

Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825–1895): A 200-Year Jubilee with Pitfalls

Florian G. Mildenerberger

Article - Version of Record



Suggested Citation:

Mildenerberger, F. G. (2024). Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825–1895): A 200-Year Jubilee with Pitfalls. *Sexuality & Culture*, 28(6), 2770–2775. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-024-10254-8>

Wissen, wo das Wissen ist.



UNIVERSITÄTS- UND
LANDESBIBLIOTHEK
DÜSSELDORF

This version is available at:

URN: <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:061-20241204-095010-8>

Terms of Use:

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

For more information see: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>



Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825–1895): A 200-Year Jubilee with Pitfalls

Florian G. Mildenberger¹

Accepted: 11 July 2024 / Published online: 17 August 2024
© The Author(s) 2024

Abstract

For the opponents of the sexual reform movement, he was the father of all evil; for the proponents of the decriminalization of same-sex desire, he paved the way for objective research. With the term “Urning”, he gave homosexuals an anthropological dignity. The Hanoverian lawyer Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825–1895) was notorious during his lifetime and at times esteemed after his death, but it was not until the 1990s that he became the secret hero of sexual emancipation and sexual history/historiography. Streets and squares were named after him, but his life’s work was also often instrumentalized.

Keywords Sexual history · Karl heinrich ulrichs · Sexual reform movement · Germany · 19th century

Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825–1895)

Round birthdays or jubilees of men who are considered significant enough for streets to be named after more than a century after their death sometimes exert an astonishing attraction on historians, journalists and politicians. This is all the more evident in the case of figures from the past who were initially forgotten and only rediscovered and instrumentalized some time after their death. This was and still is the case with the Hanoverian lawyer Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, whose 200th birthday (and 130th death anniversary) will be celebrated in 2025.

Ulrichs is considered a “preceptor” of the same-sex emancipation movements of the 20th century and the “first gay man in world history” in sexual historiography and the popular tradition of queer subcultures in the West. Both terms were coined by the

✉ Florian G. Mildenberger
florian.mildenberger@gmail.com

¹ Institute for the History, Theory and Ethics of Medicine, Heinrich-Heine University Düsseldorf, Moorenstrasse 5, D-40225 Düsseldorf, Germany

influential sexologist Volkmar Sigusch (1940–2023), who had a style-defining effect (Sigusch, 2000a, b).

Karl Heinrich Ulrichs was born on August 28, 1825 in Westerfeld, which is now part of Aurich in East Frisia. He studied theology and law at the University of Göttingen from 1844 to 1846 and experimented with homosocial life in the Alemannia and Hercynia fraternities. Despite the homophobic character of these male-only clubs, they offered a chance to come close with men of the same age, get some secrets of each other and maybe the opportunity for informal sex, nobody would ever speak about. Ulrichs moved to Berlin after the summer term of 1846 and completed his studies there in 1848 with a doctorate of law. He then found employment as an assessor in the civil service of the Kingdom of Hanover, but he had to give up this position in 1854 because of causing public offense through same-sex sexual contact - homosexual activity itself was not punished in Hanover, unlike in Prussia (Kennedy, 2001). He initially set up as a lawyer, but the rumors about his private sex life caught up with him in 1859 and so he lost his license and from then on had to earn his living as a secretary, correspondent and tutor. From 1864, he began to publish writings on homosexuality (which had not yet been coined as a term).

Ulrich's influence and impact was not of his own making, but was largely due to the reception of his works by contemporaries and later supporters or opponents (Fraeckman 2024, p. 2). He achieved immortality by coining the term "Urning". He wanted to give the same-sex lovers of his time an anthropological dignity. Until then, they had been referred to as "pederasts" or "sodomites" in a derogatory way. Ulrichs made use of a reference to Greek antiquity and especially to Pausanias' speech in Plato's Symposium. Here the two figures of the goddess Aphrodite were discussed: on the one hand Aphrodite Dionea as the daughter of Zeus and Dione, on the other hand Aphrodite Urania - created from the severed body parts of Uranus. An Urning (or Urinde) was therefore a being that did not fit into the binary gender scheme. According to this logic, sexual predisposition was innate and punishment was therefore contrary to nature and morality. Ulrichs corresponded with important scholars of his time about these theories, including the influential Austrian psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902). However, he drew pathologizing rather than emancipatory conclusions from Ulrichs' studies, which annoyed Ulrichs for a long time. He had to watch as his research was re-instrumentalized by neurologists and turned into the opposite. He noted critically in 1880:

"Admittedly, we are not yet in complete agreement. For me, the urning system is a physiological, i.e. hermaphroditic phenomenon, a fact of natural law. Those, on the other hand, declare it to be something pathological, a pathological phenomenon, without, of course, denying its innate nature." (Ulrichs, 1880/1994, p. 92).

Ulrichs used the term "Naturgesetz" (natural law) for his theory. This did not mean a theological approach but the idea, that same-sex-desire was part of human nature. He only managed to captivate his audience once, when he presented his theories and the associated criminal law demands at the German Jurists' Conference in Munich in 1867, but was shouted down within a few minutes. He later recalled:

"To my dying day I shall count it my glory that on August 29, 1867, in Munich, I found the courage in myself to face eye to eye a thousand-year-old, fearsome-eyed hydra, which has truly been spraying me and my fellow citizens with poison and

drool for too long, driving many to suicide, poisoning everyone's happiness in life. Yes, I am proud that I found the strength to give the hydra of public contempt its first lance thrust." (Ulrichs, 1868/1994, p. 1).

After this and other defeats, he left Germany in 1880 and settled first in the Italian towns of Naples and later in L'Aquila. From here, he edited the journal "Alaudae" with the aim of reviving Latin as the common scholarly language of the West (Ulrichs, 2004). He died at his home on July 11, 1895 and was also buried here.

A few years after his death, the doctor and sex researcher Magnus Hirschfeld (1868–1935) rediscovered him, edited his preceptor's works - with slight abridgements - and ensured that they were received within the sexual reform movement (Kennedy, 2001, pp. 102, 127, 131f, 136, 138, 201f, 205, 273–276). This can be seen in several essays in the famous "Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen" (Karsch-Haack, 1900, p. 153; Friedlaender, 1905, p. 440). However, it was not only those in favor of reforming sexual criminal law who referred to Ulrichs, but also his opponents. In the German parliament, the Reichstag, Johann Thaler (1847–1920), a member of the catholic Center Party, declared that Ulrichs had put his private sexual interests "in the balance against the consciousness of all mankind" (Neunzehnter Bericht, 1905, p. 1008). Christian opponents of sexual reform in particular saw Ulrichs as the main culprit for the fact that such a topic was being discussed in public at all. While his Urning terminology gradually faded into the background in favor of the term "homosexuality", he himself posthumously became the distorted image of the modern homosexual.

In the eyes of conservative catholic priests and politicians, Ulrichs was the first to attempt to enshrine sexual predisposition as a "natural law" (Boeser, 1929, p. 50), making a mockery of the "divine moral law" (Capellmann & Bergmann, 1923, p. 221). Attempts by self-appointed guardians of morality to have Ulrichs' works banned, failed, however, due to resistance from the relevant Prussian authorities, who recognized their scientific nature (Dobler, 2008, 499). With the demise of Hirschfeld's sexual reform movement in 1933, the reception of Ulrich's writings also ended for decades. It took until the 1990s for the Ulrich renaissance that is so successful today, to take shape. The Germanist and Historian Wolfram Setz (1941–2023) was responsible for this. Setz worked full-time as managing director of the renowned "Monumenta Germaniae Historica" (MHG), but in his spare time he reissued forgotten authors of same-sex literature and sexual reform with the "Bibliothek rosa Winkel" series. They were published in the gay-movement based publishing house „Verlag rosa Winkel“ until it went bankrupt in 2000. Then Setz moved to Männerschwarm (which went bust in 2021/22 as well). The four-volume new edition of Ulrich's writings was followed by Setz's popular historiographical crusade across Europe with the aim of naming streets and squares after the "first gay man in world history" (Ulrichs, 1994). This was achieved in Munich in 1998, in Bremen and Hildesheim in 2002, in Hanover in 2006 and even in L'Aquila in 2007. Setz organized a series of lectures with renowned scholars on Ulrich's 175th birthday (Setz, 2000), accompanied the new edition of a biography by the American historian Hubert Kennedy (Kennedy, 2001) and published another volume with "new findings" on Ulrich in 2004 (Setz, 2004). Finally, he even succeeded in publishing a notebook a from Ulrichs' personal

