Evaluating the Impacts of the Democratization of Germany on Berlin's Queer Community (1919-1933)

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[1]According to urban historian Robert Aldrich, homosexuality has been associated with the city since "the time of ancient Athens and the Biblical Sodom and Gomorrah."[2] While cities have always been linked with homosexuality, Weimar Berlin was in a league of its own when it came to queer culture; historian Clayton Whisnant called Weimar Berlin "Sodom and Gomorrah put together," and the gay writer Christopher Isherwood, a resident of Berlin during the Weimar years, famously wrote, "Berlin meant boys."[3] The history of homosexuality in Germany dates further back than the Weimar period. Historian Robert Beachy argues that homosexuality was 'invented' in Germany after Prussia and the German Empire created antisodomy statutes in the mid-19th century.[4] Yet, the Weimar period certainly was the era in which homosexuality was most visible in Germany, especially in Berlin.

This paper focuses on examining the impacts of the political and societal changes fostered by the democratization of Germany on homosexuality in Berlin. In doing so, it finds that the switch to democracy led to a host of political and societal changes that significantly impacted Berlin's queer community. Specifically, the shift from monarchy to democracy allowed for changed attitudes toward sexuality, the establishment of an institute of sexual science, lessened

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[1] It's important to note that this essay uses outdated but historically accurate terminology to describe sexual orientation.

[2] Robert Aldrich, "Homosexuality and the City: An Historical Overview," *Urban Studies* 41, no. 9 (2004): 1719-37 https://doi.org/10.1080/0042098042000243129. 1721

[3] Clayton John Whisnant, *Queer Identities and Politics in Germany: A History, 1880-1945* (New York, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2016), 84, EBSCOhost; Christopher Isherwood, *Christopher, and His Kind: 1929-1939* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976), 2.

[4] Robert Beachy, "The German Invention of Homosexuality," *The Journal of Modern History* 82, no. 4 (2010): 801–38, https://doi.org/10.1086/656077, 807-810.

censorship, and lenient policing. All these factors converged to create an atmosphere in which queer people in Berlin could find aid, community, partners and express themselves in ways not possible before the Weimar era.

The november revolution and the democratization of Germany would allow for increased openness to sexuality in German politics and society. The rise of the Weimar Republic—a democracy—meant a leap into modernity and a rejection of the conservative society or, as stated by Laurie Marhoeffer, the "dictatorship of tradition."[5] In her 1931 lecture at a Berlin Transvestite Club, Marie Weis claimed that when "Germany had transformed itself into a democratic republic… it seemed as if with the collapse of a moribund monarchy, dogmatic and conservative moral theology ceased to rule our lives." With this collapse came more open attitudes toward sex; as historian Eric Weitz stated , in *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy*, "to be modern meant to be democratic, and it also meant a freer attitude towards sex."[6] Importantly, the work of Gottfried Korpf shows this attitudinal shift to modernity was most present in Berlin. He stated, "Unlike any other German city [in the 1920s], Berlin appeared as a metaphor for an automatically developing progress."[7]

This freer attitude toward sex, developed with the revolution, involved a changing perception of queerness. In an account from Marheoffer's work, an unnamed source argued that the drastic change from monarchic rule to democracy in 1918 was the first instance—regardless of actual policy changes— that allowed transvestites to enter the public sphere.[8] Similarly, Edward Ross Dickinson points out that despite the politicization of sexuality in the German parliament during the Weimar era, most working-class people were uninterested in the discussion

[5] Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 298; Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis,* 26
[6] Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy*, 298
[7] Gottfried Korpf, "The City Is Man: Inner Urbanization," in *The German Urban Experience 1900 - 1945 Modernity and Crisis*, ed. Anthony McElligott (London: Routledge, 2001), 21–22.
[8] Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazi*, 30

and, frankly put, did not care about sexual politics. As Dickinson notes, in the early 1930s, Nazis "were horrified to discover even in the early 1930s that most working-class men did not see homosexual acts as a problem."[9] In short, there was a freer and less antagonistic attitude toward sex and homosexuality in the Weimar era.

