Decriminalization, Seduction, and “Unnatural Desire” in East Germany

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Fears concerning sexual intransigence, deviance, and seduction have a long history in Germany, as elsewhere, surfacing in sexual scandals, medical texts, psychiatrist notations, the columns of newspapers and boulevard press, and in debates about the criminalization of same-sex relations. By the end of the Weimar Republic, both opponents and supporters of decriminalization agreed that adolescents were particularly vulnerable to seduction by adult male homosexuals. The Nazis relied on this idea when they expanded Paragraph 175 in 1935, adding a new paragraph, 175a, to the legal code to address intergenerational sex, male prostitution, and the threat of seduction.

Just as Nazi Germany expanded the Criminal Code as part of its social revolution, similarly, Stalin’s Soviet Union (U.S.S.R.) treated homosexuality as suspicious activity linked to sabotage, espionage, and a lack of political reliability. The U.S.S.R.’s most celebrated playwright Maxim Gorky was unequivocal in 1934 in seeing homosexuality as antithetical to the tenets of communism: “exterminate homosexuals and fascism (itself) will disappear.” Homophobia ran rampant across the political spectrum. Like the Nazis, the U.S.S.R.’s People’s Commissar of Justice Nikolai Krylenko thought homosexuals were sexual pariahs, who “in filthy little dens and hiding places” made elaborate plans to corrupt the innocence of youth.
through seduction. In the volatile 1930s, both the fascist and Stalinist regimes relied on similar notions of youth endangerment, rendering the male homosexual a danger to the moral and material integrity of the state.

Following the collapse of the Third Reich, the Allied occupation, and the creation of the two Germanys in 1949, how did East Germany (the German Democratic Republic, or GDR) deal with this twofold inheritance, that is, the Nazi past and the Soviet presence? Mass rape, prostitution, displaced populations, and the destruction of the family created what many observers felt was a significant moral vacuum in both Germanys. Children were forced to bear adult burdens at an early age, and the conditions of scarcity and lawlessness spawned renewed debates surrounding the dangers of sexual impropriety. The conditions of defeat and occupation, together with what some experts gauged might be between 10 and 20 percent of returning soldiers having experimented with homosexuality during the war, brought the very definition of normative masculinity back into focus. In the midst of a deepening cold war, fear over the moral condition of male youth was at the same time a concern with the roles young East or West German men would be required to play in state and society. As the 1940s gave way to the 1950s, adolescence itself acquired new political significance as both East and West Germany viewed consumer culture, smutty literature, and pornography as cold war weapons of corruption aimed at each country's youth. In East Germany, the struggle to define new social and legal maxims turned on the place that morality was to have in the revolutionary rebuilding of society.

In this article, I suggest three things: first, I bring to light the uneasy relationship between prudishness and changing social mores that failed to dissipate after the decriminalization of homosexuality; second, I show that biological explanatory devices were central instruments of state power in East Germany; and third, I argue that efforts at controlling sexual desire backfired in significant ways, enabling subcultural self-determination and emboldening citizens after 1968 to take the regime to task for failing to live up to the spirit of the new law. Taking seriously Günter Kracht's argument that the gendered worlds of individual citizens must be analyzed together with statements generated by the regime, I wish to argue for a political-cultural synthesis in thinking about the way masculinity and the
abject functioned historically in the GDR. We must begin by looking at the ways in which various images of masculinity shaped official and private life, both the roles set out by the state for its citizens and those internalized, embraced, or rejected in the intimate realm.

**Constructing a New Socialist Manhood**

With the increased numbers of refugees fleeing across the internal boundary from East to West Germany, the nation's youth as "the bearers of hope for the Party" (die Hoffnungsträger der Partei) held a particularly important place in the realization of new social and political norms in the GDR of the 1950s. East German advice literature attempted to inculcate a socially responsible form of heterosexuality to help channel pleasure-seeking impulses for the collective struggle. While youth services hurried to discipline and reeducate deviations from prescribed norms, institutions, such as the state youth organization, the Free German Youth, and the National People's Army, steeped young men in traditions of duty and respect for authority. Homosexuality, like delinquency and rowdiness (Rowdytum), called into question the smooth transition from fascism to "actually existing" socialism. Same-sex sexuality and the masculinities it unleashed gave rise to a host of anxieties: East German experts and politicians feared narcissistic, sick, inward-looking men who ignored both their productive and reproductive responsibilities and who might lead lives outside of the purview (and control) of the regime. As in the West, GDR ideologues used social policy to shore up what they viewed as moral behavior for its citizens.

Along with such fears, the postwar crisis gave rise to voices in East Germany that viewed sexual expression as a fundamental freedom and embedded this view in a broader vision of radical social and political change. Dresden psychiatrist Rudolf Klimmer reignited the debate over decriminalization of homosexuality between men and began to court favor for his view, based on the work of sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, that there existed a basis in nature for homosexual desire. Although Great Britain, the United States, and France in the West and the Soviet Union in the East refused to revoke Paragraph 175 criminalizing male homosexuality in the immediate postwar revocation of Nazi laws, and although German courts in the Western zones of occupation and after 1949 in the
newly founded Federal Republic continued to prosecute homosexuals according to the 1935 Nazi law, the East Germans entertained a more lenient stance. In 1950, the Berlin Court of Appeals (Kammergericht Berlin) reinstated the pre-1935 version of Paragraph 175, although it retained Paragraph 175a. In the mid-1950s, a reform commission set up at the behest of the Ministry of Justice went so far as to suggest homosexuality should be decriminalized entirely; and after 1957 consensual acts among adults were less likely to proceed to court unless there was a perceived threat to public order or the social good. Legal wrangling and state pressure delayed the actual Criminal Code reform until the late 1960s, but by reverting to the pre-1935 definition of the law and then discontinuing the prosecution of most adult infractions, the GDR took a bold step away from West German jurisprudence.

