



The Great War and Modern Homosexuality: Transatlantic Crossings

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In June 15 1918, Captain Edward Brittain was killed at Asiago, on the Alto-Adige front in northern Italy, leading a small number of British troops in what appeared to be a hopeless, full-frontal attack upon numerically superior Austrian and German forces. Just the day previously, Brittain had been informed by his superior officers that he was being investigated on account of allegations that he had engaged in sexual relations with men under his command. Edward Brittain was the beloved younger brother of Vera Brittain, the remarkable young woman whose service in the war as a VAD nurse formed the core of her remarkable and successful memoir, *Testament of Youth*. Later in her life, Vera Brittain would wonder if her brother had purposely exposed himself to reckless danger as a way of courting death, in effect committing suicide, in an effort to avoid the disgrace and shame that would come to him—and to his family—were his homosexuality to be publicly revealed (Bishop and Bostridge).

Brittain's experience as a soldier whose life was shadowed and ultimately darkened by society's rejection of his sexual orientation was not unusual. For the most part, early twentieth century European and American societies rejected the concept that same-gender sexual orientation should be regarded as a normal, healthy, moral, legal, and acceptable mode of existence. Queer individuals paid the price by being forced to live hidden lives, often with the guilt of censure and rejection weighing heavily upon them. Only in Germany did a nascent legal and cultural rights organization for these people exist. There, in the lands of the social and medical scientists who had coined the very term homosexuality, a small but growing number of men and women worked to achieve legal rights for homosexuals, believing strongly that once official governmental discrimination ended, cultural and social acceptance would soon follow. (See the discussion of early twentieth Century homosexual rights activism in *Gay Berlin*, Robert Beachy, especially Chapter 3, 88-119).

World War I had a deep impact upon the development of gender relationships in the Western World, and was especially significant in the way that it fostered the development of homosocial and homosexual identities among its participants. Many men and women who were involved in the war effort formed profoundly deep emotional and physical same-gender relationships. Observers and participants alike have attested that World War I encouraged a kind of incipient "gay solidarity" among some of its survivors—for example the British war poets such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfrid Owen, as well as the German-American Henry Garber, founder of the first American gay rights organization in the 1920s. At the same time, however, the war inspired intense concerns about policing same gender desire. In the United States, there were several large scale incidents where dozens of inducted soldiers were suspected of engaging in homosexual activity, resulting in mass trials and convictions of those accused. In Britain, likewise, "homosexual panic" manifested itself through the demagogue Pemberton Billing's insistence that the German military command possessed a "Black Book" of 47,000 Britons who were homosexual and thus subject to



blackmail and betrayal. In both countries, some homosexuals were regarded as “sick” and were treated accordingly in various mental health facilities; others were regarded as “criminal” and were subject to punishment in civil or military prisons.

By contrast, in Germany homosexual rights activists were inspired by the war effort to work at increasing the visibility of homosexuals. Military experiences of homosexual soldiers led to homosexual rights activists strengthening their efforts to accomplish war reforms. But anti-homosexual writers blamed the community for weakening the fiber of German masculinity, presaging the line of attack that would be employed in the terrible NAZI-era persecution of homosexual men in the 1930s. In Britain, the USA, and in Germany, the experience of World War I played a formative role in helping shape later twentieth century gay attitudes and identities.

In the United States, the relatively late entry of the country into the conflict meant that anti-homosexual purges of the military did not really have a full opportunity of developing on a widespread scale. But especially in urban areas, the effort to recruit and enlist hundreds of thousands of healthy men was accompanied by a general campaign directed at “cleaning up” what was perceived to be rampant “vice” and immorality in America’s urban centers. These “morals” campaigns had the effect of making homosexuality—like venereal disease and prostitution—seem to be a factor in an underlying social malaise. As George Chauncey writes in his masterly account of *Gay New York*,

World War I was a watershed in the history of the urban moral reform movement and in the role of homosexuality in reform discourse. The war embodied reformers’ darkest fears and their greatest hopes, for it threatened the very foundations of the nation’s moral order – the family, small town stability, the racial and gender hierarchy—even as it offered reformers an unprecedented opportunity to implement their vision. It also led them to focus for the first time on homosexuality as a major social problem (141).

