

## ‘LIBERATION WAS ONLY FOR OTHERS’: Breaking the Silence in Germany Surrounding the Nazi Persecution of Homosexuals

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In the spring of 1939, 22-year old Heinz Heger answered a summons by the local Gestapo in his hometown of Vienna. He was alarmed but could not recall breaking any law or personally offending any of the Nazi officials that seemed to be everywhere after Germany's annexation of Austria one year earlier. An hour later, Heger stood before the desk of a Nazi bureaucrat, waiting to hear why he had been called to report. Finally, after an eternity of silence, the SS doctor looked up and spoke: ‘You are a queer, a homosexual, do you admit it?’ Without waiting for a reply, the official slammed shut a file on his desk and shipped Heger off to prison. As it turns out, Heger had indeed broken a law, Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code, which strictly prohibited all homosexual activity between men. After he had served his six month sentence, Heger was immediately transferred to Sachsenhausen concentration camp, where he stayed until his transfer to the Flossenbürg concentration camp a year later.<sup>1</sup> Through it all, Heger managed to keep a journal, and for the entry dated 23 April 1945, there are only two words: ‘Amerikaner gekommen’ (Americans came).<sup>2</sup> After liberation, Heger made his way back to his home in Vienna, where he died in 1994 at the age of 77.

Klaus Born, a young man from northwestern Germany, also found himself in trouble with the authorities. He was 20 years old and, by his own account, naïve when he moved to Berlin looking to experience the city's famed gay life. His excitement was short-lived, however, and he was arrested only a couple of months after his arrival for having sex with another man in a public park. Born was also sentenced under Paragraph 175, but unlike Heger, he never wore a pink triangle, the badge that homosexual inmates were forced to wear in concentration camps.

<sup>1</sup> Heger (1994), p. 21. ‘Heinz Heger’ is a pseudonym for Josef Kohout, but since Kohout chose to write under this name, he will be referred to as ‘Heger’ throughout this article.

<sup>2</sup> USHMM, RG-33.002, Acc. 1994.A.0332, Folder 10: Josef K./Wilhelm K. papers, 1939-1948.

That is because there were no concentration camps left standing and the judge overseeing his case was not a Nazi. In fact, at the time of Born's arrest and sentencing, Hitler's regime had been defeated for two decades. The year was 1965, and yet the Federal Republic of Germany had prosecuted Born with the same law that had sent Heger to multiple concentration camps during the Third Reich.<sup>3</sup> Klaus Born's case may be surprising, but it was by no means unique. In fact, there were tens of thousands of other men like him, who lived in a democratic state but were convicted under the Nazi version of Paragraph 175.

The continued use of Paragraph 175 to prosecute homosexual men in the Federal Republic of Germany raises important questions, especially as we commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Allied liberation of the Nazi concentration and death camps.

First, it causes us to question the notion of 'liberation' itself. For thousands of men who wore the pink triangle, the spring of 1945 meant a release from the camps, but it certainly did not mean an end to persecution. As Born's case demonstrates, even homosexuals born in West Germany not only faced social discrimination, but also had to fear legal prosecution under a Nazi-amended law years after Hitler's defeat. It is difficult, therefore, to conceptualise 1945 as a moment of full liberation and a complete break with the past for either pink triangle survivors or homosexual men born in the post-war period.

Second, a closer look at both the treatment of pink triangle survivors and post-war Paragraph 175 cases complicates the notion that knowledge of the Nazi persecution of homosexuals was simply nonexistent until the 1980s. Such a notion is embodied by the inscription carved into several of the memorials that West German and Austrian gay groups dedicated to the Nazis' pink triangle victims: *Totgeschlagen, Totgeschwiegen* (Beaten to Death, Silenced to Death). While it is true that the general post-war stance in West Germany towards the Nazis' homosexual victims was characterised by silence, this inscription risks oversimplifying the matter. Instead, if we understand silence not as an absence of memory, but rather as a form of memory in itself (albeit a non-memory), we see that West German politicians, scholars, gay rights activists and homosexual Holocaust survivors have been engaged in memory politics over the meaning of the pink-triangle past since the end of the Second World War. In the following decades, these multiple – and often competing – memories gradually began to coalesce into a more cohesive collective memory among the West German, and then unified German, public, although the details of this collective memory are still contested.

The gradual process to first remember and then commemorate the victims of the Nazi persecution of homosexuals can be taken as a case study that demonstrates the dynamics inherent in the construction of our memory of the past, one that adheres to and selects certain memories while eschewing and oppressing others. This case study also demonstrates that such a construction of memory has concrete effects on daily life in the present. More broadly, by studying how different actors remembered (or did not remember) the heritage of Nazi persecution to achieve a variety of ends, we may gain insights into the relationship between history, social activism and political power.

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<sup>3</sup> Susanne Höll, 'Der Richter und das Opfer', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 18 July 2012, p. 3. Born was sentenced to six weeks in prison, but once the verdict was reached, the judge decided that the time Born had already served during the trial sufficed and he was set free.

## ‘The Damndest of the Damned’: 1933–1945

When the National Socialist German Workers Party came to power in 1933, it quickly put an end to the growing homosexual subcultures that had developed in larger cities across Weimar Germany.<sup>4</sup> While the oppression homosexuals experienced under the Nazi regime was unprecedented in history, it is important to realise that the Nazis were able to build on prevailing social, legal and cultural prejudices.<sup>5</sup> The burgeoning homosexual emancipation movement in early twentieth-century Germany could not overshadow the existence of anti-homosexual ideologies and laws, such as Paragraph 175, which was written into the German Penal Code at the founding of the German Reich in 1871.

