Lesson Two: Backgrounder

What Is the LGBT Purge?

Between the 1950s and mid-1990s, 2SLGBTQI+ members of the Canadian Armed Forces, the RCMP and the federal public service were systematically discriminated against, harassed and often fired as a matter of official government policy. In what came to be known as the "LGBT Purge," people were followed, interrogated, abused and traumatized under the guise that being queer made a person a national security threat.

The LGBT Purge was implemented at the highest levels of the Government of Canada and was carried out with callous disregard for the dignity, privacy and humanity of its victims. With its roots in the Cold War, the Canadian Government's LGBT Purge continued for over 40 years.

An estimated 9,000 lives were devastated over those years, and the irreparable psychological trauma continues to this day. The careers and self-esteem of a generation of young people were destroyed; victims were denied benefits, severance, pensions and opportunities for promotion if they managed to keep their jobs. This shameful period in Canadian history also resulted in suicide, fear, depression, PTSD, addiction, disownment, criminalization, rejection, isolation, erasure and many other enduring and painful experiences.

The Cold War

When the Second World War ended in 1945, Europe lay in ruins. The Soviet Union and the United States emerged as the world's two superpowers. They became locked in a confrontation known as the Cold War. The Soviet Union sought to spread its systems of communism and socialism globally. The United States, Canada and other Western allies resisted Soviet expansion. They wanted to promote their own systems of democracy and capitalism around the world. In tense moments, the Cold War threatened to turn hot, with potential for another world war.

Tensions mounted as both countries raced to develop and stockpile nuclear weapons. During the Cold War, Soviet spy-rings were detected in Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States. This created fears that disloyal civil servants might be spying for the Soviet state. The United States government developed strict screening processes to ensure trustworthy public servants. It was believed that queer employees would be prime targets for Soviet agents. The government falsely held that queer people could be pressured to give away state secrets to avoid exposing their sexuality. The solution? They would have to be purged from positions within government.

Photo: U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command, public domain

Profile:

Frank Kameny

Frank Kameny was fired from his job as an astronomer for the US Army Map Service in 1957 for being gay. He devoted many years of his life to trying to get his job back. In 1960, he co-founded the Mattachine Society of Washington, DC, which campaigned for gay rights. In 1965, Kameny organized the first gay rights protest in front of the White House. In 1975, he helped Leonard Matlovich, a Sergeant in the US Air Force who was also fired for being gay. Matlovich sued for reinstatement. The Air Force settled out of court. On June 29, 2009, the US government formally apologized to Kameny. Kameny's home in Washington is designated as a Washington, D.C., historic landmark.

Lavender Scare

American leaders worried that queer civil servants could be forced to reveal state secrets. The belief was that Soviet agents could threaten to expose their sexuality. Queer workers were falsely assumed to be deceptive and unreliable. As a result, they were blocked from employment. Other Western nations adopted similar programs of discrimination. Senator Joseph McCarthy stated that homosexuality "led people toward communism." Many politicians viewed both communists and queers as threats to American values.

Pre-Purged

Historically, the federal government usually hired white, cisgender, heterosexual men. Later, some positions opened to cisgender, mostly white women. The government seldom hired people from Indigenous communities and visible minorities. They were "pre-Purged." In other words, they were not offered employment in the first place and experienced racism.

LGBT Purge

Canada typically fell in line with American defence policies. When the United States government called "homosexuals" a security threat, Ottawa had to respond. This meant removing queer workers from sensitive government positions. Otherwise, Canada could lose valuable defence contracts with American companies. It also risked losing agreements with NATO agencies to share information.

The LGBT Purge was implemented at the highest levels of the Government of Canada and was carried out with callous disregard for the dignity, privacy and humanity of its victims. Between the 1950s and mid-1990s, LGBT members of the Canadian Armed Forces, the RCMP and the federal public service were systematically discriminated against, harassed and often fired as a matter of policy and sanctioned practice.

The military opened many positions to women in the 1970s and 1980s. But women who joined drew attention from the Special Investigations Unit (SIU). Despite working in a masculine field, they were expected to behave and dress according to feminine standards. If women worked with heavy machinery or played softball, they were often suspected of being lesbians. And lesbians were more likely than gay men to be harassed, investigated and discharged.

Both men and women who were affected by the Purge fought back against the injustice. Across the same decades that the Purge continued, 2SLGBTQI+ individuals and communities took part in a growing resistance.

LGBT Purge Fund members at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in 2024. Photo: Ian McCausland, CMHR

Profile:

Douglas Sanders

The Association for Social Knowledge (ASK) was the first Canadian gay rights organization, formed in 1964 in Vancouver, British Columbia. The group created a social and political network for both gays and lesbians at the time. Douglas Sanders was the second president of ASK and was a human rights lawyer. In 1968, he made a submission to the Royal Commission on Security, arguing against denying government jobs for gays and lesbians. In 1992, Sanders was the first out gay man to speak at a United Nations Conference.

Photo: City of Vancouver Archives, 2018-020.2751

Profile:

We Demand Protest

The first large-scale gay rights demonstration in Canada occurred on August 28, 1971, in Ottawa, with a parallel rally in Vancouver. The protest included a list of demands for gay and lesbian rights, including an end to the LGBT Purge.

Photo: Jearld Moldenhauer

Pride Week event in Toronto, in 1973. Photo: Jearld Moldenhauer

LGBT Purge Survivors Going Public

Profile:

Gloria Cameron

After eight years in the military, Gloria Cameron was interrogated for nine hours about her sexuality. She was released from the military in 1977. After grieving her case, she was told that she might corrupt younger service members. Cameron was so outraged that she publicized her case through the CBC and other media outlets.

Profile:

Barbara Thornborrow

In May 1977, Barbara Thornborrow was interrogated about her sexual identity. She was given the choice to confess and be discharged or see a psychiatrist to alter her sexuality. She refused both. Instead, Thornborrow told her story to news outlets to expose the reasons for being purged.

Profile:

Jacques Gallant

Jacques Gallant served seven years in the military when he was dismissed as a "sexual deviate." He became the first queer service member to appeal his discharge in federal court. Although he didn't succeed, his case was covered in the gay liberation press.