

# “Another one bites the dust”: War dreams in a long dream series

Michael Schredl

Central Institute of Mental Health, Medical Faculty Mannheim/Heidelberg University, Germany

**Summary.** Wars have been fought and are still fought in many parts of the world. Based on the continuity hypothesis of dreaming, it is plausible that persons who experienced war also quite often dream about it. However, war-related dreams can also be found in persons who were never directly exposed to war. In a long dream series of 14,064 dreams recorded between 1984 and 2018 by a male dreamer, 0.96% of the dreams included war topics. A very small percentage of war dreams (3.7%) were related to wars that actually happened during that time. Thus, the question remains whether war-related dreams reflect waking-life worries about war or are a dramatized version of personal issues of the dreamer. As an increasing number of studies showing that political issues can be incorporated into dreams, it would be very interesting to study whether and how strong topics like worries associated with climate change or war affect dreams. In this case, dream research can expand the methodology of political psychology.

**Keywords:** Dream series, war-related dreams, continuity hypothesis, media

## 1. Introduction

Since the Bronze age, warfare is part of human history (Keegan, 1993), for example, World War I and II in the 20th century, currently (April 2024) the war of Russia on the Ukraine and the ongoing armed conflict between Palestine and Israel. In addition to the suffering caused by death and destruction, wars also have long-lasting psychological effects on humans (e.g., Bramsen & van der Ploeg, 1999). These aftereffects can also be seen in war-related dreams and nightmares, in veterans (Barrett et al., 2014; de Dassel, Wittmann, Protic, Höllmer, & Gorzka, 2018; Kramer, Schoen, & Kinney, 1987; Sandman et al., 2013; Wilmer, 1985) as well as in civilians (Barrett & Behbehani, 2003; Bulkeley, 2004; Qouta et al., 2016; Rogowska & Pavlova, 2023; Schredl & Piel, 2006). The assumption that salient life experiences are reflected in dreams is the key axiom of the continuity hypothesis of dreaming (Schredl, 2003). Whereas the occurrences of war-related dreams in person who experienced war are very plausible, the question remains why persons who never directly experienced war in their waking lives might also have war-related dreams. In the study of Schredl and Piel (2006), 17.3% of the Germans who experienced World War II reported war-related nightmares, even in the year 2000; on the other hand, Germans born long after the war ended (between 1971 and 1982) also reported war-related dreams, although the percentage of persons with war-related dreams was lower: 8.6%. In a sample of school-aged children (Schredl & Pallmer, 1998), 5.8% of the most recent bad dreams dealt with war. This figure is lower com-

pared to in children who experienced war respective the direct aftereffects of the war: A study published ten years after World War II showed that 18.1% of the children's dreams were war-related (Schnell, 1955).

One driver of war-related dreams in persons without direct war experiences might be worries associated with wars that are raging in other countries. In a poll within the European Union carried out in Summer 2022, 36% of the EU citizens expressed their worries about the Russian war on the Ukraine might spread to other countries (European Commission, 2022). The study of Ka mierzczak et al. (2023) carried out in Poland (neighbor country of the Ukraine) during May/June 2022 showed an increase in war-related dreams that might be related to these worries. In students of the Western Ukraine, the frequency of war-related nightmares was not only related to actual war experiences but also to war-related fears (Rogowska & Pavlova, 2023). However, systematic in-depth analysis of war-related dreams in persons who have never been directly exposed to war has not been carried out yet.

The present analysis of a long dream series recorded between 1984 and 2018 was undertaken to study how often war-related dreams were present in a person who lives in Germany and who was never affected by war directly. During this time period, wars occurred all over the world, e.g., the wars in former Yugoslavia (1991 to 2001), the Gulf wars involving the USA in 1990/91 and 2003, the war in Afghanistan (1996 to 2001). It was investigated whether the war that occurred in the dreams were related to wars occurring during that time. Furthermore, other aspects of war-related dreams were studied, for example, the question whether the dreamer was a soldier in the dream, or whether people were killed.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participant and dream diary

The male participant kept an unstructured dream diary from the age of 22, beginning in September, 1984 through De-

Corresponding address:

M. Schredl, Dr., Schlaflabor, Zentralinstitut für Seelische Gesundheit, Postfach 12 21 20, 68072 Mannheim, Germany.  
Email: Michael.Schredl@zi-mannheim.de

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ember 2018. During this time, he recorded 14,064 dreams. The mean dream length was  $139.90 \pm 85.86$  words (range: 3 to 760 words).

The dreamer was born, grew up, and lived his whole life in Germany. Being of Austrian nationality (because of the parents who moved from Vienna to Germany prior to the birth of the dreamer), the dreamer was not obliged to do military service as a young adult, neither in Germany nor in Austria.

