



# Berlin

by Jennifer Chase

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In glbtq history, Berlin is legendary for its thriving subculture during the Weimar Republic (1919-1933), that brief moment when it was the center of the homosexual emancipation movement, and for its role as capital of Nazi Germany.

A reunited Berlin has concentrated on remembering its history to create a more liberal present. Berliners recently elected an openly gay mayor and participated in the struggle to gain legal recognition of gay relationships. Berlin surpasses other German cities in the scope of possibilities it offers to its queer residents.

## Frontier Town to World City

Berlin was founded in the twelfth century as a trading town and eventually became the largest city in Prussia. Berlin's cosmopolitan character was established in the seventeenth century, with the arrival of Poles, French, Italians, and others.

The Hohenzollern dynasty came to power in 1442 and made Berlin a military center in 1448. From this point on, except for a respite between 1918 and 1933, Berlin was dominated by the militaries of various governments until 1990.

The greatest of the Hohenzollern rulers was Frederick II, also known as Frederick the Great (1740-1786). A cultivated Francophone, he doubled the size of Prussia, establishing it as a major European power. Under Frederick, Berlin emerged as the center of German science and art.

Frederick's homosexuality was an open secret even during his reign. Mistreated by his father, Frederick Wilhelm I, who had his son's youthful lover beheaded, Frederick the Great became not only a military genius, but also an enlightened king, who introduced a number of civil reforms. He pursued his erotic friendships in private, especially at his retreat named Sans Souci, where he built a Friendship Temple commemorating the homoerotic relationships of Greek antiquity.

Despite the relative openness of Frederick, during the eighteenth-century same-sex sexual relationships were condemned by both church and state. Up until 1791, the official punishment for sex between two men was the death penalty, though such a sanction was only rarely applied.

The French Revolution and Napoleon's rule exposed Berliners to new ideas of liberty, fraternity, equality, and nationalism. Berlin became the center of German nationalism and intellectualism. However, although the new ideas inspired five German states to end legal persecution of homosexual behavior, Prussia, and hence Berlin, were not among them.

With the Industrial Revolution, Berlin became Europe's fourth largest city. By the middle of the nineteenth



**Top:** Students organized by the Nazi party parade in front of the Institute for Sexual Research in 1933. The next day, Nazis pillaged the Institute and burned its books.

**Above:** Openly gay Berlin Mayor Klaus Wowereit (right) attends Christopher Street Day celebrations in 2001. The image of Klaus Wowereit appears under the GNU Free Documentation License.

century, it was Europe's most important industrial center.

After the unification of Germany in 1871, Berlin became the new country's capital. A result of the unification was the imposition of the Prussian legal code on all the German states. In the section of the code soon to be known as Paragraph 175, imprisonment for up to four years and the revocation of citizenship were prescribed for those convicted of sexual activities between men or between men and animals.

### **The Early Twentieth Century**

In the early twentieth century, especially after Germany's defeat in World War I, Berlin gained an international reputation for its sexual openness. A thriving sexual subculture developed in the city and attracted visitors from throughout Europe.

Berlin's inflation made it a magnet for visitors and expatriates from America, England, and the rest of Europe, who could live cheaply and avail themselves of the opportunity to visit male and female brothels and clubs catering to every sexual taste. By 1933, there were more than 100 gay, lesbian, and transvestite bars in Berlin.

In this environment, the homosexual emancipation movement flourished. By the end of the nineteenth century, Berlin was a center of homosexual activism. In 1898, militant publisher Adolf Brand launched the first homosexual journal, *Der Eigene*, a literary and artistic magazine devoted to "male culture." In 1897, the more scientifically-oriented activist Magnus Hirschfeld founded Germany's first gay organization, the *Wissenschaftlich-Humanitaeres Komitee* (Scientific-Humanitarian Committee). In 1919, he established the Institute for Sexual Research.

Hirschfeld's Scientific-Humanitarian committee sponsored the first sexual survey of its kind among Berliners, gathered signatures to repeal Paragraph 175, and also published the *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* (Yearbook for the Intermediate Sex) between 1899 and 1923. In addition, a host of other doctors and jurists and activists theorized about the origins of homosexuality and campaigned for the rights of sexual minorities. These activities made Berlin the center of Germany's homosexual emancipation movement from the late nineteenth century to 1933, when Hitler came to power.

English novelist Christopher Isherwood, who lived in Berlin from 1930 to 1933, created the unsurpassed portrait of pre-Hitler Berlin in the *Berlin Stories* (comprising *The Last of Mr. Norris* [1935] and *Goodbye to Berlin* [1938]).

### **The Nazis**

Berlin was the center of opposition to the Nazis, who regarded the city and its "vices" as decadent and depraved. Although the Nazis hated Berlin, its centrality to German political, intellectual, economic, and cultural life made it vital for them to have a presence there.

