



# **Sex after Fascism**

Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany

**Dagmar Herzog**

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TWENTIETH-CENTURY GERMANY

*Dagmar Herzog*

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## Introduction

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WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP between sexual morality and mass murder and its aftermath? In view of Nazism's horrific crimes, sexuality might be seen as a frivolous or inappropriate subject for scholarly study of twentieth-century Germany. Yet precisely the opposite is the case.

Careful attention to the history of sexuality prompts us to reconsider how we periodize twentieth-century German history; it changes our interpretation of ruptures and continuities across the conventional divides of 1918, 1933, 1945, 1968, and 1989. Consideration of the history of sexuality and insistence on integrating the history of sexuality with more traditional topics of historiography can also challenge our assumptions about key social and political transformations and provide new insights into a broad array of crucial phenomena. To neglect the history of sexuality, for example, is also to fail to care about the content or force of antisemitism both during the Weimar Republic and in the early years of the Third Reich. Similarly, if we set sex aside as irrelevant, we lose opportunities to comprehend the extraordinary appeal of Nazism both to those Germans who sought the restoration of conservative family values and to those who benefited from Nazism's loosening of conventional mores. Nor can processes of popular secularization or religious renewal be understood without attention to the history of sexuality. Likewise, to disregard conflicts over sexuality is to risk misunderstanding the extensive emotional repercussions of Germans' military and ideological defeat in World War II, and its consequences especially for German manhood. Perhaps most significantly, to treat sexual issues as marginal is also to miss how the postwar Federal Republic of Germany, in striving to be incorporated into the Cold War West, was able to manipulate the memory of Nazism and to redirect moral debate away from the problem of complicity in mass murder and toward a narrowed conception of morality as solely concerned with sex.

Sexual politics functioned as a main locus for recurrent reconstructions of the memory and meanings of Nazism. Because the reworking of sexual mores had been such an important feature of the Third Reich, attempts to come to terms with the legacies of fascism in Germany could not help but address sexual matters. No less pertinent a factor, however, was the unexpected revival of Christian authority in the political realm in the western zones and then subsequently the Federal Republic of Germany. As it turns out, to delineate the ways in which sexuality, memory, and

morality repeatedly intersected in postfascist Germany is also to shed light on Germans' efforts to grapple with the possible relationships between pleasure and evil.

This book was originally conceived as a study of the generation of 1968 in West Germany. Seeking to understand how Nazism and its legacies were interpreted in the 1960s, especially by the New Left student movement, I was struck by the preponderance of arguments that the Third Reich was a distinctly sexually repressive era and that to liberate sexuality was an antifascist imperative. Numerous New Leftists argued directly that sexuality and politics were causally linked; convinced that sexual repression produced racism and fascism, they proposed that sexual emancipation would further social and political justice.

Members of the West German New Left student movement, along with many of their liberal elders, defended activism on behalf of sexual emancipation on the grounds that sexual repression was not merely a characteristic of fascism but its very cause. As one author put it, "it would be wrong to hold the view that all of what happened in Auschwitz was typically German. It was typical for a society that suppresses sexuality."<sup>1</sup> Another argued that "brutality and the lust for destruction become substitutes for bodily pleasure. . . . This is how the seemingly incredible contradiction that the butchers of Auschwitz were—and would become again—respectable, harmless citizens, is resolved."<sup>2</sup> Or as yet another phrased it even more succinctly: "In the fascist rebellion, the energies of inhibited sexuality formed into genocide."<sup>3</sup> In the 1960s these views were widely held, and they provided moral justification for dismantling the postwar culture of sexual conservatism. To liberate sexuality, it was believed, would help cleanse Germany of the lingering aftereffects of Nazism.

For many commentators in present-day reunified Germany, more than fifteen years after the collapse of communism, it has become standard to denigrate the rebellions of the later 1960s for their utopian romanticism and fierce anticapitalism. But in their historical moment, those rebellions—and not least the sexual element in them—were signally important. They fundamentally reconfigured familial, sexual, and gender relations and all codes of social interaction. They undermined the authority of political and religious conservatives who had dominated West German political life for nearly two decades, and they succeeded in reorienting society-wide moral discussion and debate toward global concerns like social injustice, economic exploitation, and warfare.