Paragraph 175a governing male prostitution and intergenerational sex, however, was retained in spite of the fact that it had been a Nazi addition to the law. East German courts declared the legality of this facet of the Nazi legislation because it was rooted in “progressive ideas in that it defended sexual integrity and thus the healthy development of youth.” Rejecting pleas by Klimmer to protect sexual choice as a matter of privacy, GDR legal authorities saw Paragraph 175a as protecting men under the age of twenty-one against unnatural sexual experimentation at the hands of the preying homosexual. More generally, they viewed it as a bulwark against the development of abnormal sexual expression among the country’s male youth.

Spurred on by the evolving debate on both sides of the East German/West German border over the early onset of puberty and its implications for age-of-majority discussions, the East German regime and courts paid particular attention to masculine comportment. But despite mounting concern with the private actions of its citizens, especially in sexual matters, the reform commission remained undecided about which strand of moral regulation to incorporate into the rewritten legal code for Paragraph 175. Before a consensus could be reached, the events of 1953—both inside and outside East Germany—halted the project of legal reform.
In the wake of Stalin’s death and with the introduction of intense economic restructuring in the spring of 1953 a wave of labor unrest swept across the country. Legions of young workers went on strike, angered by increased production norms and what amounted to wage cuts. Faced with revolt, the regime changed its course almost overnight. Gone were the halcyon days of utopianism; as the Soviet Union had in the mid-1920s when it backed away from sexually progressive policies as Stalin tightened his grip on power, GDR leaders set in motion a series of socially conservative policies designed to cloak the population in a blanket of Communist ethics that included the promotion of the family, pronatalism, and respectability. Any plans for wide-sweeping legal reform were put on hold until the economic situation had stabilized.

In using family discourse as a moral cudgel to garner sympathy and bring discipline to a people undergoing rapid social and economic change, the regime highlighted homosexuality’s alleged bourgeois origins—and its links to fascism—and drew with increasing vigor on Paragraph 175a to criminalize all acts of homosexual incitement and desire involving minors. The former Minister of Justice, Max Fechner, and the founding father of the Ministry of State Security (Stasi), Wilhelm Zaisser—both political opponents of SED leader Walter Ulbricht—fell victim to this homophobic rhetoric and were purged from their posts as “not only politically but morally degenerate.” Conjuring the specter of sexual impropriety and seduction that had worked so well against Ernst Röhm in the early 1930s, the East German High Court charged Fechner with tempting “the still under 21 year old witness G.—a member of the Guards’ Battalion of the People’s Police—to commit indecent sexual acts by unbuttoning his trousers and touching his genitals.”10 Same-sex desire challenged the regime’s purity of purpose, evoked uncomfortable images of another totalitarian state’s rule, and threatened to loosen the bedrock upon which the GDR’s social, economic, and family policy was mounted.

In other words, like Nazis in the mid-1930s, GDR leaders in the 1950s marshaled homophobia to project a sense of normalcy during moments of intense sociopolitical modernization and change to rid themselves of dissenters within the leadership. East German leaders explicitly used Paragraph 175 to do so. At the same time that homosocial institutions
such as the People's Police were expanded to prop up the insecure regime, appeals to morality and justice helped formalize an ethics of collective citizenship and belonging that hinged on men's involvement in productive labor and healthful heterosexual relations. The GDR stood at the forefront of the Eastern bloc in cementing images of a “new socialist manhood” in the cultural imaginary. Casting shock workers—those heroes of industry who labored for the nation by meeting and exceeding quotas—and soldiers as emblems of masculinity, class consciousness, and moral integrity, East Germany clamped down on anything smacking of sexual transgression. Gone was the morally suspect image of nudity in free body culture (FKK, or Freikörperkultur); only the half-naked bodies of the activist brigades managed to pierce the public sphere. In this gender constellation, homosexual acts between men, even if consensual, were considered not only unmanly but also unproletarian, endangering working-class respectability and conjuring up images of the effeminate male. There was no longer any room for Klimmer to lobby for the decriminalization of homosexuality on the basis of sexual choice and individual freedom. Same-sex activity endangered the iconic position of the worker hero, soldier, and father—the three core components of masculine citizenship.