Although National Socialist ideology was full of homophobic rhetoric, it was the Nazi amendment of Paragraph 175 that was decisive in ending the period of relative freedom enjoyed by homosexuals in Germany’s largest cities, such as Berlin. Whereas the original wording of the law criminalised ‘unnatural sex acts’ between men, the Nazi version of the law, enacted in 1935, made all ‘indecenty’ between men illegal. This new wording purposefully offered a broad and vague vocabulary, allowing judges to interpret the meaning of ‘indecenty’ on an individual basis, which meant that everything from sex and mutual masturbation to kissing and even ‘lustful gazes’ became criminal offences.<sup>6</sup>

As a result, the number of convictions of homosexual men under Paragraph 175 skyrocketed after 1935.<sup>7</sup> Facilitated by the creation of the *Reichszentrale zur Bekämpfung der Homosexualität und der Abtreibung* (Central Reich Agency for Combating Homosexuality and Abortion) in 1936, convictions rose by an astounding 900 per cent from their pre-1933 levels.<sup>8</sup> During its 12-year reign, the Nazi regime arrested roughly 100,000 men for homosexual ‘indecenty’, and just over 53,000 of those men were convicted.<sup>9</sup>

Punishment for an offense against Paragraph 175 included a prison sentence that could range anywhere from several months to ten years, depending on the case, and civil liberties could also be revoked. However, for many homosexual men, the punishment did not stop there. Between 10,000 and 15,000 men were sent into *Schutzhaft* (‘protective custody’) in a concentration camp after serving their prison sentence.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> English translations of German studies of the Nazi persecution of homosexuals are available, but many English-speaking authors have conducted their own research, as well. For an excellent English-language overview of the Nazi persecution of homosexuals, see Schulze (2011).

<sup>5</sup> Stefan Micheler urges us not to idealise the acceptance of homosexuality in Weimar Germany, as doing so could hinder our understanding of how the Nazis were able to usher in an era of wholesale persecution so quickly; see Micheler (2002), p. 102.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed study of the Nazi amendment of Paragraph 175, see Giles (2005).

<sup>7</sup> Same-sex desire between women was not criminalised by the original version of Paragraph 175 or by the Nazis; see Schulze (2011) and pp. 66–7 further down.

<sup>8</sup> Dickinson (2007), p. 206.

<sup>9</sup> Giles (2005), p. 352; Hoffschildt (2002), p. 148.

<sup>10</sup> Some men were even sent directly to concentration camps for ‘protective custody’ without any judicial process whatsoever; see Schulze (2011), p. 23.

Accounts of the treatment of pink triangle prisoners tell us that homosexuals were the lowest in the internal, unwritten hierarchy among camp inmates. They were frequently given the hardest work assignments, routinely given less food rations, and were used most often as the subjects of medical experimentation.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, it was not only the SS guards who treated the homosexuals more harshly; their fellow inmates also ostracised, abused and generally discriminated against the men wearing the pink triangle. Heinz Heger, who survived six years in multiple camps, wrote in his memoirs that he and the others who wore the pink triangle were the ‘damndest of the damned’.<sup>12</sup> While it may be fruitless to construct a hierarchy of suffering or attempt to deduce which group the Nazis tortured the most severely, the historical records do reveal that two thirds of all men interned as homosexuals died within one year of entering a camp.<sup>13</sup>

The arrival of the Allied forces in the first months of 1945 was a moment of liberation for the vast majority of the camp survivors. For many of the men wearing pink triangles, however, the end of the war did not bring freedom. Once the camps were shut down, many homosexual inmates were re-incarcerated as criminals under the Allied occupation or forced to keep their time in the camps a secret for fear of being arrested. Pierre Seel, reflecting on his experience as a homosexual camp prisoner in Nazi-occupied France, recalled the moment that Allied troops freed his camp, stating poignantly: ‘Liberation was only for others.’<sup>14</sup>

### **‘An Unholy Tradition of Silence’: 1949–1969**

When the Federal Republic of Germany was established in 1949, the young state continued a process of denazification that had officially begun in 1945, yet the Nazi version of Paragraph 175 remained on the books. Prevailing homophobia and the continued illegality of homosexuality in West Germany meant that only a handful of the thousands of pink triangle survivors broke the silence about their experiences in the camps. As a result, the post-war West German attitude towards the Nazis’ homosexual victims was characterised by what historian Klaus Müller referred to as ‘an unholy tradition of silence.’<sup>15</sup>

It was not a complete silence, however. As early as 1948, homosexual survivors petitioned to be included in the *Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes* (Association of the Persecuted of the Nazi Regime), a German advocacy group made up of Holocaust survivors. However, their membership was denied on the unjustified basis that homosexuals had not participated in anti-fascist resistance.<sup>16</sup> In the early 1950s, a camp survivor, writing under the pseudonym L.D. Classen von Neudegg, described his years in Sachsenhausen in a series of five articles in

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<sup>11</sup> Knoll (2002), p. 68. In his autobiography, Rudolf Höß, commandant of Auschwitz from 1940, also speaks to the fact that homosexual inmates were almost always secluded in a separate bunk, given harsher treatment and generally disdained by all in the camp; see Höß (1961), pp. 85-7.

<sup>12</sup> Heger (1994), p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> Giles (2005), p. 352.

<sup>14</sup> Seel (1995), p. 88.

<sup>15</sup> Müller, cited in Linenthal (1995), p. 189.

<sup>16</sup> Wahl (2011), p. 206.

