

### Masculinities in Interwar Europe

Workshop am German Historical Institute London,  
veranstaltet von Maria Fritsche, Southampton University  
London, 10. Juni 2010

This one-day workshop discussed the problems of analysing “masculinity” and debated the usefulness of theoretical concepts, such as R.W. Connell’s concept of “hegemonic masculinity”. It covered not only discourses of masculinity and the power of masculine norms, but also looked into social practices, the process of “doing gender”, and the emotional aspects of masculinity. This focus on emotions and experience reflects the general shift in emphasis in the historiographical field.

The conference opened with a keynote address by *Michael Roper* (Essex), in which he questioned why masculinity is not quite an object of interest in the way it once was, noting that he decided not to foreground the concept in his recent book “The Secret Battle”. He reflected on how, twenty years ago, masculinity allowed historians to introduce a gender perspective to traditional areas of study. “The Secret Battle” does this in one sense, but it also strains the paradigm of gender by exploring subjectivity of mothers and sons. Roper argued that intimate lives are not wholly reducible to masculinity; masculinity does not just exist in relation to other identities such as class or race, but also in relation to subjectivity and emotional states. He asked whether historians focus too much on masculinities, at the risk of misinterpreting the evidence, and warned that we should remember that masculinity is our construct, not that of the actors under investigation. It never constituted the sum total of their subjectivity. Roper then discussed his future work, which will look at the effects of World War I on veterans and how the emotional experience of war carried through generations. This will focus on the private sphere and how much the experience of war could be contained by loved ones. It will also examine the investment veterans made in domesticity by analysing the narratives of their children. Roper pointed out that this research would benefit from a wider European comparison. How was the aftermath of war relatively effectively contained in Britain, compared with the brutalisation that took place in Europe? Finally, Roper will also look at how the First World War was implicated in a shift towards the psychological interior and the emergence of new concepts of the self during this period and the powerful role that psychoanalysis played in this process. Roper concluded by emphasising that masculinity is indeed an important form of identity but warned that we risk essentialism if we fail to consider the limits of masculinity as a concept.

The first two papers looked at masculinity in the interwar years in Germany and France, respectively. *Christopher Dillon* (Birkbeck) focused on three entangled aspects in the construction of normative masculinity amongst SS guards in Dachau: women as the antitype; the ceaseless exhortations to toughness, and the construction of a compensatory comradeship. He argued that the constructed normative of tough masculinity strongly influenced the habitus of the guards. Firstly, Dillon set out how masculinity was constructed as a flight from the feminine. There was no place for women on the battlefield; SS men had to apply for permission to marry; the domesticated fecund female bolstered the masculinity of the SS man; the foe was feminised and the role of the father in enticing men to kill was suggested. Dillon analysed the concept of “Härte” or toughness which played a key role in the harsh training regime for Dachau recruits and drew upon broader discourses of masculinity. The exceptions, such as those criticised for being too compassionate,

accentuated the prevailing norm. Finally, Dillon pointed out that the function of “Kameradschaft” or comradeship was to offer consolation or reward for toughness. Male bonding was not a German phenomenon, but a whole metaphysics was developed around it. Comradeship embraced more than a suggestion of homoeroticism and played a role in enticing males to an all-male organisation such as the SS. Comradeship worked to create a masculine equilibrium of inclusion and exclusion. Dillon concluded that historians should view masculinity in this period as a social status contingent on citizenship duties. Through it, inclusion and exclusion were applied to the SS and a failure to adhere to these masculine ideals carried the risk of shame and ridicule.

*Joan Tumblety* (Southampton) analysed the world of male physical culture in France in the 1920s and 1930s. “Physical culture” was explored as a set of practices or ideals, which encompassed gym, sports, and physical education for children, adolescents and servicemen. Sporting practice was sex-segregated and the vast majority involved in sporting life were men, probably because the French citizen army depended on men alone. Tumblety then demonstrated how physical culture also infused consumer culture; the cult of sporting celebrity was particularly dominant amongst cyclists, boxers and tennis players. According to Tumblety, the anxieties of the interwar period were mediated by hopes and anxieties about manliness. Physical culture was framed as part of the problem of social hygiene. The visual prominence of disabled war veterans, the prevalence of TB and the low birth rate were all cited after 1918 as proof of crises in masculine virility. Conversely, corporeal strength of males was regarded as proof of aptitude and as a means of national defence. As well as the commercial world of get-fit enterprises and sport associations, key politicians and commentators from both the right and the left participated in the discursive rhetorical construction of the “new man”. Tumblety then reflected on four sets of questions. Firstly, she discussed the “elasticity” of masculinity and argued there were, possibly, several different types of dominant codes of masculinity. Drawing upon Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, Tumblety set out how social class operated in physical culture, allowing men from the lower middle class to develop cultural/social capital through their body. In this way, differences of social class served to shore up and flatten out a normative masculinity. Secondly, Tumblety looked at the question of subjectivity and whether men internalised or rejected the dominant masculine ideals, focusing in so doing upon the longevity among the intelligentsia of appeals for physical culture, its ubiquity in advertisements and the infiltration of physical culture into policy. Thirdly, Tumblety looked at the cult of virility, which had considerable purchase in interwar France. Tumblety ended with the problem of distinctiveness. She asked if developments in France had ready parallels in western countries, how cross-cultural similarities can be explained and how masculine ideals travelled.

