

world news

Soviet "Stonewall"

Moscow and Leningrad lesbian and gay pride events dubbed Soviet "Stonewall" and attract nearly 20,000 people

by Rex Wockner

MOSCOW—When the final tally was complete, it was estimated that nearly 20,000 people participated in the Soviet Union's first gay and lesbian pride events held July 23-Aug. 3 in Moscow and Leningrad. American organizers and several of the 70 North Americans who joined in the celebrations dubbed the two weeks "the Soviet Stonewall."

Scores of Soviet gays and lesbians said their lives had been changed forever.

"We have much new information on what it is to be gay," said Arunas Dainauskas of Vilnius, Lithuania. "It is very difficult to speak of what your visit means to us."

"One year ago, it would have been incredible to think of events like this," said Roman Kalinin, founder of the Moscow Gay and Lesbian Union and, in essence, of the Soviet gay movement itself. "We will remember this forever."

"I want to say to our American friends, you have infected us with the will to be free," Kalinin said. "I think we're sick with it now. Thank you. We owe you for the fact that when we started coming out, we were not alone...I want to say to the Soviets in this room, we have received help from the West; now it's our turn to do our part to advance the movement."

Similar sentiments were expressed over and over by the hundreds of delegates who attended the four-day gay and lesbian symposiums in Moscow and Leningrad, the thousands who crowded into the Soviet Union's first gay film festivals, and the brave 200 who staged the country's first gay-rights demonstration.

American organizers were repeatedly stunned at the turnouts for the events, saying they had no idea so many Soviet gays and lesbians would risk being known as homosexual. The events were heavily—and objectively, translators said—covered by the Soviet media.

With only minor exceptions (all in the past two years) life for Soviet gay males has consisted of careful cruising in parks and toilets, and Soviet lesbian life has been all but non-existent, delegates said. Now, the possibilities seem unlimited, some overwhelmed delegates suggested.

The Moscow film festival attracted 16,000 people, organizers said, making it the fifth-largest gay film festival in the world. It was staged by Frameline, which organizes San Francisco's film festival. There were several screenings each of *Coming Out* (East Germany), *Desert Hearts*, *The Times of Harvey Milk*, *Maurice*, *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *November Moon*.

"The films provided the first visual exposure of lesbian and gay relationships on the screen for the audience members and they've been extremely moved—beyond the point of being able to speak—at seeing men kiss each other and women kiss each other on the screen—and the loving relationships depicted in the films," said Frameline's Tom DiMaria.

About 1,000 people attended the Moscow symposium July 29-Aug. 1. In Leningrad, 300 people participated in identical events held July 23-28, and an additional 150 showed up for the films. Workshops focused on gay culture, coming out, sodomy-law repeal, the gay press, anti-gay violence, AIDS treatment, Marxism, and

scores of other topics.

A member of the Leningrad City Council addressed the opening plenary session there, telling Soviet gays and lesbians that the only way to win their freedom is to come out of the closet.

Condom-distribution events in downtown Leningrad and Moscow attracted more than 100 participants. In Moscow, activists made a hasty retreat in tourist buses after traffic police called for 800 back-up officers in response to a kiss-in initiated by a group of suddenly radicalized lesbians from Siberia.

The Soviet Union's first planned gay-rights demonstration took place the next day on the steps of Moscow's Bolshoi Theater—attracting 200 activists, a horde of reporters, and about 500 onlookers.

The protestors demanded the repeal of Article 121.1 of the Russian Republic Penal Code, which punishes male-male sex with five years' imprisonment, and called on Soviet authorities to move immediately to stave off HIV infection in the country.

Officially, there are 654 AIDS cases, according to Dr. Irina Eramova of the All Union Center for AIDS, who admitted that the figure is inaccurate.

The North American delegation featured several major figures in the gay and lesbian movement, including Canadian member of Parliament Svend Robinson, who addressed the closing plenary session in Moscow, wearing a "Silence=Death" T-shirt. "We are sending a powerful message...that we will accept nothing less than full equality. The greatest barriers that face our community are invisibility and silence. And as the slogan suggests, silence equals death and action equals life. Thank you for breaking the silence. Thank you for making our community in the Soviet Union not only visible, but strong and proud. We stand together today in pride and solidarity, as family. We shall overcome."

Most North American delegates were shocked at the social and economic "shambles" that surrounded them during their visit.

Long lines were seen outside near-empty stores. Routine goods were unavailable—such things as clothes (in the right size), watches, toiletries, lighters, pet food and hundreds of ordinary items.

During the Moscow conference, the government announced that foreign passports will henceforth cost 1,000 rubles. That's more than three months' salary for an average Soviet worker. Several American delegates left money with their new Soviet friends, who hope to visit the United States.

Ultimately, said many Soviet and American delegates, the success of the Soviet gay and lesbian rights movement will depend on whether the Soviet Union survives the seemingly impending social-economic collapse.

If the country achieves democracy, a market economy, and human-rights protections, then the lesbian and gay movement will mushroom, they said. The recent coup attempt and demise of the Communist party appears to indicate that lesbian and gay liberation in the Soviet Union will happen in this era.

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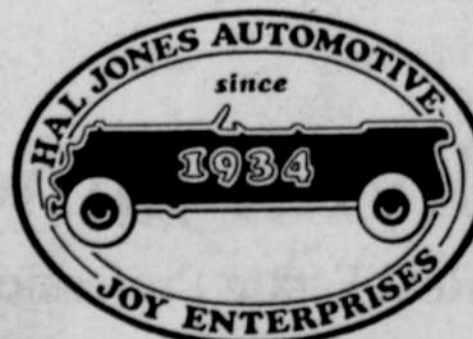
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