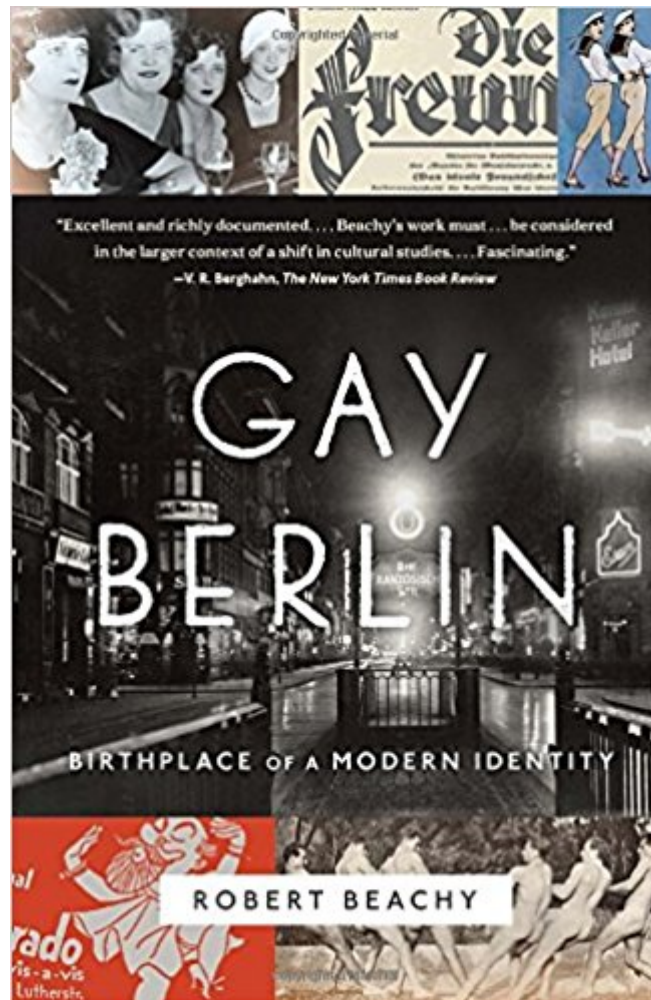




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Gay Berlin: Birthplace Of A Modern Identity



Synopsis

Winner of Randy Shilts Award
In the half century before the Nazis rose to power, Berlin became the undisputed gay capital of the world. Activists and medical professionals made it a city of firsts—the first gay journal, the first homosexual rights organization, the first Institute for Sexual Science, the first sex reassignment surgeries—exploring and educating themselves and the rest of the world about new ways of understanding the human condition. In this fascinating examination of how the uninhibited urban culture of Berlin helped create our categories of sexual orientation and gender identity, Robert Beachy guides readers through the past events and developments that continue to shape and influence our thinking about sex and gender to this day.

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Customer Reviews

Winner of the 2015 Randy Shilts Award
“Excellent and richly documented. . . . Beachy’s work must [be] considered in the larger context of a shift in cultural studies. . . . Fascinating.”—V.R. Berghahn, *The New York Times Book Review*
“Beachy enlarges our understanding of how the international gay-rights movement eventually prospered, despite the setbacks that it experienced not only in Nazi Germany but also in mid-century America.”—*The New Yorker*
“A very good, serious, detailed, scholarly work of history by an excellent researcher who has clearly done his homework” and then some.—*San Francisco Chronicle*
“A superb work of historical reclamation—by far the best account we have of the formative years of homosexual identity and emancipation, it is brilliantly researched and beautifully written.”—Martin Duberman, Distinguished Professor of History Emeritus, CUNY

Robert Beachy was trained as a German historian at the University of Chicago, where he received his PhD in 1998. He is presently associate professor of history at the Underwood International College of Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea.

