

DID SEX BRING DOWN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC?

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German fascism was a moral abyss. The darkness of that chasm overwhelms the catastrophe that came just before it, dwarfing the significance of German democracy's collapse between 1930 and 1933. Yet the Weimar Republic's fall was a catastrophe, one of the history of democracy's most unnerving. It brought the world to the edge of the abyss. Had the Republic survived, even as a semi-autocracy with a right-leaning head of state, there would have been no fascist dictatorship. Think what would have happened had Heinrich Brüning remained chancellor, or even if Kurt von Schleicher had.

The historical profession, therefore, ought to be able to say with some confidence why the Weimar Republic fell. Historians have spilled a lot of ink on the problem. We now have a pretty good idea of what went wrong and why. Yet, we are still piecing together some important parts of the story. One of those parts is about sex. Many people think that sex had something to do with the Weimar Republic's collapse. This might surprise some readers. Sex has a history, but often, too often, professional historians do not relate the history of sex to major, "old-school" historical questions. When it comes to the Weimar Republic, however, they do. This delighted me as a graduate student. I had begun to study history because I wanted to study the history of sex. To find it front-and-center in a major debate, one that had been going on for decades, about one of the most profound questions in modern European history — why fascism came to power — was inspiring. The idea that sex helped bring down the Republic seemed to justify the study of the history of sex, which was often pushed to the margins of the history profession.

Yet sex did not bring down the Weimar Republic. Sex and the politics of sex were, nevertheless, important. The history of sexuality is a valid field of study. It does shed new light on the Republic's collapse and on fascism — not, however, for the reasons we had assumed.

I. The Kit Kat Club theory

Historians have been blaming sex for the Republic's fall for a long time. Just after the end of the Second World War, illustrious West German historians rushed to explain the cataclysmic sequence of

events between 1918 and 1945. They pointed to sex as an explanation for what had gone wrong — that is, why Hitler had come to power. Thus in his 1948 book *Europa und die deutsche Frage* the conservative historian Gerhard Ritter wrote that the Weimar Republic had destroyed authority, thus unleashing “cultural decay, lack of [religious] faith, and moral nihilism” — this was a reference, among other things, to the Weimar era’s relatively progressive, left-leaning sexual politics. According to Ritter, it was only in this “atmosphere” of moral nihilism that “the sudden expansion of the Hitler cult into a mass party is comprehensible.”¹ Because Ritter was one of early postwar West Germany’s most prominent historians,² his interpretation was highly influential.

Ritter’s idea was that the Weimar Republic’s relative toleration of sexual diversity amounted to moral nihilism, a revolt against moral authority that opened the door for even more immorality, namely, fascism. In his view, fascism represented a rejection of Christian moral values, such as the condemnation of murder. Moreover, fascism’s rejection of the Christian injunction against taking human life and its rejection of Christian sexual morals were of a piece. Living as most of us do, thankfully, in a different time, it can be difficult to remember that, not too long ago, many people saw homosexuality and murder as related moral violations.³ Another prominent historian, Friedrich Meinecke, made the same point in a similar book.⁴ These historians were not the only people who hit on this explanation for Weimar’s fall. One can trace it in popular culture, too.

To an American audience, perhaps the best example of this long-lived explanation for Weimar’s fall is Bob Fosse’s 1972 film *Cabaret*. One of the pleasures of watching *Cabaret* for someone with an interest in German history is that it paints a very stark portrait of what Ritter described: the sexual immorality of Weimar feeding the immorality of fascism. The cabaret in the film, the Kit Kat Club, is home to gender-bending and sexual transgression — heterosexual transgression, often. Joel Grey’s character, the Master of Ceremonies, presides over the Kit Kat Club. He cross-dresses and sings about the pleasures of three-way relationships. To American critics in 1972 the Master of Ceremonies was, as Terri Gordon writes, an embodiment of “the decadence and decline of an increasingly corrupt society” or, perhaps, a Hitler-figure, “luring the audience into blind complacency.”⁵ That is, critics linked his sexual and gender rule-breaking to fascism, which makes sense — the film’s plot makes the same link.

