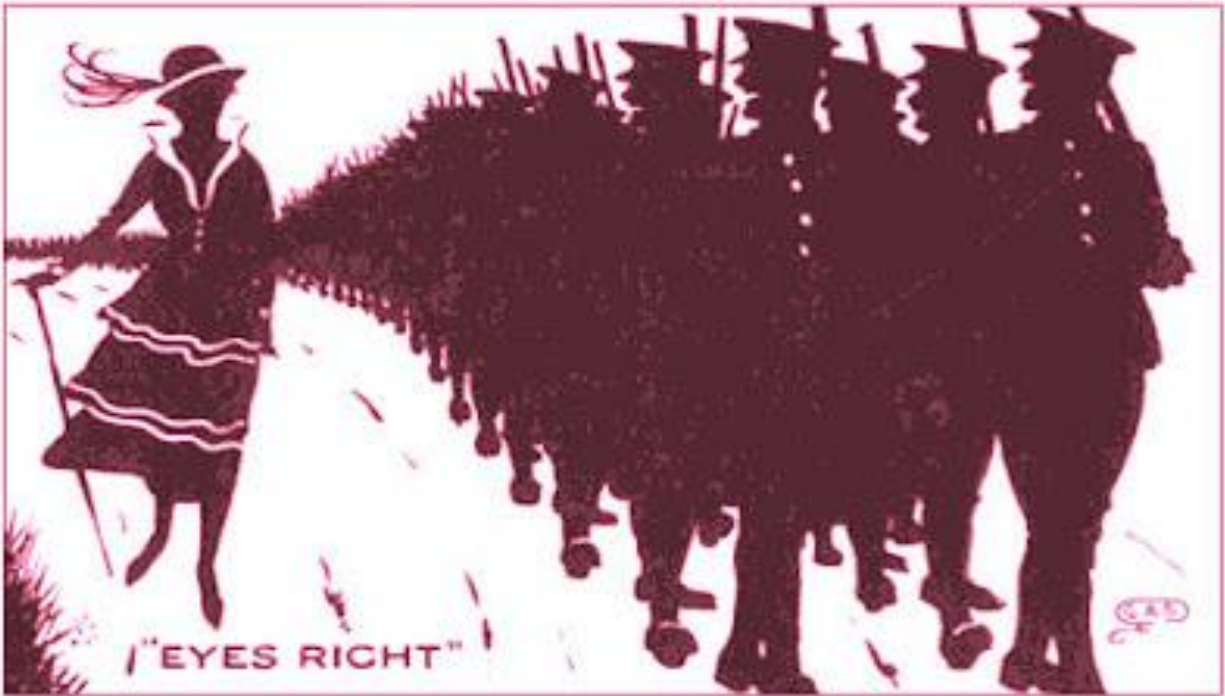


They Didn't Want to Die Virgins: Sex and Morale in the British Army on the Western Front, 1914–1918

by Bruce Cherry
Helion and Co., 2016



Illustrations from *They Didn't Want to Die Virgins* (author's collection)

Describing Victorian soldiers, Rudyard Kipling wrote that "single men in barracks don't grow into plaster saints." The generation of "Tommyes" who fought in the Great War, as well as those in all wars before and since, are very much the same. Civilians quite often combine a total ignorance of the life of a soldier with a need to idealize them as their nation's finest young men, flawless and pure. Nature has made most men, especially most young men, very sexually...enthusiastic. Armies around the world have always had their "camp followers" and readily available "bawdy houses." With small professional armies fighting in foreign lands, civilians could remain blissfully ignorant of how men in uniform dealt with their sexual needs and desires. However, the vastness of the First World War expanded all military matters exponentially, including coping with that most basic of human drives.

Giant armies were now made up of more men in uniform than had ever been seen before, slaughtering each other in vast numbers with unprecedented violence, The sheer numbers of young men, combined with a total dearth of young women, and those men living with the near certainty of violent and painful death or injury, intensified their sexual needs. Ironically and sadly, the Great War occurred near the end of the long overly moralistic Victorian Era, when all things sexual were stifled, hidden away, or driven underground. Now the children of the

Victorians were thrown into the double dose of unheard-of violence and unspoken sexual impulse. Bruce Cherry's outstanding book *They Didn't Want to Die Virgins* tells the story of these young men and the British Army's and government's attempts to deal with all things sexual in the war while dealing with civilian pressure for enforced celibacy.

