

“Berlin Meant Boys”: Christopher Isherwood in Weimar Germany’s Gay Culture

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Our collective memory of Germany in the 1920s and 1930s focuses on Adolf Hitler’s rise to power and leaves little room for much else; thus, we have overlooked—or passed over—one of the most incredible cultural scenes to have existed during this period in not just Germany, but also in history: Berlin’s extensive and internationally known gay culture. This paper examines and analyzes Berlin’s vibrant and thriving gay culture through the renowned British novelist Christopher Isherwood’s experience in Berlin and how his participation in this internationally known hub of social and sexual freedom changed his writing and boosted his self-confidence and self-esteem. This research explores the economic, social, and political conditions in which this culture was able to form in Berlin, the exact nature of the gay scene in the city, and Christopher Isherwood’s background and experience in this liberated culture and how it influenced him. In researching this largely unknown culture, this paper will contribute to the relatively small body of work on this subject and help bring awareness to this culture’s importance and its legacy through Isherwood’s writings, especially in a time that is still struggling with LGBTQ rights.

Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s is usually associated with the rise of Adolf Hitler. While Hitler was indeed gaining a foothold at this time, much more was happening in Germany that has not received as much attention in our collective memory. Berlin was an internationally known hub of social and sexual freedom during this period, and had a particularly vibrant gay culture. The British novelist Christopher Isherwood was one of the many visitors to Berlin who came to this city specifically in order to escape the oppressive nature of his country’s condemnation of homosexuality and homosexual behaviors. In Berlin under the Weimar Republic, Isherwood participated in an uninhibited gay culture and that included nightclubs and acceptance of gender non-conformity and sexual experimentation. Isherwood experienced a sexual freedom that changed his writing as well as his self-confidence and self-esteem.

Christopher Isherwood (1904-1986) was born near Manchester, England, and he had a privileged childhood, as his grandfather

was a country squire.¹ Isherwood did not have a close relationship with his parents, so when he went to boarding school at eight years old, he forged “intimate and creative friendships with a vast range of personalities from all walks and classes of life.”² That close bond he did not share with his parents, he created with his peers. In 1925, at age twenty-one, Isherwood was dismissed from Cambridge University after supplying nonsensical responses on his final exams. After his expulsion, he served as a secretary, a tutor, and briefly as a medical student; during this time, he published his first novel *All the Conspirators* before joining his childhood friend and fellow writer W. H. Auden in Berlin in 1929.³ Berlin was to

¹ Katherine Bucknell, “Biography,” *The Christopher Isherwood Foundation*, 2012, Accessed March 28, 2016, <http://www.isherwoodfoundation.org/biography.html>.

² *Ibid.*

³ Bucknell, “Biography”; Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern*

become the setting for several of his novels as well as somewhat of a safe haven from his home country's attitude toward homosexuality.

In the years following World War I, Berlin became a hub of sexual freedom. There, gender identity and expression did not conform to traditional cultural and societal expectations. Berlin during this time could be described as an anomaly; homosexuality and nonstandard expressions of masculinity and femininity were, in many places, criminalized, yet the gay culture in Berlin existed without much backlash. After World War I, Germany had fallen into a pit of defeat, economic inflation, and general despair, and, with the dismantling of the Kaiser and his censorship, "the celebrated cultural efflorescence and social tolerance of the Weimar years arose out of, or in spite of, a perhaps equally celebrated atmosphere of perversion and abandon."⁴ It was accepting of and even encouraged open sexuality, transsexuals, cross-dressers, same-sex couples, and everything in between, and it was because of this that Berlin became internationally known as a place of freedom for the closeted and persecuted LGBTQ community throughout Europe and America.

Eastern and Western Europeans and Americans flocked to Berlin for its gay culture. Many visitors were sex tourists, travelers interested primarily in taking advantage of the unregulated sex industry, but some were just curious onlookers, there to observe the culture and document their experiences.⁵ The sex industry was promoted by advertisements, gay and lesbian magazines and newspapers—allowed by Weimar's relaxation of

censorship in print media⁶—and a homosexual population between 50,000 and 100,000.⁷ Prostitution was also a major attraction to visitors. "The pervasive prostitution (both male and female), the public cross-dressing, and the easy access to bars and clubs [catered] to homosexual men and lesbians."⁸ Many male sex workers who engaged in same-sex acts did so only for the sake of making a little extra money—around one third identified as heterosexual in their personal preferences.⁹ Not all prostitutes were hesitant to serve the gay community, however. Prostitution was a source of income for some—not always stable or reliable—but it provided some money in a time of fewer jobs and opportunities.¹⁰ Some men even endeavored to find a long-term partner, one who might pluck them from their lives as sex workers and foster a relationship around true love.¹¹

Berlin also had a flourishing "homosexual bar scene," boasting a "vibrant nightclub culture and cabarets,"¹² each with a unique atmosphere and focus; some specialized in shows, while others were just social gathering places:¹³

These bars were the foundation of ordinary Berlin homosexual life; some bore evocative names (like the café Amicitia), others were perfectly

Identity (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), ix.