The parties that represented the working class advocated for sex reform causes. In the new democratic state, the initial, yet short-lived, leftist dominance in the Reichstag prompted early support for homosexual activists. The revolution shifted the power toward left-leaning reformers who advocated for progressive sex reform causes. Importantly, this new government endowed Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, a long-time partisan of the SPD, with funds to establish the world's first Institute for Sexual Science Research in Berlin.[10] The institute's primary aim was to foster a place of research for sexology— a discipline ignored by universities.[11] The shift to democracy allowed for the world's first institute of sexual science to be founded—an institute that Hirschfeld coined his "child of the revolution."[12]

Hirschfeld's museum in the Institute of Sexual Science puts Weimar Berlin's openness to sexuality into perspective. By the mid-1920s, Hirschfeld began to emphasize public education on sexuality.[13] In doing so, he created a museum in the institute that displayed homosexuality and transvestism. This exhibit captured global attention, and accounts from international visitors demonstrate that Germany and Berlin's attitude towards sexuality had an idiosyncratically

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[9] Edward Ross Dickinson, "Complexity, Contingency, and Coherence in the History of Sexuality in Modern Germany: Some Theoretical and Interpretive Reflections," *Central European History* 49, no. 1 (2016): 93–116, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0008938916000078, 110-111.
[10] Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazi*, 31; Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 160
[11] Micheal Thomas Taylor, Annette F. Timm, and Rainer Hernn, "Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science: A Visual Sourcebook," in *Not Straight from Germany: Sexual Publics and Sexual Citizenship since Magnus Hirschfeld*, ed. Michael Thomas Taylor, Annette F. Timm, and Rainer Hernn (Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 2017), 37-38.
[12]Taylor, Timm, Hernn, "Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science: A Visual Sourcebook," 37
[13] Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 162; Taylor, Timm, Hernn, "Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science: A Visual Sourcebook," 38

liberated quality that reflects the post-imperial German sense of freedom. Visitors, like Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger, were shocked by the most "extraordinary mansion" where "men decked out as women…and women in men's clothing" roamed the halls freely.[14] Dr. William Robinson, a prominent American sex activist, was envious of the institute, stating, "It is an institution absolutely unique in the whole world… which I hoped to establish in the United States but which I felt would not thrive on account of our prudish, hypocritical attitude to all questions of sex."[15] During his first day in Berlin, English novelist and tourist-turned-resident Christopher Isherwood visited the space and was shocked by the openness to homosexuality. Previously to Isherwood's experience in Berlin, homosexuality was a unique, private, hidden part of his life, but the museum changed that. He states in his memoir, "A gallery of photographs, ranging from sexual organs to photos of famous homosexual couples…at last, he was being brought face to face with his tribe. Up to now, he had behaved as though his tribe didn't exist and that homosexuality was a private way of life discovered by himself and a few friends."[16] The reactions from these international visitors demonstrate that the perception of queerness in other Western nations differed from that of Germany and Berlin. These visitors, who were progressive, were shocked by the liberated attitude of the museum.

The Institute of Sexual Science also provided Berlin's queer community with a variety of services and, in doing so, created a space for Berlin's queer community. Hirschfeld and his colleagues aided the queer community in a host of ways. The institute provided counselling services for homosexuals; as stated by Hirschfeld, "We reassure the homosexual personality, whether male or female; we explain that they have an innocent, inborn orientation, which is not a

[14] Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 163
[15] Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 163
[16] Christopher Isherwood, *Christopher, and His Kind: 1929-1939*, 16

misfortune but rather experienced as such because of an unjust condemnation."[17] The institute also ensured that gays, lesbians and transvestites had a social network; they recommended queer bars, clubs, and locales for them to frequent.[18] On a similar note, Hirschfeld ensured that his patients were educated on the dangers of same-sex relationships—especially when it came to the legal risks of homosexuality: arrest and blackmail.[19] The Institute of Sexual Science was a first of its kind and provided queer residents of Weimar Berlin with a unique, safe space.

The partial elimination of censorship enacted by the Weimar Constitution allowed for an overall environment of freedom of expression. Although writers and activists in imperial Germany had, as argued by Robert Beachy, "probably more titles on sexual minorities than the rest of the world combined," there was still a substantial threat of censorship in the country.[20] Before the First World War, imperial Germany only allowed sexual materials to be published if they could be proven to have scientific or artistic merit, and, during the war, under the military government, censorship was stringent, allowing scant publication.[21] Yet, the risk of censorship diminished once the Kaiser fell; on November 12, 1918, it was announced that "there was no more censorship" in Germany, and, in July 1919, the new constitution guaranteed freedom of expression.[22] Article 118.1 of the Weimar Constitution stated: "Every German has the right, within the boundaries of the general laws, to express his opinion freely through word, writing,

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[17] Beachy, *Gay Berlin* 179-180
[18] Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 180-181
[19]Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 180-181
[20] Beachy, *Gay Berlin,* 164; Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazi*, 31.
[21] Laurie Marhoefer, "'The Book Was a Revelation, I Recognized Myself in It': Lesbian Sexuality, Censorship, and the Queer Press in Weimar-Era Germany," *Journal of Women's History* 27, no. 2 (2015): 62–86, https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2015.0016, 64; Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazi*, 31
[22] Beachy, *Gay Berlin,* 164; Gary D. Stark, "Aroused Authorities: State Efforts to Regulate Sex and Smut in the German Mass Media," in *Not Straight from Germany: Sexual Publics and Sexual Citizenship since Magnus Hirschfeld*, ed. Michael Thomas Taylor, Annette F. Timm, and Rainer Hermm (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 110–132, 122.