From the summer of 1953 on, men and youths accused of besmirching the tenets of socialist citizenship became targets of especially exacting intervention, particularly if they were in any way linked to the SED, the People's Police, or mass organizations such as Free German Youth or Free German Trade Union. The National People's Army, founded in 1956, was so preoccupied with what men did in their private time that it routinely transferred and decommissioned “offenders” while simultaneously denying the existence of homosexuals in its ranks. To safeguard the ideological chasteness of social policies, promote instructive examples of civic manhood, and secure productivity, authorities turned the private realm into a potent site of intervention in the promotion of shared civic, sexual, and social ideals. They used a mix of social welfare and penal measures to reinforce the message that full and active citizenship must revolve around (re)productive labor and sexual restraint. Drawing inspiration from Soviet pedagogue Anton Makarenko, who, in the early 1920s, was one of the first
in the U.S.S.R. to advocate temperance and the sublimation of sexual drives in the service of state building, youth services employed detention centers and workhouses such as the Struveshof facility just outside of Berlin to reeducate itinerant and criminal youth through a mix of socialist stewardship, agricultural labor, and industrial training. Reeducation was anchored in the view that sexual desire shaped gender identity, was dangerously malleable, and required responsible sculpting.¹²

Socially conservative visions of sexual behavior surfaced in court cases and politicians' speeches as a central feature of appropriate socialist identification. They also reflected the average German's desire for what was viewed as traditional values in a period of political upheaval. For example, the remote district attorneys' offices, which had been set up in mining towns in the Wismut region to prosecute crimes in the highly secretive uranium operations, reported that "unnatural desire" endangered the "the health and purity of worker citizens." In 1958, Ulbricht reminded his audience at the Fifth Party Congress of the SED that the achievement of state socialism would require both the engagement and energy of all citizens. In outlining his Principles of Socialist Morals and Ethics—popularly known as the Ten Commandments—he underscored that "respect for family" was "a firm element of our world-view." The Ten Commandments surfaced in facilities such as Struveshof as essential features of reeducation programs linking heteronormative sexual ideals to healthy and active citizenship. The irony, of course, is that for the most endangered, the family ideal could only be enforced in the sterile environment of an institutional homosocial space, where, at least according to neurologist Hanns Schwarz, it took only one malcontent in a sleeping hall to unleash a "wellspring of infection"—a reference to seduction and the "disease" of homosexuality. Supported by such views, in 1957 a dormitory warden at a Bitterfeld film-works felt no shame putting these ideas in to practice, turning in her seventeen-year-old male charge to the police for soliciting a relationship at the local train station. In an interview thirty years later, she held firm to her position. The last she heard the boy had become an excellent specimen of "new socialist manhood," successfully "putting it all behind him."¹⁴

The Ministry of Justice, the police, and youth services were not the only institutions policing sexuality by linking normative (re)productive
masculinity to the strength of the state. From the pages of magazines such as Junge Welt (Young World) and Das Magazin (The Magazine) to the myriad sex education and advice manuals of the 1950s and early 1960s, a host of experts sought to shape the thoughts, minds, and actions of young GDR citizens with regard to the moral economy of sex and preferred gender expression. At the same time that progressive-minded sex educators advocated against a “morality of the convent,” discourses of responsible heterosexuality also percolated into the 1964 juvenile justice statute, the new 1965 Family Code, and the 1966 education reform act. Medico-moral definitions of gender and sexual norms perpetuated the idea that homosexuality hinged on the specter of seduction. Even the generally progressive East German Dictionary of Sexology from 1964 characterized homosexuals as “rapturous, gushing, and exalted [personalities] of fragile affect, with early sexual awakening.” Gynecologists such as Wolfgang Bretschneider never once wavered from the notion that homosexuality spread by seduction to prepubescent youth. Rudolf Neubert preferred the bourgeois thesis, stating gay men were “pleasure-addicted progeny of rich families.” The Committee of Anti-fascist Resistance Fighters claimed plainly that “the majority of surviving homosexuals live in the FRG [Federal Republic of Germany or West Germany] . . . and stand in opposition to the socio-economic changes put in place in the GDR.” Apparently only heterosexual young men could thrive in the GDR. Despite the talk of sexual openness in the 1960s, most experts agreed that homosexuals were effeminate and politically unreliable cosmopolitans who threatened to spread their malevolence to the innocent.

Homosexuality Decriminalized
In 1968, following the successes of new economic initiatives, East Germany formally decriminalized homosexuality among consenting adults. Both Paragraphs 175 and 175a were removed from the Criminal Code, only to be replaced by a new provision, Paragraph 151, for policing the age barrier. While the age of majority for heterosexual encounters was set at fourteen, the new law prohibited sexual activity between adult men and youths under eighteen and for the first time ever acts between women and girls under eighteen. In many ways, both subtle and explicit, decriminalization
was a pyrrhic victory. The hard-fought guarantees of sexual self-determination for adult men came at a cost as female and male youths garnered additional scrutiny for their sexual choices and actions.

Decriminalization certainly did not mean the issue of male sexual deviance was off the table. If anything, the opposite was true. The 1960s marked an end to the preoccupation of legal reformers with aberrant desire. As in Western nations, authority over the question changed hands from jurists and reform commissions to sociologists and criminologists, psychiatrists, and psychotherapists. Homosexuality was less of a legal issue than a medical one, affirming, in a way, Hirschfeld's original line of argumentation.

