



Resources

Holocaust Unit

Action - Resource D

The Stonewall Riots

Something unremarkable happened on June 27, 1969 in New York's Greenwich Village, an event which had occurred a thousand times before across the U.S. over the decades. The police raided a gay bar.

At first, everything unfolded according to a time-honored ritual. Seven plain-clothes detectives and a uniformed officer entered and announced their presence. The bar staff stopped serving the watered-down, overpriced drinks, while their Mafia bosses swiftly removed the cigar boxes which functioned as tills. The officers demanded identification papers from the customers and then escorted them outside, throwing some into a waiting paddy-wagon and pushing others off the sidewalk.

But at a certain point, the "usual suspects" departed from the script and decided to fight back. A debate still rages over which incident sparked the riot. Was it a 'butch' lesbian dressed in man's clothes who resisted arrest, or a male drag queen who stopped in the doorway between the officers and posed defiantly, rallying the crowd?

Riot veteran and gay rights activist Craig Rodwell says: "A number of incidents were happening simultaneously. There was no one thing that happened or one person, there was just... a flash of group, of mass anger."

The crowd of ejected customers started to throw coins at the officers, in mockery of the notorious system of payoffs - earlier dubbed "gayola" - in which police chiefs leached huge sums from establishments used by gay people and used "public morals" raids to regulate their racket. Soon, coins were followed by bottles, rocks, and other items. Cheers rang out as the prisoners in the van were liberated. Detective Inspector Pine later recalled, "I had been in combat situations, but there was never any time that I felt more scared than then."

Pine ordered his subordinates to retreat into the empty bar, which they proceeded to trash as well as savagely beating a heterosexual folk singer who had the misfortune to pass the doorway at that moment. At the end of the evening, a teenager had lost two fingers from having his hand slammed in a car door. Others received hospital treatment following assaults with police billy clubs.

People in the crowd started shouting "Gay Power!" And as word spread through Greenwich Village and across the city, hundreds of gay men and lesbians, black, white,

Hispanic, and predominantly working class, converged on the Christopher Street area around the Stonewall Inn to join the fray. The police were now reinforced by the Tactical Patrol Force (TPF), a crack riot-control squad that had been specially trained to disperse people protesting against the Vietnam War.

Historian Martin Duberman describes the scene as the two dozen "massively proportioned" TPF riot police advanced down Christopher Street, arms linked in Roman Legion-style wedge formation: "In their path, the rioters slowly retreated, but - contrary to police expectations - did not break and run ... hundreds ... scattered to avoid the billy clubs but then raced around the block, doubled back behind the troopers, and pelted them with debris. When the cops realized that a considerable crowd had simply re-formed to their rear, they flailed out angrily at anyone who came within striking distance.

"But the protestors would not be cowed. The pattern repeated itself several times: The TPF would disperse the jeering mob only to have it re-form behind them, yelling taunts, tossing bottles and bricks, setting fires in trash cans. When the police whirled around to reverse direction at one point, they found themselves face-to-face with their worst nightmare: a chorus line of mocking queens, their arms clasped around each other, kicking their heels in the air Rockettes-style and singing at the tops of their sardonic voices:

'We are the Stonewall girls

We wear our hair in curls...

We wear our dungarees

Above our nelly knees!"

"It was a deliciously witty, contemptuous counterpoint to the TPF's brute force." The following evening, the demonstrators returned, their numbers now swelled to thousands. Leaflets were handed out, titled "Get the Mafia and cops out of gay bars!" Altogether, the protests and disturbances continued with varying intensity for five days.

In the wake of the riots, intense discussions took place in the city's gay community. During the first week of July, a small group of lesbians and gay men started talking about establishing a new organization called the Gay Liberation Front. The name was consciously chosen for its association with the anti-imperialist struggles in Vietnam and Algeria. Sections of the GLF would go on to organize solidarity for arrested Black Panthers, collect money for striking workers, and link the battle for gay rights to the banner of socialism.

During the next year or so, lesbians and gay men built a Gay Liberation Front (GLF) or comparable body in Canada, France, Britain, Germany, Belgium, Holland, Australia, and New Zealand.

The word "Stonewall" has entered the vocabulary of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered (LGBT) people everywhere as a potent emblem of the gay community making a stand against oppression and demanding full equality in every area of life.

Source: <http://socialistalternative.org>

