



The pink triangle was first used as a mark of homosexuality in Nazi concentration camps.

## Pink Triangle

by Tina Gianoulis

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The pink triangle, inverted so that it rests on its point, was first used as a symbol of the criminalization and persecution of gay men. Less than forty years later, the pink triangle symbol was reclaimed by a new generation of gay men and lesbians who sought both to memorialize the painful past and celebrate what they hoped would be the dawning of an era of freedom and openness.

During the 1930s, Adolph Hitler's Third Reich government began the process of "cleansing" Germany of undesirable elements by arresting and incarcerating members of targeted groups. Officials developed a system of marking each concentration camp inmate with the reason for his or her detention.

This marking was achieved by sewing a colored triangle of cloth onto the front of each inmate's uniform. Criminals wore a green triangle; political prisoners wore red. Jehovah's Witnesses were given purple triangles, and "asocials," which included the Romany people or Gypsies, wore black triangles. Jews were marked with a yellow triangle, or two yellow triangles overlapping to form a six-pointed Jewish star.

In the late 1930s, the Reich penal code revised Paragraph 175. The newly drafted law not only outlawed sex between men, but also any kissing, hugging, or even homosexual fantasies. Gay men were rounded up by the thousands. Many were sent to regular prisons, but between 5,000 and 15,000 were incarcerated in concentration camps, where most of them perished.

In the camps, the homosexual prisoners suffered mistreatment by guards and other prisoners alike. They were subject to gruesome medical experiments, including castration; and were assigned the most arduous tasks. The majority of them were literally worked to death.

The homosexual prisoners were identified in the camps by a pink triangle sewn to their uniform jackets. This marking not only allowed the guards to differentiate between groups of inmates, but also served to institute a hierarchy among the inmates themselves, allowing gay men to be singled out for mistreatment by their fellow prisoners as well as by the administrators of the camps.

In the early 1970s, gay rights organizations in Germany and the United States launched campaigns to reclaim the pink triangle. In 1973 the German gay liberation group Homosexuelle Aktion Westberlin (HAW) called upon gay men to wear the pink triangle as a memorial to past victims and to protest continuing discrimination. The 1976 film *Rosa Winkel? Das ist doch schon lange vorbei...* (Pink Triangle? That was such a long time ago...), directed by Peter Recht, Detlef Stoffel, and Christiane Schmerl, also brought the issue to glbtq audiences.

American gay activists of the 1970s also promoted the pink triangle as a symbol of remembrance. The San Francisco journal *Gay Sunshine* and the Toronto gay journal *The Body Politic* publicized the use of the pink triangle in the Nazi concentration camps and urged the use of the symbol as a memorial to those who were persecuted.

During the early 1980s, as the heady rush of the early gay liberation movement began to give way to the

shock of the AIDS epidemic, many individual gay men and groups began to use the pink triangle as a modern symbol of gayness. Since it was not universally known, the triangle could be a sort of "in" sign, a subtle way to recognize other gay men and lesbians when placed on an automobile bumper sticker, or lapel pin. The triangle served as a reminder of past and current oppression and a tribute both to those who died in the camps and to those who were dying of the new disease.

ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) adopted the triangle but with the point facing upward to symbolize the need for an active response to AIDS and to the continuing oppression of glbtq people.

However, the pink triangle has a cheerful appearance, and it was soon used to add a "gay" touch to everything from bank checks to golf balls. In terms of popularity as a symbol of homosexuality, it is rivaled only by the rainbow flag.

However, some gay men and lesbians, especially Jews, have questioned the taste of adopting a Nazi badge as the symbol of all things gay. Others have questioned whether the symbol trivializes the suffering of gay men during the Nazi era.

Many lesbians felt little connection to the pink triangle, since it had only been placed on gay men. Lesbian sex was not criminalized by the Nazis in the same way that male-male sex had been. When lesbians were placed in concentration camps, they were often labeled "asocial" and given black triangles.

In acknowledgement of a need for a specifically lesbian symbol of oppression and resistance, some lesbians have reclaimed the black triangle rather than the pink.

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**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.