The European post-war gay and lesbian movement.
/Oosterhuis, Harry; Hekma, Gert; Duyvendak, Jan-Willem. In: Homologie, Vol. 16, No. 4, 1994, p. 22-28.

After the leading homosexual movement in Germany and its branches in surrounding countries had been wiped out by Nazism, gay emancipation had to make a fresh start after World War II. Succeeding to homosexual journals published in Weimar Germany, *Der Kreis* (The Circle, 1933-1967), was exceptional in surviving the war in Switzerland. In the 1950s this international cultural journal, which was edited by Karl Meier and could only be obtained by subscribing, appeared in German as well as in French and English.

For homosexual men and women in Europe, the late 1940s and the 1950s were a period of repression. Male homosexual behaviour was still criminalized in several countries such as in Great Britain (until 1967), West- and East-Germany (until 1969 and 1968), Austria (until 1971), Finland (until 1971), Ireland and Russia (both until 1993). In some countries, like the Netherlands, the age of consent for homosexuals was higher than that for heterosexuals. In Great Britain and West-Germany (where the strict nazi-law on homosexuality remained in place) the number of prosecutions for homosexual offences and 'public indecency' even increased compared to the prewar period. After two homosexual spies, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean had been exposed in England, homosexuals were sometimes targeted as scapegoats against the background of the Cold War. The media generally reinforced the moral consensus by caricaturing homosexuals as immoral corrupters, effeminate and potential or actual traitors. They had to live a double life and could only express themselves in the underground subculture.

Before the 1960s, reformist organisations advocating equal rights for homosexuals had to operate cautiously and discretely in order not to offend authorities and public opinion. Most successful was the Dutch COC (*Cultuur- en Ontspanningscentrum*, Cultural and Recreational Centre) founded in 1946. Approaching leading figures in politics and civil society, this lobby-organisation tried to advance social acceptance, while at the same time providing support and recreation to individual homosexual men and women. In its strategy, the COC was typical for homophile organisations which were founded in Denmark (1948), West-Germany (1949), Sweden (1951), Belgium (1954), France (1954) and Great Britain (1958). Upholding a political neutral stance and endorsing dominant social values, they tried to improve the public image of homosexuals: they were represented as law-abiding and respectable citizens and, apart from their sexual orientation, not different from heterosexuals. In the early 1950s, the COC took the initiative to establish the *International Committee for Sexual Equality*, in which several national organisations participated and which organized some international conferences. In the early 1960s, however, this committee withered away, mainly because most national organisations were barely surviving.

In the second half of the 1960s homosexual movements in Europe received new impetus. Social attitudes towards homosexuality began to change, not so much because of the impact of homosexual activism, but more as a consequence of a gradual relaxation of the moral climate in Western-European welfare states. Religious and bourgeois moral codes began to crumble as a result of the postwar period of economic growth and increasing affluence. Possibilities for geographical and social mobility were expanding and facilitated more individual freedom and alternative lifestyles. Changes in the pattern of family life and the growing provision of contraception advanced a shift from procreation to relational affection and pleasure as important aspects of sexuality. Around 1960 more and more professionals, politicians and clergymen began to doubt the effects of the criminalization and suppression of homosexuality, and some of them started to argue for a more compassionate and humanitarian attitude. In England the publication of the *Report of the Wolfenden Committee* in 1957, proposing the decriminalization of homosexual relations between consenting adults in private, was a milestone, although this was realized only ten years later. At the same time, in the Netherlands, catholic and protestant clergymen and psychiatrists argued that homosexuals should be accepted for the sake of social justice and humanitarian values. Progressive Christians contributed to a redefinition of social values, which laid the foundation for the reputation of the Netherlands as a tolerant nation.

In the newly emerging welfare states, especially in Great Britain, West-Germany, and the Benelux and Scandinavian countries, a rapid growth took place in professional mental health care and social work. The sociopsychological approach questioned not only traditional legal and religious attitudes, but also medical perspectives. More and more, homosexuality was no longer considered as sinful, criminal or pathological, but as a more or less unfortunate condition that deserved compassion and acceptance. This perspective marked a fundamental change in social policy: whereas before the 1960s homosexuals had been labelled as abnormal and as such excluded from the healthy and virtuous body of society, now professional strategies were directed towards integration and normalization.

After 1965 in several Western-European countries liberal reforms in the field of family and sexuality were introduced. Only France under de authoritarian Gaullist government lagged behind. The most important legal reforms with regard to homosexuality took place in England and Wales (1967) and in West-Germany (1969). Much publicity was given to the issue in these countries and decriminalisation stimulated homosexual self-organisation. Next to the appearance of new homosexual journals and the rise of a commercial subculture in cities such as London, Amsterdam, West-Berlin and Hamburg, more radical gay groups began to manifest themselves.

