

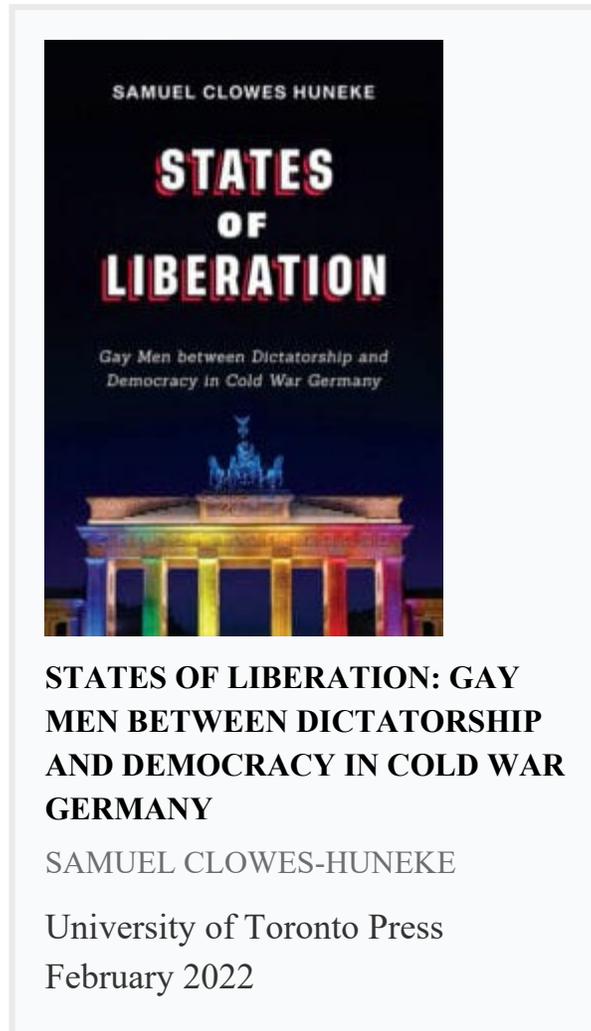
# STATES OF (GAY) LIBERATION IN EAST GERMANY AND WEST GERMANY

Samuel Clowes-Huneke's decades-spanning, groundbreaking history of gay



liberation in East Germany and West Germany challenges conventional assumptions about dictatorships and democracies.

By [George de Stefano](#) / 11 July 2022



“**E**ast Germany was an extraordinary place for gay people in the 1980s.” That startling statement, so counter-intuitive to the conventional wisdom about the defunct German Democratic Republic (GDR), appears in the last chapter of *States of Liberation*, historian Samuel Clowes Huneke’s groundbreaking comparative study of gay activism in East Germany and West Germany. In the book’s preceding chapters, Huneke meticulously details the “convoluted” path that liberation took in a divided country to arrive at “the utopian quality of queer life in contemporary Germany.”

In his account, liberation proceeded further and deeper in authoritarian, communist East Germany than in the liberal, capitalist Federal Republic of Germany (FDR). Huneke's book challenges the common assumption, in scholarship and popular perception, that gay movements can arise only in "Western, consumer-capitalist democracies." Germany's first post-Second World War gay movement, the Homosexuelle Interessengemeinschaft Berlin (HIB), was founded in the GDR. Moreover, East Germany abolished anti-gay laws several decades before the FDR removed them from the penal code.

*States of Liberation* draws on Huneke's research in English and German archives. His deep dive into the files of the GDR's intelligence service, known as the Stasi, yielded a motherlode of information about East German gay activism and the state's responses. He also conducted oral histories with gay and lesbian activists. He has written a fascinating account of how activists in the divided country acquired a consciousness of themselves as an oppressed social minority and organized to make demands on their governments. Huneke's dialectical approach to this history is attuned to complexity and contradiction, delineating the main developments, interrelations, and transformations that occurred in the social processes of liberation.

Huneke tells this remarkable story by "combining and comparing the trajectories of male homosexuality in the two German states across the span of forty years." He makes three central arguments about gay citizenship and Cold War Germany. Comparing the persecution of gay men in the 1950s and '60s reveals homophobia "to be a much more malleable phenomenon" than previously recognized. The author's comparison of gay activism in the two Germanys shows that gay liberation was historically contingent and not dependent on Western consumer capitalism. Postwar German history unsettles assumptions about "the supposed success of liberal capitalism in West Germany and the alleged failures of state socialism in East Germany." Huneke's larger purpose is to offer "a more complex picture of dictatorship and democracy" during the Cold War and today.

Some of his most original observations emerge from his analysis of how states use anti-gay sentiment for political purposes. Homophobia, rather than being a transhistorical phenomenon, is “a constructed belief or feeling” that sometimes is “imposed with specific political goals in mind.” Huneke prefers the phrase “anti-gay animus” to “homophobia” because the latter term “encompasses too many different phenomena that served different purposes in different times and places.”