1 Quoted in Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis* (Toronto, 2015), 10.

2 On his reputation see for example Andreas Dorpalen, “Historiography as History: The Work of Gerhard Ritter,” *The Journal of Modern History* 34:1 (1962), 1-18: 1.

3 For context on the medieval Church’s conflation of sodomy and murder see Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, NC, 1999), 62-3.

4 See Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 194-195.

5 Terri J. Gordon, “Film in the Second Degree: “Cabaret” and the Dark Side of Laughter,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 152:4 (2008), 440-465: 461.

Watching *Cabaret*, one watches the Kit Kat Klub transform from anti-fascist to pro-fascist. At first, the Master of Ceremonies makes fun of Hitler, and an SA man is kicked out of the club. Yet, there is no guarantee that this antifascism has any legs. Although no one comes out and says this, the film implies that the people of the Kit Kat Club have no moral norms. As time goes on, the Kit Kat Club abandons anti-fascism. The Master of Ceremonies sings an antisemitic song (“If You Could See Her,” the gorilla number).⁶ He dances cross-dressed in a chorus number where the corset-clad kick line transforms itself into a phalanx of goose-stepping soldiers.⁷ In the film’s final scene, the Master of Ceremonies tells the audience that the beauty of the cabaret will help them forget their troubles, and the camera pans to show us that now, SA men are in the audience. To put it bluntly, it’s “debauched Germans into Nazis.”⁸

Why did so many people think Weimar’s sexual and gender “disorder” dovetailed with the moral disorder of fascism? One reason is that the Weimar Republic’s founding ushered in a sexual revolution. Or, at least, in the years just after the First World War, a lot of Germans believed that they were living through a sexual revolution and that the Republic had something to do with it. From left-leaning “new women” to septuagenarian Protestant morality crusaders, a host of authors in the early 1920s described how the war and the new democracy had overturned nineteenth-century mores.⁹

Another reason is that the Republic did transform Germany’s laws about sexuality in the media, homosexuality, sexually transmitted diseases, prostitution, and even abortion. Censorship became much less strict than it had been under the Kaiser, even though Imperial Germany had already been lax in censoring discussions of sexuality in print.¹⁰ In 1926, the Reichstag reformed the abortion law. Though it did not legalize abortion on demand, it did make getting an abortion a misdemeanor crime and lower possible jail sentences to just a day. The following year, a Reichsgericht decision allowed abortion for medical reasons with a doctor’s approval. An ambitious law on sexually transmitted diseases passed in 1927.¹¹ Its aim was to launch a modern, scientific state response to the public health dangers posed by syphilis and other infections. Among other things, this new law also deregulated women’s sex work (previously, female sex workers had been strictly controlled by police and other authorities). It was now legal for women to sell sex in Germany free from police oversight. The Reichstag’s penal reform committee was in the midst of

6 On “If You Could See Her” see Gordon, “Film in the Second Degree,” 460 and following.

7 Thanks to Geoffrey Giles for catching my prior sartorial confusion here: see Geoffrey J. Giles, “Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis by Laurie Marhoefer,” *Canadian Journal of History* 51:3 (2016), 606-608: 607.

8 Paraphrasing Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999).

9 See Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 26 and following.

10 See Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York, 2015); Gary Stark, *Banned in Berlin: Literary Censorship in Imperial Germany, 1871-1918* (New York, 2009).

11 On this law see among others: Michaela Freud-Widder, *Frauen unter Kontrolle: Prostitution und ihre staatliche Bekämpfung in Hamburg vom Ende des Kaiserreichs bis zu den Anfängen der Bundesrepublik* (Berlin, 2003); Julia Roos, *Weimar through the Lens of Gender: Prostitution Reform, Women’s Emancipation, and German Democracy, 1919-1933* (Ann Arbor, 2010); for a more complete review of studies of the law see Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 83; 251-252.

the mammoth task of re-writing the entire criminal code.¹² In 1929, it reached article 175 of the penal code, the sodomy law, and voted to strike it from the law code.¹³ Though the vote never took on the force of law, because the entire effort to revise the penal code failed, it was a powerful symbol.