*Humanitas*, a West German homophile publication.<sup>17</sup> That same decade, 14 homosexual men broke their silence by filing for Nazi victim compensation from the West German government. When the deadline for applications came on 31 December 1959, all 14 petitions were denied.<sup>18</sup>

While politicians and organisational leaders denied that homosexuals were ‘official’ victims of the Nazi regime, the West German state continued to enforce the same version of Paragraph 175 that Nazi lawyers had enacted in 1935. In fact, in 1957 the West German Federal Constitutional Court explicitly upheld the 1935 version of the law, stating that anti-homosexual ideologies and policies predated Hitler and therefore homosexuals were not victims of ‘typical Nazi injustice.’<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the court argued that Paragraph 175 was still needed to protect the moral fortitude of the German people.<sup>20</sup>

The law was eventually liberalised in 1969 when the West German parliament decriminalised homosexual acts between consenting men over the age of 21, but in the meantime, Paragraph 175 had wreaked havoc on another generation of homosexual men.<sup>21</sup> No one was murdered by the West German state under Paragraph 175, but criminal prosecution alone sealed many men’s fate in a politically and morally conservative West Germany. A Paragraph 175 conviction forcibly ‘outed’ men to friends, family and co-workers, which often cost them their jobs, their relationships and their reputations, and suicides were not uncommon occurrences following Paragraph 175 convictions. In the first 20 years of West Germany’s existence, over 100,000 homosexual men were placed under legal investigation, and 59,316 men were sentenced, forever branded as criminals.<sup>22</sup> That is why, as late as 1963, historian Hans-Joachim Schoeps felt justified in claiming: ‘For gays, the Third Reich hasn’t ended yet.’<sup>23</sup>

## ‘Treated Like a Stepchild’: 1969–1990

In the years following the 1969 liberalisation of Paragraph 175, the West German gay rights movement began to break the silence surrounding the Nazi persecution of homosexuals. In 1972, Heger published the first, and still the most well-known, autobiography by a gay Holocaust survivor, titled *Die Männer mit dem Rosa Winkel* (The Men with the Pink Triangle).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See the articles entitled ‘Schicksale’ in *Humanitas: Monatszeitschrift für Menschlichkeit und Kultur* written under the pseudonym L.D. Classen von Neudegg (February 1954, March 1954, July 1954, December 1954, and February 1955).

<sup>18</sup> Wahl (2011), p. 207.

<sup>19</sup> Bluhm (2011), p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Klaus Müller, ‘Introduction’, in Heger (1994), p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> The age of consent for heterosexuals was 14. For an excellent discussion of the liberalisation of Paragraph 175 and homosexual life in West Germany between 1945 and 1969 in general, see Whisnant (2012).

<sup>22</sup> von Wühl (2011), p. 205.

<sup>23</sup> Schoeps (1963), p. 86.

<sup>24</sup> Heger’s book was originally published in Hamburg by Merlin-Verlag in 1972 under the title *Die Männer mit dem rosa Winkel: Der Bericht eines Homosexuellen über seine KZ-Haft von 1939-1945*. It was first translated and published in English by Alyson Books in 1980. The autobiography was also published in French (1981), Dutch (1982) and Swedish (1984), and was released in a new English edition in 1994.



Heinz Heger's account *Die Männer mit dem Rosa Winkel*: German original (Hamburg: Merlin, 1972), and translations in Swedish (Stockholm: Författarförlaget, 1984), English (Boston, MA: Alyson Books, 1980) and French (Paris: Éditions Persona, 1981).

'Stop the Brown Danger! Gays and Lesbians against Nazis': sticker worn by gay activists protesting against Neo-Nazis, depicting a pink triangle destroying a swastika.

Only months after reading Heger's book, members of the *Homosexuelle Aktion Westberlin* (HAW) became the first gay liberation group in the world to adopt the pink triangle as a symbol in the fight for equal rights. Peter von Hedenström, a founding member of the HAW, recalled the group's decision to adopt the pink triangle:

For political reasons, we needed to make ourselves visible as homosexuals. By wearing it, we could show that we were gay, so it became a symbol of pride and positive self identification. But, at its core, the pink triangle represented a piece of our German history that still needed to be dealt with.<sup>25</sup>

Within a year, the pink triangle had become an integral part of the HAW's activism, and it appeared on banners, posters and pamphlets. In 1975, the HAW even led a 'Pink Triangle Campaign,' in which they plastered the Kurfürstendamm, West Berlin's central shopping boulevard, with information flyers about their political goals.<sup>26</sup>

Soon, other gay liberation groups in West Germany also adopted the pink triangle as their symbol. As a result, despite the fact that a handful of homosexual Holocaust survivors had told their stories for decades as they sought restitution, it was gay liberation activists who first informed the wider West German public about the plight of homosexuals under National Socialism. West German gay rights groups almost always presented information about pink triangle prisoners alongside demands for the termination of contemporary anti-homosexual policies. Critics claimed that this was simply an instrumentalisation of the past for present-day goals.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Peter von Hedenström, Berlin, 11 February 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Salmen and Eckert (1989), p. 45.

In a letter to the editor of a Munich-based gay magazine, one observer even asserted that the discovery that homosexuals were also interned in concentration camps must have been a 'pleasant surprise' for the early leaders of West Germany's gay rights movement. 'The discovery,' continued the author, 'saved us from having to insist on our rights armed with nothing more than our self-respect. Instead, the comfortable path of guilt and pity offered itself to us.'<sup>27</sup>

In the face of such criticism, gay rights activists maintained that their strategy was to force the West German government to distance itself from its National Socialist past by drawing direct connections between the anti-homosexual policies of the Nazi state and the legal, political, and social discrimination that gays and lesbians continued to face in West Germany.

By the early 1980s, West German theatre goers also found themselves confronted with the Nazi persecution of homosexuals. Martin Sherman's play *Bent*, which follows the story of three gay men from the time that they are arrested by the Nazis in Berlin to their internment in a concentration camp, debuted in London in 1979. One year later, it was playing on New York's Broadway and premiered in West Germany at the National Theater in Mannheim. The play became incredibly popular and was also staged by theatres in Cologne, Berlin, Hannover, Essen, Aachen, Munich and many more West German cities under the title *Rosa Winkel* (Pink Triangle).



