Diversity Despite Adversity: The Stonewall Uprising of 1969

Miranda Ratayczak

Senior Division

Historical Paper

Paper Length: 2,332 words
New York City was stewing in the early hours of Saturday, June 28th, 1969, and Michael Levine was on a date. The people of the Greenwich Village of Manhattan were rounding off their bustling endeavors of the night, and the sun was beginning to creep up from the horizon. The spirits of the patrons of the Stonewall Inn\(^1\) were lively and animated. The booming roars of their merriment could be heard from blocks away. In a single moment, quiet spread.

“Suddenly,” explains Michael, “a deafening silence occurred. The lights went up, the music went off, and you could hear a pin drop, literally.” Several officers shouted, “We’re taking the place!” and began lining up the 200 patrons for an ID-check. Many resisted, refusing to show their identification or to go willingly with the police. As the officers forced the customers outside—where the “Public Morals Squad” was waiting with a wagon—a crowd gathered on the street and confronted the cops. Some threw bottles and pelted police officers with coins. Chants of “liberate Christopher Street!” and “we shall overcome!” echoed throughout the neighborhood as a chorus line formed and kicked its way down the block.\(^2\)

The bars of Greenwich Village were not strangers to police raids. LGBT+ bars would routinely be emptied by the vice squads of the New York Police Department. Usually, people would leave quietly, unwilling to risk being prosecuted for their love.\(^3\) The morning of June 28th, 1969 was different. On this day, people chose to revolt.

Conflict had grown steadily between the New York Police Department and the LGBT+ community, stemming from harsh laws the police enforced against the LGBT+ community. The LGBT+ community had organized in various ways to resist government persecution and oppression. The conflict between police and the LGBT+ community finally boiled over in the Stonewall Uprising of 1969 and led advocates of LGBT+ rights to stand up for their values and

\(^1\) See Figure 1 in Appendix A.


refuse to compromise their principles of equality. Stonewall remains a milestone in the LGBT+ struggle for societal acceptance, a defining moment of conflict and compromise for civil rights.

The New York Police Department and the NYC LGBT+ community were prone to butting heads in the late 1960s. According to Seymour Pine, the former deputy inspector of the NYPD who led the raid, law enforcement, reflecting the broader views of society, had little understanding of the people of the LGBT+ community. Their actions were guided by their own prejudice along with the orders from their superiors.\(^4\) Laws at the time prohibited people from dressing outside their birth gender, which left people who identified as transgender without appropriate clothing options. One of these laws stated that a person must be wearing three items of clothing at all times that fit with the gender roles assigned to their birth sex. If a person was not wearing at least three items, they were legally allowed to be arrested or fined. This was per subsection 4 of section 240.35 of the New York Penal Code.\(^5\)

As of 1961, the laws in America that oppressed the people of the LGBT+ community were harsher than those in other countries such as Russia, East Germany, and Cuba.\(^6\) The laws demeaning the LGBT+ community of Greenwich Village along with the persecution they faced caused the patrons of the Stonewall Inn to be unwilling to remain oppressed and quieted. The Stonewall Inn welcomed youth that had less to lose than many adult patrons who feared arrests or humiliation.\(^7\) The youth protected the Stonewall Inn as their home, a concept sorely lacking in


\(^6\) Ibid.

their lives. As a result of this feeling, the patrons of the Stonewall Inn stood their ground and refused to accept the unequal treatment they faced. On the night of the raid, the rioters fought for their rights because they were no longer willing to allow themselves to be persecuted for being their true selves.

Accounts of the night of the raid illustrate the chaos that occurred. A large majority of the recorded statements follow the same basic storyline of the night. One Stonewall veteran, Raymond Castro, mused in an interview that he put up a large fight when a police officer tried to force him into a paddywagon after his arrest. His struggle eventually led to him being driven off, but he didn’t go easily. Most recounts state that the uprising was led by the outlaws of the LGBT+ community. It was led by the Puerto-Rican Drag Queens and butch lesbians of the bar. It was led by the people who knew that they weren’t accepted and were willing to risk all for the hope of freedom. Sylvia Rivera described a scene she witnessed.

Here, this queen is going completely bananas, you know, jumping on, hitting the windshield. The next thing you know, the taxicab was being turned over, the cars were being turned over, things — windows were shattering all over the place, fires were burning around the place. It was beautiful. It really was. It was really beautiful.