For the soldiers themselves outlets for sexual energy were sought in all avenues, from increasing availability of pornography and masturbation to friendly French and Belgian women and prostitutes approved and not approved. For the Army the goal was maintenance of morale and avoidance of disease. Seemingly worse than their fear of disease was the Army's concern that if soldiers' "normal" sexual needs were not met, they might turn to each other, and "unnatural" sexual congress between men would most certainly destroy the morale of the Army.

In a war that was grinding away the nation's youth at an alarming rate with shell fire and rifles, it would be unthinkable to lose men to venereal disease or bad morale. For the government it was the struggle between meeting the physical needs of the troops — including their sexual needs — and keeping civilians, whose support was essential for continuing the war effort, from knowing too much about the realities of the war's horrors and the men's sexuality. There were also, of course, the additional problems of coping with Tommy's sexuality by the French Army, French civilians, and the French government, all of whom had to deal with the British soldiers' presence in their country.

For Bruce Cherry, the research necessary to write this book posed more problems than the usual difficulties confronting historians. Even in more modern times, an individual's sexuality is rarely discussed openly. For young men of the Victorian/Edwardian generation, even diary writers were reticent about recording sexual matters. Direct references in official documents are also quite rare. Cherry does a masterful job digging out information, learning from the periphery, analyzing data, and then collating all the material and presenting to the reader a masterful study. It is ironic that while sexuality is such a fundamental part of all humans, talking about it is difficult and trying to examine this largely unspoken topic from the past is even more challenging. In *They Didn't Want to Die Virgins* Cherry overcomes these challenges and presents to the reader an excellent glimpse into the multifaceted sexual life of Britain's soldiers of the Great War.

Reviewed by James Thomas

There has been a collective amnesia when it comes to recalling the sexual activities of the British soldier on the Western Front between 1914 and 1918. Perhaps there has even been a conspiracy of silence with some inclined to let sleeping dogs lie. That the soldier could find the time, inclination, and indeed partners to enjoy a sex life amidst the mud and carnage is often a revelation even to those who are Western Front experts. Yet, as official venereal disease treatment figures attest, many a man or boy - even those with wife or sweetheart at home - took every opportunity offered to satisfy their lust, or assuage their natural youthful curiosity. Sexual adventures took place in regulated brothels, with 'wayside' prostitutes, and with compliant local women, themselves seeking the excitement of 'wild love'. And the army not only turned a blind eye but effectively became a procurer as Edwardian morals were sacrificed for morale and the need to keep men healthy enough to die in the line.

This meticulously researched study examines the soldiers' sex life in detail, exploring its impact

on morale and placing it the context of both prewar civilian morality and the army's historic policy on sex. The author has read between the lines of published and unpublished memoirs and letters; listened carefully to hundreds of memories stored at London's Imperial War Museum; analyzed soldiers' songs and jokes; and reinterpreted contemporary paintings, magazine illustrations, postcards and cartoons, that unconsciously left visual evidence of the importance of sex. Recently discovered unique photographs are included to give weight to his argument. The men's attitudes as well as actions are examined, as is their ownership and use of pornography. Noting that it 'takes two tango', the book looks at the socio-demographics and motives of the women involved and the workings and economics of the 'Red Lamp' army-regulated brothels. Careful not to denigrate the memory of the men who served and died, and avoiding sensationalism, hyperbole, or tabloid-style copy, the author paints a vivid picture of the seedier aspects of life behind the front while arguing its positive impact on morale.

Dr Tom Thorpe [TT]: Welcome to 'Mentioned in Dispatches' the podcast in The Western Front Association with me - [Dr. Tom Thorpe](#). The WFA is the UK's largest Great War History Society. We are dedicated to furthering understanding of the First World War and have over 60 branches worldwide. For further information visit our website at www.westernfrontassociation.com. It is the 30th of September 2019. And this is episode 130.

On this week's podcast Dr. Bruce Cherry talks about his book '*They Didn't Want to Die Virgins*' - about sex and morale in the British Army on the Western Front during the Great War. This has been published by [Helion & Co](#). I spoke to Bruce from his home in Berkshire.

