

# Sexuality, Sexual Relations, Homosexuality

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## Summary

This article provides an international overview of the history of sexuality in the Great War, including (1) the venereal disease epidemic, prostitution, and expanding state surveillance of sexuality; (2) the war's effects on perceptions of intimacy and sexuality; and (3) the war's effects on sexual reform movements, particular the homosexual emancipation movement in Germany. While military authorities in both democratic and authoritarian societies tried to enforce hegemonic gender and sexual norms, the war fragmented and complicated soldiers' and civilians' perceptions of "normal" sexuality, which were transformed in response to the traumatic effects of total war.

## Table of contents

[1 Introduction](#)

[2 Sexual Crisis: Prostitution, Venereal Disease and Sexual Violence](#)

[3 Wartime Intimacy, Sexual Behavior and the Crisis of Masculinity](#)

[4 Homosexuality and Sex Reform Movements](#)

[5 Conclusion](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

## Introduction

Historians have recently turned their focus to the effects of the First World War on sexual behavior and perceptions of sexual norms and identities. As historian Dagmar Herzog observed, the First World War disrupted traditional social structures and created an environment in which men and women could explore new sexual experiences made possible by mass mobilization and separation from the restrictions imposed by traditional institutions.<sup>1</sup> As a result of this disruption of existing social structures, military and civil authorities in both democratic and authoritarian societies tried to control and monitor the behaviors of both soldiers and civilians, enforcing ideal "[masculine](#)" and "feminine" sexual behaviors in the context of militarization and the nation's interests. Ordinary men's and women's responses to medical, military and political efforts at control were complex. As historian [Christa Hämmerle](#) recently observed, it is difficult to uncover the degree to which hegemonic, militarized

conceptions of gender roles were accepted by the majority of soldiers who experienced the Great War.<sup>2</sup> While many soldiers and civilians reinforced hegemonic gender and sexual paradigms, the [total war](#) experience also led many to subvert, appropriate and distort prevailing norms.

The goal of this article is to provide an overview of both how authorities tried to control sexuality, and how men and women negotiated or responded to these controls. While many soldiers and civilians were traumatized by the war experience and perceived it as a damaging force in regards to gender roles and sexual norms, others saw the war as sexually liberating, allowing them to explore new behaviors or manifest existing, but previously hidden, identities. This article provides an overview of prevailing scholarship dealing with the history of sexuality in the Great War, comparing and contrasting international contexts. In addition, it offers a glimpse into primary sources, including [front newspapers](#) produced by German soldiers that provide evidence of how ordinary men perceived the sexual effects of the war. The first topic explored here is the impact of the [venereal disease](#) epidemic, [prostitution](#), and expanding surveillance of sexuality by military and civil authorities. Second, this article will analyze the war's impact on perceptions of intimacy and sexuality. This section emphasizes how the war altered perceptions of masculinity and contrasts hegemonic ideals with grass roots constructions of male sexuality. The final section explores the war's effects on sexual reform movements, particularly the homosexual emancipation movement in [Germany](#), which provides a useful framework for analyzing how sexual minorities simultaneously challenged and adopted dominant gender paradigms in the wake of the war experience.

## Sexual Crisis: Prostitution, Venereal Disease and Sexual Violence

The war displaced families and created tremendous anxiety about sexual behavior on the home and combat fronts. Militaries and civil governments mobilized to cope with the reality of millions of sexually frustrated men at war. They also set up systems on the home fronts to monitor and control sexual infidelity of women who, as the war dragged on, were increasingly targeted either as infected threats to the health of fighting men, or disloyal, unpatriotic individuals who betrayed the nation. These anxieties intensified resentments and tensions between the two fronts, as private lives became subject to state surveillance and control.

Men and women were expected to be mutually bound by their service to their country, whether as loyal wives and mothers or warriors. Their sexual instincts were supposed to be suspended while both sexes dedicated their energies to fulfilling their mutual roles for the nation. Poems and feature articles in front newspapers, both those produced by military

officials and by soldiers, were filled with tributes to loyal women who, along with God and faith in the fatherland, gave men the psychological strength to fight bravely.<sup>3</sup> Women were expected to play an almost mythical role as sacred, waiting figures. [Australian newspapers](#) bolstered an image of women who, like those in ancient Greece, sent their men off to war without complaint or any mention of personal needs.<sup>4</sup> This image of the patient and loyal woman on the home front was supposed to serve as a fantasy for lonely soldiers, and military and civil authorities tried to reassure men that dreaming of idealized women at home provided enough sexual satisfaction.<sup>5</sup> In their [letters from the front](#), especially in the first year of the war, soldiers reinforced the home front's perception that they remained sexually "pure" while on the front lines, and they reassured their wives and girlfriends that "foreign" girls did not tempt them to stray.

