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Queer Visibility and Erasure: LGBTQ+ Life in Weimar and Nazi Germany

The history of the Holocaust and World War II is often told through narratives of destruction, suffering, and survival. Yet within the immense tragedy lies another story—one of visibility, resilience, and cultural vibrancy that existed just before it was erased. LGBTQ+ life in Germany before World War II represents a moment of profound human expression, especially during the Weimar Republic. In a world that briefly allowed queer people to exist more openly, artists, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens created a culture of freedom that challenged social norms. The subsequent Nazi regime, however, would destroy that progress, replacing queer celebration with persecution and silence. Exploring these two sides—the liberation of Weimar and the repression under Nazism—reveals not just historical shifts, but deeply human stories of love, identity, and endurance.

The Weimar Republic, founded after Germany's defeat in World War I, became a laboratory for social and cultural experimentation. Between 1919 and 1933, Berlin emerged as the center of queer life in Europe. Bars, cabarets, and publications flourished, giving space to gay men, lesbians, and transgender people to live and express themselves. Historian Robert Beachy, in "Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity", describes how Berlin developed one of the first visible gay rights movements in the world. Organizations like the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, led by Magnus Hirschfeld, advocated for the repeal of Paragraph 175, the German law criminalizing male homosexuality. Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science, founded in

1919, became a pioneering space for research on gender and sexuality, offering medical support for transgender individuals and promoting public education about sexual diversity.

Queer spaces during this era were not hidden; they were part of Berlin's nightlife and cultural identity. Cabarets and clubs such as Eldorado offered both entertainment and refuge, featuring drag performers and same-sex couples dancing openly. Photographs and film fragments from the 1920's depict scenes of joy and confidence—a powerful image of queer normalcy before its suppression. The Illinois Holocaust Museum notes that Berlin in the 1920's was “a city alive with queer joy,” where people explored self-expression through art, fashion, and performance (“Celebrating Queer Joy in 1920's Berlin”). This celebration of identity created a foundation for modern LGBTQ+ culture, illustrating that queer existence was not new or hidden, but an integral part of human society.

At the same time, this period of openness was fragile. Many Germans viewed the Weimar years as morally corrupt, and conservative backlash brewed against the perceived decadence of Berlin's queer culture. When the Nazi rose to power in 1933, it exploited these sentiments, promising to restore traditional values. The queer world that had blossomed under Weimar freedom was rapidly dismantled. The Nazis targeted LGBTQ+ people as enemies of the state, accusing them of undermining the Aryan ideal. Paragraph 175 was not only reinstated but also strengthened in 1935, criminalizing even the suspicion of homosexual behavior.

The persecution that followed was severe. According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, approximately 100,000 men were arrested under Paragraph 17, and thousands were sent to concentration camps where they were marked with pink triangles (“Gay Men under the Nazi Regime”). Many died from mistreatment, forced labor, or execution. Yet beyond these numbers were personal stories—of love, fear, and defiance. Heins Heger, in the

men with the Pink Triangle, recounts his experience of surviving a concentration camp as a gay man, offering rare testimony of what it meant to be punished for one's identity. His words give voice to those who were silenced, transforming statistics into lived human suffering.

For transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals, the Nazi regime brought both invisibility and danger. Before the war, Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science had provided gender-affirming care and documented the lives of trans people, long before such terminology existed. However, in 1933, the Nazis destroyed the Institute, burning its library and medical archives. The Museum of Jewish Heritage highlights how this act was not just an attack on knowledge but on humanity itself—an attempt to erase trans existence (“Transgender Experiences in Weimar and Nazi Germany”). The Loss of Hirschfeld's research delayed the world's understanding of gender diversity for decades. Still, his legacy endures as a testament to scientific compassion and courage in the face of hate.

