

Masons at War: Freemasonry during World War Two

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In 1933 Adolph Hitler and the Nazi Party gained control of Germany. Six years later he plunged the world into the horrors of a second World War and the Holocaust, which resulted in nearly fifty-five million deaths across the world.¹ World War II affected many different peoples and groups, and the Freemasons were no different. Internationally they faced repression and execution at the hands of Nazi Germany, but also emerged as key leaders of the free world. Locally the war brought “out the best”² in United States Masons as they threw their support behind the war on the home front. This paper will cover the oppression of Freemasonry by Nazi Germany, the influence of Freemasonry on the leadership of the Allied powers, the support of Illinois Freemasons on the home front, and will also show how WWII influenced the increase of Freemason membership in the United States. This paper will demonstrate that even though Freemasons faced persecution internationally throughout WWII, they aided in the winning the war both on the battlefield and in the background at home and emerged stronger than before the war began.

When the Nazis gained power in Germany after Hitler was named Chancellor on January 30, 1933, they began targeting their political enemies, Jews, and also Freemasons. General Erich von Ludendorff, who had joined Hitler in the failed 1923 Right-wing revolt in Munich, published in 1927 the anti-Freemasonry book *The Destruction of Freemasonry through the Disclosure of its Secrets*, in which he claimed Freemasonry, was controlled by the Jews.³ Hitler also put forth this belief that Freemasonry had “succumbed” to the Jews and was an “excellent instrument with which to fight for his [the Jews] aims and put them across” in his autobiography *Mein Kampf*.⁴ Because of this, the Nazis quickly began suppressing the Masonic Lodges within Germany. On January 16, 1934 the Prussian Premier Herman Wilhelm Goering

¹ “World War II in Europe,” *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, last modified, May 11, 2012, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007187>.

² Karl J. Mohr, “Freemasonry Enlists in the War,” *Grand Lodge Proceedings*, (1942), in *Illinois Freemasonry*, (2005): 16, accessed October 14, 2012, <http://www.illinoisfreemason.org/files/magazine/IllinoisFreemasonry-SpringSummer2005.pdf>.

³ Jasper Ridley, *The Freemasons: A History of the World's Most Powerful Secret Society*, (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2001), 230.

⁴ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, (1926): 227, <http://www.angelfire.com/folk/bigbaldbob88/MeinKampf.pdf> (accessed March 30, 2013).

“wiped out” the three main Prussian Masonic lodges, stating that there was “no further need for their existence.”⁵ He also sent a warning with a threatening undertone to remaining lodges “he simply saw no further use for them [Masonic lodges] and then left it to the lodges themselves to vanish from the picture voluntarily.”⁶ Then in September of 1934 Nazi Minister of Interior Wilhelm Frick dissolved thirteen Masonic lodges claiming that Freemasonry was “controlled by international Jews and is useless to the third Reich.”⁷ As the war escalated Germany captured new territories and dissolved Masonic lodges under the newly established occupational regimes.⁸ After the Gestapo disbanded a lodge “it was ransacked for membership lists, important library and archival items, furnishings, and other cultural artifacts.”⁹ The Nazis used the confiscated materials to fuel their anti-Masonic propaganda campaign. They set up anti-Masonic exhibitions throughout occupied Europe with stolen artifacts attempting to create fears of a “Jewish-Masonic conspiracy.”¹⁰ One such exhibition entitled “Der ewige Jude” (The Eternal Jew)¹¹ was set up in Munich, Germany. The Munich exhibition used a fusion of actual Freemason symbols and style; it was arranged like a Masonic lodge room would be, but it also had Jewish symbols mixed in. It used symbols of the sinister with skulls and skeletons to play on people’s fears.

Nazi propagandists printed cartoons and wrote articles that linked Jews and Masons in a world domination conspiracy.¹² They also used slogans such as “All Masons Jews—All Jews Masons!”¹³ Hitler used an

⁵ “Masonic Lodges in Prussia Wiped Out by Goering,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jan 17, 1934, 9.

⁶ “Masonic Lodges in Prussia Wiped Out by Goering,” 9.