possessions, which he bought at an auction (Ulrichs, 2017). The literary experiments were also published (Ulrichs, 1995).

After his death, Ulrich's life's work in sexology served not only as a vehicle for promoting sexual reform, but also - especially in the decades after 1990 - for reorganizing sexual historiography and sexual history as well. Sigusch's turn to Ulrichs was not accidental, but was part of his plan to steer sexual historiography in Germany in a certain direction. Instead of focusing on Magnus Hirschfeld, Sigusch recommended a broader perspective by turning to Ulrichs (Sigusch, 2008, 2009). Previously, Sigusch had failed in his attempt to reduce Hirschfeld's oeuvre to eugenics. In the 21st century and in view of the public debates surrounding the tightening of sexual criminal law, the interests of various Ulrichs researchers soon collided. After all, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs lived and wrote at a time when theories about gender relations in ancient Greece were still highly idealized. As a result, intergenerational relationships were not a problem for him and when Wolfram Setz addressed this at a lecture in 2017, the Munich "Forum Homosexuality and History" immediately distanced itself from Setz but not from Ulrichs, as the bavarian historians claimed to be able to take the interpretation of the great role model into their own hands. To a certain extent, the Ulrich renaissance also testifies to a lack of historiographical understanding on the part of those who see themselves as the heirs of the "Urnings". Most of the research itself now takes place in the Anglo-American world. The American historian Robert Beachy made the start with his iconic study "Gay Berlin" (Beachy, 2014). This was followed by a series of other publications (Leck, 2006; Singy, 2021). The American private scholar Michael Lombardi-Nash made a significant contribution to this Ulrichs boom by translating all of the Hanoverian jurist's works into English and making them accessible via e-books by the summer of 2024. The Australian historian Douglas Pretsell translated Ulrichs' surviving letters and thus also encouraged further research (Pretsell, 2020, 2023, pp. 4–8, 13–16, 29–35). The anniversary will probably be celebrated more in the USA than in Germany, which is also due to the disagreement among German-speaking sexual historians. Both the organization of an anthology and the coordination of an exhibition failed in the run-up to the event. However, this does not detract from international historiographical research. In Germany, Ulrichs is primarily instrumentalized politically: he may not only planned the founding of a "gay civil rights movement", but also gay marriage and anti-discrimination laws (for adults only, of course). Karl Heinrich Ulrichs would probably be astounded, to say the least, if he could see what is being read out of his writings by interested parties. They all seem to forget, that Ulrichs never saw himself as a revolutionary or a social campaigner. He was a lawyer and a philosopher of sex/gender. Ulrichs wanted to change the law and he justified it by giving the same-sex-desire an anthropological theory and dignity. Ulrichs believed, that he could reach his goal within a monarchy. He only wanted to expand the sexual rights on all people and sexual interests beyond heterosexuality and sex during marriage. Naming him a campaigner may be useful today, but it is not historically correct.

Author Contributions The author contributed all material to the study himself. There were no other contributors.

Funding No funds, grants, or other support was received.
Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Declarations

Competing interests The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethics Approval This is an historiographical study. No ethic rules were violated.