The problem with *Cabaret*, Ritter's interpretation, and all the other versions of what we might call the "Kit Kat Club theory" is that, although these reforms were progressive, they cannot fairly be described as "moral disorder." They were, in fact, quite orderly. At the time they were passed, some people, especially on the far right, claimed they were signs of moral disorder. But many Germans — probably most Germans — did not think that these reforms amounted to disorder. Instead, what they saw before them was a new order: a modern, scientific approach to gender and sex. The idea of a new state response to sexuality, often framed in terms of public health, had broad appeal. Even the Catholic Center Party voted for the 1927 law on sexually transmitted diseases, although Center Party members later claimed parts of the law hadn't worked and called for revisions.

With *Cabaret* looming over us, it is hard to forget just how bourgeois and respectable the Weimar moment was. The Republic's reforms were pretty mild compared to, say, the reforms of the late 1960s and 1970s. They were mostly in keeping with prevailing bourgeois norms of gender and sexuality. Although Weimar Germany had its pockets of "decadence" like the Kit Kat Klub, the prevailing trend was bourgeois respectability. Magnus Hirschfeld, for example, the world-famous leader of Germany's homosexual emancipation movement, wanted to strike down the sodomy law, article 175, which criminalized sex between consenting adult men. He also wanted the world to recognize that many homosexual men and women were upstanding citizens. While those were radical demands at the time, Hirschfeld did not want to overturn the social norms of gender and sex completely. He was a reformer, not a revolutionary. For instance, he did not want homosexuals to acknowledge their homosexuality in public. By the way, doing that in the 1920s was called "self-denunciation" — the term itself is a reminder of the heavy stigma and legal risk involved in what would much later be called "coming out."¹⁴ Hirschfeld did not want people to come out. He was not "out." He also did not want legal protections for same-sex relationships. When Hirschfeld wrote about homosexuals and marriage, he did not write about same-sex marriage. Rather, he argued that because homosexuals were nature's

12 On this see also Richard F. Wetzell, "Introduction: Crime and Criminal Justice in Modern Germany," in Richard F. Wetzell, ed. *Crime and Criminal Justice in Modern Germany* (New York, 2014), 1-28: 7-11.

13 On the penal code reform committee's vote against Paragraph 175 see the committee's proceedings, reprinted as "Die Verhandlungen des Strafrechtsausschusses des deutschen Reichstages über die Strafbarkeit der Homosexualität," *Mitteilungen des Wissenschaftlich-humanitären Komitees* Nr. 24, September/October 1929, 176-191 and "Deutscher Reichstag: Beratungen des Strafrechtsausschusses des Deutschen Reichstages über den §297 des Amtlichen Strafgesetzentwurfs," *Mitteilungen des Wissenschaftlich-humanitären Komitees* Nr. 26 December 1929/January 1930, 209-223. See also Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 112-145.

14 Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 7.

way of containing and neutralizing hereditary degeneration, they ought not to get married to people of the opposite sex, because if they had children those children would probably be degenerate.¹⁵ When a colleague of Hirschfeld's suggested creating a mass movement of openly homosexual people, Hirschfeld dismissed the notion.¹⁶ Hirschfeld probably would have enjoyed catching a show at the Kit Kat Klub (though not the antisemitic gorilla number or the Reichswehr kick line number). He would have been disgusted, however, by the suggestion that the Kit Kat Klub typified the homosexual emancipation movement.

A second small but vivid example of just how respectable the Weimar Republic's gender and sex radicals were was unearthed by the historian Katie Sutton. Trans activists admonished trans women to dress respectably. They ought to take care to look bourgeois and demure in public, by, for example, avoiding costume rings and big showy earrings.¹⁷ In short, the historical reality was nothing like the sexy, dangerous Weimar Republic that is so fun to watch in *Cabaret*, nor was it anything like the Pride Parades and radical homosexual politics of the 1970s. To be sure, persistently but politely demanding the repeal of the sodomy law was radical and shocking at the time. But, by post-1970s metrics, Weimar-era homosexual emancipation was a little boring.¹⁸