Poster for a special production of Martin Sherman's play *Rosa Winkel* (*Bent*) at the theatre Der Keller in Cologne, with a historical introduction and a discussion afterwards, organised by the *Schwulen- und Lesben-Zentrum SCHULZ* (Gay and Lesbian Centre Cologne).

<sup>27</sup>Norbert Reck, 'Die Liebe zum Feind' (letter to the editor), *Südwind*, no. 5 (1988), p. 6.

For many West Germans, gay and straight alike, this fictional account was their first encounter with the history of the Nazis' persecution of homosexual men. Therefore, the information presented in the play carried substantial weight as a purveyor of historical memory. The play was not simply meant to entertain an audience; it was also – and perhaps primarily – meant to inform them and, by doing so, help to develop a larger awareness and ultimately a collective memory about what happened to homosexuals during the Third Reich. The vast majority of the playbills and programmes that accompanied the play contained articles written by scholars on the history of the pink triangle, articles that filled more pages than the biographies of the actors and the schedule for the night's performance.

Generally speaking, professional historians joined the discussion of the Nazis' treatment of homosexuals relatively late. Erik Jensen argues that, because of this deficit of scholarship, homosexual survivors and subsequent gay rights movements typically relied on the Jewish experience as a template for making sense of the homosexual persecution since it was the story most readily available for understanding the Holocaust.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, the story that emerged in the early 1970s and 1980s, disseminated by gay rights activists and other media such as the *Rosa Winkel* play, was one in which the Nazis initiated a systematic 'gay genocide,' or what some have even called a 'Homocaust,' in an effort to completely annihilate all of Europe's homosexuals.<sup>29</sup>

While some scholars have disputed these community-based narratives of Nazi persecution, activists cannot be fully blamed for this inaccurate interpretation since there was essentially no scholarship available at the time. Even as late as 1990, historian Burkhard Jellonnek claimed that in comparison to the amount of research dedicated to some victim groups of the National Socialist regime, other victim groups, including homosexuals, had been 'treated like a stepchild.'<sup>30</sup> In 1996, the State Archive in Hamburg found itself at the centre of a national scandal for allegedly destroying files pertaining to Paragraph 175 cases under the Nazi regime, thus making room for more 'archive worthy' material.<sup>31</sup>

There were a couple of works in the late 1960s that attempted to examine the topic of homosexuality under the swastika, but the first serious archival research on the topic was not published until 1977 by the sociologist Rüdiger Lautmann.<sup>32</sup> Shortly thereafter, a handful of lesbian and gay scholars began piecing together what exactly happened to a generation of homosexuals under Hitler.<sup>33</sup> The historical narrative offered by these scholars was yet another voice in the slowly growing dialogue about the Nazi persecution of homosexuals. Moreover, this narrative had to compete with those already maintained by government officials and gay rights activists.

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<sup>28</sup> Jensen (2002), p. 342.

<sup>29</sup> Take, for instance, the title of Massimo Consoli's book, *Homocaust* (1984). As another example, see the American website [www.homocaust.org](http://www.homocaust.org), run by Lewis Oswald (accessed 11 September 2014).

<sup>30</sup> Jellonnek (1990), p. 9.

<sup>31</sup> Cornelia Bolesch, 'Wichtige Akten über Nazi-Opfer vernichtet?', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 12 March 1996, p. 40; see also Silke Mertins, 'NS-Justizgeschichte im Reißwolf', *TAZ Hamburg*, 22 May 1996.

<sup>32</sup> Wilde (1969); Lautman (1977).

<sup>33</sup> In the introduction to their edited volume, Burkhard Jellonnek and Rüdiger Lautmann even quantify this statement by asserting that four-fifths of the scholars publishing on this topic are gay or lesbian; see Jellonnek and Lautmann (2002), p. 12.

The earliest studies published contested the assertion by activists that the Nazis sought a systematic extermination of all homosexuals. While the details of the ‘Homocaust’ debate are many and nuanced, it must suffice here to say that most historians agree with Burkhard Jellonnek’s view that the ‘National Socialists’ homosexual policy did not culminate in notions of extermination, nor did it aspire to the radical obliteration of all homosexuals in the sense of a “Final Solution”.<sup>34</sup>

One additional point from the ‘Homocaust’ debate is worth exploring here, because it ultimately had a direct impact on the ways in which activists and lawmakers remembered the pink triangle past. In line with the dominant understanding of sexuality at the time, Nazi ideologues acted on the belief that homosexuality was constituted by a set of undesirable, learned acts. Arguably, what the Nazis sought to eradicate, therefore, was not homosexual men themselves, but rather the homosexual acts they committed. The aforementioned decision in 1957 by the West German constitutional court to uphold Paragraph 175 was predicated not only on the fact that the original law predated National Socialism, but also on the basis that the law criminalised only certain acts, not entire groups of racially or ethnically defined peoples. With this decision, the West German court upheld both the Nazi version of Paragraph 175 and the Nazi understanding of the Third Reich’s homosexual victims themselves.

As Angelika von Wahl demonstrates in her study of ‘transitional justice’, this decision had dramatic consequences for thousands of men in West Germany:

Neither homosexual individuals nor the vibrant gay community that existed during the Weimar Republic were recognized as ‘persecuted’ by the Nazi regime in the legal sense, because they did not belong to ‘political, racial, or religious groups’ designated by the Nuremberg Laws.<sup>35</sup>

As long as West Germany continued to remember and understand homosexuality as a set of illegal actions rather than a subjective identity, homosexuals were not considered victims of ‘typical Nazi injustice.’