Bruce, welcome to the 'Dispatches' podcast. Can you start by telling us about yourself and how you became interested in the Great War and the sex life of the Tommy?

Dr Bruce Cherry [BC]: Yes, Well, thanks, first of all, for asking me to do this podcast, it should be great fun. I have now been a member of The Western Front Association for 15 or 20 years, perhaps. Like most people I first became interested because of a relative interest - a couple of grandfathers who were involved in the Great War - and spent my first summer after university, 1974, or 1975, I hitchhiked down to Sarajevo to stand in the footsteps of Gavrilo Princip - and basically, I've been hooked on the Great War as a subject ever since.

TT: And why do you think 'Sex and the Tommy' is an important subject?

BC: Well, I fell into 'Sex and the Tommy' almost by accident. I picked up a book written by a German author called Hirshfeld, many years ago, which explored the whole area of sex - mostly from a German perspective in the Second World War - and then I started to read various bits from English academics which would claim that there was very little sex going on. And that didn't seem to me to be correct - because, if anything what proved there was sexual activity, were the venereal disease figures, more than anything else. So once my curiosity was piqued I started to take note of the references I was finding.

TT: Now to give us a bit of background. What was the average, in inverted commas, 'sex life of Edwardian men' prior to the Great War.

BC: Well, it is going to depend very much on the class, culture, the age and the experience of the man. I am not sure, we'd have to look at averages in each of those areas. I would say that generally, let's talk about anything other than - the very high social classes and the very low social classes - because those two would have had a quite different sex lives to the average Edwardian man. But the prevailing moral norm, would be best described as 'muscular Christianity' - and whilst there was not perhaps a huge amount of church-going per se, people still would have had a strong moral code, that would have been described, I suppose, as knowing what was right and what was wrong. They would have followed the ten commandments - and self-control would have been the all-pervading code.

TT: What was the general view of masturbation in this period? Was it seen as some form sort of weakening, that men, that anybody should avoid engaging in this solitary activity?

BC: That was very much part of the self control - masturbation would have been - as Kipling and others would have described it, as 'beastliness'. It was felt to basically weaken the spirit and the soul. And that, so even at the basic level, was frowned upon. Sex was about something that you did for procreation not really enjoyment.

TT: And obviously homosexuality was illegal under the current statute then. And how was it viewed by society as a whole?

BC: Well, I think largely society didn't really know much about it; it was something that was so much on the fringes that it would have been, only, certainly only the upper classes areas - of course the public school boys might have seen it and been aware of it. But I think in the general run of things people didn't know much about it - and if they did, they would have thought it was abhorrent.

TT: So Tommy joins up, gets into khaki and arrives in France. What was his sex life like and where did he have sex?

BC: Well, the important thing to note there, was how a man's moral code eroded from that position of muscular Christianity to an acceptance of sexual acts and the army did a lot to do that. His moral code came under threat from other guys, from the old soldier, the old regular soldier whose sexual attitude was very different to the Kitchener army's, and then drink, played a large part in it that it eroded if not his morals, then he was open to temptation.

So where was that temptation? Well, you can you put it down into two distinct activities, I guess, or distinct areas: one would have be 'paid for sex' and the other would have been, what we might call, 'fraternisation'.

TT: And is this is generally sort of found in documentary and sort of memoir accounts. Is it a relatively common thing that people report?

BC: Oh no, absolutely not, it is hidden. It is hidden under the bed clothes so to speak. There is a great quote from the French authors, Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker 'Understanding Great War' (2002)

'Aside from very rare illusions in their accounts ... masturbation, prostitution and homosexuality are shrouded in the deepest silence.'

And I think that's probably the best summary of it.

TT: This obviously was going on in France. How did the High Command view all this activity with Tommy doing whatever thing - and what sort of the measures did they do to prevent or whatever, sexual activity in the army?

BC: The army's was really split - the army's main concern was keeping men fit for the Front Line. And anything they could do to make sure of that, they would do. But set against that is the moral code back at home that they have got to adhere to, or at least 'to be seen to be' adhering to. So the army is really schizophrenic over this.

It starts realising that if morale is to be upheld then young lads at the heights of their youthful virility period are going to do whatever they do and the army's not really going to stop men going off and finding the other sex.

