



History 395

Warm Brothers in the Boomtowns of Hell: The Persecution of Homosexuals in Nazi Germany

Robert Franklin

Adolph Hitler, the leader of the National Socialist, or Nazi party, became the German chancellor on January 30, 1933, marking the end of the Weimar Republic and, with it, the democratic ideals introduced (some say forced) onto Germany after the First World War. The Nazi regime was focused on the economic and cultural revival of Germany, a Germany that under their rule became a twisted abomination marked by militaristic aggression and conquest, economic renewal and the imposition of Aryan superiority over all other races. It is the latter that the Nazis are best known for--this idea of superiority led the Nazis to try and exterminate what they considered undesirables: Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Gypsies, Slavs, and homosexuals. While homosexuals were one of the smallest groups targeted for extermination, Nazi leaders, especially Heinrich Himmler, reserved a special hatred for homosexuals, and the Nazi party moved against them almost immediately after assuming power. While to the Nazis homosexuality was perceived as a threat to their male-dominated organization, it was also used as a tool: charges of homosexuality were often enough to send the perceived offender to jail or to a concentration camp. In the camps, homosexuals suffered abuse from not only the guards, but the other prisoners as well, and were segregated to keep them from forming into groups. In comparison,

from the late nineteenth century Germany had been one of the leaders in the homosexual rights movement, and homosexuals were an established, although still controversial part of German culture. However, during the Nazi regime the homosexual fight for equality and any gains that were made vanished and replaced with an attitude that was both brutal and dehumanizing to those accused of homosexual behavior. After World War II ended homosexuals experienced continued legal and social discrimination on a far greater scale than other victims of Nazi brutality.

The newly formed German state exercised the Anti-homosexual sentiment that existed by drafting Paragraph 175¹ in the German penal code of 1871. Paragraph 175 (or P175) effectively criminalized sodomy, stating that "A male who indulges in criminally indecent activities with another male... will be punished with jail."² The text does not mention women; in fact lesbianism was never criminalized in Germany. The male dominated Germany society viewed lesbianism as a casual outgrowth of female bonding that manifested itself during adolescence and usually subsided as women joined or were forced into patriarchal households. During the Nazi controlled years lesbianism was not seen as a threat to the perpetuation of the German race as lesbians could be forced to have children.

The gay rights movement was born in response to P175. The leading figure of this movement was Magnus Hirschfeld who in 1919 founded the Institute for Sexual Research which was revolutionary for its time by employing physicians to offer sexual counseling and offer tests for sexually transmitted diseases. Hirschfeld, a Jew, doctor and homosexual, authored over 200 titles from books to pamphlets on homosexuality in men and women. Hirschfeld also formed the World League for Sexual Reform in 1921³ and became involved in the effort to legalize

homosexuality in Germany throughout the 1920's. While Hirschfeld's influence cannot be overstated, some of his ideas by today's standards seem backwards. One of these was his idea of homosexuals comprising a "third sex" between men and women.⁴ Sex and gender were often thought as mutually exclusive at the time and the idea of a third sex was held to account for the existence of the gay subculture. However, this idea was insulting to homosexuals who firmly identified as men. Hirschfeld had abandoned the idea in 1910 but it was not dead: the Nazi party resurrected it during their rise to power and used the "third sex" theory to classify homosexuals as a subhuman race, similar to the Jews.

The gay rights movement worked with other movements such as women's rights, and gay culture was the subject of heated debates fueled by a new medium of expression: celluloid. Many homosexual and lesbian films were produced in Weimar Germany, the most famous being *Anders als die Andern*, or "Different from the Others." In 1919⁵ *Anders als die Andern* sparked heated debate within the medical community and drew criticism for pushing the third sex idea from large segments of the general public and from other homosexuals. In the movie the protagonist blackmails his lover into staying with him, offending many of those in the gay rights movement who were pushing to decriminalize homosexuality. Blackmail of homosexual conduct was also used in politics at the time, even among those who claimed to be allies of the movement, the Social Democrats and Communists. The legislation to overturn P. 175 was introduced several times to the Reichstag, the German national assembly, but was defeated by a coalition of right wing parties including the National Socialists. The 1924 trial of Fritz Haarmann, a homosexual who admitted to 124 murders of young men split the Communist and Social Democrat alliance. Haarmann was an informant for the chief of police in Hannover, a Social Democrat who often raided the Communist party headquarters in Hannover. The shocking

details of the case were in the German papers for months and permanently damaged the gay rights movement while adding fodder for the arguments of their enemies, notably the Nazi party.

