

# From Mark of Oppression to Symbol of Gay Pride

## -- The Pink Triangle --

**Purpose** - This display exhibit (treated thematically) explores the creation, use, evolution, and cultural legacy of the Pink Triangle symbol in the overall context of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer / questioning) history. It has served as a touchstone for the development and adoption of other community symbols, and has recently reemerged in ongoing sociological discussions, political activism, and the current culture wars.



Modern Gay Pride tape/pins (above and bottom left).

During WWII, the Nazis developed a system of fabric patch symbols worn on the blue and grey striped uniforms marking prisoners in the various concentration camps. The Yellow Star-of-David, which marked Jews, is perhaps the most well known. The **Pink Triangle (pointed DOWN)** was used to mark gay men. It is believed **PINK** was chosen to be the color most demeaning to masculinity. It is estimated more than 150,000 gay men were arrested, and as many as 70,000 gay men may have died during the Holocaust.

Over time, the mark has been reclaimed as a symbol for political activism and Gay Pride, and has led to the development of other important LGBTQ community symbols.

**Poland** - cacheted cover, 1968 (far left) with a prisoners' Triangle and a 'P' for Poland over uniform stripes, honoring Holocaust victims. Stamps of the Struggle and Martyrdom of the Polish People 1939-1945 series.

**Germany** - photograph (near left) of gay men held at Sachsenhausen (Oranienburg) Concentration Camp near Frankfurt, 19 December, 1938.

### The Exhibit is Organized into the Following Major Sections

- 1] Gay Culture in Pre-War Germany
- 2] Social Nationalism and the Rise of the Nazis
- 3] The Pink Triangle, WWII and the Concentration Camps
- 4] Other Symbols and Persecuted Groups
- 5] Liberation (for Some ...), Reflection and Remembrance
- 6] Early Gay Rights Movement and The Stonewall Riots
- 7] Politics and the HIV / AIDS Epidemic
- 8] Reclaiming the Pink Triangle for Social Activism
- 9] LGBTQ+ Identity and The Current Culture Wars
- 10] Beyond the Pink Triangle - Gay Pride and Modern Society

ACT UP adopted the motto '**SILENCE = DEATH**' and image of the Pink Triangle, as a bold, militant graphic. **The Pink Triangle was inverted (with the point facing UP)** for future hope.



USA - art postcard (above) of the ACT UP symbol and motto with social criticisms. By ACT UP, 1987.

● Descriptors highlighted in light blue with red dots denote rarity

🔍 Denotes original research

## From Mark of Oppression to Symbol of Gay Pride – The Pink Triangle

**The Pink Triangle stands as a symbol of man's inhumanity toward his fellow man. It is a stark reminder of what can happen when bigotry and hatred are enshrined into law. But it is also a powerful symbol reclaimed in social activism, pride, and hope for the future.**

**Purpose** – This display exhibit (treated thematically) explores the creation, use, evolution, and cultural legacy of the Pink Triangle symbol in the overall context of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer / questioning) history.

**Scope** – The Pink Triangle and subsequent symbols are examined including their importance in modern culture and our current sociopolitical climate.

- 1) It opens with materials from 1930s Pre-War Germany, when gay culture was accepted and even celebrated;
- 2) It then reviews initial creation and use of the Pink Triangle by the Nazis during the Holocaust and in the concentration camps of WWII;
- 3) It continues with reclamation of the symbol by political activists during the gay rights movement of the 1960s and 70s, and the HIV / AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 90s;
- 4) It concludes with discussion of the extrapolation beyond the Pink Triangle to creation of the Rainbow Pride Flag and other LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning) supportive symbols.

However, the exhibit is not intended as an exhaustive review of all symbols associated with homosexuality or the LGBTQ+ activism or Gay Pride movements.

**Importance** – During the Nazi Holocaust, an estimated 150,000 gay men were arrested, and as many as 70,000 died. The Pink Triangle was used to mark gay men in the WWII concentration camps. Discrimination against homosexuality peaked again in the 1980s with the advent of HIV/AIDS. Despite some recent sociopolitical gains and increasing acceptance across multiple countries and cultures, homosexuality remains a target of hate, bigotry and discrimination. It is still illegal in 64 United Nations member states, including 11 that can legally impose the death penalty (most often by stoning), and many others that include life imprisonment as a legal option.

**Philatelic / Subject Knowledge** – The main challenge in creating this exhibit is that NO stamps or other philatelic issues specifically depicting or honoring the symbol of the Pink Triangle or these Holocaust victims have been produced to date. Instead, a wide variety of materials linking this theme have been selected to capture and tell the story of the role the Pink Triangle has played in LGBTQ+ culture.

**Personal Study and Research** – I have been collecting historical and philatelic materials for more than 30 years. As part of this exhibit, I have conducted both primary and secondary research using a wide variety of resources including library materials from various philatelic and Holocaust collections (both online and in print), and other published documents. I'm currently preparing manuscript materials for future publication in philatelic and historical journals.

**Rarity** –This exhibit includes multiple rare items, although rarity may not be immediately obvious. For example, postally used covers mailed by the political action group ACT-UP LA, may appear to be very common material. However, these are printed on letterhead with specific cachets and stickers. Most people would have simply discarded these, so finding them for sale or auction is exceedingly difficult. Rare peripheral materials are also included such as vintage protest buttons, items from countries typically hostile to homosexuality including the Soviet Union of the 1980s, and modern materials created to protest current social and political issues from today. For example, *'The Gay Kingdom of the Coral Sea'* was a new 'Sovereign Nation' established by marriage equality activists off the coast of Australia in 2004. They issued a set of 9 vignettes showing important symbols of the LGBTQ+ community to raise public awareness. This set is extremely scarce and difficult to acquire. I contacted more than 50 dealers including 15 in Australia and New Zealand, none of whom had ever heard of the set, and none of whom knew of any availability or auction. My exhibit now includes an imperforate full set, and an example sent postally used on cover. This highlights a major challenge with this type of modern material. There is essentially no existing catalogue of these types of materials or on this topic. Rarity is highlighted in the individual item descriptions.

**Condition** – Material from WWII shows typical aging but the best possible examples have been selected. Modern items and selected peripheral ephemera and other materials are also of excellent quality.

**Presentation** – Information is presented in ten major sections to place the Pink Triangle in overall historical context of LGBTQ+ culture. PINK is highlighted throughout the exhibit, and subsequent colorful material emphasizes hope for the future. The exhibit has been consistently updated to include material related to current sociopolitical news and ongoing government actions (particularly in 2025 in the United States).

### **Materials Included in the Exhibit**

As a display class exhibit, careful attention has been paid to inclusion of a wide variety of materials. This includes stamps, postcards (both original art and real picture postcards), first day covers, postmarks and cancels, signed proofs, cachets, business stationery, political action buttons and pins, flyers, decals, and book/script covers.

### **Honors and Awards**

- Invited exhibition at the Spellman Museum of Stamps and Postal History, Weston, Massachusetts, USA, May 1 – June 30, 2024 (for Yom HaShoah and LGBTQ+ Pride Month).

- Most Popular Single Frame Exhibit Award – Greater Houston Stamp Show – Humble, Texas, USA, September 15-17, 2023.
- Most Popular Topical Exhibit Award – National Topical Stamp Show (NTSS) / Great American Stamp Show (GASS) – Schaumburg, Illinois, USA, August 14-17, 2025.

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