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Review: "Aus dem Volkskörper entfernt". Homosexuelle Männer im Nationalsozialismus – By Alexander Zinn

Author: Sébastien Tremblay

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Freie Universität Berlin
Global Histories: A Student Journal
Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut
Koserstraße 20
14195 Berlin

Contact information:

For more information, please consult our website www.globalhistories.com or contact the editor at: admin@globalhistories.com.

“Aus dem Volkskörper entfernt”.
Homosexuelle Männer im
Nationalsozialismus –

by Alexander Zinn, Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2018.
39,95€, Pp. 695p, ISBN: 978-3-593-50863-4

Reviewed by:

SÉBASTIEN TREMBLAY

Although he has already written on the subject in numerous publications, Alexander Zinn, journalist and *Diplomsoziologe*, has finally published his pivotal work on the life of homosexual men under National Socialism. Based on his 2016 doctoral dissertation in Erfurt, this voluminous empirical study of non-heteronormative everyday life between the German Imperial period and the long post-war era presents ground-breaking archival work and a much-needed focus on local aspects of homosexual life. By focussing on the *Alltagsgeschichte* of small towns and the countryside, Zinn adds nuance to some of the better-known theses about the persecution of homosexual men before, after, and especially during the Nazis' rise to power. In doing so, he offers a well-elaborated study on the infamous §175 in both its original Prussian form and after the radicalisation of 1935. At the center of his vast archival endeavour, Zinn succeeds in shedding light on the everyday realities of non-heteronormative men in the 1930s and on the top-down measures (*Sanktionsmaßnahmen*) established by the National Socialist regime to hunt, persecute, and in many cases, murder homosexual men. In order to do so, he concentrates his efforts on a chronological exposé of homophobic Nazi ideology, strategies, and action plans, as well as on a spatial comparison between the Reich as an entity, a regional examination of Thüringen, and a local focus on the area around the town of Altenburg. According to Zinn, these spatial considerations were taken concurrently with the archival corpus available for historical research, as well as the regional particularities. Indeed, Thüringen and the county of Altenburg, devoid of big metropolitan centres, constitute spaces where urban proletarian and agricultural homosexual life coexisted. These regions are also the setting for the life of Rudolf Brazda, one of the main protagonists of Zinn's story, who was born in Thüringen and was persecuted most heavily at the hands of the Nazis in Buchenwald and near Altenburg.¹ As Zinn has previously published Brazda's story, it is unsurprising that he made the young man his focus throughout the book. Through multiple extensive empirical renditions of Brazda's fate and cohabiting stories across his regional points of interest, Zinn intends to correct previous gaps in historiography. He aims to demonstrate how previous works on the persecution of non-heteronormative individuals ignore important data, contradicting pre-supposed ideas of the complete acceptance of the regime's homophobic ideology by the broader population. He also examines the possibility of homosexual life away from the all-encompassing urban oppressive gaze of the Gestapo. Moreover, Zinn goes in extensive detail about the necessity of a paradigm shift. According to Zinn, historians have focussed for far too long on the possible motivations of the Nazi's attack on homosexuality as a strategic and rhetorical device without pointing out

¹ For a semi-autobiographical portrait of Brazda, one of the last surviving homosexual survivors of the Nazis' atrocities: Schwab, Jean-Luc /Brazda, Rudolf: *Itinéraire d'un Triangle rose. Témoignage du dernier survivant déporté pour homosexualité*, (2013) Paris: J'ai Lu. (Translated into German, Italian, Spanish and Romanian). For Zinn on Brazda: Zinn, Alexander: „Das Glück kam immer zu mir“: Rudolf Brazda - Das Überleben eines Homosexuellen im Dritten Reich. FaM: Campus, 2011.

the ideological fundamentals of the persecution. To his credit, it is by concentrating his gaze on key ideological moments of Nazis' virilism that Zinn shines at his best. Embodied in figures like Himmler, Röhm or pre-*Machtübernahme* characters like Blüher, the ideological basis of these persecutions unveiled an orchestrated terror machine that is exposed brilliantly and at great length throughout the seven chapters of his dissertation. The unfortunate doctoral tone of Zinn's monograph will be dealt with at the end of this review. Indeed, most of Zinn's highs and lows connect to the original medium of the material at hand. In other words, Readers are confronted with a grand overarching empirical project, a monotonal statistical tone, a flawed, incomplete and dated theoretical background paired with a somewhat debutant misunderstanding of the fine line separating a social history book project and the desire to prove one's academic qualifications. Excelling at finding archival material to present, Zinn nevertheless brushes over recent scholarship and presents a sketchy understanding of queer historiography. However, first let us give credit where it is due: this is truly an impressive piece in terms of archival research.