The other problem with the idea that sex destroyed the Weimar Republic is a problem of evidence. If sexual politics did help to bring down the Republic in a major way, we would be able to see the traces of that causal chain in the historical record. I'm not convinced that we do, and I've looked in many places.¹⁹ One can run a quick check for accuracy on the Kit Kat Klub theory. If sexual immorality led into fascism, a substantial number of people with progressive views of sexual politics in Weimar must have backed the fascists. Nothing remotely like that happened. Progressives hated the fascists, and vice versa. It was mostly right-of-center people who came around to the fascist cause. Many reformers who pushed for new laws on prostitution, abortion, and homosexuality quickly fled into exile in 1933.²⁰ Hirschfeld left Germany in 1930 to give lectures in New York City. To his great sadness, he never returned. What kept him away was a well-founded fear that the Nazis would murder him. Both before and after 1933, on many issues, the fascists were not sexual progressives; fascism in power was very much its own beast, neither fully rejecting what had happened in the Weimar era nor fully embracing

15 Magnus Hirschfeld, *Die Weltreise eines Sexualforschers* (Brugg, 1933), 307; on Hirschfeld and homosexuals and marriage see also my forthcoming book on Hirschfeld's politics of antiracism and eugenics. Some good resources on all things Hirschfeld are Manfred Herzer, *Magnus Hirschfeld und seine Zeit* (Berlin/Boston, 2017); Ralf Dose, *Magnus Hirschfeld: The Origins of the Gay Liberation Movement*, trans. Edward H. Willis (New York, 2014).

16 Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 6-7.

17 Katie Sutton, "'We Too Deserve a Place in the Sun': The Politics of Transvestite Identity in Weimar Germany," *German Studies Review* 35:2 (2012), 335-354: 342.

18 By calling it "boring" I do not mean to hide the movement's more sinister impulses, which were often directed towards sex workers. See Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 207-209.

19 For a much fuller account of this research see Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 174f.

20 Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 200; Atina Grossmann, *Reforming Sex: The German Movement for Birth Control and Abortion Reform, 1920-1950* (Oxford, 1997), 136 and following.

it. Regarding homosexuality, let us note that the Nazi regime carried out modern history's bloodiest persecution of gay men.²¹

II. The backlash thesis

21 Readers interested in Nazi persecutions of gay men might consult some of the following books and articles: Burkhard Jellonnek and Rüdiger Lautmann, eds., *Nationalsozialistischer Terror gegen Homosexuelle: Verdrängt und ungesühnt* (Paderborn, 2002); Stefan Micheler, *Selbstbilder und Fremdbilder der "Anderen": Männer begehrende Männer in der Weimarer Republik und der NS-Zeit* (Konstanz, 2005); Günter Grau, ed., *Hidden Holocaust? Gay and Lesbian Persecution in Germany, 1933-45*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London, 1993); Geoffrey J. Giles, "The Denial of Homosexuality: Same-Sex Incidents in Himmler's SS and Police," in Dagmar Herzog, ed., *Sexuality and German Fascism* (New York, 2005), 256-290; id., "The Institutionalization of Homosexual Panic in the Third Reich," in Robert Gellately and Nathan Stoltzfus, eds., *Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany* (Princeton, N.J., 2001), 233-255; id., "A Gray Zone among the Field Gray Men: Confusion in the Discrimination against Homosexuals in the Wehrmacht," in Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth, eds., *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (New York, 2005), 127-146; id., "The Most Unkindest Cut of All": Castration, Homosexuality and Nazi Justice," *Journal of Contemporary History* 27, no. 1 (1992): 41-61; id., "Legislating Homophobia in the Third Reich: The Radicalization of Prosecution against Homosexuality by the Legal Profession," *German History* 23, no. 3 (2005): 339-354; Alexander Zinn, *Aus dem Volkskörper entfernt? Homosexuelle Männer im Nationalsozialismus*

There is a second, more formidable theory of how sex brought down the Republic, and it directs researchers to much more likely places in the archive to identify signs of that causal chain in action. What I will call the "backlash thesis" argues that conservatives were frustrated and alarmed by the Weimar Republic's sexual libertinism and legal reforms. Those anxieties boiled up into a strong counter-reaction, a backlash. Conservatives rose up against the Republic in order to save traditional morality. The Nazis' promise to clean up Weimar brought conservatives over to their side, so that Hitler could ride to power on a wave of reaction against sexual liberation. Historians have pointed to different ways in which this supposedly happened. While some argue that frustrated conservatives jumped on the fascist bandwagon because of sexual politics, others contend that a backlash against sexual liberation drove people who had been democrats to embrace authoritarianism, though not necessarily Nazism. In particular, historians have pointed to conservative anxiety about homosexuality, divorce, lax censorship, and prostitution.²²

