

# Critical thinking on treatment of homosexuals in the third reich

[People](#), [Adolf Hitler](#)



The Nazis' desire to purify the German nation turned out to be a tragedy for all non-Aryan people. The people considered "different" were penalized not only by concentrations camps but morally as well. All minorities that did not match Nazi criteria of "purity" were treated severely in concentration camps, however the distinctive place in the Nazis' racial policy belonged to homosexuals. Homosexuality was a criminal offense in Germany as early as 1871, under section 175 of the Criminal Code of the German Empire so the system of Nazi persecution of homosexuals did not appear out of nowhere. And yet, before the Nazis came to power, the situation was much more relaxed. Although there were not that many homosexuals during the Third Reich they were the lowest category of prisoners and were treated especially severely even in comparison to other "enemies of Reich".

In 1919, Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld founded institution called the "Institute for Sexual Science" in Berlin. The institution contributed to the promotion of research and debate on family problems, venereal diseases, and to legislature relating to sexual crimes, abortion and single-sex relations. Being a homosexual himself Hirschfeld spent three decades reforming the legislature on homosexuals (Grau and Schoppmann et al., 1995, p. 31). The result of this activity was the more liberal attitude of the authorities and the public to persons with a homosexual orientation. Prior to the rise of Hitler, Berlin was one of the most popular gay and lesbian big cities. The city had a lot of exclusive bars and nightclubs. However, when NSDAP came to power the situation in the region changed significantly. The Nazis in their criminal law did not consider women with homosexual (lesbian). The massive and systematic persecution was launched at homosexual men. Unlike men,

lesbians were usually not perceived as a social or political threat (Friedman, 2011, pp. 392-393). Even after the Nazis came to power in 1933, most lesbians in Germany could live a pretty quiet life. The Nazis saw homosexuality as a disease or as a criminal vice. Due to the fact that gay people do not give birth to children, the Nazis established the Reich Central Office for Combating Homosexuality and Abortion regarded the both issues together. The Nazi regime's desire to link the homosexuality and abortion together was a reflection of politics of increasing fertility of Aryan population. On September 1, 1935, the more rigid amended version of section 175 of the Criminal Code entered into force. Previously, it said, "unnatural fornication between men or a man with an animal shall be punished by imprisonment with a possible deprivation of civil rights". After 1935 it covered a wide spectrum of "indecent assault" and "indecent" behavior of men. The law also prescribes penalties for pedophilia. In Düsseldorf about 400 people were arrested for "homosexual acts". In 1937-1938 came the repressions of homosexuals and lesbians in different parts of the country; homosexuals were rounded up in bars, coffee shops and other venues. According to the new German law even attempts to flirt or touch were criminally punished (Friedman, 2011, pp. 389-391).

Unlike lesbians, who were persecuted systematically by the Reich, male homosexuals became the primary target for prosecutions and assaults. The paragraph 175 did not mention lesbianism as a crime, however homosexual women were convicted morally, as they did not correspond to Aryan women image. In most cases lesbians were tagged as prostitutes and arrested on this basis. The category of antisocial also included vagrants, murderers, and

thieves. Persons in this category have a corresponding mark on concentration camp prisoner's clothing (black triangle). Nazi Germany did not try to kill all homosexuals. However, the Nazis actively persecuted and terrorized gays, forced them to meet the sexual and social norms (Koskovich, 1998).

After the adoption of the new law more than 10, 000 people (gays, male sex workers, people who have sex with animals) were arrested as unworthy representatives of the Aryan Nation. Approximately 5, 000 were sent to prisons and labor camps, where they were to be "cured" and "corrected" by the heavy physical labor. Since 1940, according to Himmler's orders, homosexual men with recurrent relied on paragraph 175 could be sentenced for up to 10 years in concentration camps. The same fate awaited those who served a prison sentence. After 1941 homosexuals who served time in prison were not freed, but automatically sent to concentration camps. Some were subjects to castration and other medical experiments. The number of homosexuals being sent to forced treatment in psychiatric hospitals is still unknown. Some of those who were persecuted for their sexual orientation did not even identify themselves as homosexuals, but only "looked like" homosexuals (Friedman, 2011).

The attitude towards homosexuals in concentration camps was as cruel as to the Jews and Communists. It was a reflection of homophobia in Nazi Germany. The inmates of concentration camps, first of all political prisoners, treated homosexuals as people rejected by society. In the camps homosexuals lived in separate barracks, where they had to sleep with their hands on top of the blankets, and were exposed to torture for the slightest

infraction (Burleigh and Wippermann, 1991).

As a rule, homosexuals wore pink triangle on their clothes. Nevertheless, in Dachau the triangle was green (criminals), and in Neuengamme such specific patches on clothes were applied only to the German inmates, so that 5500 prisoners from the Netherlands wore red triangles of political prisoners, regardless of the articles for which they were convicted. Finally, instead of a pink triangle 175 or the letter A were used (as the paragraph 175 of the Criminal Code of Germany or *Arschficker* (offensive German word for homosexuals) (Tatchell, 1997). A lot of gay people have died after SS brutal beating and torture. The doctors in the concentration camps conducted medical experiments on homosexuals in order to find out the cause of homosexuality, and considered the possibility of hormonal imbalance in homosexuals. In 1942, the SS camp commanders allowed to castrate homosexuals to preserve the Aryan gene pool. It will probably be never known how many homosexuals were killed in concentration camps,. Historical studies today are very limited. According to a study of the famous German sociologist R. Lautmann, not all homosexuals were subjected to destruction in concentration camps, although the proportion of survivors in comparison to other groups of prisoners was less. Lautman believes that the mortality rate of convicts for 175th paragraph in the camps may have reached up to sixty percent. In comparison, 41% of political prisoners and 35% of the Jehovah's Witnesses died in concentration camps (Lautmann and Vismar et al., 1990). This can be explained by the small number of homosexuals in comparison to other categories of prisoners.

