

# Ain't It War?

## Queer Nation Building in Berlin-Schöneberg<sup>1</sup>

»The concept of the nation ... remains alien to me. Perhaps because I grew up in a city that has not belonged to any country.«

*Michael Wildenhain (2008)<sup>2</sup>*

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### »A Masquerade of Perversions«

*In Our Name* is the title of a brochure published in January 2006 by the Berlin initiative »Queer Nations«. According to the greeting words of the Governing Mayor of Berlin<sup>3</sup> in the brochure, this initiative aspires to »build on the tradition of Magnus Hirschfeld« and create an institution in the city for the scientific study of the »history and sociality of homosexuality and the discrimination of homosexuals«. That hereby one or

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- 1 Translated from the German by Christopher M. Sweetapple, made possible by Merseburg University of Applied Sciences, Germany.
  - 2 This and all other quotations in this article were translated from German; page references refer to the German editions.
  - 3 Translator's note: The author refers here to the then-mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit, who during his tenure was one of the most nationally recognized gay male politicians in Germany.

the other »painful memory gaps« should be closed, as Klaus Wowereit laments (*Queer Nations*, 2006, pg. 5), is visible upon first glance.

»Berlin as the capital of our country«, raves the blurb for which the *taz* journalist Jan Feddersen, co-founder and board member of the initiative, is responsible as an editor.

»It is closer than ever to the sentiments of life [original: Lebensgeföhle], of which a Brit like Christopher Isherwood in the late twenties reported back to their homeland: liberal, tolerant, in the Prussian sense perfectly suited to make each and every one happy according to their fashion« (ibid., pg. 12).

In fact, Isherwood writes in his memoirs that he wanted his readers »to find excitement in Berlin's drab streets and shabby crowds, in the poverty and dullness of the overgrown Prussian provincial town which had become Germany's pseudo-capital«. The fact that later generations envied him for his time there seemed to him »flattering, but also ironic« (Isherwood, 1992 [1976], pg. 169).

At that time he insisted that his landlady in the Schöneberg Nollendorfstraße vote for the communists (cf. ibid., pg. 120) and felt »marvelous freedom« only in the company of boyish young workers, »nearly all out of work«, in humble Kreuzberg bars (ibid., pg. 34). On the other hand, he remembers the west of the city this way:

»Here screaming boys in women's clothes and girls in monocles, tuxedos, and short haircuts like out of Eton play-acted the high jinks of Sodom and Gomorrah, horrifying the onlookers and reassuring them that Berlin was still the most decadent city in Europe.«

For Isherwood, this was only a »commercial line« in the competition of the metropolises, because »what was left for Berlin to offer its visitors but a masquerade of perversions?« (ibid., pg. 33).

Incidentally, the brochure of the »Queer Nations« continues on:

»The annual parade on Christopher Street Day [the German term for Gay Pride] is one of Berlin's most powerful tourist magnets: no bad tone spoils this summer's procession of those who were persecuted and punished not so long ago, and, in the bourgeois sense, could hardly be socially acceptable« (Queer Nations, 2006, pg. 12).

## European or Anatolian Side?

The B1, first called Hauptstraße, then Potsdamer Straße, is »the Bosphorus of Schöneberg«, as recently proclaimed by the Berlin magazine *tip* in a cover story dedicated to the intensified gentrification of the district (*tip*, 2011). The course of the main road was suggested to the readers of the magazine for a rough orientation in the »new Schöneberg«, which exhibited comparably above-average price hikes for newly-rented apartments in Berlin (see also *taz*, 2011). About two and a half kilometers long, it proceeds from Innsbrucker Platz, where the S-Bahn Ring and highway ramp mark the southern boundary of the city center, through the densely-populated terrain between Wilmersdorf and Kreuzberg: »To the west are the popular residential areas, to the east the problem areas« (*tip*, 2011).

In the north of Schöneberg, this social topography is at times more of an allegation than a reality—not just because people from all points of the compass come together in the church on Dennewitzplatz when parcels from the Berlin foodbank are distributed. In the post-war blocks of Bülow- and Frobenstraße, a district west of Potsdamer Straße, where institutional investors savor the legacy of abandoned urban construction policy, long-time residents complain about prostitution, which spreads here in the wake of EU enlargement. Already in the imperial era this area in the central outskirts of the capital was quite notorious

and later provided literary designs of West Berliner melancholy the appropriate local atmosphere, from the worldwide bestseller of Christiane F. to Pieke Biermann's hooker-thrillers. In a piece for the cultural magazine *Transatlantik* about the dealers' area and the many cheap brothels, the journalists Benny Härlin and Michael Sontheimer quote a connoisseur who said, »if you just collect all the people four hundred meters left and right of Bülowstraße, you would have easily got ten thousand years of jail time together« (Härlin & Sontheimer, 1983). But trying to make one's own milieu respectable is not new—half the city has cheated itself accordingly through the Wall years.