While it offers little that is new, this book is readable, covering an important period in gay history. Beachy was not ploughing fresh ground - not even in the English-speaking world. Exactly forty years ago, there appeared the breakthrough book of John Lauritsen and David Thorstad, *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1935)*. Anyone who was keeping abreast of these matters in those exciting days of gay liberation read this revelatory book. I certainly did. It was buttressed by a similar volume by James Steakley. Then in 1975, the Arno Press issued an important set of reprints, including a volume of *Documents of the Homosexual Rights Movement in Germany (1836-1927)*, as well as stout volumes by K.H. Ulrichs, Benedict Friedlaender, and Ferdinand Kaarsch-Haack. The last volume is particularly important since it covers same-sex behavior among tribal peoples, a true first. Initially, Magnus Hirschfeld's magnum opus of 1914 was hard to find, but then it was republished in Germany and translated into English. So for anyone curious to look - and we all should be - a lot of valuable information has been available now for years. These publications were the foundation of the material summarized in the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*, which appeared in New York in 1990. Beachy does offer an innovation of a sort. He accepts the Social Constructionist view that the modern homosexual identity emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, he wishes to shift the primary locus of that change from Britain, France and the US to Germany, specifically to Berlin. The reason it seems is the interaction of two factors: an upsurge of elite scholarly and medical writing, some of it by homosexuals themselves; and the flowering of a bar and entertainment subculture. The last was swept away after 1933, to be reinvented after World War II. As for the writings, some of which I have mentioned above, their circulation was limited to a small circle of intellectuals. It is not clear how these two disparate factors interacted to produce a new identity. Now somewhat dated, the identity thesis is itself questionable, inasmuch as human beings have engaged in same-sex acts from time immemorial. Some have complained that all this is ancient history - of only antiquarian interest. What does this stuff have to do with us? There are in fact several connections. In 1924 when Henry Gerber started the first (unfortunately temporary) gay rights group in Chicago, he was specifically imitating the German groups. As a soldier, Gerber had been stationed with the US Army in Germany. Later, when it was launched in LA, the gay movement as we came to know it adopted the term "homophile." This expression was invented by a German, a

man named Karl-GÃ nther Heimsoth: via Isherwood and others the adjective came to circulate among the LA founders. Finally, Kinsey amassed a large collection of the German books, some of which he had translated for the use of his own group. Kinsey also emulated Hirschfeld's system of gathering masses of case histories.

Impressive, scholarly and well documented history of the early gay movement in Germany from the mid-19th. Century through to the demise of the Weimar Republic. Without ignoring the important first two thirds of this book, most readers will probably be drawn to the Weimar period (1919-1933). Reading Christopher Isherwood or reliving "Cabaret" only scratches the surface of this incredible period when censorship was abolished and gay and lesbian people enjoyed unbelievable freedoms (especially compared to the rest of the world). Access to all sorts of sexual expression (and excesses) was available and Berlin was the hot spot for gay people. Just look at the photos displaying dozens of gay newspapers and magazines at the newsstands and the work of Magnus Hirschfeld and the Institute for Sexual Science! At times I got a bit confused in the early sections with so many individuals and gay groups being documented, all with their various legal, political and sexual reform agendas, but overall, an important and vital study of gay history.

This is an excellent book, although it's probably a little too academic for many modern readers. But I look at the academic rigor in the book is a good thing. The book is convincing precisely because it supports what it asserts with reliable research rather than on general impressions. Nevertheless, the writing is not that dense, and if readers will just stick with it, they will find that the effort pay off a hundredfold. In fact, if you're into the history of this period and the whole gay movement, you won't be able to put this book down. Gay activism began long before Stonewall riot of '69. If it hadn't have been for the rise of the Nazis to power, gay marriage would have been an issue decided back in the 70s at the latest. Really, I had no idea just how extensive gay life and culture was in the Weimar Republic, and to some extent even in the late 19th century, although there were also a major fascistic wrong turn (namely, the Mannerbund which aligned itself with Nazi Aryanism foolishly expecting that it could find acceptance in the Third Reich). Still in all, Berlin was indeed the first San Francisco! Forget your London and Paris! Magnus Hirschfeld is a true gay hero in my mind. I can hardly wait for the "sequel" to come out: "Long Knives: Homosexuality in Nazi Germany." Once the Nazis tightened their control, everything went downhill fast for homosexuals in addition to the Jews. I liken that transformation to what would happen if all of a sudden ISIS were to take over San Francisco. I wish Beachy would come back to the US some time and do presentations at Holocaust

Museums across the country. He deserves a lot of recognition. Furthermore, I highly recommend a related work "An Underground Life: Memoirs of a Gay Jew in Nazi Berlin" by Gad Beck. In this memoir, you get a better idea what Berlin was like once the disco lights were finally extinguished. The before-and-after contrast is staggering.

"Gay Berlin", a recent book by Robert Beachy, delves into what we might call homosexual realization that began in the nineteenth century. It culminates with its tolerance during the time of the Weimar Republic and ends, tragically, with the rise of the Nazi Party. Central to Beachy's book is Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, who was one of the early and most vocal proponents that homosexuality was an innate quality and ought not to be penalized under German law. He had many supporters, of course, but some enemies as well...fellow gay men among them. The author does a good job of relating Hirschfeld's field work and catches the atmosphere of Berlin in the 1920s. There are a few too many characters to keep track of and his writing sags along the way at times, but it's an insightful read. (To think that some of those points of view that Hirschfeld held are still in question in parts of the United States is astounding!) "Gay Berlin" is a recommended work.

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