This data, provided by G. Grau clearly shows that the number of

homosexuals in concentration camps rose up significantly only after 1943 (Grau and Schoppmann et al., 1995, p. 270). The convicts were used mainly for experiments and were counted as permanent labor force in the concentration camps. Another possible explanation of the high death rate of homosexuals can be explained by bad attitude from other prisoners, such as political prisoners, Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses. If other prisoners could find some support among other prisoners, the homosexuals were completely alone under those harsh conditions. Moreover, according to Stephan Ross, the founder of the New England Holocaust Museum, about 20% of the concentration camp guards who were guarding the Jews were homosexuals (Ross, 2013). The guards were recruited from among homosexual criminals. This made the homosexual prisoners' life in concentration camps even worse, as the guards could easily be repressed in case of tolerating prisoners.

Pierre Seel, one of the witnesses of the Nazi persecution of homosexuals, describes a number of bullying suffered by homosexuals in those days. Pierre Seel lived in Mühlhausen and made no secret of his homosexuality. After the Nazis came to power, he and some homosexuals were required to attend the police station. There they were beaten, and those who resisted had their nails tear out or a broken line thrust in the anus until it opened bleeding. After his arrest, he was taken to a concentration camp near Schirmeck. There he witnessed the massacre of his sexual partner. The hungry dogs tore 18-year old Seel's friend alive. Pierre Seel in his memoirs highlights the horrifying details of treating homosexuals. There was no space for any sort of equality even between prisoners. Everyone had to talk less in order to stay

alive. Sometimes the community of prisoners convicted one or the other homosexual and public punishments were applied. Seel expressed the view, according to which homosexuals were treated worse than animals. Even without punishments they had few food and sleep, wore bad clothes and had to work almost all day long. The guards found it fun to make homosexuals do primitive tasks, like picking up pieces of paper from the ground. Those who refused to do it were shot. The prejudices to homosexuals and their treatment were explained by the Reich's desire to make them think in terms of National Socialism. However, the true degradation of homosexuals as well as of other prisoners was explained by inhuman conditions and hungers. After being driven to the level of animal the prisoners could not even think of something beyond concentration camp (Seel and Le Bitox, 1995). Seel's memoirs were so powerful and vivid, that it is difficult to understand how he managed to preserve his human traits in that environment.

After the war, most of the gay victims of Nazism were not rehabilitated and did not receive compensation. Moreover, on 10 May 1957 the Federal Constitutional Court recognized paragraph 175 in the formulation of 1935 law as legal. According to the court's decision, this paragraph bears no peculiarities of National Socialism law, and therefore there is no reason to cancel it in a free democratic country. The judges of the Constitutional Court decided that sexual activity between same-sex partners clearly contradicts the law of morals. Paragraph 175 was repealed only after the unification of Germany, which happened in 1990. During the years 1945-1969 there were about 10, 000 people under investigation and about 5, 000 were convicted under this law. The after war events with the paragraph 175 clearly show the

supreme level of discrimination of homosexuals in comparison to other minorities in concentration camps (Moeller, n. d., pp. 395-429). During the Third Reich they were deprived of most human rights and freedoms, were treated and fed worse than other prisoners and were applied disgusting punishments on a basis of their sexuality. However, the turning point in homosexuals' rights recognizing was after war period. The fact that their rights were not recognized and no compensations were issued is the most obvious evidence of Germany's intolerance to this minority. It can also be said that intolerance to homosexuals existed in German society long before Hitler came to power. The moral values of Kaiser Germany as well as Weimar Republic (on a constitutional level) were incompatible with such human right as the right to choose sexuality. This factor made homosexuals' position in totalitarian Germany the most vicious one.

## **Conclusion**

Homosexuals in the Third Reich were completely pushed out of the public view and subjected to cruel persecution. The rise of homosexual subculture under the Weimar Republic was completely destroyed. Homosexual men were subjected to systematic monitoring and accounting. Amendments of 1935 criminalized any sexual interaction between men, even those that occur without direct physical contact. And even after serving his prison sentence, convicted men were often deported to concentration camps under the so-called "defensive" arrests to prevent "recurrence". Lesbians were not subjected to mass persecution, but they often experienced the other forms of discrimination on the part of the authorities. In comparison to other minorities' discrimination homosexuals were considered as the lowest and



most despicable of them. The treatment of homosexual prisoners can be explained not only by political, but by moral criteria. Even among concentration camp prisoners they were considered scums. The German sociologist Lautmann found that the death rate of homosexual prisoners was almost twice as much as of other convicts. This means that homosexuals were the most deprived category during the Third Reich.

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