

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context.
Mikhail Bakhtin

HISTORY AND MEMORY OF THE NAZI PERSECUTION OF HOMOSEXUALS

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Erik Jensen, Miami University, United States

Interview by Ana Fonseca

Ana Fonseca: Hello and welcome to Radio Heteroglossia. I am Ana Fonseca and our guest today is [Dr. Erik Jensen](#). Dr. Jensen is a historian and an Associate Professor of History at [Miami University](#) in the United States. Today, we will be discussing the article written by Dr. Jensen entitled, “[The Pink Triangle and Political Consciousness: Gays, Lesbians, and the Memory of Nazi Persecution](#),” published in 2002 in the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, which traces the development of collective memories of Nazi persecution in both the American and German homosexual communities over the span of thirty years, while providing insights into the relatively less known legacies and memories of Nazi persecution. Dr. Jensen, welcome and thank you for talking to us today.

Erik Jensen: Thank you for having me. I’m eager to talk to you about this subject.

Ana Fonseca: Great! Let me start by asking you about the reasons that led you to write this article and what would be the main ideas that you hope people can take from it.

Erik Jensen: The idea for the article grew out of a graduate school seminar way back when I was in the University of Wisconsin Madison. It was probably 1994-95 and I was taking a seminar with my advisor on the subject of collective memory. At the same time the local gay newspaper in Madison was publishing a series of articles about the Nazi persecution of homosexuals, and they were publishing some relatively wild numbers and figures in terms of the number of men who were persecuted for being homosexuals, somewhere upwards of three million people; and of course, you know, I was a young historian and I was like, Oh my gosh! This is a violation of the historical record, this is inaccurate! And it’s also an interesting reflection of the way in which community newspapers can contribute to a certain collective memory of an event, in this case a persecution.

So in the context of that seminar, I decided to write my seminar paper on the subject of the collective memory of the Nazi persecution within the gay and lesbian community both in the United States and in Germany. And, my main idea kind of evolved overtime. At first as I mentioned I was sort of outraged as this young historian like you know, “how can they be so inaccurate!” As I researched more deeply into the topic and began to think about what was going on in the larger societal context at the time of various publications in the 70s and 80s, it started to make complete sense and I don’t think it was willful misleading by any means. I think here was a community that felt itself persecuted at the present moment -whether it was the 70s, 80s, or 90s- and was unconsciously or consciously seeing parallels to earlier persecutions and kind of making sense of these earlier persecutions in the context of what they were feeling at the time, and vice versa. So, I think overtime I gave a much more nuanced understanding of the way that collective memory works.

So I guess what I want readers to take form this article is maybe just a better sense of how, the way in which we think about the past and talk about the past in popular venues is so thoroughly shaped by what is going on around us at the present time. And I should add, this is not just of popular venues, this is absolutely true of academic historians as well. We are very much shaped by our contemporary context. When we go to the archives and look at documents and start thinking about the past, we can’t remove ourselves from our present-day mentalities.

Ana Fonseca: Speaking of that contemporary context, I would like to ask you, first of all what was the “Pink Triangle” during the Nazi regime? And how has the pink triangle spoken to more contemporary struggles of the homosexual community?

Erik Jensen: The pink triangle was initially and insignia sewn onto the concentration camp uniforms of men who had been imprisoned in the concentration camps for violations of paragraph 175 or 175 A, which were these paragraphs in the German criminal code that criminalized not just homosexual behaviour, but -in the case of paragraph 175- homosexual intent or homosexual suggestion. In the 1970s the pink triangle was revived in the context of certain gay right struggles. For example, in 1974 in New York in the context of gay rights legislation that was pending before the city council there. A little bit earlier than that, in West Germany, in the context of some gay right issues there. And then in the 1980s, of course, perhaps even more famously, in the context of the AIDS epidemic the AIDS activist group appropriated the pink triangle flipped it outside down and applied their famous motto, “Silence = Death.” That was a very visible use of it. Lately, you see it a little bit less often. I think it has largely been supplanted

in the 1990s by the rainbow flag. But, for example, the safe zone signs that are relatively ubiquitous in American college campuses, and even American high schools, has used the Pink Triangle as well. So, it was a type of reappropriation of the symbol of persecution that both reminded gays and lesbians of previous persecution, but also as a sort of a symbol of struggle and a fight for greater civil equality.

Ana Fonseca: Central to your article is a discussion of the memories of the Nazi persecution of homosexuals that contemporary homosexual communities chose to remember and the reasons for it. Along these lines, you discuss some of the exaggerations, myths and historical inaccuracies surrounding people's memories of the Nazi persecution of homosexuals. I wonder if you can talk more about these myths and inaccuracies, and what circumstances and/or constraints led to the emergence of these somewhat misleading pictures of the Nazi persecution of homosexuals?

Erik Jensen: Absolutely. First of all, I'll preface this by saying that for a long time after the end of the Second World War and the liberation of these concentration camps there was almost no discussion of the persecution of homosexuals. It was a society that was very homophobic and most homosexuals were not at all willing to come forward and talk about their past persecutions. They remained completely silent about what happened during the war or they made up something to cover up where they had been for all those years. So there is a great deal of silence for the first two decades-two and a half decades after the end of the Second World War. It was only in the 1970s that a very few survivors began to talk about their experiences mostly anonymously or under pseudonyms, which again speaks to the climate in which they were publishing and trying to talk about this. So there is a great deal of unknowingness with respect to what happened to these men and what the fates of these men were. In the absence of documents and testimonials, there is kind of this void that people filled as best they could. To some extent that meant drawing parallels to the Nazi persecution of Jews. In the absence of knowing what the specific nature of the Nazi persecution of homosexuals was like, they'd be looking around and thinking, "well, here is another example of Nazi persecution this time of Jews. There must be parallels that may give insights into what happened to homosexuals." This led to some of the exaggerations.

