In the quarter century between the Second World War and the 1969 Stonewall uprising, gay and lesbian Americans navigated a society that relentlessly demonized and demeaned them. In this difficult era, bars and nightclubs were among the few available gathering places for gay people to locate others like themselves. While big cities served as magnets for gay people seeking anonymity and freedom, big-city police departments frequently raided their gathering spots, arresting the patrons and sometimes even notifying their employers. Some were able to carve out spaces where they were tolerated or accepted, such as in artistic or bohemian communities. Many people who engaged in homosexual acts did not adopt a personal identity as gay or lesbian. Moreover, since being exposed as gay in this era could result in losing your job or family, many were afraid to associate with other gay people. The vast majority of those who considered themselves gay carefully concealed their homosexuality from their straight coworkers, relatives, and friends.

World War II had a contradictory impact on gay and lesbian life in the US. On the one hand, the nation’s mobilization to defeat the Axis powers plucked millions of men away from their families of origin and into military service. Both men and women found work in the booming defense industries that supported the war effort. As a result, many Americans were exposed to new places and people, and some gay people were able to find others like themselves for the first time. Draft policies that exempted husbands, and later fathers, encouraged heterosexual marriages, even as wartime conditions separated many heterosexual couples. While existing gay social networks were also disrupted, many others found themselves for the first time
in close contact with others who shared their same-sex attractions in new institutional settings occasioned by the wartime emergency.

On the other hand, the wartime expansion of governmental power led to new restrictions on homosexuality. The US military had long banned same-sex acts, but during World War II, following the recommendation of psychiatric experts, who were brought in to screen men subject to the draft, it instituted a new ban on individuals—both men and women—merely possessing homosexual inclinations. Moreover, after the war’s end in 1945, the nation’s most powerful authorities worried about how to maintain stability and productivity in the face of military demobilization and the adjustment to peacetime daily life. Many politicians and journalists called for a restoration of traditional family life.

By the end of the 1940s, with the onset of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, the nation’s political culture took a sharply conservative turn. In an echo of the post-World War I red scare, conservative leaders urged the political purification of the country by rooting out and excluding communists and other leftists—as well as what they considered moral deviants, including gay people. In this era, which included the baby boom, Americans were encouraged to marry at a younger age than ever, while “unwed” motherhood and divorce were highly stigmatized, especially among the growing white middle class. Popular culture glorified motherhood, yet it blamed mothers for a variety of social problems, such as juvenile delinquency; indeed, many commentators believed homosexuality in men was caused by overbearing mothers. In the nation’s cities, gay communities grew, and African Americans migrated in larger numbers than ever before in search of jobs and housing. Yet the federal government also subsidized the movement of white families from cities to suburbs, and journalists increasingly portrayed urban life in a harsh light.
During the 1950s and 1960s, many institutions in the United States became more hostile toward gay and lesbian people. In 1950, a Senate subcommittee investigated homosexuals in government and associated them with communists, issuing a report urging that the government root out gay people from federal jobs on the grounds that they either could be blackmailed by foreign spies, were inherently emotionally unstable, or both. “One homosexual can pollute a government office,” the report said. In 1952, the American Psychiatric Association published its first *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* officially designating mental illnesses, formally listing homosexuality as a mental disorder. In 1953, through an executive order issued by President Dwight Eisenhower, homosexuality—labeled as “sexual perversion”—became grounds for firing any federal employee. Many states and cities, school systems, and corporations followed the lead of the federal government in purging gay employees.

In mainstream cultural productions, homosexuality typically appeared as a threat to children and family life. Popular culture tended to link same-sex acts with immorality and criminality. From 1930 to 1968, the Motion Picture Production Code suppressed gay content in Hollywood movies or permitted only the most negative depictions. Movies like *Rope* (1948) and *The Children’s Hour* (1961) drew on antigay stereotypes and portrayed gay people as dangerous, immoral, and criminal. While queer readers and viewers sometimes “read between the lines,” and certain stars, such as Judy Garland, were underground gay icons, most prominent people who were gay, lesbian, or bisexual concealed their sexuality. The civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, who was Martin Luther King Jr.’s mentor in the principles of Gandhian nonviolent direct action, was passed over for organizational leadership positions because his homosexuality was a public-relations liability.
Even in this difficult era, some critics questioned the prevailing attitude. A landmark step toward challenging the scientific perception of homosexuality as deviant or dangerous was the work of Alfred Kinsey, who surveyed ordinary Americans in the 1940s. Kinsey published two widely read books suggesting that behaviors like adultery and homosexuality were far more widespread than most people acknowledged. Crucially, Kinsey suggested that many people who lived heterosexual lives nonetheless engaged in homosexual acts—and, moreover, that many people fell somewhere in between a strictly homosexual or heterosexual orientation. “The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats,” he wrote. Other scientists who built on Kinsey’s work included Evelyn Hooker, who argued that studies of gay people had been distorted by sampling bias—that is, researchers had drawn their conclusions from samples of those homosexuals who sought treatment for their condition, thus failing to include gay people who had no wish to be “cured.”

