

Stonewall and the Early Days

June 21, 2019



The “Stonewall riots”, which began on 28 June 1969 in New York, marked the start of the modern lesbian and gay rights movement.

During the McCarthyite witch hunts in 1950s America it was believed that a homosexual underground existed as part of a “communist conspiracy”. It was sometimes called the Homintern (after the Comintern, the Stalinist Communist International). The fearful authorities went so far as to depict this threat to security as a contagious social disease. Despite the fact that it was completely illegal to be gay and despite rabid persecution by the FBI and other state agencies, some brave souls formed a “homophile” association called the Mattachine Society in 1950.

Harry Hay, a longtime member of the Communist Party, was among the first to point out that homosexuals were a “cultural minority” and not just individuals. He and the Mattachine society had even begun to call for public protests for gay rights, thus pre-figuring later gay pride marches. Hay was expelled from the CP in 1951 as a “security risk”. The only left group to come vaguely close to supporting gay rights was the Young Socialists (then influenced by the “Shachtmanite” Independent Socialist League) which in 1952 published an article in the Young Socialist Review.

The sixties blew apart the repressive political climate and stifling conventions of the 1950s, with massive civil unrest throughout America. The Black Civil Rights Movement was on the march against racism, and then the more militant Black Panther Party, and Malcolm X’s uncompromising message of political and social revolution. Black communities rose up against social injustice and there were “race” riots in many US towns and cities, notably the Watts riots of 1965.

There were huge demonstrations against the Vietnam war from about 1967. Students rebelled and demanded greater democracy and freedom in education. The “counter-culture” refused to conform to the dictates of bourgeois norms. The growth of the Women’s Liberation Movement began a journey towards self-determination and freedom from the straitjacket of oppression and second class citizenship.

“We homosexuals plead with our people to please help maintain peaceful and quiet conduct on the

streets of the village” — Mattachine, September 1969.

This plea from the Mattachine Society, now much more conservative in outlook, was posted in a window of the Stonewall Inn three months after the riots. The MS had become a liberal lobby group trying to influence and educate the great and good heterosexuals towards more “tolerance” of homosexuality, and was clearly spooked by the spontaneous uprising of the oppressed. They sought to prove that gay people could be assimilated into bourgeois society and favoured a non-confrontational, conformist approach. The new Gay Liberation Movement would be different.

Gay people living under conditions of complete illegality had become easy prey for police entrapment, blackmailers, queer-bashers, criminal gangs, homophobic employers and landlords and were refused entry to bars if their behaviour or appearance was “odd”.

The Stonewall Inn gay bar is on Christopher Street, Greenwich Village. That was the centre of liberal/radical/artistic/bohemian life in New York. The bar was controlled by the Genovese crime family (Mafia). Almost all of the gay bars were controlled by organised crime and money was extorted through overpriced alcohol, watered down beer and blackmailing the richer gay clientele. The bar was also paying off the police to allow this to happen, in weekly envelopes of cash.

The bar had no liquor licence, no running water, overflowing toilets, no fire exits, and drug dealing was rife. Customers were inspected through a “speakeasy” peep-hole by a bouncer and (to avoid undercover police entrapment) only allowed entry if they were known or “looked gay”. People rarely signed their real names in a book to gain entry. Only a few trans people or men in drag were allowed in by the bouncers. A few lesbians came to the bar, but it was 98% male. Homeless young men would try to get in for free drinks from customers. The age of the patrons ranged from late teens to early thirties, and there was an even racial mix between white, black and hispanic people. It was the only gay bar in New York where dancing was allowed. The patrons included drag queens, transgender people, effeminate young men, butch lesbians, male prostitutes, and homeless youth — some of the most oppressed sections of the working class.

Police raids against gay venues were routine and frequent. The Stonewall was raided at least once a month and patrons were arrested, handcuffed and herded into police wagons. The management knew about the raids beforehand and they were early enough for them to re-stock the bar from hidden supplies to carry on serving once the police had gone. The mafia still wanted its cut of the profits.

This was the modus operandi during the raids: “... the lights were turned on, and customers were lined up and their identification cards checked. Those without identification or dressed in full drag were arrested; others were allowed to leave. Some of the men, including those in drag, used their draft cards as identification.

“Women were required to wear three pieces of feminine clothing, and would be arrested if found not wearing them. Employees and management of the bars were also typically arrested. The period immediately before June 28, 1969, was marked by frequent raids of local bars—including a raid at the Stonewall Inn on the Tuesday before the riots—and the closing of the Checkerboard, the Tele-Star, and two other clubs in Greenwich Village.”

Things came to a head when, so it was rumoured, the police were no longer able to receive kickbacks from blackmail and payoffs, including the theft of negotiable bonds from threatened gay Wall Street employees. It was more than likely that the Public Morals or the Food and Drugs Administration had decided to close the Stonewall Inn permanently on alleged “health and safety” grounds, as had happened with other bars in the neighbourhood.

People began to defy the police. They refused to show ID cards or be hustled into the bathroom so that police could verify their sexual identity. Men in drag were immediately arrested. Those not arrested congregated outside the bar and were joined by others in ever increasing numbers from the neighbourhood. Some people were rescued from the patrol wagons, and when a lesbian resisted arrest the police started to beat her and knocked others to the ground.

