

**ENEMIES OF THE REGIME:**

Political Opponents, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Homosexuals



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**A**DOLF HITLER, THE ONETIME STRUGGLING LEADER OF THE RADICAL FRINGE NAZI movement, was appointed Reich Chancellor of Germany by President Paul von Hindenburg on January 30, 1933. The decision came as a surprise to the nation, especially because the president was under no obligation to put Hitler in power. The Nazis—although Germany’s largest political party in the national elections of 1932—did not command a majority in parliament (called the *Reichstag*) and, therefore, did not have the votes to form a government on their own. Furthermore, President von Hindenburg disliked Hitler personally and had in the past resisted naming him chancellor for fear that the move would result in a one-party dictatorship. At the same time, Hindenburg was exhausted by Germany’s seemingly endless and unresolved political, economic, and constitutional crises.

Advancing in age, Hindenburg was ready to become an elder statesman, freed from the daily responsibility of governing the country. His advisers, who were close to the German Nationalist People’s Party, told him that by appointing Hitler chancellor he would create a Nazi–Nationalist coalition, which would effectively end Hitler’s career as a radical outsider and vocal critic of the Weimar government, stabilizing it in the process. Hindenburg was further reassured that conservative and nationalist elements in the Reichstag would use their political savvy to keep the Nazi party in check. Despite deep misgivings, the president took the fateful step, persuaded that Hitler could be controlled.

Hindenburg’s advisers could not have been more wrong. Hitler and the Nazis had no intention of being managed by the president or anyone else. Indeed, with his role as chancellor secured, Hitler saw his way clear to take the troubled nation in hand. Recalling a key element of his campaign platform, he triumphantly declared the establishment of the National Community (*Volksgemeinschaft*), which the Nazis envisioned as a unified race of “Aryan” Germans under their leadership. Hitler then moved carefully—operating both inside and outside the legal framework of the constitution—to organize the police power necessary to enforce his long-term policies of racial purification and European conquest.

As a first step, the Nazis set out to crush political opposition inside Germany. In 1933, the priority enemies were the Communist and Social Democratic Parties, politicians, and trade union leaders. The Nazis began by identifying individual political opponents; branding them enemies of the German nation and dangerous obstacles to its recovery; and systematically attacking, persecuting, and suppressing them in the name of national peace.

In addition to political opponents, the Nazis identified and targeted spiritual resisters (Jehovah’s Witnesses) and so-called social deviants (especially homosexuals). Nazi theory

held that those people, insofar as they were “Aryan” Germans, were worthwhile members of the social order who had lost their sense of their intrinsic racial value and, in consequence, had drifted away from the National Community. German society would welcome them back, provided they embraced Nazi ideology and accepted the roles and responsibilities that came with their racial status. Although in practice the Nazis moved harshly and often with lethal outcome against activist leaders and others who resisted their authority, they expected, in accordance with their racist view, that the rank and file—perhaps after time in a concentration camp—would see the light and fall in with the collective. Those who persistently refused to be reformed were to be further terrorized and punished as a warning to other recalcitrant offenders, and, if necessary, to be removed from society.

Communists being held at gunpoint (right) by a member of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA) after a mass arrest of political opponents of the Nazi regime. BERLIN, GERMANY, MARCH 6, 1933. WITH PERMISSION OF THE BUNDESARCHIV

#### POLITICAL OPPONENTS

Hitler inaugurated his regime with a wave of public violence against political opponents. The brutality was carried out by members of the Nazi paramilitary formations, namely the SA (*Sturmabteilung*) also known as storm troopers, and the SS (*Schutzstaffel*), the elite guard of the Nazi party. On February 22, 1933, Hitler’s second in command, Hermann Göring, inducted members of the SA and the SS into the police as auxiliaries, giving them

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license to arbitrarily beat or kill people whom they deemed to be opponents. In response to expected protests over the Nazi takeover, Göring ordered the police to shoot to kill all Communist demonstrators. In individual spontaneous acts of violence or in locally organized waves of persecution, Nazi party faithful assaulted those whom they perceived to be enemies of the regime. Street battles, such as “Bloody Sunday” in February 1933, left one Communist dead and hundreds wounded. A few months later, during a violent spree that came to be called the “Week of Blood,” Nazi thugs killed dozens of political opponents in Berlin alone.

On the night of February 27–28, 1933, 24-year-old Marinus van der Lubbe, an unemployed bricklayer and recent arrival in Germany from Holland, set fire to the Reichstag, the German parliament building, in protest against Nazi persecution of the Communists. Although he acted on his own, van der Lubbe had been a member of the Communist youth movement. Hitler and Joseph Goebbels, Nazi party district leader (*Gauleiter*) of Berlin, seized the opportunity to portray the incident as being a signal for an armed Communist uprising against the state. That very night, German police arrested and detained 4,000 Communists and Social Democrats.

The following day, under the pretext of national security, Hitler—counting on the support of his Nationalist coalition partners—persuaded President von Hindenburg to issue a decree that suspended German constitutional provisions guaranteeing basic individual rights, including freedom of speech, assembly, and the press. The new law also permitted dramatically increased state and police intervention into private life, allowing officials to censor mail, listen in on phone conversations, and search private homes without either a warrant or the need to show reasonable cause. Most important, under the state of emergency established by the decree, the Nazi regime could arrest and detain people without cause and without limits on the length of incarceration. Within a few months, the German police had arrested and incarcerated more than 20,000 people in Prussia alone.

