

# Gays and the Holocaust

*Martin Gilbert*

*The Pink Triangle* by Richard Plant.  
Holt and Co., 1986, 288pp.

In just over two hundred pages of text, Richard Plant has provided a powerful and painful account of what he calls "The Nazi War Against Homosexuals." In statistical terms, sixty percent of all homosexuals sent to German concentration camps were murdered: Plant estimates the total death toll at between 5,000 and 15,000.

It is clear from this work that homosexuals were marked out for discrimination from the earliest days of the Nazi regime. Within four weeks of Hitler coming to power, all homosexual-rights groups were proscribed, together with "pornography." But it was two years later, in January 1935, that the Nazis amended and reinforced paragraph 175 of the Penal Code of 1871, a paragraph which stated in its opening sentence that any male who "indulges in criminally indecent activities will be punished with jail."

On the basis of this notorious paragraph 175, first the incarceration, then the humiliation, and finally the murder of homosexuals was given the veil of legality.

I describe paragraph 175 as "notorious" because a reading of this book makes clear just how systematically and in the end barbarically, its ruling was interpreted. Richard Plant is indignant, however, that all too few historians of Nazi Germany or of the Holocaust have referred to paragraph 175 or its aftermath. In this I sympathize. My own map showing the countries of origin of homosexuals murdered in Mauthausen was criticized (when first published in 1982 in the *Macmillan Atlas of the Holocaust*) as having nothing to do with the

Holocaust and mass murder. It was argued that although the murder of homosexuals was odious, it was neither systematic nor comprehensive.

Each reader of this book will have to make up his or her own mind as to how far the murder of homosexuals by the Third Reich was or was not an aspect of genocide. As Plant shows, the anti-homosexual drive in Nazism ran parallel with and was consistently linked with the anti-Jewish drive. When, in 1929, four years before Hitler came to power, a Parliamentary Committee of the Weimar Assembly voted in favor of abolishing paragraph 175, the official Nazi newspapers wrote: "Among the many evil instincts that characterize the Jewish race, one that is especially pernicious has to do with sexual relationships. The Jews are forever trying to propagandize sexual relations between siblings, men and animals, and men and men. We National Socialists will soon unmask and condemn them by law. These efforts are nothing but vulgar, perverted crimes and we will punish them by banishment or hanging."

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In a speech to SS trainees in February 1937, Himmler linked homosexual practice with the demographic decline of a Germany obviously weakened numerically by the slaughter of World War I. As to homosexuals, he declared, "like stinging nettles we will rip them out, throw them on a heap, and burn them. Otherwise, if we continue to have this vice predominant in Germany without being able to fight it, we'll see the end of Germany, the end of the Germanic world."

The language used to denounce homosexuals was as cruel as that used in abusing the Jews. The results were also cruel: German and Dutch homosexuals were, when they could be identified, sent to concentration camps. In March 1942, a directive issued by the Gestapo declared that it was "necessary to proceed against homosexuals ... even if these are Poles and have sexually interacted with Poles only." Plant does not tell us how, or even if, this instruction was carried out. Likewise, when Heydrich, in Prague, ordered the expulsion of non-German homosexuals from the territory of the Reich that same month, it is not clear to what extent this order was carried out. Insofar as deportation was the essential preliminary to incarceration and death, Heydrich's order was however, in concept at least, a link between homosexuals born outside the Germany of 1937 and Jews. But whereas the Jews murdered in Mauthausen came from at least twenty countries and the Gypsies from twelve, the homosexuals came from only three (Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland).

For the Nazis, both in Greater Germany and in the conquered lands, the principal problem was one of identification. Other than subscription lists to some thirty homosexual magazines or membership of certain clubs, no lists existed that could in any way identify homosexuals. Jews, by contrast, were well identified in the membership lists of their communities, as well as in their political, literary, charitable and Zionist organizations. The only formal registration of homosexuals in Germany had taken place before World War I, in 1897, when more than 20,000 had been registered.

This problem of identification must have saved tens of thousands of homosexuals. A Jew could be ordered to wear a yellow star while going about his daily urban life, and could be severely punished if he was found without it. A homosexual, not readily

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identifiable in any street or communal setting, did not wear the pink triangle after he had been sent to the concentration camp.

It is clear, and Plant gives considerable eyewitness testimony to this, that once in camp, homosexuals were often singled out for particularly violent assault by camp guards. Many were subjected to medical experiments. Others were sent to some of the most harsh labor tasks in quarries and underground factories. At Sachsenhausen, of 300 homosexuals selected to work

in a cement quarry in June 1942, only 50 were still alive two months later.

This is certainly persecution of a racial or group sort, but in this reviewer's opinion it is not easily described as genocide. Homosexuals were not deported to those camps where the sole and immediate end was death, as it was for all Jews deported to Chelmno, Treblinka, Sobibor, Belzec and Maly Trostenets. No attempt was made to persecute the parents or siblings, or to find those who would betray them, certainly not beyond the

confines of the Reich. The slave labor system and the camps to which homosexuals were sent were not specifically geared to their torment as a group, but to their destruction primarily as individuals. When all is argued, however, on both sides of this debate, the truth remains that the treatment of the homosexuals at camps such as Flossenburg, Sachsenhausen and Mittelbau-Dora was abominable by any standards of human behavior. □