

Lesbian Women during National Socialism

Lesbian Women in the Women's Concentration Camp of Ravensbrueck

Since the beginning of the 1990s we as autonomous feminist and lesbian women from Germany and Austria have been taking part in the anniversaries of the liberation of the women's concentration camp at Ravensbrueck, the youth concentration camp for girls and young women at Uckermark and the men's camp. To us Ravensbrueck is a site of remembrance, of warning and of commemoration. But it is also a place of dispute and an important place in my political life.

In three consecutive years, we organized events on the topic of "Persecution of Lesbian Women during National Socialism", giving information, providing opportunities of exchange and commemoration at the Ravensbrueck memorial site.



On the occasion of the 70th

anniversary of liberation day we laid a memorial ball, by which we wanted to commemorate lesbian women and girls in Ravensbrueck, believing that it is high time to also make visible and to remember those women. Last year the initiative submitted an official request, after the authorities responsible for the memorial site had removed the ball. Unfortunately, there has not been a positive decision so far, only the information that there had been highly controversial discussions. We still hope that the next meeting of the advisory committee on May 5th, 2017 will agree on the memorial ball to remain.

During National Socialism, lesbian women were discriminated against, stigmatized and also persecuted. Women who were persecuted for racist and other reasons were additionally punished for their (allegedly) lesbian behaviour, for example at the women's concentration camp.

There is little we know about the lives of lesbian women during National Socialism. How had their everyday situation changed after the Nazis came to power and in which ways and to what extent were they discriminated against and persecuted? The question of evidence is to be raised. In our opinion, there are many indications that deserve to be considered and put into context.

The following will include thoughts, facts and quotations from reports and research papers that prompted our reflections and which have confirmed us in our assessment.

Neglected Research

Again and again, scholars have pointed out that there has been little research on this topic. At this point we would like to express our gratitude to Claudia Schoppmann who has for decades carried out research in this field. All in all, research funds, interest and recognition were denied.

In addition to that, many documents were already destroyed by the Nazis. In the meantime, many survivors and contemporary witnesses have deceased.

Homophobia and Lesbophobia

Homophobia and in particular, lesbophobia – a term in use since 1994 – play an important part since taboo and lesbophobia have had an impact on memories, reports and research.

Discrimination against Lesbians and against Women in General

... cannot be considered independently of each other but are closely interlinked. The discrimination and devaluation of women during National Socialism is the foundation of the discrimination and persecution of lesbians.

Already in 1921, one year after it was founded, the NSDAP committed itself to exclude women from both the party's leadership and its "managing committee". After its access to power in 1933 several laws were passed: women were expelled from universities and higher professions. They were urged to abandon their waged labour jobs in favour of marriage and motherhood. They were deprived of their passive suffrage, i.e., their right to be eligible for elections. The women's movement was brought into line. Women were pushed out of the public sphere while the private sphere was assigned to them, leaving them subordinated to their husbands as wives and mothers. Women's independent sexuality did not count and was subordinated to the obligation for reproduction.

In *Frauen im Nationalsozialismus (Women during National Socialism)*, Renate Wiggershaus lists the following examples of **NS sexist legislation**:

"Female parliamentarians lost their positions. Many were driven into exile, expatriated and expropriated, for example, Anita Augspurg (USPD) ...; or they were sentenced to prison or



Feminists Anita Augspurg (1857-1943) and Lida Gustava Heymann (1868-1943)

penitentiaries ...; or they lost their lives in concentration camps, for example, Johanna Tesch (SPD), who perished at Ravensbrueck concentration camp 11 days before her 70th birthday, or Leni Rosenthal (SPD) who was murdered by the Gestapo after severe abuse; or, in great despair, they took their own lives."

If women are barred or hampered from employment and if they should not live on their own but are expected to get married and give birth to children, measures like this have a twofold effect on lesbian women. In the few biographies compiled by Claudia Schoppmann and Ilse Kokula, lesbian women report that in their everyday lives during National Socialism, they experienced dismissal from their jobs and termination of their rental contracts, if – by way of denunciation – it became public that they lived in a lesbian relationship.

Destruction of Lesbian Subculture and Infrastructure

In Germany, already as early as 1933, pickup points, magazines and books for lesbian women were blacklisted and destroyed by the National Socialists.

