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## The Effects of War-Related Trauma on Dreams and Dreaming

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### The Effects of War-Related Trauma on Dreams and Dreaming

In 2015, at the age of 14, I had a spinal fusion to fix my scoliosis. The surgery itself went as expected, but about a day after the surgery my IV lines became unusable and I lost access to pain medicine for several hours, making the experience extremely painful and memorable. For years after the surgery, I had a recurring dream about my time in the Intensive Care Unit at Boston Children's hospital. These dreams would depict the seven hours I had been there, soon after my surgery and without any pain medicine, exactly as it had happened. This is not uncommon in dreams that people have about traumatic events, but it is not always the case: though some post-traumatic nightmares repeat the traumatic events as they occurred in waking life, others represent trauma through more symbolic means (Owczarski 2020, 139). Thankfully I no longer have these nightmares, but sometimes trauma can stay with a person for much longer. For instance, when my great grandfather returned from World War II, his wife and children noticed a difference in his personality. The sensitive, quiet, intelligent father who left to fight in WWII came home a changed man, according to my grandmother. The things he had seen in the war, which he would not talk about, were so horrific that he drank to forget. The condition he had, then known as battle fatigue, afflicted other veterans from WWII, as did the affliction known as shell shock in WWI (Boehnlein and Hinton 2016, 156). Scientists have noted throughout history that people who survive a war are sometimes considered to be different from the person they were before the conflict, often experiencing new or worsened irritability, anxiety,

and nightmares (Boehnlein and Hinton 2016, 159). Though these symptoms have been recorded in ancient documents such as *The Iliad*, the phenomenon that was known as shell shock and battle fatigue in the past was only recently introduced to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD (Echterling et al., 2016). The diagnosis has evolved over time, in part due to controversies surrounding the politicization of certain wars and related veteran-care expenses in America (Echterling et al., 2016). PTSD is now a widely accepted diagnosis among those that have experienced trauma.

PTSD is not limited to those who have been involved in a war or combat-related experience, but it is very prevalent in this population because the horrors of war are traumatic. According to Andrea Rock, a science reporter, roughly 25 percent of people who go through trauma experience PTSD (Rock 2004, 116). People involved in war, whether they are civilians or soldiers, often experience extremely traumatic events due to the horrific nature of warfare. One of the ways in which trauma (including, but not limited to PTSD symptoms) can affect those involved in war is through dreams, the focus of this paper. The trauma-related dreams that afflict those impacted by war can reflect feelings of anxiety, fear, or guilt. Relatively common are those dreams that replay a traumatic event, which are considered a “hallmark of PTSD,” but as Phelps has noted, such classic dreams are but a “small subset of the range of recurrent and distressing dreams experienced by individuals with PTSD” (Phelps 2008, 343). Traumatic dreams, in other words, may take many shapes—and they may occur with or without a diagnosis of PTSD. Moreover, traumatic dreams associated with war often show the imprint not only of an individual’s unique experience but also the experience of entire communities—as well as a given community’s cultural understandings of their own histories, of local events, and of the ontology<sup>1</sup> of dreaming itself. In what follows, I discuss several studies that examine the relationships

between war-related trauma and dreaming, highlighting, as much as possible, their relevant social and cultural contexts.

In their review of articles surrounding sleep and PTSD, Khazaie, Ghadami, and Masoudi recorded the presence of nightmares. The authors found that “war-zone trauma exposure had shown the strongest correlation with nightmare complaints” (Khazaie et al. 2016, 102). The veterans who had experienced direct conflict and other traumatic events often had a higher frequency of nightmares. Crucially, the authors also found that “nightmares and anxiety dreams occurred with equal frequency among veterans and civilian war victims” (Khazaie et al. 2016, 103). Though the civilians might not have had active roles in combat, those who witnessed it were still traumatized. This trauma can have immediate and long-lasting effects on a person, and many anthropologists and sleep scientists have studied the dreams of those involved in war in the period before the conflict takes place, during the conflict, and in the aftermath. The effect of trauma on the dreaming mind is not known in its entirety, but is an important topic to study, especially in the context of war. Here, I consider these different periods and introduce a cross-cultural perspective by reviewing studies centered in Peru, in the European theater of WWII (including the contemporary aftermath in Germany), and among Hmong refugees living in the US.

The months and years before a war breaks out are often a period of high tensions and even violence. Arianna Cecconi, an anthropologist focusing on an indigenous peasant community in Peru, noted this phenomenon during her time conducting ethnographic fieldwork with survivors of the conflict between the Shining Path movement and the Peruvian army in the 1980s and 1990s. Before the conflict came to the cities of Chihua and Contay, where Cecconi’s ethnographic research took place, people began having dreams that predicted the war. “Apart

from foretelling a general state of alarm, many peasants, when remembering specific violent episodes, tell about dreams that anticipated them” (Cecconi 2011, 412). Emic perspectives of dreaming in the culture Cecconi researched suggest that dreams are messages from spirits or divinities, so the dreams individuals had before the war, which often included war-related imagery such as soldiers or guns, were often considered to be premonitions of the coming conflict (Cecconi 2011, 405). The anxiety and tension surrounding this period of unrest before war broke out were reflected in the dreams of those who would soon be affected by the violence once it officially began.