The police were pelted with coins and bottles to begin with, by the crowd, and later bricks and stones from a nearby building site. Barricading themselves inside the Stonewall Inn, police were forced to call for assistance. From there on as crowds swelled in numbers over several successive nights, the whole thing escalated into a full blown riot. It took three days and nights before the Tactical Patrol Force, trained to deal with Vietnam war protests, could finally subdue the rioters.

The rioting was not organised or orchestrated by any particular group. It was a spontaneous uprising and rebellion by people who had been beaten down to the lowest level of human existence by repressive anti-gay laws, corrupt police and officials in cahoots with criminal organisations. After years of unchecked oppression they had reached the end of the tether and vented their fury on the oppressors. However during the riots leaflets were distributed, one of them reading "Get the Mafia and Cops out of Gay Bars".

Others called for gays to own their own establishments, for a boycott of the Stonewall and other Mafia-owned bars, and for public pressure on the Mayor's office to investigate the "intolerable situation". Within days of the rioting groups did begin to spring up to demand equality, and the Gay Liberation Front was born. Within a year or two, GLF organisations had spread to many towns and cities throughout the USA, making radical, revolutionary demands in line with black and women's liberation movements of the time.

The establishment of the Gay Liberation Front in Britain was a much more subdued affair. It was founded at the London School of Economics, by two Maoists, Aubrey Walter and Bob Mellors, in October 1970, despite Mao's "Cultural Revolution" in China killing thousands or millions and homosexuality being illegal in China until 1997 and classed as a "mental illness" until 2001.

Walter and Mellors had visited America, and were mightily impressed. The GLF imported the radical politics of its sister organisations in the USA and the revolutionary demands of the movement are embodied in the Gay Liberation Manifesto of 1971. Almost in a parallel way to the GLF in America, groups sprouted up in many towns and cities in Britain, and practically every University had a GaySoc.

The GLF experimented with consciousness-raising "think-ins", alternative lifestyles to what was expected in bourgeois "straight" society. Many campaigns were enhanced through street theatre and direct action, challenging anti-gay moral crusades, repressive legislation, media censorship and social intolerance in general. Always with a clear anti-capitalist objective in mind.

Feminist, academic, and lesbian Elizabeth Wilson later looked back on the achievements of the Gay Liberation Front: "The 'Manifesto Group' was one of many launched in the ferment of activity that was the Gay Liberation Front in 1970-71.

"Today it seems incredible that so many young adults had the time and energy to devote themselves full time to political struggle (although incidentally many of us also had paid jobs - the workplace just wasn't as demanding as it is today).

"GLF is best understood as a fabulous political firework display. Demonstrations, sit-ins, drag events, consciousness raising groups, street theatre, night graffiti raids, workshops, rallies, dances

and 'think-ins' were all included in the stellar spectacular that was GLF.

"The Manifesto Group came from the ideological, intellectual side of the movement and debated the question: What was it about society that led to the oppression of lesbians and gay men? The Manifesto's answer was what would now be termed a 'functionalist' one: that capitalism 'needed' gay oppression - to shore up the nuclear family (a big bugbear for radicals at the time) and to police citizens into conformity.

"The Manifesto reads today as a fairly one-dimensional attempt to account for gender and sexual victimisation. However, it asked an important and still relevant question about the sources of prejudice and hatred. The group met in my basement living room throughout a rather hot summer.

"The atmosphere was sometimes tense and febrile, but however black and white the answers we developed appear today, it seemed crucial at the time to understand better the nature of the society we lived and live in. If it seems both raw and over-simplified now, it did actually (along with the work of feminists) spark a way of thinking about human relations in society that has led to significant change.

"Like all pioneers, we sometimes got it wrong, but we believed in what we were doing. We believed in our power to change society. And that is surely a good thing."

Elizabeth Wilson has captured the political zeitgeist of the 1970s that affected the GLF. Scarcely a day would go by without some form of struggle going on, whether it be strikes, demonstrations, sit ins or pickets. Not just in the labour movement but right across the board including School Students' strikes, anti Vietnam war demonstrations, Troops out of Ireland, anti-apartheid movement, Anti-Nazi League, the burgeoning Women's Liberation and Black power movements, the start of the Environmental-Green Movement, continuing counter-cultural influences, the student movement sparking educational reforms and prompting the labour movement to engage with political issues beyond the workplace, the squatters' movement for housing and alternative lifestyles and so on.

Despite all that there was very little connection between the GLF and the labour movement — hostility and distrust on both sides. Despite some Marxist and socialist individuals, the GLFers hitched their wagon mostly to the Women's Liberation Movement and to a lesser extent to the Black movement (macho posturing and aversion to gay people got in the way there. Huey Newton, a leading member of the Black Panthers, in a very strong statement urged solidarity with the gay movement. But others accused Black gay men of being traitors to their race for not producing black children).

The lack of connectedness to the labour movement considerably diminished the GLF's (I could write "our", since I was active then) understanding of working-class consciousness and why that is important. Patriarchy and male privilege were the enemies and many gay radicals felt that ridding the world of male power and chauvinism and throwing in our lot with oppressed women was sufficient to bring about equality and freedom. Even today it is still a big task to stop LGBT+ people from being exiled from our class and raise awareness that as part of the working-class struggle for emancipation we can share in the potential to overthrow capitalism.

Originally posted at the Alliance for Workers' Liberty website. Be sure to also take a look at NP's 2008 symposium on "Gays and the Left."