In East Germany social scientists were enlisted to understand why the socialist norms formulated in the 1950s were not being adequately internalized in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Drawing on a strand within Marxist-Leninist ethics on socialist personhood, new research initiatives sought to decode the root causes of criminal motivation, marking the reemergence of the social and psychological sciences in matters of educational, youth, and criminal policy east of the Iron Curtain. This new fixation on the consciousness of social outsiders arose during the years of the New Economic System (1963-1969), which the regime hoped would propel economic competitiveness and viability through an emphasis on know-how, innovation, and science. Life course, mental health, family life, and sexuality were natural subjects of inquiry as citizens were instructed to involve themselves ever more directly in building a sustainable socialism. On the heels of the 1963 SED Party Program, Bernd Bittighöfer claimed that recognition of one's moral obligation to the state would only increase “socialist class consciousness and love of the fatherland, attachment to socialist ideals, commitment to active work within the collective, high individual engagement, courage, [and] self-knowledge.” According to Herbert Zerle, a professor of pedagogy at the University of Leipzig, such moral education had to be directed at young teens in order to create “well-rounded and cultivated people” with deep respect for the collective struggle. Zerle recognized the years between twelve and fourteen as especially important moments of self-discovery. That they were also the key
years in sexual awakening only lent urgency to Zerle's ethics of moral development.17

The new emphasis on the inner workings of the socialist personality coincided with a change in priorities within the regime over how to balance liberalizing tendencies in legal reform with an increase in popular expectations for greater political freedom. By 1971, with Erich Honecker’s ascension to power, the Ministry of Health, Justice, and Education began to work more explicitly with psychologists and police to assess the reasons behind the continued “asociality” of select groups such as alcoholics, so-called rowdies, and the perpetually unemployed. Frequently, they cited juvenile delinquency and homosexuality as risky behaviors in need of better management. Failure to demonstrate commitment to the socialist community was now a psychological failing, securing a firm place for psychosocial definitions of same-sex attraction. Homosexuality had been transformed into a condition to be pitied if not prosecuted, one that might be treated if not prevented. In the process, it morphed from a series of acts with some influence upon gender comportment into the basis of an identity.18

Within a few years after decriminalization, homosexuality among adults became a topic positively discussed in the East German press even as youth sexuality remained politically contentious. When sexologist Siegfried Schnabl described homosexuality as normal in his impassioned 1973 “Plea for a Minority” in the East German glossy paper Das Magazin, twenty-year-old student and later gay rights activist Klaus Laabs’s “heart almost stopped beating” at the sight of an open and professional discussion of the issue. Despite this new openness, lesbians and gay men still needed to meet clandestinely in apartments and salons, such as Charlotte von Mahlsdorf’s nineteenth-century museum in the far-eastern suburbs of the city. Emboldened by the changing climate but still fearful of state repression, they could not have imagined that von Mahlsdorf herself was working as an informer for the secret police. Huddled around the period bar salvaged from one of the most notorious Berlin lesbian and gay clubs of the 1920s (which had been brutishly dismantled in 1963), discussants felt buoyed by the spirit of Hirschfeld, who had once sought refuge there.19
But greater public discussion of homosexuality did not eradicate the confusion surrounding its root causes. Even Schnabl’s sympathetic approach contained the prospect of therapeutic intervention to help heal the afflicted. In a 1978 forum in the magazine Deine Gesundheit (Your Health), physicians Klaus Tosetti and Gerhard Misgeld humanized homosexuality as providing “everything the culturally developed person might hope for in life: sexual harmony, aesthetic taste, love, and the recognition of one’s peers.” Even as they proclaimed that homosexuality was “neither a sickness, nor something that made one ill,” they advocated for greater research into its biological origins because it could be a burden some people did not wish to bear. Similarly, Jutta Resch-Treuwert’s column “Between Us” in the Free German Youth periodical Junge Welt trod softly on the issue. In a response to an adolescent’s question about a gay friend, readers were told they had nothing to fear because gay people “are no different in their urges than anyone else, and they are important and useful members of society, whom no one has the right to ostracize.” However, when asked more directly whether a reader should respond to a friend’s advances, she too maintained the distinctions between normalcy and deviance by evoking the time-honored refrain of the deleterious impact of homosexuality on impressionable youth. With a final word of caution, she affirmed the connection between sexual experimentation and gender confusion, warning her readers that “a sexual relationship with a homosexual itself, when it is over, could burden your future love life.”

Press reports, radio programs, and lectures, such as those in Bert Thinius’s philosophy classes at Humboldt University, marked the transformation of homosexuality as a subject of expert knowledge to an issue of wider concern. The eventual recognition of homosexual rights organizations, such as Berlin’s Homosexual Interest Group (Homosexuelle Interessengemeinschaft Berlin, or HIB) in the mid-1980s, was a major step forward, considering it had operated underground in the years since it was founded on the heels of the World Youth Festival of 1973. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed the slow liberalization of attitudes on matters of sexuality generally, yet many East Germans continued to view gay people as perverse, upholding traditional visions of women’s and men’s roles. Reflecting on the situation in 1981, one interviewee in an ethnography on queer East Germans claimed that hateful
comments such as “you should castrate that sow” were in fact “par for the course.” A People’s Police officer let go from his post upon discovery of intimate letters in his locker in the 1980s was even told by his colleagues, “Hitler forgot to gas you.” The state’s position did little to clarify matters. The age boundary between adolescent and adult continued to provoke controversy. As the 1981 commentary to the Criminal Code made plain, consensual sex between men might be tolerated, but it certainly was not sanctioned if one or both partners was under the age of eighteen. Homosexual acts were still judged “liable to compromise the formation of sexual-ethical norms . . . and the normal sexual development of young people.”