One of the best examples of the new kind of “moral crusade” directed against homosexuality in the United States was the “purge” of homosexual sailors in Rhode Island, in 1919 and 1920. In March 1919, the Office of Naval Intelligence created a new task force consisting of 14 recruits—volunteers—based in Newport Rhode Island. Their mission was to entrap other sailors who were suspected of being guilty of a variety of homosexual acts. Not quite a month after the task force was commissioned, 20 naval personnel were arrested and detained pending trial and a nearly guaranteed conviction. Naval historian Sherry Zane notes, “Anxious and afraid, the suspects remained in solitary confinement for three months and 21 days before they received official charges of sodomy and scandalous conduct” (Zane 280). Ultimately, all of the accused were court martialed, found guilty, and sentenced to maximum sentences of between three and ten years of hard labor.

Having suffered the shame and humiliation of courts of inquiry, unfair and misguided court-martial proceedings, and severe prison sentences, they were finally released and dishonorably discharged between December 1921 and March 1922. Their lives would never be the same. They did not receive any military benefits, nor were they buried with the honor of military funerals (Zane 305).

Zane concludes that,

World War I, not the Cold War, marked the beginning of a national security state that grew out of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Great War provided government officials



new opportunities to expand notions of America's core values as national security concerns, and the Newport scandal demonstrated the extent to which the construction of gender and sexual norms shaped national interests in the development of a security state (306).

The Newport scandal also inspired a general re-evaluation of the entire American military's treatment of those deemed "sexually deviant." Some American political leaders were themselves sympathetic to the new, scientific understanding of same-sex desire, even while this did not lead them to advocate for it being accepted or even tolerated. Perhaps it was true that homosexuality was a disease, and not a crime. It was still a condition that needed to be isolated, treated, and repelled from the official military organism, much like a dangerous disease or ailment. Henry Keyes, Senator from New Hampshire, was one who adopted this view: "Perversion is not a crime, but a disease that should be properly treated in a hospital." The idea was flatly rejected by the new Naval Secretary, Edwin Denby. Sexual dissidence was too dangerous for the survival of the race for it to be accepted as a mere health-released variety of human life. Only through stern vigilance and adherence to god-given and long-accepted social norms could the moral rot of relativism and decadence be extirpated from the social discourse. The Secretary expressed his satisfaction at knowing that the fall of morality in the USA would not occur under his watch (Zane 305-306).

By contrast, Great Britain, America's close ally in World War I, did not use professional "decoys" to entrap homosexual soldiers. Individual soldiers might be "noticed" and then made subject to the strict discipline of the armed forces, but their superiors did not devise elaborate internal sexual policing units such as those which existed in the American services. Still, in Britain not only was homosexuality illegal, strong social currents as well as the lingering memory of the famous trials of Oscar Wilde meant that homosexuals were much on the mind of some social leaders, especially among those in the moralistic middle class opposing same sex relationships. Moreover, during wartime, at least 230 British soldiers were court-martialled, convicted and sentenced to terms of imprisonment for contravening military discipline with homosexual acts OR behavior (Harvey).

Strong emotions targeting men suspected of "effeminate loving" motivated harsh attacks on known and suspected homosexuals. One British MP, Noel Pemberton Billing, served as the most vocal scourge of homosexuals. In an article in the appropriately named *Vigilante* magazine, he claimed that the German secret intelligence possessed a list of 47,000 blackmail-able British individuals, men and women from high ranks of society, including even members of the Cabinet and the high military command. They were "perverts" of "moral and sexual weakness" whose lack of human decency reflected the utter degeneracy of the governmental elite:

. . . incestuous bars were established in Portsmouth and Chatham. In these meeting places, the stamina of British sailors was undermined. More dangerous still, German agents, under the guise of indecent liaison, could obtain information as to the disposition of the Fleet. . . Wives of men in supreme positions were entangled. In Lesbian ecstasy the most sacred secrets of State were betrayed. The sexual peculiarities of members of the peerage were used as a leverage to open fruitful fields for espionage (Hoare).

