

Homosexuals and the Third Reich

The focus here is the persecution of gays but also mentions Freemasonry

“After roll call on the evening of June 20, 1942, an order was suddenly given: 'All prisoners with the pink triangle will remain standing at attention!' We stood on the desolate, broad square, and from somewhere a warm summer breeze carried the sweet fragrance of resin and wood from the regions of freedom; but we couldn't taste it, because our throats were hot and dry from fear. Then the guardhouse door of the command tower opened, and an SS officer and some of his lackeys strode toward us. Our detail commander barked: 'Three hundred criminal deviants, present as ordered!' We were registered, and then it was revealed to us that in accordance with an order from the Reichsführung SS, our category was to be isolated in an intensified-penalty company, and we would be transferred as a unit to the Clinker Brickworks the next morning. The Clinker factory! We shuddered, for the human death mill was more than feared.”

Appallingly little information is available on the situation of homosexuals in Nazi Germany. Many historians have hinted darkly at the “unspeakable practises” of a Nazi elite supposedly overrun with “sexual pervers,” but this charge is both unsubstantiated and insidious. Upon closer examination, it turns out to be no more than the standard use of anti-gay prejudice to defame any given individual or group - a practise, incidentally, of which the Nazis were the supreme masters. The Nazis were guilty of very real offences, but their unspeakable practises were crimes against mankind. That homosexuals were major victims of these crimes is mentioned in only a few of the standard histories of the period. And those historians who do mention the facts seem reluctant to dwell on the subject and turn quickly to the fate of other minorities in Nazi Germany. Yet tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of homosexuals were interned in Nazi concentration camps. They were consigned to the lowest position in the camp hierarchy, and subjected to abuse by both guards and fellow prisoners; most of them perished. Obviously, gay people are going to have to write their own history. And there is enough authentic documentation on the Nazi period to undertake a first step in this direction. The words at the beginning of this article were written by one concentration camp survivor, LD Classen von Neudegg, who published some of his recollections in a German homophobia magazine in the Fifties. Here are a few more excerpts from his account of the treatment of homosexuals in the concentration camp at Sachsenhausen: “We had been here for almost two months, but it seemed like endless years to us. When we were 'transferred' here, we had numbered around three hundred men. Whips were used more frequently each morning, when we were forced down into the clay pits under the wailing of the camp sirens. 'Only fifty are still alive,' whispered the man next to me. 'Stay in the middle - then you won't get hit so much.' ... (The escapees) had been brought back. 'Homo' was scrawled scornfully across their clothing for their last walk through the camp. To increase their thirst, they were forced to eat over salted food, and then they were placed on the block and whipped. Afterwards, drums were hung around their necks, which they had to beat while shouting, 'Hurrah, we're back!' The three men were hanged.”

... Summer, 1944. One morning there was an eruption of restlessness among the patients of the hospital barracks where I worked. Fear and uncertainty had arisen from rumours about new measures on the part of the SS hospital administration. At the administrator's order, the courier of the political division had requisitioned certain medical records, and now he arrived at the camp for delivery. Fever charts shot up; the sick were seized with a gnawing fear. After a few days, the awful mystery of the records was solved. Experiments had been ordered involving living subjects and phosphorus: methods of treating phosphorus burns were to be developed and tested. I must be silent about the effects of this series of experiments, which proceeded with unspeakable pain, fear, blood and tears: for it is impossible to put the misery into words.”

