

The Stonewall Uprising 1969

Define and Justify

The proposed subject of this study is the 'Stonewall Uprising'. The civil rights and general attitude toward the LGBTQ+ community within our society has evolved a great deal over the course of the years although the Stonewall Uprising, which took place in June of 1969, is renowned as the catalyst for the equality movement. The reason that the Stonewall Uprising initially interested me was the complete lack of LGBTQ+ history represented within the Irish Education system. Although Stonewall's effects are still relevant today, with the recent same-sex marriage referendum and Pride Parades which take place annually across the country during Pride Month in June, it seems that the majority of people are oblivious to the rich history and struggles that the LGBTQ+ community had to face in order to make the progress that they've made.

Aims

1. To further my knowledge and understanding within the history of the LGBTQ+ community in the 1960s.
2. To understand the isolation and prejudice forced upon them by the police force and general public.
3. To explore how opinions toward the LGBTQ+ community shifted in light of the Uprising.

The Intended Approach

- I intend to make use of my sources such as books, online documentaries, as well as newspaper articles published around the late 1960s such as the 'New York Times' and 'The Village Voice'
- I plan to draft and re-draft my essay using google docs so that I can easily edit my progress while I further my research.

- I hope to consult with my teacher and local librarian about the topic in order to gain a clearer understanding of the project.

Evaluation of Sources

Source One:

The “Stonewall Uprising” documentary is a secondary source released in 2010 edited and produced by Kate Davis and her husband David Heilbroner. They are both established and experienced directors, having previously received an Academy Award for Best Documentary Short Subject. I discovered this documentary on YouTube and found it to be my most helpful source. It was incredibly insightful to visualise the faces of the riot and hear them tell their perspective in their own words. One issue that I had is that the documentary seemed to whitewash the Uprising and skim over the contribution made by people of colour such as Drag Queens Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera.

Source Two:

David Carters book served as a secondary source as it was published in 2005. David Carter is a freelance writer and editor who lives in New York City's Greenwich Village which is where the Uprising took place. I was unable to access a physical copy of the book through my local library but ordered it through my local Waterstones book shop. I found the book to be my second most helpful source as it was incredibly detailed and easy to understand as it was written using factual-based text and in chronological order. At times I found some of the details of personal accounts to be irrelevant in regards to my project but nonetheless it gave me a greater insight into the era as a whole.

Source Three:

The article published in the New York Times of July 6th 1969 titled “Homo Nest Raided, Queen Bees Are Stinging Mad”. I found this primary source online as the article was not available in my local library or elsewhere. While I understand the report itself is heavily homophobic and politically biased, I found it to be incredibly useful in establishing the general public’s attitude toward the uprising.

Source Four:

The anti-gay propaganda film entitled "Boys Beware" from the year 1961. I found this short video on YouTube and found it to be extremely ignorant and homophobic however it highlighted the stark and senseless prejudice felt towards the LGBTQ+ community at the time.

Extended Essay

'The Stonewall Uprising' was a series of violent protests and street demonstrations that took place at a local gay bar in the Greenwich Village area of New York City, beginning on the morning of June 28th 1969. The riots themselves are widely credited as being the catalyst for the success within the LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer+) movement, along with the formation of the first pride parade. In this essay, I will outline the events leading up to the riots, as well as the outcomes and effects of the events.

During the 1960s, life for the LGBTQ+ community was a life of oppression, suppression and secrecy. 'Homosexual sex' was illegal in every state besides Illinois. Medical authorities claimed that homosexuality bordered on a form of psychopathy, a "mental illness" that had reached "epidemiological proportions" (1). Advertisements such as "Boys Beware" of 1961, depicted a paedophile as being synonymous to a homosexual man. Such advertisement convinced parents that their children could be "lured" into homosexuality if they were not careful and that these homosexuals were incapable of a lasting relation as they were "too promiscuous" (2). It is no surprise that these derogatory depictions would influence society.

Psychiatrists also actively attempted to convert homosexuals into being "normal" with methods like aversive conditioning which involved showing victims pornographic photographs accompanied by a strong electric current, hoping that they would develop an inability to feel sexually aroused by members of the same sex. In extreme cases, homosexuals were subjected to sterilisation and occasionally castration. Medical procedures like lobotomies (a form of psychosurgery used to treat mental illness) was the "only way to truly cure homosexuality", according to doctors (3).

The most infamous institution was "Atascadero State Hospital", referred to by the LGBTQ+ community as the "Dachau for queers" due to the medical experimentation which included administering a drug that simulated the experience of drowning. While other minority groups were protected under a constitutional amendment, this was not the case for homosexuals. Due to

Joseph McCarthy's "Lavender Scare", if a gay man was caught involved in what they called "immoral behaviour", he would have his name, age and home address listed in major newspapers, resulting in him being "shunned by employment" (4) and abandoned by his family. With all of this combined, an uprising seemed inevitable.

'The Village', Christopher Street, was the only street that people could be themselves without fear of public ostracisation. Many residents had been thrown out of home with nothing to lose. Homosexuals did not have the same opportunities as their heterosexual counterparts to meet and find love in places like hotels, motels, theatres and clubs. Instead, they resorted to meeting in meat trucks during the late hours of night. The trucks were dark, dingy and crammed with desperate individuals. Diseases such as STDs were "rampant" (5). Additionally, police would raid the trucks multiple times a night, not only arresting those found inside on the grounds of trespassing but also using clubs to beat them.

