

## Stonewall Riots Lesson Plan

### Central Historical Question: What caused the Stonewall Riots?

#### Materials:

- Stonewall PowerPoint
- Copies of Documents A-D
- Copies of Guiding Questions
- Copies of Graphic Organizer

#### Plan of Instruction:

**Note:** The original historical documents contain homophobic and transphobic language and curse words. If teachers wish to use the original versions of the documents, we strongly recommend reading through them in advance and preparing students for this content.

1. Introduction: Stonewall PowerPoint.
  - a. Slide 2: The Stonewall Riots. *In the early hours of Saturday, June 28, 1969, a riot broke out during a police raid of the Stonewall Inn, an LGBT bar. Like most gay bars in New York, it was owned by the Mafia, an organized crime group. The Stonewall is located in the New York City neighborhood of Greenwich Village, which had a sizable LGBT community and was known as a center of the city's counter-culture. During the riot, a crowd of 400-600 people formed, and the police barricaded themselves inside the bar with their guns drawn. The police inside the bar had to call reinforcements in order to get out. Confrontations continued outside, with rioters throwing things at the police and police hitting rioters with batons. At the end of the night, thirteen people were arrested and several police officers were injured. Sporadic rioting and protests continued for the next several days.*
  - b. Slide 3: The Lavender Scare. *Legal and social discrimination against LGBT people has existed throughout U.S. history. During the 1950s and 1960s, LGBT Americans were imprisoned, committed to psychiatric institutions, subjected to electroshock therapy, and lobotomized for violating state laws and accepted social norms. Many LGBT Americans kept their gender identity or sexual orientation a secret because disclosing this information could have meant losing their jobs, their homes, and even their freedom. Many of those who were unable to live in the closet—or who chose not to—faced tremendous persecution. In the conservative environment of the early Cold War Era, LGBT people were deemed subversive and anti-American, and even perceived as being part of a Communist threat. Thousands of gay and lesbian armed service members*

*and other government employees were pressured to resign or were fired during the Second Red Scare, in what some historians have called the “Lavender Scare.”*

- c. Slide 4: Early Organizations. *In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, there were very few LGBT organizations. However, a growing number of LGBT Americans began to fight for their rights. In 1966, transgender women and gay men fought against police harassment at a cafeteria in San Francisco. Following the riot, a support and advocacy organization for transgender people was formed, called the National Transsexual Counseling Unit.*

*The Mattachine Society, a gay rights organization, was founded in 1950, and the Daughters of Bilitis, a lesbian rights organization, was founded in 1955. Both groups used non-confrontational methods to try to educate gay and straight Americans on gay issues. They wanted to assimilate into mainstream American society and worked to show that gays and lesbians could model American social values.*

- d. Slide 5: Stonewall’s Legacy. *The Stonewall Riots are widely considered to be one of the most important events in the gay liberation and LGBT rights movements. After the Stonewall Riots, there was a tremendous growth of LGBT organizations and publications. On the first anniversary of the riots, LGBT organizations in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago organized gay liberation marches to commemorate the riots and broaden their activist networks. These marches led to the hundreds of Gay Pride marches held around the world today.*
- e. Slide 6: Central Historical Question. *Today you are going to analyze and corroborate four historical documents to explore the question: What caused the Stonewall Riots?*

- 2. Hand out Document A and have students complete the corresponding sections of the Guiding Questions and Graphic Organizer.
- 3. After students have completed the corresponding sections of the Guiding Questions and Graphic Organizer, ask them to share their responses.
  - a. (Sourcing) Who was Jerry Lisker? Was he present at the Stonewall Riots?

*Jerry Lisker was a reporter for the *New York Daily News*. He was not present at the riots. Students may also infer that he was not a member of the LGBT community.*

- b. (Close reading) According to the individuals interviewed in this article, what was the real reason the police raided the Stonewall Inn?

Students should point to Nan’s response: “I believe they closed up the Stonewall because there was some trouble with the payoff to the cops.” The interviewees believed the police had known for years that the Stonewall operated without a liquor license but hadn’t raided the bar because they received bribes from the bar owners. Nan said that when the police didn’t receive a payoff, they raided the bar.

- c. (Close reading) What is the tone of the author toward the patrons of the Stonewall Inn? Cite at least one example to support your answer.

Students may describe Lisker’s tone as degrading and/or prejudiced and cite his description of the patrons as wanting a “private little place where they could . . . do whatever little girls do” or saying the interviewees wanted “to live together happily ever after.” Students may also argue that Lisker’s tone is dismissive, since he characterized the riots as having “comical overtones.”

(Contextualization) How might this help to explain what caused the riots?

Students may reason that this article may be representative of widespread attitudes towards LGBT people and that the riots were a response to this type of discrimination.

- d. Is this a reliable source on the riots? Why? Why not?

Due to the author’s tone towards LGBT people and his absence at the riots, students are right to be skeptical of this source. However, students should also consider that the interviews with Bruce and Nan may be reliable information and that the basic information presented about the police raid may be useful. Students should recognize that in order to evaluate the article’s reliability, they’ll need to corroborate it with other accounts.

4. Hand out Document B and C and have students complete the corresponding sections of the Guiding Question and Graphic Organizer for Documents B and C.

**Note:** The word “transgender” was not common in 1969. Many people at the Stonewall Riots referred to themselves as “queens” and identified as transgender women later in life, when the term came into common use.

5. After students have completed the corresponding sections of the Guiding Questions and Graphic Organizer, ask them to share their responses.
6. Hand out Document D and have students complete the corresponding sections of the Guiding Questions and Graphic Organizer.

**Note:** Point out that this document describes Stonewall’s connection to the Mafia. If necessary, explain that the government refused to issue liquor licenses to gay bars. The Mafia took advantage of this. The Mafia established gay bars and made money from them by selling alcohol illegally and blackmailing patrons. The Mafia paid the police a percentage of the profit. In turn, the police allowed the Stonewall to operate illegally.

After students have completed the corresponding sections of the Guiding Questions and Graphic Organizer, ask them to share their responses.

7. Discussion: Ask students to consider the following questions: *How are these accounts of the Stonewall Riots similar? How are they different? What are possible reasons for the differences among the accounts?*
8. Final Question: Students use evidence from the Graphic Organizer to explain what caused the Stonewall Riots.

Explain to students that it is likely that different students will have different answers. This is part of history. Different people can arrive at different conclusions as long as they have historical evidence to support their claims.

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## Documents

### Document A

*Jerry Lisker, The New York Daily News, July 6, 1969.*

### Document B

*Sylvia Rivera, Speech to the Latino Gay Men of New York, June 2001. Reprinted in Centro Journal, Spring 2007.*

### Document C

*Dick Leitsch, “The Stonewall Riots: The Gay View,” from the Mattachine Society of New York Newsletter, August 1969.*

### Document D

*“Gay Power in New York City,” The Ladder, October-November 1969.*