Three out of four Berliners voted against the Nazis in the 1932 elections, and Communists and Nazis fought each other in street battles until Hitler came to power in 1933.

Soon after Hitler became Chancellor, on May 6, 1933, Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Science was plundered, destroying what was then the largest archive of glbtq material ever assembled. The Nazis then began removing Berlin's intellectuals, homosexuals, and Jews. Secret police and informers silenced those Berliners who felt these removals were wrong.

To seem more hospitable during the 1936 Olympic games in Berlin, the Nazis allowed some prostitutes to work and reopened some gay bars. They would later use police records to prosecute Berlin's homosexuals

under Paragraph 175, which they strengthened to criminalize almost any same-sex sexual activity.

In 1936, the Nazis created a department (*Reichszentrale zur Bekämpfung der Homosexualität und Abtreibung*) that was specifically devoted to the arrest and detention of homosexuals. Almost 100,000 homosexuals were arrested between 1936 and the end of the war and between 5,000 and 15,000 homosexuals were sent to concentration camps, where they were marked with the pink triangle that would later be a sign of gay pride.

As command central for the German war efforts and an important industrial center, Berlin was bombed during World War II, beginning as early as 1940. By the end of the war, allied bombing and the Russian advance had destroyed most of the city.

### **Post-World War II Berlin**

After World War II, the city was divided into a Western and Eastern sector. The end of the Nazi government permitted a brief resurgence of gay life in Berlin. The first gay bar in post-war Berlin opened in the summer of 1945, and the first drag ball took place in West Berlin in 1946.

After the war, West Germany, including West Berlin, reinstated the Nazi version of Paragraph 175 and retained it until 1969, when it was changed to punish only adults who engaged in same-sex sexual activities with minors. East Germany adopted the pre-Nazi version of Paragraph 175 and retained it until 1968, when it was changed to punish only adults who engaged in same-sex sexual activities with minors. The East German law was finally repealed in 1989.

The official position of East Germany was that homosexuality was a capitalist condition. Gay East Berliners organized a movement in and under the protection of churches, the only institution not under direct state control. All meetings of the movement had to be disguised as private parties or social gatherings in order to escape punishment.

During the 1980s, however, the East German government altered its position toward homosexuality and permitted greater openness. In 1986, the Berlin-based group *Schwule in der Kirche* (Gays in the Church) began publishing a gay newspaper. State-sponsored gay meetings were held in cafes and restaurants, and books and articles about homosexuality appeared in the mainstream press.

Gays in West Berlin were also ostracized, but they gradually formed groups and issued publications. Inspired by the 1969 American Stonewall riots and Rosa von Praunheim's 1971 film *Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers, sondern die Situation in der er lebt* (The Homosexual Isn't Perverse, but the Situation in Which He Lives), gay and lesbian West Berliners created a gay liberation movement. Paying homage to the street on which the Stonewall Bar was located in New York, they named their annual parade the Christopher Street Day Parade; it was begun in 1979. Today Berlin's CSD parade draws 500,000 visitors annually.

### **Berlin Today**

The atmosphere for glbtq people in the former East Berlin is still markedly different from that in the former West Berlin. However, a reunited Berlin has reclaimed its famed openness and now competes with Amsterdam as a destination for gay and lesbian travelers. No other city in Germany has such a varied queer scene. Hundreds of gay and lesbian bars, clubs, bathhouses, and social organizations serve a range of sexual tastes, intellectual interests, and social concerns.

Berlin remembers its history as leader in Europe's gay emancipation movement at the turn of the century. The Schwules (Gay) Museum, founded in the late 1980s, is devoted to chronicling all aspects of glbtq history, but it has special interest in the early gay emancipation movement and in the treatment of homosexuals during the Nazi era. The museum houses a memorial to Hirschfeld, to whom a memorial also

stands in the Charlottenburg district. The Museum also houses archives and exhibits.

Another institution, the Spinnboden, founded in 1973, maintains an archive concerned with lesbian life in the 1920s and from the 1970s to the 1990s. It also sponsors readings, films, and discussion groups relevant to numerous aspects of lesbian life.

In the Nollendorfplatz, a gay center in the 1930s and 1990s, there is a plaque memorializing the gay men who were persecuted by the Nazis.

Berlin's gay men and lesbians again have a strong presence in the city. Klaus Wowereit, an openly gay man, was overwhelmingly elected mayor in 2001, the same year in which Germany recognized same-sex unions. The city honors the history and presence of its gays and lesbians with archives, museums, bars, and clubs.

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### **About the Author**

**Jennifer Chase** is a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. She is preparing for research in Germany, where she will work with gay men and lesbians to explore questions of national identity as they intersect with sexual identities. Her work will utilize the extensive history of self-identified gays and lesbians in Germany to analyze current questions of national self-understandings.