print imagery, or other manner."[23] Yet, it must be noted that part two of Article 118 contradicts part one; conservative forces left their print on the constitution by prescribing the right of "restrictive regulations" on erotic or pornographic "Trash and Smutt literature."[24]

Even though Article 118.2 allowed for some risk of censorship, authorities largely permitted the sale of homosexual periodicals. Historian Florence Tamagne argued in her work on Berlin that, when periodicals were tried for being "Trashy" and "Smutty," "censorship was neither systematic nor blind. The judge did not censor any homosexual publication *a priori*, but only those which were disturbing to the law and order."[25] The 1923 Trial Against *Friendship,* one of the most popular periodicals, best defines what homosexual publications could and could not publish. The high court emphasized that if homosexual articles did not "depict sexual intercourse" or have eroticism as "characterizing the whole article," then they were entirely legal.[26] While laws did become stricter in 1928, with the arrival of the new "Law to Protect Youth Against Trash and Smut," a law that took special measures to censor periodicals by limiting their display in stores or, sometimes, as was the case with *The Girlfriend* and *Friendship,* banning them for a year-long period. Yet, despite the laws, queer media was never unavailable to the reader; in circumstances when a periodical was banned for a year-long period, publishers would often just change names— for instance, *The Girlfriend* became *Single Women.*[27]

With the 1919 censorship lift, queer media exploded in Germany, particularly in urban Germany. This rise in media significantly contributed to Germany's LGBTQ culture. In the years

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[23] "The Constitution of the German Empire of August 11, 1919," In Weimar Germany, 1918/19-33), German History in Documents and Images, German Historical Institute, Washington, DC. https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=4862
[24] Stark, "Aroused Authorities: State Efforts to Regulate Sex and Smut in the German Mass Media," 122.
[25] Florence Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe Berlin, London, Paris, 1919-1939, Volume I & II* (New York, NY: Algora, 2006), Ebscohost, 336
[26] Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazi*, 46
[27] Whisnant, *Queer Identities and Politics in Germany: A History, 1880-1945*, 118

of the Republic, there were an estimated twenty-five to thirty queer publications published in Berlin.[28] Importantly, in his book, Beachy points out that, "there were practically no [queer] journals published anywhere else in the world until 1945."[29] Due to this, Germany, and its epicentre, Berlin, was a unique place where queer people could easily access queer media at the newsstand. This media played a prominent role in fostering a queer culture.

Relatively censor-free media became a way to create ties between members of the queer community in Berlin. Like Hirschfeld's institute, the Weimar queer press used their papers to foster a queer community.[30] *In Gay Berlin*, Robert Beachy argues that "Berlin's homosexual scene after 1918 relied specifically on a popular homosexual press with not only a reading public but also advertisers."[31] The popular press was an incredible way to foster the scene as queer newspapers used their advertising pages to promote the queer underside of the city. The advertising in the papers provided a network of queer-friendly destinations in Berlin; same-sex bars, clubs, and cafés were regularly promoted. Yet, many papers, specifically gay papers, included ads from what was often referred to as "friends" or, simply put, fellow gay men who could provide a variety of services—gay doctors, lawyers, private investigators, and dentists all listed in these papers. Beachy argues that these "friends" were crucial to the community as the criminalization of homosexuality meant many could not rely on non-allied doctors. He states, "Certainly for a homosexual man with anal syphilis or a throat rash, a gay paper would be the best place to seek the name for a discreet doctor."[32] Advertisements in the press were influential in fostering the queer community by providing destinations and resources for queer people in Berlin.

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[28] Beachy, *Gay Berlin,* 189; Hannah Steinkopf-Frank, "Publishing Queer Berlin," JSTOR daily, June 7, 2023, https://daily.jstor.org/publishing-queer-berlin/.
[29] Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 190
[30] Whisnant, *Queer Identities and Politics in Germany: A History, 1880-1945*, 112-120
[31] Beachy, *Gay Berlin,* 189
[32] Beachy, *Gay Berlin,* 191

Advertisements in queer publications were also used by the queer community to foster close relationships with each other. Newspapers published "personal ads" to aid in finding and developing queer relationships—whether platonic or romantic.[33] In her work, "I Feel that I Belong to You," Angeles Espinaco-Virseda sheds light on the power of these advertisements, stating, "the small advertisements section of *Die Freundin [The Girlfriend]* provided a way for women (and men) …to find and make contact, and to psychologically, if not literally, expand their community."[34]

While advertisements were à way that queer people could most easily create connection, the magazines and the articles presented also provided hope for connection. Espinaco-Virseda argues that magazines—in her case, *Die Freundin*—were used by lesbians and transvestites to signal their identities to other magazine readers. Several articles in the magazine told stories in which women reading *Die Freundin* met like-minded women; one article told the story of how two readers met at a newsstand.[35] Thus, the papers themselves were used to make connections between queer people in Berlin.