Strict moralists and public adventurers like Pemberton Billing used the prospect of blackmail and the vague sense that homosexuals were anxious to betray their own country to unleash a frenzy of innuendo and scurrilous gossip in his news magazine, *The Vigilante*. At the same time, however, it was certainly true that in the modern metropolis of London, some homosexuals and lesbians were indeed taking advantage of wartime license to lead their lives more freely than any previous



generation. One Captain of the Flying Corp, Leo Charlton, was especially emblematic of a new spirit of liberation that was stalking the land. He opened his sumptuous London home for parties that attracted airmen of all nations who were stationed in or near London, as well as officers from the other branches of service, and an interesting array of cultural leaders of all generations. His parties witnessed officers flirting with other officers, enlisted men flirting with other enlisted, and perhaps most shockingly, officers flirting with enlisted men. “It cannot be claimed that the scenes which were enacted late at night were uniformly decorous. Much license was allowed, especially to those who had just come from, or were immediately returning to, an agony of life at the war” (Charlton).

Another angle of attack upon these queer Britons was that they failed the nation and the race by entering into liaisons that could not bear offspring. To be a homosexual was not only illegal and immoral, it was also a patriotic shirking of the responsibility for all good Britons to “go forth and multiply.” Some Britons took pride in perceptions of their nation’s moral rectitude, as evinced by the continued strength and glory of the British empire. Contrasts were also drawn with the perceived effeminacy and lack of manly convention found on the continent, especially among the German military leadership, whose espousal of bright shiny metallic helmets and fascination with elaborate displays of courtly etiquette were suspect. Popular novelist John Buchan exploited this view in his wartime novel *Greenmantle*, originally published in 1916. The hero Richard Hannay “penetrates” Germany, posing as a Boer from South Africa. He enters Germany via the Netherlands, posing as an anti-British exile itching to fight for the Germans. He meets the powerful and sinister Colonel Ulric von Stumm, and persuades him he can help persuade the Muslims to join the Germans' side. Von Stumm is an overweight voluptuary, addicted to scented cigarettes, French perfume, and purple linens. “At first sight, you would have said it was a woman’s drawing room. But it wasn’t. I soon saw the difference. . . I began to see the queer other side to my host, that evil side which gossip had spoken of as not unknown in the German army” (Buchan 217-18; see also Robb).

Things were indeed quite different in Germany. There, sexologist Magnus Hirschfield cited the positive contributions of homosexuality to the German war effort. He praised the patriotism and loyalty of German homosexuals, who he claimed served in large numbers and were frequently to be found in the most dangerous and exposed positions. In Hirschfield’s view, modern homosexuals were the equivalent of the Spartan band of brothers. Hirschfield and his followers were much more organized, much more involved in public discussion and debate than their counterparts in Britain or the US. They argued that modern war actually demonstrated the fitness and appropriateness of homosexuality, and that therefore homosexuals should be “legally emancipated” from the shackles of social disapproval and legal harassment. But after Germany faced defeat and occupation in 1918 into 1919, forces opposed to homosexuals became louder and more organized. On the far right of the political spectrum, some journalists grouped homosexuals along with “greedy Jewish bankers” and “rabid socialist agitators” as prime culprits in their conspiracy theories of “stab-in-the-back” and internal betrayal. One writer, H.A. Preiss, published a small book, entitled “The Sexual Cruelties of Love-Crazy Men,” in which he argued that certain coteries of homosexuals in high position had consciously undermined the proper masculinist foundation of German society. Memories of a notorious sex scandal which had touched the inner circles of the Kaiser in 1908, the Eulenburg affair, were raked over once again to re-familiarize German readers with the pernicious treachery of the homosexual elite. Writers for the “Die Freundschaft,” (The Friend), a



newspaper that supported homosexuals in Berlin and other large German cities, countered the stab-in-the-back claim. “Homosexuals were exceptional only in their goal to emancipate themselves from legal discrimination. Otherwise they were committed to protecting the nation, as evidenced by their war experience” (Crouthamel).