Homosexual culture was often attacked by its opponents as being criminal, which it was to a degree under P. 175. Homosexuals were also attacked for being effeminate; during this period there was a major focus on masculine men's movements from the Free Youth Movement to the Nazi SA. Men's organizations were seen as an expression of nationalism and many German philosophers glorified the bonds formed between men but at the same time decried homosexuality as unnatural; the Nazis were no exception. In 1929 during a vote on striking down P. 175 in the Reichstag, Hitler's official newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter* wrote: "But don't think that we Germans will allow these laws to stand for a single day after we have come to power.... Their (Jewish) [sic.] efforts are nothing but vulgar, perverted crimes and we will punish them by banishment or hanging."⁶

The punishment of these laws would be laid out by two of the Nazi regimes most infamous criminals, Adolph Hitler and Heinrich Himmler. While Hitler's hatred for non-Aryans is well known, his hatred for homosexuals was not an obsession unlike Himmler's. Hitler often spoke of his solutions to the problems but rarely gave specific orders or directions: it was up to Himmler to figure out the Fuhrer's wishes and fulfill them. Before 1934 the only recorded remark Hitler said about homosexuality was that it had destroyed the empire of Ancient Greece.⁷ Hitler's anti-homosexual feelings seem to spring from his hatred of Jews. An early idol of his was Otto Weininger, a homosexual Jewish author of *Sex and Character*⁸ who stated that the essence of Jewishness was femininity. Possibly, Hitler used this logic to equate effeminate homosexuality with Jewishness. Himmler is said to have been afraid and hateful of homosexuals from his childhood, stemming from his need for inclusion in homosocial fraternities. The young Himmler's

diary mentions two influential books which are at the core of this hatred, *The Priest and the Acolyte* by John Francis Bloxam and *Die Rolle der Erotik in der männlichen Gesellschaft* (*The Role of Eroticism in Male Society*) by Hans Blüher.⁹ To Himmler the ideas presented in *The Priest and the Acolyte* on homoerotic bonds between men and boys, and the focus of homoeroticism as the crucial element in men's organizations in *Die Rolle der Erotik in der männlichen Gesellschaft* combined in his mind to produce an idea of homosexuality as pederasty, with young boys as the main victims. To the Nazis and Himmler the estimated two million homosexuals in Germany were a threat to the Nazi ideal of propelling the Aryan race to such a overwhelming degree that it could take over the world. Himmler viewed homosexuals as "propagation blanks"¹⁰ that preyed on boys and subverted Himmler's goal of a worldwide German master race.

The Nazi regime can be seen as a "Biocracy"¹¹, subverting and twisting medical science to serve state policy. In order to impose global will, the Third Reich needed to increase its population to match and exceed that of its opponents. The Nazi idea of their racial superiority to their opponents meant that this population growth could only take one form: childbirth. Homosexuals seemed to work against this goal; not only would they not have children, but the Nazis believed that they would seduce weak men, men that would otherwise be attracted to women. Homosexuality was also viewed as a danger to the all male organizations in the Nazi government (Hitler Youth, SA, SS and the fighting units of the military). All allegiance was supposed to be given to the Führer and Germany; if homosexuality was allowed anywhere the prevailing thought was that homosexual seduction would draw male allegiance away from the state and to each other. However, much like the Social Democrats and Communists of the Weimar years, the Nazi party used charges of homosexuality as a political tool. Charges of homosexual behavior were often used to get

rid of opponents, and civilians used them to carry out personal vendettas often unrelated to the charges themselves.¹² Nazi leaders seemed to have little concern for lesbians, due to the fact that they held few positions of prominence in the Nazi state and could be forced into having children.

The Nazis moved against homosexuals immediately after they entered power in January 30th, 1933 and proved the seriousness of their violent rhetoric. On February 23rd of that year, less than a month later, homosexual rights organizations and pornography were banned in Germany. The Nazis' next act was a huge blow to the Gay rights movement. On May 6, 1933 the Nazis ordered the closing of the Institute for Sexual Research as well as the destruction of all the materials contained within. Hirschfeld was in Holland during the time and so he avoided capture; he never returned to Germany, and died in Holland in 1935.

During the night of June 30th, 1934 (also known as "The Night of the Long Knives"), under the orders of Hitler the SS (at this point a subgroup of the SA) attacked and killed prominent SA leaders and other enemies of the state, including the SA leader, Ernest Röhm. The purge was publicly justified by Hitler who leveled charges of treason and homosexuality at the leadership of the SA, including Röhm. Hitler also wanted to assure the public that he was a moral steward and would not let German boys "become morally corrupted in their [the SA] ranks."¹³ The Nazi idea of homosexuality could not be realistically applied to most homosexuals, especially Röhm. Röhm was a former military man, served in World War I and loved a fight; he gave Hitler his first job¹⁴ and was one of Hitler's most ardent supporters and closest associate until his death in a Berlin jail cell on July, 1 1934. Röhm hated cowardice – physical as well as mental, he was unapologetic of his sexual orientation and believed that it was a private matter: "it appears to me to defy all laws of common sense if the state takes it upon itself to regulate the private lives of human

beings or tries to redirect these lives toward other goals.”¹⁵ Röhm’s attitude and flagrance of his homosexuality along with his power as leader of the SA made him an enemy of the Third Reich, although he was defended by Hitler from his detractors until it served his interest not to. No one hated Röhm more than Heinrich Himmler, Röhm did not fit into Himmler’s idea of homosexuality and Himmler must have found it unbearable to be under a homosexual. It is worth noting with some irony that one of Röhm’s biggest detractors, General Werner von Fritsch, four years later became victim to accusations of homosexuality that forced him to resign.

It seems that Hitler needed some way to assuage his conscience for killing one of his most loyal supporters, and Röhm’s homosexuality offered just what he needed. From this point on the Nazi regime became even more oppressive and deadly to homosexuals. On January 28, 1935 the Nazis strengthened P175, including any activity between two men judged to be “indecent”, and if found guilty the court could deprive a subject of his civil rights.¹⁶ The new law, P175a was also made retroactive going back ten years, precipitating a jump in arrests by the Gestapo and marking the turning point to which many scholars call the “war against contragenics.”¹⁷ Himmler was dismayed at the idea of two million homosexuals in German territory and focused much of his and the Gestapo’s activity on the eradication of homosexuality. The first step was to morph the vague language of P175a into something that could be used to arrest whoever was deemed a “community alien,” someone who “shows himself unable to satisfy the minimal demands of the racial community by his own efforts.”¹⁸ This addition to P175 gave the Gestapo and Kripo (criminal police) carte blanche to arrest anyone accused of homosexual conduct, and once in jail homosexuals could be tortured and held without charge. At the beginning of 1938 Himmler issued a memo stating that men accused of a P175a violation could be sent directly to a concentration camp, thereby

completely stripping the alleged offender of their civil rights. Later in 1941 it was decided by Himmler that a *Volksschädling* or damager of the racial (German) people, i.e. homosexuals, could be put to death. Without documents detailing the arrest of P175a offenders after 1938, it is impossible to know just how many people were put to death in this fashion. In 1943, apparently convinced that Germany was free of homosexuals, Himmler gave the Gestapo the power to intervene in military courts in cases concerning homosexuality, angering many in the military who resented this state intrusion. Many military sentences for homosexual conduct were much less severe than the Gestapo’s, a possible reason that Himmler wanted to interfere.