⁴ Nick Paumgarten, "Berlin Nights," *The New Yorker* 90, no. 5 (2014), n.p.

⁵ Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 198.

⁶ Brent L. Pickett, *The A to Z of Homosexuality*, The A to Z Guide Series, No. 122. (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 79.

⁷ Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 189, 197.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 44-45, 188.

¹³ Florence Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe: Berlin, London, Paris, 1919-1939*, Vol. I & II (New York: Algora, 2006), 38.

anonymous—only the informed customer would know what to expect inside. Many were tastefully decorated, with boudoir-like soft lighting and upholstered banquettes* to facilitate dialogue and enable clients to become acquainted, with the utmost discretion. These clubs were preferred by homosexuals of the middle class, and above all they sought to preserve their reputation and avoid embarrassing scenes, touts, gigolos, and too-conspicuous personalities.¹⁴

The local gay community in Berlin knew which bars offered certain services as well as which bars had been shut down and where they were reopening next, and those long-term visitors to Berlin also learned.¹⁵

Berlin was also home to the Institute for Sexual Science, a revolutionary museum-like institute founded in 1919 by Magnus Hirschfeld.¹⁶ The Institute was focused solely on sex and sexuality and their variations and manifestations.¹⁷ Hirschfeld could be referred to as an archivist of sexuality, for inside his museum, he displayed “whips and chains and torture instruments designed for the practitioners of pleasure-pain; high-heeled, intricately decorated boots for the fetishes; lacy female undies which had been worn by ferociously

masculine Prussian officers beneath their uniforms.”¹⁸ In addition to material objects, the Institute also possessed a collection of photographs (fig. 1) that showed both sexual and non-sexual scenes.

Hirschfeld was considered a specialist in homosexuality and homosexual practices, and he actively pushed for the reversal of Paragraph 175, the German law that stipulated that sexual acts between men were illegal and could result in a five-year prison term.¹⁹ Partly because of this and partly because of his own sexuality, Hirschfeld was also viewed as a humanitarian and his institute and foundation were clear representations of that status.²⁰ He founded the Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld Stiftung—Foundation—in 1919 (the same year as the Institute for Sexual Science) for “scientific investigation of sexual variation and diseases.”²¹ Hirschfeld was also praised for bringing awareness to the existence

* Cushioned benches usually attached to walls and commonly found in bars, restaurants, and diners.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 36-37.

¹⁶ Christopher Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976), 17.

¹⁷ Camilla Smith, “Challenging Baedeker Through the Art of Sexual Science: An Exploration of Gay and Lesbian Subcultures in Curt Moreck’s Guide to ‘Depraved’ Berlin (1931),” *Oxford Art Journal* 36, no. 2 (2013): 245.

¹⁸ Ibid., 16.

¹⁹ Glenn Ramsey, “The Rites of ‘Artgenossen’: Contesting Homosexual Political Culture in Weimar Germany,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17, no. 1 (2008): 85, 86. Lesbians were not mentioned in the law. The culture of the nineteen twenties and thirties viewed lesbians as “unobtrusive,” meaning they were less obvious than male homosexuals and tended to fly under the radar; the nature of female relationships was seen as one of companionship. Because of this, lesbian relationships may have been perceived as simply an example of that female friendship, and thus, less threatening; this may have been the reason lesbians were excluded from the law. Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, “Lesbianism in the 1920s and 1930s: A Newfound Study,” *Signs* 2.4 (1977): 895.

²⁰ Ramsey, “The Rites of ‘Artgenossen,’” 92.

²¹ Ibid.



Figure 1. Institute for Sexual Science interior. (From German History in Documents and Images, copyright Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=4242.)

of homosexuality and not to feel like a societal outcast—although Hirschfeld did not coin the term, this became known as homosexual “emancipation.”²²

This “emancipation” extended outside of Berlin and offered a freedom to many gay, bisexual, and other sexually unconventional men and women that was not allowed in many countries. In 1929, Christopher Isherwood traveled to Berlin from his home in England for a week in March to join his good friend, poet W. H. Auden (fig. 2).²³ Auden told his friend that Berlin was the place to be freely homosexual without having to worry about the strict laws, stigmas, and the social, cultural, and legal implications and consequences of engaging

in same-sex behavior in England,²⁴ so when he traveled to Berlin for the first time, he was excited to visit “the Berlin Wistan [Auden] had promised him. To Christopher, Berlin meant Boys.”²⁵ And boys, he got. On their first day together, Auden took Isherwood to the Institute for Sexual Science, out to eat, and then to the place he was staying, called the Cosy Corner, which was just down the street from Auden’s favorite brothel.²⁶ The Cosy Corner was also a “boy bar,” and it was Isherwood’s first

²⁴ David Garrett Izzo, “Christopher Isherwood’s *A Single Man* and *Christopher and His Kind*: Milestone in the Literature of His Tribe,” *Harrington Gay Men’s Fiction Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (2004): 28.