⁷ “13 Masonic Lodges Dissolved by Nazis; no Reason is Given,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Sep 19, 1934, 4.

⁸ “Freemasonry Under the Nazi Regime,” *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, last modified, May 11, 2012, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007187>.

⁹ “Freemasonry Under the Nazi Regime.”

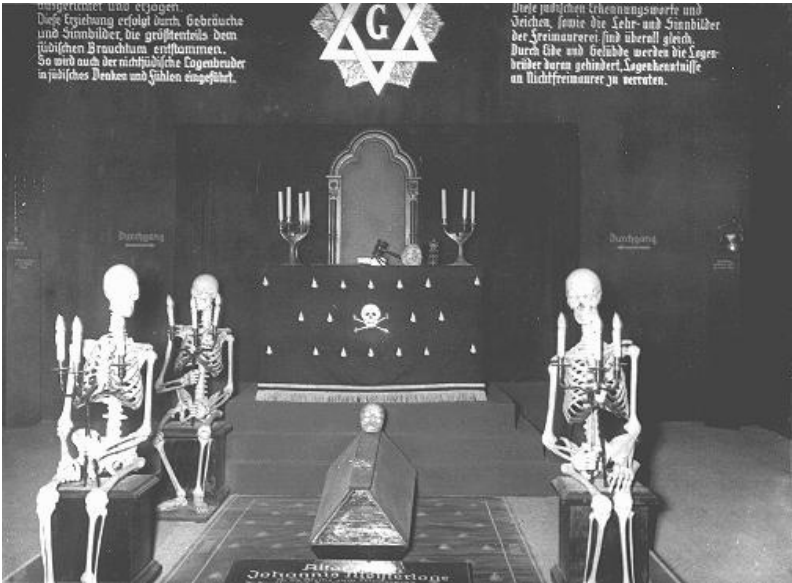
¹⁰ “Freemasonry Under the Nazi Regime.”

¹¹ “An antisemitic and anti-Masonic display at the exhibition “Der ewige Jude” (The Eternal Jew) Munich, Germany, November 10, 1937,” *National Archives and Records Administration*, College Park, Md. http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_ph.php?ModuleId=10007187&MediaId=5781.

¹² “Freemasonry Under the Nazi Regime.”

¹³ Paul M. Bessel, “Freemasonry & Judaism,” (paper was revised for presentations September 5, at Skidmore Daylight Lodge No. 237; and October 2, 1995, at Elmer Timberman Lodge No. 54), http://www.bessel.org/masjud.htm#N_29_.

earlier Russian anti-Jewish and anti-Mason propaganda book written in the late 1800s, translated into German in the 1920s, entitled *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* to support his theory of a Jewish, Freemason world domination plot.¹⁴ Eventually, along with having their lodges forcefully closed, many prominent Masons were sent to concentration camps, which forced many Freemasons to go underground.¹⁵ To identify fellow Masons they replaced the traditional square and compass pin with the small blue Forget-Me-Not flower lapel pin.¹⁶



While Freemasonry *Figure 1* was being suppressed in Nazi controlled Europe, Freemasons in the free world emerged as key leaders in the Allied fight against Nazi expansion. The heads of state for both Great Britain and the United States were Freemasons. Sir Winston Churchill the Prime Minister of Great Britain, while not vigorously involved in the fraternity, joined as a young man and “was initiated in Studholme Lodge No. 1591, London and raised March 25, 1902 in

¹⁴ Bessel, “Freemasonry & Judaism.”

¹⁵ Paul M. Bessel, “Bigotry and the Murder of Freemasonry,” accessed March 30, 2013, http://bessel.org/naziartl.htm#N_28_.

¹⁶ “The Forget-Me-Not (Das Vergissmeinnicht) The Story Behind This Beloved Emblem Of The Craft in Germany.” *Phoenixmasonry*. http://www.phoenixmasonry.org/masonicmuseum/forget_me_not_lapel_pin.htm.

