

Debate paper

'Anyone who thinks of homosexual love is our enemy': remembering the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people during the Nazi terror

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Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) provides an opportunity for people to reflect on the terror inflicted by powerful groups against weaker sections of society. Where the memories of these patterns of terror have been obliterated, HMD enables service providers and educators to engage with historical events and their possible impact on survivors and the following generations. In January 2012, Brighton Ourstory Project, a long-established lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) history group, mounted an exhibition in Brighton Central Library about the experiences of LGBT people in the face of the Nazi terror; the exhibition was called *The Third Sex in the Third Reich*.

Until 1933, Germany was home to the largest openly gay population in the world. *Goodbye to Berlin*, Christopher Isherwood's novel set in Weimar Germany, and research (see, for example Steakley, 1975; Bolle, 1984; Plant, 1987) reveal that Berlin alone had over 100 bars targeted at a gay clientele, of which the best known was the Eldorado Club. There was also a lesbian guidebook to the city, and there were at least 25 political, social and cultural gay organisations. The first ever gender reassignment surgery was performed in Berlin in 1930. Films explored the lives and loves of homosexual people in an unapologetic way, and the Institute of Sexual Research compiled an archive of 20 000 volumes and 5000 photographs that explored sex and sexuality from anthropological, legal, medical and social perspectives. People came from all over Europe to take part in this dazzling cultural scene. Magnus Hirschfeld, the Director of the Institute, claimed on visiting the Eldorado that people 'had been seen arriving from the provinces weeping tears of joy at this spectacle' (Hirschfeld, 1993, p. 56).

This was only one side of the picture. Paragraph 175 was the name of a law, passed in 1871, which criminalised sexual contact between men; it was very similar to the UK's Criminal Law Amendment Act, which came

into force in 1885. Neither law criminalised lesbian behaviour, and this may have reflected the view of the time that women were incapable of autonomous sexual expression. Nonetheless, the prejudice against homosexuality, which underpinned the law, also manifested itself against lesbians, and they were seen as inferior beings.

In 1928, the Nazi Party was one of many minority parties jostling for public attention. The party made use of Paragraph 175 as part of its strategy for achieving political power. The Nazi position on homosexuality was clear: 'Anyone who thinks of homosexual love is our enemy' (Heinrich Himmler, quoted in Steakley, 1975, p. 84). Within weeks of taking power in 1933, the Nazis resolved to destroy books which they deemed to be un-German, and the Institute for Sexual Research was one of their first targets. The attack on the Institute made it clear that the Enlightenment approach of gathering evidence on a topic such as sexuality was to be replaced by the glorification of ignorance and bigotry. Gay meeting places were closed down. The intimidation and arrest of homosexual people intensified, especially in the period leading up to the Berlin Olympics in 1936.

Paragraph 175 was strengthened by the Nazis so as to clarify that it referred to kissing, fondling, oral sex or mutual masturbation, as well as anal intercourse; the maximum sentence was increased to ten years. People were encouraged to report on neighbours and work colleagues whom they suspected of homosexual activity, and successful prosecutions increased by ten-fold, to 8000 a year. Around 100 000 men were taken in for questioning under the terms of Paragraph 175 between 1935 and 1945.

Many men who were sentenced to imprisonment found that, on completion of their sentence, they were sent to a concentration camp (Heger, 1980, p. 27). Between 10 000 and 15 000 men who were deemed to

be homosexual were transported there. There was a strict system of monitoring the reasons why people were sent to concentration camps, and homosexual men were required to identify themselves by wearing a pink triangle. They were not targeted for systematic extermination in the way that the Jews and Gypsies were, but their low survival rate suggests that they may have been subjected to particularly harsh treatment. Buchenwald had a programme for developing methods to eradicate homosexuality through the use of hormone implants. There was also a scheme whereby prisoners with pink triangles who agreed to be castrated would be transferred away from the camps to factory work (Plant, 1987, pp. 176–8). Pierre Seel records how he was beaten and raped, on one occasion with a piece of wood. On another occasion he and his fellow inmates were required to watch while his 18-year old-lover was stripped naked, had a bucket placed over his head and was then ripped apart by guard dogs; classical music provided a background to this butchery (Seel and Le Bitoux, 1995, p. 171).

