

## A historian's analysis of The Pink Swastika, part 2

Posted on June 9th, 2009 by JDWyneken

1 (Editor's note: Yesterday, historian Dr. Jon David Wyneken began a series regarding the book, *The Pink Swastika*  
 tweet by Scott Lively and Kevin Abrams. I asked Wyneken for his assessment of the book. Part one was posted yesterday  
 retweet and part two is posted today.)

Stein then reviews and analyzes *The Pink Swastika*. Now for her sections on Lively and Abrams and the elements of the Christian Right who embrace their arguments:

By the late 1980s and into the 1990s, a new Christian right cultural genre—books, videos, special reports, was specifically dedicated to identifying the gay threat and calling Christian believers to arms; dozens of conservative Christian organizations devoted themselves solely to antigay activities (Herman 1997), and anti-gay discourse came to encompass an attack on the status of homosexuals as a “minority” group deserving equal rights under the law. This marked a shift on the right from a focus on the immorality of homosexuality, to an attribution of superior power to gays. Gays were viewed as undeserving “special interest groups” which have won “special rights” by manipulating government corruption, gerrymandering elections, and appealing to a judicial system dominated by liberals, a powerful, morally corrupt school system, and a Congress that promotes the destruction of the family (Johnston 1994:7; Herman 1997) (Stein, 528-529).

During these initiative campaigns, the Christian right at times deployed rhetoric and imagery that echoed European anti-Semitism. The Oregon Citizens Alliance film, *The Gay Agenda*, closely resembled the 1940 Nazi propaganda film *The Eternal Jew*. Echoing traditional anti-Semitic propaganda which deliberately inflated the power of Jewish bankers, international Jewish conspiracies, and so forth, conservatives suggested that lesbians and gay men have higher incomes than others. A cartoon published by the Oregon Citizens Alliance showed a gay man manipulating the strings of the government and the economy. It was, one gay writer pointed out, ‘a virtual copy of a Nazi cartoon,’ one that replaced ‘the stooped, hook-nosed puppeteer with a fresh-faced gym boy (Solomon 1997:7).’ At the same time, the OCA challenged the right of lesbians and gay men to align themselves with the victims of the Holocaust. In the 1994 campaign for ballot measure 13, which sought to deny civil rights to lesbians and gays, a rightwing group calling itself ‘Jews and Friends of Holocaust Victims’ purchased space in the Official Oregon Voters Pamphlet (1994:79) arguing in favor of the ballot measure:

Who's a Nazi? Americans are watching history repeat as homosexuals promote the BIG LIE that everyone who opposes them is harmful to society. It's nothing new. They used this tactic in Germany against the Jews...Don't buy the BIG LIE. Opponents of minority status for homosexuals are not “Nazis” or “bigots”. And homosexuals aren't “victims” of your common sense morality. Protect our children! (Stein, p. 529).

In the following passage, Stein correctly argues that Lively and his supporters attempt to flip the victimhood metaphor from gays to themselves. *The Pink Swastika* has been a key aspect of that effort.

The ‘true’ victims are the guardians of ‘common sense morality,’ the Christian right. As a leader of the Oregon Citizens Alliance suggests, “‘gay rights’ activists—not pro-family conservatives and OCA supporters—should be wearing the label of Nazi.” Homosexuality was a CENTRAL element of the fascist system, that the Nazi elite was rampant with homosexuality and pederasty, that Adolph Hitler intentionally surrounded himself with homosexuals during his entire adult life, and that the people most responsible for many Nazi atrocities were homosexual.<sup>9</sup> This encapsulates the argument of *The Pink Swastika* (1995), authored by OCA activist Scott Lively, along with Kevin Abrams, who is identified as an Orthodox Jew residing in Israel. The book is a carefully constructed piece of political rhetoric, mixing serious scholarship with lies and outright distortions, truths with half-truths and falsehoods. The authors draw upon a variety of scholarly sources to make the argument that many, if not all, of the major leaders of the Nazi movement in Germany were homosexuals—including Hitler, Goebbels, Goering, Himmler, and Hess. While they do admit that homosexuals were persecuted by the Nazis, they suggest that homosexuals comprised the core of the Nazi Party. *The Pink Swastika* explains how homosexuals can be both Nazis and their victims. The authors contend that more masculine, “butch” homosexuals were responsible for building the Nazi party and creating the SA, or Brownshirts. Male homosexual “femmes” were persecuted by the Nazis, but largely escaped death...*The Pink Swastika* concludes with the claim that the contemporary gay rights movement, far from sharing a historical lineage with Holocaust ‘victims,’ actually has historical links to the Nazi perpetrators of genocide. (Stein, 530).

