

# But What Does It Mean? The Pink Triangle and Its Many Different Roles

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Symbols are defined by context.

Take for example the pound sign.

If you're on Twitter, this may be seen as a hashtag.

If you're making a list, this may be seen as a number sign.

But if you're making a phone call, you'd call it the pound sign.

Even the symbology of color is defined by context.

In a wedding, white represents purity and innocence.

But in a hospital, white represents clean, sterile, cold.

Green shows envy or jealousy, unless it is on packaging, and then it's seen as eco-friendly.

Even symbols that seem factual are entirely defined by their context.

Take for example an x in math.

When attached to a number, this x is seen as a variable.

But if not, it's a multiplication sign.

This symbol is defined by the formula that surrounds it.

It is defined by the context that surrounds it.

It is defined by where its place is in that context.

All symbols are defined by the context that surrounds them and where they fit in that context.

This is exactly the story of the pink triangle.

A symbol, whose meaning changed over time as the context around it shifted.

But how, and why, did this context shift. And how did that change the meaning of the pink triangle?

This is **Sydney Reuter**, and I will be joined by Dr. Erik Jensen, professor at the University of Miami, and Dr. Jake Newsome, historian at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and author of upcoming book *Pink Triangle Legacies: Coming Out in the Shadow of the Holocaust*.

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The pink triangle first came into existence in Nazi Germany.

In concentration camps, prisoners were marked according to their so-called crimes.

For Jews, it was a yellow star.

For criminals, it was a green triangle.

For asocial, a black triangle.

And for homosexuals, it was the pink triangle.

Now, there is a common belief that homosexual persecution was the worst in camps.

However, this is not necessarily true.

In order to understand the persecution that homosexuals faced, we have to understand the different types of persecution.

**Newsome:** "There was, um, a perceived, different perceived threats to the so-called master race"

That was Dr. Jake Newsome.

He was explaining that all persecution during the Nazi regime was based around the idea that these groups, who were different, would be a threat to the master race.

The so-called, best race.

But these groups threatened the master race in different ways.

Jews and Roma, for example, were seen as a threat to the master race, regardless of if they converted and no longer identified with that group.

To the Nazis, the members of these groups could not be quote-end-quote cured.

**Newsome:** "These types of racial threats needed to be physically eliminated. To be murdered. To be taken out of society."

So, in order to cleanse their master race, the Nazis systematically killed these people.

Homosexuality, though, was seen as a disease.

Inherently, diseases can be cured.

So instead of systematically killing homosexuals, the Nazi's aimed to reform them.

To cure them of their vice, and reintegrate them into society.

The Nazi's applied this mindset to other groups too, like asocial and criminals.

So, what you get is these two separate groups.

One, that is slated for murder, and the other that isn't.

However, in the group that wasn't systematically killed, Dr. Eric Jensen and Dr. Jake Newsome agreed that there is a chance that homosexuals were the worst treated.

**Jensen:** "You know, there, you know, probably, within in the pecking order, you know, I imagine, gay men, the pink triangle prisoners, were pretty low"

**Newsome:** "They were kept isolated, we know that they were often times given less food, or often time the harshest work details"

The most defining experience that homosexuals faced while at camp were the harsh work details.

Gay prisoners were given the hardest manual labor as a way to cure them.

Hard labor was seen as masculine.

And masculinity can "cure" homosexuals from being gay.

So, the Nazi theory was to make the gay prisoners more masculine, and therefore less gay, by giving them harsh manual labor.

However, this hard labor also led to high death rates.

Homosexuals faced a death rate of about 65%.

This was the highest death rate among prisoners not slated for murder.

This likely caused the myth that homosexuals were treated the worst in the camps.

But it's important to note that homosexuals were not the target of the Nazi regime.

Jews were.

And homosexuals were not systematically killed off like Jews.

That being said, the persecution that gay prisoners faced was still significant.

And this persecution is the first context that shapes the pink triangle.

And this context gives it its first meaning.

One of victimhood and victimization.

One of mourning.

One of fear.

One of terror, suffering, pain, starvation, and death.

