

History Topic of the Month

Gay Berlin

The 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York are often recognised as the birthplace of the modern LGBTQ+ civil rights movement.

However, LGBTQ+ people had been fighting for acceptance and equality long before this. We can look much further back, to the 1870s and Germany, one of the first countries which saw a campaign for change in the treatment of LGBTQ+ people. Today, this can feel surprising, especially when we remember the targeted persecution of gay men that came under Hitler's Nazi regime only fifty years later.

However, before Hitler came to power in 1933, Germany was a thriving centre of LGBTQ+ culture where people could experiment with their sexuality and gender identity much more freely. Berlin became known as the 'gay capital' of Europe, with its inclusive venues attracting LGBTQ+ visitors from all over the world.



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Pride flags

LGBTQ+ Presence in Germany

Germany has always had a complex and unique relationship with the LGBTQ+ community. During the medieval and early modern period, many people believed homosexuality was a sin. In the Holy Roman Empire (that covered much of modern Germany) gay people were given the death penalty as a punishment.

However, by the eighteenth century, there was some progress. The Kingdom of Prussia abolished the death penalty and replaced it with the punishment of prison with hard labour. In the mid-late nineteenth century books and articles were written about homosexuality, such as works by Johann Ludwig Casper, a German forensic scientist. By 1869 the term "homosexuality" appeared in print for the first time in an article written by Karl-Maria Kertbeny.

People started to feel able to write about their feelings: a lawyer, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, wrote about his attraction to men in a series of books in 1864. Three years later, he became the first openly gay man to publicly call for an end to laws discriminating against homosexual rights. Not only does this remind us that LGBTQ+ people existed at this time, but also tells us that they were increasingly more visible and willing to speak out about their identity.

Paragraph 175

Despite this, on 15th May 1871, a law was passed declaring homosexuality and relationships between men illegal in the German Empire. This law was known as Paragraph 175. Interestingly, the law never mentioned same-sex relationships between women. It was debated in the Reichstag (the German parliament) in 1907, but never introduced.

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It is estimated that, in its 122-year history, 140,000 men were persecuted under Paragraph 175. While sexual relations between consenting men was made illegal, the police struggled to enforce the law. This was because most people kept their relationships private, making it very difficult for the police to make accusations. The only way to convict someone of illegal sexual relationships was if they made a confession or a witness could be found.

Instead, police tended to keep watch on anyone they suspected of homosexuality. This meant, the difficulties the German police had enforcing Paragraph 175 ironically *helped* create an underground gay network in Germany, particularly in Berlin. The law met fierce opposition, with many people calling for it to be scrapped, ultimately inspiring the first gay rights movement in 1897.

Magnus Hirschfeld: a German LGBT pioneer

In 1897 a Jewish doctor in Berlin, Dr Magnus Hirschfeld, founded The Scientific-Humanitarian Committee – the very first gay and lesbian organisation in the world. His aim was to achieve “justice through science” and to fight for the rights and recognition of LGBTQ+ people. As an openly gay man himself, Hirschfeld was a pioneer for the gay liberation movement. He believed science and knowledge could cure prejudice, and argued being born gay was natural, not a deliberate choice. He also believed sexuality fell on a **spectrum** and was one of the first people to recognise transgender identity.

In 1919 during the Weimar Republic, Hirschfeld opened the Institute for Sexual Science, the first clinic in the world dedicated to researching sexuality and gender. The Institute provided education for health providers, offered medical services to patients and even performed the first recorded modern sex reassignment surgeries. Hirschfeld campaigned tirelessly for LGBTQ+ rights. The Scientific-Humanitarian Committee gathered 6000 signatures from prominent Germans on a petition to overturn Paragraph 175, including Albert Einstein. Unfortunately, Hirschfeld’s attempts were unsuccessful.



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Magnus Hirschfeld

A sexuality spectrum is the idea that people’s sexual identities and orientations are not fixed but can change or be fluid and cannot be easily fixed or defined as just one simple ‘thing’.

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Berlin in the Weimar Republic: an LGBTQ+ destination?

The Weimar Republic, Germany's first parliamentary democracy, lasted from 1918 until 1933. The new republic ended censorship, allowing greater freedom of expression in Germany. During its 'Golden Age' Weimar saw developments in architecture, art, cinema, music and literature.

By 1920 Berlin was the third largest city in the world and established as the centre of German cultural and intellectual life. Many of Germany's most prominent artists, writers, academics and performers were based in the city. In addition, a thriving LGBTQ+ culture emerged in Berlin.

Cabarets in Berlin

After the First World War, despite Paragraph 175 still being in force, Berlin became a place where behaviour which had been considered 'immoral' and unacceptable was more tolerated. Cabarets became very popular with people socialising in clubs and watching performances like drag. Cabarets were frequently visited by openly gay men and women and also provided a safe haven for the trans community. By the 1920s, Berlin was home to nearly 100 gay and lesbian bars or cafes.

Cabaret was a style of entertainment featuring music, dancing, theatre and live performance in a restaurant or bar.



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Scene from Die Katakombe cabaret

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Eldorado

One of the most famous was a group of three clubs called the Eldorado. They were run by businessman Ludwig Konjetchni. They were famous for their drag shows. Magnus Hirschfeld was a regular visitor and famous stars such as Marlene Dietrich and Josephine Baker (both icons for the LGBTQ+ community) performed there. Marlene Dietrich, who was bisexual, was often seen at drag balls and her performances enticed queer crowds.

