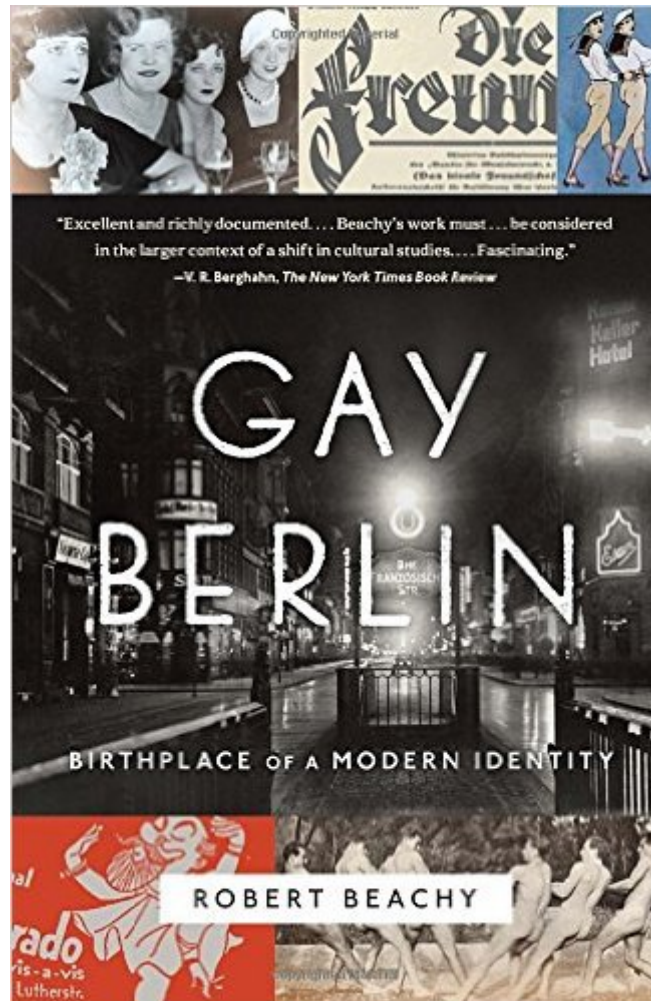


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Gay Berlin: Birthplace Of A Modern Identity



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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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.

Knowing nothing of the gay culture of Berlin (let alone the gay culture of the city where I live) this has been a book that gave me an insight into the gay culture of Berlin. The author takes time to trace the origin of gay German culture and at times goes a little over the top describing the pioneering work of some of its participants. To declare that someone is the "first" publicly declared homosexual is something of a reach considering the excesses of the Roman empire. The German researchers into gay culture did go to pains to give words to gay individuals. I've read dozens of books describing the Nazi culture and the war machine they created, but this is one of the first on the "counter culture" to not only the Weimar republic, but the Nazi regime as well. This is a book filled with insight and research of a movement that was cut short before it reached its apex. The mysteries of the Nazi movement rise to power in Germany has always been expressed as how could a super civilized and well educated nation could stoop to support such thuggish Nazi leadership. Gay Berlin describes the gay sexual freedom that represented an anathema to the Nazi's seemingly rigid moral codes of conduct. Scratch the surface of the Nazi ideology and it was anything but rigid. Brutal, yes -- but its rigidity was anything but consistent. Maybe people who are more immersed in gay cultures might think this book pedantic. As a guy who is a neophyte to ANY gay culture anywhere this book was insightful and tried hard to trace the origins of gay culture in Berlin & Germany. Another thing I'd like to add. Pre-WWII Berlin was looked upon as a beacon of free expression, education, arts, entertainment and debauchery.

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