

Freemasonry and the Holocaust

Inverted Red Triangle Worn by Imprisoned Freemasons

We've all learned in history classes about World War II and how people of the Jewish faith were rounded up, imprisoned, and brutally tortured and killed by the Nazis, but what most people don't know is that the Freemasons were among those rounded up and systematically murdered by the Nazi war machine.

“During the Holocaust between ten and eleven million people were murdered by the Nazi's, Jews accounted for approximately 5.7 million and the rest were non-Jews. Among the non-Jews were certain types of people such as Gypsies, Soviets, Polish Citizens, Jehovah's witnesses, and other political and religious opponents which included Freemasons. Nazi ideology believed that the “high degree” Masons were willing members of the Jewish conspiracy, and many of the Nazi's believed Freemasonry was one of the causes of Germany losing the first World War.” [1]

Hitler strongly believed that the Jews and Freemasons in tandem controlled the press, which is evident from his book Mein Kampf,

“The general pacifistic paralysis of the national instinct of self-preservation begun by Freemasonry is then transmitted to the masses of society by the Jewish Press” [2]

To understand the hatred aimed at Freemasonry from the Nazi party, we have to begin by going back in time to World War One, at the time where the political and social consequences of Germany's humiliating defeat were beginning to take a toll on the German political landscape. “The responsibility for the war, the defeat, and the peace terms were blamed on the opponents of the war and on those politicians who favored the democratic process”,[3]and as we all are aware, a Masonic Lodge definitely operates on a democratic process. Despite this, the Lodges in Germany grew quite well until the Nazi party began seizing control of power in 1933, at which point there were more than eighty-two thousand Masons and six hundred thirty-two Lodges in Germany.[4]

German Lodges at this time were considered, “places of coalition for like-minded people, beyond political disagreement and economic misery”[5] and they did attract new members after 1933, yet they never had the social standing or clout that American or British Lodges had due to the growing atmosphere of anti-Semitic and anti-Masonic attitudes in Germany post 1933. Also, at that time Freemasonry in Germany was divided, because there were the Old Prussian Grand Lodges and the Humanitarian Grand Lodges. The Old Prussian Grand Lodges had deliberately excluded Jews from membership and the majority of their members were also part of the German Nationalist milieu. There was also a movement among the Old Prussian Lodges to drop the Jewish storyline for the degrees to make them more Aryan in nature. The Humanitarian Grand Lodges members were mostly members of political parties that were in the middle left of the political spectrum. Three of the eight Grand Lodges were Old Prussian and five were Humanitarian and the Old Prussian Grand Lodges were the oldest in Germany because they had secured Royal Patronage from their beginning.

“Most members of the Old Prussian Lodges and even some members of the few dogmatic Humanitarian Lodges did not find the central elements of the Nazi Party's ideology to be contradictory to their Masonic beliefs. Instead, they found the ideology to be rather complimentary to their own understanding of Freemasonry. Before the Nazis came to power, the president of the German

Freemason Association, Diedrich Bischoff, even suggested an inspiration of the “Third Reich” based on or through Masonic idealism.” [6]

At this time a man named Erich Ludendorff, the former chief of the German Army’s General Staff during World War One, became an outspoken critic of the fraternity, and openly attacked it, including his 1927 publication, “Exterminating Freemasonry by Uncovering its Secrets”. In this work he completely distorted and falsified the rituals of Freemasonry under the Grand National Lodge of Freemasons of Germany, and in it he claimed that Freemasons had training to become artificial Jews. “This defamatory piece of writing made all of the nine regular Grand Lodges in Germany agree with each other. On September 15, 1927, the Grand Masters published a declaration that rejected Ludendorff’s depiction of Freemasonry and described it as an “incitement to the German Nation” and “Misleading to the masses.” This was the only time when all of the German Grand Lodges would unite to counter an accusation of their nationalist enemies.”[7] This would have been a most difficult time to be a Freemason, because we are told to obey the laws of our country; however, when a country like Germany was undergoing a radically negative transformation in the two decades leading up to World War Two, this would have been an extremely difficult thing to do for any true and honest member of the craft.

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler, the leader of the Nazi party, was appointed German Chancellor. At this point, the Grand Lodges of Germany were still very much estranged from each other, but they were well aware that they were facing an uncertain and dangerous future, because the Nazi’s had always been very hostile towards any kind of Freemasonry. In Hitler’s book, Mein Kampf, he claimed that “the Jew” used Freemasonry as an “excellent instrument” as the Fraternity was “completely under the Jews spell.”[8] By April 7, 1933, Herman Goring who was then the Nazi Minister of the Interior had met with the Grand Master of the National Lodge of Freemasons of Germany and a law was passed that would reorganize the Grand Lodge as follows:

- 1) “The Order will return to its original shape. From today on, the term National Lodge of Freemasons of Germany, which was taken on in the 18th century will no longer be valid. The order will henceforth have the name that corresponds with its nature: German Christian Order of the Grail of the Knights Templar.
- 2) With this decision, the order has ceased to be a Masonic corporation.” [9]

With the Creation of these new “German Christian Orders” the rituals of German Freemasonry had changed with it. This was something that the more nationally oriented Old Prussian, and a few of the Humanitarian Lodges, had wanted in the first place. With this edict in place, the Old Prussian Lodges replaced some of the Old Testament legends with Germanic legends and the mythology of the Holy Grail, the saga of the Germanic God Baldur took place of Hiram Abiff, and the Pillars were now named Light and Folk and were no longer Jachin and Boaz. The checkered floor no longer showed Solomon’s Temple but was now a representation of Germany’s Strasburg’s Cathedral.