EMPIRICAL MERITS

After an imposing journey across almost the whole Federal Republic, Zinn brings to life a remarkable corpus of both biographical stories, legal conjunctures and new archival material. If the first chapter following the introduction offers a relatively tame overview of the German Empire's dealings with homosexuality, Zinn's third chapter about everyday male homosexual life in distinctive milieus (agricultural, proletarian, bourgeois and elite) is an empirical tour de force. Unfortunately, the redundant information offered by Zinn's wall-to-wall presentation of homosexual life and the excessive scale of the demonstration (i.e. a chapter of almost 150 pages) hints more at a grocery list of empirical findings and at a dissertation draft, rather than a final published work. This is notwithstanding the constant emphasis on outmoded and out-of-date theoretical and sociological concepts such as "stigma-management" (more on this below). In chapter four, Zinn almost redeems himself with a more concise overview of the persecution at the level of the Reich. He consequently complements or corrects some of the better-known historiography, namely the works of Rüdiger Lautmann and Burkhard Jellonnek. Chapter five and six shift the emphasis onto the regional and the local levels, concluding the triangular spatial inquiry advanced by Zinn. Yet again drowning his readership in listed archival material, Zinn also follows some strange additional tangents unrelated to his original research questions and somehow loses the reader along the way. Nonetheless, this is where the book takes all its sense, as his convincing demonstration fills multiple gaps in the pre-

existing historiography of the time period. Zinn offers nuanced and multifaceted angles and perspectives that have rarely been put at the forefront of research on this topic. Finally, he provides a last chapter on the aftermaths of 1945 until the liberalization of §175. In doing so, he looks at the memory of the atrocities and eventual discussions on reparation well into the 21st century. Still, slapped to the end of such an imposing volume, the discussion feels forced, rushed and put forward to connect the project to contemporary discussions deserving of their own contribution and lacking a connection to the primary effort. Giving us closure to Brazda's life story, it nonetheless opens the discussion for readers unfamiliar with German republican history before and after the *Wende*.

THEORETICAL INADEQUACY

It is in his theoretical approach that Zinn's book really shows its flaws. Conservative, insistent, and brushing over more than 40 years of gay, lesbian and queer studies, he spends pages following what seem to be historiographical vendettas. Along the way, he uses intellectual shortcuts to dismiss a whole corpus of social science that could have been beneficial to his analysis. For instance, his shot fired at Claudia Schoppmann's work on lesbian persecution is enough to raise the eyebrows of anyone interested in systematic and structural genocide studies and the history of sexuality. In 2018, it is surprising to consider a lack of direct concerted persecution as a proof of its absence. For a historian spending so much time on detailing his methodology while dealing with perpetrator sources and reading against the grain, Zinn ignores his own advice when it comes to the persecution of other forms of non-heteronormative sexualities. This is, of course, after years of literature examining the violence and persecutions of so-called "asocial" women. But this example is only the tip of a much more problematic iceberg. Anchored in dated theories from the 1970s and 1980s, Zinn's work obstinately ignores decades of literature on the topic. The works of people like Dagmar Herzog, on the creation of the queer self, on the constructivist aspects of queer, and on the cultural phenomenology of the queer subject are completely ignored by, if not unknown to, the author, as are works on queer shame, "queer spectrability" and queer longing. Indeed, Zinn spends some pages in his introduction on what he calls the "purist constructivist" approach. Yet, in a time where canonical journals like GLQ offer their readers epistemological discussions and self-reflections on early queer studies by Cohen and Halperin, the simple mention of Butler and Foucault as strawmen appears more like an embarrassing lack of knowledge. A brief overview of the literature list at the end of the book also exposes the German-centric aspect of the secondary literature. This becomes painfully apparent when Zinn mentions as "novelty" things that

have already been dealt with in other languages. This criticism is not intended to reinforce the status of English as an imposed lingua franca in academia, but the lack of awareness of seminal theoretical work in this day and age is difficult to take seriously. This would maybe be less problematic if Zinn did not insist on the "ahistorical" aspect of queer theory and write an unconvincing dismissal of identity-based framings in order to bring back old ones from the 1970s. In this regard, the book reflects more the apparent swansong of an outdated vision of LGBTQ history (i.e. gay history), if not a generational gap. This is unfortunate, as the empirical data amassed by Zinn is proof in itself that he has extensive knowledge about his material. Regrettably, good historical praxis isn't worth much if not paired with a solid theoretical background. That being said, the book would have benefited from further revision between the dissertation and the monograph. Its doctoral aspect is still too static and dry, and it would have been helpful to bring modification to what is essentially a manuscript rather than a book.