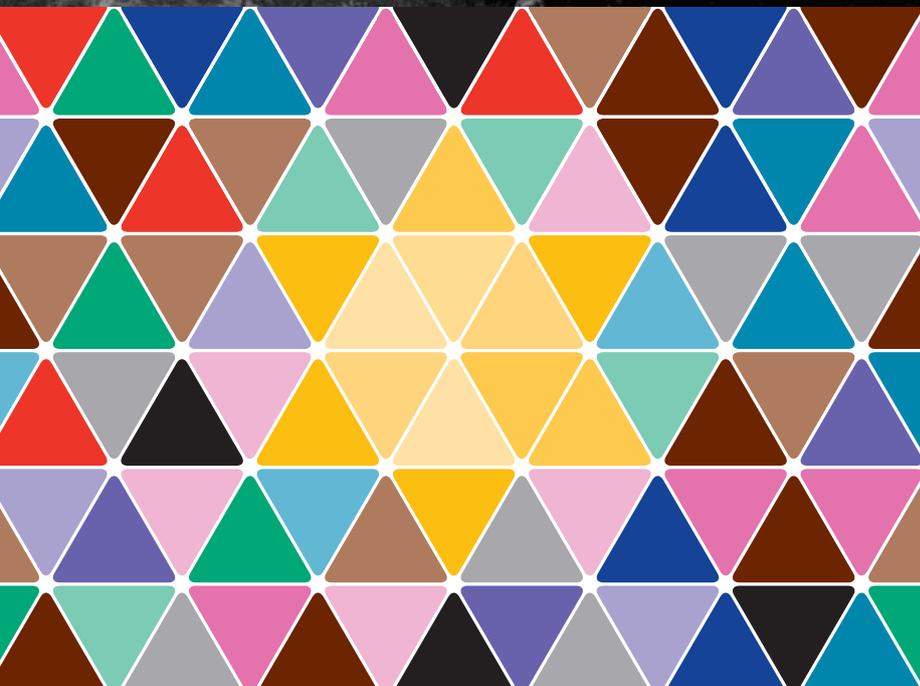


Persecution of Gay Men



Mosaic – Victims
of Nazi Persecution



Persecution of Gay Men

Although the gay rights movement is seen as being relatively modern, there have often been periods in history when there have been liberal attitudes towards homosexuality. One example was in the early 19th century when a number of German states passed laws which decriminalised homosexual acts between men. However, male homosexuality remained against the law in Prussia, the largest German state. This meant that when Prussia united Germany in 1871 homosexuality was again made illegal. This was done through the notorious Paragraph 175 of the Criminal Code which outlawed 'criminally indecent activities' between men.

Yet despite legal persecution, an active gay culture developed before World War I in larger cities and many famous Germans, including Albert Einstein and the writer Thomas Mann, campaigned for the repeal of Paragraph 175. The liberal atmosphere of the Weimar Republic in the 1920s led to further improvements. Berlin became the centre of gay life in Europe whilst homosexuality was openly represented in books, magazines and movies. In 1919 Dr Magnus Hirschfeld founded the Institute for Sexual Sciences, an organisation which studied issues such as homosexuality on the basis of science rather than prejudice. Hirschfeld also led the campaign against Paragraph 175 and was almost successful in 1929 when the Reichstag (German Parliament) supported a proposal to make homosexuality legal. However, the shift to the right in German politics from 1930 meant that this never happened.

Many conservatives, along with the churches, were opposed to this increase in gay rights which they saw as a sign of Germany's supposed moral decline. The Nazi leadership generally agreed, although for racist rather than religious reasons: homosexuality was seen as a threat to the survival of the German 'master race', partly because it was believed that gay men were naturally weak and would therefore not be capable of fighting for Germany. The SS leader Himmler, who was the most obsessive homophobe in the Nazi leadership, also argued that homosexuality was a danger to the nation because it meant that there were men who were not fathering children. As Germany had already lost 2 million men in World War I, Himmler believed that Germany faced being 'swamped' by supposedly 'inferior' races, which he feared were producing more children.

