



“For a Pole, It all was a Great Abomination”: Grassroots Homonationalism and State Homophobia à la Polonaise—A History Lesson from a Place Between East and West

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Abstract

The article historicizes social and state practices that Jasbir Puar dubbed “homonationalism.” It argues against simplistic applications of the term to the relations between “western” and “eastern” European countries. Instead, it appeals for a more profound contextualisation of every national case. Using 20th-century Poland as a case study, it demonstrates that both homophobia and homonationalism had antecedents and that both can be used as political strategies by nationalist actors that have not previously deployed them. It also seeks to decentre the narrative about homonationalism by averting attention from the state and focusing it on lived queer experiences in Poland. The term grassroots homonationalism is an attempt to bring such analytical attention to the agency of queer subjects and their communities. It aims to conceptualise their attitudes toward nationalist discourses and state practices (both homophobic and homonationalist) and expose ways in which non-normative sexualities and their history have been politically instrumentalised. It helps to analyse attitudes that some queers in Poland have adopted when facing the issue that Puar described as a “collusion of nationalism and queer subjects”.

Keywords Nationalism · Homophobia · Homonationalism · Poland · Homosexuality · Queer · History of sexuality · Central and Eastern Europe · Interwar period

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Introduction

In 1933 a Warsaw magazine published a letter from a man who wanted to debunk a claim circulating in Poland at the time. The man, signed as J.T., was homosexual and tired of hearing that people like him had it better in western Europe. He was well-travelled and knowledgeable, he visited France, Germany, England, and Italy—or so he wrote. Now, he wanted to share his observations with other homosexuals in Poland. His message to them was a simple one: they did not know how good they had it. J.T. saw English and French “homoerots”¹ as victims of petit-bourgeois moralism and “puritan hypocrisy.” He also felt sorry for those suffering persecution in fascist Italy. But J.T. was most critical about the situation of same-sex loving men in Germany. Perhaps surprisingly, he did not so much fear the Nazis as he detested the disappearing homosexual scene of Weimar Berlin. He found this milieu aesthetically repulsive and culturally alien: to him, “a Pole, it all was a great abomination: this reduction of the mysterious—so very personal and intimate experiences—to the regulated forms of social life.” From all available interpretations of Berlin homosexual community’s distinctiveness, J.T. chose a nationalist one. Homophile activism in the city, its nightlife, the aesthetics used by its queer² community, even the homosexual sex workers of Berlin—all this J.T. considered the German way of being homosexual. And Germanness made it unrelatable to him, a self-declared “Pole.”

Just a year before the publication of J.T.’s letter, Poland introduced a new Criminal Code which decriminalised homosexual acts. It was the first reform of its kind in twentieth-century non-communist Europe.³ The Code opened the door wide for queer voices to speak out in Poland’s public life. Soon, a translation of the seminal novel *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall (in 1928 a court in the UK declared the original version obscene and ordered the destruction of all copies of the book) hit the Polish book market along with openly lesbian works of fiction by Polish writers (Pająk, 2018, 2022). The lifestyle magazine for men, to which J.T. sent his letter, regularly published homophile articles. Today, it might surprise that in 1933, with their public visibility increased, queer desiring men and women seemed to

¹ The term (*homoeroci*) was sometimes used in interwar Poland and Germany to refer to men having sex with other men.

² In addressing the subject of sexual and gender dissent I often use the word “queer” as an umbrella term offering a broad spectrum of inclusion, especially in the contexts involving past individuals who left no accounts that could inform us about their identity choices (Kolker et al., 2020). In contexts related to the current political situation (including identity politics), I use the acronym LGBTQ+, as some members of queer community find clear-cut sexual categories (LGBT) as better describing their experiences, while others prefer more fluid terms (Q for queer); the symbol + stands for all other non-heterosexual identities.

³ Only internationally ostracised Soviet Russia had done it earlier—in 1917 (Healey 2001); Denmark adopted an almost identical regulation in 1933 (Rydström and Mustola, 2007); subsequently, Estonia, Switzerland, and Sweden followed the suit. The significance of the Polish Code lay rather in its social context and timing than in its chronological precedence among other reforms of this kind. Homosexual acts had been decriminalised before on the old continent, to be sure, but never had such decisions involved a discussion about the nature of the “homosexual.” When Poland’s Penal Code entered into force in 1932, the medical “species” of homosexual, understood as a separate type of a person, not just someone committing a sinful or criminal acts seems to have been established in Europe as a paradigm. Thus, it can be claimed that in 1932 for the first time it was the homosexual, not the sodomite, who was spared criminal punishment.

enjoy more freedom in Poland than in any other European country. Some of their accounts, such as the one penned by J.T., suggest that many “homoerots” in Poland discerned at that moment hitherto unseen opportunities. But J.T.’s letter reveals yet another phenomenon—his sense of national(ist) superiority over other nations (and nation-states) derived from the way Poland handled homosexuals and from particular forms that the social life of “homoerots” took in this country.

Attending to the Queer Past in Eastern Europe

This article uses the example of Poland to demonstrate that the contemporary phenomenon that Jasbir Puar dubs “homonationalism” (Puar, 2007) has a long genealogy. I believe that what in her west-oriented critique seems to be a relatively recent development has in fact precedents, both in western and non-western societies. Attending to them can refine our understanding of the practices behind the term and throw new light on the mechanisms that caused their emergence. It also demonstrates how ambiguous the relationship between the politics of sexual repression and sexual resistance have often been.

