



Warsaw

by John D. Stanley

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An important financial, commercial, intellectual, and cultural center in Eastern Europe, Warsaw is Poland's capital and largest city. In 1999, it had a population of 1,616,500.

History

Warsaw has a very long history. A settlement has existed on its site since the tenth century. By the thirteenth century Warsaw was considered a city. Warsaw's location on important trade routes soon gave it national significance. In 1611, it replaced Cracow as Poland's capital.

In the eighteenth century, Warsaw prospered as it became a commercial, manufacturing, and banking center. By 1792, the city's population had attained 100,000. The court of Stanislaw August (reigned 1764-1795) in Warsaw became the motor for the Enlightenment project in Poland. After Poland's second partition, the city rose up against Russian domination in 1794.

When the Polish state was extinguished in 1795, Warsaw was ceded to Prussia. Napoleon entered the city in 1806, and he made Warsaw the capital of the small Duchy of Warsaw (1807-1813), and then of the slightly larger Kingdom of Poland (1815-1830). By 1829, Warsaw's population was 140,000. A series of uprisings against Russian rule (1830-1831, 1863-1864, and 1905) led to increasingly oppressive conditions.

With the construction of railway lines to St. Petersburg and Vienna in the mid-nineteenth century, Warsaw became an important transportation and industrial center. Its population increased dramatically, from 500,000 in 1900 to 764,000 just ten years later. With the development of a large working class, it soon became the center of Polish socialism. By 1900, the city was the most populous Jewish center in the world, and it became a focus of Jewish political, cultural, and intellectual life.

Poland again became independent in 1918, and Warsaw became once again a capital city and Poland's largest industrial and commercial center. By 1939, its population was 1,289,000.

From September 8 to 28, 1939, Warsaw defended itself against the German *Blitzkrieg*. When the city surrendered, it had sustained over 50,000 dead, as well as heavy damage from incessant bombing.

During the Nazi occupation, Warsaw's population drastically declined: as many as 670,000 residents died, including the city's 375,000 Jews, who were systematically exterminated by the Nazis, along with the Polish intellectual and cultural elite. The city's revolutionary traditions were continued with the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943 and the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, after which Hitler ordered the city depopulated and physically erased. Over 85% of the capital's buildings were systematically burned and destroyed.



Top: A skyline view of downtown Warsaw.
Above: Marchers carry an enormous rainbow flag in the 2006 Pride Parade in Warsaw. Photograph by Paul David Doherty. The photograph of downtown Warsaw was created by Wikimedia Commons contributor DocentX. Both images appear under the GNU Free Documentation License.

Warsaw was liberated in January 1945, and by 1948 a Communist regime firmly controlled Poland. Under the Communists, Warsaw was physically restored. Once again Warsaw became Poland's largest city. Warsaw was a center for the Polish workers' movement, Solidarity, in 1980 and 1981. With the fall of the Communist regime, the city once again became a self-governing municipality.

Most residents are ethnic Poles, and the population is predominantly Roman Catholic, though there is a small Protestant minority and a tiny but vibrant Jewish community.

Gay Traditions

Warsaw has a lively gay tradition. During the late eighteenth century, Warsaw's royal court and magnate palaces were the sites of cross-dressing balls. It was rumored that Poland's last king, Stanislaw August, was bisexual.

The Code Napoleon, in force during the period of the Duchy of Warsaw, was silent on the issue of homosexuality, and this treatment came to be considered Poland's legal norm. However, under Russian rule, imperial laws prevailed: from 1835 homosexuality was illegal throughout the empire. This prohibition was confirmed by the Russian criminal code of 1903. The code's paragraph #516 decreed that those convicted of "pederasty" were to be sentenced to no less than three months in prison.

Lesbians in Warsaw

The history of Warsaw's lesbians is barely documented. While isolated figures such as Narcyza Zmichowska (1819-1876) and Maria Dabrowska (1889-1965) are known, social circles or cultural bodies are not documented until the post-Communist period.

Lesbianism was not mentioned in the Russian criminal code in force in Warsaw, and Polish criminal codes have always also been silent on lesbianism. Currently, there are no exclusively lesbian organizations in Warsaw. Some women's organizations provide space for meetings of lesbians, as does the gay men's group Lambda Warsaw.

The Inter-War Period

During the inter-war period, such reformers as Professor Anton Feliks Mikulski (1872-1925) worked to remove the existing foreign laws outlawing homosexuality. Mikulski wrote an influential treatise on homosexuality in 1920 that demonstrated the rise of the medical model of homosexuality on Polish soil. Such reform efforts were successful: independent Poland's criminal code of 1932 was silent on homosexuality, in keeping with earlier Polish legal tradition.