The backlash thesis is a much more recent invention than the Kit Kat Klub theory, and it is much more promising. After all, many conservatives were indeed upset about Weimar-era reforms and libertinism. Although Weimar's popular image today is one of experimental art and left-wing politics — Marlene Dietrich in the *Blue Angel*, Fritz Lang's movies, Max Beckmann's paintings — most of the adults alive at the time were not cabaret singers. A big slice of the Weimar-era electorate was rather right-of-center when it came to sex and gender. If one looks just at "morality" issues, about a third of the electorate was voting for parties that were conservative: the DNVP (*Deutschnationale Volkspartei* or German National People's Party), the right-liberal DVP (*Deutsche Volkspartei*, German People's Party), and the Catholic Center Party. In 1932, the Nazis would garner about a third of the national vote, but no more.

(Frankfurt am Main, 2018). For a more complete review of this large literature see Laurie Marhoefer, "Lesbianism, Transvestitism, and the

Nazi State: A Microhistory of a Gestapo Investigation, 1939-1943," *The American Historical Review* 121:4 (2016): 1167-1195: 1171.

22 For a review of scholarship that argues for backlash, see Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 176-177.

Yet if the Nazi Party did ride to power on a backlash against sexual progressivism, one would expect the Nazis themselves to be aware that they were riding on a backlash and to make propaganda that stoked it. After all, the fascists are famous for their savvy propaganda. Yet — and this surprised me when I went to the archives to research backlash — they did not. The Nazi Party's two largest newspapers, *Der Angriff* and the *Völkischer Beobachter*, for instance, in the period when the Nazis began to win a significant share of the vote, that is, 1930 and afterwards, rarely mentioned sexual politics. When they did, the mentions were often vague and embedded within long lists of other grievances. In a 1932 article, for example, Joseph Goebbels blasted the Social Democrats for fomenting class warfare, wrecking the economy, taking land from farmers, destroying the army, losing the First World War, signing the Versailles treaty, attacking the middle class, supporting the Young Plan, mocking religion, and "corrupt[ing] public life, poisoning the *Volksmoral* ... betray[ing] the youth to the poison of demoralization" and "destroy[ing] family life."²³ This passage and many others like it show that the Nazis do not seem to have thought that sexual politics was an especially powerful message for them. They did not play it up. To be sure, it was present, but it was not as front-and-center as the backlash theory predicts. There are similar articles in the Nazi press at the same time that list many reasons why the Weimar Republic ought to be overthrown but do not mention sexual politics at all.

Moreover, as Goebbel's very long list demonstrates, the Nazis did not campaign against specific legal reforms that the Republic had implemented, such as the 1927 law on prostitution and venereal disease or the 1929 vote against the sodomy law. (Nor did other parties, for that matter.) Had popular discontent about those reforms been red-hot, and had the Nazis been well-poised to capitalize on that anger, surely they would have done so. But although they did position themselves as conservative on sexual-political issues, they did not make a singular and loud appeal about sexual politics. The Nazis themselves do not seem to have believed they were uniquely suited to benefit from conservative unhappiness about Weimar-era sexual progressivism.

In fact, it is easy to see why they did not. Despite the image of sexual conservatism cultivated by the Nazi press, after the spring of 1932 the Nazi Party was associated in a very public way with Weimar-era

²³ Joseph Goebbels, "SPD—Schamloseste Partei Deutschlands," *Der Angriff* 5 July 1932.

sexual progressivism, in particular with male homosexuality. In 1932, an ally of the Social Democrats revealed to the public that a leading Nazi — Ernst Röhm, the head of the SA — was quietly homosexual by publishing a clutch of Röhm’s letters to a friend in a pamphlet. In the letters, Röhm discussed his desire for other men frankly and without shame. For those who missed the pamphlet, Röhm’s sexuality got frontpage attention a short time later, in May of 1932, when one of Röhm’s lieutenants happened to run into the man who had edited the pamphlet in the café in the Reichstag building. Röhm’s henchmen attacked the publisher and beat him. The police came, rescued the publisher, and shut down the Reichstag. Several Nazis went on trial for the beating. As a result of national newspaper coverage of this altercation, millions of people found out what Röhm had long sought to conceal from the public and most of his fellow Nazis: that he considered himself a homosexual and had been having discrete affairs with other men. Röhm’s secret became so widely known that when Hitler had Röhm killed in 1934 and the Nazi-controlled press reported that Hitler had been shocked to discover Röhm’s homosexuality, people saw right through the pretense. The Social Democrats in exile reported that many people commented that in fact, Hitler — and everyone else — had known of Röhm’s homosexuality since 1932.²⁴ Röhm’s private life did not mesh well with the Nazi Party’s rabidly anti-gay stand; the party advocated, literally, drowning homosexuals in bogs.²⁵

Thus, in the early 1930s the Nazi Party was publicly tainted by male homosexuality. This is in part why the Kit Kat Klub theory thrived for decades. This taint also explains why the NSDAP would not try to claim to be the party best suited to clean up immorality and would, instead, keep relatively quiet about sexual politics. The Nazi state’s 1933 crackdown on public queer and transgender cultures also has to be understood in this context. By burning Magnus Hirschfeld’s library in public and by shutting queer and transgender bars and magazines, the regime was beating back the litany of accusations by Communists and Social Democrats that fascists were homosexuals and vice versa.

III. A naturally occurring experiment

Yet the story of the dramatic upswing in the Nazi vote is not the whole story of how Weimar fell. There is a separate process that played out around the same time. In 1930, when a coalition government led by the Social Democrats fell, the Republic’s duly elected

24 *Deutschland-Bericht der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands* (Salzhausen, 1980 [1934]), 200-201.

25 On how Röhm squared his fascism with his queerness see Laurie Marhoefer, “Queer Fascism and the End of Gay History,” <http://notchesblog.com>, June 19, 2018.

president, Paul von Hindenburg, refused to let new elections take place. Instead, he used his legal authority to depute a politician from the Catholic Center Party, Heinrich Brüning, to serve in the chancellorship independent of the parliament. This was the beginning of the end of democracy.

The attack on the democratic system by conservatives who were not fascists is a crucial part of the tragedy of the Weimar Republic. Recent books on Weimar rightly blame people like President Hindenburg and his advisors for gutting the democracy, even if they did not want a Hitler dictatorship.²⁶ Did sexual politics have anything to do with this? Some historians argue that it did. My own research, however, has shown that there is no evidence that right-of-center politicians, police officers, and bureaucrats were powerfully, primarily motivated by sexual-political issues, and that those concerns drove them to authoritarianism. To be sure, conservatives did care about combating “immorality”; many — though not as many as one would suspect — did not like the Weimar-era reforms on sexuality. Conservatives knew that one benefit of a right-wing dictatorship was that it would afford an opportunity to roll some of these reforms back. Once Hitler was in power, some conservatives praised him for rolling back some of those reforms. Before 1933, however, sexual politics were not a primary motivator for these important players. Absent sexual politics, the key right-wing authoritarians like Hindenburg and Franz von Papen would have acted just as they did. This is true as well for the more moderate opponents of fascism who fell in line, such as the Catholic Center Party. Their primary motives lay elsewhere.

Franz von Papen is probably the worst remembered, most responsible person in the tragedy of the Republic’s fall. An archconservative Catholic aristocrat, he attached himself to President Hindenburg and helped Hitler get the chancellorship. Von Papen and others sought a right-wing authoritarian regime, not the fascist one that they inadvertently helped to create. Von Papen thought he could use Hitler as a puppet and rule from behind the scenes. Conservatives like von Papen needed the Nazi Party’s support because they had no large popular backing of their own. The old conservative party, the DNVP, was hemorrhaging votes — to the fascists. In the high-turnout July 1932 elections the DNVP vote shrank to 5.9 % and the NSDAP became the Reichstag’s largest party, winning about 37% of the popular vote.

²⁶ Eric Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton, 2007); Benjamin Carter Hett, *The Death of Democracy: Hitler’s Rise to Power and the Downfall of the Weimar Republic* (New York, 2018).