The time during a war is incredibly traumatic, as civilians and soldiers experience bloodshed and destruction. The fear surrounding war can even extend to those that are not directly experiencing combat. In his analysis of *The Third Reich of Dreams* by Charlotte Beradt, dream-studies scholar, Kelly Bulkeley discussed many of the dreams that German citizens had during WWII. Beradt (herself a journalist and German Jew), interviewed many Germans during the Nazi rule, many of whom were German Jews who felt anxiety about the brutal Nazi policies, and some who were non-Jewish German citizens who did not support the Third Reich (Bulkeley 1999, 55). Due to the danger of Nazi officials discovering the research, Beradt recorded very little that could be used to identify participants and took care to write the information in code and sent them to people outside of the country (Bulkeley 1999, 47). During the time that Beradt compiled the dreams, Nazis were in control of the German government and cultivated an atmosphere of fear for German citizens. Germans who had not experienced war firsthand reported dreams to Beradt that reflected the extreme terror and trauma of living under Nazi rule: one woman dreamt of household appliances recording her and relaying her words to Nazi officials and a man dreamt of meeting a high-ranking Nazi and being unable to salute him

(Bulkeley 1999, 47-8). People who were German but had features that Nazis associated with inferiority also reported dreams in which their “Aryan” decent was questioned or outright denied (Bulkeley 1999, 48). This intense trauma, though not directly related to firsthand experiences of military combat, is reflected in the feelings of anxiety and fear present in these dreams.

Another instance of trauma-related dreams that occur during a war in a person not directly involved in combat comes from an article written by Matt Newsom. Newsom interviewed contemporary German university students residing in Berlin about their dreams. Despite decades separating the university students from WWII, Newsom argues that some of the reported dreams showed students’ efforts to process the war and its relationship to their German identity. Newsom’s research also revealed dreams that comment on recent events, such as issues that Germany’s refugee population face. One such example involves a man called Finn, who reported dreaming of a conflict currently taking place. Finn’s girlfriend is a Syrian refugee who fled due to the conflict in Syria. Finn describes being inside of a military jet in his dreams and feeling helpless when the pilot performs evasive maneuvers with him inside, as well as being in a room that resembles a boat (Newsom 2021, 84). In waking life, Finn follows news reports that show similar jets and the efforts of Syrian refugees to flee by boat (Newsom 2021, 85). Furthermore, his connection to the conflict is strengthened due to his girlfriend’s experience as well as the reports of her family still in Syria, who tell her and Finn of the bombs and other dangers (Newsom 2021, 84). Though Finn’s only experience of the conflict comes from the media and his girlfriend’s experiences, the trauma of war is reflected in his dreams. Newsom argues, in fact, that Finn’s dream was not only about contemporary refugees but also harkened back to German history and identity.

Another example of a trauma-related dream occurring during a traumatic event comes from an article by Wojciech Owczarski, who analyzed the dreams of Polish citizens interned in the Auschwitz concentration camp. The dreams, which were collected as part of a survey sent in 1973, describe some traumatic dreams that occurred during the war and their internment, as well as some that occurred in the aftermath. One of the dreams took place in October of 1941, roughly four years before Auschwitz would be liberated. The dreamer described seeing a “hideous apocalyptic beast” and other creatures wearing SS uniforms (Owczarski 2020, 143). This dream reflects the extreme trauma that prisoners experienced, comparing the Nazi officials at Auschwitz to horrific beasts. Auschwitz was home to some of the worst atrocities during WWII, perhaps most infamously the gas chambers that prisoners were led into to be killed. The trauma of the horrific treatment the prisoners received shaped their dreams, both during their time at the camp during the war and in the aftermath.

The trauma of war lingers long after the conflict ends. Nearly three quarters of the German university students that Newsom interviewed reported having dreams that involved images directly related to World War II (Newsom 2021, 77). Newsom’s interviews took place decades after WWII, and indicated “millennial Germans are still very much working through the historical trauma passed on to them by their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents” (Newsom 2021, 77). Newsom suggests that the younger generations of Germans feel a sense of guilt over the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany, which is reflected in their dreams today and the presence of the defense mechanisms many young Germans have to protect themselves from these feelings (Newsom 2021, 72). The trauma of WWII, which saw the use of chemical warfare, genocide, and other forms of violence, still haunts the people who were born decades after its end.



Another example of nightmares in the aftermath of violence and war comes from the article by Owczarski. A female prisoner described a recurring dream in the immediate aftermath of the war in which her sister was led into a gas chamber; this dream evolved in the decades after the end of WWII to show the woman's children in the gas chamber instead of her sister (Owczarski 2020, 141). Many prisoners' dreams reflected experiences that were not their own in a phenomenon Owczarski refers to as dreaming about "what could have been," which often involves images or scenarios of a prisoner's escape or execution, or both (Owczarski 2020, 140). The themes of escape and execution often occurred together, likely because those who were caught attempting to escape were executed. The prevalence of dreams of escape in the aftermath of the war suggest the severity of the trauma experienced by the prisoners continues to haunt those who survived, years and decades after the liberation of Auschwitz and the end of the war.