Dr. Neudegg's recollections are confirmed in many details by the memoirs of Rudolf Hess, adjunct and commander of the concentration camps at Sachsenhausen and, later, Auschwitz. Neudegg's account is something of a rarity: the few homosexuals who managed to survive internment have tended to hide the fact, largely because homosexuality continued to be a crime in postwar West Germany. This is also the reason why homosexuals have been denied any compensation by the otherwise munificent West German government. The number of homosexuals who died in Nazi concentration camps is unknown and likely to remain so. Although statistics are available on the number of men brought to trial on charges of “lewd and unnatural behaviour,” many more were sent to camps without the benefit of a trial. Moreover, many homosexuals were summarily executed by firing squads; this was particularly the case with gays in the military - which encompassed nearly every able-bodied man during the final years of the war. Finally, many concentration camps systematically destroyed all their records when it became apparent that German defeat was imminent. The beginning of the Nazi terror against homosexuals was marked by the murder of Ernst Rohm on June 30, 1934: “the Night of the Long Knives” Rohm was the man who, in 1919, first made Hitler aware of his own political potential, and the two were close friends for fifteen years. During that time, Rohm rose to SA Chief of Staff, transforming the Brownshirt militia from a handful of hardened goons and embittered ex-soldiers into an effective fighting force five hundred thousand strong - the instrument of Nazi terror. Hitler needed Rohm's military skill and could rely on his personal loyalty, but he was ultimately a pragmatist. As part of a compromise with the Reichwehr (regular army) leadership, whose support he needed to become Fuhrer, Hitler allowed Goering and Himmler to murder Rohm along with dozens of Rohm's loyal officers. For public relations purposes, and especially to quell the outrage felt throughout the ranks of the SA, Hitler justified his blatant power play by pointing to Rohm's homosexuality. Hitler, of course, had known of Rohm's homosexuality since 1919, and it became public knowledge in 1925, when Rohm appeared in court to charge a hustler with theft. All this while the Nazi Party had a virulently anti-gay policy, and many Nazis protested that Rohm was discrediting the entire Party and should be purged. Hitler, however, was quite willing to cover up for him for years until he stood in the way of larger plans. The Nazi Party came to power in 1933, and a year later Rohm was dead. While Rohm and his men were being rounded up for the massacre (offered a gun and the opportunity to shoot himself, Rohm retorted angrily: “Let Hitler do his own dirty work”), the new Chief of Staff received his first order from the Fuhrer: “I expect all SA leaders to help preserve and strengthen the SA in its capacity as a pure and cleanly institution. In

particular, I should like every mother to be able to allow her son to join the SA, Party, and Hitler Youth without fear that he may become morally corrupted in their ranks. I therefore request all SA commanders to take the utmost pains to ensure that offences under Paragraph 175 are met by immediate expulsion of the culprit from the SA and the Party.

Hitler had good reason to be concerned about the reputation of Nazi organisations, most of which were based on strict segregation of the sexes. Hitler Youth, for example, was disparagingly referred to as Homo Youth throughout the Third Reich, a characterisation which the Nazi leadership vainly struggled to eliminate. Indeed, most of the handful of publications on homosexuality which appeared during the Fascist regime were devoted to new and rather bizarre methods of "detection" and "prevention".

Rudolf Diels, the founder of the Gestapo, recorded some of Hitler's personal thoughts on the subject: "He lectured me on the role of homosexuality in history and politics. It had destroyed ancient Greece, he said. Once rife, it extended its contagious effects like an ineluctable law of nature to the best and most manly of characters, eliminating from the reproductive process precisely those men on whose offspring a nation depended. The immediate result of the vice was, however, that unnatural passion swiftly became dominant in public affairs if it were allowed to spread unchecked." The tone had been set by the Rohm putsch, and on its first anniversary-June 28, 1935, the campaign against homosexuality was escalated by the introduction of the "Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honour." Until 1935, the only punishable offence had been anal intercourse; under the new Paragraph 175a, ten possible "acts" were punishable, including a kiss, an embrace, even homosexual fantasies! One man, for instance, was successfully prosecuted on the grounds that he had observed a couple making love in a park and watched only the man. Under the Nazi system, criminal acts were less important in determining guilt than criminal intent.

The "phenomenological" theory of justice claimed to evaluate a person's character rather than his deeds. The "healthy sensibility of the people" (gesundes Volksempfinden) was elevated to the highest normative legal concept, and the Nazis were in a position to prosecute an individual solely on the grounds of his sexual orientation. (After World War II, incidentally, this law was immediately struck from the books in East Germany as a product of Fascist thinking, while it remained on the books in West Germany.)

Once Paragraph 175a was in effect, the annual number of convictions on charges of homosexuality leaped to about ten times the number in the pre-Nazi period. The law was so loosely formulated that it could be, and was, applied against heterosexuals whom the Nazis wanted to eliminate. The most notorious example of an individual convicted on trumped-up charges was General Werner von Fritsch, Army Chief of Staff; and the law was also used repeatedly against members of the Catholic clergy. But the law was undoubtedly used primarily against gay people, and the court system was aided in the witch-hunt by the entire German populace, which was encouraged to scrutinise the behaviour of neighbours and to denounce suspects to the Gestapo. The number of men convicted of homosexuality during the Nazi period totalled around fifty thousand: 1933 - 853; 1934 - 948; 1935 - 2,106; 1936 - 5,320; 1937 - 8,271; 1938 - 8,562; 1939 - 7,614; 1940 - 3,773; 1941 - 3,735; 1942 - 3,963 (first quarter); 1944-45 - 966.