The [propaganda](#) image of men as abstinent heroes dedicated to the nation was undermined by a crisis that served as a flashpoint for sexual tensions between combat and home fronts. The spread of venereal disease (VD) reflected the reality that sexual adventure proved to be a popular relief from the stress of the front for millions of men dislocated from home and distant from traditional social structures. Hospitals in cities like [Freiburg](#), Germany, where soldiers in transit to the front mixed with an ever-expanding market for prostitutes, overflowed with infected men and women to such a degree that beds for VD patients had to be set up in lecture halls and makeshift clinics.<sup>6</sup> In a March 1915 letter exchange with the state secretary of the interior, German Chancellor [Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg \(1856-1921\)](#) declared that the VD crisis had reached such an epic scale that it weakened the German army's fighting strength and required "an energetic state intervention" to protect against the disease's spread.<sup>7</sup>

Militaries organized systems to regulate sexual behavior. The German military organized a system of regulated brothels just behind the lines, with medical examinations of prostitutes. The French military also expanded a system of *maisons tolérées* (tolerated houses) where prostitution was carefully regulated. Doctors and government ministers in [France](#) advocated regular medical checks for soldiers and prostitutes to control the spread of disease, which, as one expert asserted, threatened to erode not only the fighting strength of the army, but also France's racial health.<sup>8</sup> The American military used posters in training camps to urge soldiers to remain "morally clean."<sup>9</sup> In Germany, men infected with VD on the home front were required to identify the women alleged to have transmitted the disease, and, revealing the degree to which women bore the brunt of punishment, suspect women were registered as prostitutes.<sup>10</sup>

Military authorities generally saw soldiers' sexual activity and search for relief as a natural instinct that could not be negated, but had to be managed. The Austro-Hungarian military, for example, saw soldiers who sought sexual relationships as perfectly normal, while women who became prostitutes were perceived as temptresses who caused this crisis.<sup>11</sup> Catholic authorities in [Austria-Hungary](#) lay the blame for the sexual crisis on the rise in prostitution, and women were perceived as immoral, while the proliferation of male sexual instincts was seen as excusable in the context of war.<sup>12</sup> This perception of men as more sexually aggressive also had a racial dimension. For example, French police saw [African American soldiers](#) as more sexually promiscuous and more difficult to control.<sup>13</sup>

Sex was rationed as the military attempted to take control of human sexuality.<sup>14</sup> Civilian organizations in Germany, including the German Center for Youth Welfare (*Deutsche Zentrale für Jugendfürsorge*), called on the Bavarian War Ministry to organize regular medical examinations for prostitutes, isolate and treat men with VD, and educate soldiers on how to avoid infection.<sup>15</sup> The Baden-Württemberg and Prussian administered armies also mobilized VD prevention campaigns by early 1915. The Prussian War Ministry organized lectures for soldiers on the potential consequences of alcohol abuse, which doctors argued led to higher rates of infection as drunken men were less likely to abstain from visiting prostitutes.<sup>16</sup> French morality crusaders also denounced the proliferation of alcohol at the front as the trigger for sexual degeneration. In 1915, François Dulom wrote a study of prostitution that attacked the "dealers of liquor and beer" for the proliferation of sexual immorality that "poisoned" France's fighting strength.<sup>17</sup> In [Italy](#), The Humanitarian Society of Milan linked rising alcohol consumption to escalating sexual promiscuity, and social commentators tried to curtail drinking in an effort to control youth.<sup>18</sup> When the [United States](#) entered the war in 1917, the American Progressive movement quickly saw the war as both a threat to morality and an opportunity for expanding social control. The US War Department set up a commission that encouraged soldiers to "armor" themselves against the temptations of alcohol and sexual infidelity, and the government set up workshops for soldiers in stateside barracks to prepare them before being shipped to France.<sup>19</sup>

Even more aggressive than the German and French efforts to combat the scourge of VD, the British civil government shifted its focus from prostitutes to all women. Historian [Susan Grayzel](#) demonstrated that in contrast to French and Belgian portrayals of women as victims of sexual predators, British women on the home front were widely perceived as the aggressors who threatened the health and survival of the nation with their immoral conduct. The British Contagious Disease Act contained added provisions that targeted any women who

infected members of the armed forces with VD for criminal prosecution.<sup>20</sup> This was partly in response to the proliferation of “khaki fever,” where young women flirted with soldiers on the streets of London, leading government officials to label them “amateur prostitutes.” Most upsetting to authorities was the fact that women were openly initiating sexual relationships with men. Police in [Britain](#) struggled to identify the expanding number of women whose behavior got them labeled as prostitutes, yet who had no pre-war criminal record. While the number of alleged prostitutes, in particular in urban areas flooded with men in uniform, expanded exponentially during the war, the rate of arrests actually went down as police, sympathetic towards soldiers who felt entitled to sexual adventure, turned a blind eye to the commercial sex industry.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to Britain, the [French wartime government](#), while it continued to regulate prostitution as it had before the war, did not add legal provisions for attacking women with venereal diseases.<sup>22</sup> Brothels in [Russia](#) were also regulated, but the Tsar’s police were unable to reduce the number of women and teenagers who became amateur street prostitutes as economic crisis drove them to desperation.<sup>23</sup>

Despite military assurances that they were in control of male sexual behavior, medical and civilian interest groups considered these programs for regulating sex to be counter to national values. Moral crusaders made a concerted effort in soldiers’ media to promote what they regarded as the best solution for coping with the sexual displacement of German soldiers and their families: abstinence. The idealized front fighter was supposed to be so focused on the nation’s survival and final victory that he did not require the solace or escape of sexual pleasure.<sup>24</sup> Front newspapers published articles by military doctors on the dangers of venereal disease that emphasized sexual control as a heroic ideal, necessary not only for the health of their families, but also the survival of the nation.<sup>25</sup>