The Eldorado clubs have been featured in art, theatre and cinema. In the 1920s a new artistic style appeared in Germany known as the New Objectivity movement. Artists started painting German society in a more realistic way. One of the most famous members was Otto Dix. In 1927 Dix painted *Eldorado* which featured three individuals in dresses, representing drag queens and the transgender community in Berlin's bars. This suggests places like the Eldorado not only provided safe havens for LGBTQ+ people but also attracted heterosexual audiences too.

Author Christopher Isherwood visited Berlin in 1929 and enjoyed the opportunities it gave him to explore his homosexuality. His writings about his experiences later inspired the Broadway musical (and film) *Cabaret*, which gave people decades later an insight into Berlin during the Weimar period and its LGBTQ+ culture.



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Eldorado Cabaret

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Nazi period

After the Nazis came to power in 1933, they cracked down on what they saw as 'un-German ideas'. Hirschfeld was constantly attacked by the Nazis. As a gay human rights activist and a Jewish man, Hirschfeld represented everything the Nazis hated. In May 1933, the violent Nazi stormtroopers the SA looted the library at the Institute of Sexual Science. Approximately 12,000 books and 35,000 photographs stolen from the Institute were destroyed in Nazi book burnings. The Institute was closed and Hirschfeld fled to France, although Nazi propaganda continued to attack him for several years.

This had a huge impact on the diverse culture of the Weimar period. Many of the freedoms LGBTQ+ people enjoyed, especially in Berlin, vanished. Marlene Dietrich realised Germany was no longer representative of her identity, art or audiences. She declared "if that is what being German involves, then I am no longer German". Many clubs including the Eldorado were closed down – the Nazis even used the venue as an SA office.

In 1935, Paragraph 175 was extended to make it easier to bring criminal charges against homosexual acts, leading to a large increase in arrests and convictions. Between 1933 and 1945, over 100,000 men were arrested on suspicion of having same-sex relationships. Although many were sent to prisons, an estimated 10–15,000 men were suffered under inhumane conditions in concentration camps.

Queer Berlin today

In the decades after the Second World War, life improved for LGBTQ+ people in Germany. The law banning homosexuality was finally scrapped in both East (1968) and West (1969) Germany.

Today Berlin is the leading city in Europe for gay cultural events with four major gay festivals each year including Christopher Street Day (Berlin Pride) as well as the largest gay street party in Europe called Lesbian and Gay City Festival. The first ever Christopher Street parade took place in 1979 in memory of the Stonewall riots in New York. Berlin's parade is among the city's largest events, attracting an estimated one million attendees in 2019.

In 1985, Berlin opened the world's first gay museum, called the Schwules Museum, dedicated to preserving and celebrating gay and lesbian history, art and culture. Today there are approximately 150 venues in Berlin where events are held for the LGBTQ+ community reflecting the diversity of the city's population and visitors.

Berlin has once again become a flourishing LGBTQ+ hub, often dubbed the 'gay capital of Europe'. Berlin's queer history must never be forgotten; it was the city that started the gay liberation movement and a city proud to have done so.

Discussion points

- Imagine if you were discriminated against because of your sexuality or gender identity. How might that make you feel?
- Why do you think the law only criminalised gay men and not women? Why might gay men be seen as more of a threat than gay women?
- Why do you think Berlin was so welcoming of LGBTQ+ people in the 1920s? What might have influenced these more accepting attitudes?
- What more can you find out about Magnus Hirschfeld and how people reacted to his ideas? Did he face discrimination?
- Why are cabaret stars such as Marlene Dietrich considered 'gay icons' today? Why do people connect to their stories?
- What can you find out about life for LGBTQ+ in London in the 1920s and 1930s? How does the experience compare to 1920s and 1930s Berlin?
- Look up the painting 'El Dorado' (1927) by Otto Dix. What does this tell us about life for trans people in Berlin in the 1920s?
- Research the different festivals and events celebrated by LGBTQ+ people in Berlin and Germany today. Why are these important to LGBTQ+ community?
- How should Berlin's LGBTQ+ history be remembered? Design what you would include in a piece of artwork or museum exhibition to commemorate Berlin's role in the gay civil rights movement.
- Research European countries and their record on LGBTQ+. How far do you agree that Berlin is still Europe's 'gay capital'?

Further reading and resources

Articles

[History of Homosexuality in Berlin](#) – Visit Berlin

[Gay people](#) Holocaust Memorial Day Trust



Article for Teachers

[Paragraph 175 and the Nazi Campaign against Homosexuality](#)
– Holocaust Encyclopedia



Further reading:

Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity,
Robert Beachy (2015)

*Magnus Hirschfeld: The Origins of the Gay Liberation
Movement*, Ralf Dose (2014)

*The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against
Homosexuals*, Richard Plant (1988)



Podcasts

Between World Wars, Gay Culture Flourished In Berlin,
Robert Beachy

<https://www.npr.org/2014/12/17/371424790/between-world-wars-gay-culture-flourished-in-berlin> – 34 minute listen.

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Research

Rainer Schulze – “Through Science Toward Justice”:
Magnus Hirschfeld, pioneering advocate of
LGBTIQ rights in the early 20th century