The decree provided a legal basis to intimidate, persecute, and pass discriminatory legislation against political opponents (especially those in the Communist and the Social Democratic Parties), and it offered a pretext for targeting politically active Jews. With all of the Communist representatives under arrest and after intense intimidation and bullying by the Nazis, the remaining parties represented in the Reichstag passed the Enabling Act in late March 1933. That measure gave the Nazi government the authority to pass laws and issue decrees without parliamentary consent. By divesting itself of legislative authority, the Reichstag effectively legalized a dictatorship and became a rubber stamp for the Nazi regime. By mid-July, a scant four and a half months later, the

Nazis were the only political party left in Germany. The others either had been outlawed by the government or had dissolved themselves under pressure. The government also abolished all trade unions, long the traditional supporters of leftist parties, thus forcing workers, employees, and employers instead to join the German Labor Front under Nazi leader Robert Ley.

In the months after the Nazis seized power, officials of the Secret State Police (*Gestapo*), often accompanied by members of the SA and SS, went from door to door looking for political opponents. They arrested and in some cases killed Socialists, Communists, trade union leaders, and others who had spoken out against the Nazi party. Within six months, nearly all openly organized opposition to the regime had been eliminated. Democracy in Germany was dead.

Leaders and members of the German Communist and the Social Democratic Parties and the left-wing trade unions were among the first to organize active underground resistance. Although those two parties had been rivals during the elections of the Weimar Republic, many of their members cooperated closely after the Nazis seized power. They were joined by individuals who had not been politically active before 1933 but who held socialist convictions or simply shared a desire to resist the Nazis.

Even though most of the German Communist Party leaders fled abroad or were imprisoned in 1933, remaining members met secretly and distributed illegal newspapers and leaflets produced on secret presses in Germany or smuggled in from neighboring countries. By 1935, the Gestapo had infiltrated most of the larger political opposition groups; mass arrests and trials as well as killings followed. By 1936, the regime had crushed virtually all organized left-wing opposition, including both large-scale operations and smaller resistance cells. Still, some Communist and Socialist activists continued their efforts, sabotaging the Nazis where they could and spreading their own ideals at great risk. In the end, however, they were no match for the overwhelming power of the Nazis: they never generated widespread support from the German population, nor did they seriously threaten the stability of the regime.

As part of its campaign to eliminate all potential political opponents, the Nazi regime also targeted Freemasons, made up of a variety of fraternal organizations with a long history as secret societies cultivating international connections. Using the tools of the masonry trade (the square and the compasses) to symbolize their moral and ethical ideals, many Masonic organizations had traditionally valued equality and freedom. To the Nazis, Freemasons warranted suspicion both because of their international connections (which the Nazis linked to a Jewish conspiracy) and because of their emotional ties to the French and American revolutionary movements (which also lauded both equality

before the law and respect for personal freedom). Not all Masonic lodges in Germany opposed Nazi rule, however; some sought—and failed—to survive by being accommodating to the regime.

In 1935, the practice of Freemasonry was abolished, and individual Freemasons were dismissed from the civil service. Then, in April 1938, Hitler gave them partial amnesty, and in September, low-ranking Freemasons were readmitted to the civil service. Nevertheless, the Nazis continued to harass Freemasons who participated in meetings and went to lodges. Most notably, during “The Night of Broken Glass” (*Kristallnacht*), the attack on Jewish homes, synagogues, and businesses on November 9–10, 1938, SA men were encouraged to paint anti-Masonic slogans on damaged shops and synagogues. Some Freemasons perceived by the Gestapo to be engaging in subversive political activity were imprisoned in concentration camps. With only 70,000 Freemasons in Germany in 1933, they were a small minority and did not pose any real threat to the government. Still, the Nazis insisted on targeting any group—no matter how small, neutral, or benign—that espoused views contrary to those of the regime.

*In the name of Germany's Communist party, I call on all class comrades, even if you have not yet joined us. If you hate fascism and love freedom, join us in the common fight. If we, the workers and working class youth, whose hands create all value, stand together, shoulder to shoulder, if we fight together, we are unbeatable. If we fight together, we will sweep up with us in the united front against fascism millions of poor farmers in the countryside, and millions of employees, civil servants, and members of the middle classes from the cities!*

ERNST THÄLMANN in *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* on February 27, 1933

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On March 3, 1933, just five days after publishing those lines, ERNST THÄLMANN (right) was arrested in Berlin. As the leader of the German Communist Party from 1925 and a one-time candidate for the German presidency, Thälmann was targeted as part of the anti-Communist crackdown that followed the Reichstag fire. He spent most of the following 11 years held in isolation in prisons and concentration camps. On Hitler's orders, the SS transferred him to Buchenwald concentration camp, where he was murdered in August 1944. GERMANY, 1932–33. WITH PERMISSION OF THE SUE-

DEUTSCHER VERLAG BILDERDIENST

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The German authorities began establishing concentration camps soon after Hitler's appointment as chancellor in January 1933. Housed in hundreds of empty warehouses, factories, and other makeshift sites, the facilities were portrayed as temporary detention centers for the reeducation of political opponents. The reality, however, belied such euphemistic language. Individuals were imprisoned without trial or legal recourse and held for indefinite lengths of time under conditions of exceptional cruelty. Even so, the first camps should not be confused with either the wartime concentration camps and forced labor camps, which were created to exploit the labor of their inmates, or the killing centers, which were established to mechanize mass murder. Among the original concentration camps were Oranienburg, north of Berlin; Esterwegen, near Hamburg; Dachau, northwest of Munich; and Lichtenburg, in Saxony. By the end of July 1933, almost 27,000 people—virtually all of them political prisoners—were detained throughout Germany.

By the close of 1934, the German authorities disbanded most of those makeshift facilities. In their place, the SS established a centrally organized concentration camp system. The first of the SS-run camps was established on March 20, 1933, in an abandoned World War I munitions factory outside Dachau, which is located near Munich in southeastern Germany. Dachau served as the model for what was to become a vast SS-run organization that eventually included both labor camps and the killing center at Auschwitz-Birkenau. By 1939, the system consisted of six large concentration camps: Dachau (1933), Sachsenhausen (1936), Buchenwald (1937), Flossenbürg (1938), Mauthausen (1938), and Ravensbrück (1939). The latter was to house women prisoners.