British military authorities permitted their soldiers to visit the *maisons tolérées* in France, but they came increasingly under fire from civilian critics. The Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (AMSH) argued in Parliament in February 1918 that British men should not be given access to French brothels, and when the Undersecretary for War suggested that the brothels were a necessary evil, AMSH members countered that turning a blind eye to soldiers’ sexual promiscuity was inconsistent with prevailing views of masculinity that expected men to practice self-control and respect for women. Similarly, members of the French Union of Suffrage complained that the brothels were an affront to respectable women, and that while regulated sex may have helped contain disease, it contributed to the moral decay of men and women.<sup>26</sup>

While the military regulated sex and encouraged men to take prophylactic steps to prevent

the spread of VD, the home front tenaciously held on to the image of men as sexually “pure.” Morality crusaders were concerned that unless men remained abstinent, soldiers would suffer spiritual crisis and moral degradation that was just as threatening to the nation as the spread of venereal disease.<sup>27</sup> Civilian organizations advocated the shutting down of all bordellos and total sexual abstinence for soldiers. The German Band of the International Abolition Federation, led by middle-class women, complained to the Bavarian War Ministry that it was disappointing for women on the home front to hear that men who could not handle the stress of the front resorted to seeking comfort with prostitutes. The federation thus advocated a total prohibition on extramarital intercourse imposed on soldiers.<sup>28</sup> French doctors and civilian critics complained that the regulated brothel system, justified by the military as necessary for soldiers’ temporary sexual relief, was ultimately detrimental. [Louis Fiaux \(1847-1936\)](#), who wrote a study of soldiers’ sexual behavior, argued that the military-sanctioned brothels gave men greater possibilities for sexual infidelity than before the war. Other French doctors warned that otherwise innocent soldiers were corrupted by the brothels, where a single lapse would cause moral damage and shatter their ability to remain pious and loyal to wives in the future.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the military’s reassurances that it could manage the spread of infection through abstinence education and management of prostitution, the numbers of soldiers afflicted with VD escalated. By January 1915, medical experts in Germany estimated that the equivalent of an entire army corps had been stricken with syphilis and gonorrhea and rendered incapable of fighting.<sup>30</sup> In Berlin alone, over 1,000 soldiers in military hospitals were being treated for venereal diseases only three months after the war had broken out.<sup>31</sup> The military was overwhelmed. Soldiers desperately went to quack doctors for ineffective treatments, and unregulated bordellos continued to thrive near the front and in Germany’s cities. According to some moral reformers, prostitutes on the home front posed greater danger for soldiers than those on the combat front, as prostitutes at home were less regulated and thus more likely to be infected.<sup>32</sup>

As the front displaced millions of men from traditional social structures, it also corrupted women’s sexual lives, according to civilian critics. A representative from Düsseldorf’s Rhineland-Westphalia Prison Association wrote to the German government about the “moral damage” caused by the war, which resulted in skyrocketing numbers of women and girls falling into prostitution and contracting venereal diseases.<sup>33</sup> Women on the home fronts were widely perceived as more promiscuous, and authorities in Great Britain pointed to higher rates of illegitimate birth, generating a public crisis over “war babies,” who were allegedly the result of military men having brief affairs with women while on leave. The [British](#)

[government's](#) decision to provide state support for “war babies” represented an interesting double standard, as the government both fueled anxiety about moral decay and promiscuous women, while at the same time granting welfare for these women.<sup>34</sup>

War governments aggressively policed “immoral” behavior. German civilians were encouraged to place surveillance on women at home who were disloyal to their husbands, and police collected reports from neighbors who eagerly provided information to authorities about women who were perceived to betray not only their husbands, but also the nation.<sup>35</sup> Women who had relationships with [prisoners of war](#) were particularly vulnerable. Their names were printed in newspapers and they could face fines and jail.<sup>36</sup>

While French, British and German soldiers at the front eagerly sought sexual relief in the bordellos carefully regulated by their respective armies just behind the lines, soldiers on leave were horrified by what they perceived as the morally loose environment on the home front. French popular media was filled with images of the “Flirt 1914,” women who displayed greater sexual freedom, especially in urban scenes where the dislocation caused by war made it possible to explore spaces and behaviors that were once taboo. [Paul G eraldy \(1885-1983\)](#) popular war novel, *La Guerre, Madam (The War, Madam)*, depicted a soldier returning to Paris shocked by [war widows](#) who flaunted their sexuality and seemed more interested in their own material pleasures and gratification than the reality of the war.<sup>37</sup> French soldiers' newspapers also expressed resentment towards women enjoying themselves and seeking illicit sexual liaisons while their husbands sacrificed themselves at the front. These resentments intensified and further damaged relations between men and women as the traumatic experience of the war unfolded.

While French soldiers expressed resentment about women at home flaunting their sexuality, they were also incensed by reports of sexual violence inflicted by German soldiers on French women in occupied territories. [Rape](#) became a nationalized issue in the context of total war. In September 1914, the French government set up a commission, similar to government inquiries in Britain and [Belgium](#), to investigate reports of rape committed by German soldiers. Testimonies to the commission revealed the brutality of rape, as French women reported the humiliation and violence they suffered at the hands of the occupying army. As historian Ruth Harris demonstrated, the commissions reports often reveal little about women's psychological trauma, but rather uncover more about male-dominated police and political authorities who used these narratives to fuel nationalistic and cultural hatreds towards the German invaders. Rape victims received much more empathy than pre-war cases whose sexual honor was often questioned by society and the courts. During the war there was also more focus on the fear and outrage provoked by these crimes than on the individual victims

themselves. In propaganda illustrations of rape, stories often implicitly humiliated French husbands and spurred them on to fight more aggressively.<sup>38</sup> Rape narratives were used to justify the war. The British government tried to “market the war” and ultimately generated a gendered language about “just war,” as historian [Nicoletta F. Gullace](#) has argued, by reporting German [atrocities](#).<sup>39</sup> Similar to discourse on rape in France, the individual experiences of women were subsumed into the larger military and political agenda of motivating men to join the army and defend the nation’s, and in turn women’s, honor.