This meaning is one of the Nazi regime.

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After the fall of the Nazi regime and the ending of world war two, various homosexual organizations became popular in west Germany.

One of these organizations published an article that advocated for the use of the pink triangle.

So, we start to see the use of the pink triangle in the gay liberation movement around 1973.

And the use of it begins to spread, and it becomes a symbol to identify gay people.

But the triangle was picked for a very strategic use.

It wasn't just thrown in as a random suggestion.

**Newsome:** "There was a need, to figure out, well how can we, as activists, make ourselves known as being gay without literally telling every single person, then there was this idea of pick a gay symbol"

For homosexuals, coming out was a political act.

It was a way to show society that gay people exist, and that there are a lot of them.

By coming out to the general society as gay, it showed society that they know a gay person, whether they are aware of it or not.

And the pink triangle allowed gay people to come out publicly.

And this allowed the gay rights movement to grow in numbers.

Which then allowed it to become a more powerful minority.

So, one of the reasons the pink triangle was chosen was simply to gain numbers and influence during the gay liberation movement.

But the triangle was also chosen for its controversy.

**Newsome:** "You want to find something that is, that sparks discussion"

The triangle was a symbol that was able to stop people in their tracks.

Mainstream society would be able to identify that it was tied to homosexuals and the Nazi regime.

And the ability to make this connection got mainstream society to pause and think and ask questions.

The pink triangle was able to spark discussion through its controversy.

The gay community wanted something that somebody walking down the street would stop to look at.

They wanted something that mainstream society would pay attention to, so they could talk about what it was like to be gay in the 1970s.

What it was like to face homophobia, legal oppression, erasure of their past persecution, and all the other hardships.

And the symbol that mainstream society would pay attention to?

The pink triangle.

**Newsome:** "It's power, was, um, while it had the risk of being controversial, it actually helped raise awareness and achieve the gay right's movements goals"

But these were not the only two reasons why the pink triangle was chosen.

**Jensen:** "There was a political use, that this memory of victimization could be put to, especially in the 1970s"

The pink triangle pointed back to the Nazi regime and the persecution that gay prisoners faced.

It framed homosexuals as victims of the Nazi regime.

And this framing served as a warning sign to the gay community.

It not only reminded the gay community of what did happen, but it reminded the gay community of what can happen when you become complacent.

In this sense it almost served as a type of motivation for the gay rights movement.

To tell them to keep fighting against their current persecution to avoid repeating their past persecution.

So, all of these reasons why the pink triangle was chosen are very heavily political.

And this is where we see the second context around the pink triangle start to form.

One of politics, and controversy, and coming out.

And this second context gives it its second meaning.

And this isn't necessarily one of persecution.

It certainly still had that meaning, but it gained a meaning of political strategy and gay pride.

The pink triangle allowed people to come out publicly, and to be proud of that.

The pink triangle allowed its users to have gay pride, and through that, it became a symbol of gay pride itself.

It gained a meaning of just simply, pride.

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So, there are these two contexts and these two meanings of the pink triangle.

One, recognizing a horrible instance and the persecution of the Nazi regime, and the other of gay pride and being happy to be a part of the community

And there is a tension between these two roles

**Jensen:** “So, you know, it’s supposed to be this marker of solemn commemoration and we think about what we’ve survived and on the other hand it’s supposed to be like yay gay pride. I always thought there was a little bit of tension between those kinda dual roles”

These two roles are on opposite ends of the spectrum, and the pink triangle was responsible for carrying both of them, at the same time

But this was not the only tension that surrounded the pink triangle

There were other tensions that were also significant

One of which was the tension between gays and lesbians

**Newsome:** “And that it wasn’t as inclusive enough for the rest of, you know, for the, the L, the B, the T, and the Q of the community”

There were almost no historical documents that showed lesbians were persecuted in the same way gay men were

In other words, the pink triangle seemed to belong exclusively to gay men

Because of this, many gay men didn’t include lesbians in the use of the pink triangle

Naturally, many lesbians pushed back against this, asking why they weren’t included

