The Stonewall Riots: The Sissies Fought Back

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Throughout the course of its history, the gay civil rights movement has constantly evolved, progressing from sporadic, individual complaints, to group consciousness and unity, to information and education, and finally to civil rights activism and liberation. While all of these steps were important to the history of the homosexual rights movement, the most salient of these developments was the change from quiet acceptance to aggressive activism. This transformation of the gay civil rights movement is most often attributed to the Stonewall riots of 1969. During the 1960s, gay bars were not permitted to have liquor licenses because it was illegal to serve alcohol to openly gay patrons. On the night of June 27, 1969, the New York City police raided an illegal gay bar called the Stonewall Inn at 53 Christopher Street in Greenwich Village, the most prominent gay community in NYC. However, instead of quietly leaving the bar and accepting the police brutality as usual, the homosexuals atypically fought back. They rallied and protested for six days, demanding equal rights and an end to police harassment. And thus, the new gay civil rights movement was born.

It is unclear who actually fought at Stonewall and what motivated them to retaliate. Historian John D’Emilio suggests that the new form of militancy displayed during the Stonewall riots was caused by the rebellious action of Black civil rights activists and college students during the 1960s. He argues that this concurrent activism by the New Left inspired the oppressed gay community to fight for the equal rights and protection that they had for so long been denied. However, historian Lillian Faderman offers a different point of view, highlighting the growing resentment that queens (overly effeminate homosexuals who dressed in drag) felt towards the New York Police Department for its constant raids on Greenwich Village gay bars. She therefore suggests that this growing anger towards the New York Police caused the
queens to riot during the police raid on the Stonewall Inn and throughout the following week. Who actually fought at the Stonewall, and why were they fighting? The answer to this question is a combination of different factors. Ultimately, Faderman gets closer to the truth. The Stonewall riots were fought and led by the queens and homeless gay teens of Greenwich Village, and there are two main reasons. First, these marginalized homosexuals were dependent on the Stonewall Inn as their only place of acceptance. Second, these queens and young homosexuals were revolting against the unfair regulations maintained by the State Liquor Authority (SLA), which allowed for a Mafia monopoly over gay bars and corruption within the New York Police Department.

Counter-Culture Movements and College Activism

It is reasonable to assume that the Stonewall riots were the first example of the entire homosexual community working together to demand equal rights, inspired by the concurrent activism of the New Left during the 1960s. The 1960s were a turbulent time, as indicated by all the different movements started during this decade, such as the student movement, the hippie movement, and most significantly, the Black civil rights movement. All of these movements shared a key aspect: they brought together large groups of people who actively protested for the power to lead their own lives. These protests weren’t always violent. Hippies promoted flower power and other nonviolent forms of resistance, and Black civil rights activists performed sit-ins and peaceful demonstrations, such as the marches from Selma to Montgomery in March 1965. However, the Black civil rights movement did not remain peaceful.

African American activism became militant. In August 1965, Watts, a ghetto in South Central Los Angeles, erupted in flames as African Americans violently protested the treatment they received from white policemen. Proactive militancy became characteristic of certain Black civil rights groups, such as the Black Panthers, who believed that the only way of achieving equality was through powerful, aggressive demonstrations. It is therefore understandable why some people believed that this new militancy led to the Stonewall riots. As noted in The Insider’s editorial, “Gay Power Explodes,” homosexuals had never shown such extreme,
violent outbursts of militancy until the Stonewall riots. According to this editorial, “Militant protestors rationalize their destructive methods by pointing out that knocking on doors is useful only to a point. When it becomes clear that the doors are never going to open...then it is time to knock the doors down.”

In this way, the editorial is suggesting that homosexuals saw the violent protests of African Americans as a signal to abandon peaceful requests for equal rights, and instead replace them with aggressive action. It argues that homosexuals were inspired by the militant action of the counter-culture movements of the 1960s, which led them to the revolutionary, violent outbursts at the Stonewall. According to John D’Emilio, the Black civil rights movement provided homosexuals with examples of effective protests, as the Blacks “rejected the oppressed role of victim” and gained recognition and equality.

D’Emilio argues that the growing activism of white college students and Black civil rights activists, such as the Freedom Riders, inspired new levels of action within the homosexual community, and thus suggests that the revolutionary Stonewall riots occurred because homosexuals were drawing from the tactics of the New Left.