Stein then comes to a similar conclusion about the claims made by *The Pink Swastika* as I do when she writes:

Despite the claim of a direct link between Nazi ideology and homosexuality, historical evidence points to the opposite conclusion: that while the Nazis may have aestheticized homoeroticism to a point, they identified homosexuality with the emasculation of men, which they saw as a threat to the traditional patriarchal, procreative family which they idealized. (Stein, 531).

Stein asserts that *The Pink Swastika* seeks to accomplish ends which serve political, not scholarly, purposes. As noted, the line of thinking employed in book seeks to flip the victim status from gays to conservative Christians. Furthermore, as Stein puts it, the book seeks to “pit two traditionally liberal constituencies, gays and Jews, against one another, thereby...drawing parallels between Jews and Christians” (Stein, 531).

Speaking about Christians who advance the rhetoric and argumentation of *The Pink Swastika*, Stein writes:

Christian conservatives have deliberately distorted Holocaust memories to deflect lesbian/gay victim claims, and to make moral claims of their own. In the process, they have degraded the memory of Holocaust victims and alleviated the burden on the perpetrators. (Stein, 535).

I generally agree with Stein's conclusions here, and I ask all those reading this site, no matter their political beliefs, orientations, etc., to thoughtfully consider these conclusions, even though some of her criticisms of your various positions may challenge you.

I would go further, though, than Stein does in challenging the validity of Lively's book as legitimate and responsible history. First, though Lively does use a number of secondary sources in his research (including scholarly books by Grau, Michael Burleigh, and others), he does no original research in primary archival documents; ; meaning, he has not examined the thousands of documents available on these subjects for himself. While certainly effective synthesis histories can be written from strictly secondary sources (and a number of high-quality historians have written such books), the most effective and legitimate ones are usually written by scholars who have done extensive primary archival research on those subjects in the past and have a mastery of the secondary literature as well. In my professional opinion, Lively does not fit either of these categories.

Second, responsible historians tend to cast a skeptical and cautious eye on any historical conclusions that appear reductionist, monocausal, and polemical in their conclusions. In particular, books that use historical topics to score contemporary political points are often dismissed by scholars out of hand as not dealing with the past honestly. Anachronism is not the historian's goal or friend. While lessons can and should be drawn from history, these are not nearly as easy to arrive at as many (especially Lively, it seems) think.

Finally, in my opinion (and one that I would hazard a guess many other Christian and secular historians share), in any contemporary debates on ANY political / social subject, the arguments for and against certain positions should be made on the basis of the issues at hand, not on simplistic extrapolations from historical events, figures, and issues that were particular to their own contexts and time periods. Though certainly history can and should elucidate our understanding of the present as well as the past, using the past as a weapon in a contemporary political/social debate is inherently dangerous, for it risks obscuring more measured views of the past with hyperbole, confirmation bias, polemics, and (most importantly for me) historical inaccuracies that, through reductionism, view everything in history and in the present in overly simplistic terms. Doing so, in turn, does nothing to further either better historical inquiry or produce effective academic/political /social dialogue on vital contemporary issues (As an aside, I should also add that for Christians, I dare say, such reductionism is anathema to developing a stronger faith based on humility, prayer, theological study, contemplation, and intellectual honesty). But don't just take my word for it. A number of excellent scholarly historical works—by both Christians and non-Christians—have been written about the nature of historical inquiry, research and writing, and the historical profession's purpose(s) in explaining contemporary events and issues. In particular, the works of Richard J. Evans (*In Defense of History*), John Lewis Gaddis (*Landscapes of History*), Joyce Abbelby / Lynn Hunt / Margaret Jacob (*Telling the Truth About History*), and George Marsden (*A Christian View of History?* and *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*), David Hackett Fisher (*Historians' Fallacies*) and Jacques Barzun (*The Modern Researcher*) all explain and defend various notions of historical inquiry and methodology much more effectively than I can here. All readers of this site, and especially current or aspiring writers, should examine such books in order to learn exactly what historical inquiry is and what it is not. In my mind, Lively's book is an example of the latter. History is a complex and challenging and often humbling discipline for many reasons, something I ask all readers here to keep in mind as you continue to debate these very important issues.

Prior posts in this series: