

## A historian's analysis of The Pink Swastika, part 1

Posted on June 8th, 2009 by JDWyneken

1 (Editor's note: This guest post is authored by Jon David Wyneken, Associate Professor of History at Grove City College.)  
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retweet Back in March, Warren asked me (a colleague of his in the Department of History here at Grove City College) if I had any opinion on the validity of arguments made by Scott Lively and Kevin Abrams in their book *The Pink Swastika: Homosexuality in the Nazi Party*. I told Warren that the book had not been well-received by academic historians for a number of reasons, and at his request I did some research to illustrate this as clearly as I could. In the interest of full disclosure, the reader should know that I have a PhD in Modern German history with a focus on the period 1933-1955, so I have studied the Nazis extensively and am very familiar with their policies against those they considered "undesirables." I have also done research and worked at seminars at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and have done research on the Nazis in numerous archives in Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

However, there are a number of scholars who have done more in-depth work on the issue of homosexuality in Nazi Germany than I have, so I looked into some articles by such scholars that provide a number of effective and convincing counterarguments to Lively / Abrams. Historians like Geoffrey Giles and Gunter Grau have done a great deal of work on this (Lively does cite Grau a few times in *The Pink Swastika*, but I encourage readers here to examine Grau's book of documents entitled *The Hidden Holocaust?* to see just how wrongly selective Lively was in his use of that text), and the most recent edition of Jeremy Noakes' four-volume collection, *Nazism: A Documentary Reader* provides revealing material from Grau that Lively left out of his book. I have given Warren all of this material and I know he will be making use of it on this site. I know he will also provide the titles of complete articles/books that readers should examine, and I will continue to make Warren aware of any other materials I come across that will help him and readers better understand why Lively's book is simply not good history and is, in fact, not really history at all. Instead, in my view, it is a book that uses history as a weapon in a contemporary political battle, completely outside the historical context of Nazi Germany.

Fortunately, there are other scholars who have made this point much better than I can here. In particular, Arlene Stein's 1998 article from *Sociological Perspectives* (Vol. 41, No. 3 [1998], pp. 519-540) entitled "Whose Memories? Whose Victimhood? Contests for the Holocaust Frame in Recent Social Movement Discourse" makes a strong case against Lively and against all groups—whether Christian or secular, from the political Right or Left—who try to revise the historical record of the Holocaust for their own contemporary political (and hence, in my opinion, ahistorical) ends. Stein in my view rightly criticizes a number of groups and individuals in her article, and she is very careful and balanced in her conclusions. While I encourage all readers to read her entire article (those of you with JSTOR access can find a full-text copy there), I have provided below a few selections from her article that illustrate what she thinks (and I agree) is behind Lively's book/arguments [*in part two*]. I have presented the quotes below sequentially as they appear in the article in order to give the reader a better sense of the entire piece. The first series of quotes present her arguments about how some gay/lesbian organizations have misused the history of the Holocaust for their own ends—I have done this so as to provide for the reader a more balanced view than is provided by Lively on these issues. First, Stein indicates two levels of appropriation:

Uses of Holocaust memory by those who lack a direct connection to the historical events are, in effect, acts of appropriation. But all acts of appropriation, I will argue, are not equivalent. Against the post-structuralist belief that texts, such as stories, take their meaning relationally within a global universe of interacting texts, an ethical approach to the appropriation of historical memories, particularly atrocity memories such as the Holocaust, distinguishes among claims on the basis of the social contexts within which texts are produced, and the uses to which they are put (Plummer 1995; Lamont 1997). Hence, I distinguish between two different types of appropriation: revisionism (efforts to rewrite the history of the Holocaust which make claims about a historical event) and metaphor creation (efforts to compare present events or experiences to those of the Holocaust). The distinction between these two rhetorical strategies, I will argue, is best understood in relation to the social contexts, such as contemporary social movements, in which Holocaust memories are deployed (Stein, 520-521).

Then she describes the type of appropriation by GLB groups:

The Holocaust frame appeared in lesbian/gay rhetoric at three different moments: the early 1970s, in relation to the rise of the gay liberation movement; the early to mid 1980s, in response to the twin threats of the New Right and the AIDS epidemic; and the 1990s, in response to anti-gay ballot measures sponsored by Christian conservative organizations in several states. Gay activists have sought to revise the historical record to reflect

the extent of gay victimhood during the Nazi period; they have also used the Holocaust as metaphor, comparing the plight of homosexuals today to the plight of victimized minorities during the German Reich. Through the use of the Holocaust frame, lesbians and gay men have positioned themselves as victims and situated their opponents—garden variety homophobes, negligent AIDS bureaucrats, and Christian right anti-gay campaigners—as perpetrators. Invoking the history of the Third Reich, contemporary lesbian and gay activists recall that the Nazi Party sought to “cleanse” German society of those groups that violated the tenets of Aryan purity and that were believed to pose a threat to national unity: Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, communists, and the disabled. Though the “final solution” targeted Jews for annihilation above all else, other marginalized groups were caught in the frenzy of purification. Among them were homosexual men, who were seen as a threat to the patriarchal family idealized by Nazism. A 1928 Nazi Party statement proclaimed: ‘Anyone who thinks of homo-sexual love is our enemy. We therefore reject any form of lewdness, especially homosexuality, because it robs us of our last chance to free our people from the bondage which now enslaves it.’<sup>2</sup> Between 1933 and 1945, tens of thousands of homosexual men were sent to concentration camps, and perhaps 10,000 of them perished.<sup>3</sup> (Stein, 523)

In summary, the spectre of a Holocaust has been utilized by lesbians and gay men to dramatize their plight as an oppressed group in American society. Lesbians and gay men engaged in a form of revisionism, adjusting the historical record to reflect the historical oppression of homosexuals during the Nazi reign of terror. They also used the frame as metaphor, drawing parallels between contemporary homosexuals and the victims of Nazism fifty years earlier. In relation to the AIDS epidemic, lesbian and gay activists invoked the memory of the Holocaust to suggest that government inaction is tantamount to genocide. In response to the anti-gay campaigns of the Christian right, they suggested that homosexuals, a relatively powerless group, are being used as a convenient scapegoat for widespread social anxieties (Stein, 527).

Stein illustrates how a scholar approaches a topic. She is even handed and fair in her analysis. I encourage readers to carefully consider her points.

(Editor's note - Due to length, I am dividing Dr. Wyneken's analysis into two parts. Although readers might come to the conclusion that Drs. Stein and Wyneken have found some agreement with Lively and Abrams, this would not be an accurate perception. Tomorrow's post will provide Stein's assessment of *The Pink Swastika* and Dr. Wyneken's reasons for agreeing with her significant criticisms of the book. Please look for the conclusion tomorrow.)

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