Nazi persecution of political opponents exacted a terrible price in human suffering. Between 1933 and 1939, the criminal courts, run by the Ministry of Justice, sentenced tens of thousands of Germans for so-called political crimes. Gestapo officials often seized people upon their release from prison after serving their sentences and incarcerated them in concentration camps for indefinite periods as potential enemies of the state. In Nazi Germany, once targeted by the authorities, a suspected political opponent would find no protection from the judicial system. Guilt was determined by association and suspicion, rather than by evidence and proof; likewise, once convicted, the fate of an outcast was sealed without possibility of appeal.

After 1939, as the Nazis initiated new territorial conquests and had to manage larger and more diverse groups of prisoners, they rapidly expanded the camp system both in the number of inmates and in geographic locations. Concentration camps increasingly became sites where the SS killed targeted groups of real or perceived enemies of Nazi Germany. Between 800,000 and 1,000,000 non-Jewish inmates died in the concentration camp

system between 1933 and 1945. The majority of them were classified by the Gestapo as political prisoners. Like other prisoners, they were deployed at forced labor in service of state-owned, SS-owned, and private German industries. They died directly at the hands of the SS authorities or indirectly of starvation, disease, mistreatment, or accident as a result of the conditions under which they were forced to work.

#### JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

The Nazis targeted Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany because they placed their loyalty to God and to their faith above any allegiance to Hitler or the state. They saw themselves as citizens of a spiritual realm, the Kingdom of Jehovah, and their faith forbade them to swear allegiance to any worldly government. In the Nazis' view, those beliefs constituted an intolerable rejection of the National Community. Few in number, the Witnesses never posed a real threat to the stability of the Nazi government. But their dedication only to God and their refusal to abandon their beliefs made them dangerous in the eyes of a regime that tolerated no rivals. For the sake of their faith, Jehovah's Witnesses faced harassment, imprisonment, and the threat of death in Nazi Germany.

The Jehovah's Witnesses (before 1931 known primarily as the International Bible Students) were first organized as a Bible study group in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, in 1872 by Charles Taze Russell. The group sent missionaries abroad to seek converts in the 1890s and opened its first branch office in Germany in 1902. Their numbers grew rapidly; by 1926, more than 22,000 Germans followed the movement, the largest association of Witnesses outside the United States. By the early 1930s, as many as 35,000 Germans (of a population of 67 million) were members or interested sympathizers of this Christian denomination.

Despite their small numbers, the Jehovah's Witnesses were relatively visible in German society. A number of their beliefs and activities—namely, door-to-door evangelizing and distribution of religious tracts—made them stand out as nonconforming outsiders. The mainstream German Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches identified the Witnesses as heretics, and many people opposed the group's efforts to win converts. Even before Hitler's rise to power, some German states and local authorities had periodically sought to limit the group's proselytizing by charging its members with illegal peddling or disturbing the peace. Local German authorities had also, from time to time, banned the denomination's religious literature, which included the booklets *The Watch Tower* and *The Golden Age*. In the early 1930s, even before assuming power in Germany, Nazi party and SA fanatics, acting outside the law, disrupted Bible study meetings and beat up individual Witnesses.



The last photo of the entire KUSSEROW FAMILY (left). Standing from left to right are SIEGFRIED, KARL-HEINZ, WOLFGANG, parents FRANZ and HILDA, ANNEMARIE, WALTRAUD, WILHELM, and HILDEGARD. Seated are PAUL-GERHARD, MAGDALENA, HANS-WERNER, and ELISABETH.

Franz and Hilda Kusserow were practicing Lutherans during the early years of their marriage, but after World War I, they became Jehovah's Witnesses and raised their 11 children in their adopted faith. After 1931, the family moved to the small town of Bad Lippspringe in western Germany, where their home became the headquarters of a new congregation.

The Kusserows endured close scrutiny by the German secret police who repeatedly searched their home and confiscated their religious literature. Firm in their conviction that their highest allegiance was to God, the family members did not bend under the pressure of harassment and intimidation. They continued to carry out their missionary work, hosting secret Bible study meetings in their home, circulating religious material, and offering refuge to fellow Witnesses.

In 1936, Hilda was arrested and imprisoned for six weeks. Not long after her return home, Franz was detained. He would spend much of the next nine years in prisons and concentration camps. In 1939, the German police took away the three youngest Kusserow children—on the grounds that their moral welfare was being threatened by their family's faith—and put them in foster homes for so-called reeducation.

The eldest child, Wilhelm (named for German Emperor Wilhelm II) refused to join the German army after the onset of World War II, adhering to the commandment against killing. For this civil disobedience, he was tried and sentenced to death and was shot by a firing squad in Münster prison on April 27, 1940. In July of the same year, his brother Karl-Heinz was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to Sachsenhausen and then Dachau. Younger brother Wolfgang also refused to be inducted into the German army. He was apprehended in December 1941 and spent months in prison before being tried and convicted. On the night before his execution, he wrote to his family, assuring them of his devotion to God. Wolfgang was beheaded by guillotine in Brandenburg prison on March 28, 1942. He was 20 years old.

Hilda, Franz, and two of their daughters, Hildegard and Magdalena, were arrested in April 1941. After serving their respective prison terms, Hilda and Magdalena were each given the opportunity to return home if they signed a statement repudiating their beliefs; they refused. They eventually found each other and Hildegard at the Ravensbrück concentration camp, where they all remained until April 1945. On a forced march from the camp, they were liberated by the Soviets. The surviving family members were reunited after the war, but Karl-Heinz, who had been imprisoned for five years, died in 1945 as a result of maltreatment during his incarceration.