### ‘Do You Want a Memorial for Such People?’: 1985–1995

Interestingly, the first monument to the Nazis’ homosexual victims was not dedicated in either German state. In 1984, the *Homosexuelle Initiative Wien* (HOSI Vienna), a collective of gay activists, was successful in installing a pink stone triangle at the former Mauthausen concentration camp, establishing the first memorial in the world to commemorate the homosexuals who were persecuted by the Nazis. As early as 1979, officials in Amsterdam had planned the construction of a large ‘Homomonument,’ and though the plans were not fully realised until 1987, it was still the first monument to the Nazis’ homosexual victims dedicated in a public space by a government of any kind. Many West German activists were incensed that other nations were the first to memorialise the victims of a German regime, and soon West German gay groups coordinated their own efforts for pink triangle memorials.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup>Jellonnek (1990), p. 36.

<sup>35</sup>Wahl (2011), p. 205.

<sup>36</sup>In a 1988 edition of the West German gay magazine *Südwind* (No. 1, p. 11), for example, the author writes that, ‘Former prisoners and present day politicians alike want to have nothing to do with gay victims. It’s different in Amsterdam.’



The Pink Triangle plaque in the memorial hall of the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site. The original marble plaque, placed in the courtyard of the *Evangelische Versöhnungskirche* (Protestant Church of Reconciliation), was irreparably damaged when it was knocked down in a storm in March 1994. One year later, an identical granite monument was allowed to be placed in the memorial hall, ending a ten-year struggle.

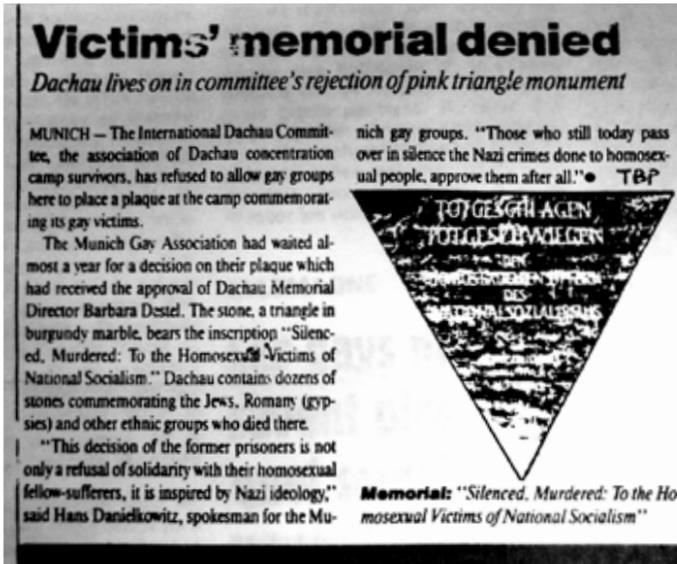
In 1985, motivated by the instalment of the pink triangle memorial at Mauthausen, an initiative of gay groups in Munich resolved to memorialise Hitler's homosexual victims in (West) Germany as well.<sup>37</sup> In February, the Munich chapter of the *Ökumenische Arbeitsgruppe Homosexuelle und Kirche* (HuK, Ecumenical Working Group Homosexuals and the Church) submitted a petition in the name of several Munich gay groups to the *Comité International de Dachau* (CID, International Dachau Committee), an organisation of former prisoners that helped run the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site. The gay groups sought to dedicate their own pink triangle monument during the Dachau Memorial Site's ceremonies for the 40th anniversary of the camp's liberation. The monument was nearly identical to the one that had been installed at Mauthausen: a large triangle made of pink marble with an inscription that read

Beaten to Death, Silenced to Death  
 To the Homosexual Victims of National Socialism  
 The Homosexual Initiatives of Munich, 1985

One month later, the general secretary of the CID replied that only the CID general assembly could decide on such matters, and it would not meet until the end of the year.

In May, the HuK submitted another petition along with 1,300 signatures in support of the instalment of the pink triangle monument at Dachau. This time the HuK received absolutely no answer at all from the CID, and it was only in March 1986 – over one year after the first petition had been filed – that a HuK representative found out by chance that the CID had, after a 'very emotional discussion', already decided to reject the HuK's request and had simply never informed the HuK of their decision. No reason for the rejection was given, but this was not the first time that there had been opposition to memorialising Dachau's homosexual

<sup>37</sup> AGD: Folder 'VSG-Schwulen Gruppe ab 1986': Verein für sexuelle Gleichberechtigung VSG e.V., Pamphlet, 'Aufstellung des Gedenksteins der Münchner Schwulengruppen für die homosexuellen Opfer des Nationalsozialismus, KZ-Gedenkstätte Dachau, 18. Juni 1995'.



Clipping from the October 1986 issue of *The Body Politic*, a gay magazine published in Toronto, Canada, showing that the debate over the right to commemorate the pink triangle victims at Dachau reached an international audience.

Barbara Distel (not Destel) was Director of the *KZ-Gedenkstätte* (memorial site) Dachau from 1975 to 2008.

inmates. In 1960, Hans Zauner, then mayor of the town of Dachau, told a reporter, "You must remember that many criminals and homosexuals were in Dachau. Do you want a memorial for such people?"<sup>38</sup>

Upon learning of the CID's rejection of their request, the gay groups launched a campaign in the local and national press, even accusing the CID of being "not any better than the Nazis."<sup>39</sup> The *Verein für Sexuelle Gleichberechtigung* (VSG, Association for Sexual Equality) went on to say that, "Whoever silences the persecution of homosexuals ultimately approves of it."<sup>40</sup> Readers of gay publications, such as the *Keller Journal*, were encouraged to write letters to the president of the CID, demanding that the pink triangle monument be installed.<sup>41</sup> Members of the HuK, VSG and other West German gay groups also contacted individuals and groups from across Europe and North America, encouraging them to put international pressure on the CID. By the end of 1986, countless letters of protest had flooded in from abroad, especially from the United States.<sup>42</sup>

After two years, when it became clear that the CID would not revisit its decision, the HuK used membership connections to turn to the *Evangelische Versöhnungskirche* (Protestant Church of Reconciliation) for support. As an autonomous religious institution on the Dachau memorial grounds, the church did not require the CID's approval for what it could or could not memorialise. In May 1988, the church agreed to house the pink triangle memorial in their courtyard.