As my research unfolded, I found that the New Left's interpretation of the Third Reich's sexual politics as profoundly repressive had been almost uniformly adopted in recent scholarship on Nazism as well. I also found, however, in researching the more immediate post-World War II period, that numerous commentators in that period had a completely different

interpretation of the Third Reich. They argued that the Nazis had encouraged sexual licentiousness or even suggested that their sexual immorality was inextricable from their genocidal barbarism. Indeed, for many of these more immediate postwar observers, the containment of sexuality and the restoration of marriage and family were among the highest priorities for a society trying to overcome Nazism. It increasingly appeared as though the postwar culture of sexual conservatism was not (as the New Left believed) a watered-down continuation of a sexually repressive fascism but rather had itself been developed at least in partial reaction *against* Nazism.

The puzzles presented by the contradictory postwar interpretations of Nazism—and the utterly conflicting lessons drawn from them—led me to broaden the scope of my study. If I was going to explain the New Left's viscerally intense but also highly mediated relationship to the Nazi past, I had to expand my focus considerably. This entailed reconstructing debates over sexual mores under Nazism, as well as the evolution of postwar interpretations of Nazism. It also required an examination of the sexual culture of the first two postwar decades, first in the western zones under military occupation and then in the Federal Republic of Germany, in order to clarify in what climate the generation of 1968 had come of age and against which it would subsequently rebel. But it also became important to explore the comparative context of developments in the Soviet zone of occupation and then in the German Democratic Republic, in order to see how the development of postfascist sexual moralities differed in East Germany, especially due to the dramatically reduced presence there of those two main social forces—consumer capitalism and the Christian churches—which each in its own way kept sexual matters so integral to politics and culture in the West. In addition, I wanted not only to understand how the convictions about Nazism held by members of the generation of 1968 informed its efforts to remake German society from the 1960s to the 1980s but also to see how those efforts—and indeed the meaning of 1968 itself—had been reinterpreted yet again in the wake of German reunification in 1990.

In short, I began to consider questions of continuities and discontinuities (and complex mixtures thereof) in twentieth-century German history through the lens of conflicts over sexual morality. It seemed that the history of sexuality in Germany and other aspects of German history articulated constantly with one another—though always again in different ways—and thus could not be told separately. It also became clear that the generation of 1968 was not the first to believe that sexual and other kinds of politics were intrinsically connected. Sex was a crucial theme for politics even before the Third Reich began. It was closely linked with antisemitism.

After Germany's defeat in World War I, in the politically and economically unstable experiment with democracy called the Weimar Republic, Jews were—for the rising National Socialist movement as well as for many across the political spectrum—powerfully identified with sexual liberality. Not coincidentally, the sexual demonizing of the Jewish man became a major element in early National Socialist campaigns, and during the Third Reich the equation of Jews with sexual immorality helped facilitate first their exclusion from German society and subsequently their murder. Issues of sexual morality were central as well to the Christian churches' initial defense of National Socialism after Adolf Hitler's ascension to power in 1933—and thereby of the moral legitimization of the regime—even while differences of opinion over sexual mores subsequently emerged as a source of tension between the churches and the Nazis. Attending to this conflict over sex between the churches and the Nazis during the Third Reich in turn brings us much closer to an understanding of why the postfascist period in West Germany, under the leadership of the Christian Democratic Party (CDU), would be so strongly marked by a preoccupation with sexual propriety.

It is not least because scholarship on the Christian churches and scholarship on sexuality under Nazism have generally proceeded separately (all the more remarkable since sexual matters are often central to an erosion of faith) that so many scholars continue to presume that the Third Reich's sexual politics can best be characterized as prudish and conservative. For this turns out to be an only partially accurate reading. Without a doubt there were massively repressive elements in Nazi sexual politics: from the torture and murder of homosexual men to the incarceration of prostitutes to the forced sterilization of proletarian women whose purported promiscuity was taken as a sign of mental deficiency, from the prosecution of Jewish-Gentile sex in the so-called race defilement trials to the grotesque reproductive experiments and sexual sadism practiced on Jewish and other prisoners in the concentration and death camps. But none of this evidence justifies the conclusion that the Third Reich was repressive for everyone. What has routinely been downplayed since the 1960s is that Nazi policy and practice, for those broad sectors of the populace that were not persecuted, was anything but sexually repressive. Indeed, and this was especially apparent in the regime's vigorous attacks on the Christian churches, Nazism advanced an often ribald and unapologetic celebration of sexual activity; it avidly promoted both pre- and extramarital heterosexual sex.

There were also for the duration of the Third Reich regime-encouraged tendencies toward the maintenance of conventional sexual morality. Sexually conservative values were preserved in the bourgeois middle class and among church-affiliated individuals and groups of all social strata.

Nazi spokespeople did on many occasions appropriate and actively disseminate these values; for instance, examples of Nazi sex advice materials advocating premarital chastity and marital fidelity—especially for women—abound. But these traditional mores were also intensively combated by the regime.