Although Poland might not seem an obvious choice for a protagonist of an essay on homonationalism, I set to argue that the country’s history offers an illuminating blend of homonationalist and homophobic tropes. As of 2022, Poland has infamously seized pole position in state-led homophobia among the countries of the European Union. In the recent years, the ruling party Law and Justice (PiS, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) used homophobic rhetoric and hate speech as an electoral strategy and a defining element of the party’s identity (ILGA Europe, 2022). PiS has casted itself as the sole defender of Polish heterosexual families, presented as the fundament of the nation, allegedly under attack from ominous pro-European (or pro-western) gays (Santora, 2020). This element of a broader cultural war waged by PiS has been discussed by both academics and the press (Ayoub, 2016; Charlish, 2016; Easton, 2019). However, it is a little known fact that the homophobic policies and rhetoric of PiS are rooted in the history of nationalist disagreements inside Poland. In this sense, they are not as much a response to the homonationalism of the west as they are an instrument of suppression that the government uses against the political (and sexual) dissidence in Poland.

The historical sources quoted in this essay are an invitation to think about homophobia and homonationalism in less dichotomic and antithetical ways, especially in the context of relations between “the west and the rest.” However, there is one caveat: even if we can trace homonationalism to earlier historical periods, we should not expect that it has had the same meaning everywhere and at every time.

The argument that serves as the point of departure for this essay is as much guided by the historical sources as by Moss’s (2014) and Renkin’s (2014) pithy observations that critics of western homonationalism have often overlooked the experiences of local queer communities in non-western countries. This omission sometimes is meant to serve anti-imperialist, postcolonial critique. Too often, however, it sides with non-western nationalists in denying queer subjects in their countries the right to choose the form of queerness they want for themselves, as some ways of being queer

are labelled as "foreign" by their compatriots.⁴ Therefore, I seek to decentre the narrative about homonationalism in yet another way—by shifting its attention from the state to lived queer experience. Thus, this essay might be seen as an attempt to listen to the queers of the past talking about their sexual and national feelings.

To integrate the state perspective with the accounts of queer people, I distinguish between homophobia and homonationalism on both the state and citizen level. As demonstrated by Puar (2007), nationalist ideologies sometimes claim to protect sexual minorities by persecuting other groups. But nationalists may use homophobia in quite similar ways. In such cases they tend to allege that queers imperil other groups, principally "the traditional family" (Ayoub, 2016, p. 176). On the citizen level, I contrast popular homophobia often framed in nationalist terms with a political stance that I call grassroots homonationalism.⁵ The latter describes an alignment of nationalism with the emancipation of sexual minorities. This simple distinction is needed in any productive inquiry into individual homonationalist sentiments arising independently of state politics. The attribute "grassroots" helps to refine the analysis of often ambiguous relationships some queer people have had with their nation-states.

Accounts such as the letter of J.T., along with the history of the 1932 Polish Penal Code, demonstrate that the depiction of sexual minorities' rights as something foreign to the Polish tradition is historically incorrect. One might even argue that making homonationalism part of Polish national identity could be a tempting perspective for some political actors. In fact, such efforts have been made in the past, for example by Karol Szymanowski, the most acclaimed Polish composer of the twentieth century (Wightman, 1999). Apart from defining the national style in music, Szymanowski (1989) wrote the first openly homosexual novel in Polish, titled *Efebos*. The book praised Poles as a nation faithful to the European heritage of ancient Mediterranean cultures understood as inherently homophile. At the same time, it blamed Jews for a contamination of Europe's culture with the allegedly homophobic content of their religion. Szymanowski's views are an early example of grassroots homonationalism. He appealed for the recognition of homosexuals' existence within the nation(-state) by arguing that homosexuality, wickedly demonised by Jews, was an inherent part of Polishness. In this way, the composer attempted to "replace the evil of homophobia with the evil of anti-Semitism" (Szymanowski, 1993, p. 126).⁶ This

⁴ For example, some human rights, such as marriage equality, might be presented as inherently western, thus foreign or serving a neo-colonial agenda (Ayoub, 2016; Healey, 2018).

⁵ In 2013, Puar defined homonationalism as "a historical shift marked by nation-state, a constitutive and fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality" (2013, p. 337). The question arises to what extent homonationalism in Puar's terms refers more to the state than to nationalist ideology. Ernst Hass defines nationalism as "a belief held by a group of people that they ought to constitute a nation, or that they already are one." He adds that it "is a doctrine of social solidarity based on the characteristics and symbols of nationhood" (1986, p. 727). Thus, while Puar's "homonationalism" refers to the state, the traditional use of the term "nationalism" concerns the nation. If we focus on queer subjects' attitudes to states and nations, we could differentiate between homopatriotism (attachment or loyalty to a state) and cases in which they perceive a nation (or a nation-state) as superior to other nations due to the way in which it manages queer desires.

⁶ Mark Cornwall (2012) writes about a similar case in interwar Czechoslovakia. It was closely intertwined with homophobic national stereotypes.

was a different kind of grassroots homonationalism than the one expressed by J.T. for whom Polishness was supposed to determine the right ways of expressing one's homosexuality. By no means, however, was it any less xenophobic.

