

Being a Man Under Nazism

by Éliisa Goudin

A history of masculinity and a history of men, this collective volume shows that while “ideal” Nazi masculinity was opposed to that of Jews and homosexuals, it was also contested and fragmented, both in the private sphere and on the battlefield.

About: Patrick Farges and Elissa Mailänder (eds), *Marcher au pas et trébucher. Masculinités allemandes à l'épreuve du nazisme et de la guerre*, Presses du Septentrion, 2022. 244 p., 20 €.

The volume edited by Elissa Mailänder and Patrick Farges, *Marcher au pas et trébucher* (Marching in step and stumbling), is at once a history of masculinity and a history of men under Nazism. Its various contributors did not aim to write a history of manhood as such, but a relational history of gender during the Nazi period.

The first half of the book's title evokes the *Gleichschaltung*, an untranslatable word that describes a bringing to heel and is used to explain to students that Nazism was a system in which all social spheres were brought under control. However, the reality was clearly more complex, and the application of the doctrine was often hesitant. As the second half of the book's title implies, the school of manhood that Nazism aimed to be did not always function as intended: Stumbling and marching in step are two sides of the same domination.

The theme of domination runs through the book: domination of men over women, domination of men over other men, and social and racial domination. The book examines these various forms of domination through an intersectional lens and confirms, if proof were needed, the fruitfulness of this approach. Oppressed men are

not oppressed at all times and in every aspect of their social identity: Even under Nazism, privilege and oppression sometimes went hand in hand.

To Be a Warrior or To Be an Outcast

Since Antiquity, the ideal of manhood has been built in and through war on the model of the Greek citizen-soldier, masculinity needing to be warlike, as it were, in order to exist. The Nazi state, for its part, was founded on an ideal of hegemonic masculinity reserved for the men of the “racial community of the people” (*Volksgemeinschaft*): These men exercised control over women and other (“non-German”) men, but also over themselves, their bodies, and their fears. To “be a man,” one had to abide by strict discipline, celebrate comradeship, prepare oneself to die for Nazism, and constantly sacrifice the self on the altar of the collective. The book makes the point very clearly: Racism includes as much as it excludes.

Several contributions analyze the process of acting out to show how violence emerges. The reader is immersed in the life stories of a number of men through oral testimonies and written traces—left voluntarily or not. “Walter the Bloodthirsty,” a former SS member who had embodied the Nazi ideal of masculine toughness and taken pride in his lack of compassion and pity, gave Thomas Kühne an interview over coffee and cake decades after the events.

Likewise, in her discussion of the “supermen” of an elite corps (the Condor Legion), Stefanie Schüler-Springorum shows how Spain served as a playground and field of military and sexual experimentation for the Nazis. She describes the arrogance and self-satisfaction of these men using the written testimonies they left behind.

The Nazis opposed this ideal masculinity to that of the “outcasts,” deemed such either because of their “racial” affiliation or because of their “deviant” sexuality. Since Jews could not embrace the martial aspects of Nazi masculinity, their manhood was called into question. They fought back in various ways: through sport, Zionism, and even by appropriating certain elements of the Nazi discourse on masculinity. Farges shows how Zionist culture borrowed militaristic and masculinist values from the cultural repertoire of German nationalism in what could almost be described as the “ultimate form of assimilation” (p. 71).

Defining a Homosexual

Unsurprisingly, this work centered on the history of everyday life has bodies as its core object of study. We know, especially since Foucault, that relations of power are exercised on, via, and by means of bodies: They materialize and circulate through them. The book examines the impact of the internalization of Nazi ideas on men's bodies, that is, the way in which power relations took hold of bodies under Nazism.

As is made clear time and again, masculinity was often fragile, contested, put to the test, shot through with contradictions. Geoffrey Giles, for instance, shows that the ban on homosexuality tolerated exceptions. In the Wehrmacht and the SS, homosexuals contributed to Nazi male hegemony; in some cases, sexual misery was even accepted as an excuse to justify homosexual practices.

Moreover, being homosexual was no guarantee against participation in acts of violence. On the contrary, one had to play the archetypal role of the violent heterosexual to be able to live homosexuality, a practice described by Farges and Mailänder as a form of "othering" (p. 24): Transgression and conformism were not always in conflict.

The categories of belonging that defined Nazi society were not, as one might think, rigid, stable, and binary; on the contrary, they were often changing and always complicated. As Giles explains, the question of the identification of "true" homosexuals—or, in the terms of Nazi ideology, those who were "curable" and those who had to be euthanized—was the subject of much trial and error.

The obsessive thoroughness of Nazi investigations, the insanity displayed—even at the very end, when Germany was in the throes of defeat—shows just how much the Nazis struggled with how to define a homosexual, perhaps even more so than with how to define a Jew.

"Proudly Facing the Fatherland"

This non-linear history of masculinities under Nazism is inseparable—need we say it?—from that of femininities. The word "sex" derives from the Latin verb *secare*, meaning to separate. In many respects, the other sex is central to the book, revealing

the extent to which the distribution of qualities attributed to the masculine and the feminine is variable. Thus, the feminine is present, at least between the lines, in all the chapters, including those on male homosexuality, the repression of homosexuals being often justified on the grounds that they are “effeminate.” Particularly instructive are the passages on what it meant at the time to “look homosexual” (p. 127 *et seq.*).

