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The Stonewall Uprising and the Legacy of Nazi LGBTQ+ Oppression

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About the Author

Sarah is in her first year of an MA in history at the University of Guelph. A former professional actor, Sarah returned to Guelph in 2019 to complete her BA, only to fall in love with history, add on a second major, and pursue a second career. Her research interests include postwar German history, the history of sport, Cold War history, and the history of sexuality. She is currently working on a thesis that examines the space postwar German football provided to process the nation's emotion, trauma, and guilt. This essay was originally written for Dr. Norman Smith's HIST*2450: "The Practicing Historian," and uses a primary source comparison to explore the role LGBTQ+ persecution under the Nazis had on the Stonewall riots and the birth of the American Gay Liberation movement.

"We've had all we can take from the Gestapo. We're putting our foot down once and for all," proclaimed an unidentified protester outside the Stonewall Inn on the evening of June 28th, 1969.[1] In the decades that followed, this invocation of LGBTQ+ persecution by the Nazis would become a common refrain of gay rights activism, particularly in the United States.[2] But what did it mean to denounce the Gestapo amid the Stonewall riots, the birthplace of the modern gay rights movement? In using the July 6th, 1969, *New York Daily News* coverage of the Stonewall riots and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's (USHMM) oral history of Nazi concentration camp survivor Harry Pauly (1914–1985) as windows through which to compare the two eras, striking similarities in the persecution and lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people of 1960s America and Nazi Germany become evident. Continuities in the criminalization of queer behaviour, the attacks on safe spaces that formed a refuge from the harassment and danger to the LGBTQ+ community posed by the public, and a preoccupation with the gender non-conformity of drag queens and trans individuals, demonstrate a legacy of LGBTQ+ oppression that connects the Holocaust through to the Stonewall riots. In conjuring up the image of the Gestapo, protesters at Stonewall may not have just been making an equivalence between two anti-gay police factions, but in their creation of a new narrative of gay liberation, they were also crushing the legacy of Nazi LGBTQ+ persecution under their heels.

Nazi persecution of the LGBTQ+ community happened throughout the reign of the Third Reich (1933–1945) but accelerated with its 1935 amendments to Germany's anti-gay law Paragraph 175, which specifically targeted homosexual men. While not selected for extermination to the same extent that Jews were during the Holocaust, the Nazi's use of Paragraph 175 still resulted in an estimated 50,000 to 63,000 convictions of German men for the crime of homosexuality. In fact, 5,000 to 15,000 of those were interned in concentration camps, where many were executed.[3] In the camps, gay men were classified separately from other inmates, forced to wear the pink triangle as even in internment "the Nazis wished gay men to be especially visible."[4] While only gay men were listed in Paragraph 175, all members of the LGBTQ+ community found themselves in danger as the Nazis closed down all gay and lesbian bars, publications, and clubs and were intolerant of any forms of homosexuality.[5] In its online Holocaust Encyclopedia's article "Paragraph 175" about the history of Nazi homosexual persecution, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum includes the oral history of gay Holocaust survivor Harry Pauly. Pauly's lived experience provides particularly valuable insight through which to understand the history of Nazi LGBTQ+ persecution having been convicted under Paragraph 175 multiple times, interned in Neusustrum concentration camp, and later assigned to a penal battalion.

The Stonewall riots began on June 28th, 1969, as a response to a police raid on the Stonewall Inn, a popular gay bar in New York City. Fed up with the constant raids and police harassment, the crowd outside of Stonewall violently fought back, forcing the police back into the bar to find shelter. It was a moment when the American LGBTQ+ community not only rose to fight back against oppression but, at least temporarily, won. Protests continued to occur throughout the week, and while it was not the first action of resistance against police

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[1] Jerry Lisker, "Homo Nest Raided, Queen Bees Are Stinging Mad," *New York Daily News,* July 6, 1969, Section 2, M1.

[2] Erik N. Jensen, "The Pink Triangle and Political Consciousness: Gays, Lesbians, and the Memory of Nazi Persecution," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, no. 1/2 (2002): pp. 329–331.

[3] Marnie Rorholm and Kem Gambrell, "The Pink Triangle as an Interruptive Symbol," *Journal of Hate Studies* 15, no. 1 (2019): p. 64.

[4] R. Amy Elman, "Triangles and Tribulations: The Politics of Nazi Symbols," *Journal of Homosexuality* 30, no. 3 (March 26, 1996): p. 3.