Sex and race intersected in conflicts over colonial soldiers called to fight for Britain and France in the wake of manpower shortages. As [Santanu Das](#) argued, “the war upset the traditional colonial relation between race and gender.”<sup>40</sup> Reversing the typical imperialist dynamic in which white imperialists had access to African and Asian women, huge populations of non-white soldiers, desperately needed by white imperialists to win the war, lived in Europe and started relationships with white women. In France, for example, resentment and violence grew against Vietnamese and African soldiers. Conflict erupted when men from colonial populations pursued relationships with French women, and white French soldiers, incensed over racial mixing and the perceptions that they were being “betrayed” by white women while “real Frenchman” fought at the front, harassed and attacked colonial soldiers.<sup>41</sup> African American troops who arrived in France in the last months of the war also faced racism as the French police monitored interactions between these US soldiers and white French women.<sup>42</sup> The reactions of white men in the face of racially mixed relationships reflected the deep insecurities about a disruption in the racial and sexual order.

## Wartime Intimacy, Sexual Behavior and the Crisis of Masculinity

The psychological strains placed on men in the trenches created an ever-expanding chasm between the combat and home fronts, despite efforts to maintain ties. In their letters home, men tended to reinforce prevailing masculine ideals and commented little on their sexual experiences. Men often appealed to their wives and girlfriends to provide them emotional support. The French military organized letter exchanges between soldiers and [marraine de guerre](#) (“war godmothers”), who out of patriotism corresponded with soldiers to provide this emotional support and, though it was officially taboo, sometimes the promise of sexual availability.<sup>43</sup> According to historian [Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau](#), these letters and care packages from the home front were a vital emotional lifeline for French soldiers.

Despite post-war memories of “[comradeship](#)” as the essential foundation for soldiers’



psychological survival, men continued to rely on women for emotional support. Though men often censored themselves in their correspondence with women and found it difficult to convey the experience of mass violence or describe the war's deeper effects, they did not cut off their emotional ties with women on the home front. Indeed, men did not simply rely on "comradeship," but rather their letters home reveal that many actually intimated feelings of vulnerability and became increasingly emotionally dependent on their wives and girlfriends.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, as the war dragged on, the heartfelt longing for the home front could easily collapse into disillusionment when men perceived women as not sharing the sacrifices or not remaining emotionally and sexually loyal to their men at the front.<sup>45</sup> Studies of British soldiers' letters reveal that they imagined a strict dichotomy between a sense of martial masculinity, which entailed selfless devotion to the fatherland, and the loyal woman, who showed her dedication to the nation by supporting her soldier husband through the lifeline of the mail. At the same time, men also grew resentful of women for not sharing the horrifying realities of war.<sup>46</sup>

Mass media on the home fronts fed anxieties about women's sexuality with stories about women who were sexually out of control. The image of the sexually independent woman who smoked in public and asserted greater economic power became a target of conservative critics who saw female sexuality as a threat to men fighting at the front. Women countered allegations that the "new" woman was disloyal, and they protested the double-standard in which societies turned a blind eye to male sexual behavior while women endured heightened scrutiny. In 1916, French feminist [Marguerite de Witt-Schlumberger \(1853-1920\)](#) called for a single moral standard in response to the relaxed morals that came in time of war. This included sexual restraint not only for women, but also men. Women criticized the permissiveness enjoyed by men who were away from home. In 1917 the French National Council of Women brought attention to English soldiers who circulated "pornographic" rumors about loose French women. In this way, women tried to shift the blame for moral decline on sexually deviant soldiers.<sup>47</sup>

As tensions between men and women escalated, sex became, as some soldiers observed, more "mechanical" and unfulfilling. One of the most interesting critics of the "mechanization" of love and sex was a German front soldier named [Paul Göhre \(1864-1928\)](#), a socially progressive former Lutheran pastor who joined the [Social Democratic Party](#) in 1900.<sup>48</sup> At the age of fifty-one, he volunteered to fight on the Russian front in 1915, witnessing firsthand the traumatic violence of the trenches. Göhre argued that the prewar gender and sexual order had been substantially changed by the war experience. One of the overarching effects of the war that affected both men and women, Göhre observed, was the hardening and even

deadening of emotions resulting from pain experienced in the face of mass violence. For women, the loss of loved ones at the front meant that feelings of happiness were replaced with the need to survive, bitterness, disappointment, and feelings of an unfulfilled life. The stress of war changed women's "inner nature," turning them into "torn (*zerrissenen*) beings." Even women whose husbands survived expressed feeling coldness and antipathy towards men as a result of years of isolation and fear on the home front.<sup>49</sup>

