

Geifman Award

The Queer Holocaust

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On January 30th, 1933, a very charming and respected man named Adolf Hitler was appointed as Chancellor of Germany. He campaigned for this position, and he won the electoral vote. His policies before winning this appointment included repealing the Treaty of Versailles, along with extreme German nationalism, a promise to fix the economy, and a solution to the so-called “Jewish problem.”¹ These ideals were welcomed by the German people, as World War I had left them embarrassed and distressed. He quickly enacted harmful policies within a few months of his appointment, eliminating all opposition to his rule. He wouldn’t allow any parties other than the Nazi Party to exist; anything deemed “un-German” was burned (such as books written by Jews), and he initially focused on political opposition.² Adolf Hitler was becoming a dictator.

Soon, many began to realize that he had a much more devastating and sinister plan: wiping out not only Jewish people, but Romas, non-Germans, disabled people, and homosexuals as well. In this essay, I will address the importance of learning how Hitler’s rule targeted and wiped out thousands of queer folks - especially gay men - attempting to eliminate their existence. I will use the works of multiple Holocaust memorials, the Anne Frank memorial, and Geoffrey J. Giles to examine the truths of homosexual persecution and the book “Branded by the Pink Triangle” by Ken Setterington to show personal experience with this issue. It is important to keep in mind that the Holocaust and genocides in general target a main group, but other minority groups are hit hard as well. Hitler found out that by making minorities a scapegoat, he could place blame for things that were not the fault of marginalized people on them. Homosexuals were blamed for the lack of reproduction in the country, making for fewer births of pure German

¹ “Germany 1933: From Democracy to Dictatorship,” Anne Frank Website, accessed November 8, 2024, <https://www.annefrank.org/en/anne-frank/go-in-depth/germany-1933-democracy-dictatorship/>.

² Ibid.

babies. To truly examine and learn about this traumatic event, we must find the reasons as to why each group affected was victimized.

Many people don't realize that the LGBTQ+ community was victimized during the Holocaust alongside Jewish people. Mere months after Hitler took office, he banned lesbian and gay organizations, and the Institute for Sexual Science (a museum run by Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, a queer Jewish man who was seen as a threat by the Nazi party) was ransacked, and books were publicly burned.³ This was the start of a terrifying future for the queer community. Prior to 1933, Germany had already had a statute banning homosexual relations between men, known as Paragraph 175. Punishment had never been what it stated it would be (most violators just received a warning), so no gay men had to worry.⁴ But, in 1935, the Nazi regime intensified the law and anyone found guilty could receive up to a decade in prison.⁵ In 1936, Heinrich Himmler created an entire Reich office dedicated to combating homosexuality and abortion, which gave law enforcement the right to jail anyone found guilty indefinitely - without a trial.⁶ It can be easy to see this and think that the law being enforced is not a bad thing, but this was just the beginning.

Among the first group of people imprisoned at Dachau Concentration Camp were homosexuals and homosexual rights activists.⁷ Since 1900, police had lists of men suspected of homosexuality called "pink lists." These pink lists were used to keep track of men accused of homosexuality. When the Nazi regime began enforcing laws against homosexuality, these men

³ HolocaustCentUK, "Homosexual Victims of Nazi Persecution," The National Holocaust Centre and Museum, March 30, 2020, <https://www.holocaust.org.uk/news/homosexual-victims-of-nazi-persecution>.

⁴ Ken Setterington and Bill Marchant, *Branded by the Pink Triangle* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2020). (00:10:42)

⁵ HolocaustCentUK, "Homosexual Victims of Nazi Persecution," The National Holocaust Centre and Museum, March 30, 2020, <https://www.holocaust.org.uk/news/homosexual-victims-of-nazi-persecution>.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ken Setterington and Bill Marchant, *Branded by the Pink Triangle* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2020). (00:18:15)

having their names on this list was enough to get them sent to a concentration camp.⁸ They used the names of the people on these lists to find more homosexuals. They would raid different places for their address books in order to track down the men on the pink lists, and once they found them, they would be arrested and repeatedly tortured so the police could get the names of other homosexuals to put on their list. The police were trained on how to identify gays, and these identifiers were stereotypes about the gay community. “They would likely have feminine appearances and mincing movements. They were supposed to like makeup and perfume, and some enjoyed women’s clothing.”⁹ These methods of “hunting” homosexuals were damaging ideas, as they perpetuated harmful stereotypes, put pressure on these men to out their friends, and made these men unsafe until gay marriage was legalized.

The issue of pink lists affected everyone at the time, not only gay men. Paragraph 175 was rewritten in such a way that made it possible for the Nazis to arrest anyone they wanted (including straight men) under suspicion of being homosexual.¹⁰ By 1942, the German community was being asked to help the government out by identifying queer individuals in order to get rid of them quicker (and so the Nazis could focus on the Jews). This made it even more concerning for everyone because if you had made too horrible of an enemy out of someone, you could be reported for homosexuality, and you would be taken to prison.¹¹ A woman who has gone unnamed to the public felt her relationship was going nowhere, and she feared it was because of a male friend that her boyfriend had. She denounced both of them as gay to the

⁸Ibid (00:51:56)

⁹ Ken Setterington and Bill Marchant, *Branded by the Pink Triangle* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2020). (00:52:37)

¹⁰ Ibid, (00:54:31).

¹¹ This is a normal thing that humans do out of spite. For reference, read Mark Jordan’s chapter “The Care of Sodomites” to see how reporting people for sodomy out of disdain in Medieval Times was also common.

police.¹² Men who thought they would be kept safe if they enlisted in the army were mistaken, as military men who were found out as gay were immediately executed.¹³

Men who were found guilty of one account of homosexuality could be taken directly to a concentration camp, but men who had been proven to have had sex with more than one man had to be taken directly to a concentration camp, without exception.¹⁴ In the past, it was widely thought that gay people had a disease causing them to be homosexuals, and it could be contagious. So, in the concentration camps, the pink triangle wearers (the homosexual men) were kept separate from the other prisoners because it was thought that their disease would spread to the other prisoners if they were in contact for too long.¹⁵ They were humiliated within the camps, being forced to sleep with their hands outside of the blanket to prove that they weren't masturbating due to the idea that queer men were perverts.¹⁶ If they were caught with their hands under the blanket, masturbating or not, they would be forced to either run outside naked in front of everyone or they would be tied to a spiked pole with their hands behind their back in an extremely uncomfortable position.¹⁷ The sexual exploitation of gay men is ironic, as they were arrested due to the indecency of homosexuality, but they were almost never indecent except when they were forced to be by law enforcement.

They were forced to go through dehumanizing experiences such as having sexual relations with a Kapo (the direct boss of a group of prisoners) in exchange for special treatment. If they didn't want to be abused or killed, they didn't have a choice but to accept the sexual

¹² Ibid, (01:04:07).

¹³ Ibid, (01:05:42).

¹⁴ Ibid, (01:06:23)

¹⁵ Ibid, (01:12:40)

¹⁶ This was not a new thought. Read Mark Jordan's chapter "The Care of Sodomites" to read how sodomy was a crime created for homosexuals since sodomy is one of the few ways gay men can have sex, making them perverted.

¹⁷ Ken Setterington and Bill Marchant, *Branded by the Pink Triangle* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2020). (01:14:04)

advances of a Kapo.¹⁸ I think that it is undoubtedly a form of sexual assault imposed on the gay prisoners, as they were coerced into sexual acts with their superiors if they wanted to survive. Men wanted survival more than they wanted dignity, leading to their reluctant approval. From 1942 until the end of the Holocaust, judges had the right to order castration of any imprisoned homosexual without their consent. In 1943, organized mass executions of queer men began.¹⁹ In comparison, queer men of color or Jewish faith, disabled gay men, or Polish gay men, it was even worse.

It is clear how horrible the treatment of gay men was during the holocaust, but it is important to ask why. Why were homosexual men the target of hate during this time? The big reason is that homosexuals do not produce children. The Nazi party wanted nuclear families to have multiple pure German children, and queer men do not provide that. They thought that men such as Dr. Hirschfeld wanting gay marriage to thrive would lessen the amount of babies born each year, taking strength from the Nazi regime.²⁰ They said, “German life can only survive if it fights, and it can only fight if it maintains masculinity.”²¹ It is no secret that Jewish people were the Nazis main target, and there was a rumor that Jewish people were proponents of gay sex, which increased Nazi hate for the queer community.²² Gay marriage went against the Nazi idea of traditional German values and lessened their “racial purity.”

It may be confusing to think about Hitler as homophobic, especially because one of his top employees for the beginning of his reign was a homosexual - and Hitler was fully aware.²³ It

¹⁸ Ibid, (01:15:27)

¹⁹ HolocaustCentUK, “Homosexual Victims of Nazi Persecution,” The National Holocaust Centre and Museum, March 30, 2020, <https://www.holocaust.org.uk/news/homosexual-victims-of-nazi-persecution>.

²⁰ Ken Setterington and Bill Marchant, *Branded by the Pink Triangle* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2020). (00:14:19)

²¹ Ibid, (00:15:22)

²² Ken Setterington and Bill Marchant, *Branded by the Pink Triangle* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2020). (00:14:43)

²³ Giles, Geoffrey J. “Why Bother about Homosexuals?” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum , 2004.

was really Hitler's right hand, Heinrich Himmler, who planted the idea of homosexuality being something to fear. Hitler reported that he truly did not mind that his ally, Ernst Röhm, was gay; he even stood up for him initially when the press found out about his sexuality. Hitler seemed to be concerned with what he called "pederasty," which is homosexuality in its purest form. This is the idea that homosexual actions are less of a concern than actually being gay. It is thought that he was more concerned with true homosexuality than just homoerotic thoughts and actions.²⁴ This idea is not new, as scholar Mark Jordan discusses how Medieval Europe criminalized sodomy but was mostly concerned with the act of sodomy itself, more than just homosexuality. In all of my personal experiences with reading historical work, I can see that people have always been more concerned about identity over actions.²⁵ Hitler turned on his chief, Röhm, while expressing public horror over finding out that Röhm's sexuality was indeed perverse. It was a shock to him that gay men would form ties based on sexuality, and Hitler said that this would bring down the regime. He betrayed Röhm by having him taken to prison and shot on July 1, 1934. From that day on, he was pro-homosexual arrest. This is one of the most heartbreaking personal stories of the Holocaust, in my opinion, so I will dive deeper into this later on.

Another question that makes you think is why gay men were targeted at a much higher level than lesbian women.²⁶ The Nazi party actually never criminalized sexual relationships between women. This was the case because more than anything, lesbians were seen as women. This meant that they were just a childrearing tool for the Nazi party.²⁷ German lesbians were

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ 1. Mark D Jordan, "Chapter 5: The Care of Sodomites," essay, in *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 92–113.

²⁶ We will only be referring to AFAB and AMAB people in this paper, as those were the only two genders widely recognized at the time.

²⁷ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, "Lesbians Under the Nazi Regime," United States holocaust memorial museum, March 31, 2021, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/lesbians-under-the-nazi-regime>.

women, which means they had a responsibility to be mothers to pure German babies to build the regime, known as “Aryans.”²⁸ In order to encourage the birth of these babies, the Lebensborn program was introduced. The main idea within this was for women to have lots of babies, even outside of marriage. At the same time that this was happening, marginalized groups were hearing of the Nuremberg Laws, which carefully outlined who could have sex with whom.²⁹ No specific laws were created for the lesbians because it was widely believed that Aryan women could be easily coerced into marrying and having sex with men, even if they were lesbians.³⁰ For me, learning all of this has been hard because it is a difficult idea to grasp that women have been treated so terribly just because they are women, that it sometimes bars them from being marginalized in other senses. It seems to be a form of stripping their identities from them, making them two-dimensional baby makers.

Lesbian women did not have specific laws that applied to them, but they did not fit the typical German mold, leading them to be social outsiders, which made them an easier target for the Nazi regime. Aryan lesbians had a lot more options and chances of surviving than Jewish and Roma lesbians, who were arrested due to racial issues anyway.³¹ Aryan lesbians could try to hide their sexuality and cut off their homosexual friends to stay more hidden, which was their best chance at survival.³² Lesbians who did not comply with the law were arrested and sentenced to concentration camps. They wore a black triangle, as they were deemed social outcasts.³³ Though being a lesbian was not inherently illegal, being outed to law enforcement was shameful. It was

²⁸United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, “Lesbians Under the Nazi Regime,” United States holocaust memorial museum, March 31, 2021, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/lesbians-under-the-nazi-regime>.

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

³³ Ken Setterington and Bill Marchant, *Branded by the Pink Triangle* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2020). (00:36:35)

frowned upon for either gender to be homosexual, so the outing of these lesbians more than likely led to unwanted scrutiny for them to face from friends, family, neighbors, and police. Though lesbians were not being killed or arrested at the same level that gay men were, they were still being stripped of their freedom by their identities being taken away in exchange for more babies.

I am more than grateful that some gay men did indeed survive their experiences in concentration camps, so we are able to have their personal, first-hand accounts of what happened in their lives. A story that is very interesting is that of Rudolf Brazda, the last gay man from the Holocaust alive. He died in 2011 at age 98. Growing up, Brazda always knew he wasn't attracted to women, and he knew that he didn't want to follow in his father's footsteps of being a miner. He wanted to work in the men's fashion industry. Jobs in most fields were extremely scarce, so he trained as a roofer instead so he could make good money. He met his husband, Verner, at the age of 20, and they lived together. He grew up in a tolerant era for homosexuals, so he felt relatively safe, until one day, he was at a known gay hangout when stormtroopers (the infantrymen of the imperial German army) came bursting in and arresting folks. Brazda was not arrested, but this was a wakeup call for him. In 1936, Brazda was arrested under suspicion of being a homosexual, and he was charged with unnatural lewdness. Verner was also arrested, but since he was in the military, he was arrested in a different city. They were both sentenced, and they never saw one another again.³⁴

At the end of Brazda's sentence, he was expelled from Germany. His parents were immigrants from Czechoslovakia, so he was now a non-German with a criminal history. He went back to Czechoslovakia, but the Germans soon invaded. He was arrested again and served 15

³⁴ Ken Setterington and Bill Marchant, *Branded by the Pink Triangle* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2020). (00:27:52)

months. He was then put into protective custody until he could be sent to a concentration camp. When he got to the concentration camp, the guards forced his head into a pool full of disinfectants. He had to wear the striped uniform, but with a pink triangle instead of the well-known yellow star for Jews. Homosexuals were assigned to work in the stone quarry, the most difficult place to work in the entire camp. Brazda luckily formed a good relationship with his Kapo due to his youth and good looks. This Kapo got him a less brutal job as a roofer, thus saving Brazda's life. Brazda attributes his survival to his good age and his great roofing skills. It is wildly unfortunate that losing his dream of being a designer is what saved his life.³⁵ His story is heartbreaking; I find it so difficult to wrap my head around the fact that losing his dream saved his life.

Though this isn't an account of someone who lived to tell their story, it was written down, and I believe that one of the saddest stories of homosexuality during the Holocaust is that of Ernst Röhm. As mentioned earlier in this essay, Röhm was Adolf Hitler's chief of staff of the stormtroopers, and he was outwardly gay. He did not fit the gay stereotype perpetrated by the Nazi party, as he was reported as "pompous, greedy, a harsh father to his troops, and a boor with no sense of tact" by Richard Plant in the book "The Pink Triangle." Röhm was an injured soldier during World War I, which led to his intense German nationalist views. He was the only person on Hitler's staff who was a true friend of his outside of work, and he helped Hitler's rise to power (Hitler held lower seats before he became chancellor of Germany). Hitler did not mind Röhm's sexuality, because his work was fantastic. That was until they got into a huge fight in 1925, leading to Röhm's banishment to Bolivia.³⁶

³⁵ Ibid, (00:27:52)

³⁶ www.auschwitz.org, "Robert Biedroń, Nazism's Pink Hell," Robert Biedroń, Nazism's Pink Hell / Homosexuals. A Separate Category of Prisoners / Categories of prisoners / History / Auschwitz-Birkenau, accessed November 10,

When Hitler's stormtroopers began to revolt in 1929, he called for Röhm's immediate return to Germany. Upon Röhm's return, their relationship improved, and they seemed to be friends once more. Hitler even defended Röhm's "immoral" behavior that was reported by the stormtrooper team, saying that the stormtrooper association "is not an institution of moral education for delicate maidens, but a formation of hardened fighters." He even added that Röhm's personal life was not something that anyone could bring up as long as his work was not affected. In 1932, Röhm's letters to a potential male partner were leaked, and Hitler didn't have a direct need for him, so in Röhm's time of need, Hitler let him go. On June 28th, 1934, the Night of Long Knives took place. On Hitler's orders, a guesthouse on a lake near Munich was invaded, as it was housing former soldiers that did not uplift Nazi ideology. Ernst Röhm was one of many staying at this guesthouse. He was arrested, and while in his cell, he was handed a revolver, and the soldier told him that he would be back in 15 minutes. Röhm replied, "Let Adolf do it. I have no intention of doing his job for him." Hitler executed Röhm himself later that day.³⁷

The topic of queer execution during the Holocaust is one of utmost importance. This is because every person affected by the Holocaust received a form of government pension after the war was over. One group did not receive a pension. That group was the homosexual community. After World War II was over, homosexuals who were in concentration camps during the Holocaust weren't even deemed victims. They were considered criminals who got out. The stay in concentration camps was wiped out for every group, but the homosexuals kept their stay in the

2024, <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/history/categories-of-prisoners/homosexuals-a-separate-category-of-prisoners/robert-biedron-nazisms-pink-hell/>.

³⁷ [www.auschwitz.org, "Robert Biedroń, Nazism's Pink Hell," Robert Biedroń, Nazism's Pink Hell / Homosexuals. A Separate Category of Prisoners / Categories of prisoners / History / Auschwitz-Birkenau](https://www.auschwitz.org/en/history/categories-of-prisoners/homosexuals-a-separate-category-of-prisoners/robert-biedron-nazisms-pink-hell/), accessed November 10, 2024, <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/history/categories-of-prisoners/homosexuals-a-separate-category-of-prisoners/robert-biedron-nazisms-pink-hell/>.

camps on their criminal record. It was simply considered jail time. They were finally recognized as victims of the Nazi regime in 1969.³⁸

It is extremely consequential to ignore the lived experiences of homosexuals during the Holocaust. Homophobia and the “justified” murder of gay people are still prevalent in parts of our world even today, in 2024. Ignoring the suffering of the queer community during this time places you on the same side as Hitler and his men in a way.³⁹ The world is in far too vulnerable a place to succumb to Nazi ideologies. I believe that I made a strong argument as to why it is important to take into account the stories and horrors of those gay people who paved the way for the LGBTQIA+ community of today. I hope that this reading helped reveal that it is important to learn the entire truth of an event, not just the truth you want to hear.

³⁸ Ken Setterington and Bill Marchant, *Branded by the Pink Triangle* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2020). (01:56:30)

³⁹ [www.auschwitz.org](https://www.auschwitz.org/en/history/categories-of-prisoners/homosexuals-a-separate-category-of-prisoners/robert-biedron-nazisms-pink-hell/), “Robert Biedroń, Nazism’s Pink Hell,” Robert Biedroń, Nazism’s Pink Hell / Homosexuals. A Separate Category of Prisoners / Categories of prisoners / History / Auschwitz-Birkenau, accessed November 10, 2024, <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/history/categories-of-prisoners/homosexuals-a-separate-category-of-prisoners/robert-biedron-nazisms-pink-hell/>.

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