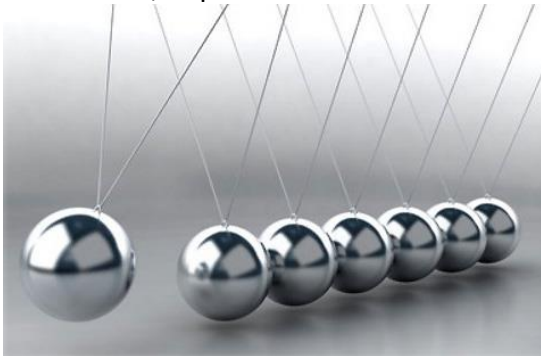
This was impressively described by both Claudia Schoppmann and Corinna Tomberger.

There are reports about **raids and even arrests at lesbians' pickup-points.**

Background to the Ideology of Degeneration

The book "Medizin und Geschlecht: zur Konstruktion der Kategorie Geschlecht im medizinischen Diskurs des 19. Jahrhunderts" ("Medicine and Gender: on the Construction of the Category of Gender in the 19th Century Medical Discourse") by Kathrin Schmersahl includes a historical analysis of the so-called doctrine of degeneration:

"Also, the doctrine of degeneration contributed to objectivising 19th century gender hierarchy, i.e., the social, political and cultural discrimination against women, as an apparent natural law. There is a tendency, on principle, towards pathologizing the female sex. The women's emancipatory movement and prostitution served as prototypes of female "degeneration", with prostitutes' lesbian relationships being regarded as particular phenomena of degeneration. Italian psychiatrist Cesare Lombroso (1836-1909) had claimed the existence of a close connection between female homosexuality and prostitution – a stereotype repeated by other psychiatrists (among others, Krafft-Ebing and Moll) and, finally, the National Socialists. The prostitute was the female counterpart of "the born criminal", a theory popularised by Lombroso. Pathologized sexual behaviour was associated with other social deviations, criminality, in particular. Lombroso advocated lifelong internment, deportation and extension of the death penalty to the "degenerated".



Besides criminalisation, this pathologizing became the breeding ground for the National Socialist ideology of inferiority, degeneration, criminality and asocial behaviour. The National Socialists also ascribed to lesbian women sexual instinct behaviour above average, considering them as prostitutes and denouncing them as degenerated, asocial and criminal.

Kathrin Schmersahl continues, "Around 1890 Julius Koch (1841-1908) coined the umbrella term of "psychopathic inferiority", thus linking psychopathy with explicit social depreciation. According to Koch, psychopathy was either innate or acquired and was associated with "asocial behaviour", sexual excesses and raised levels of sexual instinct behaviour. In the following decades "psychopathy" became stylised as the prototype of "degeneration". Thus, psychiatrists had created a diagnosis allowing them to exclude all those people deviating from the bourgeois norm that contained, among others, a duty for those considered "superior" to beget new citizens ...".

Indeed, we find an equation of lesbian women with prostitutes also in the more recent past. For example, *amnesty international* published the following incident in a report about human rights violations on the grounds of sexual orientation: on January 5th, 2001, 32 women were arrested for prostitution, because they were present at the New Ocean Bar in the Mexican city of Monterrey, a location mainly frequented by lesbians. For hours, the lesbian women were detained at the police-station and subjected to harassment. They were

released only after having paid a fine as prostitutes for their “breach” of the *Reglamento de Policia y buen Gobierno*.

(“Breaking the Silence- Human Rights violations on the grounds of Sexual Orientation” / “Menschenrechtsverletzungen aufgrund sexueller Orientierung”, edited by Wolfgang Dinkelberg, Eva Gundermann, Kerstin Hanenkamp, Claudia Koltzenburg. Amnesty international 1999, Berlin).

“... In that respect, the National Socialist sexual and population policies did not represent a fundamental ideological turning point, although it bore specific racist, anti-Semitic and patriarchal ideologic characteristics ... Two cornerstones seemed to be decisive for its increasing expansion: the reference to “healthy popular sensibility” and the definition of the “alien to the community”. In that way, it was guaranteed that all people and ways of behaviour not meeting the requirements of the National Socialist system of norms and values, could be prosecuted.” (Helga Amesberger, Katrin Auer, Brigitte Halbmayr: *Sexualisierte Gewalt – Weibliche Erfahrungen in NS-Konzentrationslagern* [Sexualised Violence – Female Experiences in NS-Concentration Camps], Vienna 2004, p. 336).

Article 175 and Lesbian Women in the German NS-State

In the aftermath of the “Roehm Coup” and the power interest to deprive the SA from power, the existing Article 175 was strengthened so as to criminalise homosexual men even more. Like after 1945, extending legal prosecution to homosexual women was taken into consideration, but not put into practice. Article 175 was not extended to cover lesbian women, because the National socialist ideologists and jurists assumed that they had already won the battle against lesbian way of living by passing the bills and acts applying to all the women.