It appears that the German Freemasons where desperately trying to hang on to Freemasonry as best they could, while at the same time trying to appease the laws of their country. However, even with concessions and changes, the noose continued to be tightened around the neck of Freemasonry, because on September 6, 1933 the regulations enacted the previous April were not only being harshly enforced, but a new ordinance was enacted:

“Brothers who are not of Aryan descent are to be honorably discharged from the order immediately, persons with Aryan descent are in this ordinance defined as persons whose parents and grandparents

were Aryans, and for Brothers who are Jewish, point one will be enforced.”[10] These same guidelines would be used for new members as well. One could say that at this time Freemasonry as it was intended to be was all but dead in Germany. Because of these new regulations, German Freemasons couldn't see how they could possibly continue under the Nazi regime, and the German division of the Universal Masonic League as well as the Freemasons Union of the Rising Sun dissolved. Scottish Rite Masonry was over with as well, although they did not formally dissolve, they simply longer existed. Palestine.

“In June 1933, at a secret meeting in Frankfurt am Main, Grand Master Leo Muffelmann and some of his close companions decided to move the Symbolic Lodge to Palestine. The Symbolic Grand Lodge of Germany in Exile was constituted on November 17, 1933, when British authorities gave the needed permission.” [11]

In the early part of 1934, the chief of the Nazi Party court system ruled that Masons who did not leave their Lodges prior to January 30, 1933 were not permitted to join the Nazi party. The Reichstag President Hermann Goering stated that, “in National Socialist Germany there is no place for Freemasonry”, and he issued a decree calling for the Lodges to voluntarily dissolve, yet required these to be submitted to him for approval so that the property of all Lodges could be confiscated under the "Enabling Act". The Enabling Act also stated that “those who had been members of Lodges when Hitler came to power in January 1933 were prohibited from holding office in the Nazi party or its paramilitary arms and were ineligible for appointment in public service.” In May 1934, German Freemasonry was once again dealt another blow when the Ministry of Defense banned membership in Lodges to all personnel, soldiers, and civilian employees. By 1935 every single Masonic Lodge and organization relating to Freemasonry had either been prohibited, dissolved, or forcibly shut down. Those that had voluntarily shut down were not declared hostile to the state, but their possessions were seized and controlled by the Gestapo. Those that were shut down by force were declared hostile to the state, and their possessions were confiscated, their records were destroyed, and their buildings were vandalized. The members of these hostile Lodges were dismissed from civil service and transferred from any positions of power that they held in the profane world.

While many former Freemasons within Germany tried to keep in contact with one another despite a ban disallowing them to do so, many did regularly meet under the pretext of playing the game skat. Although these gatherings were not actually Masonic meetings it did help preserve the bonds of Brotherhood even though on occasion these meetings took place under the watchful eyes of the Gestapo.

Anti-Masonic Propaganda Material

Even though German Freemasonry had effectively been eliminated, Nazi propaganda continued to link conspiracy theories and numerous printed cartoons and articles would portray and perpetuate this “Jewish-Masonic conspiracy.” This became a particular obsession with the chief of Security Police, Reinhard Heydrich, who “counted the Masons, along with the Jews and the political clergy, as the most implacable enemies of the German race.”[12] He even argued the need to eliminate any visible manifestations of these enemies, and to also root out from every German the “indirect influence of the Jewish Spirit”-a Jewish, liberal and Masonic infectious residue that remains in the unconscious of many, above all in the academic and intellectual world.”[13] Heydrich also created a special section of the Security Service to specifically deal with Freemasonry, because they believed that Masons shaped public

opinion through the press, exercised political power, and that they were in a position to provoke war, subversion, and revolution.

Beginning with the annexation of Austria, in 1938, the persecution of Freemasons increased. At the beginning of World War Two in 1939, almost five million copies of the "NSDAP (Nazi Party) letter of political instruction against Freemasonry" had been distributed. While in Nazi Germany a former Freemason was usually not personally persecuted, unless he was also a Jew or did not act in conformity with the Nazi system, in countries occupied by Nazi Germany, being a member of a Masonic Lodge could mean a direct risk of losing property and even one's life.[14] In 1942 Hitler appointed Alfred Rosenberg, to intellectually fight Jews and Freemasons, and Rosenberg ordered the personal property, real property, archives, records, libraries, and artworks of Freemasons and Jews to be confiscated or destroyed. [15] Eventually, Freemasons were rounded up with the political dissidents, Jews, Gypsies, and others deemed unfit or dangerous, and taken to concentration camps. It has been estimated that anywhere between eighty thousand and two hundred thousand Freemasons were murdered under Nazi rule.

