The Fight For Respect And Dignity:

Lotte Hahm And Lesbian Persecution During The Holocaust

The persecution lesbians underwent as a part of the Holocaust was less overt than that of gay men, but was nonetheless devastating to the LGBTQ+ community. Through it we can explore the ways it exposes Nazi ideas of gender and sexuality, and what parallels we can draw with anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments today. In order to inform our approach to combating these sentiments, we can look at the experiences of Lotte Hahm, a lesbian activist who challenged Nazism in both identity and action. We must also ultimately understand the horrors undergone by so many during the Holocaust, and honor their memory by working for a more equal and beautiful future for all queer people.

In order to understand the persecution of lesbians and queer people as a whole during the Holocaust, it is necessary to understand what life was like before the Nazis took power. After World War I, there grew an increasingly visible and diverse queer community within Germany, especially large cities like Berlin. Increasing medical understanding, social establishments, publications, and LGBTQ+ rights organizations made Weimar Germany a remarkably progressive place (Espinaco-Virseda 84-86). Sex between men was illegal under Paragraph 175, though Weimar authorities often chose to overlook this. The law nevertheless

represented the social position of queer people as an oppressed group. As such, many queer activists pushed to abolish Paragraph 175, and nearly succeeded in 1929. Among them was prominent lesbian club owner, Lotte Hahm (Roberson 28). Hahm (fig. 1) was also heavily involved in the publication of a popular lesbian magazine, Die Freundin, in which similar ads often appeared ("Advertisement for 'Violetta Ladies Club'").

Fig. 1. Unknown, *Advertisement for 'Violetta Ladies Club,'* 1928

Hahm was not only a lesbian, but a "female transvestite", and was heavily involved in advocacy for "transvestites" in addition to lesbians. The term "transvestite" was used to describe a variety of people we would now describe as transgender or gender-nonconforming, but could also refer to cross-dressing ("Advertisement for 'Violetta Ladies Club'"). Sources disagree on how to refer to Hahm given this difference in terminology. I have elected to use the gender neutral pronoun "they." There is, however, no debate on Hahm's commitment to solidarity and the fight for

human rights for the whole queer community. Hahm wrote of this, “not just dances and social events will bring you equality; you also have to fight if you want respect and dignity” (qtd. in Boxhammer and Leidinger). That fight would become all the more necessary in the years following 1933.

Though queer people enjoyed relative freedom and visibility in the 1920s and early 30s, there was still a great deal of opposition, evidenced by the speed with which queer people were targeted by the Nazis. LGBTQ+ nightclubs were officially shut down by the German government in February of 1933 “only about a month after the Nazi party took power” (“Photo Collage”). A Nazi propaganda magazine published this collage (fig. 2) of such establishments and their patrons to paint a picture of the “degenerate” laxity of the Weimar era, and portray Nazism as a “defender of ‘traditional’ German values.”

Fig. 2. Unknown, *Collage From A Nazi Magazine*, 1933

In 1935, Nazis went beyond shutting down social spaces, and amended Paragraph 175 to "[impose] harsher legal restrictions and penalties on sexual activity between men" ("Paragraph 175"). Enforcement skyrocketed alongside the amendment. Lesbianism was not formally criminalized for a variety of reasons, one of which being patriarchal views on the nature of sexual relations (Iannucci 3). Male homosexuality was seen as a threat to the eugenicist aim of expanding a "racially pure" population, in that men having sex with each other were wasting their reproductive potential. Lesbianism in and of itself was not necessarily considered as large an issue, but lesbians often remained childless or otherwise deviated from the strict gender binary Nazis enforced. These actions could certainly have resulted in consequences including imprisonment in concentration camps for the crime of "anti-sociality," although such extreme punishment was not so common for lesbians as it was for gay men (Roberson 37).