Attending to the Queer Present in Eastern Europe

The historical perspective on the division of Europe into homophobic vs. homonationalist countries shows that it relies on ahistorical and essentialising assumptions that reproduce orientalising discourses about central and eastern Europe (CEE; Szulc, 2018, p. 5; Pająk, 2022; Karczewski, 2022a; Renkin, 2009, 2015, and this volume). What is more, the critique of western homonationalism played into the hands of the Polish far-right, which has exploited the postcolonial theory to question not only LGBTQ+ rights but also multiculturalism by labelling both as western European and thus foreign and serving neo-colonial interests (Moss, 2014; Sejm, 2016, p. 86; Bill, 2014; Graff, 2006, 2010). The country's right-wing nationalists claim a fundamental cultural difference between Poland and the west, especially in aspects related to sexuality. In September 2022, Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of PiS, said that western Europe belonged to "a different cultural zone" than Poland. To support this claim, he recalled visiting Vienna in the early 1990s, where he saw "various things" which "were enough" for him to understand the west's "cultural strangeness" vis a vis Poland. By refusing to reveal what shocked him so much in Austria, Kaczyński implied that either it was something too obscene to discuss openly, or his opinions were too politically incorrect to be expressed publicly. It is hard to overlook that his words echoed not only the opinions of J.T. but also those of Vladimir Putin, who has presented LGBTQ+ rights as the epitome of western alleged demoralisation (Ayoub, 2016, p. 41). It is also hard to consider Kaczyński's views as representative for Poland's society—just like in the interwar period some tourists from Warsaw, among them "homoerots," enjoyed the Berlin queer scene without feeling alienated there, in the 1980s and 1990s it was possible for Poles, including homosexuals, to feel comfortable in Vienna (Jasiński, 2006, p. 280; Kaliściak, 2011; Szulc, 2018).

PiS has claimed the "cultural strangeness" of the west to construct Poland's distinctiveness. Paradoxically, a century earlier, the decriminalisation of homosexual acts served the same purpose, even if similar reforms were being debated in some western countries at the time (Marhoefer, 2015; Rydström et al., 2007; Karczewski, 2022a). Today, the discourse of sexual differences buttresses the homophobic politics of PiS in Poland and forms one of the pillars of the party's anti-westernism. In 2019, speaking in unison with Putin and Hungary's PM Victor Orbán, Kaczyński called LGBTQ+ rights a foreign "import" (Roache, 2019). At that time, his party encouraged local communities across the country to declare their territories "LGBT-free zones," while PiS's presidential candidate called queers "an ideology" worse than communism (Gera, 2020). Little seemed they bothered by Poles having had chosen—already in 2011—one of the first openly transgender MPs worldwide, nor by the annual Pride in Warsaw attracting thousands of participants (Charlish, 2021; Grodzka, 2013). As LGBTQ+ activism seemed to grow stronger in the country, the

intensification of state-homophobia galvanised the queer community and pushed the main opposition parties towards more LGBT-friendly politics (Tilles, 2022). In this way, the attempts to define the relationship between the nation and queerness have become the central political battlefield in Poland. No wonder Puar's "homonationalism" has seemed to hold promise to explain these developments.

Is Poland the Iraq of Europe?

By coining her prolific concept, Puar added a new angle to an older debate on the relationship between nationalisms and sexualities (Puar, 2007; Parker et al., 1992; Pryke, 1998; Mosse, 1985). Conceived as a category in the analysis of US and Middle East politics, homonationalism has been considerably remodelled by those who tried to adapt it to the CEE context (Kulpa, 2014; Kulpa & Mizielnińska, 2011). While for Puar (2013) homonationalism is intimately related with Islamophobia and as such it benefits the US and Israel (p. 337), some authors from CEE applied the term to the internal relations within the European Union (EU). For example, according to Kulpa, eastern EU members (such as Poland and Hungary) face homonationalist practices of the supranational EU when it pleads for the rights of queer citizens of these countries (2014, 2011). Such an analysis casts what are arguably the most openly-Islamophobic governments in the EU (examples will follow) as the victims of western homonationalism side by side with Muslim populations in Iraq and Palestine. However, it goes without saying that Poland has never been invaded by the EU. Instead, it was Poland, who joined the US in the 2003 aggression on Iraq. Therefore, such applications of the concept of homonationalism to CEE imply that the suffering of those who have been targeted by military interventions in the Middle East are comparable to the alleged mistreatment of Polish governments by the systems protecting human rights in Europe. This kind of appropriation waters down the political potential of the term, relativises it, and, eventually, may deprive its real victims of an opportunity to name their plight.

What is more, the accusation of the EU of homonationalist practices against its own eastern member states might have a detrimental effect on their queer communities. In Poland, like in other CEE countries, many LGBTQ+ people have seen European integration as a process conducive to their emancipatory pursuits (Ayoub, 2016; van der Vleuten, 2014). Presenting the EU as a homonationalist agent of western (neo)imperialism perfectly fits in with the rhetoric of PiS and makes it easier for the party to make Poland's queer community a hostage of Kaczyński's nationalist ideology. It leaves them with a dilemma—if the homonationalist EU is against Poland, is it right to accept its support and solidarity?."

As Stanley Bill (2014) observes, Polish right-wing nationalists exploit the essentialising potential of postcolonial theory to combat universalist emancipatory projects. Undoubtedly, along global class solidarity, gender equality and queer rights feature highly among them. Therefore, the depiction of western Europe as deploying homonationalist practices against CEE (as homophobic) is analytically flawed at best. At worst, it abuses the ethical principles underpinning Puar's concept and is

harmful to the pursuit of legal recognition by the queer communities in CEE (Leksikov & Rachok, 2020).

