



## Nazism and the Holocaust

by Luca Prono

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As part of its agenda to preserve an "Aryan master race," Nazism indicted homosexuals as "socially aberrant" and persecuted them. Between 1933 and 1945, it is estimated that more than 100,000 men were arrested on homosexual charges, and half of these were officially sentenced.

Most of the convicted men were jailed in regular prisons, but between 5,000 and 15,000 of the men who were sentenced for homosexual offenses were incarcerated in concentration camps.

### Erasure from History

In spite of this well-documented persecution, research on the Nazi war against homosexuals long remained a taboo subject, hindered by the discrimination and social stigma that homosexuals endured in Europe and the United States even in the decades following the Holocaust.

Most survivors of the persecution were afraid or ashamed to tell their stories. Homosexual victims of the Nazi Holocaust have until recently been left out of commemorations of the tragedy and have been erased from the collective memory surrounding this historical event.

Earlier historians of the Holocaust, especially those who asserted that the Holocaust was a historical experience unique to the Jewish people, have contributed to the erasure of homosexual suffering from history, dismissing as unworthy of mention the "prostitutes, homosexuals, perverts, and common criminals" incarcerated by the Nazis.

### Nazi Objections to Homosexuality

At the base of the Nazi persecution of homosexuals were a number of legislative and violent actions against homosexuals, motivated by Nazi ideology, which found homosexuality anathema to their eugenic theories.

During the Weimar Republic (1919-1933), glbtq people had created a vibrant subculture in Germany's major cities. Through a proliferation of specialized bars, publications, and political and social organizations, they had become an increasingly visible part of urban life.

However, they were viewed by Nazis as decadent and undesirable. Confirmed male homosexuals in particular were regarded as diseased, degenerate creatures who could weaken the German *Volk* by spreading contagion, especially by seducing youth and by failing to contribute to the population growth necessary to sustain Nazi imperial ambitions.

### Nazi Actions against Homosexual Organizations



Many homosexuals died at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, which has been preserved in memory of the Holocaust. The entrance to the camp (top) bears the inscription "Arbeit Macht Frei." A plaque memorializing homosexuals who suffered at Sachsenhausen (above) has been placed inside the camp.

Soon after Hitler's rise to power in 1933 the new government instituted a systematic program for destroying gay and lesbian institutions and eliminating homosexual visibility.

In February 1933, police began raiding and shutting down gay and lesbian bars and clubs. Publications with homosexual content were seized and destroyed. Citizens were invited to "denounce" or turn in homosexuals as "asocial parasites."

On May 6, 1933 the Nazis raided the "Institute for Sexual Science" in Berlin, home of the major organization that crusaded for glbtq rights, the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee. A few days later, it burned thousands of books from the Institute's library, undoubtedly the largest archive of glbtq material then in existence.

Founded in 1919 by Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935), the Institute conducted research and discussion on marital problems, sexually transmitted diseases, and laws relating to sexual offenses, abortion, and homosexuality. The author of several studies, Hirschfeld, himself a homosexual, had actively campaigned to reform laws criminalizing homosexuality.

### **The Purge of the SA**

On June 30, 1934, Ernst Röhm and almost three hundred other members of the SA, the Nazi party "Brown Shirts" who helped bring Hitler to power, were slaughtered by members of Heinrich Himmler's rival SS, or Gestapo. The purge was undoubtedly spurred by internal rivalries within the Nazi hierarchy, but the justification for the murders was the homosexuality of Röhm, an early ally of Hitler.

Röhm's homosexuality had been an issue during the electoral campaigns of 1930, much to the embarrassment of the Nazis. The day after the assassinations, Hitler addressed the nation and defended the murders as necessary to protect the nation against degeneracy.

Nazi leaders routinely used allegations of homosexual behavior as a means of attacking enemies and rivals. Hermann Göring, for example, accused the supreme military commander Von Fritsch of homosexuality when he removed him in 1938. Officials of the Roman Catholic Church, particularly Franciscan Friars, were also accused of corrupting Aryan youth.