The event to her, although scarring and chaotic, was beautiful. The scene symbolized the oppression that was no longer going to be accepted. As a transgender female, Rivera felt the

---

8 Carter, Stonewall: The Riots, 61.
10 See Figure 2 in Appendix A.
impact of the uprising. Sylvia Rivera, along with other monumental queer figures like Marsha P. Johnson and Mama Jean, knew that it was time for the discrimination to end. They stood their ground and overcame all the adversity the world threw their way.\textsuperscript{14}

Stonewall was different from other gay bars in Greenwich Village. It was a place that housed the youth and openly served the outrageously dressed drag queens, no matter their sexuality, gender identity, or race.\textsuperscript{15} The club\textsuperscript{16} was “a seedy, mafia-run bar,”\textsuperscript{17} but it was home to many people of the LGBT+ community. For a small entrance fee, one could spend the night. It wasn’t strictly a bar. In fact, it was one of the only gay clubs in the Village that allowed people to dance. The owners didn’t care. They would allow in anyone who could pay the price. This included the drag queens, crossdressers, and gay youth who would be kicked out of bars and other local establishments. LGBT+ youth in the late 1960s were often forced out of their homes for their identities. Many had to resort to panhandling and prostitution because they were not allowed to enter the local bars. Stonewall Inn was different. The club allowed the youth in for the same entrance fee as anybody else and gave them shelter and a home for a night. The kids weren’t forced to buy drinks or hustle their bodies, they could just be for a night. This was monumental to the teenagers who would have otherwise had to try to make it on the streets of New York alone. There was a sense of unity and equality at the Stonewall Inn. That is why the club and its patrons held so much power.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Andrew Kopkind, "On Stonewall," \textit{Grand Street}, June 1, 1992, 145, MasterFILE Premier (852073).
\textsuperscript{16} See Figure 3 in Appendix A.
\textsuperscript{17} Anne-Marie Cusac, "The Promise of Stonewall," \textit{The Progressive}, August 1999, 10, MasterFILE Premier (2107610).
After the riots, newspapers from around the city of New York, such as the *New York Post* and *The New York Times*, issued articles covering the rebellion. Former Deputy Inspector Seymour Pine of the NYPD commented in an interview with Amy Goodman that the uprising was the first time the New York Police Department began to truly see the people of the LGBT+ community as human beings. In the years after the rebellion, pride parades started to pop up around the city of New York and throughout the country. The memory of Stonewall was strong with organizers. The gay liberation movement was starting to blow up.

A parade provided to be ideal for the affirmation of gay collective identity and for the production of feelings of pride central to the emotional culture of the movement. The emotional impact granted the parade lasting cultural power.

People cheered, chanted, and fought for their civil rights. They were no longer willing to allow themselves to be victimized.

After the event, the New York Police Department had to face the realization that the people of the LGBT+ community were no longer compliant with persecution. They were no longer submissive and scared. Other spots around America followed in the steps of Stonewall. Cities like Atlanta, Georgia began to hold pride parades of their own and fight back when their own establishments were raided. Seymour Pine, the Deputy Inspector who led the raid, realized that night that things were going to change - and fast. While the actions and raids by the police of New York did not stop after the rebellion, it became more difficult and tedious for the police

---

19 See Figure 4 and Figure 5 in Appendix A.
23 Shepard, "History or Myth?,".
to carry out their task. The advocates of the gay community were banding together and uniting into a stronger community that was unwilling to be dismissed, attacked, or routed.

Stonewall Veteran Michael Levine described the comfort he felt after the event in an interview with Matt Merlin. Levine told Merlin about how three days after the raid and the events that followed it, he went back to the bar with his partner. He talked about how they “stood there on the street and held hands and kissed — something [they] would never have done three days earlier.” Michael Levine grew the strength to love and live how he wanted after the uprising. Nearly 41 years later, Levine stated to Merlin that while he didn’t feel more or less comfortable with his own sexuality after the night, he did feel that the world was more comfortable with him and the person he loved.24

The rebellion that sparked the gay rights movement on June 28, 1969 impacted far and wide. LGBT+ youth today should know that they have the courageous veterans of the uprising to be thankful for when they exercise their ability to show affection with their same-sex partners in the streets of their towns. Life is by no means perfect for people who place themselves in the queer community, but it has come a long way. Anne-Marie Cusac, professor of journalism at Roosevelt University in Chicago, knows the impact that Stonewall has had on her life. She writes:

I was three-and-a-half years old during the Stonewall riots. I had no idea that it happened until after I came out as a lesbian in my mid-twenties. Even so, it made the life I live possible. Stonewall, and the burgeoning movement that followed it, inspired many gay and lesbian people to live openly. Their visibility, in turn, helped me to understand that it was possible to live a different sort of life—which became for me a lesbian life. When I walk hand-in-hand with my girlfriend through the streets of Madison, Wisconsin, I credit Stonewall.25