The written protest filed by jurist Rudolf Klare against the decision by the board on penal law clearly shows that the reasons for that were of a merely strategic nature and did not have anything to do with the acceptance of lesbian life. Regarding homosexuality as “degeneration based on race”, Rudolf Klare wrote, “On principle, female homosexuality is to be considered punishable behaviour, as it is prone to undermine blood values and to withdraw woman from her tribal and nationalist obligations”.

The Reich Ministry of Justice decreed that with homosexual men “potency” was wasted, but that homosexual women would not “drop out of reproduction”. In addition to that there was much less homosexual activity among women than among men – except by prostitutes. Moreover, both the more intimate relationships among women and possible denunciations were much more difficult to investigate. “Finally, ... one important reason for the criminal liability of homosexual relations lies in the corruption of public life which will occur if this plague is not encountered with determination.” This would hardly be the case in view of the relatively minor part women played in public life.

In an edition of “Die Frau” (“The Woman”) jurist Gertrud Schubart-Fikentscher wrote in 1939, “Punishing unnatural fornication among women is intended for cases of aggravated offence”.

Alice Rilke, member of the Reich Women’s Leadership made the following remarks, “Independent of how the lawmaker will decide – as a matter of course, homosexuality among women is like the one among men, moral degeneration, threatening the existence and morale of the tribal community which is obliged to fight all phenomena of degeneration.”

Discussions like that show very clearly that besides the ban on pickup points for lesbians, also women’s general deprivation of rights, their dismissals from their jobs and their forced

displacement from higher positions and professional life, their exclusion from passive suffrage and also the implementation of heterosexist ideology by the homogenized women's organisations were calculated and strategic measures against lesbians.



Gay and lesbian commemoration at Ravensbrueck

Registration of Lesbians in Card Files

From 1944, the Berlin Criminal Investigation Department for Homosexuals was obliged to register the dates of lesbian women.

Differences in the Persecution of Homosexual Men and Women

“The kind and extent of persecution of lesbian women cannot be equivalised with the persecution of homosexual men. The article 175, which had been introduced in 1871, during the German Empire, and was massively tightened in the NS-state in 1935 exclusively applies to men. This was different from Austria or the Ostmark where, contrary to Germany, lesbian relationships were punishable by law (Article 129 Ib, Penal Code), since after the annexation of Austria, the legal practice was not harmonized. However, in general, female homosexuality was considered “socially less dangerous” and therefore not prosecuted. Still, homosexual activities were denounced as “a characteristic feature by no means intrinsic to a German woman”. (Helga Amesberger, Katrin Auer, Brigitte Halbmayr: *Sexualisierte Gewalt – Weibliche Erfahrungen in NS-Konzentrationslagern* [Sexualised Violence – Female Experiences in NS-Concentration Camps], Vienna 2004, p. 99, footnote).

In her paper on “Persecution and Discrimination of Female Homosexuality in Rhineland-Palatinate between 1947 and 1973”, Kirsten Plötz writes, “It is well-known that for a possible prosecution of lesbian love it was not exclusively important if it provided a threat according to article 175 of the Penal Code. Every now and then women were accused of lesbian love on behalf of the police and the judiciary, although it was not in itself punishable. This could be shown by research on prosecution during National Socialism.

From regional research in Hamburg it is well-known that in 1941 a woman was denounced, who was accused of “activities punishable by article 175”: “Since underage children were living in the same household, immediate intervention is required”. There were investigations also on the grounds of “lesbian activities”; suspected women were interviewed by the criminal investigation department and asked about the most intimate details, and women offenders were often punished more severely than others if it became known that they lived in a lesbian relationship. A denunciation accusing women of alleged lesbian sexuality is also reported from Hannover with the investigating department regretting that article 175 of the Penal Code was not also applied to women. All in all, it is not certain if women were convicted on the grounds of the article.”