The problem is, they go off and find the other sex - at that time Venereal Disease was prevalent in the civilian population, and the army was very keen to ensure that its men did not get any form of STDs because that by definition would take them out of the line.

So the army's responses were, first and foremost, to try to control prostitution, if they couldn't control men's desire they could at least control the health of those they went to see so the famous red lamps - or they sanctioned the use of the existing '*maison toleree*', which existed, this is the French brother system that existed throughout France and Belgium before the Great War.

TT: Did the Army have a different attitude to officers having sex as opposed to the ranker having sex?

BC: Not really, I wouldn't say there was a different attitude, the main thing was that officers should not be seen in the company of known prostitutes because that obviously would be, in some way, denigrating the uniform.

They never really encouraged it openly. And they did everything they could, formally, to try and hide what was being done. This was a fairly successful policy, in there was very little in primary sources written for example, with any formal sanctioning of it by the army until you get a case in 1917, in a brothel in Abbeville which suddenly became the centre of attention because people at home, some of the Christian Brigade, took up cudgels against this particular brothel. And then the army did everything it could to, one the one had to try and show that it was trying to suppress ... or control the brothel, while at the same time turning a bit of a blind eye to it.

TT: What kind of sexually transmitted diseases were prevalent amongst the soldiery during the First World War?

BC: Well, pretty much every you could name: gonorrhoea and syphilis were rife. And of course there was no real treatment, for those Wassermann tests and whatever for syphilis and hadn't come in yet.

The key thing was that once a man contracted venereal disease he was going to be pretty poorly - particularly if he didn't admit to it, if he tried to hide it because of social embarrassment, or family embarrassment or whatever, he could become very sick indeed.

TT: What was the attitude of people at the home front towards the sex life of Tommy Atkins in France and Belgium?

BC: Well, it's quite interesting, because your attitude is going to be different over the whole period - obviously we're looking at the whole 14-18 period - and there are lots of nuances that occur over the course of that. And you had, for example at home there was quite a lot of sexuality going on at home. Again, not totally being talked, but in war time morals generally decline. You had a great deal of, I suppose, premarital sex - if men were off to join the army and they may not come back, there was a feeling perhaps that maybe the seed should be spread while the opportunity was there.

You also had a, sort of, a general breakdown amongst young girls - with a 'khaki madness' with young girls chasing soldiers in the uniform for a while - and that'll obviously lead to something of a breakdown of moral standing here.

Then also had in the major cities, especially in London, you have a lot of girls - or women who turned to prostitution - or if not outright prostitution, then we might say, semi-prostitution where they may be working for favours as opposed to money. Now they're most prevalent, of all, in London was crawling with these girls who would target the young Tommy coming home on leave and especially the Dominion boys, the Aussies, Kiwis, and the Canadians all coming back to the UK for their leave because they couldn't go home - and these girls would target these them, because they were healthy young men and had more in their pocket than Tommy had. The problem then was that those men might contract VD back in London and that was very damaging to the Dominion armies, and the Dominion leaders were the ones who were the most outspoken about that situation rather than the families.

TT: How did the army screen or maybe treat venereal disease and were there any treatments available at the time to manage these problems?

BC: The first thing the Army did of course was to try ensure that the chaps didn't catch anything - by controlling the brothels - the base camp brothels, especially, were subject to regular inspection by doctors - the girls were inspected regularly, and within the very primitive environment in which the brothels existed ... a sort of health of regime was put in, to ensure that as much as possible cleanliness would be adhered to. So that's really the most important thing, to control the base camp brothel and controlling the girls who were active there.

The next level were the 'maison tolerees' which existed outside the based camps, which might have been licensed by the French state, they too would be regularly visited by doctors so you could control it there but beyond that, in what you might call the clandestine prostitution area - then there was no method of controlling health.

If the military police discovered girls who were working actively but without some sort of formal recognition of their status then those places would be closed down. So that was the armies second line of response.

And the then Third line of response was simply to scare the living daylights out of Tommy, with which lectures ...

So you then get the third line of response, which would be threatening that their family might be told. So up to 1916 there was a policy in the army that if a lad got a disease of any sort then his payments back home might be stopped and his wife, his parents whatever, mostly his wife, would be told why the payments had stopped. That backfired as there was moral outrage. As there were suicides by men who couldn't face going home and admitting it.

