
Letter to the Editor

DOES PEACE PREVENT HOMOSEXUALITY?¹

Dorner and co-workers (1980, 1983, 1987) asserted that in wartime more homosexual men are born than in times of peace. A high proportion of the 865 homosexual men treated for venereal diseases in six regions of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) were born between 1941 and 1947 (related to the annual total births in the German Reich, Soviet Occupation Zone, GDR). Dorner *et al.* (1987) drew on evidence from experiments on rats, which showed that prenatal stress leads to a "significant decrease in plasma testosterone levels of male rat fetuses and newborns . . . followed by bisexual or even predominately heterotypical (homosexual) behavior in adulthood" (p. 18). They suggested that the findings on men born in wartime can be explained in psychoendocrinological terms: war means stress, stress induces a lack of androgens in male fetuses, a lack of androgens encourages the development of a homosexual orientation. To quote Dorner *et al.*'s (1983) conclusion: "These findings indicate that prevention of war . . . may render a partial prevention of the development of sexual deviation" (p. 87).

There are two clear objections to Dorner's approach (cf. Schmidt, 1984):

The Data. It is unlikely that such a highly selected sample (venereal disease, six districts, limited period of investigation) could provide valid estimates for the incidence of homosexuality in different generations. One also wonders why the patients would or should tell the doctor that they are homosexual. Dorner *et al.* gave no details about the ages of the patients, and omitted a check on a possible age effect. This is necessary when investigating different generations. The variation described in the relative incidence of homosexuality could be due to age variations because homosexuals of different ages may suffer more or less frequently from venereal diseases, depending on how active they are sexually. Thus WWII-period aged persons with many partners could be more likely to appear at such clinics.

Their Interpretation. Even if homosexuals are born more often during wartime, it seems rash to offer a purely endocrinological explanation. In Dorner *et al.*'s view, the immense upheaval that war entails, its profoundly

¹This letter is a revised version of a paper read at the 14th Annual Meeting, International Academy of Sex Research, August 16-20, 1988, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Translated by Jane Wiebel, Ph.D.

Table I. Sexual Behavior in West German Students: 1966 and 1981: Overview

1966	1981
Postmailed questionnaire	Postmailed questionnaire
Random sample	Random sample
12 German universities	13 German universities
Refusal rate 40.2%	Refusal rate 63.4%
$N = 3666$	$N = 1922$
$N\sigma = 2835$	$N\sigma = 1106$
$N\varphi = 831$	$N\varphi = 816$
92% 21-30 years old at interview (born 1936-1945)	81% 21-30 years old at interview (born 1951-1960)

threatening and destructive effects on society at large, the family, and the individual, can be reduced, at least as far as any links with homosexuality are concerned, to a hormonal disturbance. This reveals an ignorance about psychic and social factors. In wartime children tend to grow up more often without a father or to be separated from other members of the family.² If homosexuality really occurs more frequently during wartime, it would be just as reasonable to take this as "proof" of certain psychodynamic theories of homosexuality, e.g., the lack of a father, a particularly close bond between mother and son.

We reinvestigated Dorner *et al.*'s empirical findings, i.e., the statistical connection between homosexual behavior in men and their date of birth (before, during, and after the Second World War), drawing on two studies of West German students carried out by the Department of Sex Research, University of Hamburg, in 1966 and 1981 (Giese and Schmidt, 1968; Clement, 1986; Clement *et al.*, 1984).

Table I summarizes the main features of both studies. We combined both samples and divided them into four cohorts or generations according to the year of birth: one pre-war (1936-1940), one wartime (1941-1945), and two post-war (1951-1955, 1956-1960) (Table II). Six variables of homosexual behavior during adolescence and adulthood (prior 12 months) were analyzed: accumulative incidence before age 20; incidence at ages 15 and 18, and during the prior 12 months; incidence of 2 or more partners at ages 12-18, and during the prior 12 months.

As Table III shows, there are almost no differences between the generations for homosexual activity during adolescence (apart from the fact that those born between 1951 and 1955 had more homosexual experiences before their 20th birthday). During adulthood, homosexual activity is more frequent

²In our study, 17 and 18% of boys born 1936-1940, 1941-1945 grew up without father compared to 6 and 4% born 1951-1955, 1956-1960, respectively.