The Penal Code: Article 175 in Austria and Bohemia and Moravia

“The Austrian Penal Code dating from the year 1852 requires in article 129 the criminal prosecution of homosexual men and, in contrast to the German Penal Code, also of women.” (schwarzwurzelkollektiv)

In contrast to most assessments, Johann Karl Kirchknopf arrives at the following resumé in his master thesis, “The result of my research clearly proves that women in Vienna were by no means affected to a lesser extent by the prosecution of homosexuals by the NS-regime. The number of women the courts investigated against on the grounds of article 129 lb, Penal Code, rose by more than half in the year 1941 compared to the average of the years 1932 to 1945, with their share in the group of persons against whom investigations were conducted on the grounds of Article 129 lb, Penal Code rising to nearly 15 percent. The number of women sentenced at both Vienna’s Criminal Courts on the grounds of Article 129, Penal Code, reached its climax in the year 1942, amounting to more than double the average number of the years between 1932 and 1943 ... The specific prosecution of homosexuals in the NS-regime did not only have effects on the intensity by which women were prosecuted in Vienna on the grounds of Article 129 lb, Penal Code, during the period of National Socialism. Also, normative measures by which the facts of the crime created by Article 129 lb, Penal Code, were significantly extended and which removed all the barriers for the jurisdiction regarding the interpretation of this legislative provision, had considerable effects on women. I have shown that the interpretation of Article 129 lb, Penal Code in the sense of Article 175 Reich Penal Code was applied to women in 1935 and the years to follow. The question remains to be answered in how far the NS-leadership intended these consequences or drew into consideration the consequence of these measures at all. The majority among the NS-leadership did not, in female homosexuality, see any threat to the “people’s body” worth mentioning ... The fact remains that the systematic prosecution of homosexuals by the NS-regime, at least in Vienna, also affected women, as I have been able to show.”

National Socialist Categories, “Asocial” Persons

Helga Amesberger, Katrin Auer, Brigitte Halbmayr: Sexualisierte Gewalt – Weibliche Erfahrungen in NS-Konzentrationslagern [Sexualised Violence – Female Experiences in NS-Concentration Camps]:

“Lesbian Women were exposed to particular forms of prosecution. Bock supposes that many lesbian women fell victim to the so-called ‘prosecution of asocial persons’. Among the 110,000 Germans committed to concentration camps between 1937 and 1943, 70,000 were done so as ‘asocial persons’, 40,000 as political prisoners.”

“Sexualised-heterosexist violence: As already mentioned, lesbian women were not affected to the same degree by National Socialist prosecution as gay men. The fact that in the admission lists to the Ravensbrueck concentration camp the note ‘asocial/lesbian’ can be found, seems to confirm Schoppmann’s thesis (1997) that lesbian women were to a greater extent affected by prosecution as “asocial” than on the grounds of homosexuality. Especially regarding the allegation of asociality the Nazis liked to resort to so-called moral aberrations. At the Ravensbrueck concentration camp lesbian behaviour was explicitly listed as an aspect of the internal SS penal system:

According to the Ravensbrueck camp rules, women were punished, among others, if “they approached other prisoners with lesbian [sic!] intentions, if they committed acts of lesbian ‘swinishness’ or did not report any such acts if they witnessed them.” (Schoppmann 1997, p. 254).

Alleged or real relationships were punished with relocation to the penal confinement barrack and/or beatings on the naked buttocks and enforced undressing in public. Again and again, reports by contemporary witnesses tell us about homosexual relations among prisoners in the camps. The greater part of these reports betrays prejudice, a stigmatising and depreciating attitude to these. This shows that many norms and attitudes acquired in everyday life also remained valid in the everyday life of the camp.” (Schoppmann 1997, pp. 248f)

Sexualised-heterosexist violence is directed against the (female) body defined according to heterosexist norms. Sanctioning of behaviour ascribed to the opposite sex and same sex ways of life, “attempts at reversal” and rape as well as forced labour to be carried out by lesbian women are just some examples for sexualised forms of violence homosexual women and men were exposed to. In her published memoirs, a Polish survivor mentions the incidence at the Auschwitz concentration camp of a Polish countess arriving at the concentration camp in men’s attire who had to prove to the SS-men her “womanhood” so as not to be taken to the men’s camp. (Lengyel 1972, p. 19f, quoted in Schoppmann 1997, p. 245)