[5] Clayton J. Whisnant, *Queer Identities and Politics in Germany: A History, 1880–1945* (New York, NY: Harrington Park Press, LLC, 2016), p. 229.

oppression, the Stonewall riots are widely regarded to be the birthplace of the modern gay rights movement.[6] Few newspapers featured much coverage on Stonewall, or if they did, relegated it to the back pages. However, on July 6th, 1969, more than a week after the uprising, the *New York Daily News'* coverage of the Stonewall riots was featured on its front page and provided more comprehensive coverage of Stonewall than all other New York newspapers at the time.[7] Yet the title of the article, "Homo Nest Raided, Queen Bees Are Stinging Mad" along with author Jerry Lisker's (1937–1993) mockery of the LGBTQ+ community through purposeful misuse of pronouns and patronizing, over-the-top descriptions of the protestors, undermined much of the potential power of the coverage of such an important historical event.[8] However, as one of the few sources of journalism about Stonewall, the article proves an invaluable resource of both police and protester statements, and through which to view public opinion of the LGBTQ+ community at the time.

In both Nazi Germany and mid-twentieth-century America, anti-gay laws were expanded to criminalize not just queer sex but the very behaviour of LGBTQ+ people. In Germany, Paragraph 175 pre-dated the Nazis, having been a part of the German criminal code since 1871, its definition of illegal behaviour strictly confined to acts of sodomy. However, on June 28th, 1935, the Nazis revised and expanded the law with the explicit purpose of making persecution of gay men easier. In the new version of Paragraph 175 "'sodomy' was replaced simply with the word 'indecency'" and could be applied to "any personal conduct that offended 'public morality.'"[9] This meant that behaviour such as kissing, touching, or even glances between homosexual men could now get one arrested.[10] That Harry Pauly was convicted multiple times between 1936 and 1943 demonstrates the success of the Nazi creation of an anti-gay law that needed little proof to achieve a conviction. Throughout his sentencings Pauly was subjected to the range of punishments a homophobic legal system could dish out: coming before the infamous Judge Sponer, a "unique pig" who singled out gay defendants for particularly severe punishments[11]; fifteen months in the Neusustrum concentration camp; and assignment to a penal battalion during the war, from which Pauly was one of the few survivors.[12] The broadened and ambiguous scope of the Nazi version of Paragraph 175 made what the authorities considered to be queer behaviour illegal, creating a sharp increase in arrest rates, convictions, and gay men sentenced to serve dangerous forms of punishment from which many never returned.

In mid-twentieth-century America, laws making homosexuality illegal varied from state to state but as Edward Alwood demonstrates, even in places where it was not "illegal to be a homosexual, it was against the law in most places to behave like one."[13] In echoes of Nazi policy, indecency laws were created to make it illegal for LGBTQ+ people to touch or kiss while dancing with members of the same sex; legally be served alcohol in bars; or wear what

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[6] Walter Frank, *Law and the Gay Rights Story: The Long Search for Equal Justice in a Divided Democracy* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014), pp. 33–34.
[7] Larry Gross, *Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 41.
[8] Lisker, "Homo Nest Raided," M1, M6.
[9] David Raub Snyder, "Homosexuality and Violations of Paragraph 175," in *Sex Crimes Under the Wehrmacht* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 103–104.
[10] Elman, "Triangles and Tribulations," p. 3.
[11] Ulrich Würdemann, "Harry Pauly – Pauline Courage (1914–1985)," 2mecs: Homosexualities in France and Germany, last modified April 13, 2020, https://www.2mecs.de/wp/2012/02/pauline-courage-harry-pauly/.
[12] "Paragraph 175: Harry Pauly," Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, last modified July 12, 2018, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/paragraph-175.
[13] Edward Alwood, "The Role of Public Relations in the Gay Rights Movement, 1950–1969," *Journalism History* 41, no. 1 (April 1, 2015): p. 11.

the authorities deemed gender-inappropriate clothing.[14] Part of what made the Stonewall Inn so special to the queer community is that it was a safe place to do all of these things away from the prying eyes of the law. The *New York Daily News* article repeatedly justified the actions of the police in its Stonewall coverage: "it was a raid. They had a warrant . . . it was the law."[15] Yet what it failed to acknowledge was that just as with Paragraph 175, those laws were fundamentally immoral, discriminatory, and designed with the sole purpose to make it easier to persecute LGBTQ+ individuals. When protesters stood up to the police at the Stonewall Inn, they were not simply protesting the raid that night but the kinds of laws that enabled the raid to occur. Laws that made their mere presence and behaviour illegal, just as those same kinds of laws had done to Harry Pauly thirty years earlier in Nazi Germany.