Consent to Participate/Consent to Publish There is only one author, who participated and I do consent to publish.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Beachy, R. (2014). *Gay Berlin. Birthplace of a modern identity*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Boeser, T. (1929). Die homosexuelle Propaganda Und Ihre Bekämpfung. *Volkswart*, 22, 49–56.
- Capellmann, C., & Bergmann, W. (1923). *Pastoral-Medizin*. 19th edition. Schöningh.
- Dobler, J. (2008). *Zwischen Duldungspolitik und Verbrechensbekämpfung: Homosexuellenverfolgung durch die Berliner Polizei von 1848 bis 1933*. Verlag für Polizeiwissenschaft.
- Fraeckman, K. (2024). Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and the queer ecology of sericulture. *German Quarterly*, 97, 1–4.
- Friedlaender, B. (1905). Entwurf zu Einer Reizphysiologischen Analyse Der Erotischen Anziehung Unter Zugrundelegung vorwiegend homosexuellen materials. *Jahrbuch für Sexuelle Zwischenstufen*, 7/I, 387–463.
- Karsch-Haack, F. (1900). Päderastie und tribadie bei den Tieren auf Grund Der Literatur. *Jahrbuch für Sexuelle Zwischenstufen*, 2, 126–160.
- Kennedy, H. (2001). Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. Leben und Werk. 2nd edition. Männerschwarm.
- Leck, R. M. (2006). *Vita Sexualis. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and the origins of sexual science*. University of Illinois Press.
- Neunzehnter Bericht. (1905). Bericht Betreffend Änderung Des § 175 Strafgesetzbuch, Drucksache 407, Berichterstatte Dr. *Thaler Jahrbuch für Sexuelle Zwischenstufen*, 7/II, 971–1037.
- Pretsell, D. (2020). *The correspondence of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs* (pp. 1846–1894). Routledge.
- Pretsell, D. (2023). *Queer voices in the works of Richard Von Krafft-Ebing, 1883–1901*. Routledge.
- Setz, W. (Ed.). (2000). (Ed.). *Die Geschichte Der Homosexualitäten Und die schwule Identität an Der Jahrtausendwende. Eine Vortragsreihe aus Anlass des 175. Geburtstages Von Karl Heinrich Ulrichs*. Verlag rosa Winkel.
- Setz, W. (Ed.). (2004). (Ed.). *Neue Funde und Studien zu Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. Männerschwarm*.
- Sigusch, V. (2000a). Uranität als Existenzweise. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs als Präzeptor Der Homosexuellen-Und Schwulenbewegung. In W. Setz (Ed.), *Die Geschichte Der Homosexualitäten Und die schwule Identität an Der Jahrtausendwende. Eine Vortragsreihe aus Anlaß des 175. Geburtstages Von Karl Heinrich Ulrichs* (pp. 65–92). Verlag rosa Winkel.
- Sigusch, V. (2000b). *Der erste Schwule der Weltgeschichte*. Verlag rosa Winkel.
- Sigusch, V. (2008). *Geschichte Der Sexualwissenschaft*. Campus.

- Sigusch, V. (2009). Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. In V. Sigusch, & G. Grau (Eds.), *Personenlexikon Der Sexualforschung* (pp. 706–715). Campus.
- Singy, P. (2021). Sexual identity at the limits of German liberalism. Law and science in the work of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825–1895). *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 30, 390–410.
- Ulrichs, K. H. (1994). *Forschungen über das Räthsel Der mann männlichen Liebe. 4 volumes*. Verlag rosa Winkel.
- Ulrichs, K. H. (1995). *Matrosengeschichten Und Gedichte*. Ein Lesebuch. Verlag rosa Winkel.
- Ulrichs, K. H. (2004). *Alaudae Eine Lateinische Zeitschrift 1889–1895*. Männerschwarm.
- Ulrichs, K. H. (2017). *Auf Bienchens Flügeln. Ein Flug um den Erdball in Epigrammen Und Poetischen Bildern*. Männerschwarm.
- Ulrichs, K. H. (1868/1994). *Forschungen über das Räthsel Der mann männlichen Liebe. VI: Gladius Furens*. Verlag rosa Winkel.
- Ulrichs, K. H. (1880/1994). *Forschungen über das Räthsel Der mann männlichen Liebe*. Critische Pfeile. Verlag rosa Winkel.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.