

The Queer Cultures That the Nazis Destroyed

An exhibition in Munich looks at the lives of some of the Third Reich's lesser-known victims, reframing the way history is told.



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5 MIN READ

MUNICH — A tailor who made special clothes for transgender people wishes her clients happy holidays in an ad. A guidebook features dozens of cafes, clubs and bars where lesbians could meet. In personals in the back of a gay magazine, men search for love, sex and companionship.

These items are all on display in “To Be Seen: Queer Lives 1900-1950,” an exhibition at the Munich Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism that runs through May 21, 2023. The five-part show explores different dimensions of the robust lives queer people in Germany carved out for themselves in the beginning of the 20th century, positioning them as pioneers who challenged existing social structures. The final section focuses on life under the Nazis and the years that followed.

“We have to focus on the diversity that existed before 1933, because otherwise, we’re repeating the narrative of exclusion, of persecution,” said Mirjam Zadoff, the director of the Documentation Center museum, referring to the year Hitler and his National Socialists came to power.



The exhibition combines documentary artifacts with artworks, including “Quilt #43 (Sophia Goudstikker),” by Philip Gufler. NS-Dokumentationszentrum München; Connolly Weber Photography

The aim of “To Be Seen” is to give space, agency and voice to some of the Nazi regime’s victims, and to reframe the way history is told: from the point of view of the victims, instead of the oppressors. Several other recent historical projects in Germany have attempted similar shifts in framing, including an exhibition about revenge at the Jewish Museum Frankfurt and two shows about the lives of people from Africa and Oceania who were put on display in an 1896 colonial exhibition in Berlin.

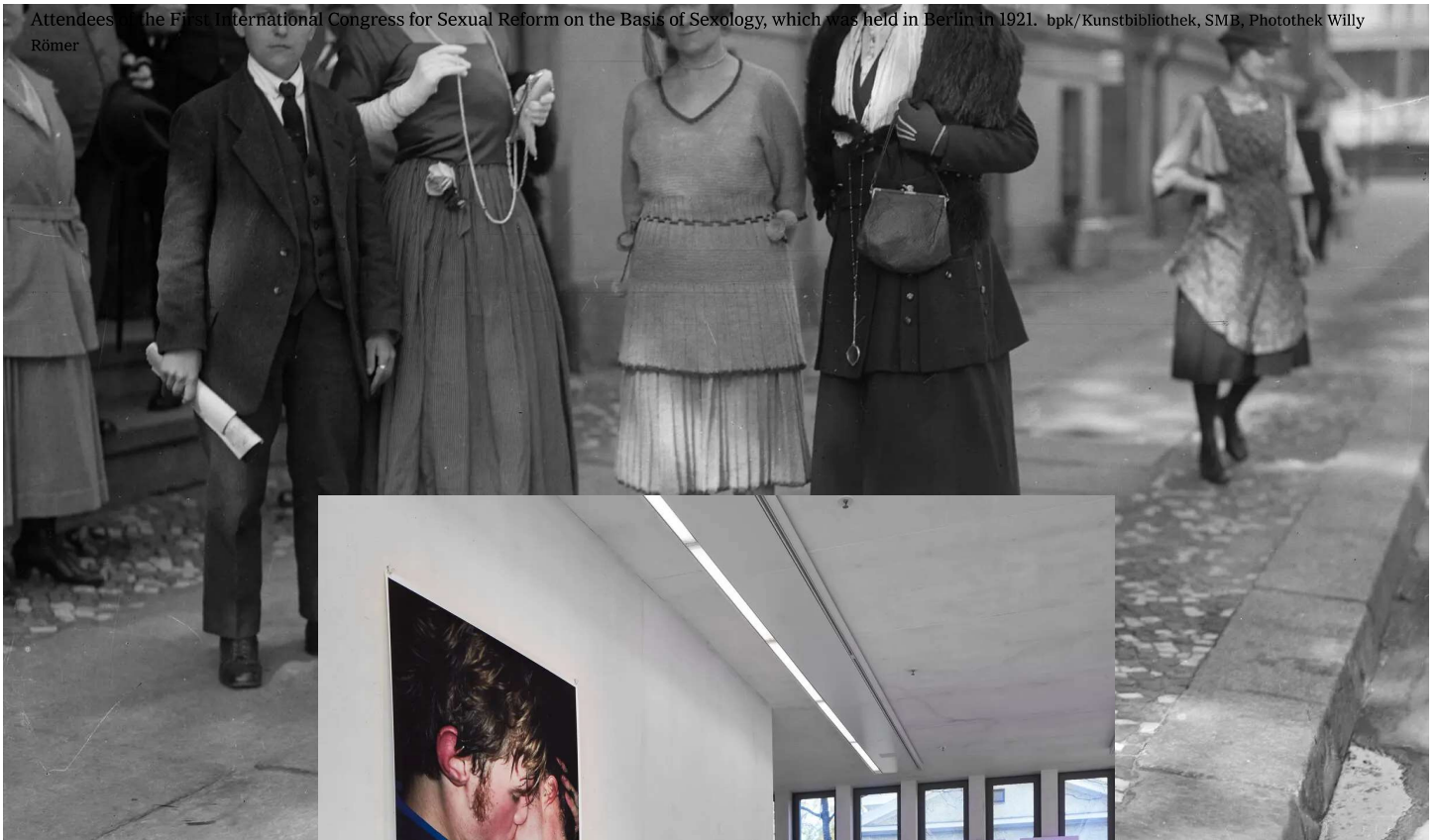
The permanent exhibition at the Documentation Center explains the political, economic and cultural factors that informed the rise and rule of the Nazis in Munich, where the party was founded. Throughout, the victims of the dictatorship are of course discussed, but not in great detail.