If the Stonewall Riots of 1969 had not sparked a stronger gay rights movement, people such as Cusac would not be able to walk hand in hand with their partners. The nights of the rebellion did not eliminate anti-LGBT+ laws or actions, but they showed the country that the visible presence of LGBT+ people as part of the fabric of society would no longer be hidden. People would be confident and open with their love. They could feel safer to express their affections. The LGBT+ community is still waiting for the federal anti-discrimination laws to catch up with the acceptance the community has found among much of the public. However, some progress has been made. Alfred P Doblin stated that “adoptions by same-sex couples. Domestic partnerships. Civil unions. Shared health benefits. Same-sex marriages. They all can be traced back to the infamous bar on Christopher Street that was a gathering place for people on the fringe of traditional society.”

The people of the LGBT+ community showed on the nights of the uprising that they were no longer willing to compromise their principles. In past raids, the numbers of the community and the patrons of the bars were taken begrudgingly but without strong physical resistance into police cars. They allowed themselves to be arrested because they felt shame and fear. On the night of the raid, the drag queens, crossdressers, gays, lesbians, and queer-identifying people alike took to the streets. They chanted and they sang at the top of their lungs. Cries of “occupy -- take over, take over” and “Liberate the bar!” rang down the street of Christopher Street. A

---

29 Franke-Ruta, "An Amazing,".
group of drag queens stood arm in arm, Rockettes style, in order to barricade the bar with their pride.\textsuperscript{30} They believed in their own equality and were unwilling to compromise it even when faced with violence, shame, disrespect, and persecution. Despite the oncoming conflict, they stood their ground. The veterans of the riot spit, both metaphorically and literally, in the faces of the people trying to make them hide who they were.

New York had a long history of homophile activists who organized to allow the LGBT+ community incremental progress; to attempt to blend in and conform.\textsuperscript{31} One such group, the Mattachine Society, sought acceptance for the mostly white, mostly male participants and the group was willing to compromise with a judgmental society.\textsuperscript{32} Those compromises excluded the lost youth, the poor, the non-white participants, the transgender kids, the drag queens, and most of the lesbian community.\textsuperscript{33} The Stonewall conflict showed another path, one with less compromise and more success at bringing the entire LGBT+ community forward.\textsuperscript{34} If they had been willing to compromise these values, the world would not be in the state it is in now in terms of equality. It would be much worse.

The loyalty and determination of the veterans of the Stonewall Riots showed the world that the LGBT+ community was to be taken seriously in the fight for civil rights. They showed that they are to be taken seriously. Life would not be the same if it were not for the strong patrons of the Stonewall Inn who stood their ground when they were faced with conflict and adversity. On the night of the Stonewall Rebellion, the LGBT+ community told the world that

\textsuperscript{30} See Figure 6 in Appendix A.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 163.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 242.
diversity was more than adversity and that equality would prevail through any conflict the world may throw its way.
Appendix A
https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e3-57e3-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.

This photo depicts the entrance to the Stonewall Inn in daylight.


This photograph shows what Raymond Castro looked like somewhere around 1969.
This is a close up picture of the entrance to the Stonewall Inn from shortly after the uprising in 1969.


This is a scan of the article put out by The New York Times the morning after the uprising on June 29, 1969.


The is a scan of the article that the New York Post put out after the uprising. It was published on June 29, 1969.

"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!"


This is a scan-in of a song that was sang by rioters during the uprising.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


This interview by Jonathan Ned Katz helped me better understand the intensity of the uprising through the first-hand account of Stonewall veteran Raymond Castro. The interview is a primary source because Castro was present at the riots. He knew what it was like to be arrested for his sexuality, and gave information on the experience here. Along with this, Castro also gave insight on his thoughts during the rebellion and how the riots affected him as a person.


https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e3-57d0-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.

This photograph, taken shortly after the uprising, provided me with an image of what happened to the Inn after the rebellion. While no context is given with the picture, inferences can be made through observation. As there is a for sale sign in the window of the Inn, it can be assumed that the club closed after the raid. In this way, the photograph helped me better understand the riots along with giving me a visual aid for my appendix.


https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e3-57e3-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.
This photograph shows what the Stonewall Inn looked like from the perspective of Christopher Street. The club, while full of life and meaningful for its patrons, was inconspicuous to the outside world. This served as a good introductory image for my paper. It is a primary source because it was taken by Diana Davies in 1969, the same year as the Stonewall Uprising.


This magazine article provided me with a first hand account of the riot. Due to the fact that the speaker, Dick Leistch, was present at the riot and in the gay liberation movement in 1969, this source qualifies as primary. This account really helped to inspire this entire project because it captured my attention early on. It gave me a story that I wanted to pass on to as many people as possible.