Kaczyński in the Long Shadow of Prince Eulenburg

To understand the roots of Kaczyński's anti-western, homophobic rhetoric, one should look back at the history of Polish nationalism and how it has stereotyped the neighbouring nations. In Europe, national stereotypes have often used queer sexual practices to define national identities and to conceptually border one nation from another (Pryke, 1998). They have essentialised certain sexual practices or (in)tolerance of them as typical of a nation. Nastulczyk and Oczko (2012) demonstrate references to same-sex practices in early modern Poland and find their echoes in the present-day conservative discourses presenting the west as deviant and the east as barbaric. With the emergence of modern nationalism certain sexual stereotypes gained wider currency. Already in the 1870s some Polish right-wing nationalists cast Germans, along with Jews, as Poles' main enemies (Porter, 2000, pp. 158–167). Simultaneously, corresponding beliefs gained traction among German nationalists, who increasingly presented Poles as inherently backward and half-barbaric (Stoetzler et al., 2013). In the early twentieth century, when the Polish-German nationalist antagonism was particularly acute and Poland did not exist as an independent state, the trope of homosexuality as the “German vice” had already been established in Polish-speaking lands (Śmieja, 2015, p. 140).

Wojciech Śmieja (2015) demonstrates how Polish newspapers mixed sexual moralism with nationalism when reporting on the Eulenburg affair, a 1907–1909 homosexual scandal involving members of the German imperial court (Domeier, 2015). For example, *Dziennik Śląski* (Silesian Daily) framed homosexual practices in terms of a nationalist binary:

... Prince Eulenburg was a supporter of several laws that targeted us Poles ... Our culture ... is more moral and as pure as a driven snow. The dirt of prince Eulenburg's kind ... is absent in our Polish society. (“Brudy junkrów”, 1908)

Kuryer Śląski (Silesian Courier) in the article “German Scandal” emphasised that “now, we know well, what kind of people pursue ... anti-Polish policies” (“Skandal niemiecki”, 1907), while *Katolik* (The Catholic) reminded its readers that prince Eulenburg was “a great enemy of Poles” (“Niemcy”, 1908).⁷

In the interwar period, the right-wing Polish press continued this trope. In 1927, a nationalist daily reported that the “leprosy of [homo]sexual perversion” was brought to Warsaw by Germans during the first world war. The report claimed that “Prussian officers [had] infected” the city with homosexuality, for Germany had been “completely gangrenated with sexual crimes.” What is more, “[German] imperial court [had] led the way” in this German national vice (“Wypalić”, 1927).

⁷ However, in 1907 homosexuality was not only a German speciality; one weekly from Poznań interpreted the scandal as a result of French cultural influences on Germany (Śmieja, 2015, 142).

The association of Germans with homosexuality in Poland's press intensified with the rise of Nazism. In 1934, a Jewish daily in Polish run a full-page article titled "Homosexuality—the Illness of Hitlerism." It used Nazi claims against those who championed them. The newspaper employed German medical experts' knowledge to argue that homosexuality was as hereditary as nationality and it ran deep in German veins ("Homoseksualizm", 1934). The article exploited homophobia to fight (German) nationalism just like Szymanowski had used antisemitism and (Polish) nationalism to combat homophobia.

The trope of "the German vice" has set the tone for the exclusionary strand of Polish nationalist discourse about homosexuality ever since. But at the beginning of the twentieth century similar national sexual stereotypes were common across Europe. For example, in France, sex between men was often called "*le vice allemand*" (Courouve, 1985, p. 25; Rosario, 1997; Tamagne, 2006, p. 17). The rhetoric of Irish nationalists seems to have resembled that of their Polish counterparts at the time. Commenting on the late-nineteenth-century "homosexual scandals" in the British Isles, Kieran Rose underlines that the Irish press accused the royal administration in Dublin of "contaminating the running stream of Irish moral purity by stirring up the stink of pollution" (1994, p. 6; Earls, 2019). Hence, the attitudes of some Polish nationalists to homosexuality before the second world war reflected ideas about national and sexual categories popular across Europe and there has never been anything distinctively "Polish" about them.

The Janus Face of Polish Nationalism

The history of interwar Poland is sometimes told as a tale of two Polish nationalisms. One, dominant until the mid-1930s and embodied by the country's strongman Józef Piłsudski, represented a relatively inclusive vision of the nation. It tolerated ethnic minorities although it rested on the assumption of Poles' supremacy in the state envisioned as their nation-state (Brykczynski, 2016; Ciancia 2021; Friszke, 2020; Snyder, 2010). This left-leaning version of Polishness had a doppelgänger—an exclusionary, right-wing project that identified the state with the nation and the nation with Catholicism. It was aggressive and rested on the Darwinist vision of progress and modernity (Porter, 2000). The movement known as *Endecja* was its political representation throughout the interwar period.

It was the previous—Piłsudski's variant of nationalism—that delivered the 1932 Penal Code after the 1926 coup-d'état when a political movement called *Sanacja* was established (Plach, 2006). This turn from democracy towards authoritarianism allowed Piłsudski's camp to introduce the Code by shutting out *Endecja*, the Catholic Church, and in fact the parliament from debate on the law. The creators of the Code ascribed to it nationalist meanings—it was supposed to be a codified emanation of Polishness. Out of principle, the new Penal Code was supposed to be different from the German one, which criminalised homosexual acts (Makarewicz, 1924, p. 4; Karczewski, 2022a). Thus, the reform was an element of organizing the new state in specifically Polish ways. None of the decision-makers saw a contradiction between Polishness and the decriminalisation of homosexual acts.