Von Papen is of interest to our argument because he is a good example of just what role sexual politics played in far-right authoritarianism in the Republic's twilight moment. Prior to Hitler's appointment, von Papen was briefly chancellor. He used the emergency dictatorial powers imbued in that office to illegally take over the government of Prussia, Germany's largest province, which had been run by a democratically elected coalition of Social Democrats and Catholic Center Party politicians. (This is known as Papen's "coup" against the Prussian provisional government, the so-called *Preußenschlag*, remembered today as a major step on Germany's path away from democracy). Papen's short reign as Chancellor and as the unelected head of Prussia offers a naturally occurring experiment about what right-wing authoritarians who were busy taking the democracy apart wanted to do about sex. Papen had a chance to roll back the Weimarer reforms. If doing that would garner him public support, he had a strong motive to do it.

However, Papen did not do it. While he and his subordinates did try to fight "immorality," the steps they took to do that were surprisingly minor and tentative, at least compared to what the backlash thesis predicts. Under Papen, the state of Prussia mandated that if men and women were going to swim together in public, they had to wear bathing suits, and those suits had better not be skimpy.²⁷ This bathing suit order was quickly dubbed the "crotch decree (*Zwickel-Erlass*)" by its critics and was an object of much hilarity in the left-of-center press and foreign press.²⁸ (Catholic bishops had been complaining for years about skimpy bathing suits; indeed, swimwear designs changed dramatically between 1900 and the 30s.) The Prussian police under Papen also shut down Adolf Koch's controversial school of naked gymnastics.²⁹

What's even more interesting than these attempts to make residents of Prussia wear clothing in public is what Papen's regime there did not do, and what moreover he did not do as Reich Chancellor, though that post empowered him to hand down decrees without the parliament's approval. Papen did not issue a general ban on women selling sex on the streets, even though police chiefs in a few cities did so while he was in power. Under Papen's Prussian regime, the provincial Interior Ministry did try to use the obscenity law to crack down on homosexual magazines and other media with sexual content; the courts however resisted and the homosexual press remained in business.³⁰ In sum, the rollbacks were mild. They were not heralded with

27 Preußisches Innenministerium an die Polizei, 30 September 1932, Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz HA I. Rep. 84a Nr. 8101 Bd. X, 212.

28 Jens Dobler, *Zwischen Duldungspolitik und Verbrechensbekämpfung: Homosexuellenverfolgung durch die Berliner Polizei von 1848 bis 1933* (Frankfurt a.M., 2008), 534; Sybille Steinbacher, *Wie der Sex nach Deutschland kam: Der Kampf um Sittlichkeit und Anstand in der frühen Bundesrepublik* (München, 2011), 38-39.

29 See Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz HA I. Rep. 84a Nr. 8101 Bd. X, 178-216.

30 See Marhofer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 185-6.

great fanfare, nor were they met by a huge outpouring of support for von Papen, who remained markedly unpopular, even with his fellow political Catholics in the Center Party.³¹

From his position as Reichskommissar of Prussia, von Papen appointed an archconservative police chief in Berlin, Kurt Melcher, who attempted another kind of rollback: he threatened not to renew the permits held by gay, lesbian, and transgender clubs in the Mitte neighborhood to host dance parties. That is, he announced that he would refuse to renew their permits to hold dance parties when the permits expired. He did not try to shut the clubs; he just tried to stop the dancing.

In a memorable example of how broadly accepted the idea of homosexual emancipation had become by late Weimar, the gay rights movement erupted in outrage and demanded that Melcher reverse himself. He refused. He did however pen a remarkable letter to gay rights advocates; one of the gay magazines printed it. In the letter, Melcher insisted that pulling the dance party permits was “in no way” a restriction of “the rights of same-sex orientated people” or their clubs. The clubs in question were welcome to have dances, he wrote, but they had to make sure they were discrete events open only to some people, not advertised to the public, so that “the events do not cause a sensation among sexually normal people or offend sexually normal people.”³² So here, a far-right police figure with authoritarian leanings who worked for the archconservative Catholic von Papen, who shortly after this gave Hitler a major leg-up into dictatorial power, acknowledged that “same-sex orientated people” had “rights.” The canceling of the dance party permits for Mitte’s queer and transgender clubs was not a good sign. But it was not the crackdown one would expect if people like Melcher and von Papen were motivated by a backlash against the moral permissiveness of the Weimar Republic.