The Gestapo was the agent of the next escalation of the campaign against homosexuality. Ex-chicken farmer Heinrich Himmler, Reichsführer SS and head of the Gestapo, richly deserves a reputation as the most fanatically homophobic member of the Nazi leadership. In 1936, he gave a speech on the subject of homosexuality and described the murder of Ernst Rohm (which he had engineered) in these terms: "Two years ago...when it became necessary, we did not scruple to strike this plague with death, even within our own ranks." Himmler closed with these words: "Just as we today have gone back to the ancient Germanic view on the question of marriage mixing different races, so too in our judgement of homosexuality is a symptom of degeneracy which could destroy our race - we must return to the guiding Nordic principle: extermination of degenerates." A few months earlier, Himmler had prepared for action by reorganising the entire state police into three divisions. The political executive, Division II, was directly responsible for the control of "illegal parties and organisations, leagues and economic groups, reactionaries and the Church, Freemasonry, and homosexuality." Himmler personally favoured the immediate "extermination of degenerates," but he was empowered to order the summary execution only of homosexuals discovered within his own bureaucratic domain. Civilian offenders were merely required to serve out their prison sentences (although second offenders were subject to castration). In 1936, Himmler found a way around this obstacle. Following release from prison, all "enemies of the state"-including homosexuals-were to be taken into protective custody and detained indefinitely. "Protective custody" (Schutzhaft) was an euphemism for concentration camp internment. Himmler gave special orders that homosexuals be placed in Level Three camps-the human death mills described by Neudegg. These camps were reserved for Jews and homosexuals. The official SS newspaper, Das Schwarze Korps, announced in 1937 that there were two million German homosexuals and called for their death. The extent to which Himmler succeeded in this undertaking is unknown, but the number of homosexuals sent to camps was far in excess of the fifty thousand who served jail sentences. The Gestapo dispatched thousands to camps without a trial. Moreover, "protective custody" was enforced retroactively, so that any gay who had ever come to the attention of the police prior to the Third Reich was subject to immediate arrest. (The Berlin police alone had an index of more than twenty thousand homosexuals prior to the Nazi takeover.) And starting in 1939, gays from Nazi-occupied countries were also interned in German camps. The chances for survival in a Level Three camp were low indeed. Homosexuals were distinguished from other prisoners by a pink triangle, worn on the left side of the jacket and on the right pant leg. There was no possibility of "passing" for straight, and the presence of "marked men" in the all-male camp population evoked the same reaction as in contemporary prisons: gays were brutally assaulted and sexually abused. "During the first weeks of my imprisonment," wrote one survivor, "I often thought I was the only available target on whom everyone was free to vent his aggressions. Things improved when I was assigned to a labour detail that worked outside the camp at Metz, because everything took place in public view. I was made clerk of the labour detail, which meant that I worked all day and then looked after the records at the guardhouse between midnight

and 2 am. Because of this 'overtime' I was allowed seconds at lunch - if any food was left over. This is the fact to which I probably owe my survival... I saw quite a number of pink triangles. I don't know how they were eventually killed... One day they were simply gone.

Concentration camp internment served a twofold purpose: the labour power of prisoners boosted the national economy significantly, and undesirables could be effectively liquidated by the simple expedient of reducing their food rations to a level slightly below subsistence. One survivor tells of witnessing 'Project Pink' in his camp: 'The homosexuals were grouped into liquidation commandos and placed under triple camp discipline. That meant less food, more work, stricter supervision. If a prisoner with a pink triangle became sick, it spelled his doom. Admission to the clinic was forbidden.' This was the practise in the concentration camps at Sachsenhausen, Natzweiler, Fuhlsbuttel, Neusustrum, Sonnenburg, Dachau, Lichtenberg, Mauthausen, Ravensbruck, Neuengamme, Grossrosen, Buchenwald, Vught, Flossenburg, Stutthof, Auschwitz, and Struthof; as well, lesbians wore pink triangles in the concentration camps at Butzow and Ravensbruck. In the final months of the war, the men with pink triangles received brief military training. They were to be sent out as cannon fodder in the last-ditch defence of the fatherland. But the death of other pink triangles came much more swiftly. A survivor gives this account: 'He was a young and healthy man. The first evening roll call after he was added to our penal company was his last. When he arrived, he was seized and ridiculed, then beaten and kicked, and finally spat upon. He suffered alone and in silence. Then they put him under a cold shower. It was a frosty winter evening, and he stood outside the barracks all through that long, bitterly cold night. When morning came, his breathing had become an audible rattle. Bronchial pneumonia was later given as the cause of his death. But before things had come to that, he was again beaten and kicked. Then he was tied to a post and placed under an arc lamp until he began to sweat, again put under a cold shower, and so on. He died toward evening.'