Close to 100,000 men arrested for P175a convictions, around 5,000 to 15,000 were sent to concentration camps, mainly Mauthausen in southern Germany. Homosexual prisoners comprised one of the smallest groups sent to concentration camps; however they suffered the highest rate of death of all groups of prisoners at over sixty percent. Camp inmates had to wear a triangle on their coat and pants to distinguish their offense: homosexuals wore a pink triangle. Originally all triangles were the same size; however, to make identification easier after March, 1941, the pink triangle doubled in size while others stayed the same.¹⁹ Life in the camps was especially cruel for homosexuals; they were mistreated by both the guards and prisoners. Many guards took special pleasure in torturing homosexual prisoners. One account tells of a man who had his testicles held in boiling water until the skin peeled off, after this he was sodomized with a broken broomstick, while the assembled SS guards drank and engaged in mutual masturbation.²⁰ Homosexual prisoners were also punished by other prisoners for homosexual actions by camp guards against other inmates in a twisted association between the two. Homosexuals were not assigned to blocks; they were spread

out among the camp in order to prevent their organization. This lack of protection and social structure made them more vulnerable than other prisoners, contributing to their high death rate. Homosexuality was still prevalent among other prisoners; many young homosexuals were taken under the wings of "Capos"²¹, prisoners selected by the SS to be in charge of cell blocks. Capo protection often meant extra rations and a lighter work detail and these could be the difference between life and death for homosexuals. Another survival method for homosexuals in the camps was to declare revulsion for homosexuality and accept castration. German prisoners who took this option were often put in a *Dirlewager*,²² or penal division and sent to the Russian front. While these units were deemed expendable and suffered high casualties, it was often preferred to life in the concentration camps.

Of the estimated two million homosexuals in Germany, only around 100,000 are recorded as arrested, which leaves a large segment of the homosexual population unaccounted for. Certain homosexuals were protected by the Third Reich; Gustaf Gründgens was a famous actor, director and star of the Berlin State Theater that was a favorite with Hermann Goering.²³ While few homosexuals were as well connected as Gründgens, others had minor connections or were extremely discreet and able to suppress their homosexuality from others. This is one advantage that social criminals had over racial criminals--German homosexuals were born German, not Jewish or Gypsies. Armed service was also another way for homosexuals to avoid the camps until 1943 when the Gestapo turned its attention on the military.

The criminalization and imprisonment of homosexuals did not end with the fall of the Third Reich. Paragraph 175a was kept as law in both post-war Germanys, in the communist East until 1967 and 1969 in the democratic West. Interestingly, this law appears to be one of the few, if any, Nazi laws that stayed on the books in both East and West Germany after World War II. German courts ruled that

time spent in concentration camps was not considered jail time, and homosexual prisoners who had sentences left at the end of the war were sent to jail until the sentence imposed on them by the Nazi courts was complete. Many homosexuals were afraid to speak out even after homosexuality was decriminalized. A lifetime of discrimination had taken its toll – of 1,000 known homosexual concentration camp prisoners alive in 1980 only 15 have spoken of their experience and all of them anonymously.²⁴ Homosexuals were also not able to receive reparations payments until 1982, long after many had died from injuries they received in concentration camps. Of the few books on the subject most are in German and have been printed on gay-run presses with low print runs, complicating the ability of interested non-Germans to gather information.

The persecution of homosexuals in Nazi Germany is a unique and violent episode of Nazi history. Homosexuals in Berlin at the beginning of the twentieth century were leading the fight for mainstream societal acceptance and making gains – gains that would soon be undone by the Nazi Party upon acquisition of power in January 30th, 1933. Under the Nazis homosexuals would become a major target of persecution: they were stripped of their civil rights, forced into concentration camps where they were abused by guards and prisoners, and suffered the highest death rate of any group in the camps. It is impossible to know how many homosexuals were arrested and/or killed, after 1939 the Gestapo often did not keep records due to the ever-increasing workload and pressure from the architect of Nazi hatred, Heinrich Himmler. After the war ended homosexuality continued to be illegal, adding to the injuries suffered by homosexuals under the Nazis. Failing to hide a basic characteristic of humanity, their sexuality, became deadly for homosexuals in Nazi Germany.

