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Conclusion: Between Persecution and Freedom

The period between 1945 and 1969 brought a revival of the urban gay scenes that had been destroyed by the Nazis, witnessed the emergence of a more masculine understanding of homosexuality, and ushered in a widespread debate about homosexuality that yielded the reform of Paragraph 175. Although homosexuals found it difficult to organize in this period amidst widespread prejudices, ultimately these years were much more than a pause in the history of the homosexual movement that separated the gay liberation movement of the 1970s from the early-twentieth-century pioneers. It was also not simply an era in which the Nazi persecution of homosexuality persisted under the cover of democratic ideals, as argued by homophile leaders during the 1950s. Instead, this era made a positive contribution to the history of German homosexuality, without which it is impossible to imagine gay life in the country today.

The steady growth of the gay scenes in the 1950s and the 1960s laid the groundwork for the explosion of gay life that would follow the reform of Paragraph 175 in September 1969. The number of gay bars increased dramatically, so that cities such as Hamburg and West Berlin had perhaps 60 or 70 such establishments by the early 1980s. The first gay bathhouses appeared soon after the reform of Paragraph 175 took effect. Like similar establishments opening up in New York, San Francisco, London, and elsewhere at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, they generally offered saunas, whirlpools, a swimming pool, a bar, and private cabins that could be rented out at an hourly rate. New homosexual periodicals appeared on the market, beginning with Du&Ich, him, and Don. In Hamburg, the Revolt shop opened in February 1976, laying the groundwork for other gay pornography stores. By the end of the 1970s, a number of gay cafés were also launched,
offering comfortable spots to eat or get some coffee in the afternoon. In the evening, gay men could head off to discos such as the Pit Club in Hamburg or the Metropol in Berlin to dance through the night.³

The reform of Paragraph 175 set the stage for the rebirth of homosexual activism. In late 1969 and early 1970, several short-lived groups following the old homophile model appeared in Hamburg, Wiesbaden, Kassel, Berlin, and Munich; the only successful one was a local Hamburg chapter of Denmark’s International World Organization of Homophiles (Internationale Homophile Welt-Organization, or IHWO), which survived until 1974 in part because of its reliance on the network of members built by the Danish group through the 1950s and 1960s.⁴ A better sign of what was to come, though, could be found in the gay student groups that organized at the Universities of Bochum and Münster beginning in 1970. By this time, news of the Stonewall riot that took place in New York City on the night of June 27, 1969 had left its mark on a younger generation of homosexual men and women. Deeply influenced by the student movement of the 1960s, they consciously rejected the term ‘homophile,’ indicating that a new chapter in the country’s history of homosexual organization had begun.

For the German gay liberation movement, the single most important galvanizing event was the premier of Rosa von Praunheim’s film It is Not The Homosexual That Is Perverse, but the Situation in Which He Lives (Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers, sondern die Situation, in der er lebt) on July 5, 1971. Produced with the help of the New Left sociologist Martin Dannecker, Praunheim’s film criticized the efforts of gay men and lesbians to fit into the straight world. Homosexuals, it suggested, should not reject traditionally pejorative terms like schwul but should embrace them and transform their meaning into a positive description for an alternative form of love and sex free of bourgeois norms. Implicitly, Praunheim attacked the homophile strategy of the 1950s, which had emphasized adopting respectable behavior in public and advocated establishing long-standing relationships between two people that resembled heterosexual marriage. Such conduct, he suggested, was in fact a rejection of one’s own homosexuality: ‘Gay people (Schwule) don’t want to be gay; instead, they want to live the bourgeois, trashy life of the average citizen.’⁵ Like the young militants in the new American gay movements, he suggested that a radicalization of personal behavior and self-conception could lay the groundwork for a more thorough social transformation.

In less than a month after the premiere, a number of young radicals came together to found the Homosexual Initiative of West Berlin