Rosemary Lodge No. 2851.”¹⁷ Another of Great Britain’s leaders, King George VI, was also a Mason. He would state at the “end of his reign...that he had always regarded Masonry as one of the strongest influences of his life.”¹⁸ Freemasons also led the United States throughout the war; both Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman were Masons. Truman remained active even as President, rendering Masonic services and even receiving the 33rd Degree while in office.¹⁹ Freemasons also took a leading role in the military. Some of the most famous were General Douglas MacArthur, U.S. Commander in the Philippines, General Omar Bradley, who “was raised in West Point Lodge No. 877, Highland Falls, N.Y. in 1923,” and General Henry “Hap” Arnold, the commanding general of Army Air Forces.²⁰

On the home front, United States Freemasons threw their wholehearted support behind the war effort, and Masons in Illinois were no exception. During the war thousands of Illinois men and women served in the armed forces and thousands of others were stationed or temporarily housed on bases in Illinois.²¹ To provide for the comfort and morale of all these servicemen Illinois Grand Master Karl J. Mohr, like other Grand Masters across the country, began to establish Masonic Service Centers throughout Illinois similar to today’s USO Centers. Each of the seven service centers were located near major military bases at “Waukegan for the Great Lakes Training Station, at Highland Park for Fort Sheridan, at 912 N. LaSalle St., Chicago, for Navy Pier and Northwestern, at Rockford for Camp Grant, at Rantoul for Chanute Field and at Belleville for Scott Field.”²² The service centers were located in local Masonic lodges each “fully equipped to furnish fun, recreation, and comfort to the men of the service.”²³ However, these service centers were not just for Freemasons; Grand Master Mohr stated in 1942 that “Our facilities are proffered alike to

¹⁷ William R. Denslow, *10,000 Famous Freemasons*, (Richmond: Macoy Publishing & Masonic Supply Co., 1957), “Sir Winston L. Churchill,” http://www.phoenixmasonry.org/10,000_famous_freemasons/Volume_1_A_to_D.htm.

¹⁸ Denslow, *10,000 Famous Freemasons*, “George IV King of England (1895-1952).”

¹⁹ Denslow, *10,000 Famous Freemasons*, “Harry S. Truman Thirty-third President of the United States.” Truman had served as Grandmaster of Masons in Missouri while a Senator.

²⁰ Denslow, *10,000 Famous Freemasons*.

²¹ Rodger D.Launius, “Illinois in World War II,” *Illinois Periodicals Online*, (1995), <http://www.lib.niu.edu/1995/ihy950449.html>.

²² Mohr, “Freemasonry Enlists in the War,” 16.

²³ Mohr, “Freemasonry Enlists in the War,” 16.

members of the Fraternity and those in uniform, regardless of whence they may come.”²⁴ The Masonic service centers provided free hot meals daily, games such as ping pong and billiards, and even dancing.²⁵ The centers serviced hundreds of thousands of servicemen throughout the war and between 1942 and 1945 the 912 N. LaSalle St. Center “served 372,000 meals.”²⁶ The service centers also provided for the morale of the servicemen by holding forums for the men to discuss their complaints. They discussed issues such as “how to get along with their officers, what their future will be after the war, and the present state of the nation.”²⁷

The Masonic Service Centers not only provided for the physical comforts and morale of the servicemen at home, but also for troops overseas. Committees on Service to the Armed Forces were appointed in every Illinois lodge with the purpose of furnishing “the names of all members in service and a multitude of names of relatives in the service” and each was written a “warm letter of good luck and good cheer.”²⁸ By 1943 Mohr stated, “Over 26,000 men in uniform, one-third of them brother Masons, have received letters from this committee, and have been the recipients of its activities.”²⁹ In response the Committees on Service to the Armed Forces received letters from service men that “replete with grateful, enthusiastic, responsive and appreciative letters, evidences the value of our endeavors.”³⁰

The Masonic Service Centers were run entirely by volunteers from local lodges but by far the majority of the volunteers came from the women of the Order of the Eastern Star led by Grand Matron Ester Gielow. The Order of the Eastern Star is a Masonic affiliated fraternal organization that includes both men and women. The Order was started in 1850 by Dr. Rob Morris, who believed “Masonry should be for the whole family.” The Order of the Eastern Star was

²⁴ Everett R. Turnbull, *The Rise and Progress of Freemasonry in Illinois, 1783-1952*, (United States: Pantagraph Printing and Stationery Co., 1952), 294.