This source is a collection of many primary sources that helped to fuel my project through visual aids and historical context. As I didn’t use any actual information from the text of this website, I am counting it as a primary source. The fundamental aspect of this piece was the scans of newspaper articles from the days following the riots. Along with this, the source provided me with a song that was sung by rioters during the uprising.
This magazine article was a crucial part of the development of my paper. This source, tantamount to my *The Atlantic* piece, gives the first-hand account of Dick Liestch. The article qualifies as a primary source because it is simply a reprinted version of Liestch’s original Mattachine Society newsletter from shortly after the riot. It gives insight on how the society chose to view the article from the perspective of their editor. The source was reprinted for easier reading quality and remembrance on the 40th anniversary of the event.


If I had to choose a source that helped me the most, it would be this interview. Through Amy Goodman’s conversations with various people who were veterans of the uprising, I was able to include vital information about what it would have been like to riot alongside LGBT+ figures such as Sylvia Rivera. This helped better establish my connection with my topic as well as pique my interest on the subject.

This transcript of an interview of Michael Levine by Matt Merlin had a large impact on me when I first read it. As a primary source, the piece told about Levine’s experience on the night of the riot. It was really interesting and helpful for me to be able to see how intense the experience was. It also helped for me to know that, despite the terror, Levine was able to find joy and laughter from the situation, just from the sheer absurdity of it all.


I picked up the backgrounder on Michael Levine as one of my last sources. This source gave me a first-hand account of the riot by a patron of the bar on the night of the raid. This piece was vital in the creation of my opening as I used a block quote from it to grab the attention of the reader. I included this piece with my primary sources because it involved many descriptions of the riot by a person who was present at the event. This source told me more about how the rebellion started along with how it progressed throughout the night.

Secondary Sources

This journal article gave me information why Stonewall became a symbol for the gay liberation movement instead of other raids and uprisings. The source explains why Stonewall was so impactful and why it is commemorated so strongly. I was able to paraphrase information from this source and use it to benefit me in my research paper.


This journal article told me about how the diversity of the raid in terms of race and gender-identity is often overlooked in most pieces about Stonewall. The piece was able to give me an overview of how racial minorities were extremely influential in the uprising. This information allowed me to go deeper with my paper. Furthermore, it allowed me to more accurately represent the event.


This book was vital in my research about the rebellion. Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution is often thought of as the holy grail of information about Stonewall. In fact, many of my other sources made references to this book and used facts from it. This source, along with giving me an overview of the whole riot, allowed me to center in on some details that it would have been difficult to find elsewhere.


The piece *Atlanta Since Stonewall* is an online research collection that covers how the Stonewall Uprising impacted the city of Atlanta, Georgia. This source allowed me to talk about the effect that the riots had on other parts of the country along with Greenwich Village in New York. Essentially, this collection helped to make my piece more well-rounded in terms of sectors of information.


Anne-Marie Cusac’s magazine article about Stonewall helped me establish the impact of the riots. In her piece, Cusac discussed how she gives credit to Stonewall for her ability to express affection in public with her same-sex partner. Furthermore, this piece helped me to add information into my paper that appeals to emotion through the mentioning of love and affection.


http://sks.sirs.com/webapp/article?artno=0000293968&type=ART.

This newspaper article gave me information on the impact of the riot. I used the source in a quote about how Stonewall helped to change the modern world for same-sex couples. Although legal provisions in terms of LGBT+ rights were not achieved because of
Stonewall, social change was sparked there. This article gave me information on how the uprising changed people and society to be more accepting.


This source is a journal article that gave me radical yet factual information about the riots. Majorly, this piece talked about how the end of the 1960s was thought of as bad. As well as this, the article discusses how the Stonewall uprising of 1969 is often misrepresented in the pieces that cover it.


Andrew Kopkind’s magazine article gave me general information on Stonewall. This piece put Stonewall into perspective as a milestone event in the LGBT+ rights movement. It emphasized the importance of people of color, drag queens, and transgender people in the event. It contrasted the lost youth who had nothing to lose against the white gay males who had more interest in conforming.


This journal article helped me to tell about the impact of Stonewall on the New York Police Department. This article talks about Seymour Pine’s perspective of the raid. It also gave me information on how the LGBT+ community is split on the argument of the
importance of Pine. This piece is a secondary source because it is not told from the perspective of anyone present at the riots.


This newspaper article helped me by giving me information on the general overview of the Stonewall Uprising of 1969. The piece delved into some personal anecdotes by veterans of the riots, but mostly gave a general synopsis. This piece helped me attain the information that was fundamental in holding my piece together.