BAD LIPPSRINGE, GERMANY, CIRCA 1935. USHMM, COURTESY OF WALTRAUD AND ANNEMARIE KUSSEROW

From the outset of the Nazi regime, most Witnesses openly refused to conform. They would not raise their arms in the “Heil, Hitler!” salute; they ignored Nazi organizations such as the German Labor Front, which all German salaried workers had been compelled to join after the dissolution of the labor unions; and they failed to vote in elections or plebiscites sanctioning Hitler’s government. In April 1933, four months after Hitler became chancellor, the Nazi government in Bavaria banned the regional Jehovah’s Witnesses organizations. By that summer, most other German states had made it illegal for the Jehovah’s Witnesses to practice their faith and to produce and distribute their literature. Twice during 1933, police occupied the Witnesses’ offices and printing site in Magdeburg and confiscated religious literature. Witnesses defied Nazi prohibitions by continuing to meet and distribute their literature, often covertly. They made and shared copies of booklets smuggled into Germany, mainly from Switzerland.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses came under Nazi scrutiny not only for rejecting the regime’s authority but also for their alleged ties to the United States where the religion had been founded. The Nazis took their suspicions even further, linking Jehovah’s Witnesses to “international Jewry,” citing Witnesses’ refusal to remove references to the Hebrew Bible from their publications. Although the Nazis had grievances with many of the smaller Protestant denominations on similar issues, the Witnesses were the only group that refused to swear loyalty to the state or to bear arms for its cause. Their very real resistance to the government’s authority, compounded by their perceived connections to sworn enemies of the German state, made them visible targets in Nazi Germany.

Initially, the group’s leaders sought to avoid a standoff with the government, sending a letter in October 1934 that explained their core beliefs and reiterated their absolute loyalty to God. They stated that Jehovah’s Witnesses “have no interest in political affairs, but are wholly devoted to God’s Kingdom under Christ His King.” At the same time, the leaders did not shy away from firmly rejecting Nazi authority, writing the following:

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*There is a direct conflict between your law and God’s law, and, following the lead of the faithful apostles, we ought to obey God rather than men, and this we will do (Acts 5:29). Therefore this is to advise you that at any cost we will obey God’s commandments, will meet together for the study of His Word, and will worship and serve Him as He has commanded. If your government or officers do violence to us because we are obeying God, then our blood will be upon you and you will answer to Almighty God.*

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German authorities responded with economic and political harassment. From that date forward, Witnesses who continued to proselytize or who refused to participate in Nazi organizations lost their jobs and their unemployment and social welfare benefits; some were arrested.

The children of Jehovah's Witnesses also suffered. In some cases, teachers publicly humiliated them for refusing to give the "Heil, Hitler!" salute or to sing patriotic songs. Classmates shunned or even assaulted them, and in other instances, principals expelled them from schools. Witnesses' families were at risk because the state was empowered to judge whether parents were instilling the proper moral values in their children. The German courts ruled that it was the "task of the parents to provide their children with an upbringing that does not alienate them from German ways, raising their children in German customs and beliefs that morally and intellectually reveal the spirit of National socialism in the service of the people (*Volk*) and the National Community." German judges sometimes harshly applied a portion of the 1931 German Civil Code, which stated that child endangerment could be proven if, under parental influence, a young person behaved (or was likely to behave) in an immoral or dishonorable fashion.

Under the terms of the law, a teenager who refused to comply with Nazi norms of education, such as enrollment in the Hitler Youth, could unwittingly trigger an investigation of his or her parents. Social welfare bureaucrats could remove children from the custody of their parents on the grounds that their moral well-being was being jeopardized. In many cases, the authorities would put children in the homes of families whose beliefs reflected Nazi values; in other instances, young people were delivered into juvenile homes or correctional facilities despite having committed no crime. Parents who were Jehovah's Witnesses were forced either to inculcate in their children the beliefs that ran counter to their religious teachings or to risk losing them to the Nazi state. For their part, children found themselves facing a distinctly adult dilemma: what choice should they make when caught between love for their families and fear of punishment by the authorities? For many families, the price of remaining true to their beliefs and loyal to each other was high. From 1935 to 1938, more than 860 children were taken from their families on these grounds.

In April 1935, when the Nazi regime reintroduced military conscription, many Witnesses refused to serve or to perform war-related work. Furthermore, they tried to persuade others to ignore the summons. Although not pacifists, Jehovah's Witnesses saw themselves as soldiers in God's army and, therefore, would not bear arms for any nation. They had refused to fight in World War I, and they had been generally indifferent to the consequences of the lost war for Germany. Indeed, public memory of their passivity contributed



to hostility against them in a country still wounded by defeat and determined to reclaim its previous world stature. In response to Witnesses' disregard for the draft, the Nazi state dismissed all Jehovah's Witnesses from civil service jobs and made arrests across Germany. More than 200 men were tried by the Reich Military Court and executed for refusing military service or for undermining the integrity of the armed forces.

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FRANZ WOHLFAHRT (left) was born into a Catholic family in 1920 in Köstenberg-Velden, Austria. Disillusioned with Catholicism, his parents became Jehovah's Witnesses during Franz's childhood and raised their children in their new faith.