Spaces where LGBTQ+ people could safely be themselves were extremely important during both eras, not just because of the increased criminalization of queer behaviour but also because of the frequently hostile treatment the LGBTQ+ community faced at the hands of the public. Yet, because these spaces were havens for the queer community, they also became the target of the police in both Nazi Germany and 1960s America. Often in support of, or complicity with the police, homophobic harassment and violence by the public posed a real threat to the LGBTQ+ community in Nazi Germany. Harry Pauly was subjected to homophobic slurs from fellow soldiers after being drafted into the army, causing him to eventually defect to get away from the constant abuse.[16] Such attacks suffered by gay men were not uncommon, nor were denunciations to the police of LGBTQ+ people by their neighbours, coworkers, relatives, or other members of the public. For example the one that resulted in Pauly's 1943 arrest after two boys were pressured by the Gestapo to publicly accuse him of violating Paragraph 175.[17] More dangerously, the "Hitler Youth or other self-appointed 'morality Guardians'. . . took it upon themselves to ensnare homosexuals."[18] Such as with the homophobic vigilantism that resulted in Harry Pauly's friend Susi being stabbed to death by Nazi sympathizers.[19] Yet from quite early on, safe queer places became increasingly dangerous as the Nazis set about attacking and closing gay and lesbian spaces, primary amongst them being bars. As early as February 1933, the Berlin police had orders to shut down bars "frequented solely or mainly by persons who indulge in unnatural sexual practices," with similar policies enacted throughout Germany over the following year. By 1936, even restaurants or other mixed heterosexual and homosexual meeting places that were safe queer spaces were being watched, raided, or shuttered, as were public parks and toilets.[20] Without a safe space to be themselves and find sex, love, or community, members of Nazi Germany's LGBTQ+ community found themselves increasingly isolated, with no place to find shelter from both the police and equally dangerous public.

In 1960s America, while often a refuge for LGBTQ+ individuals who had to hide their sexuality from a hostile public, gay bars were also increasingly unsafe, frequently targeted by the police. Considered a haven where queer people of all genders and races were free to be themselves, the Stonewall Inn was "a place where queer was normal, and society's prejudice could be forgotten."[21] A place safe from public homophobic sentiment was important as being outed could often result in LGBTQ+ individuals losing their jobs, friends, and even families.[22]

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[14] Nicola Field, "'They've Lost that Wounded Look': Stonewall and the Struggle for LGBT+ Rights," *Critical and Radical Social Work* 6, no. 1 (2018): pp. 39, 42–43.
[15] Lisker, "Homo Nest Raided," M1.
[16] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Paragraph 175: Harry Pauly."
[17] Whisnant, *Queer Identities*, p. 217
[18] Whisnant, Queer Identities, p. 217.
[19] Whisnant, Queer Identities, p. 217.
[20] Whisnant, *Queer Identities*, pp. 209, 216.
[21] Frank, *Law and the Gay Rights Story*, p. 32.
[22] Alwood, "Role of Public Relations," p. 11.

More dangerously, the discovery could lead to an involuntary commitment to psychiatric institutions where some queer patients were subjected to violent, non-consensual electroshock therapy or even lobotomies.[23] And like Nazi Germany, "deadly homophobic street attacks by gangs or vigilantes" were also a common threat.[24] But gay bars were also frequently the target of police attacks. In the month preceding the riots, several New York gay bars, including Stonewall itself, had already been raided by police.[25] When police could not shut down a space by force, they would often infiltrate it, making it dangerous from the inside as officers pretending to be queer would entrap LGBTQ+ individuals and arrest them.[26] By 1969 the "police habit of entrapment and attacking and closing homosexual gathering places . . . was a sickeningly familiar occurrence."[27] The police raid that started the Stonewall riots was not unique, but it was the final straw that broke the queer community's acceptance that police harassment was an understood part of the LGBTQ+ bar scene. As two of the protestors declared: "if they close up all the gay joints in this area, there is going to be all-out war."[28] Fighting not just for Stonewall, but for the preservation of queer space safe from prejudice and harassment, protesters at the Stonewall riots were also reclaiming the space stolen from the LGBTQ+ community by the Nazi regime.

While the persecution by the state in some way affected all members of the LGBTQ+ community of both eras, it did not do so equally. A preoccupation with the feminization of men meant that gay men were targeted more than lesbians, but none faced greater scrutiny than drag queens and "transvestites" who were often the first targets of persecution in both Nazi Germany and 1960s America.[29] Part of the Nazi regime's drive to persecute the LGBTQ+ community lay in its overarching campaign to police gender norms: women were to be mothers and men were to be masculine soldiers and fathers.[30] Male homosexuality, considered to be a feminized form of masculinity, posed a threat to the creation of a strong German nation. Those who visibly flaunted norms of male gender expression were even more deviant in the eyes of the state and became targets of Nazi persecution. First to be rounded up due to their obvious queerness, drag queens, cross-dressers, and transwomen were some of the earliest of Germany's LGBTQ+ population to be arrested and interned in concentration camps.[31] The fact that Harry Pauly's friend Susi was a drag queen is likely what made her a target for the Nazi supporters that murdered her.[32] Even those who did try to hide, such as transwoman Fritz Kitzing who publicly dressed in men's clothes to avoid arrest, were often betrayed. Denounced as a "transvestite" by a neighbour and arrested when the Gestapo discovered women's clothing in her apartment, Kitzing was sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp, where it is presumed that she died, as was the fate of many gender non-conforming individuals during the Holocaust.[33] In the Nazi regime's oppression of the LGBTQ+ community, its obsession with masculinity drove much of its policy. Drag queens, cross-dressers, and transwomen, due to their gender nonconformity, became its first and often deadliest targets.