Table II. Generations Studied

Generation	Born	Age at study	N♂	N♀
G1 (prewar)	1936-1940	26-30	657 ^a	98 ^b
G2 (war)	1941-1945	21-25	2000	620
	1946-1950 ^c	—	—	—
G3 (postwar)	1951-1955	26-30	329	180
G4 (postwar)	1956-1960	21-25	600	456

^a8% (of 657) born in 1940.

^b7% (of 98) born in 1940.

^cData missing.

Table III. Incidence of Homosexual Behavior in Men, By Generation (%)

	Prewar	War	Postwar	
	G1 (n = 657)	G2 (n = 2000)	G3 (n = 329)	G4 (n = 600)
Accumulative incidence before age 20	19	18	25	18
Incidence, age 15	10	9	10	7
Incidence, age 18	6	5	5	4
Incidence, 2 or more partners, age 12-18	8	9	9	8
Incidence, last 12 months	3.7	3.9	7.0	5.3
Incidence, 2 or more partners, last 12 months	2.9	1.6	3.9	3.5

in the two postwar generations than in the prewar or wartime groups (the latter group shows the lowest values). This difference may be explained by the fact that between Generations 1 and 2 on the one hand and Generations 3 and 4 on the other attitudes towards sexuality became more liberal (Clement *et al.*, 1984). The increased rate of homosexual activity in these groups, which can also be observed in women,³ permits one to conclude that in a less sexually repressive society the willingness to get involved, at least temporarily, in homosexual relationships rises slightly.

But to return to Dorner *et al.*'s hypothesis about homosexual behavior and war: The civilian population suffered most in the big cities (over 100,000 inhabitants) and towards the end of the war (1943-1945). Tables IV and V show the data for students who were born under especially difficult circumstances during the worst stages of the war compared with control groups.

³In this study the incidence of homosexual behavior in the prior 12 months in female students was 1.0% (G1, n = 98); 1.1% (G2, n = 620); 4.4% (G3, n = 180); 3.3% (G4, n = 456).

Table IV. Incidence of Homosexual Behavior in Men, Growing up in Large Cities (> 100,000), By Generation (%)

	Prewar	War	Postwar	
	G1 (n = 303)	G2 (n = 843)	G3 (n = 139)	G4 (n = 225)
Accumulative incidence before age 20	21	19	23	20
Incidence, age 15	10	10	8	8
Incidence, age 18	6	5	4	4
Incidence, 2 or more partners, age 12-18	8	9	9	7
Incidence, last 12 months	4.0	3.8	7.2	4.0
Incidence, 2 or more partners, last 12 months	2.3	1.8	3.5	1.7

Table V. Incidence of Homosexual Behavior in Men, Breakdown of Generation 2 (%)

	Total		Large cities ^a	
	Born 1941-1942 (n = 883)	Born 1943-1945 (n = 1117)	Born 1941-1942 (n = 363)	Born 1943-1945 (n = 480)
Accumulative incidence before age 20	18	18	20	18
Incidence, age 15	9	9	12	9
Incidence, age 18	5	5	5	5
Incidence, 2 or more partners, age 12-18	10	9	11	8
Incidence, last 12 months	4.1	2.9	5.0	2.9
Incidence, 2 or more partners, last 12 months	2.3	1.3	2.2	1.4

^a > 100,000 population.

There is no evidence that they were more homosexual, not even in the "extreme" group born in big cities between 1943 and 1945. Where there are differences, there are more signs of homosexual behavior in the groups of low stress.

To sum up: Our data do not reveal the slightest evidence that wartime stress during the prenatal period increases the incidence of homosexual behavior. There are two conclusions to be drawn:

1. Homosexual men can go on loving peace and getting involved in the peace movement.

2. This paper is a good example of how research often involves nothing more than dealing with our self-produced problems. As soon as someone's idea attains a certain status by being printed in a serious journal, dozens of researchers seize on the idea and try to confirm, disprove, or modify it.

We cram figures into computers and wade through mountains of data in paying our respects to each other's flights of fancy. Any attempt to change this state of affairs would be like jousting with windmills. Nevertheless, we propose to make a beginning with the necessary Don Quixotry and state: On the question of homosexuality and war, no further research is needed.

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