Germany criminalized same-sex acts and imprisoned tens of thousands of gay men long before the country’s division in 1949. They were prosecuted under Paragraph 175, a statute that became part of the German Empire’s criminal code in 1871. The statute was built on a long European tradition of criminalizing and punishing sexual relations between men. (It did not, however, prohibit sex between women.) Paragraph 175, retained in both Germanys after the war, was overturned first in East Germany. Resistance to its abolition was stronger in the West.

There were several different iterations of the law. The first, adopted in 1871, criminalized penetrative sex between men. To obtain a conviction, prosecutors had to prove that oral or anal intercourse had occurred. The law’s narrowness made gay sex relatively difficult to prosecute, but the threat of prosecution, and blackmail, hung over Germany’s gay population. Nonetheless, between 1871 and the First World War, German cities became “centers of a burgeoning homosexual subculture.” “Something like gay identity, with its own literature, public spaces, and cultural idioms began to emerge.” The sexologist Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld combined scientific research and advocacy against Paragraph 175; in 1897, he founded “the world’s first gay lobby”, the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee.

For a while, gay life flourished. Berlin’s subculture was a “fantastical place” with public cruising sites, clubs and bars, drag balls, and gay and lesbian publications. Activists focused on legal reform, and during the Weimar era, there were “increasingly robust efforts among political parties to repeal” Paragraph 175. Germany’s Social Democratic and Communist parties were allies in the anti-175 efforts while remaining “intensely ambiguous” in their attitudes; many socialists subscribed to a “narrow masculine morality” and regarded homosexuality as a symptom of capitalist decadence. In the Soviet Union, homosexuality was

criminalized in 1934, 12 years after the Bolshevik government headed by Vladimir Lenin had decriminalized it.

Whereas the imperial and Weimar eras “were periods of experimentation, tolerance, and exuberance”, they also saw anti-gay animus becoming entrenched among conservatives and “more than a few progressives.” When Hitler came to power in 1933, ambiguity in state policy and public perception gave way to persecution. The Nazi dictatorship revised Paragraph 175, making changes that “vastly increased its scope and allowed for far harsher punishments.” No longer did prosecutors have to prove that penetrative intercourse occurred; now, “any act that could be interpreted as homosexual”—a kiss, a flirtatious glance, mutual masturbation—was punishable. The new Paragraph 175(a) criminalized the so-called seduction of youth, on the assumption that since homosexuals were not born but made, their ranks could be replenished only by “recruitment” of young males by older ones. Under the new law, the Nazi regime convicted almost 50,000 men and sent 5,000 to 15,000 to concentration camps.

Why did the Nazis persecute gay men so severely? Huneke disputes that “persecution grew out of eugenic preoccupations” about gender roles and natalism. The regime didn’t criminalize lesbianism, as it would have if an obsession with reproduction drove its anti-gay animus. The main motive was the Nazis’ belief that homosexuality challenged their authority. Gay members of the Nazi party and military officers were persecuted because the dictatorship believed that all-male organizations “brimming with young men” were “ideal recruitment fields for homosexuals.” If older gay men were able to seduce these youths, they might acquire the numbers that would enable them to conspire against the regime. (Women typically did not hold leadership roles in the military, economy, or politics. Therefore, the Nazis did not view sexual relations between women as a direct threat to the state.)

The fear of so-called gay cliques or conspiracies was not the Nazis’ alone; it motivated opposition to gay rights in pre-and post-Third Reich Germanys, West and East. Although

government employees in the United States during the '50s and '60s.

After the Second World War, the governments of the two Germanys held “radically different” views of homosexuality: authoritarian East Germany exhibited a more “laissez-faire” attitude; West Germany “clung to policies and practices from the fascist past.” For 20 years, from 1949 to 1969, West Germany convicted more than 50,000 men under Paragraphs 175 and 175(a). East Germany abolished both versions in 1968. Paragraph 175 was eliminated from the German criminal code in 1994 after East and West Germany reunited as the Federal Republic of Germany.

In the chapters recounting gay liberation history from the postwar era to the present, Huneke presents detailed, decade-by-decade discussions of activist strategies and tactics and government responses; the advances and setbacks; the machinations of various political parties; the contradictory mix of increasing social tolerance and the persistence of hostile attitudes among government administrations and the general public despite advances in legal and social equality. Sometimes the thoroughness of the author’s approach bogs down his narrative; he also tends to repeat points and arguments. The book is liveliest in its oral histories of gay men and lesbians. Although the early chapters focus heavily on reform of Paragraph 175 and therefore on men, lesbians are more prominent later in *States of Liberation*. The small size and vulnerability of the movement brought men and women together, but gay men could be sexist and given to what we now call mansplaining.

Huneke’s gay and lesbian subjects provide valuable first-hand accounts of historical events, but he doesn’t hesitate to challenge their interpretations of those events. West Germans tend to look back at the ‘80s as a period of stagnation. Although “overtly political activism” declined over the decade, Huneke cautions against conceiving political engagement too narrowly; the cultural and social advances led by activist groups in West Germany were significant achievements. “These new institutions and expanding opportunities showed a genuine commitment to diversifying gay and lesbian social, intellectual, and cultural life” as well as “a fundamental rethinking of what activism meant.”

