contributed to many important theories of sexuality in the early twentieth Century. Hirschfeld is also credited for coining the terms transvestite and transsexual.¹⁹ Lesbian women's experiences, like those of Ruth Margarete Roellig, Hilde Radusch, and many others, as well as the work of Dr. Hirschfeld,

¹³ Dickinson, 152-156.

¹⁴ Marhoefer, 39.

¹⁵ Claudia Schoppmann, *Days of Masquerade: Life Stories of Lesbians during the Third Reich* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1996). Interview with Ruth Margarete Roellig, 134.

¹⁶ Schoppmann. Interview with Roellig, 134.

¹⁷ Schoppmann, Interview with Gertrude Sandmann, 85.

¹⁸ Schoppmann, Interview with Hilde Radusch, 32.

¹⁹ While we understand that terms like transvestite and transsexual are problematic and are not used today, the importance of these early discoveries about gender and sexuality must be understood in context.

are indicative of the social and political atmosphere of Germany for gay and lesbian people during the Weimar period. They are also indicative of the level of importance these places held, especially for gay men and lesbian women.

National Socialist Gender and Sexual Ideology: Articulation, Policies and Objectives

At its very core, the National Socialist Regime was concerned with the survival and continuity of the Aryan racial state. Anything that would inhibit the reproduction of Aryans was seen as degenerate and decadent. From its early years, the National Socialist Regime enacted several policies that sought to isolate and punish gay men specifically. Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code had made homosexual activities criminally punishable since the founding of the German Empire in 1871. However, this law had only explicitly mentioned male relations. In 1927, a parliamentary committee in the Reichstag with members from the Human Rights League (BFM) and the Scientific Humanitarian Committee, brought up a “counter draft” of the sexual criminal code calling for decriminalization of homosexual activity. The rising National Socialist Party (NSDAP) responded to a questionnaire concerning various parties’ opinions towards Paragraph 175 as follows:

Whoever so much as thinks of male-male or female-female love is our enemy. We are opposed to everything that emasculates our people, making it a play-thing of the enemy . . . This is why we oppose all illicit sexual acts, above all male-male

love, because it robs us of our last chance to liberate our people from the chains of slavery under which they now suffer.²⁰

It is clear, even before the National Socialist Regime came into power, that its ideologues detested homosexuality. It was not until after the counter draft had been accepted in 1929 that their homophobia took the form of concrete ideas and action. They issued an imminent threat in the *Nationalist Observer* (*Völkischer Beobachter*) in 1930, that homosexuals would be “punished by hanging or expulsion.”²¹ Then, in 1935, once the NS Regime was in power, Paragraph 175 was revised to more harshly criminalize an even broader range of behavior between men.²² It is important to note that there was not much of an attitudinal or ideological shift among German people in regards to homosexuality once the NS regime came into power, as evidenced in personal accounts collected by Claudia Schoppmann. What changed is the way the NS Regime dealt with it. Gay and lesbian organizations were disbanded and publications were criminalized; basically, the social aspects that seemed to flourish in the Weimar period were struggling to exist due to their new illegality. The destruction of these organized movements was devastating for gay men and lesbian women, as it destroyed their primary modes of connection and communication. Forming coalition and organized resistance were nearly impossible, not to mention the destruction of social and cultural life.

In the debates surrounding Paragraph 175, there were some lawyers who called for the inclusion of lesbian activity. Rudolf Klare, a lawyer and *SS-Scharführer*, asserted female same-sex activities, like male same-sex

²⁰ The NSDAP pamphlet appeared in *Eros*, publicity booklet for the magazine *Der Eigene*, no. 8.

²¹ *Völkischer Beobachter*, August 2, 1930

²² § 175 Strafgesetzbuch (StGB) (Germany). English translation by Warren Johansson and William Perry

activities, were characteristically un-German and claimed that, "Such an activity is despised as immoral."²³ He also said, "The initial practice, legislative necessity, in assessing homosexuality as racial degeneration is the punishment of female same-sex activities."²⁴ Ultimately, lesbian activity was not included as a punishable, criminal offense under Paragraph 175. Even though there were differing opinions about whether or not to include lesbian activity in Paragraph 175, the arguments used on all sides were based on sexism and homophobia.

The homophobia perpetuated by the National Socialist Regime is a key factor when looking at the status of women versus men and how that correlates with persecution of lesbians. NS leaders were deeply homophobic, and their policies and actions reflect that, even beyond Paragraph 175. In 1934, Hitler banned NS student groups from living in dorm rooms together because of the dangers of homosexuality if students happened to share bedrooms.²⁵ According to Himmler, homosexuality needed to be eradicated in the SS. So, as head of the SS, Himmler managed to get a formal decree from Hitler that made homosexuality in the SS punishable by death.²⁶ Himmler and many other NS leaders were also greatly concerned with population degeneration. In a speech in 1937, Himmler stated:

We have two million men too few on account of those who fell in the war, then you can well imagine how this imbalance of two million homosexuals and two million war

dead, or in other words a lack of about four million men capable of having sex, has upset the sexual balance sheet of Germany, and will result in a catastrophe.²⁷

National Socialist ideology detested homosexuality because they believed it would affect the propagation of the German race. If men were not having children with women, then the race could not survive. In other words, they were not fulfilling their duties as Germans. It was the belief of some NS ideologues that intimate female friendship could be mistaken for lesbianism, which is another reason they rejected proposals to criminalize lesbian acts.²⁸ Under NS ideology, a woman's primary duty and responsibility was to support her husband and to reproduce and raise the new generation of Aryans. NS racial ideology established that all other races were subordinate to the German, or Aryan, race. Women's sexual practices that did not revolve around the reproduction of the Aryan race were considered degenerate and immoral. Population policy under the NS Regime focused on raising birthrates to keep the population steady. This ties in to the NS ideological concept of "the true woman." This concept was meant to seclude women in the home and postulated that a woman was not whole, in fact, that she suffers if she is not married and has not "answered her calling to motherhood."²⁹ NS ideologues refused to accept female sexuality as self-assured or even in existence beyond the intentions of producing offspring.³⁰ Josef Meisinger, a criminal police inspector and a member of the

²³ Rudolf Klare, *Homosexualität und Strafrecht* (Hamburg, 1937), 122.

²⁴ Klare, Pg. 13

²⁵ Geoffrey J. Giles. "The Institutionalization of Homosexual Panic in the Third Reich." In *Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany*, Ed. Robert Gellately and Nathan Stoltzfus (Princeton, New Jersey: University of Princeton Press, 2001), 45.

²⁶ The Führer's Decree on Preserving the Purity of the SS and the Police (November 15, 1941)

²⁷ Excerpt from Heinrich Himmler's speech "Question of Homosexuality", February 18, 1937

²⁸ Schoppmann, 16.

²⁹ *Das Schwarze Korps*, October 21, 1937

³⁰ Schoppmann, 17.

SS, further delegitimized lesbian sexuality during a speech in 1937. He listed a few possible factors causing “lesbian activity;” including a lack of male authority and acquaintance and a lack of stern upbringing.³¹

Lesbian Women’s Experiences

Unlike homosexual men, lesbians were not criminally persecuted under the National Socialist Regime. However, there were many other ways the National Socialist Regime persecuted, erased, and oppressed lesbian women. Lesbian organizations and clubs were disbanded, publications were criminalized, and bars were shut down. Most social aspects that seemed to flourish in the Weimar era vanished. The destruction of organized movements destroyed the basic modes of connection and communication among lesbian women. Forming coalition and organized resistance was nearly impossible, and the destruction of social and cultural life was devastating. As Schoppmann points out, women were forced to hide their lesbian identities in order to fit in and seem inconspicuous.

This is evident in stories such as those of Frieda Belinfante, whose videotaped oral history is recorded on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website. Frieda was born in 1904 in Amsterdam, Netherlands. After participating in underground Dutch resistance movements and discovering her sexuality, she was forced to live in hiding, disguised as a man for three months. She was then able to flee to Switzerland and participate in many other acts of resistance and sabotage with other gay and lesbian refugees living there. She went on to become a renowned orchestra conductor and immigrated to the United States in 1947.³²

The statistics on how many lesbian women were in concentration camps is not available because lesbian women in concentration camps were not directly prosecuted under the law as lesbians. According to William J. Spurlin, author of *Lost Intimacies: Rethinking Homosexuality under National Socialism*, most lesbians were placed in the category of “asocials” in the concentration camps.³³ This group was identified with a black triangle instead of a pink triangle, which was used to categorize homosexual men. “To be labeled as asocial,” Spurlin contends, “was often vaguely and arbitrarily defined in terms of the failure to live up to what the NS Regime considered to be good citizenship and the fulfillment of one’s social obligations.”³⁴ This correlates with NS ideology concerning women’s roles. Recognizing the misogyny prevalent in NS ideology is key to understanding the treatment of lesbians during this time period. But it is also important to think about what the category of “asocial” meant for lesbians. The NS Regime put lesbian women into this category for a number of different reasons. Women who either refused to get married or to bear children, those who stopped working, or, most likely, had sexual or otherwise affectionate relationships with other women, were all lumped into this “asocial” category. This is evidenced by many accounts of women, lesbian or not, who were sent to concentration camps under the label “asocial”. Take Anneliese W. (“Johnny”) for example. She discovered how easy it was to be sent to a concentration camp labeled as an “asocial.” In 1940, Anneliese was involved with a woman named Helene Bartelt who was sent to Ravensbrück for a year for her response to a request that she work in a munitions factory.

³¹ Josef Meisinger on “Combatting Homosexuality as a Political Task” (April 5-6, 1937)

³² “Oral History Interview with Frieda Belinfante.” Interview by Klaus Müller. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. USHMM, 31 May 1994.