### **Paragraph 175**

In 1935, Germany's sodomy law, the infamous Paragraph 175 of the Criminal Code, originally passed in 1871, was strengthened.

The paragraph read:

A male who commits lewd and lascivious acts with another male or permits himself to be so abused for lewd and lascivious acts, shall be punished by imprisonment. In a case of a participant under 21 years of age at the time of the commission of the act, the court may, in especially slight cases, refrain from punishment.

Whereas the old law punished only anal intercourse, the new law criminalized all "lewd and lascivious acts." Moreover, the law was interpreted to encompass homosexual "intent" as well as acts. Kissing, holding hands, and mutual masturbation were all deemed illegal under the new law. Not surprisingly, the conviction rates for homosexual offenses vastly increased.

### **Enforcement**

In 1936 Himmler created a Reich Central Office for the Combating of Homosexuality and Abortion: Special Office (II S). The linking of homosexuality and abortion reflected the Nazi regime's concern with population growth. Himmler considered homosexuality a social illness that could divert millions of men from reproducing.

Under the revised Paragraph 175 and the creation of Special Office II S, the number of prosecutions increased steadily, peaking in the years between 1937 and 1939. Half of all convictions for homosexual activity under the Nazi regime occurred during these years. The police intensified attacks on homosexual meeting places, studied carefully the address books of arrested men to find additional suspects, and created rings of informers to compile more lists of names.

Between 1937 and 1939 almost 100,000 men were arrested by the Gestapo on suspicion of homosexuality. Not all of those who were arrested came to trial and not all those who were tried were convicted; nevertheless, even being questioned about homosexuality could be a traumatic experience. The persecution no doubt had the desired effect of not only stifling the homosexual subculture, but also of drastically reducing the incidence of male homosexual activity.

The vast majority of homosexuals arrested under the Paragraph 175 were "Aryans," especially citizens of present or future provinces of the Reich: Germans, Austrians, Alsatians, Dutch, and Czechs. Non-Aryans and homosexuals in other countries conquered by Germany were not persecuted as homosexuals. Indeed, Himmler argued that homosexuality among subject peoples would hasten their demise.

In spite of Himmler's belief that "we must exterminate these people root and branch . . . the homosexual must be eliminated," there was never a systematic program for homosexual elimination, as there was the "final solution" for the "Jewish problem." Nazi policy distinguished between individuals considered "homosexual by nature," who were apparently irredeemable, and those who may have been seduced into experimentation. The latter, it was believed, could be reclaimed for the nation and were subject to less severe punishment.

### **Incarceration**

Homosexuals incarcerated in concentration camps suffered far more severely than those sentenced to regular prisons. All prisoners of the camps had clothes marked with distinctive colors and shapes so that guards and functionaries could identify them by category. The uniforms of those sentenced as homosexuals bore various identifying marks, including, in the early years, a large black dot and a large "175" drawn on the back of the jacket.

Later, homosexuals were identified by a pink triangular patch (*rosa Winkel*), which has since become an international symbol of gay and lesbian liberation.

Conditions in the camps were harsh for all prisoners, many of whom did not have to wait for the gas chamber to die. However, many survivors have testified that gay men were treated particularly severely by guards and inmates alike because of widespread biases against homosexuals. Many homosexual prisoners, used as slave labor, were worked to death; others were beaten to death.

Homosexuals in the concentration camps had a significantly lower rate of survival than comparable groups.

### **Lesbians in Concentration Camps**

Most homosexual victims were males; lesbians were not subjected to systematic persecution. Few women are believed to have been arrested, and Paragraph 175 did not mention female homosexuality. Lesbianism was seen by many Nazi officials as alien to the nature of the Aryan woman. Nevertheless, in some cases, the police arrested lesbians as "asocials" or "prostitutes," so that in concentration camps lesbians bore the

asocials' black triangle.

### **Medical Experimentation**

As was true with other prisoner categories, some homosexuals were also victims of cruel medical experiments, including injection with typhus in order to observe the disease's natural progress.