Some supporters of *Sanacja* who were not directly involved in politics, such as the prolific intellectual Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, publicly praised the decriminalisation of homosexuality (1930; Kościańska, 2021). The feminist writer Irena Krzywicka argued that homosexuality was a “completely normal” (*zupełnie normalny*) although “inversed (*przestawiony*) instinct,” something like left-handedness (Krzywicka, 1933). *Endecja* attacked these activists as demoralised and anti-Polish (Krzywicka, 2013).

The history of this deep division between two Polish nationalisms which fought each other in the interwar period has been largely ignored by PiS, which tries to present itself as the heir to both (Napierała, 2022). Does it mean that the alignment of Piłsudski’s nationalism with the homophile movement has been forgotten? Not by Kaczyński. In 2020, he talked to the German newspaper *Bild* to defend his party’s homophobia in a rather subversive way:

... in Poland homosexuals have never been persecuted. Unlike many other countries, Poland has never outlawed homosexuality, nor punished it—apart from the time ... when Poles did not possess their own state. When after the first world war we re-established our independence, the provisions criminalizing [homosexual acts] disappeared from the Penal Code, which was unique in Europe at that time. Hence, there is neither such history, nor tradition, and there is no violence against homosexuals [in Poland]. (Ronzheimer et al., 2020)

Kaczyński does not claim that homosexuality is not compatible with Polishness, nor that it is a foreign vice. Instead, he appropriates homonationalist rhetoric to demonstrate the hypocrisy of the west and to claim Poland’s moral superiority as a nation inherently benevolent toward homosexuals. Undoubtedly, this is both a conceptually (as generalising and essentialising) and historically fallacious representation of Poles (Szulc, 2018, pp. 106–110). But Kaczyński focused on Poland’s legal history to contrast it with the western record of homophobia. His message to the German newspaper was clear: “we” have never reached the level of homophobia that “you” did. Kaczyński’s implication was unmistakable: given the history, nobody has the moral right to criticise Poland, an essentially benevolent nation, about its treatment of minorities.

Although by no means can Kaczyński be called a homonationalist,⁸ his stance on the subject does not fit squarely into the binary pitting the allegedly homophobic east against the pro-gay west. While Kaczyński remains a homophobe, he seems proud of Poland’s pioneering decision to decriminalise same-sex acts ahead of many western states. Thus, his interview for *Bild* demonstrates that even the right-wing Polish nationalists know how to adopt a homonationalist rhetoric once they find it a politically beneficial strategy.

⁸ The persistent rumours of Kaczyński’s own homosexuality are an important part of this analysis’s context (Ptak, 2022).

The Spread of "Meta-identities"

Much of the seminal literature on nationalism has hardly discussed sexuality (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1992). Before Puar's work, those scholars who addressed the relationship between the two usually focused on nationalism's tendency to hegemonize and regulate sexuality (Mosse, 1985; Parker et al., 1992).⁹ Compatibility and similarities between these categories, principal for the modern concepts of identity, have attracted less attention even if the fundamental role they share in making sense of social reality has been commonly acknowledged. For this reason, Laure Essig (1999) calls these two categories "meta-identities, ... which everyone is required to have and to hold" (p. 156). No wonder that some queer people have seen their sexuality as something similar or parallel to nationhood. Scott Spector (2016) notices how in the nineteenth century Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, "the prime mover" of homosexual liberation movement, used language that made same-sex desiring people resemble a nation, a diaspora strikingly similar to Jews (p. 89). Robert Beachy (2014) remarks that "Ulrich's human rights activism and his nationalism were curiously intertwined," as he embraced German nationalist ideology whole-heartedly (p. 8).

From the end of the nineteenth century, the nascent scientific fields of forensic medicine and sexology medicalized and construed the "homosexual" as a "species" (Foucault, 1978). This new sexual knowledge spread from German-speaking universities and the word "Homosexualität" was soon translated into other languages, including Polish (Karczewski, 2022a). On the one hand, love of the same sex was now a mental disorder just as inborn as nationality. On the other hand, some nationalists externalised same-sex desire and projected it on other nations. Often, it was "the German vice."

In Polish-speaking lands, however, the idea of the "homosexual" as a particular type of person did not enter a conceptual vacuum. German Ritz (2002), a Slavist specialising in Polish literature, describes it as "a border zone when it comes to attitudes to homosexuality, a transitional sphere between western European culture—repressive toward and clearly distinct from homosexuality—and the neutral or indistinct from [homosexuality] culture of the eastern European type" (p. 178). Some elements of this claim might seem doubtful, as it essentialises "eastern Europe" as a unique place of a "neutral" approach to same-sex desire, and disturbingly resembles the orientalisating discourses about the sexually ambiguous "east" (Boone, 2014; Renkin, 2015; Wolff, 1994). However, there is an ingenious observation in Ritz's thesis. What he detected was, in my opinion, a difference between the German-speaking (possibly also English) and more peripheral, including Polish-speaking, areas of Europe during the first decades of the twentieth century, when the idea of (homo)sexuality was a novelty. It spread unevenly across the continent and not

⁹ Some of Mosse's claims expressed in his seminal book *Nationalism and Sexuality* (1985) do not seem to hold water when confronted with more recent research on the history of sexuality (Clark, 2005, 2017; Cleves, 2014; Karczewski 2022b). Particularly, his conviction about "deep-seated general prejudice [against queers] in the population" (Mosse, 1985, p. 184) before the second world war and the assertion that homosexuals could not at the same time enter society and keep their identity (Mosse, 1985, p. 187) appear outdated and anachronistic.

without friction, as multiple sexual regimes—ways in which sexual desire is conceptualized—coexisted next to each other (Chauncey, 1994; Karczewski, 2022b).