Some of the exaggerations involved the numbers. As I mentioned, my initial interest in this topic sprang from this article that I saw that talked about three million men persecuted for same-sex sexual contact or for being homosexuals. This was wildly exaggerated. As it turns out now, according to the best

scholarly estimates, it's probably closer to seven thousand, perhaps as many as ten thousand men died, which is already a very horrific number. But it's not close to some of this wildly inflated numbers that were initially coming up in the 70s, 80s and even early 90s.

Another of the exaggerations that has led to a fair amount of political friction within the gay and lesbian community over the past four decades has been the issue of the persecution of women for same-sex contact, the persecution of lesbians as lesbians. And, again, in this void of knowledge, of this absence of texts, documents and testimonials, there was a sense that, of course the Nazis were persecuting all homosexual people. So, initially people talked about women also wearing the pink triangle, beginning in the 1980s people began to talk about lesbians being branded with the black triangle which was the concentration camp insignia applied to people who were so called "asocials." In the political context, it actually came up again during the construction and inauguration of the memorial in Berlin, which was unveiled in 2008, to the Nazi persecution of homosexuals, and that makes reference to women as well as men. Where it gets tricky is, as historians and sociologists and other scholars have gone and come through the records, they have actually found really no indications or evidence that lesbians, as lesbians, were incarcerated in concentration camps. There are absolutely lesbians who were swept up in the Nazi persecutions, but almost entirely that was because they were also Jews, socialists, communists, resistance workers, or also any number of other persecuted groups. But not specifically because they were lesbians.

Having said that, the lesbian community also suffered a great deal under the Nazi regime. Lesbian bars were closed, just as much as gay male bars were. Lesbians felt compelled to go underground, many lesbians felt in this new climate that they had to come up with a sham marriage to cover their tracks. So there was absolutely, on the social level, a rampant persecution and a rampant sense of anxiety. But there was not the type of systematic persecution of lesbians that there was of homosexual men.

So these are two examples that I would give you. And again, largely in the context of this absence of knowing, this void, this search for parallels and this trying to make sense in the context of contemporary persecution.

Ana Fonseca: Dr. Jensen, how was the Nazi persecution of homosexuals similar and/or different from the Nazi persecution of Jews? And, can we talk about a holocaust of homosexual men in the way we talk about the genocide of Jewish people that occurred during the Nazi regime?

Erik Jensen: The Nazi persecution of homosexuals was far less systematic and I think that's important to say from the outset. This was one of the things I emphasized at the very beginning of the article, and then I go back at the end of the article to talk about the particular responsibilities that gays and lesbians have to both honor the memory of those persecuted by the Nazis, but also to respect the far greater and more systematic persecution and the sensitivities surrounding that on the part of Jews and the Jewish community.

For the most part, the Nazis were not that concerned about non-German homosexuals to the extent that Polish men were engaged in same-sex activity so much the better, it just confirmed the Nazi stereotype that Slavic peoples were subhuman. So that's one big difference. The other big difference of course is the numbers. Seven to ten thousand homosexual men died in the concentration camps. Somewhere around five to six million Jews died in the Nazi machinery. And then, perhaps, a third difference is the way in which it was commemorated. A little bit of a similarity as well. After the war, anyone who was persecuted by the Nazis was reluctant to talk about it. But relatively quickly, in the 1950s, scholars focused quite a bit of attention on the Nazi persecution of Jews and their prominent trials throughout the 1960s, of course the Adolf Eichmann trial, there is a famous Auschwitz trial in Germany. They began to explore this topic in greater depth.

So, it was much less extensive, there were lots of exceptions to it in certain circumstances depending on where you were in the war effort, depending on men power needs and so on; the post-war memory was much more active, to some extent as it should be because it was much greater and more extensive around the Nazi persecution of Jews than it was around the Nazi persecution of homosexuals. And that it was, in terms of its ideological centrality to Nazi thinking, it was far less central than the persecution of Jews.

So, I would shy away from that label of a type of holocaust in terms of describing the persecution of homosexuals only because I can understand the sensitivities of a lot of people who say, "look, the Nazis first and foremost target was the Jews, it was always the Jews, the most extensive persecutions were aimed at the Jews, the greatest number of murders by far were the murders of Jews." I can definitely understand and completely sympathize with those sensitivities.

Within the gay community, I'd say there are people who obviously argue that we should consider this a holocaust or come up with some term that illustrates its profound horror and terror; and they tend to be the ones who say, "let's not

quibble about numbers, the point is this people suffered madly.” And I say, absolutely that’s true but I think it’s enough to call it a Nazi persecution of homosexuals, and then to talk specifics about what the nature of it was.

Ana Fonseca: Dr. Jensen, thank you very much for your time and for sharing with us your knowledge and perspective on these issues.

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Erik Jensen: Thank you so much for interviewing me, and thank you for giving this issue some attention!

Ana Fonseca: My pleasure! It’s a very interesting topic indeed, and I appreciate the time you took to talk to us today.

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