Ultimately, and despite the contrary impulses, Nazism perpetuated and intensified certain aspects of the sexually liberalizing tendencies underway since the early twentieth century, even as it sought to harness those liberalizations—and the growing popular preoccupation with sex—to a savagely racist, elitist, and homophobic agenda. This was the distinctive innovation of Nazi sexual politics. The goal was not so much to suppress sexuality. Rather the aim was to reinvent it as the privilege of nondisabled, heterosexual “Aryans” (all the while *claiming* to be “cleaning up” sexual morality in Germany and overcoming the “Jewish” legacy). What needs to be confronted, in short (and what the 68ers could not accept), is that this advocacy of sexual expression coexisted with virulent racism and mass murder.

Indicatively, moreover, no one in the immediate post–World War II era recalled the Third Reich as a sexually conservative time. On the contrary, observers remembered a steady liberalization of heterosexual mores over the course of the first half of the twentieth century. One question this book thus pursues has to do with how the close imaginative linkage created by Nazism between sexual libertinism and genocide was coped with and misremembered in the post-1945 period.

At its heart, then, this book is concerned with how, in the postwar era, for complicated and overdetermined—if never fully conscious or rationalized—reasons, conflicts over sexual mores could become such an important site for managing the memory of Nazism and Holocaust and coming to terms with their inheritance. Thus I investigate the history of sexuality: laws, values, beliefs, and practices; such matters as contraceptive techniques, the treatment of sexual minorities, or the prevalence of pornography; how people talked about anxieties and about pleasures. But the book also charts *what else* was getting worked through when Germans fought with each other over sex and traces the continual reinterpretations of Nazism that occurred within postwar debates over sex. As such, the book can be read in at least two ways. It is a history of conflicts over sexual morality in Germany from the Third Reich to the present. But the book also advances a conceptual argument that has to do with memory. My aim in presenting a revised assessment of the sexual politics of the Third Reich, as chapter 1 will do, is not just for its own sake (though that too), but also in order to lay the groundwork for the remainder of this study. For a central question pursued in this study concerns how the memory of the connections between Nazi sexual enticements and Nazi racism

came to be so energetically forgotten, only to be replaced by the new (and now more familiar, if also unevenly applied) “memory” of Nazism as sexually constrictive and uptight. With this question in mind, each chapter offers a different perspective on the relationships between sexual and other kinds of politics. Throughout, the book is concerned with the mechanisms of, and reasons for, the repeated reimaginings of the national past.

Chapter 1 offers a reinterpretation of Nazism’s sexual politics against the background of developments in the Weimar Republic. I emphasize how under Nazism both sexually conservative and sexually liberalizing claims were advanced through antisemitic argumentation and how Nazis “remembered” and represented Weimar in sexualized terms. I suggest the often disconcertingly protopostmodern elements of Nazi thinking about sexual orientation and desire, explore the ways young people in particular were encouraged to depart from their parents’ mores as well as the depth of the conflicts between Christians (especially Catholics) and Nazis over the status of premarital chastity and of marriage, and conclude with a discussion of the impact of total war on sexual mores. Chapter 2 then turns to the liminal moment between the end of World War II and the early years of the Federal Republic of Germany (founded in 1949). On the one hand, this was an era of considerable sexual liberality; on the other hand, it was also a time when the meanings of Nazism were actively renegotiated via impassioned discussions of sex. In these years of transition from fascism to Western democracy, diverse constituencies distanced themselves from select aspects of Nazism while they pursued fresh rationales for the continuation of other—and some of the more disturbing—elements of Nazi ideology.

Chapter 3 analyzes the claustrophobic and conformist climate of the mid-1950s to early 1960s in West Germany. Beginning with the early 1950s debate over censorship of sexually suggestive images and texts, and the need to promote sexual decency and protect young people from smut, I argue that the official sexual conservatism of this era can be understood not only as an inevitable by-product of the dominance of the Christian Democratic Party during these years but also as a powerful strategy for mastering German guilt and shame over the Holocaust. This chapter also charts the evolution of sexualized interpretations of Nazism. While in the early 1950s, commentators still emphasized Nazism’s antibourgeois component and explicitly linked Nazi encouragements to nonmarital sexuality with Nazism’s crimes, the Auschwitz trial of 1963–65 in Frankfurt am Main marked the emergence of the theory of the petty bourgeois and sexually repressed Holocaust perpetrator that was to become so important to the New Left student movement.

Chapter 4 turns to the sexual revolution that swept West German society after the mid-1960s. In this chapter, I examine the very real effects of