The Actual Fighters

While it is commonly believed that the Stonewall riots were the first example of the entire gay community fighting together for equal rights and recognition, this is not the case. The Stonewall patrons did not represent the entire gay community. Instead they represented a marginalized, outcast portion of homosexuals: homeless youths and queens. According to the New York Times, hundreds of youths fought in the Stonewall riots, not respected adults. Similarly, Dick Leitsch from the Mattachine Society of New York (MSNY), a gay organization that typically consisted of older homosexuals, emphasized that the most salient feature of the Stonewall riots was that it was led and participated in by queens. This description demonstrates the power that the queens had during the riots, but also highlights the falsity of claims that all homosexuals fought at Stonewall.

Yet although it wasn't the entire gay community fighting together, the Stonewall riots are still remarkable as the first example of the queens
and teens, who were seen as weak and cowardly, fighting back against injustice and commanding respect. As Jerry Lisker, writer for the *New York Daily News*, put it, “Queen Power exploded with all the fury of a gay atomic bomb.” Even the title of Lisker’s article, “Homo Nest Raided, Queen Bees Are Stinging Mad,” highlights the radical action of the queens as they fought against the police. This time, “limp wrists were forgotten” as “the sissies fought back” against the abusive, oppressive police. They screamed and threw objects at the police, and on that Saturday, the second night of rioting, they formed a Rockette-style chorus line in front of the Tactical Police Force and sang:

*We are the Stonewall girls  
We wear our hair in curls  
We wear no underwear  
We show our pubic hair…  
We wear our dungarees  
Above our nelly knees!*10

Altogether, these accounts of the confrontational actions of the queens and teens highlight the drastic change in their behavior. No longer weak and submissive, they broke the stereotypical mold and led the charge during the Stonewall riots.

Not only did the older generation of homosexuals not participate in the Stonewall riots, they looked on the queens’ and teens’ actions with disdain. Lucian K. Truscott IV, a writer for the *Village Voice*, commented that on Saturday night, older homosexuals came to the Stonewall having heard about the riots and rushed back from Fire Island’s Cherry Grove, a popular resort community for gay men on Long Island.11 However, most of these older gay men did not participate in the action, but looked on the younger homosexuals’ actions with horror, fearing that this rioting would lead to retribution and even more oppression.12 Some older homosexuals didn’t just stand back quietly, but voiced their objections in an attempt to end the riots, as expressed by graffiti painted on the Stonewall Inn (See Appendix A). In the message, the MSNY
begged the rioters to cease, indicating the older generation’s aversion to this style of confrontational action. Similarly, the fact that the MSNY signed the message demonstrates their desire to not be associated with the riots and the unruly queens and teens who had started them.

Dependence on the Stonewall

The queens and homeless gay teens of New York City fought for the Stonewall because they were the most dependent on the bar, and therefore had the most to lose if it was shut down. As highlighted by David Carter, a gay rights activist and analyst, “The Stonewall Riots were instigated and led by the most despised and marginal elements of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered community.” The queens were a marginalized part of society, even in the homosexual community, and therefore weren’t welcome at most gay bars. The Stonewall was the exception; queens constituted the regulars at the Stonewall Inn. Therefore, when the bar was raided, they decided to fight instead of lose the most accepting place to queens in New York City. Similarly, the homeless gay youth of New York City strongly depended on the Stonewall Inn as a place of refuge. Many of them came to New York by themselves, without money, employment, or a place to live. They hustled, panhandled, and shoplifted, anything they could to raise the $3.00 price of admission to the Stonewall. The Stonewall protected these young people from extreme weather and from the police, who would arrest them for vagrancy, and so it became a home for them. The conditions inside the Stonewall were awful. There was no running water behind the bar, which led to unsanitary practices that caused an outbreak of hepatitis among the customers; the toilets overflowed so that the floors in the bathroom were constantly wet; and there were no fire escapes, so the only way to exit the bar in an emergency was through the front door. Yet despite these awful conditions inside the Stonewall, the bar constituted an important part of life for the typically excluded and rejected homosexuals in Greenwich Village. Therefore, when the police raided the bar, the queens and teens refused to give up the most accepting place to outcast homosexuals.
Retaliation Against the SLA, the Mafia, and the Police

Gay teens and queens also fought during the Stonewall riots in retaliation against the unfair regulations maintained by the State Liquor Authority, which in turn caused a Mafia monopoly over gay bars and an illegal alliance between the Mafia and the New York Police Department. After the repeal of Prohibition, the SLA had to enact new laws regulating the sale of alcohol, their main goal being to prevent a return to the unsanitary and dangerous conditions of saloons and speakeasies.  

This goal was expressed in N.Y. ABC. Law § 106: “No person licensed to sell alcoholic beverages shall . . . suffer or permit such premises to become disorderly” lest their liquor license be revoked. Although not explicitly stated in the law, the SLA interpreted the word “disorderly” to include the sale of alcohol to homosexual patrons. Thus, the SLA effectively made gay bars illegal in New York.