Therefore, it makes sense that while in 1911 Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, a Polish teenager from a noble family, was afraid that he might have been homosexual, in the early 1920s a young Polish man of peasant descent claimed convincingly before a court that he did not know what *pederastja* (a more common term for same-sex acts between men at the time) was and presumed that men could have sex with each other due to the lack of women (Iwaszkiewicz, 2007, p. 30; Karczewski, 2022b). The idea of homosexuality was gaining popularity slowly, first among the upper social classes.

Polish Grassroots Homonationalism

In the interwar period, when nationalism flew ever higher and the medical discourse about homosexuality started to gain a foothold in Poland, the circumstances were ripe for the appearance of Polish grassroots homonationalism. J.T.'s letter described in the introduction to this essay was one of its public manifestations. In 1933, from the relatively fortunate political and legal situation of queers in Poland, J.T. drew essentializing conclusions about Poles and Germans. Rather than criticising the Nazi regime's homophobia, he preferred to focus on the queer scene of Weimar Berlin to present it as aesthetically repulsive and culturally alien, as if it had belonged to a different cultural zone. In his narrative, what happened in Germany in the early 1930s—both the existence of the vibrant community and their growing persecution—were two sides of the same coin: Germanness. When Poland had just decriminalised homosexual acts, Germany was intensifying their policing. The Nazis fought and delegitimized clubs and organisations of homoerots in Berlin, whereas in Warsaw the subject of homosexuality was part of the mainstream public life (cf. Amenta et al., 2021; Pająk, 2018, 2022; Tomasiak, 2019; Jagielski, 2017).

J.T. believed that the way a same-sex loving men's (sub)culture had developed in Berlin was defined by German national culture and therefore appalling. Himself a queer, J.T. did not reach back to the old nationalist repertoire from the time of the Eulenburg Affair, when the Polish newspapers identified Germans with homosexuality. While maintaining the discourse of national antagonism and irreconcilable difference, he presented a vision of two antithetic groups casting Polish and German homosexuals against each other. He wrote about Berlin:

The life of the members of those organisations was permeated with an unpleasant mood of petit bourgeoisie (...) They were full of younger and older men drinking beer and with blissful smiles enjoying sentimental music [and] accompanied by young boys in sport or Tirolean clothes with the dumb faces of male prostitutes— all of them knew and greeted each other, talked cordially, often sang together romantic “Lieder.” And for a Pole, for example, it was one big abomination: this reduction of mysterious, so much personal and intimate experiences—to regulated forms of community life. (J.T., 1933, p. 4)

In this essentializing outlook, queers from Poland and Germany constituted separate species, not defined by their sexuality but by nationality. J.T. was not even "sure if [he] should pity those many people from Berlin, Hamburg, or Leipzig, who complain[ed] that Minister Goebels closed those bars" (p. 4). Clearly, in this worldview, national identity trumped queer solidarity.

Yet, this does not necessarily mean J.T. believed homosexual men should not socialize in public. The object of his disgust was what he attributed to the German national character and culture: the appearance of male sex workers, German songs, traditional costumes (*Tracht*), public associations and organisations etc. He disapproved of the way in which homosexual love was expressed and socially performed in Berlin. He associated it with "petit bourgeoisie." What is more, his letter suggests that the homosexual scene of the German capital at that time was already highly nationalized (were Alpine *Lederhosen* already fetishized there?) which could make a queer Pole feel excluded or alienated.

Extant sources on the queer life in interwar Warsaw indicate that same-sex desire was often experienced and expressed in the city differently than in Berlin at the time. They suggest a coexistence of multiple sexual regimes, or ways in which queer people identified and socialised in Poland. Apart from several cruising points in the Polish capital, a few bars catered for male homosexual clientele. Yet none of them was dedicated exclusively to same-sex desiring men or women. The intellectual milieu that Czesław Miłosz, a future Noble prize winner, called later a "homosexual scene," met in a café which was the main meeting place for Warsaw's literary life (Iwaszkiewicz et al., 1997, p. 174; Shore, 2006). Transgender¹⁰ street sex workers gathered in the same neighbourhoods where their cis-gender female colleagues did. They were also treated in the same way by the police (Paleolog, 1957). Queer life in Warsaw in the 1920s and early 1930s appears to have been more integrated in the mainstream culture without a clear division between queers and heterosexuals. This way of dealing with and experiencing same-sex desire might have been the "Polish" way for J.T.

Some homosexual men and women in interwar Poland had both strong nationalist feelings and identified as homosexuals. Following in the footsteps of Ulrichs, they did not feel that being sexually different excluded the possibility of being a devoted member of their nation. Zofia Sadowska, a lesbian physician from Warsaw claimed her deep attachment to Polishness. In 1918 during an electoral campaign, she instructed Polish women that "the love of the motherland shall tell us who to vote for to have a free and prosperous Poland" (Szot, 2020, p. 66).¹¹ Sadowska emphasized her national feelings but also confidently claimed that being called a lesbian was not offensive (Szot, 2020). Although in the early 1920s having sex with other women could render Sadowska unrespectable, it did not make her an object of nationalists' attacks. Her sexuality was not yet interpreted as something non-Polish.

We still need to understand better queer people's attitudes toward nationalist ideologies in interwar Europe. The stories of Heinz Rutha, Cécile Tormay, and Roger

¹⁰ As no accounts of these people identities seem to exist, it is impossible to guess if they were transgender or should be described as crossdressers.