I will not highlight the tragedy and horror that occurred in the concentration camps, I will however describe the fortitude that some of our Brethren had, and how they continued to carry on the Light of Freemasonry in the concentration camps.

The people in the concentration camps wore a mark to show the guards of the camps what kind of prisoner each individual was. The Freemasons were considered political prisoners and had to wear inverted red triangles on their shirts and pants to identify them as such. It is rumored that Freemasons identified each other by these red triangles on their clothing, and there is also the speculation that Freemasons wore the edelweiss or blue forget me not on their lapel to identify each other; however, there is no hard evidence of either of these being true other than word to mouth passed down through the generations.

There is however undisputed proof of Masonic Lodges operating within concentrations camps. Yes, even in the face of mechanized murder and genocide, Freemasonry was still able to carry on because of the strong will and desire of its Members to maintain the Order, and its cherished principles. The first known Lodge to exist within the walls of a concentrations camp was the Lodge Liberte Cherie or Beloved Liberty Lodge. This Lodge was started by seven Belgian Freemasons on November 15, 1943 inside Hut 6 of Esterwegen Concentration Camp. The original seven Freemasons that were members of this Lodge were Paul Hanson, Luc Somerhausen, Jean De Schrijver, Jean Sugg, Henri Story, Amedee Miclotte, Franz Rochat and Guy Hannecart. These men also initiated, passed, and raised Brother Fernand Erauw whom was also a Belgian. Paul Hanson was the Master of the Lodge. The Brothers met around a table inside hut #6 which was otherwise used for cartridge sorting while a Catholic Priest stood watch over the hut so the Brethren could have their meetings in secrecy. Some of the topics of these meetings included topics about the position of women in Freemasonry, the future of Belgium, and one dedicated to the symbol of the Great Architect of the Universe.

Esterwegen Memorial 1

Esterwegen Memorial 2

Sadly, only two members of this Lodge survived the detention in this concentration camp, Somerhausen and the newly initiated Erauw. The Lodge stopped working at the beginning of 1944.[16] The other Masonic Lodge that we know of was Obstinate Lodge or L'Obstinee. This was another Masonic Lodge founded inside the walls of a Nazi prisoner of war camp called Oflag which was located near Hamburg,

Germany. It was founded by captured soldiers that were members of the Grand Orient of Belgium. We do not know much more about this Lodge other than that the Grand Orient of Belgium officially recognized this Lodge on July 14, 1946.[17] We sadly do not know just how many Freemasons and Lodges were in operation “under cover” in POW and concentration camps because of the basic fact that absolute secrecy literally meant the difference between life and death for their members.
Inmates at Esterwegen

There is a reason why I chose to write about what is most likely the most horrible and disgusting example persecution against our Fraternity, and that is to show the reader, Mason or not, that no matter what you throw at the Masonic fraternity we always find a way to rise above, and not only survive, but thrive. We are a strong brotherhood, bound by mystic ties that are stronger than earthly persecution. For my brethren, I hope this story of persecution and resolve hit you right in the gut, and is a call for to action for higher deeds and nobler purposes, especially to those Brethren who attend a Lodge that contains nothing more than boring business meetings. If you are a member of a stale and boring lodge, let me ask you this; after what you just read are you content with your Lodge remaining stagnant and stale, or are you going to honor our Masonic brothers who have been persecuted and killed because of their devotion to our craft? We must honor our departed Brethren by creating the fraternity and world that they dreamed of and died for. Freemasonry will always live on, but it is up to the Brethren of now to decide how.

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End Notes:

[1] Our red triangle, Freemasonry and the holocaust presentation Jan. 9, 2012 by Adam T. Osman
www.squareofvirtue.wordpress.com

[2] Mein Kampf by Adolph Hitler 1925 pages 315-320

[3] In the Eye of a Hurricane: German Freemasonry in the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich by Ralf Melzer

[4] These numbers are from C. van Dalen’s Kalendar fur Friemaurer, 1926 Page 94

[5] In the Eye of a Hurricane: German Freemasonry in the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich by Ralf Melzer

[6] Ibid page 206

[7] In the Eye of a Hurricane: German Freemasonry in the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich by Ralf Melzer page 208.

[8] Mein Kampf, by Adolph Hitler 1929, 1933 page 345

[9] Archives of the Grand Lodge of Freemasons, Berlin

[10] Archives of the Grand Lodge of Freemasons, Berlin

[11] In the Eye of a Hurricane: German Freemasonry in the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich by Ralf Melzer page 211

[12] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia, updated June 10, 2013 ©US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.

[13] Ibid

[14] A letter from Veljko Varicak, Grand Commander of the Supreme Council of Slovenia, stored in the Archive of the Supreme Council, 33°, S.J. Washington D.C.

[15] In the Eye of a Hurricane: German Freemasonry in the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich by Ralf Melzer page 217

[16] Our red triangle, Freemasonry and the Holocaust presentation Jan. 9, 2012 by Adam T. Osman
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