This move gained national attention, and the leader of the German Social Democratic Party, Hans-Jochen Vogel, wrote a letter to the CID, expressing his support of the pink triangle

<sup>38</sup> Hans Zauner, interviewed by Llew Gardner for the *Sunday Express*, 1960, cited in Jensen (2002), p. 321.

<sup>39</sup> Reck, 'Die Liebe zum Feind' (note 27), p. 6.

<sup>40</sup> VSG Pamphlet (1995).

<sup>41</sup> 'KZ- Gedenkstein', *Keller Journal*, Nr. 3 1985, p. 10.

<sup>42</sup> VSG Pamphlet (1995).



The Pink Triangle plaque which was put up in 1989 on the wall near the south entrance to the *U-Bahn* (underground) station at Nollendorfplatz, Berlin. The area around Nollendorfplatz was an important centre of homosexual life from the beginning of the twentieth century up to 1933, and again after 1945. The short explanatory text under the pink triangle says:

'The Pink Triangle was the badge used by the Nazis to mark in a defamatory way homosexual men in the concentration camps. From January 1933, almost all homosexual bars located around Nollendorfplatz were either closed down by the Nazis or raided to draw up 'pink lists' (registers of homosexuals).'

monument.<sup>43</sup> In an effort to add extra pressure from the West German capital, Otto Schily, then a leading politician representing the Green Party in the federal parliament in Bonn, wrote to the president of the CID two months later, firmly asserting that the Nazis' crimes against homosexuals should not be silenced. Schily even cited the 1985 speech given by Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker on the 40th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in which Weizsäcker became the first federal official in West Germany to recognise that homosexuals had also been victims of Nazi terror.<sup>44</sup> In a brief letter, the CID responded that it stood by its decision, pointing out that the International Dachau Monument (located on the memorial grounds in front of the museum) was already dedicated to all victims of Nazi barbarism without distinction.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> AGD, Folder 'VSG-Schwulen Gruppe ab 1986': Letter from Dr. Hans-Jochen Vogel to the leadership of the CID, 4 July 1988.

<sup>44</sup> AGD, Folder 'VSG-Schwulen Gruppe ab 1986': Letter from Otto Schily to Dr. A. Guerisse, President of the CID, 25 September 1985.

<sup>45</sup> AGD, Folder 'VSG-Schwulen Gruppe ab 1986': Letter from G. v. Walraeve, General Secretary of the CID and Dr. A. Guerisse, President of the CID, to Dr. Hans-Jochen Vogel, Chairman of the national SPD, 20 July 1988.

The pink triangle memorial remained in the courtyard of the Protestant Church of Reconciliation until June 1995 when, after a decade of struggle and years of growing international pressure, it was allowed into the concentration camp museum's memorial hall. In doing so, gay men were finally allowed into the official memory presented by the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site. Both sides of the debate had greatly invested in the outcome because they realised that they were fighting over more than stone and words; they were fighting over the past itself.

By the time the Dachau memorial was officially dedicated in 1995, memorials to the Nazis' homosexual victims had been established in six other locations throughout Germany: at the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial Site (1985), at Nollendorfplatz in Berlin, (1989), at the Buchenwald (1990) and Sachsenhausen (1992) Concentration Camp Memorial Sites; in Frankfurt am Main (1994) and in Cologne (1995).

These memorials – and the heated debates surrounding them – led to a growing public awareness of pink triangle persecution. Moreover, a growing population in a number of countries supported the commemoration of homosexual suffering: 12 pink triangle memorials have since been dedicated in nine states around the world in far-ranging locations such as Sydney, San Francisco and Montevideo.

However, the proliferation of these memorials should not overshadow the profound resistance and hostility that memorial organisers faced from governments, the public and opposing activists. The debate over the pink triangle monument at Dachau reveals that in 1985, even though this was the 40th anniversary of the liberation of the camps, and despite a decade of the pink triangle's use as a symbol of gay liberation, the memory of pink triangle persecution was anything but 'liberated' in the West German population at large.

### **'Not with All of the Money in the World': 1990–2008**

The unification of the two German states in 1990 brought drastic changes to the German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or process of coming to terms with the past. Among many other things, unification also forced Germans to reevaluate their position on the Nazi persecution of homosexuals. Would, for example, the liberalised version of West Germany's Paragraph 175 be extended to the former East German states where homosexuality had been decriminalised completely in 1989?<sup>46</sup> After years of deliberation and in the face of growing public pressure and changing social attitudes, German lawmakers fully struck Paragraph 175 from the books in the now-unified Germany on 10 March 1994.

While Paragraph 175 was finally gone, many German gay groups felt that the issue of commemoration had not yet been adequately settled. They vigorously fought for the construction of a national memorial in honor of the homosexuals murdered during the Third

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<sup>46</sup> In 1950, the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) re-instated the old pre-1935 version of Paragraph 175, but beginning in the late 1950s, did not usually prosecute consensual sex acts between two adult men. When East Germany introduced its own criminal code in 1968, the old Paragraph 175 became Paragraph 151, which made sex between an adult (male or female) and a minor (under 18 years of age) of the same sex a criminal offence. This paragraph remained in force until it was taken off the books in 1989. See Starke (1994).



Memorial to the Homosexuals Persecuted Under the National Socialist Regime, Berlin.