There was no backlash against “immorality.” Something more complex happened. To be clear, I am not arguing that sexual “immorality” was not important to many right-of-center voters. It was. It was likewise important to the conservatives who hijacked the government beginning in 1930. What I am arguing is that it was not of extreme importance to them. In other words, the backlash thesis greatly overestimates how influential sexual politics was. It was not a *primary cause* of the Republic’s fall, or even a secondary cause. The reforms of Weimar did not upset *enough* people *enough* to bring down

31 On this see Larry Eugene Jones, “Franz von Papen, the German Center Party, and the Failure of Catholic Conservatism in the Weimar Republic,” *Central European History* 38 (2005): 191-217.

32 Quoted in Paul Weber, “Moral gehoben werden soll!” *Die Freundin* 12 October 1932; see also Marhoefer, *SWR*; Dobler.

the democracy. They did not come close. In fact, by the early 1930s, even people like Melcher were willing to grant that homosexuals had rights. This was a far cry from the prevailing view of homosexuals a few decades before, which was that they were either mentally ill or utterly depraved. Readers interested in a fuller version of this argument, including a detailed look at the Catholic Center Party in the 1930s, will find it in my 2015 book, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*.

IV. Conclusion

The story of Weimar's collapse is scarier than it would be if we could just point to backlash and go home. The Republic was, in some respects, quite stable. Surprisingly, one area in which Weimar was stable was sexual politics. A remarkably diverse range of political actors found compromise on several contentious sexual-political issues. A right-liberal politician of the German People's Party cast the deciding vote against the sodomy law in 1929. The Catholic Center Party backed the 1927 law on prostitution and venereal diseases. When leftists revealed Röhm's homosexuality in the press, even some conservative newspapers came to his defense, arguing that a man's private homosexuality was not a public political question. There was widespread support for what I call the "Weimar settlement on sexual politics," an interrelated set of compromises that, if not loved by all parties, satisfied all parties sufficiently, so that by the early 1930s most sexual-political issues were not all that heated anymore. The settlement was that the Republic would tolerate some kinds of non-normative sexuality — female sex work, some kinds of homosexuality, some media with sexual content — as long as it remained hidden from the general public and, in the case of homosexuality, curtailed in a small adult sub-population. On the one hand, the settlement reflected general agreement that most citizens were able to make good choices regarding their own sexual expression and therefore did not need the police or the churches to tell them what to do. On the other hand, the settlement meant state management for people who made choices that were considered beyond the pale. One example of this was welfare detention for women who refused to stop selling sex on the street; another example was the planned crackdown on male sex work, a crackdown that most homosexual emancipation activists supported. Even leftists often used the language of degeneration and mental disability to distinguish the small group of incorrigible sexually disordered people who needed to be constrained.³³

33 Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 90-106; 123-128; 138-140.

Why did the Weimar Republic fall? As we learn more about Weimar we come back to older explanations. The Republic was not doomed from the start. It lasted longer than most of the eastern and central European democracies founded after World War I. It was not a society deeply riven by divisions writ large. It was, rather, riven by certain divisions over particular issues, above all those that were economic. It is not a coincidence that the Republic's crisis began in earnest in 1930, when the Great Depression hit. Hitler rode to power on a politics of resentment, of economic distress, of fervor for right-wing authoritarianism. He could only do so because at the same time, conservatives such as von Papen and Hindenburg were hollowing out the democracy from the inside, trying to set up their own dictatorship for their own reasons. Aside from a *specific crisis* in 1930-32, the Weimar Republic was a stable democracy, a system wherein people with very different views on sex and gender negotiated some surprising compromises — such as the idea that homosexuals can live in peace and even have dance parties, so long as they are discrete. This is striking because just a few years later, the German government, under Hitler, murdered thousands of people for the “crime” of consensual adult homosexual sex. The lessons of Weimar, then, are that the politics of sex can turn very quickly, and that democracies are fragile. They can fall fast.

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