However, not all Nazis shared these prejudices. In particular, Ernst Röhm, the leader of the SA stormtroopers, was himself openly gay and had campaigned for equal rights. Many German homosexuals therefore believed that they would be

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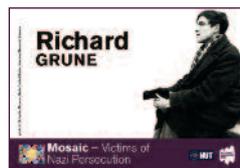
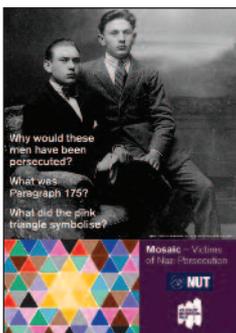


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safe when the Nazis came to power in January 1933. However, within weeks, the police closed well known gay meeting places, such as bars and clubs, and the new secret police force, the Gestapo, began to compile 'pink lists' of gay men for future arrest. On 6th May 1933 Nazi students attacked the Institute for Sexual Sciences and destroyed its library which contained more than 12,000 books.

Persecution increased after Ernst Röhm and other SA leaders were murdered on the 'Night of the Long Knives' in the summer of 1934. Röhm was killed for political reasons, not because of his sexuality, but homophobic propaganda was used to justify his murder. His removal also gave his rival Himmler increasing control over persecution in Germany. The result was an increase in the arrests of gay men in late 1934. However, the real turning point came in June 1935 when the Nazis revised Paragraph 175 to expand the category of 'criminally indecent activities' to include any act which could be considered homosexual. Anyone found guilty under this law could be sentenced to up to 10 years in prison. The consequence was a massive increase in the number of arrests and sentences: around 22,000 gay men were sent to prison between 1936 and 1938 compared to 4,000 in 1933-34. A total of about 50,000 gay men were sentenced by the courts between 1933 and 1945.

Most of these men served their sentences in prison but from 1937 onwards large numbers were sent to concentration camps, in many cases after they had finished a prison sentence. The Gestapo had the power to take homosexuals into 'protective custody' which meant that they could be held without trial even if they had already been punished by the law. Estimates of the number of gay men sent to the camps range from 5,000 to 15,000. Homosexual prisoners were marked out by being forced to wear a pink triangle on their uniforms and they suffered deplorable treatment at the hands of guards and, often, other prisoners.

For example, in Sachsenhausen near Berlin, they were forced to bring wheelbarrows of soil to the camp's shooting range whilst the shooting was taking place. Gay inmates were mostly shunned by other prisoners and they generally lacked the support networks that groups such as Communists and Jehovah's Witnesses provided for their members. As a result, they largely found themselves unprotected against the brutality of the camps so survival rates for pink triangle prisoners were much lower than for political prisoners.

Some gay men were also victims of horrific medical procedures because Himmler and many Nazi doctors believed that they could be 'cured' of their homosexuality. In some cases, they were castrated. In theory, this was a voluntary process but in 1939 Himmler told the police not to be 'too strict' in asking for the prisoner's agreement. Himmler also funded a Danish doctor, Carl Peter Vaernet who performed experiments on concentration camp inmates in 1944-45 which involved inserting an artificial gland containing the male hormone testosterone; many of the prisoners died after the operation.

Even though the 50,000 gay men who were imprisoned were only a small fraction of the 2 million that Himmler believed lived in Germany, all gay men found their lives affected by the Nazis. They were forced to live in greater secrecy with the constant risk of being reported to the police. By contrast, lesbians were not targeted by the Nazis although a small number were arrested for 'asocial' behaviour.

After the war, homosexuals were not generally recognised as victims of Nazi persecution and did not receive any compensation. Homophobic prejudice continued to be widespread and the Nazi version of Paragraph 175 remained which meant that gay men could still be punished under the same law. Not surprisingly, very few victims were willing to speak about their experiences. Paragraph 175 was only repealed in 1969.

Further materials will become available through the course of this joint project.

For further information go to

National Union of Teachers

www.teachers.org.uk and

Holocaust Educational Trust

www.het.org.uk