Warsaw's intellectual and cultural elite had a distinct gay component at this time. The Skamander circle of poets, the most important in inter-war Poland, was dominated by homosexual men. Such figures as the composer Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937), the writer Jaroslaw Iwaszkiewicz (1894-1980), the poets Boleslaw Lesmian (1877-1937) and Jan Lechon (1899-1956), as well as the novelists Tadeusz Breza (1905-1970), Jozef Czechowicz (1903-1939), and Witold Gombrowicz (1904-1969) demonstrated the strength of gay life in the Polish capital. However, most Poles looked down upon homosexuality as a perversion, an outlook encouraged by the conservative Roman Catholic hierarchy.

Communist Poland

In People's Poland, the Communists did not criminalize homosexual activity as Stalin had in the Soviet Union. A gay elite re-appeared: the most important figure in cultural politics, Jaroslaw Iwaszkiewicz, was joined by the novelists Jerzy Andrzejewski (1909-1983) and Julian Strykowski (1904-1996).

By the 1970s, cafés such as the Alhambra on al. Jerozolimskie, "Na trakcie" on ul. Krakowskie Przedmieście, the bar at the Ambassador on ul. Ujazdowskie, the café Antyczna on ul. Nowy Świat (opposite the pissoir on Plac Trzech Krzyży), and the washrooms at Warsaw's Central Station were popular cruising grounds. However, all press organs and cultural organizations were controlled by the Communist government, which did not permit homosexual expression or organizing. Moreover, the police kept detailed records on anyone suspected of homosexuality.

The first open discussion of Warsaw's homosexual underground arose from a 1981 article in the important Warsaw weekly, *Polityka*, connecting the need for greater tolerance with the importance of controlling the spread of AIDS. By permitting the publication of this article, the Communists seemed to be opening the door to greater tolerance for homosexuality. Indeed, beginning in the autumn of 1983, the periodical *Relax* permitted classified ads for encounters between gay men.

The first article from the point of view of a gay male appeared in *Polityka* in 1985: its author, Dariusz Prorok, described in vivid detail the dominant society's treatment of gay people. Despite such openings, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the police continued to collect records on homosexuals, using the need to control venereal disease as the excuse to launch Operation Hyacinth in November 1985.

During this operation, the police picked up hundreds of gay men at work, school, and home, interrogated them, and attempted to blackmail them into collaboration. Ironically, the first attempts at establishing a gay movement were linked to these mass arrests, including the appearance of the first (and last) issue of a Warsaw gay newspaper, *Efebos*, in June 1987.

Democratic Poland

With the return of democracy in 1989, Warsaw's gay community established its own organization, "Lambda," in October 1989; the Provincial court in Warsaw officially registered this body in February 1990. The first gay campaign for tolerance, "Love, don't kill" [*Kochaj, nie zabijaj*], took place that spring, with the publication and distribution of safe sex pamphlets and the establishment of a confidential telephone line.

Warsaw's Pink Service began to publish the English-language "Warsaw Gay News" in September 1990, and Warsaw soon had three more gay monthlies: *Men*, *OKAY*, and *Gayzeta--Nie? Tak?*. The city's first gay demonstration took place in 1993 on Valentine's Day, when Lambda Warsaw passed out brochures that insisted on the equal value of love, whether it be homosexual or heterosexual.

In 1994, Lambda Warsaw held a press conference to release its "Report on the discrimination for reasons of sexual orientation in Poland" [*Raport o dyskryminacji ze względu na orientację w Polsce*]. For the first time in Polish history, discrimination against gays and lesbians was formally documented.

On June 17, 1995, the first official celebration of gay pride took place in Warsaw at the student pub "Giovanni." During the 1995 election campaign, the successful Social Democratic candidate for president, Aleksander Kwasniewski, publicly appealed for support from gay and lesbian voters.

Although the Roman Catholic Church condemns homosexuality and opposes all efforts to attain the slightest acceptance, it could not stop Warsaw's gay movement. Józef Cardinal Glemp, Archbishop of Warsaw and Primate of Poland, publicly condemned homosexuality, blaming it for the fall of the Roman Empire. Pope John Paul II, the first Polish head of the Roman Catholic Church, also decried the adoption of children by gay couples and the introduction of gay marriages.

In 1994, a group of gay Christians--*Grupa Lesbijek i Gejow Chrzescijan w Warszawie*--was established to engage in dialogue with the church hierarchy and to integrate gays and lesbians into the life of the church. However, such overtures have been met with silence.

Warsaw Today

Warsaw now has a large network of gay organizations, bars, dance clubs, and saunas. Lambda Warsaw is the largest and most active gay group in Poland. The Warsaw monthly *Nowy Men* is the predominant gay periodical in Poland. Despite the favorable legal situation, the Roman Catholic opposition to gay rights shapes national attitudes, holding back the progress of Warsaw's gay and lesbian community. Most of Warsaw's gays and lesbians are still in the closet.

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About the Author

John D. Stanley is an independent scholar who has lived in Toronto since 1971 and specializes in the history of Poland, particularly during the Enlightenment. He received the Ph.D. from the University of Toronto and has published in such journals as *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism and Canadian Slavonic Papers*. He contributed two articles to *Who's Who in Gay and Lesbian History: From Antiquity to World War II* (2001).