The early 1970s were a turning-point in European gay emancipation. The reformist homophile associations which had stressed the need for moderation, discretion and respectability, were superseded by more radical and militant gay organisations. Like the American Gay Liberation Front, which sprang up after the Stonewall riots in New York, they advocated openness, defiance, gay pride and self-activity, and linked personal development with political activism. Gay and lesbian liberationist organisations came to the fore in Great Britain, West Germany, Italy, France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Although inspiration and rhetoric were borrowed from American examples, all of them were also rooted in the specific national situations and traditions. The British Gay Liberation Front was influenced by the Counter Culture and New Left, and it also drew ideological concepts from radical feminism. In France the revolutionary climate of 1968 gave birth to the *Comité d'Action Pédérastique Révolutionnaire* (Committee for Revolutionary Faggot Action) and 1971 saw the establishment of the *Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire* (FHAR, Gay Front of Revolutionary Action), which on its turn influenced the development of gay liberation fronts in Belgium and Italy (FUORI: *Frente Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano*, Italian United Front of Revolutionary Gays). All of these movements were dominated by students and radical leftist activists. The more the political climate which they faced was antagonistic in terms of rightist versus leftist or conservative and religious versus liberal (as in France and Italy), the more homosexual liberation was presented as revolutionary. In these Mediterranean countries, with their rather rigid gender norms and machismo, the attack on normalcy took the form of a celebration of 'inversion': 'our assholes are revolutionary', wrote Guy Hocquenghem, one of the founders of the FHAR.

In Germany the provocative film *Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers, sondern die Situation in der er lebt* (Not the homosexual is perverted but the situation in which he lives, 1971) directed by Roso von Praunheim gave occasion to several local activist groups, like the *Homosexuelle Aktion Westberlin* (Homosexual Action West-Berlin), which was Marxist in orientation. In the Netherlands already in the late 1960s radical student groups defied the reformist COC, followed in the 1970s by the libertarian *Flikkerfront* (Faggot Front) and *Rooie Flikkers* (Red Faggots), and radical lesbian-feminist groups. The COC, which adapted its policy to the new trend – the program of integration by means of adaptation was replaced by integration through confrontation – survived the wave of radical activism, whereas the older organisations and journals (such as the French *Arcadie*, the German/Swiss *Der Kreis* and the Danish *Vennen*) in other countries, disappeared.

In the 1970s, the growth of gay activism in Western-Europe was accompanied by fragmentation. Internal conflicts about the priority of individual consciousness-raising and cultural activities versus collective political activism and lobbying, about strategies (integration versus separatism), and about feminism, transvestism, paedophilia and sadomasochism, resulted in dispersal. At the same time increasing specialisation and

institutional integration took place: gay groups sprang up in political parties, churches, trade unions, and universities. European cooperation was advanced by the *International Gay Association* founded in 1978 and annual gay parades started in several cities from the late 1970s on. Although most radical gay liberation groups were small and short-lived, they had a substantial impact on homosexuals themselves and on society. In addition to the expansion of the gay community and the pleasure-oriented subculture, homosexuality had become more visible. More and more the idea gained ground that not homosexuality in itself, but the dominant heterosexual culture was the problem. In countries such as the Netherlands and Denmark the struggle for anti-discrimination laws began.

Differences between European countries, however, were still considerable, not only between the North and the South, but also between liberal-democratic Western-Europe and the communist Eastern part. With regard to the North-South gap – with France somewhere in between – the right-wing dictatorial regimes in Portugal, Spain and Greece as well as the strong position of the Catholic Church (and in Greece the Orthodox Church) hampered homosexual emancipation, as we can see in Ireland and Poland as well. Strict gender roles and the culture of machismo also troubled the development of strong gay identities and activism.

The example of France in the late 1970s and early 1980s shows the importance of the political context: the advance of the left and the election of Francois Mitterrand as president accelerated the development of more accepting attitudes among the French people and enabled legal reforms. Spain, which went through a wave of democratisation after dictator Franco's death, became more sexually liberal than Italy. The wavering of homosexual emancipation in (former) communist countries, even in largely atheist East-Germany and Hungary, also underlines the importance of the sociopolitical context: in Eastern-Europe decades of political repression and the absence of a democratic tradition and an effective civil society made a huge difference.

The divergent national responses to the Aids epidemic also underlines the dependence of homosexual emancipation on more general sociopolitical conditions. In the 1980s, Aids stirred a moral panic and right-wing backlashes in Great Britain, West Germany and France, which forced the gay movement in the defensive. In Great Britain police harassment and censorship were still not over and the Thatcher government tried to prohibit what it defined as 'intentionally promoting homosexuality' (the notorious Clause 28). At the same time, in the Benelux and Scandinavian countries, with political cultures oriented towards compromise, cooperation and pragmatism, the Aids crisis contributed to more public visibility and frankness, and hard-won rights were rather strengthened than endangered.

Literature

Girard, J., *Le movement homosexuel en France 1945-1980* (Paris, 1981).

Jeffery-Poulter, S., *Peers, Queers & Commons: The Struggle for Gay Law Reform from 1950 to the Present* (London, New York, 1991).

Oosterhuis, H., *Homoseksualiteit in katholiek Nederland: Een sociale geschiedenis* (Amsterdam, 1992).

Salmen, A. & Eckert, A., *20 Jahre bundesdeutsche Schwulenbewegung 1969-1989*. (Cologne, 1989).

Tielman, R., *Homoseksualiteit in Nederland: Studie van een emancipatiebeweging* (Meppel, Amsterdam, 1982).

Weeks, J., *Coming out: Homosexual Politics in Britain, from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London, Melbourne, New York, 1977).