Dreams and war-related trauma have often been considered psychological wounds, but evidence from Adler and Cecconi's articles suggest that trauma can have a physical effect on a person as well. Shelley Adler interviewed Hmong refugees living in America. The Hmong are an ethnic group indigeneous to southeast Asia, many of whom were recruited by the CIA during the Vietnam war. They fought bravely on America's side, but the extent of their contributions to the war effort were not well known nor recognized for years, and they were not allowed to enter the United States as refugees until years after the war, despite facing danger thanks to their recruitment and involvement (Adler 1991, 61). The Vietnam War was horrific for all involved, but the Laotian Hmong suffered extreme losses during the war and in attempts to flee the civil war and persecution that followed (Adler 1991, 62). When they were finally permitted to settle in America, many were subjected to racism and unable to find jobs, adding to the trauma already endured. Participants in Adler's ethnographic research reported being visited in their dreams by

Dab Tsog, a female spirit commonly known in the Laotian Hmong culture that causes sleep paralysis<sup>2</sup> and difficulties breathing (Adler 1991, 57). Many of the men that reported seeing Dab Tsog later died from an unknown condition known as Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome (Adler 1991, 57). The knowledge that other Hmong men had died in their sleep caused even more trauma and stress for surviving Hmong men, who often would set alarm clocks to go off every 30 or so minutes in an effort to avoid being a victim of Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome (Adler 1991, 66).

Members of the Hmong community believed that the deaths involved the presence of Dab Tsog, while researchers suggested that the stress caused by the war and obstacles to success in America resulted in “life-threatening ventricular tachyarrhythmia” (Adler 1991, 66). Though the manifest content of the dreams did not directly relate to the events of the Vietnam War, the feelings of anxiety, fear, and guilt that are common in PTSD and other war-related trauma were likely woven into the traditional dreams that the Laotian Hmong community experienced. Cases of severe depression and survivors’ guilt were reported in the community, and suicide rates were high (Adler 1991, 65). PTSD has been associated with breathing and movement disorders in sleep, in addition to the nightmares that are common (Khazaie et al. 2016, 106). Therefore, both the trauma and the Hmong cultural ontologies appear to have combined in the production of physiological effects.

A similar scenario was reported by Cecconi. “In many testimonies, it is specified that the soul of the dead stays behind the door of the room, watching the sleeper, and that this gaze has a physical weight—‘it weighs on you,’ ‘you can’t move.’ [...] You can’t breathe . . . you feel as if somebody is squashing you; ‘your body is immobilized’” (Cecconi 2011, 414). The manifest content of the dreams reported by Adler and Cecconi is eerily similar: both include a spirit

weighing down the dreamer's chest and making it difficult for them to move or breathe. In the case of the participants from the Peruvian Andes, the spirits are souls of the dead who come to attack the dreamer. The souls visit regularly and are not always there to torment the dreamer, but the war created "suffering" souls due to the cruelty of the violent deaths and the inability to properly bury people. The suffering souls often torment the dreamers and sometimes physically assault them (Cecconi 2011, 414). Though the dreamers who reported these dreams are not said to have died after experiencing the souls' visit, the trauma of being tormented by dead loved ones can symbolize war trauma as well as add to the already existing trauma that was experienced during the war.

In conclusion, war-related trauma can shape the dreams of people before, during, and after wars. Its effects are not limited to soldiers, nor are they limited to those who directly experienced the conflict. Though not all dreams linked to war trauma are PTSD dreams, the diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder can provide those that are suffering from classic PTSD nightmares (those in which the event is repeated) with potential treatments, such as imagery rehearsal treatment, which involves rehearsing positive dream endings while awake to change the outcome of the dream while asleep (Rock 2004, 118). Still, the effects of trauma can be devastating for those who have endured it, and especially those who experienced it firsthand such as civilians in war zones, soldiers involved in combat, and the prisoners in the Auschwitz concentration camp. War is a terrible phenomenon and can negatively affect the minds of those experiencing it, directly and indirectly, for years, decades, and even generations, and this has serious implications for the present and future.

As I completed this paper, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began back in February of 2022, has made headlines for the brutal treatment of Ukrainian civilians and reports

of the use of widely-banned weapons such as cluster munitions (Ivory et. al., 2022). What effect will this trauma have on the soldiers fighting in the war? Will they, like my great grandfather, be forever changed? What effect will it have on the civilians living in Ukraine? How will people around the world who are watching this horrific invasion unfold on live video feeds be affected? And how will dreams be influenced by the war-related trauma associated with this invasion, especially when compared across cultures and time? Trauma can affect both those who directly and indirectly experience traumatic events, and thanks to modern technology that includes countless people around the world, in the present and in the future. The study of dreaming, by anthropologists and other scholars, deserves our continued attention.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Ontology in the context of anthropology often refers to the assumptions and worldviews held by a culture.

<sup>2</sup> Sleep paralysis is a phenomenon in which a person feels awake and is aware of their surroundings but is unable to move or speak.

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