Reich. Not surprisingly, the planning of such a monument was surrounded by arguments and controversy from its inception in 1996 to its dedication in Berlin in 2008, and the memorial continues to draw often heated commentary from both critics and supporters.<sup>47</sup> For the most part, the debate was not over whether the memorial should be established, but instead over whom the memorial should commemorate.<sup>48</sup>

Whereas many of the memorial's supporters wanted to include both gay men and lesbian women in the memorial, a handful of historians spoke out vehemently against the inclusion of lesbians. In an open letter to the German State Minister for Culture, Bernd Neumann, a group of 25 gay activists, scholars and leaders of the Buchenwald, Dachau and Ravensbrück Concentration Camp Memorial Sites wrote that the inclusion of lesbians in the Berlin memorial would 'lead to a distortion and falsification of history.'<sup>49</sup> In a 1997 article, historian Joachim Müller called the inclusion of lesbians in memorials dedicated to the pink triangle victims a revision of history for the sake of 'a policy of feminist political correctness.'<sup>50</sup> Such a stance

<sup>47</sup> For a more detailed study of the Memorial to the Homosexuals Persecuted under the National Socialist Regime, see Evans (2014).

<sup>48</sup> Some critics also opposed the location of the memorial, including the then Governing Mayor of (West) Berlin, Eberhard Diepgen, who opposed the establishment of a 'memorial mile' in the heart of Berlin's government district; see 'Neuer Streit um Holocaust-Mahnmale: Auch Sinti und Roma wollen eigene Gedenkstätte in Berlin', *Wiener Zeitung*, 25 August 1999, [http://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/welt/weltpolitik/364076\\_Auch-Sinti-und-Roma-wollen-eigene-Gedenkstaette-in-Berlin-Berlin.html](http://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/welt/weltpolitik/364076_Auch-Sinti-und-Roma-wollen-eigene-Gedenkstaette-in-Berlin-Berlin.html) (accessed 11 September 2014).

<sup>49</sup> Bianca Blei, 'Aufregung um lesbischen Kuss', *Der Standard*, 8 April 2010, <http://derstandard.at/1269449160030/Debatte-Aufregung-um-lesbischen-Kuss> (accessed 24 September 2014).

<sup>50</sup> Joachim Müller, 'Leserbrief', *HuK Info*, No. 126 (September 1997), p. 60.

was adamantly opposed by lesbians, feminists, LGBT advocates as well as many politicians in the Social Democratic and Green parties.<sup>51</sup>

In the face of allegations of misogyny and discrimination, those who opposed inclusion of lesbians in the Berlin memorial asserted that they were simply adhering to the historical evidence demonstrating that the Nazis did not persecute lesbians in the same manner as they persecuted homosexual men. This group insisted that while homosexual men had to fear Paragraph 175, lesbianism was never legally criminalised.<sup>52</sup> In the open letter to Minister Neumann, Alexander Zinn explained that while there were certainly lesbians in the concentration camps, they were not interred on the basis of their sexual orientation, a situation that significantly differed from that of homosexual men.<sup>53</sup>

In the end, the planners and financiers of the monument decided to opt for an inclusive memory, dedicating it to all homosexuals – men and women – who faced persecution under the Nazi regime. As historian Claudia Schoppmann has pointed out, despite the legal differences between the persecution of homosexual men and women, all homosexual subcultures that existed in Weimar Germany were destroyed by the Nazis. Not only homosexual men, but lesbians too, had to live in constant fear; it was ultimately only the male chauvinism of Nazi ideology that kept lesbianism out of the law books.<sup>54</sup>

In December 2003, the *Bundestag*, Germany's federal parliament, resolved to fund the national memorial to the pink triangle prisoners in Berlin. Construction for the project began in the summer of 2007, and the Memorial to the Homosexuals Persecuted under the National Socialist Regime, located on the edge of Berlin's Tiergarten Park and across the street from the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, was unveiled to the public on 27 May 2008. Multiple governmental agencies were represented by dignitaries such as Klaus Wowereit, then Governing Mayor of Berlin, and State Minister for Culture, Bernd Neumann, who regretted in his speech that the commemoration of the Nazis' homosexual victims came 'very late'.<sup>55</sup>

The establishment of the Berlin memorial not only highlights the politics of memory, but also represents a significant shift in the relationship between the German government and the pink triangle past. While Paragraph 175 had been removed from German law in 1994, it was not until 17 May 2002 (symbolically set on 17/5 to recall Paragraph 175) that the *Bundestag* officially apologised to all homosexual victims of the Nazi regime and formally pardoned them of their Paragraph 175 convictions.

Finally, almost 60 years after the defeat of National Socialism, the German government changed its stance on the persecution of homosexuals, thus allowing pink triangle victims into the official German memory of the Nazi past. In addition to removing legal blemishes from survivors' records, granting a sense of official legitimacy to their victimisation and establishing a more inclusive national memory, the *Bundestag's* decisions also made any pink triangle

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<sup>51</sup> For an example of a lesbian reaction, see Alice Schwarzer's article, 'Homo-Mahnmal: Im Getto des Kitsches', *Emma* (Jan./Feb. 2007), p. 75.

<sup>52</sup> For an excellent English summary of the Nazis' reasons to not criminalise lesbianism, see Schulze (2011), pp. 29–30.

<sup>53</sup> Blei, 'Aufregung um lesbischen Kuss' (note 48).

<sup>54</sup> Schoppmann (1993).

<sup>55</sup> Cited in Schulze (2011), p. 34.



Klaus Born, born 1944, in 2013 holding a photo of himself with his life partner, who has since died.

survivors who were still alive eligible for full restitution, including financial compensation. Unfortunately, the government's apology and pardon came so late that most survivors had already passed away.<sup>56</sup>

Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, the *Bundestag's* 2002 pardon was only for men convicted under Paragraph 175 during the Nazi regime, not those convicted during the first two decades of the Federal Republic. Two years earlier, the *Bundestag* voted only to express its regret for, rather than pardon, the homosexual men who continued to be criminalised for decades after the end of the war.<sup>57</sup> Such an action again highlights the nuances of memory politics. Ultimately, the German government found it easier to pardon those convictions issued by a regime of the past, one that had been morally discredited in its entirety.