The Mafia therefore soon controlled most of the gay bars in Greenwich Village since it was able to bribe the police to ignore its illegal sale of alcohol to homosexuals. Things were no different at the Stonewall, which was de jure owned by Genovese crime family member Tony “Fat Tony” Lauria, but de facto run by crime boss Matthew “Matty the Horse” Ianniello, who ran many gay clubs in Greenwich Village. Ianniello’s control over gay bars was partly because of his power within the Genovese crime family, but also due to his connections within the SLA. In 1967, former FBI agent William D. Kane accused SLA investigator John J. Aliegro of having underworld ties with the Genovese crime family, specifically with Matty Ianniello. This connection within the SLA helped Ianniello establish a large network of illegal gay bars in New York City, which included the Stonewall.

The Stonewall operated as a normal gay bar, selling drinks to homosexual patrons. However, since they couldn’t get a liquor license, the Mafia used a common ploy, saying that the Stonewall Inn was a bottle club, a private club where members bring their own alcohol. This ruse was often employed by Mafia-run bars because bottle clubs did not require a liquor license from the SLA, since they weren’t actually selling alcohol.
The police knew about this ruse, but according to Eddie “Skull” Murphy, the door manager of the Stonewall Inn at the time of the Stonewall riots, the Sixth Police Precinct was paid $1200 a month not to raid the Stonewall. This corrupt conspiracy between the Mafia and the police was well known and despised by the gay community, especially the queens and gay youth. They resented this illegal partnership between the Mafia and the police because it enabled the perpetuation of horrible conditions inside most gay bars, including the Stonewall. This system also established a Mafia monopoly over gay bars, since it was impossible for legal businessmen to open their own gay bars without fear of the Mafia or the police, as demonstrated by flyers distributed by the Homophile Youth Movement in Neighborhoods (HYMN). According to Queen Allyson Allante, one of the fighters during the Stonewall riots, this relationship was also particularly harmful to the gay teens and queens because if the bar owner forgot to pay off the police, the police would raid the bar and arrest some of the clientele. The queens and gay youth of New York despised this routine; they would be arrested no matter if they were on the streets or in gay bars, and saw it as nothing less than systematic abuse. These arrests were particularly harmful since the police would notify employers, who would then fire these homosexuals because of their sexual orientation. As demonstrated by graffiti outside the Stonewall Inn (see Appendix B), the Stonewall patrons blamed this abusive routine of arrests on the SLA and its policy against homosexuals, which had enabled the Mafia monopoly over gay bars and the corruption within the police department. Therefore, when the First Division police raided the Stonewall Inn, their one safe haven where they could openly dance, drink and be themselves, the queens and the homeless gay teens once and for all retaliated against the corrupt actions of the SLA, the Mafia, and the New York police.

Conclusion

The Stonewall riots marked the beginning of a new era for the gay civil rights movement. It signaled to many homosexuals in New York City and around the country that the time for gay militancy was here. However, the Stonewall riots also divided the gay community into two
drastically different parties, as some of the older homosexuals resolutely refused to accept this new militancy. Right-wing groups such as the Mattachine Society and the National Homophile Planning Conference continued to promote non-intrusive forms of activism, such as providing information about homosexuality and holding silent vigils with police consent.\textsuperscript{26} This kind of action, however, was too tame for the younger gay activists. Immediately following the Stonewall riots, they created their own gay civil rights group known as the Gay Liberation Front (GLF).\textsuperscript{27} The GLF, along with other New Left gay associations, promoted more militant and bellicose gay rights activism. On June 28, 1970, a group of liberal gay rights activists organized the first Christopher Street Gay Liberation Day Parade, the first gay pride march in the United States.\textsuperscript{28} Not only has this become an annual event in New York City, but it is also celebrated around the country and around the world. These gay pride marches have become an integral part of many communities, such as the gay community of San Francisco, and have helped unite and liberate these previously oppressed people. While there remains to this day continued persecution of the gay community, there is now hope that, one day, all homosexuals will be granted the equal rights and protection they have desired for so long.
Appendix A

Appendix B


Notes


11. Truscott, “Gay Power Comes to Sheridan Square.”

12. Truscott, “The Real Mob.”


15. Ibid., 6.


19. Ibid.


25. “Queen Allyson Allante: From Stonewall the Rebellion to *Stonewall* the Movie & All Parts in Between,” Transgender Tapestry, summer 1997, 22.


27. Ibid.

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