A preoccupation with gender conformity also permeated 1960s America, and the events

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[23] Frank, *Law and the Gay Rights Story*, pp. 17–18.
[24] Field, "They've Lost that Wounded Look," p. 41.
[25] Frank, *Law and the Gay Rights Story*, p. 32.
[26] Alwood, "Role of Public Relations," p. 17.
[27] Field, "They've Lost that Wounded Look," p. 42.
[28] Lisker, "Homo Nest Raided," M1.
[29] Transvestites is used in quotations as it is an outdated term, but it appears in much of the literature, which is why I am referencing it here. It was an overarching label to mean what a heteronormative society would view as a man dressed in women's clothing, often encompassing drag queens, cross-dressers, and transwomen.
[30] Whisnant, *Queer Identities*, pp. 227–28.
[31] Whisnant, *Queer Identities*, p. 221.
[32] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Paragraph 175: Harry Pauly."
[33] Whisnant, *Queer Identities*, p. 231.

at Stonewall in particular. Cross-dressing was illegal and one of the means by which the police targeted the LGBTQ+ community. New York state law "permitted the arrest of anyone wearing fewer than three items of clothing 'appropriate to their gender,'" which frequently resulted in degrading strip searches by police to view all items of clothing the individual was wearing.[34] Once again, most vulnerable and first to be targeted because of their queer visibility, at the police raid on the Stonewall Inn "customers identified as transvestites . . . were segregated into a separate line to be 'checked' in the club toilets, unless they voluntarily confessed to being men."[35] Like Nazi Germany, they were also the first to be arrested that night. It was a wide range of gender non-conforming individuals that contributed to Stonewall becoming a site of rebellion, despite the *New York Daily News'* similar preoccupation in its coverage with what it depicted as men dressed as women.[36] It was the resistance of drag queens, trans individuals, and lesbians who had also been "checked" and charged with not wearing enough gender-appropriate clothing, and the violent treatment they received at the hands of the police witnessed that night by those present that turned the mood of the crowd into one of anger and protest.[37] First to be oppressed and to resist, the gender-nonconforming community led the charge at the Stonewall riots and inspired the rest of the LGBTQ+ community to cast off the oppression of not just 1960s American society, but also the legacy of Nazi anti-gay persecution, and in the process create the foundations of the modern gay rights movement.

In searching for an analogy that fit the moment of the Stonewall riots, a protester invoked a symbol of Nazi persecution to communicate the experience that would lay the foundation for the LGBTQ+ resistance movement to come: "we've had all we can take from the Gestapo. We're putting our foot down once and for all."[38] That Jerry Lisker followed up this quotation with the comment "the foot wore a spiked heel" as a means of mocking the speaker perhaps demonstrates just how much his reporting misread the moment.[39] While later gay activists would use Holocaust imagery and the pink triangle as a "dangerous memory" to keep the queer community vigilant against persecution,[40] at the Stonewall riots, it was articulated as much more of a moment of triumph over not just the present oppression but that of the Nazi past as well. The Stonewall riots were an uprising against the criminalization of queer behaviour, the stealing of safe LGBTQ+ spaces, the homophobia of the public, and the oppression of gender conformity experienced by both those living in 1960s America and the 1930s and 1940s German LGBTQ+ community, many of whom had perished under Nazi persecution. Yet, the Stonewall protestors were not the only ones to vanquish the oppression of the Nazis. Harry Pauly outlived them by forty years; created his own safe gay space, a pub and theatre called the MC Club; and was known there not just as Harry Pauly, but also by the wonderfully appropriate name of Pauline Courage.[41] It is fitting to think, not just of the "Queens of Christopher Street" as Lisker famously titled the Stonewall protesters,[42] but also of Pauline Courage, putting their spiked-heeled feet down and leaving the legacy of Nazi LGBTQ+ persecution in the dust.

[34] Field, "They've Lost that Wounded Look," pp. 43–44.
[35] Field, "They've Lost that Wounded Look," p. 43.
[36] Lisker, "Homo Nest Raided," M1, M6.
[37] Field, "They've Lost that Wounded Look," p. 44.
[38] Lisker, "Homo Nest Raided," M1.
[39] Lisker, "Homo Nest Raided," M1.
[40] Rorholm and Gambrell, "Interruptive Symbol," p. 67.
[41] Würdemann, "Harry Pauly – Pauline Courage."
[42] Lisker, "Homo Nest Raided," M6.

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