Mary Puenjer

Mary Puenjer is remembered in Hamburg with a stumbling stone at Wandsbeker Marktstrasse 57. The text on this stone, authored by Astrid Louven, reads as follows: “... in summer 1940, 35-year-old Mary Puenjer lived together with her mother in a house that did no longer belong to them ... In the evening of July 24th, 1940, Mary Puenjer was arrested. She spent almost three years at the police prison of Fuhlsbuettel. On October 12th, 1940, she was transferred to the Ravensbrueck women’s concentration camp. In the admission list, it said “asocial”, with the specification “lesbian”. The ‘daughter of a respectable family’ found herself labelled with the black triangle attached on the jackets of the prisoners of the concentration camp. This symbol marking vagabond, non-conformist behaviour by people from mostly poor family backgrounds was used to stigmatise so-called aliens to the community ... Between the end of November 1940 and the middle of March 1941 Mary Puenjer was again transferred into the hands of the Hamburg police authorities and subjected to interrogations, among others by the police department 23, responsible for sexual offences. On March 15th, 1941, she was taken to Ravensbrueck. In November 1941, a medical doctor took up his notorious activity there: Dr Friedrich Mennecke was an SS-

Obersturmbannführer and employed in the context of “Action 14 f 13”, taken up in 1941. According to this programme, Jewish prisoners from the concentration camp had to be removed, i.e., to be killed. In January 1942, he came to Ravensbrück for a second time. His notification sheets containing “diagnoses”, which were equivalent to death sentences, have been preserved, among others the notification sheet concerning Mary Puenjer. He wrote about her, “... married full Jew. Very active (‘rakish’) lesbian. Continually visited ‘lesbian pick-up places’ to make it out with other women.” This wording allows the conclusion that she was arrested in such a pick-up place. As far as Mennecke is concerned he selected the Jewish prisoners according to available information and wrote his characterisations on the grounds of already existing entries into the criminal police and preventive detention records. This would mean that the Hamburg criminal police or Gestapo was the authority categorizing Mary Puenjer as lesbian. The question arises, if she was really a lesbian or only taken for one by the Hamburg authorities. The women selected by Mennecke did not get a chance to escape their being murdered at the Bernburg psychiatric hospital and nursing home ... In an archive in Warsaw there exist lists kept or copied by Ravensbrück prisoners of those days according to which Mary Puenjer was killed with gas on May 28th, 1942 following a selection at the extermination centre of Bernburg near Dessau ... Her having been assigned to the category of wearer of “Black Triangle” had sent her to the concentration camp, not her being Jewish. The protection offered against deportation by a “privileged” intermarriage expired as soon as a Jewish person was criminalised.



Yayoi Kusama

Prostitutes

“Similar to the “Greens”, prostitutes belonged to the scum of the camp. They suffered a lot due to the absence of men which led to the prospering of lesbian love among them. And, how astonishing, although people were in the Reich sent to concentration camps for this reason, this matter was tolerated. Allegedly the Nazis locked up prostitutes in the camp in order to “re-educate” them and to bring them back on the track of respectable life. Yet, when they felt like it, they threw off their hypocrisy and gave back to the ‘asocial women – albeit the young and pretty ones – their freedom on the condition that they provided their services for half a year at the brothels for soldiers and at concentration camps for men.

(MGR/StBG. – vol. 42/986)

(Helga Amesberger, Katrin Auer, Brigitte Halbmayr: Sexualisierte Gewalt – Weibliche Erfahrungen in NS-Konzentrationslagern [Sexualised Violence – Female Experiences in NS-Concentration Camps], Vienna 2004, p. 106)

(Note: No single case is known of any woman who was released. When they had survived the time at the brothel, they were sent back to the concentration camp, often in very poor health conditions).

Lesbians in Brothels

Christa Paul did some research on forced prostitution during National Socialism:

“On March 25th, 1944, the ‘special barrack’ at the Flossenbuerg concentration camp was handed over to the administration. This barrack was divided into two departments, one was the brothel for prisoners, the other for members of the SS ... A homosexual male prisoner says the following about his friendship with one of the women at the brothel who was a lesbian, “We were talking extensively until I was sent away by her boss ... Else saw to it that we could meet again and again to have time for talking.”

In her book *Zeit der Maskierung (Time for Masquerade)* (1988), Claudia Schoppmann refers to a report by Erich Helbig, who had been deported to the Flossenbuerg concentration camp on the grounds of his homosexuality. He says about the life of Else, a lesbian he had met at the brothel for prisoners at the Flossenbuerg concentration camp: The Nazis liked to send lesbian women to work in brothels. There they would be brought back on track, they thought. (Lembke 1989, pp. 13-30, quoted in: Schoppmann 1998, p. 22f).

schwarzwurzelkollektiv, “After Mauthausen and Gusen, that practically represented the “prototypes”, brothels for prisoners were established at eight further concentration camps. With a few exceptions, the women who had to carry out forced labour at the brothels for prisoners, came from the Ravensbrueck concentration camp ...