²⁵ “Eastern Star’s Center Mecca to Service Men,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Mar 17, 1944: 19.

²⁶ “Masonic Service Center Reports 372,000 Meals,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 13, 1945.

²⁷ “Forum Reveals Major Worries of Service Men,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Dec 05, 1943.

²⁸ Mohr, “Freemasonry Enlists in the War,” 16.

²⁹ Turnbull, *The Rise and Progress of Freemasonry in Illinois*, 294.

³⁰ Turnbull, *The Rise and Progress of Freemasonry in Illinois*, 294.

“dedicated to charity, truth and loving kindness,”³¹ The women would volunteer every day of the week “mending for the men, bringing refreshments, and doing hostess duty.”³² In 1944 Illinois Grand Master Pierson gave high praise to the women of the Order, saying:

Words cannot express our appreciation to the members of the Order of the Eastern Star for their generous assistance in making our Service Centers a success. Without their contributions in money, food, time and more especially in actual work, it would have been well nigh impossible to have given the Service Centers the home touch that has been so appealing to the men in our country’s armed forces. Every day, Sundays and Holidays included, they have worked tirelessly and gladly cooking and serving delicious food, acting as hostesses, and doing all in their power to make a ‘Home away from Home’ for the boys. The Masons of Illinois can never forget the wonderful services they have rendered.³³

The Grand Lodge of Illinois funded the Masonic Service Centers through a combination of savings, donations from lodges, and private donations. At the beginning of the war, to start up the service centers Grand Master Mohr used the Illinois Grand Lodge’s savings “that conservative management has accumulated over the years.”³⁴ To fund the upkeep of the service centers Mohr called for donations from the lodges. Illinois Masons willingly gave more than was asked of them. “I asked every lodge in the state to send our Grand Secretary a check for a minimum of ten cents a member. We have 986 lodges in Illinois; 986 sent in checks. The amount was over subscribed by twenty-five percent.”³⁵ The centers also received private donations from fundraisers like the benefit musical held on April 4, 1943 featuring “Milton Treshansky, concert pianist, and Lois Colburn, first cellist with the Women’s Symphony of Chicago.”³⁶ After the war ended in 1945, the Grand Officers held a conference and “decided that as the Centers were primarily organized for the purpose of building morale and furnished some pleasure and comfort for those who were being trained for combat

³¹ “About the Order of the Eastern Star” and “History of the Order of the Eastern Star,” General Grand Chapter Order of the Eastern Star, accessed March 30, 2013, <http://www.easternstar.org/index.html>.

³² “Mrs. Gielow to be Feted at Luncheon.” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Apr 25, 1943.

³³ Turnbull, *The Rise and Progress of Freemasonry in Illinois*, 294.

³⁴ Mohr, “Freemasonry Enlists in the War,” 16.

³⁵ Mohr, “Freemasonry Enlists in the War,” 16.

³⁶ “Revere Masonic Lodge Plans Benefit Musical,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Apr 04, 1943.

duty, their principle function expired with the declaration of peace.”³⁷ The Masonic Service Centers in Illinois were closed down on September 28, 1945.

Before World War II, Freemasonry had been facing a decline in membership in the United States however, after the end of the war membership steadily increased.³⁸ The popularity of all fraternal organizations like the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion received a surge in popularity as the men returning sought fellowship. Freemasonry in Illinois was no different. This surge in membership is shown in this chart (see figure 2).³⁹ Between 1940 and 1950 Illinois Masons gained 50,683 members and the number was still rising.⁴⁰