These victims “don’t have a history before or after,” Zadoff said. “They’re just there as persecuted Jews, as persecuted Roma and Sinti, and so on.” The new exhibition aims to supplement those brief mentions with biographies, photos, articles and more, she said.

In the first section of the show, short films tell the stories of gay and transgender individuals from the early 20th century who “tried to be themselves and to fight for themselves and their rights,” said Karolina Kühn, the exhibition’s curatorial director. One film focuses on Anita Augspurg, an activist who fought for women’s suffrage and improved working conditions for prostitutes, and against Germany’s involvement in World War I and II; another is about Claire Waldoff, a popular cabaret singer in Weimar Republic-era Berlin who was known for bawdy songs with titles like “Oh God, How Dumb Are Men?” and lived openly as a lesbian.



Attendees of the First International Congress for Sexual Reform on the Basis of Sexology, which was held in Berlin in 1921. bpk/Kunsthbibliothek, SMB, Photothek Willy Römer



"The Cock (Kiss)," a 2002 photograph by Wolfgang Tillmans, on display at the Munich Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism. Connolly Weber
Photography/NS-Dokumentationszentrum München

For the Nazis' L.G.B.T.Q. victims, recognition has been a long road. The law that forbade sexual contact between men and was used to send about 15,000 men to concentration camps, called Paragraph 175, continued to exist in various forms until 1994. (The Nazis charged lesbians and transgender people with other crimes, like public indecency and prostitution.) About 50,000 men in West Germany were convicted under the law after World War II, and another 50,000 were investigated.

Telling the stories of victims of state discrimination and violence is one way to empower them. "Revenge: History and Fantasy," an exhibition at the Jewish Museum Frankfurt that ran from March to October, presented another: focusing on their rage.

One of the items on display in that show was a baseball bat from Quentin Tarantino's movie "Inglourious Basterds," which a character in the movie, called the Bear Jew, used to beat up German soldiers during World War II. Another part of the exhibition looked at the real story behind one Jewish group's idea to poison the water supply in some German cities after the war.

"The story of Jewish revenge is the story of agency in the face of defeat or discrimination, or violence," said Max Czollek, one of the curators. "Revenge is a reactive mode. It's a counter-strategy in the face of utter powerlessness."



A 1939 photograph from the show "Despite All: Migration to the Colonial Metropolis Berlin," at the FHXB Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg Museum, which features documents from the families of people who were put on display in a colonial exhibition. J. White/Robbie Aitken Collection

Another two exhibitions, in Berlin, focus on the victims of Germany's cruel colonial policies, who critics say have been largely forgotten. Dekoloniale, an organization that seeks to bring the nation's colonial history into the mainstream, has helped organize "Looking Back," a permanent exhibition at Museum Treptow in Berlin that explores the biographies of the 106 men, women and children from Africa and Oceania who were put on display as part of a colonial show in Berlin in 1896.

A follow-up exhibition, "Despite All: Migration to the Colonial Metropolis Berlin," which recently opened at the FHXB Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg Museum in Berlin, takes a deeper dive into the stories from "Looking Back." Curators looked at families from the human zoo who decided to stay in Berlin, and traced their lives through the next decades. For the project, curators contacted descendants and gained access to their private memorabilia.

“These histories are not covered in so-called ‘normal’ archives,” said Anna Yeboah, a general coordinator at Dekoloniale. “You don’t hear the story of the hunted, you always hear the story of the hunter.”

Zadoff, from the Documentation Center, pointed out that several groups have had to fight to be recognized in Germany’s remembrance of Holocaust atrocities. People who were killed because of their sexuality or gender identity, for example, have never been commemorated by Germany’s lower house of Parliament, the Bundestag, during an annual day of remembrance on Jan. 27. Next year will be the first time.

The exhibitions in Munich, Berlin and Frankfurt are finding their own ways to fill in history’s gaps. The bigger question they’re wrestling with is how to create a more inclusive memory culture for the next generation. “Who will carry this memory in the future?” said Zadoff. “At the end, those who feel represented are the ones.”