Göhre also found that the war created a "new class of men" whose psychological scars altered their relationships with the opposite sex. The war made sex between men and women an impersonal, cold experience. Instead of forming fulfilling, spiritual bonds, both men and women had become more interested in simply relieving the stress of the war, and promiscuous sex became a means to this end. Sex simply for instinctual, rather than spiritual, fulfillment also governed women's behaviors. Even for women, who Göhre expected to defend the sacredness of sexual relations, sex had become "impersonal."<sup>50</sup>

As emotional connections with women were strained, men sought other paths of support. Front newspapers depicted men who were loyal comrades and devoted to the nation. But soldiers who wrote in these newspapers also expressed fantasies about gender transgression, disillusionment with the emotionally stifling expectations of the masculine ideal, and desires for nurturing and love, even with other men. Recently, historians studying front newspapers have emphasized the predominance of a hegemonic masculine image defined against the deviant, effeminate male "other."<sup>51</sup> However, men writing for front newspapers, especially the frontline trench newspapers, also mocked the hegemonic masculine image and explored new emotions and behaviors, even those deemed "effeminate" and "deviant." They portrayed loving other men as a desirable and acceptable component of the front experience. As historian Thomas Kühne has argued, men celebrated the "softer" side of comradeship, including bonds of love and friendship that sustained them in the other-worldly environment of the trenches.<sup>52</sup> Seeking emotional support, including love and tenderness, men "replaced" women by taking on feminine roles, emotionally and even sexually. Soldiers' newspapers depicted men acting as surrogate women in a variety of ways, including building a domestic sphere at the front. However, front soldiers did not just want to emulate missing women for psychological and emotional relief. They also fantasized about escaping their male gender roles and expectations by changing genders.

Images of a cross-dressing man or woman became widely visible in the dislocation caused by total war. However, the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable crossing of boundaries were carefully defined by medical and military authorities. As historian Rainer Herrn has documented, doctors carefully distinguished between different types of

transvestite behaviors and the boundaries between what they perceived as threatening or benign to the military and society. Doctors specifically identified transvestites with effeminate, homosexual constitutions as problematic. For example, German psychiatrist [Kurt Mendel \(1874-1946\)](#) asserted in “War Observations” published in the *Neurologischen Zentralblatt* (*Central Paper of Neurology*) that transvestism alone was not a reason for judging men unfit for military service. Mendel specifically warned that homosexual transvestites who possessed “severe nervous disturbances rooted in psychopathic tendencies” could potentially corrupt their comrades by tempting them towards same-sex love.<sup>53</sup>

When otherwise heterosexual comrades dressed as women in the context of entertainment, military authorities tolerated this as a temporary act of relief from the stress of war. Theater groups, for example, regularly dressed men as women to comedic effect. Soldiers performed plays for wounded comrades just behind the lines, and these were enthusiastically embraced by the military as good for morale. But front newspapers contained numerous articles by soldiers who suggested playing with new gender roles stemmed from more than just the need for entertainment. They offered poems and [cartoons](#) in which they fantasized about taking on feminine characteristics like love and nurturing. Such a fantasy of gender crossing can be found in a poem titled “We poor men!” in the German front newspaper *Der Flieger* (*The Flyer*). In the poem, sergeant Nitsche psychologically escaped the trenches by imagining that he is a woman. Lamenting the images of bombed-out landscapes and the tedium of military drill, Nitsche envied women’s “sweet smiles” and beauty and reflected: “We poor, poor men are so completely wicked. I wish I were a girl. I wish I weren’t a man! [...] If only I were bedecked with curls, with stockings á la jour, I would charm a lieutenant, and I’d dance an extra round.”<sup>54</sup> Dreaming of cooking wonderful meals and gracefully moving about – “My breasts would arch themselves as I waltz about in high heels” – Nitsche ended the poem with: “For a long time I could kiss the entire company, and I would certainly not absorb the fragrances that come out of the frying pan – Oh, if I only were a girl, why am I a man?!”<sup>55</sup> Nitsche’s poem reflected a humorous fantasy of a charming woman serving soldiers and providing them relief from their stressful environment. He imagined that he could be a better comrade as a woman, providing love and comfort to men who needed it.

## Homosexuality and Sex Reform Movements

The front experience profoundly influenced the way many homosexual men imagined their masculine identities and perceived themselves in German society. Many homosexual veterans sanctified the image of martial masculinity and contested the exclusively heterosexual nature of militarized masculinity. They appropriated militarized, nationalistic

ideals of comradeship to counter stereotypes that they were effeminate social outsiders. Homosexual men used their war experience to promote an image of homosexuals as hyper-masculine warriors, which they hoped would provide the key to social assimilation and allow them to overturn laws that criminalized sexual relations between men. Homosexual veterans also perceived the front experience as a means of emotional and psychological liberation. By destigmatizing the outward display of emotions like love and compassion, soldiers created a space in which men could normalize and humanize “deviant” homosocial and homosexual inclinations and prove that they were not a deviant threat to the fatherland, but rather patriotic soldiers who were proficient with the emotions that were essential to the nation’s survival.