Some gay people defied the era’s hostile laws and social norms. In big cities, large drag balls, often held at Halloween, offered larger gatherings than bars and clubs could provide, and these sometimes received sympathetic press coverage, especially from African American newspapers and magazines. Yet while gathering in bars and clubs was the most common way that gay people found refuge in this era, a few gay and lesbian people began to think of themselves as a minority group and to advocate for their rights as citizens. In 1948, a lesbian writer in California began publishing Vice Versa, the first newsletter for lesbians, and in 1951 a gay man published a book called The Homosexual in America: A Subjective Approach. Both writers used pseudonyms to mask their real identities, yet these publications were harbingers of a new cause. In the course of the 1950s, small groups of people in big cities founded what they called “homophile” organizations (in the hope that this term, by avoiding the erotic connotations
of “homosexual,” would make their cause more palatable to the public). In 1950, Harry Hay, a former member of the Communist Party, founded the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles. Other chapters of the organization soon emerged, first in other California cities and then in major cities across the nation. And in 1955, women in San Francisco founded the Daughters of Bilitis, the first lesbian-only homophile organization.

While the homophile movement would eventually grow into a political challenge to prevailing antigay attitudes, its agenda largely reflected the conservatism of the era and deference to expert authority. The Mattachine Society’s stated goal was “promoting the integration of the homosexual into society,” by means such as “participation in research projects by duly authorized and responsible psychologists, sociologists and other such experts directed towards further knowledge of the homosexual.” Most members wished to assimilate into the American mainstream, and, given the risks, the groups typically required members to use pseudonyms and guarded membership lists carefully. Homophile activists often complained about the visibility of gender-nonconforming queer people, including drag queens, butch lesbians, and people who otherwise defied gender norms. Some also distanced themselves from what was then called transsexuality, even as the possibility of medical means of changing sex became visible in the popular press, particularly after Christine Jorgensen, a World War II veteran, made headlines for her medical transition in the early 1950s and launched a career as an entertainer.

Gay people also managed, despite censorship and public hostility, to produce and consume their own cultural productions. A few popular novelists of the era, including James Baldwin and Gore Vidal, prodded the mainstream toward a more sympathetic understanding of gay life. Lesbian-themed paperback novels and male physique magazines offered limited, narrow
images of queer sexuality that conformed to laws and post office censorship. Additionally, “pulp” paperback novels sensationalized lesbians, eroticizing them as objects of male desire and portraying them as “twisted” or “warped.” Lesbian characters usually either died or married a man by the end of the book. Yet these books also provided information about where to find other gay people. Some books’ authors managed to include more positive representations of queer subcultures, including Valerie Taylor, who wrote several of the most popular pulp novels and was also a homophile-movement activist.

In the course of the 1950s, changes in pornography and obscenity laws, along with new technology, made sex more visible and permissible in popular culture. The founding of Playboy magazine in 1953, the Supreme Court’s liberalization of obscenity laws in 1957, and the FDA’s limited approval of a birth control pill in 1960 all symbolized what came to be called a “sexual revolution,” centered in the expanding, consumer-oriented youth culture generated by the baby boom. To be sure, the mass media treated sex outside marriage as acceptable for—at most—heterosexual men only. Yet although gay men and lesbians were left out from the sexual revolution—still often viewed as deviant, sick, or criminal—the growth of eroticized books and magazines nonetheless increased the visibility of homosexuality. An article in Life magazine in 1964 and a CBS television documentary in 1967 offered detailed depictions of America’s gay subculture that in retrospect seem strongly negative, but nonetheless helped many people become aware of the existence of gay life.

By the 1960s, conditions became more favorable for the growth of a political challenge to the dominant heterosexual culture, thanks to the influence of two other activist movements. As the black freedom struggle grew in the 1960s and gained strength with the flourishing labor movement, African Americans began to engage in nonviolent direct-action protests. Influenced
by this model, small groups of gay activists began in the mid-1960s to picket outside buildings, usually ones that symbolized the hostile federal government. The most visible homophile protest of the late 1960s was the Annual Reminder protest, which was held each Independence Day from 1965 to 1969 in front of Independence Hall in Philadelphia. The goal of the picketers was to point out the tension between the nation’s founding principles and the ongoing persecution of gay men and lesbians.

The second movement that paved the way for the gay movement to grow in size was the rebirth of feminism. The visibility of women’s activism had been on the wane in the decades since the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1920, which gave women—some only theoretically—the right to vote. By the mid-1960s, however, women’s growing prominence in the workforce fueled a political rebirth of feminism. As birth control pills gave women a means of controlling whether they got pregnant, women pressed for additional changes, including access to better-paying jobs, the right to end unhappy marriages, and the legalization of abortion. In the late 1960s, some feminists began to adopt a more radical critique of sexism, advocating not just for equal access to jobs but a broader freedom from a male-dominated society. They called their cause women’s liberation.

By the late 1960s, the gay movement was also inspired by the movement against the Vietnam War, widespread protests on college campuses, and the mounting defiance of gender-nonconforming patrons of gay establishments who fought back against routine police harassment at Compton’s Cafeteria in San Francisco in 1966 and at the Stonewall Inn in New York City in 1969. In the aftermath of the latter, which went on for several nights, gay activists launched a new group called the Gay Liberation Front, which adopted a more militant stance than any homophile group had done. On the one-month anniversary of the Stonewall uprising, they held a
memorial march on New York’s Sixth Police Precinct. While the Gay Liberation Front was short-lived, its founders’ call for a radical response to social, cultural, and political marginalization led to a rapid growth in gay movement organizing. Activists increasingly gave up the use of pseudonyms and insisted on “coming out” to the non-gay people in their lives. Their actions paved the way for the 1970s, when gay activists for the first time marched in city streets and turned from pleading for sympathy to actively disrupting the institutions that oppressed them.

Further Reading