Decriminalization had hardly challenged the social stigma that the heteronormative gaze attached to the allegedly deleterious impact of same-sex acts on fragile adolescent sexuality and the maintenance of family-based male social roles.

Claims to a public gay identity frequently met with scorn and sanctions. Men who opted to live outside the closet, who even embraced their homoerotic desire as a foundation of identity, were still denied positions within the government, the party, state bureaucracy, police, military, and mass organizations. Some were able to find employment in academia, the theater, or as writers, but many more were forced into the second tier of employment. As nonindustrial workers, denied party status, they worked in a substratum of the socialist utopia, making a living as bartenders, dancers, eulogists, and booksellers. Some certainly were relegated to this realm reluctantly, but others recognized a degree of freedom within this subculture. As Heidi Minning found in her interviews with East German lesbians and gay men after 1989, those who identified publicly as gay (schwal) willingly worked in the arts and service professions, while men who sought to pass as straight often came from blue-collar professions where a hardened heterosexual masculinity remained the norm.

Far from heralding the dawn of a new era, the 1970s and 1980s remained difficult years for East Germany’s lesbians and gay men, especially those beginning to organize for change. In the mid-1980s, a story in a feminist magazine indicated a group of lesbians and gay men were put into group therapy after they had appealed for use of the local meeting house. Officials forced a battery of tests on them, including a public weighing, the
taking of blood and urine samples, and measurements for broad shoulders, small hips, and reflexive response. Two women were told that they were indeed “biological lesbians” because doctors had found too much testosterone in their blood, confirming the notion that biological deviation determined gender performance. Although less harsh than the experiences of Soviet lesbians and gay men, who faced forced punitive measures in labor details or shock therapy, the treatment of activists in the GDR nevertheless demonstrates the precariousness of coming out.24

The suppression of benign forms of public sexual expression testifies to the vigor with which the regime cultivated homophobia into the 1980s. In 1975, the Aufbau publishing house omitted the eighth chapter of Thomas Mann’s Lotte in Weimar given its unabashed depiction of homoeroticism. In 1986, the central advertising agency, DEWAG, dropped all gay “contacts desired” advertisements from weekly newspapers. Even ads in which women sought “pen pals” were censored. Those who petitioned for redress, such as Andreas T. and Lutz C. in 1986, were invited for a “conversation” with the local People’s Police detachment, who duly informed the Central Committee’s Department of Security of their investigation. Student activist Laabs’s position paper to the Humboldt University, criticizing its antiquated position on the burgeoning gay rights issue, caused the author’s expulsion from the ruling party given his “affront to collective purity.” Even the young American anthropologist, John Borneman, in East Berlin researching everyday life behind the Iron Curtain, would be monitored—by a Stasi informant, Leipzig psychologist Kurt Bach. That the Stasi had recruited Bach, among others, to inform on the nascent gay rights movement came to light in 1994, following unification, and caused great consternation among other activists. Stasi machinations, however, went even further: Bach himself was evidently under observation. In 1987, he had applied to the Ministry of People’s Development for a temporary exit visa to travel to an international conference in Amsterdam, claiming he would challenge Borneman’s anti-GDR stance on the regulation of homosexuality. Denied the exit visa, his paper was presented in absentia; in it, Bach defended the GDR, professing his belief that socialism held the possibility for destigmatizing “unnatural desire.”25
The 1980s saw a mixed picture in the GDR. Officials quashed attempts to commemorate pink triangle victims of Nazi atrocities at Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen, but in 1984 they allowed a Protestant church service in East Berlin by vicar Eduard Stapel honoring the same prisoner group. To many activists it appeared that change was on the horizon. Homosexual working groups organized in the sanctuary provided by the Protestant churches. Yet many same-sex-desiring men opted to continue meeting clandestinely, while many women remained wholly invisible to the state by living their lives without such self-defining monikers as lesbian. A 1985 Leipzig conference on psychosocial aspects of homosexuality began a period of “enlightenment from above,” as medical experts and sexologists met with local lesbian and gay activists. Even the Eleventh Party Congress of the SED in 1986 brought a glimmer of hope: the party emphasized the place of the individual in socialist society in an attempt to reach out to an increasingly disgruntled population and remain in control of social change. A thirty-five-page study, “The Situation of Homophile Citizens in the GDR,” commissioned for the Party Congress by Egon Krenz, one of the more liberal members of the Central Committee, outlined reasons why homosexuals should be welcomed into public life, citing the dangers that might ensue if they were forced underground. Underscoring the humanist dimension of socialism, the report cited the deleterious impact of continued marginalization, ranging from suicide, disease transmission (syphilis, not AIDS, because the GDR did not yet admit to the latter epidemic), and increased contacts with foreigners to clique building, cruising, seduction, and blackmail. Homosexuality, as one of a variety of forms of desire, was naturally occurring and innate. It was the conditions in which it surfaced that determined whether any harm befell the individual, and by extension, society. Provided society accepted gay people and the state created appropriate centers for socialization, such as group sexual counseling centers for “young people in the phase of Coming Out,” university clubs, and social gathering spots instead of private salons, pubs, and bars, gay people might be more readily integrated into society and enjoy greater citizenship rights as a “special and protected minority.” Although the brief attempted to destigmatize homosexuality, it still provided a series of conditions for state recognition, chief of which was unfettered access to the subculture. In
other words, this was not a celebration of difference in the service of socialist personality development, but a call for greater institutionalization.

