



## Book Review

**Kühn, Karolina and Mirjam Zadoff**, eds. *To Be Seen: Queer Lives 1900–1950*. Munich: Hirmer, 2023, 252 p. ISBN 978-377743992.

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*To Be Seen: Queer Lives 1900–1950* originated as an exhibition at the Munich Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism. Editors Karolina Kühn and Mirjam Zadoff sought to document queer lives and experiences in Germany in the first half of the twentieth century and to engage in a conversation about those experiences with the contemporary struggles and victories of the worldwide queer community. *To Be Seen* includes visual primary sources and analysis alongside contemporary art in a variety of mediums. Essays included in the volume further illuminate the diversity of queer lives from 1900 to 1950 and broaden perspectives of queer experiences through a multiplicity of disciplinary backgrounds, making this a truly interdisciplinary work.

In the first section, the editors use photographs, letters, art, and other primary sources to demonstrate that while men dominated the German Empire and strict gender roles prevailed, individuals and burgeoning groups fought for changes in oppressive laws and sought greater diversity in identities. Documents focusing on advocates and activists such as Karl Ulrichs, August Fleischmann, and Anita Ausgsprung situate Germany at the forefront of early LGBTQIA+ rights movements. This section's contemporary art uses various mediums to put historical themes into conversation with modern pieces, engaging viewers in a discourse about queer history. The essay in this section, though, feels out of place. Instead of historical context further fleshing out queer lives in the early part of the twentieth century, Michaela Dudley covers everything from Stonewall and Marsha P. Johnson to Donald Trump. The author fails to cite the major works in this historiography that could have provided necessary context for the primary sources.

*To Be Seen* then focuses on queer life in Weimar Germany. The editors clearly put a lot of thought into diversity and inclusion in source selection. This is not a history of only cisgender gay men; instead, this section explores a period in which diverse queer life flourished. Though Paragraph 175 of German law still prohibited homosexual acts between men in the Weimar era, queer communities celebrated nightlife, explored their identities, and fought for the dismantling of oppressive laws. The artwork in this section is quite powerful and once again encourages viewers to

approach this modern art through the lens of a historical subject, making it both interdisciplinary and thought-provoking.

In Weimar Germany, Magnus Hirschfeld and the Institute for Sexology expanded opportunities for individuals to embrace their identities. Hirschfeld and others thought deeply about sexuality, gender identity, and rights. His activism made an indelible mark on queer history. *To Be Seen*'s section on this period and his institute is particularly engaging. It includes a host of primary documents with photographs of individuals who sought the institute's services. The inclusion of photographs and documents relating to transgender people in Germany and identity papers, then called "Transvestite Certificates," provides readers with not just a more inclusive history, but also an opportunity to reflect on trans lives in Europe prior to the rise of the Nazis. The editors chose to feature lesser-known individuals next to more famous trans women like Lili Elbe. This section shines in its discussion of lesbian and bisexual identities. Dagmar Herzog's essay "Gay, Jewish, 'Obscene': Magnus Hirschfeld as a Sexual Reformer and Target of Nazi Hate" is an excellent piece which serves to provide historical context on Judaism in sexology. It explores the Weimar era and the rise of the Nazis, who targeted men like Hirschfeld. This essay is crucial in bridging to the later sections on Nazi persecution of queer individuals.

While Herzog's essay introduces the Nazi's rise and persecution of the queer community, *To Be Seen* then continues with the Weimar Era and focuses here on visual arts such as film, theater, literature, and, of course, centers queer life and queer expression in all of that. This section is especially useful as an interdisciplinary tool to open a dialogue. Each piece of art, photograph, or drawing has a description that is contextualized and analyzed in a way that readers may engage in thinking critically about queer life in the twentieth century. The editors were clearly cognizant of inclusivity, but also selected the source material carefully to be thought-provoking. Each piece engages the audience individually. When put together with the other sources in this section, the result is a stunning view of queer life in Europe. Modern audiences know that the rise of the Nazis meant persecution for queer people, so this section showcases the resilience, visibility, and empowerment built by queer communities and individuals in the Weimar Era.

"Life Under Dictatorship" in *To Be Seen* covers the rise of the Nazi regime and its persecution of queer individuals. The section makes it clear that while Paragraph 175 only targeted gay men, homosexual women faced social ostracization, investigations, and concentration camp imprisonment. The visual primary sources and their corresponding descriptions tell the story of resilience and adaptation in order to survive Nazi persecution. Liddy Barcroft, whose photograph graces the cover of the book, was a trans sex worker. She faced several imprisonments in the 1930s and ultimately perished in Mauthausen in 1943. While imprisoned, she wrote texts such as her poem *Die Nacht des Wiedersehen's* or "The Night of the Reunion," which is included the

compilation. A translation from its original German would make this section more accessible to a wider audience and would strengthen knowledge about trans women like Liddy Barcroft through the availability of her handwritten words. This lack of translation is not the only instance where editors missed the opportunity for explanation and context. For example, a lithograph titled *Solidarity* by Richard Grune expresses his experiences in the concentration camp system from 1934 to 1945. The description of this drawing refers to his liberation from “the concentration camp,” lacking specificity.

The postwar element of the book is shockingly brief. It includes a reflection on the Pink Triangle as a symbol of memory, a contemporary work of art, and an epilogue. Historian Jake Newsome has recently published a work on the legacy of the Pink Triangle and queer postwar experiences in East Germany and West Germany (Newsome 2022). Acknowledgement of this scholarship would have made a perfect addition to flesh this section out and add needed historical context. Likewise, major works of the historiography of queer Holocaust studies by authors such as Anna Hájková (Hájková 2021), Ingeborg Boxhammer (Boxhammer 2015), and Laurie Marhoefer (Marhoefer 2015, 2016) are missing either in essays or in efforts to point interested readers in the direction of more information. They have long thought and written about these topics in a way that would add analytical and contextual information to this collection of sources and contemporary art.

*To Be Seen: Queer Lives 1900–1950* does, however, succeed in its goal to provide an interdisciplinary look at marginalized people as well as understudied historical movements in Germany during the first half of the twentieth century. Its use of contemporary art is thought provoking and makes the book unique. The graphic layout and design are impeccable and will undoubtedly engage its readers. Because of the interdisciplinary focus, *To Be Seen* will introduce this important history to new audiences and will open up a dialogue about queer lives.

## References

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