The erasure of queer narratives extended beyond the war. For decades, the stories of LGBTQ+ victims were absent from Holocaust history. Survivors who wore the pink triangle were often excluded from recognition or reparations. It was not until the late twentieth century that historians, activists, and artists began to recover these hidden histories. Laurie Marhoefer's “Sex and the Weimar Republic” argues that the silence surrounding queer persecution reflected society's discomfort with sexuality, revealing that even after the defeat of fascism, the struggle for queer acknowledgement continued. Remembering these stories today is not only an act of justice but also of love—honoring those whose identities were erased from public memory.

Culturally, the Weimar era's queer creativity left traces that continue to influence art and identity. Writers like Christopher Isherwood, who lived in Berlin during the 1930s, captured the spirit of the time in his *Berlin Stories*, which later inspired the musical *Cabaret*. These works

remind us that queer art does more than entertain—it documents existence. Drag, performance, and queer expression in 1920s Berlin provided spaces of resistance against conformity, illustrating that joy itself could be a political act. As the Illinois Holocaust Museum writes, “Queer joy in the 1920s was a form of resistance—a declaration that identity and self-love could flourish even in uncertain times.”

Reflecting on these histories through a humanistic lens reveals that queer people were not only victims but also creators of culture, community, and courage. They imagined freedom before it was allowed, and even in the face of persecution, they left behind a legacy of resilience. Understanding LGBTQ+ life in Weimar and Nazi Germany challenges us to reconsider how societies define normalcy and morality. It reminds us that tolerance is not linear—it can be gained and lost, rebuilt and erased.

In the context of World War II studies, these stories expand our understanding of what the Holocaust destroyed—not only lives but also cultural diversity, intellectual freedom, and love itself. Recognizing LGBTQ+ experiences alongside those of other persecuted groups honors the full scope of human suffering and survival during this period. It also reaffirms the importance of inclusion in historical memory. As modern societies continue to fight for equality, remembering the queer past is both a warning and a source of strength. The Weimar Republic’s moment of queer openness shows what humanity can achieve when authenticity is celebrated, while its destruction under Nazism shows what is lost when hate prevails.

Today, memorials and museums across Germany and Europe work to restore these lost narratives, piecing together fragments of a history long silenced by prejudice and violence. The Pink Triangle Memorial in Berlin stands as a powerful symbol of remembrance, bearing witness to the persecution of gay men during the Nazi era while reclaiming the pink triangle—a mark

once used to shame—as a symbol of pride and resistance. Similarly, exhibitions at the Schwules Museum in Berlin go beyond commemoration; they educate new generations about queer life before, during, and after the war. Through art, photography, letters, and recovered personal stories, these institutions give voice to those who were erased from mainstream history. They remind visitors that LGBTQ+ individuals were not merely victims of oppression, but vital contributors to culture, politics, and intellectual life.

These acts of remembrance transform silence into speech and invisibility into acknowledgment. They challenge society to confront not only what was lost, but also what can still be reclaimed. In doing so, they offer a more inclusive vision of history—one that honors the full spectrum of human experience. Memorials and museums serve as spaces where mourning and celebration coexist, illustrating that remembrance is not only an act of grief but also one of love. They remind us that history is not solely about tragedy—it is also about the enduring capacity for renewal, solidarity, and visibility.

Ultimately, LGBTQ+ life in Weimar and Nazi Germany embodies both the beauty and fragility of freedom. The contrast between the exuberant queer culture of 1920s Berlin and the brutal repression of the Nazi regime underscores how quickly acceptance can turn to annihilation. Yet even in the face of immense cruelty, identity, expression, and love persisted—quietly, defiantly, and against all odds. The survival of these stories, and the modern efforts to tell them, demonstrate that truth cannot be permanently buried.

By remembering and honoring these stories, we participate in an act of moral and cultural restoration—returning dignity to those who were denied it and reaffirming their rightful place in history. Through art, scholarship, and empathy, we ensure that queer voices of the past continue to resonate in the present. Their courage and creativity deepen our understanding of resilience,

identity, and humanity itself. In preserving their memory, we reaffirm the timeless human pursuit of freedom—the right to exist, to love, and to be seen.

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