Despite all this, emboldened organizers used the opportunities presented in the 1980s to carve a space for greater sexual self-determination, demanding attention to the place of homosexuality in the GDR, asking for spaces to organize, the establishment of youth clubs and advice centers, and nondiscriminatory policies in the workplace. Parents now sought compassion and redress in petitions to Honecker's office when a loved one's situation appeared to contravene official policy. The mixed-sex Sunday Club was founded in 1987 as an explicitly homosocial gathering space and entertainment venue. And by January 1989, the RosaLinde Free German Youth club became the first of its kind to receive official support for gay youth in Leipzig. Although this semblance of toleration may have chipped away at homophobia within some echelons of society, it still failed to control gay bashing in the capital, especially given the rise of right-wing activity and skinhead youth. Nevertheless, lesbians and gay men made good on the promise of liberalization and reform by reinterpreting the rhetoric of personality development as a means to lobby for public visibility. In the process, they tested the state and society's commitment to inclusion and community.³⁰

As a new generation of sociologists, psychologists, and psychiatrists tapped into the discourse of personality, nowhere did this new research imperative have more sweeping influence than in the Stasi itself, which gleefully adopted methods from these research agendas. It was not uncommon for the state and the Stasi to employ research institutes for policy-driven initiatives, producing theses and dissertations on matters of crime, policing, philosophy, and sociology. In 1983, Gerhard Fehr wrote a dissertation in the criminology department of East Berlin's Humboldt University, but his was no typical piece of scholarship. A Stasi operative, Fehr's commission included the elaboration of state policy under the cover of legitimate research. Taking seriously the quest for scientific objectivity in revisiting the place of homosexuality in developed socialism, Fehr provided the Stasi with ample ammunition to better identify the now-public homosexual. Fehr's reach was wide: by one account over 150 Stasi moles who had infiltrated gay-friendly organizations within the Prot-
estant churches knew about the dissertation and its maxims. Fehr's description of homosexual typologies revisited the time-honored issues of promiscuity, broken familial bonds, seduction, and infection. The language of risk resonated with fears of Western contact, threats of loyalty and derision, and cronyism, because homosexuals "are active in all areas of society, and due to their joy in making contacts for sexual exploitation, are particularly of interest for class opponents and agents." Curiously absent from the text of the dissertation, but shaping its concerns, was information on the rising wave of applications to leave the GDR, an increase in suicides, and the specter of AIDS, all of which the state security apparatus attributed as disproportionately affecting the nation's gay people. In the rhetoric of an embattled state in the 1980s, the image of gay men remained virtually unchanged. They were sickly, weak, and effeminate, prone to pacifist tendencies and venereal disease, and thus an "internal threat to the security of the GDR."

Although the Stasi directed increasing attention toward the burgeoning lesbian and gay movements, there was a certain degree of Realpolitik at work given the fraying edges of authority and mounting waves of citizen displeasure. The security apparatus, while hard-hearted, could also be notoriously fickle, changing priorities midstream when faced with new challenges. Fehr's dissertation gloried in demonizing homosexuals as sexual saboteurs, yet the use of agents in spying on the church movement had to rely on the quiescence of lesbians and gay men forced to betray trust. Indeed, despite its own demonization of gay people, the Stasi welcomed the use of same-sex-desiring informers, even judging their abilities as uniquely sophisticated. Already in 1965 an operative's report had maintained that gay men were particularly well suited to the "information service" due to inborn psychological qualities or deviance honed in youth. Naturally conspiratorial, "given their predisposition to fantasy and emotions," gay men, like the security service itself, were "discriminating, careful, and selective with whom they shared information and intimate exchanges." Those displaying an enhanced femininity were more capable of disarming women's reticence and gaining trust. The more manly men, on the other hand, might use their physical attributes to engage in heterosexual sex without emotional attachment. "Typically of greater intelli-
gence, rarely loners, socially engaging, and well connected,” gay men were disarming and gallant, while probing and analytical. Because they were accustomed to extralegal treatment, they may be open to greater incidents of blackmail, but “no homosexual may be put under moral pressure or be easily influenced.” In a scathing yet sophisticated gender analysis, marrying psychosocial categories with case studies, the operative put together an elaborate range of gender differences in sexual behavior, roles, and drives, suggesting the strengths and weaknesses of certain masculinities over others. At the same time that the regime safeguarded heteronormative working-class manliness from the perils of the effete intellectual or lurking homosexual, it was not above using all manner of men for security work, shedding insight into the hypocrisy of the state and the durability (and apparent usefulness) of the image of gay people as politically duplicitous.