This oppression is how the Mafia initially got involved in the 'gay bar' business. Since the days of prohibition, the Mafia became heavily involved in running illicit bars. The Genovese family reigned over Manhattan's West Side bar scene, including "The Village". A member of the Genovese family known as "Fat Tony" (6) purchased "The Stonewall Inn" in 1966, transforming it into a bar that attracted a slew of desperate homosexuals. Run on the cheap, Stonewall was known for being dirty and dangerous. It operated without running water, most liquor was stolen and glasses were "cleaned" by being dunked in tubs of dirty water. (7)

However, the Stonewall became their biggest success and became a popular destination for the LGBTQ+ community. It was the "only place where homosexuals could openly dance and show affection" (8) and it kept many LGBTQ+ youths off the streets at night. However, police continued to raid the bars. The raids would typically occur in the afternoon. Bar owners would change the lights from blue to white, warning customers to stop dancing or drinking. Patrons were lined up and required to show identification, if they couldn't, they would be arrested.

The Mafia's exploitation of the LGBTQ+ community along with incessant police harassment and societal discrimination reached breaking point on Friday June 28th 1969. Deputy Inspector Seymore Pine organised the raid. He was tired of busting the Mafia-run bars only for them to re-open the following night. This raid was to be different. It was intended to permanently close "The Stonewall Inn" (9). He took precaution of getting a warrant for the fact that Stonewall had been

watering down liquor which violated federal law. Undercover policewomen entered the bar prior to the raid to investigate who was serving drinks. He also needed them to arrest transvestites. There was an 1845 statute that made it mandatory that at least three articles of one's clothing has to correspond with one's biological sex, thus female officers would often have to "verify a patron's gender" (10).

Inspector Seymour Pine eventually raided the Stonewall at 1:20 am, immediately consulting the policemen for information on who to arrest. They arrested the employee for selling watered-down liquor. They then "pushed everybody into the back room" (11) and asked for ID. They took a number of people in violation of the 1845 statute into custody. They also began to attack the Stonewall's patrons.

While the patrons usually complied with the police, that night they were fed up with the constant harassment and social discrimination; they decided to resist. The police weren't used to reluctance so they used an indoor payphone to call for backup. Locals hung around the bar rather than disperse. Within minutes, "a full-blown riot" (12) involving over 400 people formed. Violence also increased from both sides and rioters were aggressively manhandled, with an officer hitting a lesbian over the head. As he forced her into the paddy-wagon she cried out to the assembled bystanders; "Why don't you guys do something!" (13).

Thus, the crowd began to throw pennies, bricks and bottles at the police. Among these rioters, however, there were two prominent voices. The first was Marsha P. Johnson, a black transgender woman, who had thrown 'the first brick' that initiated the riot. The second was Sylvia Rivera, a Latina transgender woman who threw a glass bottle at the police in the midst of the raid and yelled "I'm not missing a minute of this. It's the revolution" (14).

The police, a few prisoners and a Village Voice writer barricaded themselves into the bar, claiming that it was "safer to be indoors at the Stonewall at this point" (15). As the crowd grew more ferocious, one rioter used lighter fluid and matches to set the Stonewall Inn on fire from the outside. Some rioters wanted to hurt the police, others wanted to kill them. And others were merely relishing in the fact that for once, the police were trapped inside the bar and the "queers were winning" (16).

More officers arrived with plastic shields, dark uniforms and riot helmets. They forced more people into paddy wagons. This was met with further resistance. The police chased many rioters around the block on Christopher Street for hours, failing to catch them. At one point, a group of drag queens began to sing and perform a kick-line in front of the police. Other rioters smashed windows and mirrors and slashed police car-tires. The Fire Department and Tactical Patrol Force arrived to free those trapped inside the burning Stonewall. One officer's eye was cut and others were brushed from flying debris. Bob Kohler states "The cops were totally humiliated. This never, ever happened... the fairies were not supposed to riot... no group had ever forced the cops to retreat before. I mean they wanted to kill" (17).

The crowd eventually dispersed but the violence increased the second night as did the political drive. Chants of "gay power" were prominent and the LGBTQ+ community had gained support from the most unlikely groups such as sympathetic heterosexuals, black panthers and anti-war groups. The Village Voice ran reports of the riots including derogatory descriptions of its participants such as "forces of faggotry", "limp wrists" and "Sunday fag follies"(18). A mob descended upon Christopher Street once again and they threatened to burn down the offices of The Village Voice.

The New York Times also printed an article entitled "Queen Bees are Stinging Mad" (19), placing the blame entirely on drag queens. But that article, however, it wasn't major in the media. The riot could have easily been buried, like all other riots prior to 'Stonewall', but the LGBTQ+ community had come too far to let this happen. Groups such as the 'Gay Liberation Front' and 'Gay Activists Alliance' were formed to organise the anger into a more cohesive movement. They held meetings, handed out pamphlets and created a prolonged push for gay rights in a far more vocal way than the LGBTQ+ groups of the pre-Stonewall era.

They eventually agreed to hold a commemorative march from Christopher Street to Central Park on June 28th 1970, the one year anniversary of the riots. This did not come without apprehension however. It was the first LGBTQ+ pride parade. In those days, the idea of walking in daylight proclaiming or even celebrating your sexuality was unprecedented. "Nobody was ready" (20). The organisers hoped that at least 10 people would march, and that they would make it to their destination alive.

There were approximately 100 marchers to begin with. People on side streets observed the marchers and slowly the numbers grew. According to a New York Times article, "there was little open animosity, and some bystanders applauded when a tall, pretty girl carrying a sign 'I am a lesbian' walked by" (21). The march took less than half of the anticipated time due to enthusiasm and perhaps fear of homophobia, but nobody resisted. The Village Voice reported "the out-front resistance that grew out of the police raid on the Stonewall Inn one year ago" (22). This parade created a precedent for annual celebration around the world and it can be universally agreed that the effect of both the riots and the march, changed the direction of the LGBTQ+ movement forever.