

National Sexualism:

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German History, Identity, and Sexuality in the Political Spectacle of Rammstein

Rammstein

Rammstein (1994-present) is a German *Neue Deutsche Härte* industrial metal band composed of six members from former East Germany. They are renowned for extreme and controversial performance spectacles and lyrics. Rammstein differs from other NDH groups by continuously asserting their German identity through national signifiers such as German vocal stylings, literature and folklore, history and politics.

- *Neue Deutsche Härte* (“New German Hardness”): German rock subgenre inspired by British and American punk-rock styles. Characterized by basic metal instrumentals alongside keyboard and synth, German vocals, and strong masculine and militaristic imagery

Germanness

Rammstein’s vocal stylings have precedent in early 20th century German cabaret performances, indicating the group’s identification with German cultural heritage. This identity is further established with the incorporation of famous German literature and folklore, such as the works of Goethe and the Grimm Brothers, into their songs. The influence and significance of German culture and history in Rammstein’s works is further reinforced by the band identifying their elaborate performances as part of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (“total work of art”), a term originating from Wagnerian operatic performance.

Depictions of controversial topics such as Nazi violence, German imperialism, and East German politics and policies— such as the Berlin Wall, communism, and censorship— demonstrate that although Rammstein identifies as essentially German, they are highly critical of German politics throughout history, and acknowledge the difficulty of claiming strong national identity, let alone pride, in the context of Germany’s political and violent history.

Sexuality

Rammstein’s provocative tendencies regarding politically charged German symbolism are understood as part of their artistic endeavour to discuss, and inspire reflection about, identity. However, their provocative sexuality is often seen as a means of drawing attention to this discussion rather than being a central aspect of it.

Rammstein’s expressions of sexuality include visual and lyrical representations of sadomasochism, explicit and implicit depictions of homosexuality, crossdressing, and depictions of sexual cannibalism. The references to specific infamous cases of violent sexuality in contemporary Germany, allusions to early twentieth century sexual politics, and self-aware politically charged representations of homosexuality and sadomasochism suggest that Rammstein’s hypersexuality is central to their discussion of German identity.

Sexuality and German Identity

In the context of their focus on German history and cultural politics, Rammstein’s sexually explicit lyrics, imagery, and performances may be interpreted as both an acknowledgment of the significance of sexuality in German history, and as critical of the association of Germanness with “sexual perversion”.



Scarlet Page, Rammstein photohoot for British magazine Kerrang!, Kerrang! magazine issue no. 849 (21 April 2011), reproduced by knukle.wordpress on “Kerrang 2002”, Rammstein on Images, 23 January 2011, <https://rammsteinimages.wordpress.com/2011/01/23/kerrang-2002/>

“Germanness” and Sexuality

In Germany

Late 19th to early 20th century: German sexology explaining loss of bourgeois morality and gender roles in urban centers as being both caused by and resulting in ‘gender confusion’ and ‘pathological sexuality’ (homosexuality, sadism/masochism).

Early to mid 20th century: Prevalence of sex-based violent crimes lead to explosion of art and media focusing on *Lustmord* (“sexual murder”) in interwar period. Increased availability of print media and photographs in modern era enable wide reach of *Lustmorde* documentation.

Weimar Republic: Advances in sexology including sexual reassignment surgery and homosexual rights activism. Increased visibility and awareness of ‘inappropriate gender behaviour’ and ‘pathological sexuality’ (homosexuality, queerness; women in workplace; urban prostitution, venereal disease, *Lustmorde*) leads to further association of urban life with moral and social degeneration. Popular fears about ‘degenerate sexuality’ contribute to Nazi popularity.

Nazi era: The Nazi Party platform includes targeting ‘degenerate sexuality’ of Weimar era. Harsh structural enforcement of ‘traditional’ gender (male dominance, female subservience) and purity. Increased legal persecution of homosexuality and gender nonconformity.

Outside of Germany

WWI: Allied propaganda depicting German army as ‘barbarians’, linking extreme violence to ‘unleashing’ of libidinal impulses under authoritarianism. Respectability (repression of sexual and violent impulses) and democracy as the foundation of ‘civilization’ and Western national identities. Accordingly, extreme violence, sexuality, and authoritarianism associated with ‘barbarism’.

Post-WWII: Scholarship explaining Nazi atrocities as driven by ‘pathological sexuality’. Nazi persecution of “sexual deviants” interpreted as act of projection. Violence, sexual abuse and sex economies in concentration camps interpreted as expressions of Nazi ‘perversion,’ especially in same-sex contexts. View of sadism shifts from ‘sexual gratification from viewing or inflicting pain on others’ to ‘deriving pleasure from extreme violence’. Immediate and late post-war reproductions of sexualized Nazism in literary erotica and Nazisploitation films.

The popular association of “German/y” with “Nazi/sm” may be viewed as the result of the extremity of Nazi violence, the extent of German civilian collaboration and justification of Nazi atrocities during and after the Nazi regime, and the popularity of WWII and Nazi representations in Western media. The prevalence of scholarly explanations of Nazi violence as sexually driven, and the popularity of hypersexualized Nazi representations, contribute to the fictionalized hypersexual Nazi image being connected with BDSM attire and practices, leading to a popular association of Nazism and BDSM.

The conflation of Germanness, Nazism, and BDSM is expressed in, and arguably critiqued by, the work of Rammstein.