When liberation came in April 1945, it was more difficult for survivors than anyone had imagined. Many died of disease and some from their inability to absorb unfamiliar wholesome food. Some homosexual men were astonished to find that, far from being treated on the same basis as other survivors, they were sent back to prison to complete the rest of the sentence that had been imposed on them under the terms of Paragraph 175 (see the Triangles Roses website at www.triangles-roses-photos.blogspot.co.uk). Many were rejected by their families and communities of origin, and the destruction of the pre-war gay culture meant that nowhere was safe for them. Solidarity with homosexual survivors of the Nazi regime was in short supply, and no one who had been sent to the camps because of his homosexuality ever received a penny of compensation (Heger, 1980, p. 114; Plant, 1987, p. 181; Lautmann, 1981, p. 14). Paragraph 175 was only finally repealed in 1994.

Most mainstream historians have ignored this aspect of the Holocaust. In the last 20 years, however, a number of historians and activists have been determined that these events should not be forgotten. Oral history, museum exhibitions and new media have all played a part in this belated renaissance. First-hand testimonies of this episode in history have been central to this work. The film, *Paragraph 175* (www.imdb.com/title/tt0236576), is based on interviews which the German historian Klaus Müller conducted with homosexual men and one lesbian woman, all of whom had survived persecution by the Nazis. They recount, in some cases with great difficulty after 40 years of silence, their memories of their lives before 1933 as well as their memories of the Terror and their strategies for survival. One man described how, even in the 1950s and 1960s, he had been arrested several times for

consenting sexual activity with other men under the terms of Paragraph 175. Müller's work has also been central to LGBT exhibitions in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in New York. The Schwules Museum, which is dedicated to LGBT history, was opened in Berlin in 1985 without any public funding, and it finally received a grant from the German government in 2009; it has organised occasional exhibitions on the Nazi Terror. A multilingual website called Triangle Roses (www.triangles-roses-photos.blogspot.co.uk) has been set up in France, and it archives much of the available material about the Nazi attempts to exterminate LGBT people.

It was through YouTube that I discovered the moving story of Rudolf Brazda (www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-1uFsOXWhQ). He was the last known gay survivor of the camps, and he died in 2011 at the age of 98 years. He spent three years in a camp, and in the chaos of the final days he survived because a friendly guard hid him in a pigsty for 14 days until such time as the Allied troops arrived. He then went to France, where he worked as a roofer, and in 1950 he met a new lover, Edouard Mayer, at a costume ball. They were together for 50 years, and it was only after Edouard's death that Brazda came out about his experiences in the camps. When he was invited to Berlin to visit the recently opened memorial to gay victims of Nazism, he flirted with the openly gay mayor of the city. Small comfort indeed, but it was clear that the Nazi attempts to terrorise him and de-sexualise him had failed to break his spirit.

Conclusion

I live in a city where there are so many gay folk that the local, apparently entirely heterosexual, football team suffers homophobic abuse when they play away games. Small slights in the scheme of things, but they caution us against a sense of complacency that persecution is in the past and that stories of Nazi atrocities have no relevance to our modern society. The legal changes of recent years have indeed brought to an end the legal discrimination experienced by LGBT people in the UK. Worldwide, however, the picture is less rosy, as 76 countries still have laws on their statute books that criminalise homosexual activity, and 7 countries still retain the death penalty. Homophobia will not disappear just because there is a measure of legal acceptance.

Humankind has a great capacity for ignoring the lessons of history, but it is important, as educators, that we facilitate learning so that people can know about the ways in which this particular population group experienced prejudice in the past. Such learning can be related to the experiences of similar population

groups in the present day, and the ways in which they may present particular needs in the context of health and social care provision. There may, for example, be mental health implications for people who, coming out as gay in a spirit of hope and discovery, find that the population group to which they now belong has a history of persecution. The fact that LGBT people in Nazi Germany suffered terror for which no one has accepted responsibility and about which there continues to be widespread denial may be very damaging to the development of an individual's socio-sexual identity. The links between the collective memory of the LGBT population and the well-being of individual members of that population could be the object of future research.

Note

The Third Sex in the Third Reich exhibition is the only English-language exhibition of its kind in Europe, and is available for hire from the Brighton Ourstory Project.

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