³³ William J. Spurlin, “The Politics of Gender: Lesbian Existence under the Third Reich.” In *Lost Intimacies: Rethinking Homosexuality under National Socialism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 57.

³⁴ Spurlin, 57.

She responded negatively, expressing her contempt for Hitler and the regime.³⁵ Schoppmann also cites an example of a woman, Mary Pünjer, sent to Ravensbrück; with the reason for her imprisonment on camp reports being “asocial” and “lesbian.”³⁶ It is also reported that many lesbians would be put to work in camp brothels to help “shape them up.”³⁷ The label of asocial was therefore extremely flexible and could apply to just about anybody who did not fit into NS Ideological standards. Anneliese W. “Johnny,” born in 1916, was introduced to the lesbian subculture of Berlin in 1931 thanks to her first girlfriend, Hilde Berghausen. According to Johnny, “It didn’t last all that long because I was very curious. But it was with her that I realized for the first time where I belong.”³⁸ Johnny was immersed in the lesbian subculture before the National Socialist Regime came into power.

From the very beginning of the Hitler regime, I still kept my hair short, man’s haircut; back then we didn’t wear pants anyway, but I still had a tailored suit. You can’t imagine what people said to us, “Take a look at the gay broads!” and things like that. It was pretty bad. They said it was supposed to be made illegal for women too; it was already for men.³⁹

Johnny continued to live as a lesbian in Germany, without being caught or arrested. After the war, she stayed in Berlin and worked as a clerk until 1972 and lived with her life companion until her death in 1995.

Other women were not as lucky. Faced with a direct threat of deportation and with no other option, Gertrude Sandmann fled her

apartment in the fall of 1942, leaving behind all of her possessions, as well as a false suicide note. While Sandmann was a lesbian, she was persecuted by the NS Regime due to her Jewish identity and ancestry.⁴⁰ With the help of her female partner, Hedwig Koslowski, she was able to hide in a tiny closet of a close family friend in the Treptow district of Berlin. After being forced to move to a few different places, Sandmann survived until the Allies liberated Berlin in 1945.

Another more somber example of lesbian experience during the Holocaust is that of Henny Schermann. Henny lived in Frankfurt with her parents and worked as a shop assistant. In 1940, Henny was arrested and deported to Ravensbrück concentration camp. On the back of her ID card a description of her was written, including the reason for her arrest: “Jenny (sic) Sara Schermann, born February 19, 1912, Frankfurt am Main. Unmarried shop girl in Frankfurt am Main. Licentious lesbian only visited such [lesbian] bars. Avoided the name ‘Sara.’ Stateless Jew.”⁴¹ Henny’s story is a lot less optimistic and bright in comparison to some stories like that of Frieda Belinfante or Anneliese W. “Johnny,” but her story, and the stories of other lesbian victims of the Holocaust, is very important to our understanding of the variance of lesbian experience during the National Socialist Period and the Holocaust.

Conclusion

This research highlights the importance of integrating studies of gender and sexuality to better understand the intersecting identities of historical actors. It is especially pertinent to include these studies of the National Socialist Period in order to understand the power

³⁵ Schoppmann, pg. 52.

³⁶ Schoppmann pg. 22.

³⁷ Schoppmann, Interview with Anneliese W. “Johnny,” 21.

³⁸ Schoppmann, Interview with “Johnny,” 42.

³⁹ Schoppmann. Interview with “Johnny,” 54.

⁴⁰ Schoppmann, Interview with Sandmann, 85.

⁴¹ “Henny Schermann.” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. United States Holocaust Memorial Council.

structure of the regime and how it related to sexual, racial, and social identity. The social and political visibility of gay men and lesbian women under the Weimar Republic was indeed short lived. After the National Socialist Regime came to power, the vital connections that gay and lesbian subcultures in Germany had enjoyed had disappeared. Gay and lesbian bars and clubs, as well as newspapers and magazines and other publications were shut down or banned. The National Socialist Regime was concerned with the survival and continuity of the Aryan racial state. Homosexuality, they argued, was in direct conflict with the ideology that would benefit the population in terms of reproduction. This racial policy was articulated in misogyny and homophobic policies that sought to isolate and reform gay men and lesbian women. This research also shows how the experience of lesbian women was different from that of gay men. It concludes with the assertion that while men were criminally persecuted for their gay identity, lesbian women were not. However, their identities were delegitimized in the eyes of the regime and essentially erased. This research shows that the experiences of women are all very different; therefore, it is important to recognize the ways in which their other identities shaped their experiences as well. As lesbian women, they suffered the destruction of their social lives and methods of organization and resistance. However many women, like Gertrude Sandmann, Henny Schermann, and Frieda Belinfante, suffered not only due to their lesbian identity, but also due to their racial identities or political affiliations.

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41-56: Interview with Anneliese W. "Johnny".

76-86: Interview with Gertrude Sandmann

"Henny Schermann." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 19 November 2015.

"Oral History Interview with Frieda Belinfante." Interview by Klaus Müller. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. USHMM, 31 May 1994.