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*Like other Jehovah's Witnesses, I refused to swear an oath to Hitler or to give the Hitler salute. Neighbors reported me to the police, but my boss protected me from arrest by saying that my work was needed. When the war began in September 1939, my father was arrested for opposing military service. He was executed in December. Following my twentieth birthday, I refused to be inducted into the German army. In front of hundreds of recruits and officers, I refused to salute the Nazi flag. I was arrested on March 14, 1940, and imprisoned. Later that year, I was sent to a penal camp in Germany. A new commander felt sorry for me; three times he saved me from execution between 1943 and 1945. He was impressed that I was willing to die rather than to break God's command to love our neighbor and not kill.*

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Franz remained in Camp Rollwald Rodgau 2 until March 24, 1945. He was liberated by U.S. forces and returned to his home in Austria. NO DATE OR PLACE GIVEN. USHMM, COURTESY OF FRANZ AND MARIA WOHLFAHRT

From 1935 onward, Jehovah's Witnesses faced renewed and intensified official discrimination. On April 1, 1935, the German government issued a national law banning the organization in Germany. In 1936, a special unit of the Gestapo began compiling a registry of all persons believed to be Jehovah's Witnesses, and informants began infiltrating Bible study meetings. In response to Nazi attacks against Witnesses, the International Society publicly supported the efforts of its brethren. At an international convention held in Lucerne, Switzerland, in September 1936, delegates from all over the world passed a resolution

condemning the Nazi regime. In that text and other literature brought into Germany, writers broadly indicted the Third Reich by denouncing its oppression of Jews, Communists, and Social Democrats; criticizing its remilitarization of Germany and the nazification of its schools and universities; and condemning its assault on organized religion.

By 1939, the Nazis had incarcerated an estimated 6,000 Jehovah's Witnesses (including those from incorporated Austrian and Czech lands). In the camps, where all prisoners wore identifying badges of various shapes and colors, Witnesses were marked by purple triangular patches. Even there, they continued to meet, pray, and seek converts. They clandestinely held study groups, met for prayers, and gave lectures to other prisoners. In Buchenwald, they set up an underground printing press and distributed religious tracts. Witnesses regularly smuggled editions of their publication *The Watchtower* into the Neuengamme concentration camp in northern Germany. SS guards shot at least one Jehovah's Witness after he was caught reading *The Watchtower* and refused to denounce his beliefs.

In keeping with their overall approach toward regime offenders who were perceived as racially valuable, the Nazi authorities promised freedom from personal harm in exchange for reconciliation with the National Community. For Jehovah's Witnesses, this offer meant renouncing their loyalty to God and swearing loyalty to Hitler and the Nazi regime. In some cases, the Nazis used negative pressure by badgering or even torturing the victim; in others, they offered incentives, promising release from prison or concentration camps for those who signed a document rejecting their own teachings. The declaration read:

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*I have come to know that the International Bible Students Association is proclaiming erroneous teachings and under the cloak of religion follows purposes hostile to the State. I have therefore left the organization entirely and made myself absolutely free from the teachings of this sect.... I will in the future esteem the laws of the State, especially in the event of war will I, with weapon in hand, defend the fatherland, and join in every way the community of the people.*

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The vast majority of Jehovah's Witnesses won the respect of their contemporaries for refusing to repudiate their beliefs.

Conditions in Nazi camps were generally harsh for all inmates, but Witnesses were uniquely sustained by the support they gave each other and by their belief that their struggle was part of their work for God. They generally earned the high regard of their fellow inmates by their dedication and by their efforts to alleviate the sufferings of those even worse off. Individual Witnesses astounded their guards with their refusal to conform to

military-type routines like roll call or the preparation of bandages for soldiers at the front. Instead, Jehovah's Witnesses sang hymns, preached to the guards, and continued to meet as best they could to sustain their emotional and spiritual strength.

Nazi persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses was not limited to Germany. Nazis targeted Witnesses throughout Europe during the course of World War II, arresting them in German-occupied Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, the Netherlands, Norway, and Poland (some of them refugees from Germany) and deporting them to Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, Ravensbrück, Auschwitz, Mauthausen, and other concentration camps. At least 1,900 and possibly as many as 5,000 Jehovah's Witnesses are known to have been killed during the Nazi period. Until the liberation of the camps, those who survived continued their work among the survivors, winning converts.

#### HOMOSEXUALS

The Nazis' persecution of homosexual men was directly linked to their population policy and the role that they believed "Aryan" German men were to fulfill in the destiny of the Third Reich. Placing great importance on high birth rates that would expand the "Aryan" German race, the Nazis viewed men who fathered children as acting in the best interest of the National Community. Homosexual men, in contrast, were seen as degenerates whose conduct was responsible for declining birth rates in Germany. In a speech in 1937, SS leader Heinrich Himmler explicitly linked homosexuality to the fate of the nation, saying, "A people of good race which has too few children has a one-way ticket to the grave." In general, the Nazis viewed homosexuality not as a biological trait but as a behavioral choice that could be rejected or overcome. In most cases, they were prepared to accept men suspected of homosexual activity into the National Community provided that they gave up their so-called degeneracy and embraced their role as racially conscious "Aryan" Germans.

Legal sanctions against homosexuals were neither new nor unique to Nazi Germany. Since the establishment of the German Empire in 1871, sexual relations between men had been against the law. Paragraph 175 of the German criminal code declared "unnatural indecency" between men to be punishable by imprisonment of up to two years. The law did not define indecency or refer to sexual relationships between women. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, the nature of homosexuality and its inclusion in the criminal code had become a topic of medical, cultural, and political debate in Germany. Paragraph 175, reformers argued, was an unwarranted intrusion of the state into private relationships between consenting adults.

After Germany's defeat in World War I and the establishment of the democratic Weimar Republic, the social, cultural, and political climate of the country placed a greater emphasis

on individual rights and personal freedom. Berlin, the nation's capital and largest city, became a center of cultural and artistic experimentation. An increased openness toward the subject of human sexuality served to make homosexuals more visible, at least in some of the larger, more cosmopolitan urban areas. By the end of the 1920s, some 350,000 homosexual men and women lived in Berlin. Scores of same-sex "friendship leagues," clubs, cafés, and dance halls provided both support and community for homosexuals. New constitutional protections such as free speech permitted an increase in advocacy for homosexual rights and publications serving their community.