²⁵ Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 2.

²⁶ Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, ix, x.

²² Ibid., 91, 96.

²³ Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, ix.



Figure 2. W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood photographed in 1937 by Howard Coster. (Photo courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.)

initiation into the gay culture of Berlin, and, though initially nervous, he loved it.²⁷ After his weeklong visit with Auden concluded, Isherwood felt a strong pull to return to Berlin, so he did, and remained there until 1933.²⁸

Once Isherwood returned to Berlin for his prolonged stay, both he and Auden started keeping journals, detailing their day-to-day activities and, eventually, their sexual encounters and conquests.²⁹ Isherwood noted that he became much more sexually confident even in the infancy of his Berlin stay,³⁰ acknowledging that his embarrassment surrounding sex and asking

for sexual favors evaporated.³¹ His self-confidence also grew tremendously, and he even wrote a brazen letter to a friend in England, saying, “I am doing what Henry James would have done, if he had had the guts,”³² meaning he was living freely in Berlin without fear. When he returned to London for a visit, he wore a bracelet a lover had gifted to him as a “badge of his liberation.”³³ In his last book about his experiences in Berlin, *Christopher and His Kind* (1976), Isherwood expresses his frustration with the state of the British society in which he lives:

He asked himself*: Do I now want to go

²⁷ Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 3.

²⁸ Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, ix.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, ix, 196.

³⁰ Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 11.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

³² *Ibid.*, 31-32.

³³ *Ibid.*, 6.

* Isherwood refers to himself in the third person throughout most of the book.

to bed with more women and girls? Of course not, as long as I can have boys. Why do I prefer boys? Because of their shape and their voices and their smell and the way they move. And boys can be romantic. I can put them into my myth and fall in love with them. Girls can be absolutely beautiful but never romantic. [...] Couldn't you get yourself excited by the shape of girls, too—if you worked hard at it? Perhaps. And couldn't you invent another myth—to put girls into? Why the hell should I? Well, it would be a lot more convenient for you, if you did. Then you wouldn't have all these problems. Society would accept you. You wouldn't be out of step with nearly everybody else. [...] Damn Nearly Everybody. Girls are what the state and the church and the law and the press and the medical profession endorse, and command me to desire. My mother endorses them, too. She is silently brutishly willing me to get married and breed grandchildren for her. Her will is the will of Nearly Everybody, and in their will is my death. My will is live according to my nature, and to find a place where I can be what I am...But I'll admit this—even if my nature were like theirs, I should still have to fight them, in one way or another. If boys didn't exist, I should have to invent them.³⁴

In Berlin, Isherwood did not have to worry as much about the pressures of society and was free to explore his sexuality in ways England did not allow. Berlin's gay subculture was also liberated from the traditional notions of masculinity. Cross-dressers and men in drag were common and it was not unusual to encounter one or two in a bar or club, or even in Hirschfeld's Institute, as Isherwood and Auden did during Isherwood's first visit to Berlin in

³⁴ Ibid., 11, 12. Emphasis original.

March of 1929.³⁵ This would have been a new experience for Isherwood, as homosexuality and nontraditional sexual expressions were criminalized in England and it is doubtful that any transvestites or cross-dressers would have presented themselves in public. Many of Isherwood's new experiences made their way into his writing.

While in Berlin, Isherwood's writing blossomed. He kept a diary during his stay and recorded the smallest details about his experiences.³⁶ Using the diary entries as a reference point, he wrote extensively about life in Berlin and what that entailed. Isherwood used the diary to create the atmosphere for two of his books, *Mr. Norris* and *Goodbye to Berlin*; after these two were written, Isherwood destroyed the diary by burning because "it was full of details about his sex life and he feared that it might somehow fall into the hands of the police or other enemies."³⁷ It is important to remember that while Berlin did afford Isherwood the sexual freedom he desired, when he left Berlin in 1933 and returned to the rest of Europe,³⁸ homosexuality and homosexual practices were still condemned and even criminalized. He burned his diary for the sole reason that it was proof of his homosexuality and could have gotten him into serious trouble if it had been read by the wrong eyes. Isherwood laments in *Christopher and His Kind* that he misses the diary, because the novels he wrote in Berlin altered the truth and the diary would have been able to fill in the gaps in great detail.³⁹

³⁵ Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, ix-x.

³⁶ Christopher Isherwood, *The Berlin Stories* (New York: New Directions, 1963), v.

³⁷ Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 40-41.