However, in Schöneberg the more recent question is, »The European or Anatolian side?« It implies the solution of a problem that became urgent in this western part of Berlin after 1989–90, when the emerging reality of the »economic geographic term ›Germany‹« (cf. Fülberth, 2007, pg. 277–281) made all the more perceptible the loss of the »we« which was staged in the decades of confrontation with the Soviets: how can the further affiliation to a »community of shared values« under the banner of »The West« be justified, »despite the end of the West-East conflict«? The answer: »There was a need for new blocks, which convincingly stand against each other« (Yılmaz-Günay, 2011, pg. 42)—which connects, as Koray Yılmaz-Günay has shown, with the social advancement of a certain part of the West German gay scene. For this scene, »Schöneberg« is as much a cipher as a desired place of living—with everything associated with it today being in the »West.«

Here, in front of the district city hall, which administered perseverance during the Cold War, a Green district mayor raised the rainbow flag in 1996 in the run-up to the Christopher Street Day, and since August 1st, 2001, partnerships can be stylishly registered in its Golden Hall. Further north, in addition to »gay« flower shops, the neighborhood around Nollendorfplatz and Motzstraße offers a well-stocked nightlife, including bars where boys from Romania hustle and clubs that specialize in a

variety of fetishes. Of course one would like to live here, preferably in a renovated Neo-Renaissance apartment in the Bavarian Quarter, but one's already »a part of it« with one of the two-room bandboxes that were stacked on the bombed out areas during the reconstruction program of the 1950s/1960s and which today often get sold for much money as »retirement insurance«. The »Lesbian and Gay Association in Germany« (LSVD) has also been a resident here for several years—in a representative old building suite for which the district pays the rent. From there it would be a comfortable walk, along Bülowstraße to the east, to the »Bosporus«. But influential gay publicists would not tire of summoning the dangers of this proximity after September 11, 2001.

## Awakening in the »Problem Area«

In fact, the second German gay movement came from the »other« side. In the east of Schöneberg, on Kulmer Straße, the socialist Homosexual Action West Berlin—founded forty years ago, in August 1971—opened in 1977 the gay center, soon known simply as SchwuZ. It was located in a factory floor—what was not yet called a »loft«—in the back of a tenement block in the »redevelopment area« intended for demolishing for the »car-friendly city«. That is why »migrant worker families« were preferred, followed by people who had escaped the civil war in Lebanon or the military dictatorship in Turkey.

At that time an adolescent, I remember that the men who frequented SchwuZ in the late 1970s and early 1980s did not seem to endeavor to comply with bourgeois norms. Most of the students, who did not miss a thing in the muffle of the West German province, not to mention the imminent compulsory military service waiting for them outside of West Berlin, were passionately discussing in the »Aunt Magnesia Room«—a tribute to Magnus Hirschfeld, the mentor of the first gay movement in the Berlin

of Kaiser Wilhelm and the Weimar Republic—the contributions for a radical paper called *Schwuchtel* [literally »faggot«] and celebrated on the weekends with boisterous parties. Conflicts with the neighbors happened usually only because of the volume, when on Sunday morning the lyrics of the band *Brühwarm* rang across the yard: »When, when, when do we finally start to live warm?«<sup>4</sup>

Did Schöneberg just catch up on a development that began in the US in the mid-1970s? According to Annamarie Jagose in her *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, the »liberation model for the gay and lesbian movement has become less important« (Jagose, 2001 [1996], pg. 79). They set out to build a »community« based on the ethnic model of American blacks based on »Gay Pride« (ibid., pg. 48) and at first »highlighted the cultural difference« (ibid., pg. 79). The intention was to »establish the homo identity of a legitimate minority whose official recognition would bring civil rights to lesbians and gays« (ibid., pg. 81).

