Making Homosexuality Medical: Nazi Notions of Sexual Degeneracy

This paper traces the processes through which the medicalization of homosexuality radicalized in Nazi Germany and ultimately resulted in the systematic persecution of the nation’s same-sex desiring men. Under the Third Reich, homosexuality was understood to be a degenerative abnormality and portrayed as a danger to the purity of Aryan blood. This project explores the means by which homosexuality began as a medical entity and eventually became a racial threat of the utmost significance, and combated by the Nazis as such.

This paper’s sections of the initial medicalization of homosexuality in Germany/German lands focuses on four figures: Heinrich Ulrichs, Dr. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Otto Weininger and Dr. Magnus Hirschfield. The focus on these four men first reveals the ways in which the medicalization of homosexuality helped to spark political organizing in support for its decriminalization, leading to an increase in medical knowledge and in public awareness. Second, it highlights another key consequence of medicalization: the emergence of the idea that homosexuality, though inborn, was the result of an individual’s degeneration. It was this notion of degeneration, despite whether it was deemed “naturally occurring” or not, that the Nazis of the Third Reich deemed a national danger, an ideological threat, and a moral contagion. At its most basic level, this paper contends with the question of how homosexuals became “victims” of the Third Reich. The medicalization of homosexuality and its subsequent racialization under Nazi ideology are crucial components of the answer.

Biography
Jessica Butler is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History at Boston College in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. Her research interests include 20th century Germany and the Holocaust, the medicalization and politicization of a “homosexual threat” leading up to and throughout the years of the Third Reich, homosexuals as victims of the Holocaust, Nazi ideology, and larger notions of degeneration and sexual degeneracy in Modern Europe. She graduated with Honors from Scripps College in Claremont, California in 2005. She is currently a Teaching Assistant at Boston College.