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KARL GORATH (right) was born on December 12, 1912, in Bad Zwischenahn, Germany. His father was a sailor, and his mother was a nurse in a local hospital. At the age of 20, Karl became a deacon in his parish church.

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*I was 26 when my jealous lover denounced me and I was arrested at my house under Paragraph 175 of the criminal code, which defined homosexuality as an "unnatural" act. Though this law had been on the books for years, the Nazis had broadened its scope and used it as grounds to make mass arrests of homosexuals. I was imprisoned at Neuengamme concentration camp near Hamburg where the "175ers" had to wear a pink triangle.*

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Having been trained as a nurse, he was sent from Neuengamme to work in a prisoner hospital at Wittenburg. He refused to carry out an order to decrease the food rations of Polish prisoners of war and, as a consequence, was deported to Auschwitz as a political prisoner. He was liberated from Auschwitz in 1945. NO DATE OR PLACE GIVEN. USHMM, COURTESY OF KARL GORATH

As a direct result of the broadening of traditional notions of acceptable sexuality and the increasing liberalization of German society, a number of activists began to work for legal reform. Liberal and left-wing human rights advocates campaigned to promote the civil rights of homosexuals and to repeal Paragraph 175. Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, the founder of the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin, for example, was a vocal critic of Paragraph 175, arguing that homosexuality was neither an illness nor a crime but a natural variation of human sexuality. Under his leadership, the institute became a symbol of the campaign for homosexual rights and legal reform in that area.



In the years of the Weimar Republic, however, some viewed the increasing civil rights for homosexuals not as progress but as evidence that German society was deserting its traditional values. They feared a cresting wave of decadence and moral abandon and responded with growing disapproval and hostility. Conservative nationalists and radical right-wing parties capitalized on this undercurrent by blaming the homosexual community for weakening established moral values and by presenting their integration into society as proof of the decadence of the Weimar Republic. As one Nazi party deputy to parliament argued in 1927, “These homosexuals should be prosecuted with all severity, because such vices will lead to the downfall of the German nation.”

Identification pictures (mug shots) of a medical doctor (right) arrested as a homosexual under Paragraph 175 and deported to Auschwitz. He arrived in the camp on October 10, 1941, and died there on October 15, 1941. AUSCHWITZ, POLAND, OCTOBER 10, 1941. WITH PERMISSION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU

After the Nazis took power in January 1933, they instituted a broad attack on so-called public indecency and moral degeneracy, capitalizing on long-standing disapproval of same-sex relationships to secure acceptance for their measures. Although the persecution of homosexual men had always had its roots in population policy, the Nazis primarily framed it for the public in eugenic terms, presenting homosexuality as a personal defect, a social vice, and a carrier of decadence that posed a threat to the well-being of the nation. They portrayed homosexuality as an infection that could become an epidemic, especially within all-male societies like the SA, the SS, the Hitler Youth, and the armed forces. The Nazis also linked homosexuality to subversive political behavior. This public message was illustrated in June 1934, when Hitler ordered the arrest and summary execution of known homosexual SA commander Ernest Röhm, together with 80 other high-ranking SA officers,



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on the false accusation that they were part of a criminal conspiracy to overthrow the government. Although Röhm's homosexuality, which Hitler had tolerated for more than a decade, was not the reason for his murder, Himmler and others focused on Röhm's sexual preference as the basis for his actions, and they used the episode to justify further attacks against homosexuals throughout Germany.

In contrast, Nazi leaders did not generally regard lesbians as a threat to their racial policies. This attitude stemmed in part from the Nazi belief that women not only were inferior to men but also were by nature dependent on them. According to this reasoning, lesbians were not particularly threatening to the regime and thus did not merit significant police attention. Furthermore, the Nazis considered that any woman, regardless of her sexual preference, could fulfill her primary role of giving birth to as many German babies as possible. Simply by becoming a mother, every woman could serve the Nazi state. Most lesbians in Germany were, therefore, able to live relatively quiet lives and were generally undisturbed by the police.

Some exceptions existed, however. Because the police in Nazi Germany regarded lesbians as antisocial—that is, as individuals who failed to conform to the norms of the state—lesbians could be arrested or sent to concentration camps. Once there, they were assigned the black triangle reserved for asocial prisoners. Although few lesbians were imprisoned as a result of their sexuality alone, the threat of persecution made living in an open same-sex relationship dangerous. Many lesbians broke off contacts with their circles of friends, and some moved to new cities where they would be unknown. Others sought the protection of outward conformity, entering marriages of convenience with male homosexual friends. Although many lesbians experienced hardships during the Third Reich, those who remained discreet and inconspicuous or who otherwise appeared to meet social expectations were generally left alone.

The Nazi crackdown on the male homosexual community began with the closing of same-sex bars and clubs and other gathering places in early 1933. Authorities soon banned their publications and closed down organizations that advocated acceptance of same-sex relationships. On May 6, 1933, Nazi student groups and sympathizers occupied the offices of the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin. Much of the institute's library and research archives were destroyed in the public burning of books in Berlin four days later. The Nazis denounced Magnus Hirschfeld, who was in Paris at the time and who was both homosexual and a Jew, as "the Apostle of Indecency."

Prior to 1934, criminal proceedings against homosexuals had required proof that a narrowly defined sexual act had occurred. In February 1934, however, the police stepped up the surveillance of men who might be expected to violate Paragraph 175. In October,

local law enforcement departments were ordered to submit to the Criminal Police (*Kriminalpolizei*, or *Kripo*) lists of men suspected of homosexual activity.

