

HOMOPHOBIA & HOMOPHILIA IN WWI. Today's 100th anniversary of the beginning of WWI is an opportune time to remember that exploiting homophobia is neither a 21st century invention—such as Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's claim that his country has no homosexuals or Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni insisting that homosexuality is a “western export”—nor one only employed in peacetime as this French postcard mocking the Kaiser's masculinity/sexuality demonstrates. Associating homosexuality with Germany went back in France to at least the 19th century and the publishing of a book called “Les Invertis (le Vice Allemand)” or “The Inverts (the German Vice).” And one way French gays identified each other was asking, “Parlez-vous allemand?”—“Do you speak German?” The sensational 1907 Harden-Eulenburg affair in which cabinet members and confidants of the Kaiser were publicly accused of being gay reinforced this naïve concept in more than one country, and was a welcome distraction in England from the lingering stink of the Oscar Wilde trials.

There in 1918, a ruthless, ambitious member of Parliament named Noel Pemberton Billing who could have given any contemporary American Antigay Industry lunatic a run for his or her demagogic money, wrote an article called “The Forty-Seven Thousand” in which he hissed:

“There exists in the Cabinet Noir of a certain German Prince a book compiled by the Secret service from reports of German agents who have infested this country for the past 20 years, agents so vile and spreading such debauchery and such lasciviousness as only German minds can conceive and only German bodies execute. [And] there had been many persons who had been prevented from putting their full strength into the war by corruption and blackmail and fear of exposure. [I]ncestuous bars were established in Portsmouth and Chatham. In these meeting places the stamina of British sailors was undermined. More dangerous still, German agents, under the guise of indecent liaison, could obtain information as to the disposition of the Fleet . . . Wives of men in supreme position were entangled. In Lesbian ecstasy the most sacred secrets of State were betrayed. The sexual peculiarities of members of the peerage were used as a leverage to open fruitful fields for espionage.”

Dancer/actress (and at least genuinely bisexual) Maud Allan unsuccessfully sued him for libel when he wrote that she was a member of the alleged 47,000 and “the Cult of the Clitoris” after she played Salome in a variation on Wilde's play. Once again demonstrating what a worm he was, no less than Lord Alfred “Bosie” Douglas, of course Wilde's former lover and the cause of his disgrace and ultimate imprisonment, testified for Billing. Eager to get even with gays who'd denounced or shunned him for betraying Oscar, Douglas had earlier played his own direct role in fanning wartime homophobia by writing a pamphlet that sold thousands of copies: “Two foes thou hast, one there one here,/One far one ultimately near,/Two filthy fogs blot out thy light:/The German, and the Sodomite.” At the trial, he praised Billing for trying to save Great Britain from people like Wilde—“a diabolical influence on everyone he met” and “the greatest force for evil that has appeared in Europe during the last 350 years.” See “Sisters of Salome” by Toni Bentley for more details of Allan's lawsuit.

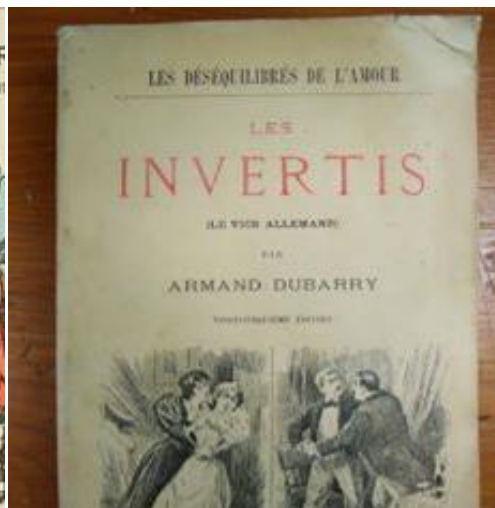
Another even more sensational trial involved Sir Roger Casement, once a hero for his reports on hideous human rights abuses in the Congo and Peru, who made the mistake of aligning himself with Germany during WWI in hopes it would lead to Irish independence through their help in the still famous 1916 Easter Rebellion—and of letting his diaries which detailed his homosexuality fall into the hands of prosecutor Lord Frederick Birkenhead whose opening statement included: “The treason which is charged against the prisoner is the treason which consists of adherence to the King's enemies in the enemy country, and in relation to that treason evidence will be given to you of many overt acts; of the attempt to seduce, and in some cases the actual seduction of His Majesty's soldiers from loyal allegiance to His Majesty.” In his closing statement, he said: “We are now in a position to connect this landing [of a German vessel on the shores of Ireland] quite simply, quite clearly, and quite inevitably with the acts of seduction and the treasonous plans which were outlined in Germany.” [“Illumination: the Undergraduate Journal of Humanities:

Spring 2006"] English poet Alfred Noyes, working as a wartime propagandist for the Foreign Office, wrote: "I have seen and read them and they touch the lowest depths that human degradation has ever touched. Page after page of his diary would be an insult to a pig's trough to let the foul record touch it." Found guilty of treason, Casement was hanged on August 3, 1916. In 1965 his body was repatriated to Ireland where a huge state funeral attended by tens of thousands was held, and he was further honored with a postage stamp there in 1966. For decades many believed (and some still do) that, whatever else he was, Casement wasn't gay, and that the British government had forged the diaries to further vilify him in the public's mind including Irish Catholics, and counteract pleas for clemency. Family and friends vehemently denied he was, and advanced theories of the diaries' real origin. But in 2002 the results of their first independent forensic examination concluded that "each of the five documents collectively known as the Black Diaries is exclusively the work of Roger Casement's hand, without any reason to suspect either forgery or interpolation by any other hand."

And it was a statute left over from the war that enabled the federal government to prosecute civilian and Episcopal priest Samuel Neal Kent during the infamous antigay witch-hunt that started at Newport (Rhode Island) Naval Training Station in 1919. It prohibited anyone within ten miles of a military installation of receiving someone "for the purpose of lewdness, assignation or prostitution into any vehicle, conveyance, place, structure or building." Kent was chased across more than one state, but was found innocent at two trials after forcefully denying accusations by more than one sailor that he had forced sex upon them in his house, car, and on a boat.

On a much lighter note, in more than one way homophilia danced with war, too. As they did in their professional approach to every other aspect of life, decades before the Village People's double-entendre "In the Navy," gay brother illustrators JC and Frank Leyendecker brought their "hide in plain sight" and naked phallic symbolism that might make Freud blush to their work during WWI, from official recruiting posters to magazine covers to advertising for men's clothes. And Terence Denman in "Ireland's Unknown Soldiers," quoted in "Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front 1914-1918," wrote of: "gunners stripped and sweating, each crew working like a machine, the swing and smack of the breech blocks as clean and sweet as a kiss, and a six-foot stream of flame from the muzzle, a thunderclap of sound, and away tore the shell over the hills to the Boche trenches 5,000 yards away."

Finally, in "The Sexual History of the World War," with "eyewitness reports by hundreds of men and women participants in the World War; describing the sex life in the warring nations," Germany's legendary sexologist and arguably the founder of the gay rights movement, Magnus Hirschfeld wrote: "The assumption that the consciously erotic form of comradeship was not infrequent is the more justified since there are reports of a not inconsiderable number of such cases between soldiers of the same rank as well as between soldiers and officers."





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