

# Magnus Hirschfeld

(May 14, 1868 - May 14, 1935)

*This essay is written by Dr. Jake Newsome and based on the important research of Dr. Laurie Marhoefer, Dr. Heike Bauer, and Ralf Dose. Thank you for your work in preserving queer history.*

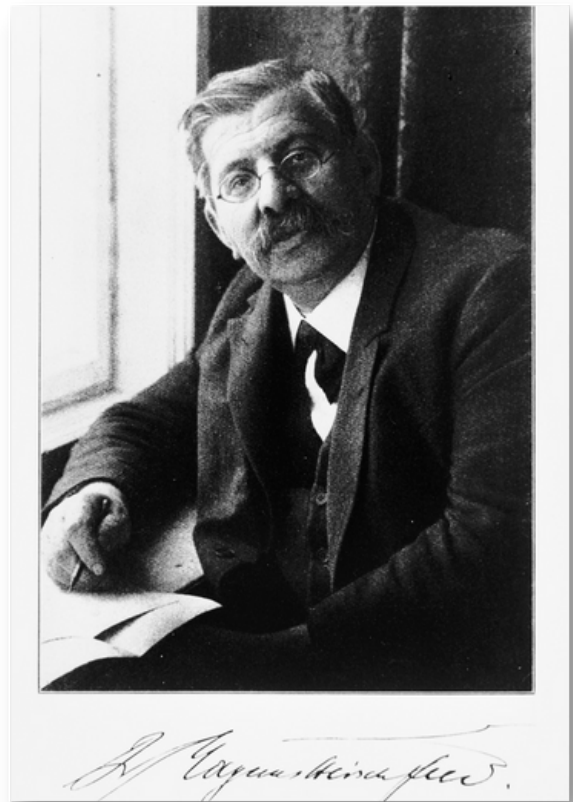
Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld was a German physician and researcher who was a trailblazer in studying human sexuality. His work was famous across the world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hirschfeld's overlapping identities as gay, social democratic, and Jewish shaped his work as a scientific researcher and political advocate for LGBTQ+ rights.

Informed by decades of research, Hirschfeld argued that homosexuality was inborn and a natural manifestation of human sexuality. He was also the first to assert that being trans is different from being gay. According to Hirschfeld, human sexuality and gender existed along a spectrum of what he termed "sexual intermediaries." He argued that because these variations were natural and inborn, society should not legally or socially discriminate against LGBTQ+ people.

Hirschfeld co-founded the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee in Berlin in 1897. It advocated for the rights of LGBTQ+ people. It also published the Yearbook for Sexual Intermediaries, an early scientific journal about LGBTQ+ topics. The Committee is considered the first LGBTQ+ rights organization in the world.

In 1919, Hirschfeld established the Institute for Sexual Science. The Institute was a scientific center for the study of sex and provided offices for doctors who researched sexual-medical issues and treated patients. It had a library and archive. Hirschfeld partnered with the Berlin Police Department to issue certificates that helped protect trans people from being arrested under the law that classified so-called "cross dressing" as a public nuisance.

In 1918, Hirschfeld met Karl Giese. He hired Giese to work at the Institute and the two began a romantic relationship soon afterward. In 1930, Hirschfeld embarked on a world speaking tour. At a lecture in Shanghai, he met and fell in love with a Chinese medical student named Li Shiu Tong. The two traveled the world together speaking about the science of human sexuality. Hirschfeld maintained his relationships with both Giese and Li until his death.



Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, circa 1930.  
*Magnus-Hirschfeld Gesellschaft*

Magnus Hirschfeld (at right with glasses and bushy mustache, holding the hand of his partner, Karl Giese) at a costume party at the Institute for Sexual Science, 1920. *Magnus-Hirschfeld Gesellschaft*



Hirschfeld's stances on gender and sexuality were decidedly progressive, and he had to deal with antisemitism directed against himself and his work. Yet, he retained racist and imperialist ideas in his work, at times denigrating people of color, particularly Black people, even as he hobnobbed with prominent Black writers and thinkers, such as the American poet Langston Hughes. Later in his life, Hirschfeld's writing became more anticolonialist. This is perhaps because, after he began traveling the world with Li Shiu Tong, Hirschfeld witnessed the racism that Li was subjected to.

As the Nazis gained influence and followers, they targeted Hirschfeld and his Institute because he was Jewish and because of his political work in favor of LGBTQ+ rights. In May 1933, college students who supported the Nazis attacked the Institute for Sexual Science and destroyed its collection. The world's first LGBTQ+ archive, consisting of nearly 20,000 books, journals, and rare artifacts, went up in flames during an infamous book burning in Berlin soon after.

Hirschfeld was abroad on his speaking tour and was not physically harmed. He hoped to rebuild his life's work, but never returned to Germany. He died suddenly on his 67th birthday in 1935.

## Sources & Further Reading

Bauer, Heike. *The Hirschfeld Archives: Violence, Death, and Modern Queer Culture* (Temple University Press, 2017)

Beachy, Robert. *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2014)

Dose, Ralf. *Magnus Hirschfeld: The Origins of the Gay Liberation Movement*. Translated by Edward Willis (Monthly Review Press, 2014)

Marhoefer, Laurie. *Racism and the Making of Gay Rights: A Sexologist, His Student, and the Empire of Queer Love* (University of Toronto Press, 2022)

Read more about Magnus Hirschfeld [online](#) and watch the video on [YouTube](#). For more LGBTQ+ Stories from Nazi Germany, visit [pinktrianglelegacies.com/stories](https://pinktrianglelegacies.com/stories).