Clearly, the danger of seduction did not just surface in the otherwise well-intentioned insights of progressive sexologists or the warped thinking of Stasi operatives but lurked in all discussions about male sexuality for the remainder of the twentieth century. Although research had taken the question of crime away from notions of inborn susceptibility toward a greater appreciation of “the psychological,” important residues of strict biological determinism remained. Certainly, the language of infection, seduction, and containment meant different things at different moments in history. But the conflation of homosexuality with treason or political degeneration remained a constant force through much of the GDR’s history. In the 1980s, homosexual activists returned to this language of right to personality as a way to realize respect for individuation and desire and, as a result, were deemed a political danger. Still, despite the denigration of same-sex-desiring men as leering seducers and unmanly individualists, at various points in its existence the state recognized the need to reach out to this marginalized group while officially ostracizing homosexuality as decadent and anticollectivist.

By December 1988, the GDR amended its Criminal Code for the fifth and final time, removing the last official reference to homosexual derision. Homosexuality in all its forms was no longer criminal. Yet despite public pronouncements of toleration, in a research lab of Berlin’s Charité Hospital endocrinologist Günter Dörner continued to search for ways to pre-
vent the heartache of sexual "abnormality." Since the late 1960s, and with much international acclaim, Dörner had been suggesting that male rats "feminized" with injections of female hormones demonstrated greater interest and capacity for being mounted, which he interpreted as meaning that men born with androgen deficiencies tended to exhibit feminine attributes and an increased predisposition to homosexuality. Holding the possibility of correcting this imbalance in utero, Dörner's work promised the near-total correction of anomalous desire before birth. This portion of Dörner's research, although controversial, managed to survive the cold war and in 2002 garnered him the highest civilian honor in a unified Germany, the coveted Cross of Merit (Bundesverdienstkreuz).35

Earlier, in the 1980s, Dörner had also made another controversial suggestion—that stressful conditions during the Second World War impacted negatively on androgen secretions in the womb, causing an upswing of homosexual births in the ensuing generation. In other words, in times of war, more gay men are born than during times of peace, possibly explaining, at least in Dörner's mind, the burgeoning homosexual rights movements of the early 1970s. War ran counter to nature; armed conflict was so debilitating that it actually undermined the virility of the state in times of peace. Seduced by Nazi militarism and not the preying homosexual, Germans had unwittingly enabled the spread of homosexuality as disease and infected ensuing generations. When Dörner was honored, activist scholars with the Magnus Hirschfeld Society in Berlin voiced their opposition in letters to the German president arguing that by calling homosexuality a condition to be prevented, Dörner was not only advocating discrimination but evoking images of euthanasia—with all its National Socialist overtones. What was forgotten in the quest to rightly call attention to the implications of hormone research was the fact that Hirschfeld, the icon of the homosexual emancipation movement, had similarly toyed with eugenics as cofounder of the Medical Society for Sexology and Eugenics (Ärztliche Gesellschaft für Sexualwissenschaft und Eugenik). In fact, Hirschfeld sought ways to "reorient" homosexuals through the implantation of "manly" testicles from healthy heterosexual men. This example suggests the need to view history in all its complexity, in recognition of the
The "Problem" of "Unnatural Desire"

On the 24th of August 1961, eleven days after temporary barbed-wire fencing cordoned off the Eastern portion of Berlin from its Western half, Günter Litfin attempted in vain to swim across the Spree. Noticed by transport police, he was shot several times and ultimately drowned. One of 70,000 workers with addresses in the East and positions in the West, Litfin crisscrossed the internal boundary without incident until that fateful day. To counter negative press reports in West Germany about the Berlin wall's first victim, the eastern media painted Litfin in stark hues. He was an "indolent element known under the nickname 'dolly-boy' in homosexual circles in West Berlin." The wall had "separated him from his lovers" in the West, leaving him "unable to ply his trade." Forgetting that the German Communist Party had supported the decriminalization of homosexuality in the 1920s, Walter Ulbricht, the leader of East Germany's Socialist Unity Party (SED), used Litfin's death to remind Germans that the building of the Berlin wall was an absolute necessity to "close the holes through which the worst enemies of the German people could creep." The wall would prevent "counter-revolutionary vermin, spies and saboteurs, profiteers and human traffickers, prostitutes, spoiled teenage hooligans and other enemies from sucking the life force from our people."37

Twenty-eight years later, in June 1989, another young man found himself at the center of a smear campaign within the internal correspondence of the SED's Central Committee. In a petition to the party, a junior officer of the East German People's Police (Volkspolizei) described his shock at being outed by colleagues for his "homosexual disposition." Labeled "a security risk out of fear of blackmail," he tried in vain to secure alternative employment, but word of his "disposition" followed him to every interview. Now he sought clarification given radio reports trumpeting liberalization.38

These two cases bound the short history of the Berlin wall with tales of transgression. Even as the East German police no longer enforced Paragraph 175 for adults after 1957, same-sex desire remained a hot-button issue throughout the history of the German Democratic Republic.
Indeed, there was no widesweeping sexual revolution in the GDR since the Communist East continued to play host to homophobic vitriol for the remainder of its existence, relying on images of espionage, secret societies, effeminacy, and treason to link same-sex desire with stunted or degenerate political maturation. Far from eradicating “the problem” of “unnatural desire” (widernatürliche Unzucht), decriminalization politicized sexual maturity, drawing a line between consensual adult encounters and intergenerational sex. No longer was sexual deviance regulated via the judicial system. Instead, the state drew upon a raft of educators, psychologists, and therapists in order to promote “responsible” sexual practices, especially among the nation’s youth.39