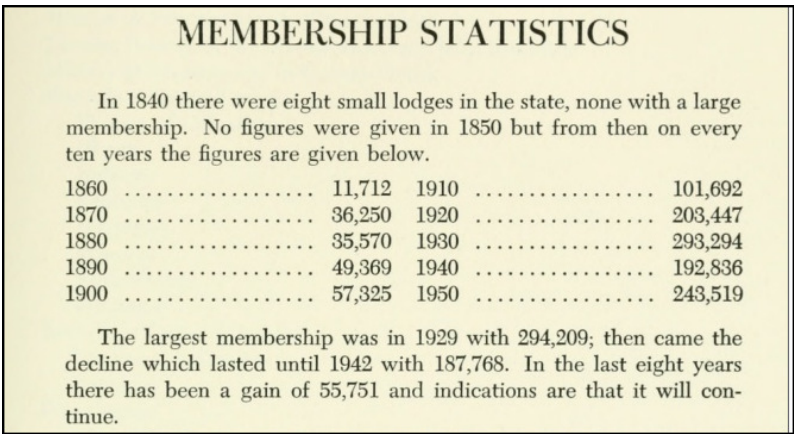


Figure 2

William J. Jones of Villa Grove, Illinois, explains why these men joined the Masons after the war.

I think immediately after WWII the Veterans experienced a great fellowship when they were in the service or whatever it was. They were together with other men and felt a close kinship and when they came home they didn't have that same feeling about the general people that they were acquainted with and stuff so they were, they liked to join a fraternity, a men's

³⁷ Turnbull, *The Rise and Progress of Freemasonry in Illinois*, 295.

³⁸ "Membership Totals since 1924," Masonic Service Association of North America, accessed March 30, 2013, http://www.msana.com/msastats_09to10.asp.

³⁹ Turnbull, *The Rise and Progress of Freemasonry in Illinois*, 303.

⁴⁰ Turnbull, *The Rise and Progress of Freemasonry in Illinois*, 303.

organization, so they could have fellowship similar to what they had when they were in the service either in the country or overseas.⁴¹

Mattoon Lodge #260 faced a steady decline in membership since the beginning of the Great Depression; however, at the end of WWII the opposite was true.⁴² In 1948 “forty-eight Master Masons were raised,” then in December of the same year the lodge had to purchase “eight dozen linen aprons,” the following year another “fifty-six Master Masons were raised.”⁴³ The growth continued steadily so that by 1958 Lodge membership was up to 765.⁴⁴ Charleston Lodge #35, who had thirty-three members who served in WWII, also had a surge in membership that reached its peak in 1955 with 412 members.⁴⁵ Membership across the United States reached a record high in 1959 with 4,103,161 members.⁴⁶

Freemasonry was heavily involved throughout World War II both internationally and domestically. They faced suppression through propaganda, expulsion, and violence in Germany and occupied Europe by the Nazi regime that feared a “Jewish-Masonic conspiracy.”⁴⁷ Even through this suppression Freemasons emerged as leading figures both in the allied civilian government and military command. In Illinois, Freemasons, with the help of the Order of the Eastern Star, threw their support behind the war effort with the opening of Masonic Service Centers that provided for the physical comforts and morale of the servicemen stationed in Illinois. Veterans returning from the war seeking the same fraternity they had with each other during the war joined the Freemasons causing a widespread upsurge in Masonic popularity. World War II brought “out the best”⁴⁸ in Freemasonry,

⁴¹ William J. Jones, Interview by Alyse Bennett and Mark Stanford, Transcript, Villa Grove, IL, September 21, 2012. William J. Jones, 33^o is Past Grand Master of Knights Templar in the United States.

⁴² Kim Torp transcriber, “Mattoon Lodge No. 260: A. F. & A. M. One Hundredth Anniversary 1858-1958,” *Illinois Genealogy Trails*. (2002), <http://www.genealogytrails.com/ill/coles/masons100th.html>.

⁴³ Torp, “Mattoon Lodge No. 260: A. F. & A. M. One Hundredth Anniversary 1858-1958.”

⁴⁴ Torp, “Mattoon Lodge No. 260.”

⁴⁵ Kim Torp transcriber, “One Hundred Fifty Years of Freemasonry in Charleston, Illinois 1845-1995.”

⁴⁶ “Membership Totals since 1924,” Masonic Service Association of North America, accessed March 30, 2013, http://www.msana.com/msastats_09to10.asp.

⁴⁷ “Freemasonry Under the Nazi Regime.”

⁴⁸ Mohr, “Freemasonry Enlists in the War,” 16.

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they faced adversity around the world and still managed to emerge stronger than when the war began.