

Researcher sheds light on life of lesbians in Nazi Germany

June 13 2017



This memorial was erected in Berlin in 2008 to honor homosexuals persecuted under Nazism. Credit: Samuel Clowes Huneke

Lesbians may have enjoyed limited toleration during the Nazi regime in Germany, according to new Stanford research.

Samuel Clowes Huneke, a doctoral candidate in history, examined [police](#) investigation files from the 1940s involving alleged violations of same-sex relations laws. His findings and analysis were recently published in the *Journal of Contemporary History*.

"These files add a new level of nuance to existing scholarship," Huneke said. "They hint at a more normal existence that was the daily experience of some [lesbians](#) in the Third Reich."

Moreover, Huneke said, "the experiences of lesbians in Nazi Germany can help shed light not only on how gender operates in multivalent ways, but also the complex negotiation of both repression and toleration on which authoritarian regimes depend."

Lack of evidence

The systematic persecution of gay men under the Nazi regime has been well documented by historians. The regime's laws explicitly criminalized homosexual acts between men. About 50,000 men were convicted for being homosexuals and between 5,000 and 15,000 were imprisoned in concentration camps, where up to 60 percent of them died, according to scholars.

But how lesbians fared is less clear. Females were excluded from the law that made homosexual acts illegal. Aside from a few cases that have been uncovered by a handful of scholars in the United States and Germany, little documentation exists describing how the Nazis treated lesbians.

This lack of evidence has led historians to debate whether lesbians had it

easier than gay men during the Nazi period. Some scholars argue that the Nazi government did not persecute lesbians to the same degree because women in general were not seen as sexual beings or as threatening to the regime's policy of pronatalism, which encouraged reproduction. Huneke, while agreeing with those views, also argues that Nazi officials believed lesbians posed less of a political threat to the regime because women were barred from most spheres of politics and public life.

"In light of both the fearsome persecution of homosexual men and scholarship that places it in the context of National Socialist pronatalism, the regime's seeming lack of interest in female homosexuality is startling, for in other respects the government placed considerable burdens on women," wrote Huneke, who is working on a dissertation about the history of homosexuality in postwar Germany.

Expanding scholarship

The German criminal police, also known as the Kriminalpolizei, or Kripo, investigated eight women as part of four separate cases that Huneke examined.

The files, which Huneke discovered in 2015 at the Landesarchiv Berlin, or Berlin state archive, included signed statements from witnesses and the accused women.

In each case, the women were denounced for allegedly violating the laws against same-sex relations by someone they knew - a neighbor, coworker or parent.

"That these eight women were denounced to the Berlin criminal police in the early 1940s is striking on its own, given the archival silence when it comes to female homosexuality," Huneke wrote.

In each case, the police, a judge or a state's attorney determined that the women could not be prosecuted for same-sex relations under the criminal code. There is no evidence that any of the eight women investigated were punished as a result of the denunciations, Huneke said.

"To scholars accustomed to seeing in the Nazi state a jungle of overlapping jurisdictions, personal initiative and law based solely on the Führer's wish, this is a curious portrait of the Nazi justice system, one marked by an unexpected concern for the strict interpretation of statute," Huneke wrote.

The case of Margot Liu née Holzmann, whose lesbian relationship was also documented in a recent German monograph, struck Huneke as particularly strange. Holzmann was a Jewish lesbian who lived in Nazi Berlin. In 1941, she married a Chinese waiter and received Chinese citizenship, which the police insisted shielded her from deportation to a concentration camp. Once Holzmann's husband became aware of her lesbian relationship, he filed for divorce and contacted the police.

Yet, as in the other three cases, the police opted not to intervene. "It is frankly bizarre that the criminal police would insist, in multiple documents, on the protections conferred a German Jewish lesbian by virtue of her de jure Chinese citizenship," Huneke wrote.

Huneke emphasized that his analysis is limited in scope. For example, the same detective was responsible for the findings in all four cases, and Huneke said that particular officer could have just been less zealous than other officers.

"But the fact that they were so persnickety in following every detail of the law in these cases - it suggests a level of toleration," Huneke said.

Tolerance for some lesbians

Huneke said the police files he examined are evidence that there was a limited degree of tolerance for lesbians in Nazi Germany.

In addition to each woman eluding punishment, the files showed that many of them led fairly open lesbian lives, sometimes for years, before finally being denounced to the police. "The files ironically show that there was a significant ability on the part of ordinary Germans to witness lesbianism and not go ahead and denounce the person," Huneke said.

But Huneke added that this apathy toward lesbianism may have come about because of the Nazi regime's non-threatening view of women.

"Gender is perhaps why lesbians weren't persecuted in the same ways," Huneke said. "But simply because there was a tolerance for female homosexuality doesn't mean that these women led enviable lives." In his article, he wrote that "these files throw into sharper relief the duplicity of tolerance that has characterized societies' views of female sexuality for centuries."

Huneke said his work demonstrates that dictatorships often rely not only on overt oppression but also on limited tolerance of certain groups.

"It is a divide-and-conquer approach," Huneke said. "One of the most important takeaways from this research, to my mind, is to break the popular idea that authoritarian governments maintain their power only through repression."

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: Researcher sheds light on life of lesbians in Nazi Germany (2017, June 13) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-06-life-lesbians-nazi-germany.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.