The women should be of German origin and “of the kind that it can be expected from the start that, due to their past and attitude, they will not ever be won over to a later well-ordered life, i.e., that even after the most thorough of examinations we do not have to reproach ourselves of having spoilt a person worth saving for the German people.” (Himmler in a letter to Pohl, quoted in: Christa Paul: Zwangsprostitution [Forced Prostitution], Berlin 1994). This clearly refers to women considered prostitutes. The SS also liked sending lesbian women to brothels for the purposes of reversal of sexual orientation. Here it needs to be stated that any sexual behaviour deviating from the National Socialist norm could lead to arrest on the grounds of “prostitution”. These women were categorized as “asocial” by the SS, had to wear the black triangle and were at the very bottom of the prisoners’ hierarchy. This means that beside their vulnerability to arbitrary cruelty committed by the SS, they were also exposed to the contempt of other prisoners, thus having very bad prospects of survival.”

Rapes

“Sociologist Ilse Kokula writes about a lesbian woman who was, at the end of the war, sentenced on the grounds of ‘undermining the military forces’ and deported to the prisoner-of-war camp of Buetzow in Mecklenburg. There she was detained in an extra bloc with six other lesbian women, separate from the rest of the female prisoners, who were placed under male surveillance, which was contrary to the usual practice. The SS-guards incited French and Russian prisoners of war against the women, urging them to rape them. This happened in spite of the rule that normally forbade prisoners-of-war to have any interaction with German women. (Kuckuc 1975, p. 127f, quoted in Schoppmann 1997, p. 239).

The Women’s Concentration Camp of Ravensbrueck

At the women’s concentration camp, lesbian behaviour was punished. Holding hands was considered lesbian behaviour and survivors such as Isa Vermehren report about beatings and women being transferred into the penal confinement barrack.

Insa Eschebach, head of the Ravensbrueck memorial site, points out that the rules of the camp criminalised lesbian contacts as well as refusing the “obligation to report others”.

Helga Amesberger, Katrin Auer, Brigitte Halbmayr: *Sexualisierte Gewalt – Weibliche Erfahrungen in NS-Konzentrationslagern* [Sexualised Violence – Female Experiences in NS-Concentration Camps], Vienna 2004, pp. 89-92:

„Having a girlfriend in the concentration camp is of immeasurably higher importance than in normal life. All one’s love is directed to them, all one’s attention and self-sacrifice, that normally belong to one’s sexual partner, one’s family, one’s children. The girlfriend – that is a symbol, the magical embodiment of family life. The girlfriend can be told “what and who one really was ...” (Kos 1998, p. 174f.)

As in Marty Kos’s book, the platonic, sisterly, purely friendly nature of such relationships is typical of the descriptions of such friendships. The surviving women rarely speak about whether some of the friendships they upheld with other women also took a sexual and intimate form and which part sexuality, desire and intimacy played for them in the surroundings of the concentration camp. In Kos’s text, a sexually intimate side of the relationship with the girlfriend can be read between the lines, because “all one’s love is directed at her, (...) which actually belongs to one’s sexual partner.” Also in the symbolisation of friendship as “the magical embodiment of family life” the sexual and intimate love between spouses is inherent, besides the parental love of children.

In telling their life stories, none of the women interviewed mentions personal, sexually-intimate relationships with other prisoners, neither to female nor to male ones. Thus, we have a similar situation here like with the issue of sexualised violence. Subjects and aspects, in one way or another connected with sexual intimacy, are rarely told or if they are, only in reports about other persons. In most cases same-sex sexuality among women is seen and presented negatively. With Schoppmann (1997, pp.44-254), we can also say that lesbian relationships are usually presented showing the imprisoned women as “asocial”, while sexual relationships among “political” or other prisoners are not made a subject of discussion.

In addition to that, the fact that there existed same-sex intimacy and sexuality between women was not known to some women before they were imprisoned in the concentration camp.

“(…) many of the asocial persons were Germans, unbelievably many among them, lesbians. I am saying, ‘Yes, I do not know of such a thing, that is why I am asking so stupidly, because I do not know about it.’” (IKF-RAV-Int-10_2, p. 73)

Therese Gericke, who came to Auschwitz on a transport, was in Ravensbrueck for 2-3 days. There she met some Frenchwomen who were lesbians. She had talked to one of them, asking her for the reason why she was in Ravensbrueck being so young and having beautiful long hair. She told her that she was a lesbian. (Visual History Online Shoah Foundation).

