



# Before Porn Was Legal: The Erotica Empire of Beate Uhse

*Elizabeth Heineman*

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Struggling to survive in post–World War II Germany, Beate Uhse (1919–2001)—a former Luftwaffe pilot, war widow, and young mother—turned to selling goods on the black market. A self-penned guide to the rhythm method found eager buyers and started Uhse on her path to becoming the world’s largest erotica entrepreneur. Battling restrictive legislation, powerful churches, and conservative social mores, she built a mail-order business in the 1950s that sold condoms, sex aids, self-help books, and more. The following decades brought the world’s first erotica shop, the legalization of pornography, the expansion of her business into eastern Germany, and web-based commerce.

Uhse was only one of many erotica entrepreneurs who played a role in the social and sexual revolution accompanying Germany’s transition from Nazism to liberal democracy. Tracing the activities of entrepreneurs, customers, government officials, and citizen-activists, *Before Porn Was Legal* brings to light the profound social, legal, and cultural changes that attended the growth of the erotica sector. Heineman’s innovative readings of governmental and industry records, oral histories, and the erotica industry’s products uncover the roots of today’s sexual marketplace and reveal the indelible ways in which sexual expression and consumption have become intertwined.

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