Lotte Hahm challenged social norms in both gender and sexuality, and was a prominent figure in the community. They were arrested around 1935 for fabricated charges of possessing communist materials or seducing a minor, and sentenced to Morningen ladies camp (Roberson 40). Conditions in such camps were hostile towards lesbians. It was common for them to be made to engage in heterosexual sex in camp brothels, "undergoing a process of forced heteronormativization [before] eventually being killed" (Iannucci 10). Although this form of rape could

be seen as a ‘cure’ to lesbianism, this was separate from the goal of the situation i.e. torture. In addition to Nazi persecution, lesbians in camps also faced homophobia from fellow prisoners. Many accounts documenting lesbian prisoners in camps such as Ravensbrück or Morningen come from homophobic co-prisoners. Even among the dehumanized, LGBTQ+ prisoners were disdained. One survivor seemed to view the “inhuman acts of lesbian love,” she witnessed with the same horror as other aspects of the camp (Iannucci 9). This stigma from all corners of society contributed to significant challenges after the war.

It is clear that the momentum towards legal freedom and civil rights for queer people was lost after the Nazi rise to power, and was slow to return. Paragraph 175 was only fully abolished in 1968 in East Germany, and *1994* in West Germany. Socially before and following decriminalization, homosexuality was still heavily stigmatized, and the consequences of outing could be quite severe. Through the 1980s, lesbian mothers in West Berlin had their custody rights to their children removed if they were discovered, so relationships had to be kept secret in order to keep families together (“The long road”). Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that we have so few testimonies from survivors because to come forward could mean losing one’s job, social ostracization, or even imprisonment. This did not stop Lotte Hahm who when released from Moringen ladies camp continued their work as an activist until their death in 1967 in West Germany

(Boxhammer and Leidinger). They would not live to see the decriminalization they labored nearly 50 years for.

The United States today is much more akin to the Weimar Republic than it is to Nazi Germany in terms of LGBTQ+ rights. Same-sex marriage was federally legalized in 2015 in historic recognition of the humanity and legitimacy of queer relationships. That being said, we have by no means ended homophobia or transphobia. This year, a whopping 655 anti-trans bills are being considered with 45 having passed ("2024 anti-trans bills tracker"). These bills share several overarching themes. One of these is the reinforcement of a distinct gender binary based upon biological sex ("What anti-trans bills passed in 2024?"). It is widely accepted among researchers and healthcare professionals that biological sex is not a binary, and "[t]he idea that science can make definitive conclusions about a person's sex or gender is fundamentally flawed" ("US proposal for defining gender"). This theme conjures echoes of Nazi enforcement of a strict gender binary and emphasis on reproduction. Another theme is the presence of trans people in education; these bills often don't discriminate against only transgender people, but all queer people. Some go so far as to ban all discussion of gender and sexuality in the classroom ("What anti-trans bills passed in 2024?"). This sends a very clear message: queer people are not appropriate for your children. Schools are meant to teach children how to be ideal citizens. This includes censoring some material such

as profanity or illicit substances. By lumping gender and sexuality education in with these things as 'inappropriate,' proponents of these bills are telling us that queerness has no place in their ideal society or in their ideal citizens. Just as Hitler and the Nazis labelled queerness "degenerate," so too do those opposed to queer rights today. Both do so to control the very bodies of their citizens by imposing standards to which they must conform.

Nowadays, when we picture queer liberation we think of pride parades and gay bars. From my limited experience with both from Kansas City Pride this summer, I find them radical in so many wonderful ways. It is amazing that we are able to have such visibly, fabulously, unapologetically, queer events in the light of day. However, I would like to remember the words of Lotte Hahm. "Not just dances and social events will bring you equality; you also have to fight if you want respect and dignity." Pride as it appears today is greatly depoliticized and does little to combat the very real threats our community faces. Visibility will not save the bars from closing if and when fascism comes for us again. It did no good in 1933. As queer people, we cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the legislation that threatens all of us, and most of all trans people. We need to connect with other LGBTQ+ people at places like Our Spot KC which is an organization that provides social gatherings and support for a number of issues facing our community. We need social events and clubs, but more than that we need action to oppose the rise

of anti-LGBTQ+ politics. As a bisexual American and a student, it is my responsibility to support the efforts of those who carry on the legacy of Hahm and other activists in protecting and furthering LGBTQ+ rights. It is my responsibility to become an adult who will join their ranks in uplifting our community into a brighter tomorrow.

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