



Gay Pride marchers in Helsinki (2007). This photograph was created by Markus Koljonen and appears under the GNU Free Documentation License.

## Helsinki

by Craig Kaczorowski

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The capital and largest city of Finland, Helsinki is the country's administrative, business and culture center. It is also the hub of Finnish gay and lesbian life and the center of the country's glbtq political rights movement.

Helsinki has a population of approximately 568,000, and the Greater Helsinki area, which contains the neighboring cities of Vantaa, Espoo, and Kauniainen, and eight outer suburban municipalities, has a population of about 1.3 million.

The population of Helsinki is predominantly Finnish, with a sizable Swedish-speaking minority.

Helsinki does not have specifically gay or lesbian neighborhoods. In fact, gay and straight groups frequently gather at the same popular venues. Lately, however, the city has developed a diverse glbtq scene, with a small number of restaurants, cafés, bars, dance clubs, and hotels all catering to the needs of the community.

Although slower than its Nordic neighbors to assure glbtq equality, Finland is liberal in regards to gay rights, and prohibits employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. Since 2002, the country's registered gay and lesbian couples, the majority of whom reside in Helsinki, have had the same legal status as married heterosexuals, with the exception of adoption rights.

### History

Helsinki was founded in 1550 by King Gustav Vasa of Sweden and originally known as Helsingfors. It was intended as a new trading post in the southern part of Finland and as a rival to the city of Reval (today known as Tallinn, the capital and largest city of Estonia), on the opposite shore of the Gulf of Finland, which dominated local trade at the time.

After it was established, King Gustav then ordered the burghers of Rauma, Ulvila, Porvoo, and Tammissaari to move to the new town to ensure its viability. Growth was slow, however, and with the Swedish acquisition of northeastern Estonia, including Reval, at the conclusion of the Livonian War in 1582, the Swedish crown lost interest in building up a rival trading post and the area languished for many decades, overshadowed by the more thriving trade centers in the Baltic region.

In 1640, Helsinki was moved from its original location at the mouth of the river Vantaa, which proved unfavorable, further south to the Vironniemi peninsula.

After Helsinki was temporarily occupied by Russian forces, first in 1713 and again in 1742, the Swedish army decided to fortify the town, constructing the sea-fortress of Suomenlinna in 1748. This marked a turning point in the history of Helsinki, bringing new prosperity to the town.

However, after Russia defeated Sweden in the Finnish War, begun in 1808, Finland was annexed to Russia in 1809 as the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland within Imperial Russia. In order to reduce Swedish influence in Finland, Czar Alexander I of Russia relocated the Finnish capital from Turku, at the edge of the Baltic sea, to Helsinki. The city's downtown core was rebuilt in the neoclassical style to resemble St. Petersburg.

The following decades saw unprecedented growth and development for the city as Helsinki became the economic and cultural center of Finland. It was also during this period that the Finnish language became predominant, both as a way to lessen cultural ties with Sweden, and as a means to assert Finnish nationalism.

However, the relationship between the Grand Duchy and the Russian Empire deteriorated when the Russian government attempted to restrict Finnish autonomy. On December 6, 1917, soon after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, Finland declared its independence.

Finland's independence was followed by a brief but bitter civil war, in which the opposing factions were supported by Germany and Russia. In 1919, after the triumph of the pro-German faction, Finland became a presidential republic.

During World War II, Finland fought both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. During the Winter War of 1939-1940 and the Continuation War of 1941-1944, Helsinki endured intense aerial bombings, but due to a successful air defense the city suffered relatively little damage.

Helsinki continued to develop steadily during the later half of the twentieth century. Rapid urbanization in the 1970s tripled the population of Helsinki's metropolitan area.

Finland joined the European Union in 1995.

### **GLBTQ Rights**

In 1889, Finland's new penal code declared homosexuality a crime punishable by a maximum of two years in prison.

Homosexuality was finally decriminalized in Finland in 1971, but "promotion" of it remained illegal. This prohibition on the "promotion of homosexuality" was finally lifted in 1999. The country's criminal code was also revised in 1999, changing the age of consent to 16 for both heterosexuals and homosexuals.

Although Denmark officially recognized same-sex civil unions in 1989, and Norway and Sweden followed suit in 1993, Finland remained the last of the Nordic countries to adopt a registered partnership act.

A proposal for registered partnership legislation was first introduced in Finland in 1993, but did not pass. Revised versions of the bill were next introduced in 1996 and 1999, but also failed to be adopted.

On September 28, 2001, following heated debate and vehement opposition by conservative Christian groups, the Finnish Parliament finally passed the 1999 version of the Registered Partnership Act with minor revisions.

The act took effect on March 8, 2002.

The Finnish act is similar to the registered partnership acts of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden both in its scope and its limitations and exceptions: there is no right to adopt children, either each other's children or

unrelated children, and no possibility to have a church wedding. The legislation permits joint custody of children, however, and grants immigration rights to a foreign partner.

Despite the legality of same-sex partnerships in Finland, bishops of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church have continued to prohibit the blessing of gay unions in church. However, they do allow those registered in homosexual relationships to perform official church duties.

In 2004, Finland's Equality Act went into force, prohibiting direct and indirect discrimination and harassment based on age, ethnic or national origin, language, religion, beliefs, opinions, health, disability, and sexual orientation.

In 2005, revisions to the Equality Act extended protection against discrimination to transgendered individuals.

### **GLBTQ Organizations and Pride Events**

Founded in 1974 in Helsinki, SETA (Seksuaalinen Tasavertaisuus, which stands for "Sexual Equality") is the national Finnish human rights organization in the field of legal equality and social justice for sexual and gender minorities, including lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered people.

SETA gathers and provides information on sexual and gender diversity, and provides consultative and support services for gender and sexual minorities not available elsewhere.

SETA also publishes *Z Magazine*, the largest glbtq publication in Finland, with a circulation of about 4,000.

Helsinki's first political gay group, Pink Rose, was founded during the Helsinki Pride celebration in July 2006. Its aim is to enhance discussion on the rights of sexual minorities in Finland.

The organization's guiding principles are based on the values of the Social Democratic Party, primarily those of equality and mutual respect for each other.

The day Pink Rose was founded, the second vice president of the Finnish Social Democratic Party and Minister of Labor, Tarja Filatov, joined the association.

Helsinki Pride Week, which is held annually in late June, is Finland's largest glbtq pride event. Helsinki Pride is a major summer event attracting thousands of visitors with exhibitions, workshops, discussion groups, parades, and many other activities and events for the glbtq community. Over 10,000 people took part in the week-long events in 2007, with more than 3,000 people participating in the pride parade.

Vinokino, Finland's Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, is held each year in September, with screenings in four cities: Helsinki, Oulu, Tampere, and Turku. The festival began in 1991 and has become one of the major highlights for the queer community in Finland. The festival aims to promote gay visibility in Finland and bring minority representation to the forefront of public consciousness. In addition to screenings of gay and lesbian-themed films, including shorts and documentaries, the festival also features a number of supporting events and guest speakers.

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### **About the Author**

**Craig Kaczorowski** writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.