Germany saw the emergence of one of the world’s first homosexual rights movements. Scientists in imperial Germany first started to define people who desired same-sex relations, “homosexuals,” as biologically determined beings. New scientific conceptions of sexuality fused with the rise of urban subcultures and political activism became the basis for a vibrant emancipation movement.<sup>56</sup> However, it was a fragmented movement, with competing organizations that embraced diverse scientific, cultural and political views on homosexual identity and society. One of the first homosexual rights organizations was the *Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee* (WhK, Scientific-Humanitarian Committee), founded in 1897 by Dr. [Magnus Hirschfeld \(1868-1935\)](#) and his colleagues. Hirschfeld, a doctor, publisher and supporter of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), saw the WhK in the context of other movements for social reform and civil rights in imperial Germany. One of the group’s main goals was the dismantling of Paragraph 175, the law that criminalized sex between men.<sup>57</sup> Hirschfeld argued that homosexual men constituted a “third sex.” He perceived homosexuals as a unique minority, a sexual intermediary with a partially female constitution that deserved both further scientific research and protection under the law.<sup>58</sup>

The WhK’s interpretation of homosexuality was rigorously challenged by an organization founded by [Adolf Brand \(1874-1945\)](#) in 1903, the *Gemeinschaft der Eigenen* (GdE, Community of the Self-Owned).<sup>59</sup> An iconoclastic former teacher in Berlin who expressed both anarchistic and *völkisch* (nationalistic) rhetoric, Brand began publishing the journal *Der Eigene* (*The Self-Owned* or *The Unique One*) in 1896. *Der Eigene* was designed as a forum for male culture that celebrated *Freundesliebe* (love of friends) as interpreted through a revival of ancient Greek celebrations of the male body and mind.<sup>60</sup> Brand and his colleagues in the GdE sharply attacked what they saw as Hirschfeld’s “effeminate” classification of homosexuals. Brand’s GdE envisioned an all-male utopia, or at least a society in which women were kept in their place as mothers and servants.<sup>61</sup> Homosexuals were, in Brand’s

estimation, ultra-masculine and culturally superior to heterosexuals in their quality of refinement.<sup>62</sup> Despite their opposing theoretical and political perspectives, Hirschfeld and Brand shared one goal: dismantling of Paragraph 175 and bringing an end to the persecution of homosexual men.

The plight of homosexual men in the imperial German army became a central site in battles over the implementation of Paragraph 175 and attempts to integrate homosexuals into German society. The war also created a new framework for constructing sexual identity and envisioning the status of homosexual men in society. Like other minorities in Germany, homosexual men saw military service as an opportunity to prove their patriotism and integration into the social fabric. Brand's GdE largely suspended its publications as many of its members, including Brand, entered military service. Hirschfeld counseled homosexual male soldiers and transvestite women, many of whom sought his advice on how to pass as heterosexual men by suppressing effeminate characteristics. Hirschfeld mobilized the WhK's scientists to study the effects of the war and they collected thousands of letters and surveys from soldiers at the front detailing their military and sexual experiences. He published many excerpts of these letters in the *Quarterly Reports of the Scientific Humanitarian Committee during the War* and in his famous postwar study, the *Sexual History of the War*.<sup>63</sup>

The military expressed contempt for homosexuals as unnatural and immoral, but Hirschfeld noted that homosexual men thrived in the military environment. One soldier reported to Hirschfeld that the war provided the opportunity for men to educate their comrades and dispel negative [stereotypes](#).<sup>64</sup> Homosexual relationships became increasingly visible and gay men felt somewhat tolerated as they shared the front experience with heterosexuals. The front, according to Hirschfeld, cultivated both the "male" warrior ideal and the "female" nurturing image, providing an ideal environment for the effeminate "third sex" to thrive.<sup>65</sup> Since homosexual men in Hirschfeld's estimation allegedly possessed characteristics of both genders, they could perform their duties as soldiers while also providing each other the nurturing and domestic security traditionally expected of women. As historian Birthe Kundrus has demonstrated, this "feminization of men" fueled fears about eroding sexual relations between men and women as men found solace in exclusively male companionship.<sup>66</sup>

Sex between men who otherwise considered themselves heterosexual was not uncommon in various military environments during wartime. Studies of working and middle class sailors in the United States during the Great War reveal complex homosexual subcultures. As historian George Chauncey demonstrated, men carefully constructed their "masculine" or "feminine" identities based on how they engaged in sexual relations with other men, rather than how

they perceived their essential nature. That is, as Chauncey observed, they defined themselves based on “what they did, rather than who they were.”<sup>67</sup> At the Naval Training Station in Newport, Rhode Island, sailors rendezvoused at restaurants and the [YMCA](#). Men who assumed “effeminate” behaviors, including dressing as women, wearing make-up, and taking what were considered feminine roles in sexual relations, were perceived as “queer” or “inverted,” while men who remained “masculine” continued to perceive themselves as heterosexual.

In his studies of the front experience, Hirschfeld highlighted the rise of “pseudo-homosexuality,” which he defined as heterosexual men engaging in homosexual behavior, which caused the most anxiety among military authorities who feared a breakdown of masculinity.<sup>68</sup> At the same time, so Hirschfeld argued, the front enabled men who were “constitutionally homosexual” to find other homosexual men in an environment that was more tolerant of same-sex relations than prewar or mainstream culture. The war did not create homosexual behavior, but rather this environment in which men were removed from social pressures at home facilitated relations between homosexual men who were otherwise repressed before the war. Hirschfeld identified three forms of “intimate comradeship”: the consciously erotic, unconsciously erotic, and bonds between men that remained unerotic. Hirschfeld argued that while physically erotic homosexual relationships remained largely hidden, same-sex bonding was to some degree encouraged under the guise of comradeship to promote cohesion and military strength.<sup>69</sup>