Condemnation and Punishment of LL (Lesbian Love) at the Women’s Concentration Camp

Isa Vermehren, who was interned at Ravensbrueck for reasons of so-called kin liability, writes in “Reise durch den letzten Akt: Ravensbrueck, Buchenwald, Dachau: eine Frau berichtet [“Journey through the Last Act: Ravensbrueck, Buchenwald, Dachau: A Woman is Telling Her Story”]:

“While all this was going on, I looked at a board on the wall which contained triangles in different colours and explanations of their meanings: ... pink = LL (lesbian love) ...” (p. 17).

Probably “LL” as an abbreviation for “lesbian love” was only used in the language of the camp, a real tagging could not be verified.

Elsewhere she writes, “In front of the typing room, a number of loudly bickering and gesticulating prisoners were coming together, as far as I could see mostly block leaders and camp police, surrounding in a half-circle two girls, one of whom was ghastly pale and breathing heavily. In the beginning, I could not understand anything, until I could repeatedly hear the word “El-El” (short for lesbian love), and “Admit that you slept with her”, “Don’t lie, you are her girlfriend” and similar things more ... But the yelling women did not know any mercy. They drove her across the court of the camp, pushing her around and on the next day she was interned in the penal confinement barrack. This penal confinement barrack was surrounded by barbed wire and located in the large camp ... indeed, it was the breeding ground of the real lesbian love with all the disgusting phenomena of its distorting effects. The majority of the younger prisoners of the penal confinement barrack had fallen prey to this vice and it was not difficult to identify them from their overly masculine outward appearance ...” (p. 49-50)

All in all, Isa Vermehren’s descriptions are detached and lesbophobic but adequately reflect the atmosphere of hostility to lesbians that prevailed at the concentration camp as well as the denunciation and punishment of (alleged) lesbian prisoners with beatings and transferal to the penal confinement barrack, where (in her opinion) many lesbian prisoners were forced to stay.

“Penal confinement barrack and punishments

The penal confinement barrack was separated from the rest of the camp by a wire fence and a wall made of wooden planks. It was the place for prisoners who were to be punished particularly severely. They had to carry out the most strenuous and dirtiest kinds of work. In addition, they had longer working hours, hardly ever a day off and were given even smaller food rations than the rest of the prisoners. The most brutal overseers were employed there, running a terror regime. Being transferred to the penal confinement barrack was a particularly dreaded kind of punishment; it was considered the ‘hell of Ravensbrueck!’”, this is what it says in the report of a contemporary witness.

www.fjweb.fju.edu.tw/lcyeh/lit/material/1_1/Strafblock%20und%20Strafen.pdf

Persecution

It is often claimed that the term of persecution must not be used for describing the situation of lesbian women during National Socialism on the grounds of them not being prosecuted as criminals.

But what does the term of persecution mean?

Duden offers the following synonyms, among others: discrimination, humiliation, violence, diminishing, belittlement, pogrom, harassment, suppression; (metaphorically) discrimination, discriminating.

An Issue of Topical Interest: The Persecution of Homosexuals and Asylum

Also today, there is a debate on the issue of persecution and its recognition – for example, in asylum law.

With the help of the internet organisation *All out* a petition is being prepared to the UK Home Office since March 2017 to prevent LGBT asylum seekers from being deported to Afghanistan. The authorities suggested they deny their sexual orientation or gender identity in public.

The argument that sexuality could be practiced in the private space after all, continuously ignores that a homosexual life includes more than a secret sexual act. For many women, the question is if this private space is available at all. But also, people persecuted for political and religious reasons are not told: Can't you stay quiet and practise your religion at home?

Multiple Persecution

How did it affect the persecuted women that they were victims of multiple reasons of persecution?

Is it important at all if National Socialists added a description such as "rakish lesbian" to the file of a prisoner at a concentration camp and what were the consequences?

Why were such extra remarks added at all?

For example, have not Jewish lesbians been threatened because they were also homosexuals?

"... Jews are not interrogated. Only if it is possible to accuse them of other, additional offences ...", Anja Lundholm writes about her experience at the Innsbruck police prison before she was sent to the Ravensbrueck concentration camp in 1944. (Anja Lundholm: Im Netz. Bericht. [In the Net. Report] Reinbek 1991)



The life stories in the "Third Reich of couple Marta Halusa and Margot Liu" is told by Ingeborg Boxhammer. The reciprocal effects of the different reasons of persecution by National Socialists – as Jewish, prostitutes, anti-fascists and lesbians – become particularly obvious in their case and have as consequences numerous arrests, denunciations, detentions, torture by the Gestapo. How great that they were able to survive those times! In 1949, they emigrated to England and started fighting for recognition as victims of persecution in a number of compensation proceedings.