¹¹ Women's suffrage was introduced in Poland in 1918.

Casement demonstrate a long-lasting entanglement of some queers with nationalism, something that today might seem fraught with inconsistencies and peculiarities (Cornwall, 2012; Kurimay 2020; Conrad, 2001). Did joining feminist, patriotic associations make it easier for Sadowska to find partners among like-minded, progressive women? Or did she try to prove her worth which might have been questioned due to her sexuality by performing her “love of Poland?” Finally, should we call Sadowska a homonationalist? Her story seems to suggest that, at a time when Polish right-wing nationalists were not yet more homophobic than society at large, some queers could see their ideology as particularly accommodating of sexual difference.

In the late 1930s, however, this time came to an end. First, in 1936, *Prosto z Mostu* (*Straight forward*), a weekly magazine of radical nationalists, called Warsaw a new “capital of perversity” (“Na marginesie”, 1936) and three years later, demanded a recriminalisation of homosexuality as “a deviation hidden in ... a Jewish house,” its “social boycott” and “absolute isolation.” The paper claimed that the time had come for “the nation-states to eradicate homosexuality,” since it had had too “favourable conditions” in Poland and started to show “imperialist” tendencies.¹² The author of the text explained that homosexuality was dangerous because it caused the decline of the birth rate and led to psychological degeneration through liberalism, the lack of moral instincts, indolence, and “philosemitism” (Łaszowski, 1939). It seems that only in the late 1930s right-wing Polish nationalists defined the homosexual as an object of their hatred and added her, along with Jews and Germans, to their collection of enemies.

Polish Crusade Against Muslims and Queers

With this shift, the emancipatory pursuit of some queer people in Poland became inevitably more difficult. Since that moment, their very right to belong as a part of “Polishness” has been questioned. In recent years, the attempts to merge LGBT symbols (e.g. rainbow) with the national ones or publications proving that some of the “great Poles” of the past were homosexual have exemplified strategies attempting to reconcile queerness with Polish nationalism (Tomasik, 2014; Kulpa, 2011, p. 49).¹³ It seems that the production of the nationally suspect queer subject by Polish right-wing nationalism created an ever-dubious category of a citizen, one placed on perpetual alert, akin to a traitor. As a result, they might feel the urge or be expected to demonstrate their patriotism and loyalty toward the nation. But what is the purpose of this predicament that Polish heteronationalism has inflicted on the homosexual? Currently, PiS exploits expressions of Polish queers’ nationalism to cast them as a danger to Poland’s sanctities and the evidence of western infiltration into the

¹² By accusing homosexuality of “imperialist” tendencies, the newspaper presumably meant the increased visibility of same-sex desire in public sphere after the decriminalisation of homosexual acts in Poland in 1932 (Karczewski, 2022a).

¹³ Symptomatically, one of the latest books about the LGBTQ+ community in Poland is titled “Poles under the rainbow flag” (Konieczńska 2021). Would a title “Queers under the Polish flag” be acceptable for the author?

national body. This, in turn, allows politicians like Kaczyński to portray themselves as the guardians of Polishness.

In 2019, Elżbieta Podleśna, a queer activist, put up several posters at a Catholic church in the city of Płock. They depicted the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, arguably the most venerated image of Virgin Mary in the country and a symbol of Polishness, with a rainbow halo around her head. By inserting this queer motive into one of the principal symbols of the nation, Podleśna wanted to protest the "exclusion of LGBT people from society." The nation-state reacted swiftly—the artist was detained and charged with "offending religious feelings" to the applause of Poland's Interior Minister (Easton, 2019).

When in 2020 a candidate of PiS was re-elected as president after a homophobic campaign, a group of activists hung rainbow flags on the most iconic monuments in Warsaw, including a statute of Józef Piłsudski (Johnbob & Sophie Press, 2020).¹⁴ The response of the government was particularly harsh: its officials called for the police to punish "the perpetrators" and arrests followed. A deputy Minister of Justice explained that the flags "insulted national monuments". A leader of a radical nationalist party compared LGBTQ+ people to a "plague" besetting the nation like the past "German ... and red plague[s]" (Santora, 2020).

As these events demonstrate, some Polish queers desire to belong in the nation just as much as right-wing nationalists try to exclude them from it.¹⁵ Poland's past and the examples of other countries, such as the Netherlands or Israel, attest to the fact that nationalism does not need to be homophobic. Instead, the current situation of sexual minorities in Poland seems contingent on geopolitics and the exclusionary interpretation of Polishness by the right. The electoral victories of PiS seem to confirm the usefulness of state homophobia as a rhetorical strategy in the pursuit of political power. This approach has relied on the assumption that popular homophobia is prevalent in Polish society. But such a belief seems increasingly questionable. In a poll conducted in 2021, 56% of Poles were in favour of same-sex civil partnerships and 21% of marriage equality (Danielewski, 2021). Can it be that the right-wing assumption about the nation's homophobia might soon be forced to flip? Or, perhaps, it has never been true and the support for PiS has been driven by other reasons?

If Polish nationalists were able to adapt their doctrine to sexual minorities' needs, grassroots homonationalism might make some queers eager to jump on the right-wing bandwagon. This latent, unexploited potential for the "instrumentalization of gay and lesbian agenda to the benefit of nationalist and racist policies" is hard to overlook in Poland (Perreau, 2016, p. 13). The argument about historical tolerance of the Polish state so proudly preached by Kaczyński in the before-mentioned interview for the German newspaper *Blid* may facilitate such a turn if it was considered useful by him or other nationalists in the country.

