

# Stonewall riots

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The **Stonewall Riots** were a series of violent conflicts between New York City police officers and groups of gay and transgender people that began during the early morning of June 28, 1969, and lasted several days. Also called the **Stonewall Rebellion**, **Stonewall Revolution** or simply **Stonewall**, the clash was a watershed for the worldwide gay rights movement, as gay and transgender people had never before acted together in such large numbers to forcibly resist police harassment directed towards their community.

Prior acts of group resistance that contributed to recognition of LGBT civil rights include the 1966 Compton's Cafeteria Riot of transgender citizens in San Francisco.

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## History

Law enforcement raids on gay bars and discotheques were a regular part of gay life in cities across the United States, until the 1960s, when sudden raids on bars in many major cities became markedly less frequent. Most conclude that the decline in raids can be attributed to a series of court challenges and increased resistance from the Homophile Movement.

Prior to 1965, the police would sometimes record the identities of all those present at a raid, occasionally providing the information to newspapers for publication. Police used any convenient justification to make arrests on charges of indecency including kissing, holding hands, cross dressing - even merely being in the bar at the time of the raid.

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In 1965, two important figures came into prominence. The first was John Lindsay, a liberal Republican who was elected mayor of New York City on a reform platform. The other was Richard Leitsch, who became president of the New York City chapter of the Mattachine Society at around the same time. Leitsch was considered relatively militant compared to his predecessors and believed in direct action techniques commonly used by other civil rights groups in the 1960s.

In early 1966, administration policies had changed because of complaints made by Mattachine that the police were on the streets entrapping gay men and charging them with indecency. The police commissioner, Howard Leary, instructed the police force not to lure gays into breaking the law and also required that any plain clothes officers must have a civilian witness when a gay person was arrested. This policy caused entrapment of gay men to become much less common in New York City (D’Emilio 207).

In the same year, in order to challenge the State Liquor Authority (SLA) regarding its policies over gay bars, Leitsch conducted a "sip in." Leitsch had called members of the press and planned on meeting at a bar with two other gay men—a bar could have its liquor license taken away for knowingly serving a group of three or more homosexuals—to test the SLA policy of closing bars. When the bartender at Julius turned them away, they made a complaint (D’Emilio 208).

The question then remains why the Stonewall was raided if gay bars were legal and on the rise. John D’Emilio, a prominent historian, points out that the city was in the middle of a mayoral campaign and John Lindsay, who had lost his party’s primary, had reason to call for a cleanup of the city’s bars. There were a number of reasons that made the Stonewall Inn an easy target: it operated without a liquor license; had ties to organized crime; and, “offering scantily clad go-go boys as entertainment, it brought an ‘unruly’ element to Sheridan Square” (D’Emilio 231).

The Stonewall Inn was frequented mainly by Black and Hispanic gay men. Many of those present were transgender and/or drag queens.

Deputy Inspector Seymour Pine, who led the raid on the bar that first night, claims that he was ordered to close the Stonewall Inn because it was the central location for gathering information on gay men who worked on Wall Street. A recent increase in the number of thefts from brokerage houses on Wall Street led police to suspect that gay men, forced by blackmail, were behind the thefts. (Carter 262)

The patrons of the Stonewall were used to such raids and the management was generally able to reopen for business either the same night or the following day.

## The Stonewall raid and the aftermath



On Saturday morning, June 28, 1969, shortly after 1:20 a.m., police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village. A number of factors differentiated the raid that took place on June 28 from other such raids on the Stonewall Inn. In general, the sixth precinct tipped off the management of the

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The Stonewall Inn.

Stonewall Inn prior to a raid. In addition, raids were generally carried out early enough in the night to allow business to return to normal for the peak hours of the night. At approximately 1:20 a.m., much later than the usual raid, eight officers from the first precinct, of whom only one was in uniform, entered the bar. Most of the patrons were able to escape being arrested as the only people arrested “would be those without IDs, those dressed in the clothes of the opposite gender, and some or all of the employees” (Duberman 192).

Details about how the riot started vary from story to story. According to one account, a transgender woman named Sylvia Rivera threw a bottle at a police officer after being prodded by his nightstick (Duberman). Another account states that a lesbian, being brought to a patrol car through the crowd put up a struggle that encouraged the crowd to do the same (D’Emilio 232). Whatever the case may be, *mêlée* broke out across the crowd—which quickly overtook the police. Stunned, the police retreated into the bar. Heterosexual folk singer Dave van Ronk, who was walking through the area, was grabbed by the police, pulled into the bar, and beaten. The crowd’s attacks were unrelenting. Some tried to light the bar on fire. Others used a parking meter as a battering ram to force the police officers out. Word quickly spread of the riot and many residents, as well as patrons of nearby bars, rushed to the scene.