In the eyes of many homosexual men the war also proved that homosexual love was entirely natural. Activists argued that the war not only entitled homosexual men to legal emancipation, but also demanded that their emotional and sexual lives be recognized as normal, even ideal in the context of war, by mainstream society. However, in the wake of defeat in 1918 there were widespread accusations, especially from the political right, that “enemies” at home had betrayed the army. Homosexuals were one of the groups targeted as culprits in the “[stab-in-the-back](#)” legend. In his pamphlet *The Sexual Cruelties of Love-Crazy Men*, conservative German journalist [H. A. Preiss](#) claimed that veterans had become so selfishly focused on their “abnormal sexual practices” that they were no longer willing to sacrifice for the fatherland.<sup>70</sup> Writers for *Die Freundschaft (The Friendship)*, a newspaper that catered to WhK contributors, sought to combat accusations of a “stab in the back.” One writer, B. Eden, stressed that homosexuals were only exceptional in their goal to emancipate themselves from legal discrimination. Otherwise, they were committed to protecting the nation, as evidenced by their war experience.<sup>71</sup>

Hirschfeld and his adherents in the WhK also stressed that homosexual men, rather than being degenerate outsiders, were exceptionally suited to endure the strain of [modern war](#).<sup>72</sup> The ongoing war against homophobia required “manliness” and resilience comparable to that found in the trenches. Homosexual men, activists argued, were better equipped to endure the traumatic human losses caused by the war because they were used to coping with the trauma of suppressing their love.<sup>73</sup> These themes were explored in the novel *Alf*, written by [Bruno Vogel \(1898-1987\)](#) in 1929. Vogel, a survivor of the trenches in Flanders and founder of the Leipzig branch of the WhK, claimed that homosexual men were doubly victimized by war and homophobia, and they were uniquely tough as a result.<sup>74</sup>

In addition to Hirschfeld’s WhK and Brand’s GdE, a new homosexual emancipation organization was founded by [Friedrich Radszuweit \(1876-1932\)](#), a politically moderate businessman, who created the *Freundschaftsbund (Friendship Association)* in 1919 and the *Bund für Menschenrecht (BfM, League of Human Rights)* in 1923. The BfM aimed to bring together moderate left- and right-wing individuals who were unified behind the legal demand for homosexual rights.<sup>75</sup> To achieve emancipation, both the BfM and the WhK made strident efforts to cooperate with women’s rights groups in the 1920s. They worked closely with [Helene Stöcker \(1869-1943\)](#) League for the Protection of Motherhood and Sexual Reform, which the WhK had been aligned with since pre-1914. After the war, leaders of Stöcker’s movement and Hirschfeld’s Sexual Research Institute worked together to provide sex counseling for youth and women, and the leaders of these movements formed coalitions through their activism in the parties of the political left. In 1921, Hirschfeld and Stöcker organized a Berlin meeting of international organizations at the World League for Sexual Reform, where the agenda included lectures on dysfunctional heterosexual relationships and lectures on homosexuality as a natural phenomenon. Women’s rights and homosexual rights activists shared resources in lobbying Weimar’s health and interior ministries to reform sex crimes laws.<sup>76</sup> This meant abolishing Paragraphs 184.3, 218 and 175 of the legal code, which restricted access to birth control and criminalized abortion and homosexuality, respectively, though they were not successful in dismantling these laws.<sup>77</sup>

During the war, female homosexuals also struggled for recognition and identity. Before 1914, lesbians tended to be represented through the prism of medical debates over sexual deviance. However, during the war, homosexual women were increasingly seen in relation to nationalistic agendas and they were compared to homosexual men in debates over hegemonic gender roles and sexuality. This can be seen in Britain, where pacifist Rose Allatini’s (1890-1980) 1918 novel *Despised and Rejected*, which followed the wartime experiences of a lesbian and a homosexual man, was banned under the [Defense of Realm](#)

[Act](#) because of its perceived threat against the nation's masculine soldierly ideals. The image of the lesbian as a deviant, dangerous figure who eroded the social fabric became a site of popular anxiety about the preservation of gender norms on the home front in Britain.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, an identifiable lesbian subculture emerged, emboldened by the war experience and the women's rights movement. Despite coalitions between women's rights and homosexual rights, many homosexual veterans expressed antipathy toward what they perceived as the negative influence of "effeminate" stereotypes in the homosexual movement. The war persuaded many homosexual veterans that homosexuals were just as masculine as heterosexuals. The war altered even WhK activists' perceptions of the nature of homosexuality, and many denounced the "effeminate" homosexual, replacing him with an all-masculine, mobilized homosexual man spiritually connected to the front ideal of "comradeship."<sup>79</sup> The BfM invited contributions to *Die Freundschaft* from homosexual activists who represented warrior masculinity in a positive light. In his article *Manliness (Manneswürde)*, one writer who gave his name as Kurt portrayed the "unique gender" as battle-hardened veterans. Kurt specifically targeted men "who clean themselves like young girls and go play and dance" as useless in the new fight. Effeminate homosexuals were weakening the struggle: "We need men, complete men. Effeminate men are no good for battle and conflict."<sup>80</sup> Kurt's call for "complete men" suggests that Hirschfeld's depiction of the "third sex" as men with feminine characteristics no longer resonated with many homosexual veterans.