³⁸ Isherwood, *The Berlin Stories*, v.

³⁹ Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 41.

While Isherwood did write faithfully about Berlin and its culture, he left out one important aspect of his stay in Berlin in his writing: homosexuality. In lieu of discussing homosexuality due to social stigmas, Isherwood occasionally wrote himself into the pages of his novels early in his career, and even in one of his later works.⁴⁰ For example, in Isherwood's 1962 novel *Down There on a Visit*, a woman has difficulty bringing her boyfriend from Germany home to England. "The story is true except that the 'young woman' is really Isherwood and the German boyfriend is his actual lover Heinz."⁴¹ In 1976, at age seventy-four, the publication of *Christopher and His Kind* marked Isherwood's public coming out. In the book, he is honest about his homosexuality and also spends time explaining to the reader that his previous works were misleading:

[W]hen *Lions and Shadows* [his previous autobiography] suggests that Christopher's chief motive for going to Berlin was that he wanted to meet [the anthropologist John Layard], it is avoiding the truth. He did look forward to meeting Layard, but that wasn't why he was in such a hurry to make this journey. It was Berlin itself he was hungry to meet; the Berlin Wystan [Auden] had promised him. To Christopher, Berlin meant Boys.⁴²

Isherwood seems to have used *Christopher and His Kind* as an outlet to finally express himself as he had longed to do for decades. Even in 1976, unashamedly declaring himself as gay was still a rather bold move, as there continued to be significant anti-gay sentiment in the United States, where

Isherwood was living at the time.⁴³ Because of Isherwood's straightforward honesty, *Christopher and His Kind* turned out to be one of the first mainstream gay memoirs that was both brutally honest and entertaining.⁴⁴ Isherwood refused to justify his homosexuality, wanting to be treated like a straight author writing about his or her sexual life—no justifications, no qualifications.⁴⁵ Because of this, he was described as "outspoken" and "unafraid,"⁴⁶ and could even be hailed as a pioneer in the gay memoir and autobiography genre.

Like Isherwood's burned Berlin diary, the gay culture in Berlin was not destined to last forever. The dissolution of Weimar's gay culture began with Hitler's rise to power in the mid 1930s.⁴⁷ Instead of reversing Paragraph 175, like many—including Magnus Hirschfeld—hoped, the Nazis made the law harsher and began efforts to extinguish the gay culture, "systematically crush[ing] the gay nightlife in Berlin and elsewhere that had developed during the Weimar regime."⁴⁸ The Nazis not only shut down gay establishments, such as bars and clubs (fig. 3), but they also arrested around 50,000 homosexual citizens, most of whom were male.⁴⁹ As 1940 neared, it became

⁴³ Thomas J. Campbell, "Diaries," *Magill's Literary Annual 1998* (1998): n.p.

For comparison, homosexuality had been decriminalized in the UK less than a decade earlier, with the passage of the Sexual Offenses Act of 1967. Kate Gleeson, "Freudian Slips and Coteries of Vice: The Sexual Offenses Act of 1967," *Parliamentary History* (Wiley-Blackwell) 27, no. 3 (2008): 405.

⁴⁴ Izzo, "Literature of His Tribe," 28.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁷ Pickett, *The A to Z of Homosexuality*, 146.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Izzo, "Literature of His Tribe," 12.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴² Isherwood, *Christopher and His Kind*, 2.



Figure 3. The Eldorado, a popular gay bar, after it was closed by the Nazis. (From Cabaret Berlin, <http://www.cabaret-berlin.com/?p=11>.)

clear that the Nazis were seriously cracking down on lesbian and gay locales, and at the same time, public opinion concerning “alcoholism, homosexual prostitution, and criminality” was becoming more negative.⁵⁰ Because of this and Hitler’s rise to power, Isherwood and his lover Heinz left Berlin and traveled around Europe.⁵¹ It is unclear whether Isherwood ever returned to Berlin again.

The atmosphere in Berlin in the 1920s and 1930s was one of sexual freedom and expression. For Christopher Isherwood, Berlin also brought inspiration, and he wrote some of his best-known works and arguably created one of the most long-lasting characters in literary history: the vivacious Sally Bowles.* Isherwood was just one of many international travelers who came to

Berlin specifically for the gay culture that existed there and the social and sexual freedom it offered. Isherwood’s experiences in Berlin both boosted his self-confidence and self-esteem and shaped his writing. Even though the Nazis mostly stamped out the gay culture in the years leading up to World War II and throughout the war, the unique character and atmosphere lives on through Isherwood’s writings and the legacy they left in their wake.

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⁵⁰ Smith, “Challenging Baedeker,” 247.

⁵¹ Izzo, “Literature of His Tribe,” 32.

* In the musical *Cabaret*, Sally Bowles is the lead female character and is a cabaret performer in Berlin.

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