And gay men responded by saying, historically, they weren’t there

And that simply, the pink triangle didn’t apply to them

Eventually this tension would give way to a more inclusive symbol, the rainbow flag

But at the time, this tension did contribute to the controversy of the pink triangle

The pink triangle also had tensions within the gay and Jewish communities

It’s pretty clear why this symbol would cause tension

After all, it is pointing back to the Holocaust

An event where Jews were the primary target, not gay men

**Jensen:** “Because I think, I think, many Jews, especially Jew survivors, rightly so, said look, the Nazi regime targeted first and foremost Jews, homosexual men were not their preoccupation the way, the way Jews were”

However, despite this natural area for tension, there was surprisingly not as much as you might expect

The pink triangle never sought to undermine Jewish suffering

And few people thought it did

While it may have inadvertently had this effect, it was never the intention

The goal of pointing back to the Holocaust was to show people that gay men were also persecuted

And to tell historians that they needed to research this topic

**Newsome:** “The, the academic community, the professional historian community, had completely ignored what happened to gay people in the holocaust”

Up until the pink triangle, most people ignored that gay men were also persecuted under the Nazi regime

So, this was why the pink triangle was chosen

To point back to past persecution, but not to say that it was worse than Jewish persecution

And for the most part, people understood this

**Newsome:** “Is that actually, it was accepted, with, I’m not going to say with no controversy, but with actually quite little controversy”

But, there was still some tension around it

Naturally, members of the mainstream, or the straight, Jewish community took up issue with the pink triangle

Despite some of the earliest users of the pink triangle being Jewish themselves, there were still tensions between the mainstream Jewish community and the gay community

Thankfully, however, there has been more of an integration between these two communities, and the tensions have since died down

Generational tensions were also present around the pink triangle

A lot of younger members of the gay community were questioning why this symbol was being used

**Jensen:** “Why are we, you know, from their perspective, like fetishizing this memory of victimization”

Why should we keep pointing back to this persecution?

We already have so much on our shoulders to bear, why should we add on to it?

Why use such a negative symbol?

Why not celebrate the good instead?

By contrast, the older community understood the importance of looking back.

They understood the importance of warning people of what can happen.

That being said, not everybody from the older generation liked the use of the pink triangle either.

**Newsome:** “Of course what they faced in the 70s was bad, but could you really compare it to being thrown into a concentration camp”

There was concern that the pink triangle was directly comparing their current persecution to their past persecution

And that you can't compare the pink triangle to today, or the 70s

Really, what we see in these generational tensions is the classic young vs. old dynamic

Where each generation has differing views and therefore differing opinions

Overall, all of these tensions are not as present today, but they did exist at one point in time

And this is the third context we see surrounding the pink triangle

One of, unintended consequences, tensions, and controversy

And this context gives the pink triangle its third meaning

One that, is a little bit more hesitant

More cautious around its use

One that has people question if it's okay

If we should be doing that

Ultimately, one that is purely, in of itself, controversial

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These three meanings of the pink triangle - persecution, pride, and controversy

These three meanings were necessary to further gay rights during the gay liberation movements

The meaning of persecution pointed back, reminding people of past and present hardships

The meanings of pride and controversy allowed knowledge and awareness to spread further than it had before

And these meanings could not have been shaped without their contexts

And without these meanings, the pink triangle would not have been as bold or strong

And it wouldn't have been able to help the gay community achieve their rights

While the pink triangle did die out, there's been a resurgence of it recently

And it's still quite significant today

Recently, the world has seen a rise of right-wing extremism

The symbols used to combat this need to be strong

**Newsome:** "The pink triangle is much more, is much more powerful to face that type of right-wing extremism than the rainbow flag is. Not only because of its reminder of history, but also as its history of, it's already been a radical queer symbol."

For the gay community, that might just be the pink triangle

Overall, the triangle has a long, complicated, powerful history as a symbol that represented both harm and pride

It was used to push for gay rights, and now it may be used to defend those same rights

So, the pink triangle's story may not be over yet

And there may be a fourth context, and fourth meaning, to come

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