Another survivor: 'One should not forget that these men were honourable citizens, very often highly intelligent, and some had once held high positions in civil and social life. During his seven-year imprisonment, this writer became acquainted with a Prussian prince, famous athletes, professors, teachers, engineers, artisans, trade workers and, of course, hustlers. Not all of them were what one might term 'respectable' people, to be sure, but the majority of them were helpless and completely lost in the world of the concentration camps. They lived in total isolation in whatever little bit of freedom they could find. I witnessed the tragedy of a highly cultured attaché of a foreign embassy, who simply couldn't grasp the reality of the tragedies taking place all around him. Finally, in a state of deep desperation and hopelessness, he simply fell over dead for no apparent reason. I saw a rather effeminate young man who was repeatedly forced to dance in front of SS men, who would then put him on the rack-chained hand and foot to a crossbeam in the guardhouse barracks and beat him in the most awful way. Even today I find it impossible to think back on all my comrades, all the barbarities, all the tortures, without falling into the deepest depression. I hope you will understand.' The ruthlessness of the Nazis culminated in actions so perversely vindictive as to be almost incomprehensible. Six youths arrested for stealing coal at a railroad station were taken into protective custody and duly placed in a concentration camp. Shocked that such innocent boys were forced to sleep in a barracks also occupied by pink triangles, the SS guards chose what to them must have seemed the lesser of two evils: they took the youths aside and gave them fatal injections of morphine. Morality was saved. The self-righteousness that prompted this type of action cuts through the entire ideology glorifying racial purity and extermination of degenerates to reveal stark fear of homosexuality. Something of this fear is echoed in the statement by Hitler cited above, which is quite different in tone from the propagandistic cant of Himmler's exhortations. Himmler saw homosexuals as congenital cowards and weaklings. Probably as a result of his friendship with Rohm, Hitler could at least imagine 'the best and most manly of characters' being homosexual. Hitler ordered all the gay bars in Berlin closed as soon as he came to power. But when the Olympics were held in that city in 1936, he temporarily rescinded the order and allowed several bars to reopen: foreign guests were not to receive the impression that Berlin was a 'sad city.' Despite, and perhaps because of, their relentless emphasis upon strength, purity, cleanliness and masculinity, the all-male Nazi groups surely contained a strong element of deeply repressed homo-eroticism. The degree of repression was evidenced by the Nazi reaction to those who were openly gay. In the Bible, the scapegoat was the sacrificial animal on whose head the inchoate guilt of the entire community was placed. Homosexuals served precisely this function in the Third Reich. The ideological rationale for the mass murder of homosexuals during the Third Reich was quite another matter. According to the doctrine of Social Darwinism, only the fittest are meant to survive, and the law of the jungle is the final arbiter of human history. If the Germans were destined to become the master race by virtue of their inherent biological superiority, the breeding stock could only be improved by the removal of degenerates. Retarded, deformed and homosexual individuals could be eliminated with the dispassionate conscientiousness of a gardener pulling weeds. (Indeed, it is the very vehemence and passion with which homosexuals were persecuted that compels us to look beyond the pseudo-scientific rationale for a deeper, psychological dynamic.) The institutionalised homophobia of the Third Reich must also be seen in terms of the sexual revolution that had taken place in Germany during the preceding decades. The German gay movement had existed for thirty-six years before it (and all other progressive forces) was smashed. The Nazis carried out a 'conservative revolution' which restored law and order together with nineteenth-century sexism. A system of ranking women according to the number of their offspring was devised by Minister of the Interior Wilhelm Frick, who demanded that homosexuals 'be hunted down mercilessly, for their vice can only lead to the demise of the German people.' Ironically, the bio-logistic arguments against gay people could be supported by the theories advanced by the early gay movement itself. Magnus Hirschfeld and the members of the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee had made 'the Third Sex' a household term in Germany; but the rigidly heterosexual society of the Third Reich had no patience with 'inter-sexual variants' and turned a deaf ear to pleas for tolerance. The prominent Nazi jurist Dr. Rudolf Klare wrote: 'Since the Masonic notion of humanitarianism arose from the ecclesiastical/Christian feeling of charity, it is sharply opposed to our National Socialist worldview and is eliminated a priori as a justification for not penalising

homosexuality.” By James SteakleyThe Virtual Jewish LibrarySources: The Body Politic, Issue 11,
January/February 1974. People with a History: An Online Guide to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans History.