Footnotes

- ¹ Paragraph 175 (P175) throughout the paper, it can be found in its entirety in Appendix I.
- ² Richard Plant, *The Pink Triangle*, (NY: Henry Holt and Company, Inc.: 2986), 106.
- ³ Plant, *The Pink Triangle*, 43.
- ⁴ Richard Dyer, "Less and More than Women and Men: Lesbian and Gay Cinema in Weimar Germany," *New German Critique* 51 (1990): 19.
- ⁵ Dyer, "Less and More than Women and Men: Lesbian and Gay Cinema in Weimar Germany," 9.
- ⁶ Alfred Rosenburg, *Völkischer Beobachter*, August 2, 1930, 13.
- ⁷ Harry Oosterhuis, "Male Bonding and Homosexuality in Nazi Germany" *Journal of Contemporary History* 32 (1997): 191.
- ⁸ Robert Gellately and Nathan Stoltzfus, *Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 2001), 233.
- ⁹ Gellately and Stoltzfus, *Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany*, 235.
- ¹⁰ Plant, *The Pink Triangle*, 185.
- ¹¹ Harry Oosterhuis, "Male Bonding and Homosexuality in Nazi Germany" *Journal of Contemporary History* 32 (1997): 187.
- ¹² Not only homosexuality was used in this way; accusations of consorting with Jews, being work-shy and others were used.
- ¹³ Plant, *The Pink Triangle*, 67.
- ¹⁴ Plant, *The Pink Triangle*, 58.
- ¹⁵ Plant, *The Pink Triangle*, 60.
- ¹⁶ See Appendix II.
- ¹⁷ Plant, *The Pink Triangle*, 74.
- ¹⁸ Gellately and Stoltzfus, *Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany*, 39.
- ¹⁹ Heinz Heger, *The Men With The Pink Triangle*, (Boston: Alyson Publications Inc., 1980), 67.
- ²⁰ Heger, *The Men With The Pink Triangle*, 83.
- ²¹ Heger, *The Men With The Pink Triangle*, 62.
- ²² Heger, *The Men With The Pink Triangle*, 98.
- ²³ Gellately and Stoltzfus, *Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany*, 108.
- ²⁴ Kai Hammermeister, "Inventing History: Toward A Gay Holocaust Literature," *The German Quarterly* 70 (1997): 20

Bibliography

- Plant, Richard. *The Pink Triangle*. NY: Henry Holt and Co. Inc., 1986.
- Dyer, Richard. "Less and More than Women and Men: Lesbian and Gay Cinema in Weimar Germany." *New German Critique* 51 (1990) 5-60.
- Rosenburg, Alfred. *Völkischer Beobachter*, August 2, 1930, 13.
- Oosterhuis, Harry. "Male Bonding and Homosexuality in Nazi Germany." *Journal of Contemporary History* 32 (1997): 187-205.
- Gellately, Robert and Nathan Stoltzfus. *Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Heger, Heinz. *The Men With The Pink Triangle*. Boston: Alyson Publications Inc., 1980.
- Hammermeister, Kai. "Inventing History: Toward A Gay Holocaust Literature." *The German Quarterly* 70 (1997): 18-26.

Appendix I

Text of Paragraph 175 (P175):
175:

1. A male who indulges in criminally indecent activities with another male or who allows himself to participate in such activities will be punished with jail.
2. If one of the participants is under the age of twenty-one, and if the crime has not been grave, the court may dispense with the jail sentence.

Appendix II

Text of Paragraph 175a and 175b added by the Nazis on Jan. 28, 1935:

175a: A jail sentence of up to ten years or, if mitigating circumstance can be established, a jail sentence of no less than three year will be imposed on:

1. Any male who by force or by threat of violence and danger to life and limb compels another man to indulge in criminally indecent activities, or allows himself to participate in such activities;
2. Any male who forces another male to indulge with him in criminally indecent activities by using the subordinate position of the other man, whether it be at work or elsewhere, or who allows himself to participate in such activities;
3. Any male who indulges professionally and for profit in criminally indecent activities with other males, or allows himself to be used for such activities or who offers himself for same.

175b: Criminally indecent activities by males with animals are to be punished by jail; in addition, the court may deprive the subject of his civil rights.

Source: Plant, Richard. *The Pink Triangle*. NY: Henry Holt and Co. Inc., 1986.