## Conclusion

The history of sexuality as constructed from the perspectives of ordinary individuals in the context of total war is difficult to uncover. While dominant images of masculinity and femininity, defined by civil and military elites, are pervasive, definitions of gender and sexuality from the perspectives of ordinary soldiers and civilians are much more evasive, nuanced and complex. As sociologist R.W. Connell argued, while hegemonic masculinity was defined in opposition to subordinate forms of masculinity, perceptions and constructions of hegemonic masculinity were contested and always changing.<sup>81</sup> The First World War caused a seismic disruption in perceptions of sexuality and gender norms. The war put tremendous strains on relations between men and women, and efforts by military, civil and medical authorities to control a hegemonic, idealized gender paradigm quickly broke down. Disillusioned with prevailing ideals of the steel-nerved, sexually chaste, emotionally disciplined warrior, some men began to mock the masculine image imposed "from above" and many rejected expectations that they sacrifice their own emotional and sexual desires. Traditional gender roles and sexual norms became further strained as men resented women's alleged infidelity, promiscuity and comfortable existence on the home front. Military



and medical authorities reinforced this resentment by scapegoating women for the VD epidemic and for not supporting the emotional needs of men at the front.

The trench experience made it acceptable for men to find emotional intimacy with other men, especially within the framework of “comradeship.” In the distorted and traumatic universe of the trenches, some men also invented a world where they could fantasize about crossing genders. However, their crossing from masculine to feminine was an attempt to find temporary relief rather than a deeper shift in identity. Within an environment of comradeship that included male-male emotional bonds, homosexual men were able to define their love as acceptable, or even ideal, for the military environment. Gay men idealized their form of love and sexuality as perfectly suited for the emotional strain of modern war. In making their case for integrating homosexuals into the national community via their experience as soldiers, gay veterans aggressively reinforced the hegemonic image of the disciplined, hyper-masculine warrior-ideal. Similar to the resentment that heterosexual men felt towards women, many gay veterans resented the effeminate homosexual, who they perceived as an embarrassment to their militant vision of the movement. In aligning themselves with the hegemonic ideal that affirmed “masculine” as militarized and superior, many gay men reinforced paradigms of male dominance. At the same time, the fact that homosexual men could appropriate images of warrior masculinity challenged the notion that hegemonic ideals of masculinity were exclusively heterosexual.

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## External Links

- [A mobile brothel as used by the Austrian Army, with the sign saying "Mobile Pleasure House number 20 — for officers only" \(worldwar1.com\) \(Image\)](#)
- [Bobič, Pavlina: Injury and Disease, Archival Research Guide \(CENDARI Collaborative European Digital Archive Infrastructure\) \(Article\)](#)
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[Central Europe](#) > [Austria-Hungary](#)

[Central Europe](#) > [Germany](#)

[North America](#) > [USA](#)

[Western Europe](#) > [France](#)

### Thematic Section(s)

[Home Front](#)

### Subjects

[Society](#) > [Everyday life, civilian war experience](#) > [Emotions, society](#)

[Society](#) > [Women and men](#) > [Femininity](#)

[Society](#) > [Women and men](#) > [Masculinity](#)

[Society](#) > [Women and men](#) > [Sexuality](#)

[The media](#) > [Press, journalism](#) > [Newspapers](#)

[The media](#) > [Propaganda](#) > [Propaganda, military](#)

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### GND Subject Headings

[Weltkrieg \[1914-1918\] ; Sexualität](#)

### LC Subject Headings

[World War, 1914-1918 ; Sex and history](#)

### Rameau Subject Headings

[Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\) -- Aspect social ; Vie sexuelle](#)

### Key Person(s)

[Stöcker, Helene](#); [Fitzroy, A.T.](#); [Fiaux, Louis](#); [Géraldy, Paul](#); [Witt-Schlumberger, Marguerite de](#); [Göhre, Paul](#); [Mendel, Kurt](#); [Brand, Adolf](#); [Vogel, Bruno](#); [Radszuweit, Friedrich](#); [Bethmann Hollweg, Theobald von](#); [Hirschfeld, Magnus](#); [Preiss, H. A.](#)

### Key Location(s)

### Title

Sexuality, Sexual Relations, Homosexuality

### Author(s)

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### Article Type

Handbook Article

### Classification Group

Survey Article (Thematic)

### Articles That Link Here

[Moral Norms and Values](#); [Historiography 1918-Today \(France\)](#); [Women's Mobilization for War \(Belgium\)](#); [Non-European Soldiers](#); [Prostitution \(Ottoman Empire\)](#); [Espionage](#); [Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War \(Australia\)](#); [Historiography 1918-Today \(Australia\)](#); [Life and Death of Soldiers](#); [Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War \(New Zealand\)](#); [Music \(Portugal\)](#); [African Labour in Europe \(Africa\)](#); [Hospitals](#); [Venereal Diseases](#); [Prisoners of War](#); [Religious Mobilization and Popular Belief](#); [Literature \(Italy\)](#); [Literature \(Japan\)](#); [Prostitution](#); [Centenary \(Russia\)](#); [Women's Mobilization for War \(France\)](#); [Intimate Relations between Occupiers and Occupied \(Belgium and France\)](#); [The Soldier's Sister](#); [Women's Mobilization for War \(USA\)](#); [Collaboration \(Belgium and France\)](#); [Private Life \(France\)](#); [Film/Cinema \(East Central Europe\)](#); [Film/Cinema \(East Central Europe\)](#); [Maximilian, Prince of Baden](#) and [Hirschfeld, Magnus](#)