## A global perspective of LGBT history

In part three of three, we consider the LGBT experience from the advent of the Gay Rights movement to the present day

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## exQlusive

In part two of this series, we concluded by mentioning briefly the onset of the social and cultural stresses that produced the Gay Rights Movement. Now we shall examine the climate as we know it today, including nods toward the activism and expanding community visibility inspired by Stonewall, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the advancement of equality legislation around the world. **Stonewall: The ripple effect** 

When the riots in New York City made headlines around the globe they set off a sequence of immediate and irrevocable events. First, they made it clear to both the heterosexual and queer worlds that LGBT people were not particularly rare — thousands participated in Stonewall alone. Second, the communities in Europe and Australia were mobilized. Third, the insurgence created a broader sense of urgency and enthusiasm for activism and collaboration.

Prior to Stonewall it was presumed that LGBT people were very few, an exceedingly rare group of sociopaths who were easily closeted away by various cultural, institutional and legal prohibitions. Stonewall did not serve to instantaneously undermine all these assumptions, but it did inspire actions that, over the course of nearly 40 years, would bring enormous improvements for LGBT lives on at least three continents.

Within only a few years of Stonewall, demonstrations and publications around the world disproved the myth of queer scarcity. In the U.S., homosexuality was removed from the American Psychiatric Association's list of disorders only five years after the riots. Throughout most of Western Europe, discrimination was legally banned within 10 years of Stonewall and by the mid-'80s Australia and New Zealand had also decriminalized homosexuality. With so many more people fighting for visibility on three continents, a large international community emerged, albeit one still rife with internalized homophobia, racism and xenophobia. Despite Stonewall being ignited by thousands of rightfully outraged gay black men, butch lesbians, male sex workers and transgender people, many in the LGBT community would continually and consistently marginalize them and try to create a more palatable face for the heterosexual majority.

This brings up an issue that is still provocative amongst LGBT people: The revolutionaries versus the assimilationists. The former tend to feel that they should not have to conform to heterosexist ideals and sometimes regard the latter as political cowards who undermine a person's right to individuality. The latter tend to feel that presenting LGBT issues in a more "acceptable" manner will lead to wider acceptance and sometimes regard the former as extremists who undermine a person's right to privacy. Both types struggle for equality; however, they follow two very divergent philosophies on attaining it. **The HIV/AIDS pandemic** 

Throughout the '70s and '80s LGBT communities in the industrialized world blossomed as a result of Stonewall's invitation to visibility; however, at the exact same time an international catastrophe was brewing in Africa that would set Gay Rights back 10 years or more in some parts of the world, especially the Americas (except Canada — Québec, in 1977, was the first jurisdiction in the world larger than a municipality to outlaw discrimination against LGBT people).

What we now know as HIV/AIDS was first documented in 1959, the same year that Fidel Castro came to power. It waited throughout the Cuban Missle Crisis, Kennedy's assassination, the Cold War, Communist domination in Eastern Europe, Nixon's impeachment, the escalating violence in the Middle East, the Beatles' musical conquest of the world, Vietnam, African "liberation," and the Civil Rights Movement. Finally, in 1970 the HIV/AIDS pandemic began silently, killing thousands of people in rural parts of sub-Saharan Africa. In 1981 the first eight cases of Kaposi's Sarcoma, a rare skin cancer, were reported in the United States in New York City. The "Gay Plague" had begun.

In France and America teams of medical professionals raced to identify the contagion and its means of transmission. Before this could be accomplished thousands had already died. The French won that race and thus had the dubious honor of naming the disease: Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome was caused by Human Immunodeficiency Virus. Before this more generalized terminology, the disease had been called "Gay Plague,""Gay Cancer" and a variety of other homophobic names until it was realized that intravenous drug users and sex workers were also at risk. Because of its apparent concentration in subversive populations it was a deeply stigmatizing infection, even after it was realized that hemophiliacs, patients receiving blood transfusions, women and infants with infected mothers were also vulnerable.

Homophobia and racism caused government delays in the U.S. in terms of research, treatment and support. It was not until 1987 that Ronald Reagan finally mentioned HIV/AIDS publicly and that was in passing. He would later apologize for willfully ignoring the epidemic. Because of political obstacles here during the '80s, many years of potential advancements were lost, along with millions of lives.

To this day there are still groups who believe that infection is deserved and is symptomatic of immorality. In the parts of the world where the virus is most severe, most notably in Africa (where the disease is destabilizing countries and destroying economies), the local governments tend to implicate religious or moral instruction rather than medical treatment and prevention awareness. China has only recently acknowledged that

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