A fourth line of prevention, shall we say, and that was to literally introduce 'préventives'. Which is where the army gets into real problems as the army cannot be seen to be providing the soldiers with preventives, when it is also trying to claim that it is not encouraging men to go with the girls. So certainly as the war progresses, and especially amongst the Colonial troops an increase in the use of prophylactics.

TT: So did access to sex contribute to morale or hinder it. I'm thinking about the sexually transmitted disease side of it.

BC: On the sexually transmitted disease side of it .. if someone did catch any kind of disease then generally that would lower their morale for a while, but having said that, if perhaps you did catch a light disease, shall we say, and that meant time out of the line, that could be quite welcome, that was perhaps like like catching a Blighty, in fact the military were rather concerned that men might use it in that way so catching a STD was counted as a self inflicted wound.

On the other hand, just going along to the brothels or playing around with the local girls - which was a very important part of the whole sexual geography, shall we say, it wasn't all paid for sex, there was quite a bit of fraternisation going on - In those cases it was was a definite moral booster.

Guys were going off and exploring, in any way they could - I think their moral was a bit dampened when they found they couldn't afford what they wanted to do as the girls were quite expensive relative to the pay they had. The girls could be more expensive for the average British Tommy when following a visit by the Aussies and the Canadians which tended to force the prices up,

But generally I think moral was boosted by it, not just, because of the action of sex, but the whole chitter-chatter that went around it, the whole group talk, the trench talk, that would go on around it. You've got to put it in the context of the army was a particularly coarse environment when it came to jokes and songs and pornography ... 'materials obscene', that would exist in the trenches too. Those sorts of things kept their spirits up rather than depress them

TT: And is the experience of the British Tommy similar to the French Poilu - the French soldier, the American Doughboy and maybe the German Stormtrooper - for want of a better word.

BC: Yes, this is universal, every soldier signs up for it : bombs, bullets, booze and birds. And the Germans had brothels, mobile brothels, right up to the Front Lines - little caravans. The French had the maison tolerees ... they had special ones for the soldiers. These are what we inherited, the existing lamps ...

There's evidence that show that when we started to push the Germans back, from the August period in 1918 that we overrun previously held German positions, Tommy made use of brothels that had previously been used by the German soldiers - the girls, of course, didn't really care what colour of the uniform was so long as the coin came across. So yes it was universal, every soldier was indulging.

TT: And finally can we trust the stats? Were they kept secret, exposing the levels of STDs and obviously the problems it brought from bringing soldiers out of active duty.

BC: That's a great question. But No. There is a difficulty because if you're going to look at statistics - let's say the statistic that one you can really focus on, how many people do we think had venereal disease - that might give us some kind of indication. There are problems with that statistic.

Firstly, we don't know how many men might have caught venereal disease at home, rather than abroad. Venereal disease was endemic so it could have been contracted during sexual activity while on leave in Britain as well as in France.

Perhaps ... that information, by the way, is there because of course you have the hospitals operating and it is pretty obvious that men are in hospital for a sexual disease and not gunshot wounds ...

The argument the military police would be advancing would be that a lot of the sexual diseases were being caught at home rather than on the front because the military police would be judged on how well they controlled the activities of the local girls, because in theory if everyone used the base camp brothel there should be no disease ... because by definition it was healthy, and no one would catch the disease from the girls, and these girls are supposedly under the control of the military police, so you get a lot of arguments going on about the statistics at that level. Now there's a school of thought, a problem to do with venereal disease, which is just to do with the nature of the statistics and how they were collected, how much misdiagnosis there might have been, or things like saying every sexual contact doesn't necessarily lead to catching a sexual disease ... even with someone who has already caught it. So there are lots of problems actually

with trying to measure them up to what was going on so they are just a pointer to what was going on.

TT: Finally Bruce, where can people find out more about your book and your research into this area.?

BC: Well. my book is called 'They Didn't Want to Die Virgins: a study of sex and moral on the Western Front'. It's available on Amazon, otherwise people can always get a copy from me if they are really desperate.

TT: Bruce. Thank you very much for your time.

BC: Thank you very much indeed, I enjoyed it very much

Inside the brothels of the Western Front