The masculine and the feminine always depend on each other for their meaning. Under Nazism, doing gender entailed giving proof of one’s masculinity or non-femininity through undergoing or subjecting oneself to various ordeals.

However, this was all very complicated. Christa Hämmerle’s analysis of the correspondence of a couple, Rudolf and Charlotte, highlights this complexity: Rudolf came to accommodate Charlotte’s desire to be an artist rather than a housewife, accepted the presence of a lover, and later agreed to their separation. Thus, Rudolf showed himself to be progressive and generous, despite being, as Hämmerle puts it, a “proud National Socialist” (p. 93) whose masculinity might have been expected to be far less compromising.

Moreover, as Kühne demonstrates, the ideal of toughness that characterized Nazi military masculinity did not exclude bonds of tenderness between soldiers. So long as the norm was met, a man could adopt “feminine” roles without compromising his masculinity (pushing a baby carriage, for example). Kühne speaks of a Protean masculinity, in reference to Proteus, the Greek marine deity who watches over the sea and has the ability to change shape (p. 101).

A few emblematic cases provide a fascinating insight into the Nazi rhetoric of gender. Klaus Latzel and Franka Maubach examine a marriage contract dated November 1944, in which the husband and wife promised to guarantee the “healthful happiness of their family” and to produce offspring “who will sacrifice their life force with dedication and self-abnegation in the struggle for power and honor” (p. 181). Both confessed to their “original sins”: an alcoholic father for him, divorces within the family for her. In their eyes, this was a “confession before the entire racial community of the people” (p. 182), which confirms that they fully embraced the 1935 “Law for the Protection of the Hereditary Health of the German People.”

The couple was guided in their choices by the anxiety of being racially unfit. This was especially true of the husband: Until he had the definitive documents attesting to the purity of his blood, he avoided intimate relations and took cold showers so that he could “proudly face the fatherland” (p. 194). The zeal he displayed

reveals that while Nazism provided Aryan men with a whole system of privileges and gratifications, it also generated oppression and an incessant fear of being excluded. This deep-seated anguish affected even the men who fully embraced Nazi values: For these men, marriage was no longer a private space or a refuge, but a service to the people (*Volk*).

In the same vein, Mailänder examines the case of a Kiel university professor who led an openly bigamous lifestyle. This professor caused a rift among those who came to know him because he operated an impossible synthesis between two irreconcilable poles: the promotion of efficient progenitors and the question of morality. Whereas Nazis obsessed with procreation described his “prodigious fatherhood” as a contribution to the *Volk* (p. 207), the surrounding villagers found his behavior shocking (p. 213). These debates did not end with the defeat of Nazi Germany, as can be seen from his trial held in 1949, in a period marked by a return to sexual conservatism.

Violence Produces Gender (and Vice Versa)

Works on masculinities are often tautological: Men’s behavior is reified in a concept of masculinity that, in a bit of circular reasoning, becomes the explanation and the excuse for men’s behavior.

There is no such tautology in this book. The authors describe in fine detail the daily negotiation of masculinities and femininities under Nazism. We see that Nazi masculinity had a color: It was systematically racialized. Yet, it was also embodied in many different ways, depending on social determinants or sexual orientation. In some cases, the war served as a school of manhood: Male togetherness and proximity to danger reinforced the feeling of belonging to a community of men.

Violence produces gender (p. 17), but the reverse is also true: Gender produces violence. Accordingly, the book sets out to understand the link between violence and the daily construction of the masculine, confirming the importance of interrogating the highly essentialist concept of masculinity (in the singular). The history of masculinities, even under Nazism, must be written in the plural. Several contributions highlight the fact that the Nazis viewed sexuality not as a “simple bodily act” (is it ever?), but as a cultural act pertaining to men’s condition in wartime.

While we can only hope that this book will soon be translated, we rejoice that it has been published in France. Indeed, American critical men's studies have taken much longer to be introduced to France than to Germany. Noting that these new critical tools have so far been mobilized mainly in the social sciences in France, Farges and Mailänder call for "the French historical debate to engage more strongly with critical men' studies" (p. 15).

One might regret that none of the contributions examine the expression or staging of masculinity in Nazi "art" —such as in painting, literature, or even dance. Likewise, little attention is given to fatherhood and filiation, except when it comes to the promotion of "good progenitors" and the precautions taken prior to procreation to comply with eugenics laws. It would have been fascinating to explore how fathers discussed the masculine with their sons and daughters under Nazism, provided written sources exist on the matter (for instance, letters addressed to children by their fathers during the war).

Finally, the study of masculinities could have paid attention to the difficulties linked to war wounds, disability, perhaps also aging, that is, to how gender configurations are expressed in situations where the body is ill or weakened and therefore can no longer serve as a weapon. Let us hope for another volume to pursue such questions!

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