The two papers forming the first panel of the afternoon examined marginalized and persecuted social groups. *Marie Fritsche* (Southampton) considered deserters from the Wehrmacht. While deserters have been regarded as traitors in many countries, she commented, they were especially vilified in the Third Reich, and with bloody results – some 15,000 were executed under the regime. Deserters continued to be defamed as “cowards” in West Germany and Austria decades after the war, and have only recently experienced rehabilitation. By attributing allegedly “feminine” qualities to the deserters, their masculinity was commonly called into question. Fritsche focused on the self-perceptions of the deserters, with the aim of establishing the influence of masculine ideals, such as the traditional “Prussian” ideal of “hard” masculinity, and its National Socialist radicalisation, by looking into the actual experience of men and the social practice of “doing gender”. For all their methodological problems, Fritsche explained, oral interviews with Austrian deserters revealed a general internalisation of military values. Interviewees identified themselves as embodying such values, and emphasised their masculine status in spite of the fact of their desertion, by highlighting with pride their other achievements in the military. The majority of the interviewees, Fritsche added, adhered to the traditional Prussian military values yet rejected the more extreme Nazi martial ideals. Citing examples, she explained how the majority of interviewees used anecdotes of their own bravery to vehemently distance themselves from accusations of “feminine” cowardice. Others pre-empted this reproach by broaching the subject of

cowardice first, the better to be able to set the terms of the discourse themselves for the purposes of self-justification, for example rationalising their acts as those of the “conscientious” soldier who defies orders perceived as illegitimate. Even though the masculine identities of the deserters varied considerably, Fritsche concluded that fundamental ideas about masculinity largely transcended societal divisions such as class and region.

*Kim Wünschmann* (London) discussed Jewish men imprisoned in the Nazi concentration camps in the aftermath of the November Pogrom of 1938. She identified the Pogrom as both the most important event of the pre-war persecution of the German Jews, and as central to the Jews’ own self-understanding. Emphasising that gender approaches are relatively new in the historiography of German-Jewish life, especially with regard to Jewish males, she used memoirs and eye-witness accounts as evidence for the “performance” of masculinity by the Jewish prisoners, and for the impact of the violence of the camps on their self-definition as men. Wünschmann argued that the concentration camp shattered the perception of the self-styled “November Jews” of themselves as patriarchs and breadwinners. The men sought to alleviate this trauma by making sense of their experience, for example by adopting the strategy of “emotional immunisation”, whereby the men consciously suppressed their feelings of longing for loved ones, or by contrasting their “rational” masculinity with the “emotionality” of women. The “November Jews” also defined themselves as masculine in contrast to the supposed new male elite represented by their SS captors. In so doing, Wünschmann argued, the prisoners regarded themselves as the “real men”, diametrically opposed to guards cast as uneducated, animalistic, even ridiculous, drawing in the process upon a Jewish self-understanding as sober, educated, middle-class and rational. Particularly sadistic guards were also denounced in homophobic terms to distance them from a Jewish identity also predicated upon supposedly “normal” sexuality. Jewish prisoners consciously challenged Nazi ideological portrayals of the Jews, Wünschmann added, by asserting their heroism and war experiences, in the case of the older men, or their lack of physical resemblance to the Nazi stereotype of the weak, effeminate, ugly and unfit “typical” Jew.

*Neil Penlington* (London) examined representations of male grooming and dress in interwar Britain as a case study of how male personal appearance reveals notions of “normal” sexuality in societies. With reference to Judith Butler’s concept of performativity, Penlington reflected upon the methodology and the existing historiography, noting in particular that the emphasis to date upon the middle class needs to be redressed. Penlington discussed the body as the effect, rather than cause, of desire, with grooming fixing the boundaries between male bodies and the external world, and identified the body as a means to understand sex and gender. Considering the dynamic between the menswear trade, the media, and the consumer, Penlington noted the dominance of homosocial images in early interwar fashion plates and advertising, in which women were marginal when present at all, and which involved homoerotic overtones not to be seen again until the end of the twentieth century. A gradual shift across the interwar period saw this give way by the late 1930s to a more overt heterosexuality in these images, whereby clothing, the body, and hygiene were linked instead to attraction to the opposite sex. Penlington noted the influence of the film industry, particularly Hollywood’s cinematic offerings, upon this change. He examined sources such as autobiographies for their evidence of the internalisation of these ideas, whereby “effeminacy”, not least in terms of “deviant” male dress (for example bright colours), increasingly came to be seen as denoting homosexuality. Such shifts, he concluded, were exacerbated by the emergence of a dating culture and the increasing commercialisation of male dress.

A concluding discussion chaired by *Sean Brady* (London) saw the speakers and attendees draw together the themes of the foregoing papers in a stimulating and fruitful exchange. The workshop highlighted the need to adopt comparative perspectives, and to focus on social practice, self-perceptions, and emotions in future research on masculinity in this period.

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### **Konferenzübersicht**

Keynote: Michael Roper (Essex)

#### *Sektion 1*

Moderation: Neil Gregor (Southampton)

Christopher Dillon (Birkbeck), "Toughness against oneself". The construction of masculinity in the Dachau concentration camp SS

Joan Tumblety (Southampton), Physical culture and the problem of masculinity in France , 1918-1940

#### *Sektion 2*

Moderation: Yohai Hakak (Portsmouth)

Maria Fritsche (Southampton), What power do masculine ideals have? Using oral history interviews to analyse masculine identities of deserters in the Wehrmacht.

Kim Wünschmann (Birkbeck), Issues of masculinity among Jewish concentration camps prisoners in the aftermath of the November pogrom 1938

#### *Sektion 3*

Moderation: Sean Brady (Birkbeck)

Neil Penlington (Birkbeck), Queering normality: masculinity and "normal" sexuality in interwar Britain

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