

# Back to 1992, When Being Gay Was Still a Crime

By [Alexander Belenky](#)

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Foreign tourists and locals gather at the Mayak club on Galernaya Ulitsa during a gay pride event held on a warm June evening back in 1992. **Alexander Belenky**

ST. PETERSBURG — It was a long time ago, at the beginning of the 1990s. It was a wild, difficult time, but a time that was of great interest to photographic journalists because entirely new, incredible subjects, previously banned and impossible to cover, were opening up.

I worked back then at a youth newspaper, Smena, and I was always on the lookout for interesting subjects for photo reports. My colleagues Felix Titov and Alexei Danichev and I had found out that the club Mayak, on Krasnaya Ulitsa (now Galernaya Ulitsa), would be holding something of a closed evening that would be, we were told, "not for everyone." There was to be a "pink and blue" festival (the Russian word for blue, goluboi, also translates as gay), a gay pride event.

In recent years we've heard a lot about the holding of gay parades, although at present it seems we're unlikely to see one in the near future. But back in 1992, when homosexual acts were still crimes, just such a parade was held in St. Petersburg. I'd like to leave aside the debates about the rights and wrongs of this — here we're talking about photography.

And so, on a warm June evening in 1992, on the eve of the event, we were in Felix Titov's photography studio drinking beer. Through the window the White Nights were in full swing, and I was already in a hurry to go and photograph the festival: "Guys, come on, it's time! Let's go! It's already 8 p.m.! We'll be late ..."

"No," replied the experienced Titov, refilling our beer glasses. "It's still early. Things will really get started after midnight ..."

And he was right. Arriving at the club on Galernaya Ulitsa around midnight, we saw that the fun was only just beginning. There were lots of people, they were all a little tipsy, but they were all smiling and happy. We met many foreign tourists who'd come to St. Petersburg to have some fun during the White Nights. Everyone was friendly and very relaxed about us taking photographs. First there was a concert, then a disco, and toward morning everyone spilled out onto the street and set off on a walk through the city by night.

We spent half the night looking through our viewfinders recording all this for the press — the festival, the gays and lesbians dancing at the disco, people hanging out in the corridors, in the street. I took a lot of shots — three whole rolls! And remember, this was in the pre-digital age, an era where you couldn't afford to shoot from the hip and be trigger-happy. You couldn't afford to leave a single shot to chance — I pored over each and every one of them, waiting for events to develop, for the moment, the right spot ... So throughout three rolls — which adds up to 108 shots — every single one was a masterpiece, or at worst a really great shot.

Back then, photo journalists had to develop their black-and-white film themselves. In little, cramped editorial lab-cages, we'd feed our exposed films into tanks and pour a developing solution over them. Each photographer had his own secret recipe. I was using a new concentrated developer that I'd made myself. I would dilute the solution — one part water, one part developing solution — and do a very subtle job developing the film, greatly increasing its sensitivity.

Arriving at the editorial offices that morning without having slept, I went into the cage-like lab, poured the concentrate into two tanks so that they were both half full, and prepared to dilute the developing solution by adding in water, before loading in the films. The shoot at the gay parade had been a dream; the shots were guaranteed to make waves when published. I was relishing the prospect of some great shots.

Having spoken for a minute, I turned off the light, loaded the films, in the darkness immersed them in the tanks and sealed the lids. The timer eventually went off, and I transferred the films into water, then into a fixing agent, then through a washer. Finally, impatiently, I unrolled the still wet films.

I broke out in a cold sweat — the films with the wonderful, scandalous shots had developed brilliantly, every detail in the shadows and light could be made out ... but only half of the shot. I'd simply forgotten to pour water into the tanks of concentrate, so only half the film had

developed — across its entire length.

Only what remained on the third film was fit to print.

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