Homosexuals were also often castrated, believing that such treatment would eradicate homosexual desire.

At the Buchenwald concentration camp, Dr. Carl Vaernet carried out experiments intended to convert men to heterosexuality. Believing that homosexuality might be caused by a deficiency of the male hormone testosterone, Vaernet implanted into his victims a capsule that released large doses of the hormone.

### **Legacy of Nazism**

For German homosexuals, the legacy of Nazism persisted for a very long time: the 1935 version of Paragraph 175 was not repealed in the Federal Republic until 1969 and in Austria until 1971. (Indeed, prosecutions and convictions under Paragraph 175 in the first 12 years of the Federal Republic exceeded those during the twelve years of the Third Reich.) More than twenty years after the fall of Hitler, homosexuals in Germany and Austria continued to fear arrest and incarceration.

In the years immediately following the war, homosexual concentration camp prisoners were not acknowledged as victims of Nazi persecution. Reparations were refused, and under the Allied Military Government of Germany, homosexuals found in concentration camps remained imprisoned and their testimony silenced. Their incarceration by the Nazis was considered justified.

In 1957 the West German Federal Constitutional Court even ruled that the Nazi version of Paragraph 175 was constitutional because it "did not interfere with the free development of the personality" and it "contained nothing specifically National Socialist." The court stated explicitly that homosexual acts "unquestionably offended the moral feelings of the German people," thus reiterating the Nazi accusation that homosexual acts were against *volkisch* values.

Homosexuals murdered by the Nazis received their first public commemoration in a May 8, 1985 speech by West German President Richard von Weizsäcker. The speech marked the fortieth anniversary of the end of World War II.

Four years after re-unification in 1990, Germany abolished Paragraph 175. In May 2002, the German parliament passed legislation that pardoned all homosexuals convicted under Paragraph 175 during the Nazi era.

### **Homosexualization of Nazism**

Paradoxically, and sadly given the historical record, homosexuality was used following the war and the demise of the Nazi regime to discredit the regime itself. In popular post-war representations, Nazism is often homosexualized.

Homosexuality became such a distinguishing trait of Nazi leaders in the popular imagination that Hitler himself was sometimes portrayed as gay. For example, Roberto Rossellini's Neo-Realist film *Roma, Città Aperta* (1945) very clearly portrays the Nazi commander and his female aide as a gay male and a lesbian.

Even an event such as the murder of Ernst Röhm has been made the subject of titillation. In Luchino Visconti's film *The Damned* (1969), the event is fictionalized as taking place in the middle of a homosexual orgy. Andrea Slane has documented how Hollywood representations of Nazism also frequently link it with

homosexuality.

Popular works such as these have contributed to the erasure of the gay and lesbian Holocaust from the collective cultural and historical memory. As Martha Sturken points out, "memory provides the very core of identity." Yet acts of remembrance are necessarily selective and can never be a copy of the historical experience. Therefore, memory becomes "a form of interpretation" and all memories are created together with a process of forgetting of the past. Such forgetting is often highly organized and strategic, as in the forgetting of the Nazis' persecution of homosexuals.

### Recent Developments

As late as 1997, Kai Hammermeister lamented the absence of a gay Holocaust literature. He cited Martin Sherman's play *Bent* (1979) as an important exception. The first documentary film on gay victims of the Holocaust that received a decent circulation was *Paragraph 175* (1999) by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman.

Recently, however, historians of the Holocaust have begun to acknowledge the homosexual victims of the Holocaust. In 2003, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum presented a major traveling exhibit entitled "The Nazi Persecution of Homosexuals, 1933-1945." A version of the exhibit is on-line at the museum's website.

The Schwules Museum in Berlin has also commemorated the victims of Nazism. The persecution of homosexuals by the Nazis was the immediate impetus for Amsterdam's Homomonument.

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### **About the Author**

**Luca Prono** holds a Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Nottingham, where he taught courses in American culture and Film Studies. He has published articles on Pier Vittorio Tondelli, Italian Neo-Realism, and American Radical Literature, as well as on contemporary representations of homosexuality in Italian films.