Throughout the night the police singled out many transgender people and gender nonconformists, including butch women and effeminate men, among others, often beating them. On the first night alone 13 people were arrested and four police officers, as well as an undetermined number of protesters, were injured. It is known, however, that at least two rioters were severely beaten by the police (Duberman 201-202). Bottles and stones were thrown by protesters who chanted “Gay Power!” The crowd, estimated at over 2000, fought with over 400 police officers.

The police sent additional forces in the form of the Tactical Patrol Force, a riot-control squad originally trained to counter Vietnam War protesters. The tactical patrol force arrived to disperse the crowd. However, they failed to break up the crowd, who sprayed them with rocks and other projectiles.

Eventually the scene quieted, but the crowd returned again the next night. While less violent than the first night, the crowd had the same energy as it had on the previous night. Skirmishes between the rioters and the police ensued until approximately 4:00 a.m.. The third day of rioting fell five days after the raid on the Stonewall Inn. On that Wednesday, 1,000 people congregated at the bar and again caused extensive property damage.

Numerous books on this North American gay civil rights flash point have been written. In 2004, St. Martin's Press published David Carter's *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution*, based on ten years of research and interviews with participants. In the book Carter examines inconsistencies of historical record, debunking a number of myths that have surrounded the events of June 1969, including the oft-repeated urban legend that it was the death of Judy Garland that sparked the riots.

## Legacy

The forces that were simmering before the riots were now no longer beneath the surface. The community created by the homophile organizations of the previous two decades had created the perfect environment for

the creation of the Gay Liberation Movement. By the end of July the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was formed in New York and by the end of the year the GLF could be seen in cities and universities around the country. Similar organizations were soon created around the world including Canada, France, Britain, Germany, Belgium, The Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand.

The following year, in commemoration of the Stonewall Riots, the GLF organized a march from Greenwich Village to Central Park. Between 5,000 and 10,000 men and women attended the march. Many gay pride celebrations choose the month of June to hold their parades and events to celebrate "The Hairpin Drop Heard Round the World" (D'Emilio 232). Many major American cities including New York City, Chicago, Houston, San Francisco, Seattle, Minneapolis and Columbus as well as other cities such as Toronto hold Gay Pride Marches on the last Sunday of June, in honor of Stonewall. Other cities such as Anchorage, Baltimore, Boston, Des Moines, Detroit, Kansas City, Salt Lake City, Philadelphia, Atlanta and Washington, DC hold their pride parade in June but not on the last Sunday of the month. Still others, such as Dallas, Texas and Palm Springs, California, hold their celebration in another month entirely.

In 1998, an LGBT-rights group in the United States formed the Stonewall Democrats (affiliated with the Democratic Party). The group was founded by Barney Frank, a gay Democratic member of the U.S. House of Representatives representing Massachusetts's fourth congressional district.

The actual Stonewall Inn was vacant and closed for most of the 1970s and '80s. It reopened after its first renovation in the early 1990s. A second renovation in the late 1990s brought in new crowds to its new multi-floor layout. The club remained popular until management lost its lease in 2006. New management reopened the latest version of The Stonewall in February 2007.

In 2006, on the anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, Iceland enacted a law to grant same-sex couples legal rights equal with those of heterosexual couples.

## In popular culture

- The prominent British gay rights group Stonewall is named after the riots. Numerous gay bars around the world take their name from the revolutionary bar - two of the most famous are *The Stonewall and Moose Lounge* in Allentown, Pennsylvania and *Stonewall Hotel* in Sydney, Australia.
- The general atmosphere of the days immediately before the riots are dramatized in a 1995 film called *Stonewall*. The film has now been turned into a stage play by the film's screenwriter Rikki Beadle-Blair, and had its World Premiere in London in 2007 followed by a run at the 2007 Edinburgh Festival.
- The late Brazilian singer Renato Russo recorded a 1993 English-language album entitled *The StoneWall Celebration Concert* and dedicated it to gay people around the world.

## See also

- Brenda Howard
- Christopher Street Day
- Compton's cafeteria riot

- Gay pride parade
- Timeline of LGBT history
- White Night Riots

## References

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- Duberman, Martin. *Stonewall*. New York: A Dutton Book, 1993.
- Teal, Donn. *The Gay Militants*. New York: Stein and Day, 1971.
- Carter, David. *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked The Gay Revolution*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004

## External links

- The Stonewall Riots (<http://manhattan.about.com/od/glbtscene/a/stonewallriots.htm/>) - About.com
- Stonewall, the movie ([http://www.outfilms.com/film\\_detail.cfm?film\\_id=1223](http://www.outfilms.com/film_detail.cfm?film_id=1223))
- Stonewall Veterans Association (<http://www.stonewallvets.org/>)
- On Important Pre-Stonewall Activists (<http://williamapercy.com/pub-Stonewall.htm>)
- Newspaper reports of the event itself (<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/eresources/exhibitions/sw25/index.html>)
- Gay memoir and history of NYC from the '50s through the '80s (<http://www.nycnotkansas.com>)

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