In June 1935, the Ministry of Justice revised Paragraph 175 as part of a massive rewriting of the criminal code. New language added as Paragraph 175a specifically imposed up to ten years of hard labor for “indecent” committed under coercion or with adolescents under the age of 21 or both, and for male prostitution. Moreover, ministry officials and court decisions expanded the category of “criminally indecent activities between men” to include any act that could be construed as sexual. The courts later decided that a violation of Paragraph 175 did not require a physical act; intent or thought alone sufficed for conviction. The result was a radical increase in prosecutions as the law prohibited virtually all interaction between men that was deemed sexual in nature.

Enforcement of Paragraph 175 fell to the Criminal Police. If a particular investigation had political ramifications (such as the investigation of a homosexual-rights activist for a left-wing party), the Gestapo might become involved. The police departments worked in tandem, occasionally conducting massive sweeps that primarily trapped victims from the working class. Less able to afford private apartments or homes, they found partners in semi-public places that put them at greater risk of discovery.

More often, however, the work of tracking down suspected homosexuals and arresting them depended on denunciations from ordinary citizens. Nazi propaganda that labeled homosexuals as “antisocial parasites” and “enemies of the state” inflamed already existing prejudices. Citizens turned in men, often on the flimsiest evidence, for as many reasons as there were accusations. Acting on the basis of those informants, the Gestapo and Criminal Police arbitrarily seized and questioned suspects, as well as possible corroborating witnesses. Those denounced were often forced to give up names of friends and acquaintances, thereby becoming informants themselves.

On October 26, 1936, Himmler formed the Reich Central Office for Combating Homosexuality and Abortion within the Security Police. The Nazis linked homosexuality to abortion because they believed that both obstructed the population growth that was so central to their ideology and goals. Indeed, for the Nazis, the termination of a pregnancy that might yield an “Aryan” German child was a crime equal to the refusal to father an “Aryan” German in the first place. After 1936, the Nazis instituted one national police registry for all sexual matters that they believed prevented the expansion of the “Aryan” race.

From early 1937 to mid-1939, the persecution of homosexual men in the court system reached its peak. Imprisonment was the most common punishment, but the length and type varied with the act involved and the individual’s prior history. For many, incarceration



meant hard labor, part of the Nazis' so-called reeducation program. All were subjected to brutal mistreatment at the hands of police, interrogators, and guards. As word spread of the arrests and the brutal conditions in German prisons, an atmosphere of fear enveloped the homosexual community.

Despite Nazi fears that homosexuality would spread through the all-male military, the German code of military conduct did not bar homosexuals from the armed forces. With the onset of World War II, homosexuals who had been persecuted and deprived of civil rights, including some who had been convicted and imprisoned, were, nevertheless, expected to fight for their country. Homosexual conduct within the German armed forces was still prosecuted under Paragraph 175, and some 7,000 soldiers were arrested and found guilty under the law. Though sentenced to prison, those who were convicted could petition to serve in a so-called punishment battalion. During the last years of the war, German military commanders often deployed those "penal" units as cannon-fodder on hopeless combat missions.

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FRIEDRICH-PAUL VON GROSZHEIM (left) was born on April 27, 1906, in Lübeck, Germany. He was 11 when his father was killed in World War I. After his mother died, he and his sister, Ina, were raised by two elderly aunts. After graduating from school, Friedrich-Paul trained to be a merchant.

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*In January 1937, the SS arrested 230 men in Lübeck under the Nazi-revised criminal code's Paragraph 175, which outlawed homosexuality, and I was imprisoned for 10 months.... In 1938, I was rearrested, humiliated, and tortured. The Nazis finally released me, but only on the condition that I agree to be castrated. Because of the nature of my operation, I was rejected as "physically unfit" when I came up for military service in 1940. In 1943, I was arrested again, this time for being a monarchist, a supporter of the former Kaiser Wilhelm II. The Nazis imprisoned me as a political prisoner in an annex of the Neuengamme concentration camp at Lübeck.*

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Friedrich-Paul survived his imprisonment and settled in Hamburg after the war. NO DATE OR PLACE GIVEN. USHMM, COURTESY OF FRIEDRICH-PAUL VON GROSZHEIM

The Nazis used the war as a pretext to intensify discriminatory measures against homosexual men. In July 1940, Himmler directed officers of the Criminal Police that "in [the]

future, after their release from prison, all homosexuals who have seduced more than one partner are to be placed in preventive detention at a concentration camp.” This radical step, intended to stop the homosexual “contagion,” meant that thousands of homosexual men convicted under Paragraph 175 whose police histories recorded multiple partners faced indefinite incarceration in the camps. Furthermore, in September 1942, the Nazi Minister of Justice agreed to transfer “habitual criminals” from ministry-run prisons to the SS-run concentration camps. Those prisoners included repeat offenders of Paragraph 175. By mutual agreement between the SS and the Ministry of Justice, the prisoners were to be subject to a process explicitly called “extermination through work.”

During World War II, approximately 5,000–15,000 homosexuals were interned in SS-run concentration camps; some were required to wear a pink triangle on their prison uniforms. In addition to the extreme privations of camp existence, homosexuals in the camps were targeted in specific ways. They were often assigned to the most dangerous tasks, especially as laborers in quarries and brickyards. Attached to punishment battalions and working long hours with few breaks and often on reduced rations, many such prisoners lost their lives from exertion and from the brutality of the SS guards. Homosexual prisoners were singled out and bore especially vicious physical abuse; at the same time, they were socially shunned and sometimes abused by their fellow prisoners. They were generally isolated, occupying nearly the lowest rung in the camp prisoner hierarchy.