Meanwhile, the gay French philosopher Michel Foucault, who wanted to see »in the fight for the rights of gays not a final goal but only an intermediate stage« (Foucault, 2007 [1994], pg. 116), warned against cruising into the mainstream of society. As early as October 1981, it seemed to him »only a small step forward« that »people have to copy marriage in order for their personal relationship to be recognized« (ibid., pg. 117). Rather, the point is to replace the heterosexual model of monogamous relationship with »friendship as a way of life«. In the same year, in the eastern part of Schöneberg in the Bülow arc, gays occupied a vacant building in order to try out new ways of living together in the »Tuntenhaus« [literally »house of queens«].

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4 Translator's note: The name of the band as well the the quoted lyrics in this passage play on an older German idiom for male homosexuality (i. e. »warme Brüder«, English: literally »warm brothers«).

## »The Turk was Too Beautiful«

In old Schöneberg, relations between majority German gays and »Turkish« or »Arab« men were not necessarily limited to »peaceful coexistence« and occasional brief, albeit intense encounters in the »Klappe« [similar to the »tearoom«], as homo-jargon called free-of-charge public toilets, which existed at that time in lieu of the Wall company's fully hygienic, individually-paid booths bathed with functional music. In Lothar Lambert's 1977 movie *Late Show* [original title *Nachtvorstellungen*], a young guy escapes his annoying girlfriend and goes to the cinema, where, by chance, the gay film »The Turk was Too Beautiful« was playing, and he begins to empathize with the protagonist. »Film, daydream and reality merge into one another«, sums up the German gay and lesbian cinema reference book *Out im Kino*, as he, for his part, turns to a man—the Lambert discovery Mustafa Iskarani (Schock & Kay, 2003, pg. 257). And in the spring of 1985 the gay writer Hubert Fichte was able to register the first reactions of the West Berlin scene to AIDS, which was just beginning to dominate the headlines of the world press, noting as a matter of course:

»The gays with positive lymph reaction are throwing a party.  
 The Kurd Ahmed.  
 – Why is everyone in Germany so grumpy, so sad?  
 – Is (it) war or what?  
 Hussein the blonde Lebanese.  
 Family man.  
 With that unspeakable extra on the rounding of the ass.  
 How he moans and lets himself be fucked, or fucks.  
 What a pity« (cited in Braun, 2005, pg. 279s.).

Which does not mean that everything was happily »multicultural.« Two other West Berlin films of Lambert's prove the opposite: In *I Berlin-Harlem* from 1974, a black ex-GI can't find

any apartment, but only gay men who like to take him home »as an exotic sex object«. When he is falsely accused of rape, the lawyer who freed him in court also expects a sexual return (cf. Schock & Kay, 2003, pg. 17). And in *Fucking City* in 1981, there is not only the couple looking for »young foreigners for sex games«, but also the gay butcher, who wanders through the park after work as a leather man. When he finally takes a liking to an asylum-seeker he encounters, he comes up with the idea that his sister should marry him so that he could »have fun with him in the future as well« (ibid., pg. 133). Lambert showed gays who were accomplices under the prevailing conditions—as far as ubiquitous racism is concerned, but also through the reproduction of social exclusion among themselves, especially in the »gentlemen's bars« with a bell button. Accordingly, the gradually mainstreamed homos started quite early on to call for a boycott of his films (cf. ibid., pg. 113). But, as another authentic witness of the time among homo-cinephiles, Frank Ripploh (*Taxi to the Loo*, 1980 [original title *Taxi zum Klo*]), put it: »One remarks that in being gay lies being free, being beautiful, aesthetics. In reality and in the film there is also a lot of filth and bourgeois culture« (in ibid., pg. 331).

## Orderly Relationships

Bourgeois culture today conceals the filth better—for the deal »residence permit for sex« the butcher would not have to rope in his sister, he could register it himself in the Golden Hall of district city hall. »The ethnic model was successful in terms of its own aspirations«, says Annamarie Jagose (2001 [1996], pg. 82). This also applies here in Germany. The circumstances seem ordered—who registers as a half of a homo-couple belongs to »us.« Ambiguities such as »gay man« and »family man«, especially »gay« and »Kurd« or »Lebanese«, are no longer provided. When the Berlin »Gays & Lesbians from Turkey«, in short GLADT, pre-

sented themselves in November 2003 in the district city hall in Schöneberg with a two-day congress on the situation of Turkish lesbians, gay men and transgender\* in the Federal Republic, the metropolitan homo magazine *Siegessäule* printed the column with the headline »Turks Get Out!« Playing on the coming-out slogan and at the same time a racist slogan, both were meant exactly the same way: after »Turks« had their coming-out, they should be invisible as such. In a nutshell, in 2008, it bore the title of Nurkan Erpulat's play *Are you gay, or are you (a) Turk?*