Surprisingly, the AIDS epidemic did not become a dominant concern for gay activists and

citizens in either German state. The West “experienced nothing remotely comparable” to the energized gay movement in the United States, even as fear and confusion spread and opportunistic conservative politicians sought to “stamp out the subculture built in the 1970s.” But right-wing politicians were thwarted by more moderate and progressive forces in the government who held key positions in health ministries. Gay self-help groups conducted outreach and education. German AIDS Help ([Deutsche Aidshilfe](#)), which still exists, was a partnership between the state and self-help organizations. It produced safer sex education posters and pamphlets that were more sexually explicit than anything produced by public funds in the United States and free of the moralizing and fear-mongering that undermined US campaigns. (Several of them are reproduced in the book.)

*States of Liberation* examines how, from the '70s on, activists in both Germanys organized and made demands on the State. In the West, liberationists sought to influence the major parties, the Christian Democratic Union, the Social Democrats, and the Free Democrats but found their best allies among the Green Party. In the East, activists first associated themselves with the Protestant Church, an institution that offered a rare space for independent action largely free from state interference. However, many activists chafed at the relationship; they believed that religion, especially Christianity, was the source of their oppression. Others were committed socialists who didn't want to challenge the communist state so much as enjoy full citizenship within it.

The GDR feared that independent gay action would lead to the formation of “cliques” that might undermine its rule; it also worried that Western intelligence agencies would infiltrate gay groups and recruit among them, a not unfounded concern. The Stasi spied on activist organizations like the HIB and tried to foment discord among their members so that they'd lose support and dissolve. However, the regime came to realize that gay demands were legitimate and that the best way to deter anti-state sentiment was to accede to them. Canny gay activism helped bring about this sea change in official attitudes: “Telling the dictatorship that gay people had no innate desire to organize within the church or to oppose the regime, they set off a chain reaction within the secret police that would have incredible ramifications” from the mid-'80s to the dissolution of the GDR in 1989.

The unification of the two Germanys was, as Huneke observes, “not a happy” process. West Germans took positions of authority away from East Germans; the new state took over East German industries and auctioned them off “at fire-sale prices” (which also happened in post-Soviet Russia). The rapid change to a privatized, capitalist economy and the consequent social and economic disruptions “led to resentment from Easterners and attacks on marginalized groups,” particularly immigrants but also gay men and lesbians. In one example, in 1991, neo-Nazi skinheads attacked a party at the villa of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, a transgender woman who had been a prominent figure in the community under communist rule.

Huneke hails “the utopian quality of queer life in contemporary Germany.” Yet, he eschews triumphalism, noting that Germany lags behind other Western countries in some areas, such as access to gay and lesbian-positive health care. Germany also lacks the large LGBT organizations that exist in the United States, which in a way attests to the successes of activism—there now exists “consensus support for gay rights across the political spectrum.” Huneke, sizing up the events of the ’80s in both Germanys, offers an intriguing observation. Although it is often assumed that a flourishing gay subculture and political progress go hand in hand, West Germany had “a huge commercial subculture” but “lacked legal reforms”, whereas the opposite was true for East Germany. The experience of the two Germanys demonstrates that “these two horsemen of gay liberation do not always ride together.”

East Germany “liberated its gay and lesbian populations in a way very few other states had done.” In addition to abolishing Paragraph 175 in its entirety before West Germany, it was one of the world’s first countries to allow gay men and lesbians to serve in the military openly and to equalize the age of consent for homosexuals and heterosexuals. In 1985, its leading sexual health agency declared, “There is no humane alternative to the full recognition of homosexuals as emancipated and equal citizens.”

The successes of gay activism in East Germany lead Huneke to draw conclusions that flout conventional understandings of democracy and dictatorship. The changes activists brought about are usually associated with liberal democracies, but Huneke says the East German experience demonstrates they are possible in authoritarian systems. Cold War historians who maintain that Western countries are capable of transformation but Eastern dictatorships are

not, engage in “essentialist frameworks”. The successes of East German gay and lesbian activists “should underscore just how limited that model is. Communist countries too had forms of civil society;” they were “never fully totalitarian in practice.” Huneke asserts that political activism “can, did, and does shape life in authoritarian states.”

That conclusion, however, may be overbroad and more limited in its applicability than the author acknowledges. Whether liberation movements can challenge authoritarian states depends on how authoritarian those governments are and how much repression they are willing to marshal against social movements. In various nations— Egypt, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Uganda, Russia, Hungary, and China, to name just a few—harsh repression has crushed activist movements or prevented them from emerging. Although the United States hasn’t descended—yet—into full-blown authoritarianism, the anti-gay and anti-trans backlash is strong and intensifying, in state legislatures, courts, local governments, school boards, and Congress. Victories won through the political system can be undone by the same system. Eternal vigilance may be the price of liberty, but an organized and strategically savvy movement, independent from political parties but allied to other social change causes, is indispensable to liberation.

**TAGS**

cold war

communism

democracies

Dictatorships

East Germany

gay liberation

nazis

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Samuel Clowes-Huneke

West Germany

**RESOURCES AROUND THE WEB**

States of Liberation: University of Toronto Press

Samuel Clowes Huneke: website

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