¹⁴ What is important, in both described cases, the activists did not engage with the symbols of the state, but rather of the nation. The objects of their actions were more related to Polish culture and history than to the system of law and civil rights.

¹⁵ Renking (2015) describes how a similar conflict has played out in Hungary.

Defining homonationalism as a historically contingent political strategy helps to understand that the adherence of some western nations to it might not be irreversible. For example, the 2019 instruction from President Trump to US embassies which banned them from raising rainbow flags signalled that the possibility of dropping LGBTQ+ rights from US foreign affairs agenda is real (Ghitis, 2019; Hauksson-Tresch, 2021, p. 564). Similarly, Dutch far-right nationalist parties have not been consistent in their deployment of homonationalist rhetoric, as in recent years they have voted against laws protecting LGBTQ+ individuals from hate speech and remained unvaryingly hostile towards transgender equality (Spierings, 2020, 2021). Importantly, the homonationalist demands of populist radical right parties in the west are of secondary importance to their anti-immigration focus (Lubbers et al., 2002; Rydgren, 2008). These parties co-operate with each other in a pursuit of a peculiar nationalist international that opposes European integration and promotes Islamophobic, xenophobic, and anti-immigration agendas (Mudde, 2007).

Just as in 1932 the decriminalisation of homosexual acts served the purpose of demonstrating Poland's distinctiveness among other nation-states, the current homophobic practices of Polish nationalists manifest their claim to Polish sexual exceptionalism *visa a vis* both west and east. The homophobic rhetoric of PiS is accompanied by an Islamophobic propaganda. For example, in 2021 during a press conference, a minister of the Polish government presented a snapshot from a zoophilic porn film. He claimed that it depicted a sexual act between "a [Muslim] refugee and a cow." It later turned out that the minister used manipulated pictures to justify new strict measures against immigrants at Poland's eastern border (the external border of the EU; Imielski, 2021). In fact, it was yet another deployment of the rhetorical strategy presenting PiS as a defender of sexually "normal" Poland against penetration by sexual perverts bringing "western" and "eastern" vices to Polish soil.

In its foreign policy, the government of PiS does not present itself as non-European, but as *truly European*, which means Christian, white, heterosexual, and attached to a binary and hierarchical understanding of gender and sexuality. It pursues a rhetoric that dehumanises both queer and non-European subjects criss-crossing west—east relations described in Puar's analysis. What is more, PiS hopes that with the support of other nationalists in Europe it can mainstream its ideology and redefine the shape of the EU (Szczęśniak, 2021; Renkin, this volume). In this political plan, PiS has used a manipulated image of Poland's history as exceptionally heterosexual and Christian. This agenda was expressed by one of the party's MPs in February 2016:

To stop the invasion of Islam, one of our kings died in Warna; another one stopped [their] invasion at Vienna.¹⁶ Our government shall draw on the wisdom and experience of Polish glorious history. Polish authorities shall continue the glorious tradition of Poland as the bulwark of Christendom instead of

¹⁶ Władysław II of Poland died during the Crusade of Varna (1443–1444), John III Sobieski defeated the Ottoman army at the Battle of Vienna (1683; Pekacz, 1995).

surrendering itself to German diktat disguised as European institutions. (Sejm 2016, p. 86).

This PiS MP presented her party's vision of Poland as a modern crusader fighting against both Islam and "European institutions," Muslims and queers, the west and the east. For now, homophobia and Islamophobia harmoniously fit into PiS's European and internal policies and goals. Thus, presenting Poland as a victim of western homonationalism strengthens one of the party's ideological pillars.

Conclusions

The case of Poland demonstrates that both homonationalism and homophobia could be used in politics as rhetorical strategies (and policy paradigms) by actors that are often seen as compatible with only one of the two. On the one hand, attending to queer history and to the accounts of queer individuals shows that the narrative of CEE as being traditionally homophobic does not hold water and relies on an anachronistic perspective of the past. On the other hand, it exposes the fact that right-wing Polish nationalists have employed a narrative about the nation that erases parts of its history. PiS selected just one tradition of Polish nationalism, its exclusionary and homophobic strand, to construct the west's "strangeness" versus Poland by claiming the nation's inherently heterosexual character. To support this discourse, the party has employed a postcolonial critique of the west casting Poland as its victim while simultaneously championing a racist and Islamophobic project of European integration. In this ideological framework Poland's queers hold a role as the nation's traitors. Although another, more inclusive, nationalist tradition exists, PiS finds the integral vision of the nation far more politically beneficial. With the help of conservative intellectuals, Kaczyński has constructed an essentialising, anti-universalist narrative about Poland as a cultural antithesis of the modern west. This reading of geopolitics limits emancipatory strategies available to the country's queers and helps PiS to stay in power by presenting itself as the sole defender of Polishness (Bill, 2014; Chibber, 2013).

Grassroots homonationalism is an attempt by some LGBTQ+ people to narrate national history their way. Just like Kaczyński's homophobia, it has a long tradition in Poland, and it has not always been cosmopolitan or inclusive of other minorities. The examples of Szymanowski and J.T. demonstrate an early "collusion of nationalism and queer subjects" as an emancipatory strategy (Puar, 2007, p. 39). The historical analysis of grassroots homonationalism shows how diverse have been the ways in which queer individuals in Poland have responded to nationalist ideologies. Therefore, this essay argues that there is nothing inherently "western" or "eastern" about nationalist homophobia nor about homonationalism as both are universally available strategies with a powerful essentialising potential and appeal.

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