Clearly, we are just at the beginning of our quest to understand the complex and indeed contradictory place of homosexuality in the fractious twentieth century. To be sure, German history has witnessed an elaborate mix of ideas on how best to control and manage “unnatural” forms of sexual expression, from legal and medical frameworks to eugenic, social hygiene, psychosocial, personality-driven, rights-based, and risk discourses. Expert knowledge played a key role, from Hirschfeld’s gender variation to the Stasi’s attempts to differentiate between friends and enemies on the basis of gender and sexuality, betraying what historians Edward Dickinson and Greg Eghigian have both pointed to in their respective work on modernity and sexuality: that each of the post-1945 Germanys, whether a democratic welfare state or welfare dictatorship, inherited, renegotiated, and redeployed biopolitical imperatives as vital elements of state building.40 Gendered norms and sexual constraints were essential components in the quest to manage and deploy citizen energy. At the same time that technocrats and Stasi operatives pathologized same-sex-desiring men as hostile to the cause of building and then sustaining socialism, by the 1970s and 1980s lesbians and gay men used Marxist-Leninist ethics to forge a place for greater public engagement while advocating for a private sphere of intimacy and companionship. The web of power built by the insecure state not only helped create the conditions of its own demise but also provided important if limited avenues of recourse for civil society.

Anthropologist Matti Bunzl has argued that in post-1945 Austria, queers and Jews form a fundamental part of the urban public sphere in a
condition of constitutive pluralism. Can this be true for the GDR, or the unified Federal Republic of Germany for that matter? Without a doubt, there were conflicting impulses at work, which would inevitably be inherited in all their untidiness after unification in 1990. Although East German society may have been more liberal in certain matters of sexuality, to the bitter end the regime maintained churlish notions of sexual propriety as far as gay men were concerned, especially when its core political and military institutions were affected. The mechanisms of education, policing, treatment, and control succeeded in making the homosexual a public subject of concern, in some cases a source of pity and not infrequently of animosity. But state involvement in the private lives of its citizens did not succeed in expunging alternative forms of sexual expression. On the contrary, in lending voice to a range of masculinities, from the normative to the abject, the effeminate to the mannish, these technologies of governance helped form a foundation for solidarity and social organization along the axis of sexual identity. In the unified Federal Republic of Germany, biological maxims remain part of the juridical and medical discussion of sexual freedom and aberrant sexual desire. Given the hydra-head that is sexual modernity, the GDR case serves as an important reminder that although Hirschfeld taught us to strive per scientiam ad justitiam (through science to justice), we must do so in full recognition of all that the modern project entails, for better and for worse.

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10. Entscheidungen des Obersten Gerichts der DDR, Urteil vom 24.5.1955, 1Zst (1) 2/55.


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13. Sächsisches Staatsarchiv Chemnitz (StAC), Bestand 32888, Bergbaustaatanswalt, no. 467 (21 Aug. 1954).


15. Herzog, Sex after Fascism, 195-96;


SAPMO-BArch) DY 30/1122 Abteilung Sicherheitsfragen; Autorenkollektiv, Strafgesetzbuch der DDR, Kommentar (Berlin: Staatsverlag der DDR, 1981), 386.


25. Thomas Mann, Lotte in Weimar (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1975) is discussed in Olaf Brühl, "Sozialistisch und schwul," in Wolfram Setz, Homosexualität in der DDR: Materialien und Meinungen (Hamburg: Männerschwarm, 2006), 89-152. For advertisements, see Bert Thinius, "Ausbruch aus dem grauen Versteck, Ankunft im bunten Ghetto? Randglossen zu Erfahrungen schwoler Männer in der DDR und in Deutschland Ost" (Berlin: Bundesverband Homosexualität, 1994), 49; and Minning, "Who Is the 'I.'" For petitions from Andreas T. and Lutz C. dated 20 Aug. 1986, SAPMO-BArch DY 30/1142 Abteilung Sicherheitsfragen. The correspondence between Dr. Kurt Bach and various functionaries within the SED, 13 Nov. 1987, is in SAPMO-BArch, Abteilung Volksbildung des ZK der SED, DY 30, nr. 5773; and Brühl, "Sozialistisch und schwul," 139; Bach's article is published as "Homosexualität in der DDR," DornRosa, no. 13 (June 1988): 12-14; Günter Grau, "Macht alle Mit," Der Tagesspiegel 12, no. 6 (1994): 41 especially wish to thank Rainer Herrn (interview by author, 4 Oct. 2008, Minneapolis, MN) for sharing his memories of the exposing of Bach as Stasi informant.


32. Gerhard Fehr, "Zu einigen Aspekten der Entwicklung der Risikogruppe der männlichen Homosexuellen und der Risikogruppe der kriminellgefährdeten, nicht lesbischen, weiblichen Jugendlichen und Jungenerwachsenen in der Hauptstadt Berlin"


