

Gay Blackmail in Germany (January 1928)

Abstract

Germany's gay community in the 1920s may have enjoyed a greater openness than that of any other country in the world at the time, but same-sex attraction nevertheless remained stigmatized in most parts of society, and many of those who acted on that attraction lived in fear of exposure. The fact that Paragraph 175 of Germany's criminal code made sexual acts between men punishable by imprisonment only heightened the potential consequences of having one's encounters brought to the attention of authorities, employers, loved ones, and the community at large. As a result, many men were vulnerable to blackmail by former partners or casual encounters. Leaders in the homosexual-emancipation movement cited the incidence of blackmail as a key reason for repealing Paragraph 175, with the prominent sexologist and activist Magnus Hirschfeld estimating that one-third of gay men had confronted blackmail threats at some point in their lives.

This article, under the heading "Sodomy, Blackmail, Theft," appeared in a 1928 issue of the newsletter published by the organization that Hirschfeld himself had founded at the end of the 19th century to advocate for homosexual emancipation, the Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee (Scientific-Humanitarian Committee), or WhK. The article detailed the actions of a 21-year-old man who had solicited, robbed, and blackmailed a series of men throughout southwestern Germany, until one of his victims summoned the courage to report his actions to the police. An earlier target had killed himself "in despair." The court found the man guilty of twelve of the thirteen charges that he faced, four of them just for the sex acts themselves—in other words, for having violated Paragraph 175.

Preventing such opportunistic exploitation of the stigma attached to homosexuality was one of the main arguments that Hirschfeld and so many others in the homosexual-emancipation movement used in the Weimar Republic to support their calls for removing Paragraph 175 from the German criminal code.

Source

Sodomy, blackmail, theft.

A multiple blackmailer of the worst kind stood before the Mannheim Grand Jury Court yesterday, presided over by District Court Judge Schmitt. In a whole series of cases, the 21-year-old factory worker Bernhard Gust.[av] Putzke from Herrndorf, district of Glogau, made friends with homosexual persons in Freiburg, Wiesbaden, and Mannheim last year and after their rendezvous, when he had run out of money, he used blackmail until the matter became too bad for a local official and he reported the matter to the police. In Freiburg, he sought out his acquaintances among students. The trial reveals a picture of moral corruption on the part of the accused. One of those exploited in Freiburg took his own life out of despair, which added drama to the case. Despite the youth of the accused, he was blatantly engaging in male prostitution. In two other cases, Putzke was accused of stealing a watch under circumstances similar to highway robbery and a number of objects in an apartment during a "visit." In the 13th case brought against him, he was charged with begging and vagrancy.

The defendant behaved insolently and brazenly. Public prosecutor Dr. Luppold requested a three-year prison term for the defendant. After one hour of deliberation, the court handed down a prison sentence of two years, eight months plus twelve weeks in jail for four counts of sodomy (one of which was acquitted), five counts of extortion, two counts of theft and two counts of vagrancy and begging. Two months of the prison term and the jail sentence are deemed to have been served by the pre-trial

detention. In addition, in accordance with the prosecutor's application, the court imposed the following ancillary penalties: three years' loss of honor and referral to the state police authorities.

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