Intersectionality

"Regarding the arguments often heard that there did not exist any sufficient proof of the persecution of women as lesbians, I think it makes sense to abandon the existing (National Socialist) categories and to count 'lesbian women among those persecuted'. This would lead to women's intersectional discrimination being acknowledged as well as the multiple-layer of persecution", Isabel Meusen, PhD, University of Memphis, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures) writes.

Continuities

The regional government of Rhineland-Palatinate commissioned a research paper with the aim to be able to deal with the historical reappraisal of the criminal proceedings against and rehabilitation of homosexual persons. Commissioned by the Department of Contemporary

History in Munich-Berlin and in cooperation with the Federal Foundation Magnus Hirschfeld, historians Dr Guenther Grau (Berlin) and Dr Kirsten Ploetz (Hannover) carried out the research. The research paper was presented to the public on January 23rd, 2017.

In it, Kirsten Ploetz arrives at the following conclusions:

“It is striking that the discriminations by law of lesbian love have not been abolished since the 1960s, as was the case with criminal proceedings against gay men. For female homosexuality, we can rather state that it was not prosecuted as a crime, but at least in Rhineland-Palatinate it was strikingly discriminated against in the late 1970s and in the 1980s. This can be concluded from the sentences that were based on the custody law and on homicide. It is by no means improbable that discrimination was the custom in these – and perhaps also other – areas for a much longer period of time. Therefore, further research would be required about the ways in which the justice system was dealing with lesbian love. The state of knowledge regarding female and male homosexuality is starkly different. Only with great effort, evidence could be found in this first short study for the discrimination against lesbian love in the years between 1946 and 1973 ...

While for men the penal law was crucial, for women the marriage and divorce laws played a major role, the life goal of marriage presented as one without alternatives, the situation on the labour market and the concealment of one’s existence. We also need to consider that some measures discriminating against women in general, hit lesbian couples doubly. Except for the rehabilitation and compensation for victims of Article 175, Penal Code, there should be a public commemoration of the discrimination against lesbian women from Rhineland-Palatinate. The target group should also include those women who did not yield to their desire but got married because of the pressure of social norms, with them being subjected to their husbands who they could leave again only when they accepted great losses. It can be assumed that under such circumstances several lesbian loves were not lived. We must also call it instances of great suffering when mothers lost custody of their children as a consequence of their living as lesbians. And, last but not least, the concealment of lesbian life in public and the withholding of literature containing lesbian characters must be mentioned. Research into such instances of discrimination has only just begun.

Article 175 of the Penal Code did not threaten women with punishment. However, this does not mean that lesbian women were spared discrimination. Rather, the article could anytime have been extended to women as long as it existed. Indeed, doing so was considered and demanded several times, for example in 1951 by the Catholic Volkswartbund. In his brochure “Das Dritte Geschlecht” [“The Third Sex”] author Richard Gratzweiler, a judge from Bonn, warned at the end of his elaborations on male homosexuality, “Also lesbian love should be liable for punishment; that it is not is inconsistent ...”

To get to the heart of the matter: Women should get married and be at their husbands’ mercy for a lifetime. It can be assumed that the pressure exerted by the law and by society as a whole made it unnecessary to make women punishable as criminals on the grounds of Article 175, Penal code. The priority of marriage which was cemented both socially and by civil law already limited substantially the possibilities of lesbian ways of life.

Concealed Alternative

In addition to that, lesbian life in public was hardly visible as a possible alternative to marriage. This could have caused many a woman to give in and to get married even if they, more or less consciously, desired or loved women.



We consider it important to evaluate from a feminist perspective the facts that are known.

We commemorate all those lesbian women who were interned and murdered in Ravensbrueck or who lost their lives in the euthanasia programme of the Nazis, like Mary Puenjer and also Henny Scheermann who were transported from the Ravensbrueck concentration camp to the Bernburg psychiatric hospital where they were killed. We remember the few women whose names and biographical data we know – thanks to the work done by Claudia Schoppmann: Mary Puenjer and Henny Schermann, Elli Smula, Inge Scheuer and Marie Glawitsch.

We think it is high time for an official commemoration of the lesbian victims of National Socialism in Ravensbrueck and also for a memorial stone. Thus, we hope for a positive decision by the advisory committee.

Wiebke Haß (for the initiative of Autonomous Feminists and Lesbians in Germany and Austria)

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