The *Bundestag's* 2002 apology therefore represents a somewhat dubious sleight of hand in which it was able to cast the German state in a progressive light for pardoning the Nazis' victims, while at the same time neglecting to exonerate the post-war Paragraph 175 convictions. Doing so would have required the government to admit that it had willingly upheld and actively convicted people with the Nazi version of a law. As a result, nearly 60,000 men, among them Klaus Born, who were convicted under Paragraph 175 in West Germany after the Second World War, still have convictions on their records. In a 2012 interview, Born stated that while a pardon of his conviction would be important, "The truth is, you can't make it better, can't make amends, not with all of the money in the world."<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> In a 1986 decision, the West German government allowed homosexual men to apply for compensation funds (though not legal rehabilitation), but explicitly not as victims of Nazi injustice, but rather as victims of warfare, and only if they had served at least nine months in a concentration camp. By only viewing individual cases, this decision continued the West German refusal to acknowledge homosexuals as a *group*. For more details, see Hutter (2002), especially pp. 347-8.

<sup>57</sup> Höll, 'Der Richter und das Opfer' (note 3).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

## Conclusion: ‘Remembering Must Also Have Consequences’

Seven decades after the liberation of Nazi concentration and death camps, we pause to reflect on the legacy of those 12 years that constituted Hitler’s ‘Thousand-Year Reich.’ The Nazi persecution of homosexuals is a topic that was, for decades, oppressively silenced by both the West German government and a conservative majority of the West German populace. It may be misleading to speak of homosexuals as a ‘forgotten’ victim group of the Nazi regime, because in reality, they had been intentionally ignored. Moreover, the Federal Republic of Germany continued to enforce the Nazi-amended Paragraph 175, convicting nearly 60,000 men for homosexual acts, the same number of men that were prosecuted by the Nazis during the Third Reich, although the convictions in the Federal Republic were spread out over a longer period of time.

Therefore, 1945 certainly does not represent a complete liberation for German homosexual men who had to fear further imprisonment, or for German lesbians who continued to face political and social persecution. To question 1945 as a *Stunde Null*, or a definitive end to one era and a clean beginning to another, is not to gloss over the fact the Nazi regime was defeated and the vast system of camps was dismantled. In that sense, the comparisons between West Germany’s anti-homosexual policies and those of the Third Reich can only go so far. Yet, the West German state’s decision to uphold and enforce the Third Reich’s version of Paragraph 175 highlights troubling continuities between a defeated totalitarian regime and a new democratic state.

Competing memories of the Nazis’ anti-homosexual campaign had existed since the liberation of the camps at the end of the war. While some homosexual camp survivors risked social ostracisation and legal repercussion to publicise their experiences and create a greater public awareness of the topic, the West German state maintained its non-memory of homosexual victimhood by excluding the pink triangle inmates from all commemoration ceremonies and victim compensation laws. Only in the 1970s, after the pink triangle and the memories tied to it were used as a symbol of the gay liberation movement, do we begin to witness the emergence of a larger dialogue in which proponents of these multiple memories were interacting more directly and more often in an attempt to come to a consensus as to what the pink triangle past meant for homosexuals and for West Germany in general.

However, while a collective memory about the pink triangle persecution has now emerged in the German public, there is no consensus on the details of that memory. The continuing debate over whether the national memorial in Berlin should have included lesbians, for example, reveals that we must question not only the definition of ‘liberation’, but also the meaning of ‘persecution’. Acknowledging that lesbians were also tyrannised under the Nazi regime does not represent a rewriting of the past for the sake of political correctness; instead, it is an acknowledgement that persecution can go beyond a narrow definition of legal injustice to include the destruction of subcultures and networks of support, the forced ‘outing’ of individuals, the suppression of identities and the exclusion from memories.

In his speech at the 2010 Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Nazism, Günter Dworek of the Lesbian and Gay Union of Germany proclaimed that, ‘Remembering must also have consequences.’<sup>59</sup> Dworek was referring to the fact that our memories have power, and that

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<sup>59</sup> Günter Dworek, speech at the commemoration ceremony for the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of National Socialism, 27 January 2010. Speech text from an online press release: <http://www.lsvd.de/presse/pressespiegel/pressespiegel/article/gedenken-muss-auch-konsequenzen-haben-11482.html> (accessed 30 September 2014).

remembering a past injustice can – and should – lead to the rectification of that wrongdoing. Thus, memory is more than a post-historical reflection on the past; it is a historical action itself. As the memories of pink triangle persecution have shown, the way we remember the past directly shapes material circumstances in the present. For decades the West German government, and then the unified German government, excluded homosexual victimhood from the memory of the Nazi past, and the result went far beyond the forgetting or silencing of personal stories.

Undoubtedly, a handful of individuals and groups promoted a greater awareness of this past for decades. But it was not until the German government changed its stance, offered limited pardons for Paragraph 175 convictions, and used federal monies to fund a memorial that the topic received widespread national attention. This demonstrates not only the ability of grassroots movements to influence official national memories through campaigning and lobbying, but also the dramatic impact a government can have on its population's collective memory of the national past. Gaining consensus over the past and constructing accurate and honest collective memories is a tricky undertaking indeed.

The gradual emergence of the pink triangle memory into public awareness and larger understanding of the Holocaust is not a uniquely West German event. The memory of Nazi persecution transcended national borders via gay activist networks, and by the 1980s, the pink triangle had become the most important and powerful symbol of the global gay rights movement.<sup>60</sup> By forcing modern democracies in the West to distance themselves from the homophobic practices of the Nazi regime, history became a tool not only to recognise victims of past transgressions, but to also push for gay liberation and to help assure LGBT rights in the present.

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<sup>60</sup>The transnational aspects of the pink triangle memory is an important topic and one that I am currently studying in much greater detail in my doctoral dissertation.

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