Thirty years after Foucault's appeal, the difference that the activists of yesteryear were so proud of has been reduced to a manageable and in all Western countries more or less uniform repertoire of the sexually explicit. Instead of an »incentive« of peripheral lusts, as the thought leader of the »subversion« had hoped for in the gay uprising, Georg Klauda found in *Die Vertreibung aus dem Serail* [literal English translation: »The Expulsion from the Seraglio«] »an unprecedented shortage of behaviors that express a sense of belonging devised and perceived as deviant sexual identities« (Klauda, 2008, pg. 13). Seen by the general public as »daring« and in many places still frowned upon, in some districts of major German cities—and especially in the Motzstraße neighborhood of Berlin-Schöneberg—they belong to the street scene without the white homos even noticing there »the heteronormalization of one's own society« (ibid., pg. 123). Instead, it seems plausible to them to delegate the problem of still-virulent homophobia to »the Muslims.« Why? As soon as »lesbian and gay subjects began to be understood as a group that was also mainstream as a minority«, as Jagose puts it, »centralization and marginalization processes recur«. And it was

»not just that the lesbian and gay community that described the ethnic model happened to be mostly white. Rather, the category race [...] could be understood as an insignificant or at best additional category of identity, since the organization of the community was based on a single identifying feature: sexual orientation« (Jagose, 2001 [1996], pg. 83).

The one-dimensionality of the new gay lobby, which began to form in West Berlin and in the Federal Republic under the impact of the AIDS crisis, seemed almost mandatory in view of its drama—after all, there was a real danger of complete disfranchisement of members of the so-called »main risk group« in the room. But how this could succeed in the longer term to strengthen their own position in society via the devaluation of supposedly »others« is ultimately understandable only against the background of the course that Germany took after the annexation of the GDR. Even today, serious public confrontation with the pogroms of the unleashed »xenophobic« mob in the early 1990s is missing, when beastly murders were perpetrated everywhere in the country—this is how the »civilized« racism, with which the ruling elites intended to appease the East and fold them into their »new world order«, is now so well-rehearsed.

In the slipstream of this development, a minority of gays and even fewer lesbians have secured a reasonably well-respected place and, in meticulously defined territories, which are therefore all the more vigorously defended, where they may become »happy according to their fashion«, provided they bring the necessary financial resources. HIV and AIDS pose a heightened risk of poverty since the years of the same »Red-Green« federal government, which »fulfilled« »our« hearts' desire for official recognition of »social loyalty«, to which Volker Beck, the Green Party's prominent »homo politician«, downgraded the Registered Life Partnership on the tenth anniversary of its introduction (cf. Beck, 2011). And how desirable can it be for people who rely on Hartz IV in times when many couples at the job center<sup>5</sup> pretend to have separated so as not to receive

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5 Translator's note: the »job center« mentioned here refers to the division of unemployment subsidies crafted in the wake of the so-called Hartz IV reforms to the German social safety net, reforms not unlike the Clintonian »welfare-to-work« scheme in the USA.

even less support? But the lucky ones, in turn, affirmed the new imperialist campaigns and willingly contributed to the mood in Germany against already particularly disadvantaged sections of the population.

### »To be ascribed to the Muslim cultural circle in the broadest sense«

It did not take the assassination of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh in November 2004 in Amsterdam »committed by a young Islamist from the Moroccan immigrant community«—as the media usually attributed it<sup>6</sup>—to inaugurate the »war on terror« in Schöneberg in like manner, nor to transfer the line of demarcation »between the cultures« onto the city map as a result. This was the concern Jan Feddersen, a West Germany transplant who had by then emerged as a proponent and propagandist of »gay marriage«, made one year prior, and certainly not by chance on the same weekend when GLADT, that self-organization of gay migrants from the north of the district, presented itself in the district city hall. The children of »guest worker families« and refugees of former times should be taught that their hometown cannot be the same as »the capital of our country«. His article in the *taz* on November 8th, 2003, first recalled a statement by the Dutch right-wing populist Pim Fortyn—murdered in 2002 by an animal rights activist from the white population, inspiring hardly any critical considerations about the cultural identity of the perpetrator. »I have nothing against Arabs, I even sleep with them« (cited in Feddersen, 2003). After it had seemed clear in

6 In Germany, there have been frequent references to »Zuwanderer« rather than »Einwanderer« (immigrants)—a phrase that has been borrowed from the CDU jargon into official state language and from there into the mainstream media. In short, this change of prefix means: »Immigrants not welcome, we are already complete.«

advance that gay racism could at worst be an affront, Feddersen passed on the challenge of Alexander Zinn, speaker at that time for the LSVD, who »did not want to make any allowances for political correctness« (ibid.). »We belong to the civil rights movement of homosexuals, and if immigrants attack us, then this must not be made a taboo« (cited in ibid.).