At the behest of German authorities, particularly the SS, physicians and scientists sought so-called medical solutions to homosexuality. Considerable disagreement existed among the professional establishment about the causes and, therefore, a recommended treatment for homosexual behavior. Some doctors considered it a genetic trait, seeking its origins within an individual’s family lineage. Others believed it to be physical, but not necessarily genetic, and looked at disorders of the central nervous system or hormone levels as possible causes. And still others saw it as a mental defect brought on by a failure of character or a negative environment. Regardless of the cause, the goal throughout all the medical research into homosexuality was to find a way to “cure” it. When that failed, outright suppression of homosexual behavior became the norm.

The avenues of so-called medical inquiry, along with the underlying beliefs that gave rise to them, resulted in a chilling array of “treatments.” The courts were anything but consistent: they convicted some individuals for acts deemed a result of uncontrollable compulsion, thereby forcibly committing the homosexuals to hospitals. They found others to be guilty as a result of diminished capacity or “weak-mindedness,” sending those men to mental institutions and, in hundreds of cases, castrating them to suppress their sex drive. Among the men committed to psychiatric clinics, some were murdered

as part of the T-4 program, which sought to rid Germany of people with physical and mental disabilities.

Homosexual concentration camp prisoners were sometimes subjected to medical experiments. For example, in late 1943, Heinrich Himmler authorized a Danish physician, SS Major Dr. Carl Vaernet, to carry out such experiments on homosexual prisoners in Buchenwald. Dr. Vaernet implanted hormone capsules in 12 male prisoners, of whom at least 10 were homosexuals. Two men died from complications of the surgery; the fates of the others are unknown.

Brutal treatment notwithstanding, the Nazi regime did not set out to kill all German homosexuals. Rather, it aimed to pressure them into changing their behavior or, if that failed, to isolate them from society and to control their supposed contagion of degeneracy. In reality, however, the Nazi state simply terrorized German homosexuals into sexual and social conformity, leaving thousands dead and shattering the lives of many more.

Using their extraordinary authority, German police arrested more than 100,000 men on suspicion of homosexual behavior. Using broad interpretations of Paragraph 175, the authorities convicted and sentenced to prison terms about 50,000 of those arrested. An unknown number of homosexual men were forced into mental hospitals or castrated rather than imprisoned. Fragmentary records indicate that at least 5,000 – 15,000 homosexual men were sent to concentration camps, a great many of whom died from starvation, disease, exhaustion, or beatings or were murdered outright.

The defeat of Nazi Germany in May 1945 brought neither reparation nor tolerance to homosexuals in Germany. The Allied Military Government of Germany, which was established in 1945 by the victorious powers to replace the central German government, repealed many decrees that had underpinned the racist and eugenic vision of the Nazis. However, the occupation authorities did not regard Paragraph 175 as a Nazi law and so left it in force after stripping it of the provisions added by the Nazis. The Allied occupation forces required some homosexuals to serve out their terms of imprisonment regardless of time spent in concentration camps. The pre-1933 version of Paragraph 175 was incorporated into the legal structure of the Federal Republic of Germany (then West Germany) and remained on the books until the decriminalization of homosexual relations between consenting adult men in 1969. The German Democratic Republic (then East Germany) reversed the law against sexual relations between men one year earlier, in 1968.

In the postwar era, German officials refused to recognize homosexuals as victims of Nazi persecution. In June 1956, West Germany declared that an individual incarcerated in a concentration camp for homosexual acts was not eligible to apply for compensation. Those homosexuals who were killed during the Nazi regime received neither commemoration

nor public acknowledgment until 1985, when, in a speech marking the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe, West German president Richard von Weizsäcker explicitly mentioned the suffering and death of homosexuals under the Nazi regime. In 1994, four years after the reunification of Germany, Paragraph 175 was formally abolished from the nation's criminal code. In May 2002, the German parliament passed legislation pardoning all homosexuals convicted under Paragraph 175 during the Nazi era.

grip of Jews, whom they regarded as cowardly and perfidious. As a result, the Germans severely miscalculated the strength and conviction of their military opponents and failed to prepare for a protracted campaign, part of which would be fought during the brutal Russian winter. The impressive initial successes of the German army only added to the German's sense of overconfidence. But as the invasion slowed and the army grew exhausted from months of campaigning, the German forces found themselves overextended, because they lacked winter clothing and equipment and had outrun their desperately needed supply lines. The Soviets began to resist more bitterly than expected, and they proved to be far better equipped than the Germans for the cold weather.

In December 1941, the Soviet Union launched a major counterattack, driving the Germans back from Moscow in chaos. Only after several weeks and tremendous losses in soldiers and equipment were the Germans able to stabilize the front east of Smolensk. Nevertheless, Hitler and the German leadership understood that the war would last much longer than anticipated. The economic requirements of a longer war and the critical labor shortage in the German economy created a desperate need for labor. In that context, the Nazi leadership realized that using Soviet POWs as laborers for the war effort was more practical than killing them. Beginning in 1942, therefore, Hitler authorized better treatment and slightly increased rations for Soviet POWs so they would have the strength to work. Although the enormous death rate among the Soviet POWs declined, it nevertheless remained higher than that among other groups of POWs. In 1943 and 1944, however, the death rates soared again as a result of starvation and disease. In total over the course of the war, the German army captured more than five and a half million Soviet POWs. Of those, more than three million died or were killed in German custody.

After the war, the ordeal of Soviet POWs who survived German captivity did not end. Soviet authorities, often without justification, tended to view returning POWs as collaborators or even traitors, because they had "allowed" themselves to be captured. After their repatriation, most POWs underwent a debriefing in which they had to justify the circumstances under which they had been caught. Some who had been liberated by British or U.S. forces had to convince the Soviet authorities that they were not Western intelligence agents. Others faced prolonged interrogation, arrest, and trial in Soviet courts. Thousands were convicted of collaboration or treason and were either executed or sentenced to confinement in a forced labor camp. Most of those who were imprisoned remained so until the death of Josef Stalin in 1953.