Despite the increasing presence of homosexuality and the ongoing anti-sodomy law, policing in the German capital was generally lenient towards homosexuality compared to other German cities and other European countries. While Paragraph 175 was repealed in the Weimar era, it was never strengthened (until the Nazi era), and in Weimar Berlin, "tolerance was the rule."[36] In contrast, the police in other German cities, such as Munich and Dresden, and other

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[33] Whisnant, *Queer Identities and Politics in Germany: A History, 1880-1945*, 112; Beachy, *Gay Berlin,* 189
[34] Angeles Espinaco-Virseda, "'I Feel That I Belong to You': Subculture, Die Freundin and Lesbian Identities in Weimar Germany," *Spacesofidentity.Net*, 1, 4 (2004), https://doi.org/10.25071/1496-6778.8015, 88.
[35] Espinaco-Virseda, "'I Feel That I Belong to You': Subculture, Die Freundin and Lesbian Identities in Weimar Germany," 88
[36] Florence Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe Berlin, London, Paris, 1919-1939, Volume I & II*, 330

European nations, like England, were much stricter.[37] Magnus Hirschfeld argued that at the root of this tolerance was the sheer number of homosexuals in the city; in his 1926 article "Sexual Catastrophes," he states, "only one out of every hundred thousand infractions is ultimately subject to criminal prosecution, and that only accidentally." In the same article, he quotes a pre-Weimar statement from August Bebel, who said in the Reichstag, "If the Berlin police—I want to speak only of Berlin—were to do its duty… there would be a scandal that would make the Panama Canal and Dreyfus affair look like child's play."[38]

While much of the historical discussion on policing refers solely to male homosexuality—as Paragraph 175 only referred to sodomy—Weimar era police also liberalized their attitudes regarding transvestites. Before the Weimar Republic, transvestites had to obtain "transvestite certificates," a pass championed by Hirschfeld that allowed for gender nonconforming individuals to be in public space.[39] Yet, in 1922 the Berlin police headquarters issued a procedural guideline highlighting the fact that "apart from male prostitution, transvestism in general has no criminal significance."[40] In doing so, they rendered the pass system outdated. Moreover, the liberalization of police bureaucracy meant that transgender people were permitted to change names that better suited them—if they remained gender-neutral. So, policing in the Weimar era also became more lenient towards transvestites.

In the years of the Weimar Republic, the change in attitudes, the establishment of the Institute of Sexual Science, lessened censorship and lenient policing all converged to allow

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[37]Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazi*, 50; Whisnant, *Queer Identities and Politics in Germany: A History, 1880-1945*, 106; Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe Berlin, London, Paris, 1919-1939, Volume I & II*, 307-313

[38] Magnus Hirschfeld, "Sexual Catastrophes," in *The Weimar Republic: Source Book*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 708–9.

[39] Katie Sutton, "We Too Deserve a Place in the Sun: The Politics of Transvestite Identity in Weimar Germany." *German Studies Review* 35, no. 2 (2012) 335-354; Livia Gershon, "Gender Identity in Weimar Germany JSTOR DAILY," JSTOR daily, November 18, 2018, https://daily.jstor.org/gender-identity-in-weimar-germany/, Paras 1, 2.

[40]Sutton, "We Too Deserve a Place in the Sun: The Politics of Transvestite Identity in Weimar Germany," 338

Berlin's queer community relative liberties. The switch to democracy evoked an attitudinal change in which working-class Germans became more open and less concerned about sexuality. The initial left-wing-dominated Reichstag supported the opening of the Institute of Sexual Science. This institute supported Berlin's queer community and demonstrated how the German attitude toward sexuality was much freer than in other nations; homosexuality in Germany was allowed to breathe, whereas, in other Western countries, it was a hidden and secretive topic that rarely left the private sphere. Moreover, Weimar censorship laws prompted an outpouring of queer media—media that was not published elsewhere until 1945. With this media came the opportunity to better connect with other members of Berlin's queer community. The advertisements, articles, and simply the public act of carrying a newspaper allowed members of the queer community to interact more easily with one another and create communal that were previously impossible. The shift in police attitudes increased socialization, and this attitudinal shift also allowed for increased transvestite freedoms and presence in the queer community. Due to these converging factors, Weimar Berlin became an urban space unlike any other—a space where the queer community could find aid, community, partners, and express themselves.

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