The author gave examples from which he wanted to surmise a »trend« that had »caused anxious murmur in the capital's gay scene (and not only there)« (ibid.). For example, the LSVD's office—at the time still housed in a simple shop east of Hauptstraße—was a »popular object of aggressive ridicule« for young people from the neighborhood. And a few blocks to the north, the shop window of Café PositHiv had been color graffitied by kids »whose appearance, it is said extremely cautiously, point to a Turkish or Arab background«. Feddersen claimed that the self-organized AIDS project would even have to »close down« because of this (ibid.). The alarm actually helped the café to move to the west side of Schöneberg North, even before the LSVD found comfortable shelter there. Already standing at the ready on location was Bastian Finke of Manco, »the telephone hotline for attacked gays in the homo citizens' center Mann-o-Meter«, who knew that »39% of the acts of violence« went to the accounts of young men »who are to be ascribed to the Muslim cultural circle in the broadest sense, all the same whether they have a German passport or one from Turkey« (cited in ibid.). Feddersen's conclusion: Schöneberg is about »to become a no-go area for gays beyond the Nollendorfplatz scene« (ibid.).

## Not in My Name

Six and a half years later, again in the Schöneberg district city hall, a Berlin LSVD board member passionately points out to the national convention of his organization »the threat of >alienation< befalling German cities and the shifting numeric weight

of >changing majorities< « (cited in Ruder, 2010). Today Maneco is still being pampered by the »Red-Red« Berlin Senate, as well as by the Greens, and is often quoted by the small new right-wing parties active in the city as a way to substantiate their »critique of Islam« (see also Bündnis, 2011), even though almost every figure Bastian Finke has ever published has been refuted numerous times. Even gay media has long recognized that the statistics of the »anti-violence project« spurn all scientific standards (see also Buchterkirchen, 2007).

What lingers on, apart from Finke's livelihood, is the rumor about »Muslims«, which people like him, Alexander Zinn, and Jan Feddersen have helped circulate. »We also know that in Berlin it is often young men with a migration background, but we shouldn't say that«, writes Martin Reichert on the eve of Berlin's Christopher Street Day 2010, on the subject of »violence against gays« in the *taz*, where this has been emphasized more than once. He also notes that in »the gay quarter Berlin »Schöneberg the anti-Turkish hostility is no longer to be ignored« (Reichert, 2010), but that doesn't seem to bother him too much, given that his statement repeats almost word for word an anonymous inflammatory article published on *Politically Incorrect*<sup>7</sup> the year before.<sup>8</sup> He much rather prefers to relate isolated attacks on ethnic German gays to the persecution of European Jews and, much like that racist blog, launches into an adventurous compar-

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- 7 Translator's note: *Politically Incorrect*, among the most visited websites in Germany's mediasphere, is an active blog and clearinghouse which focuses on amplifying news items and opinions critical of leftist discourse in general and of Islam and Muslims in particular. For a neutral description, see its entry on Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politically\\_Incorrect\\_\(blog\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politically_Incorrect_(blog)).
- 8 The following statement is emblematic for the propaganda spread by *Politically Incorrect*: »Attacks on homosexuals are increasing in Berlin. Everyone knows that almost without exception the perpetrators are young Muslims. But one is not allowed to think that, let alone say it out loud« (Cited in Hieronymus, 2014 [2011], pg. 137).

ison between the situation of the gay community and that of the isolated state of Israel in the Middle East.

In such a way, the calculated resentment peddled as repressed truth returns to those free to endorse their fearless champions: »Surely someday one must be allowed to say that«. In so doing, they are finally able to express »everything«—here in the neighborhood as elsewhere in this »Germany«, which has hardly managed to »abolish« itself<sup>9</sup> as the majority of its inhabitants so far seem unable to locate themselves in terms of class, rather than within a »nation« imagined also as »queer.« May others therefore speak in their name—*not in mine*.

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9 Translator's note: here the author evokes the title of Thilo Sarrazin's infamous 2010 best-selling book *Deutschland schafft sich ab*.