Given the fact that Germany was at the forefront of sexual liberation, that German speakers had invented the word homosexual, and that the world’s first organized homosexual rights organization was based in Berlin, it is not surprising that the first US rights organization was founded by a German immigrant living in Chicago, Henry Gerber. Gerber was a Bavarian by birth, but he and his family had moved to Chicago before World War I, when Gerber was still in his 20s. In 1917, he did not have US citizenship—or even permanent resident status—when the United States declared war on his home country, so he was effectively forced to enlist and seek work in the US Army. Ultimately, he was found to be in possession of excellent reading and writing skills and was trained as a journalist and printer, skills which he would later put to use as an activist in the 1920s.

In 1919 and 1920, Gerber was part of the US Army of Occupation in western Germany, based in the industrial city of Coblenz. There he came to terms with his own homosexuality, but also became familiar with that town’s community of homosexual rights activists who urged him to regard his own sexual orientation not as a burden but as a gift. On leave, Gerber and his friends went to Berlin where they were exposed to what was then the most active and vibrant homosexual culture in the world. When, in the early 1920s, Gerber returned to the United States and the restrictive sexual regime of Midwestern America, he was determined to share with his neighbors and friends in Chicago the liberated experiences of living in a relaxed and more tolerant society.

Gerber found employment as a clerk with the US Post Office, and support from a network of moral reformers and social activists. Some approached issues from the perspective of socialist thought, other were inspired by religious zeal, some by a desire to improve the condition of life for Chicago’s large immigrant population. All were united by a shared critique of the existing complacency and intolerance which they found in many areas of American life. Gerber made allies with a small but well-experienced group of locals who were like-minded and persistent, some of them sharing a homosexual orientation but not all. He created an organization which he called “The Society for Human Rights,” and he became its secretary and publicist. He filed an application with the State of Illinois to register the group as an officially recognized non-profit community group. The Society for Human Rights, he wrote, sought,

[T]o promote and protect the interests of people who by reasons of mental and physical abnormalities are abused and hindered in the legal pursuit of happiness which is guaranteed them by the Declaration of Independence and to combat the public prejudices against them by dissemination of factors according to modern science among intellectuals of mature age. The Society stands only for law and order; it is in harmony with any and all general laws insofar as they protect the rights of others, and does in no manner recommend any acts in violation of present laws nor advocate any manner inimical to the public welfare.

Illinois officials granted a charter to the Society on December 10, 1924, and so it has appropriately been recognized as the first documented and recognized homosexual rights organization in the Western Hemisphere (Sprague).

The Society for Human Rights lasted for only a year, and its story and legacy in Chicago, Illinois, and the United States, is outside the purview of this paper. But it is entirely relevant to the story of



homosexuality and World War I that this pioneering group in the Midwest was the result of the experience of an American soldier in wartime, and not surprising either to find that many of its first members and supporters were either themselves veterans in the war, or they possessed family members whose lives had been altered or ended by American participation in the conflict (de la Croix).

World War One was a shared experience for those who lived through it and the middle decades of the twentieth would witness its continuing effects upon the lives of those who fought in the war, those who sent relatives to die in the conflict, and the civilians at home who worked to make their communities suitable for the survivors. Both for better and for worse, World War I caused public attitudes about homosexuality to shift, as the “Great War” created a mind-set of danger, decadence, and determination which would alter the lives of queer people irrevocably.



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