## 2.2. Procedure.

The dream reports were originally hand-written and were later typed and entered into a database, Alchera 3.72, created by Harry Bosma ([www.mythwell.com](http://www.mythwell.com)) by the dreamer himself. This database allows assigning key words to the dreams, also a task carried out by the dreamer himself. Each dream was coded by the dreamer himself for the occurrence war themes or being in a war. In a second step, each war dream was coded for type of war (1 = World War II, 2 = World War III, 3 = Gulf war, 4 = War in former Yugoslavia, 9 = war not specified), "Dreamer is a soldier" (Yes/No), "Dreamer experiences fear of death" (Yes/No), "Dreamer is wounded" (Yes/No), "Other people dying" (Yes/No), and "War situation is resolved" (Yes/No).

The Alchera software also provides a word count for each dream report. Dream reports did not include redundancies or words not related to the dream experience itself. The analysis unit was a single dream report. The data were exported into an Excel spreadsheet (Microsoft) and data analysis was carried out using the SAS 9.4 software package for Windows.

## 3. Results

Overall, the dream series included 135 dreams that were related to war. Seven dreams dealt with war-related themes (e.g., war coverage in media or talking to a woman who was raped during a war) whereas being in a war was the much more common dream type ( $N = 128$ ). The percentage of war-related dreams per year decreased over time ( $r = -.318$ ,  $p = .067$ ; see Figure 1).

Most of the dreams included wars that were not specified ( $N = 98$ ), 29 dreams were related to World War II, three to the Gulf wars, two to the wars in former Yugoslavia, and three dreams addressed future wars, World War III or even World War IV.

Within the 128 dreams in which the dreamer was within a war, he often experiences death anxiety ( $N = 86$ ; 67.19%), other people died ( $N = 32$ ; 25.00%). He was a soldier himself in 31 dreams (24.22%) and he was wounded in four dreams (3.13%). Most often the war did not end within the dream ( $N = 111$ ; 86.72%), only in some dreams ( $N = 17$ ; 13.28%) the war ended before the dream ended.

### Dream examples

*Dream of being a soldier: "Berlin in World War II. I command a troop of young people. At first, we are in good spirits and leave the position. However, when things get serious, we return to the roof of the tower block. We all get scared, although we are given a small war newspaper (DIN A5, weekly) to spur us on. I can see a large cannon from a distance. 'I wonder who it's from,' I ask. A huge cannon shot hits the first floor and sets the building on fire. There's actually no chance of escaping, as there are*

*enemies everywhere. I'm doing the math when I see that firefighters have put a turntable ladder up, right next to me. I call out to the others and swing myself onto the ladder, which is now swaying dangerously as the building is about to collapse. Only one of the group makes it. We are lucky at the bottom, we find a car in which a dog is being put into a liquid to combat an animal epidemic. The owner had initially hidden the animal, so we managed to get in the car to safety. The others of our troop have died."*

*Dream of war in relation to media: "I come early in the morning to shower with the others before going swimming. I don't swim myself. I park my bike in the lobby and go into the changing room. For the others, it's a school lesson, the second, at half past eight. It's bad if someone is more than five minutes late. Later it's all about the Gulf War. The Iraqis have rejected the ultimatum; there will be a tougher war. The media have edited massive exaggerations: Reports of the Iraqis taking Warsaw or the Rhineland. Film clips in which the Iraqis fight the defending soldiers with hypermodern weapons, laser beams and beaming devices. I think it's pretty harsh that the media do this, but I'm also glad that it's not reality."*

*Dream of World War II: "World War II. I walk past a building complex that is being stormed by German soldiers (old building). Many atrocities were committed against their own civilian population, innocent people were killed. I can hardly comprehend it. I'm walking along a path and the soldiers are on my right, firing on and storming the building. There are other civilians on the path. I reach a church that is overcrowded because many people are spending the night there. The night is over and some leave. I'm in the huge church and talk to a priest. I don't want to say too much about myself, as I've only just slipped into the role of a Catholic priest (including my appearance). I think about the motivation to help, the vocation. However, as the two of them will remain in contact, it might be noticeable that I say things that the real priest doesn't see that way. That's why I try to do small talk only."*

*Dream (being wounded): "I set off across the countryside with a small group of people. The mood is good at first. Then we come across another larger group. We have to fight one of their tribe who wants to attack us. I'm pretty daring, I have a dog that can assess the situation. But, here they come, overpowering, with horses and better weapons, bursting out of the forest. Some of us aim our bows and arrows at them. I run to the edge of the forest and try to shoot one, but the small rifle with the funnel barrel doesn't work. The enemy begs me not to kill them, etc., but then he points his machine gun at me and pulls the trigger. He hits me several times in the stomach area; it hurts like hell. I sink to the ground. He comes closer, I think he's going to stab me, but I beat him to it, badly injured, and he sinks to the ground too. Another enemy sees this and chops off my arm. That also hurts like hell. I awake, before being dead."*

*Dream (nuclear war): "Catastrophe. War, World War, nuclear threat. The houses near the river are endangered by the water. They will soon collapse. I've tied up my bundle, I live in the one apartment building. There's a lot I'm taking with me. Only I am quite sure that the house will collapse. The other people still walking around tend to belittle it. I go down from the second floor of my house and visit Be-*

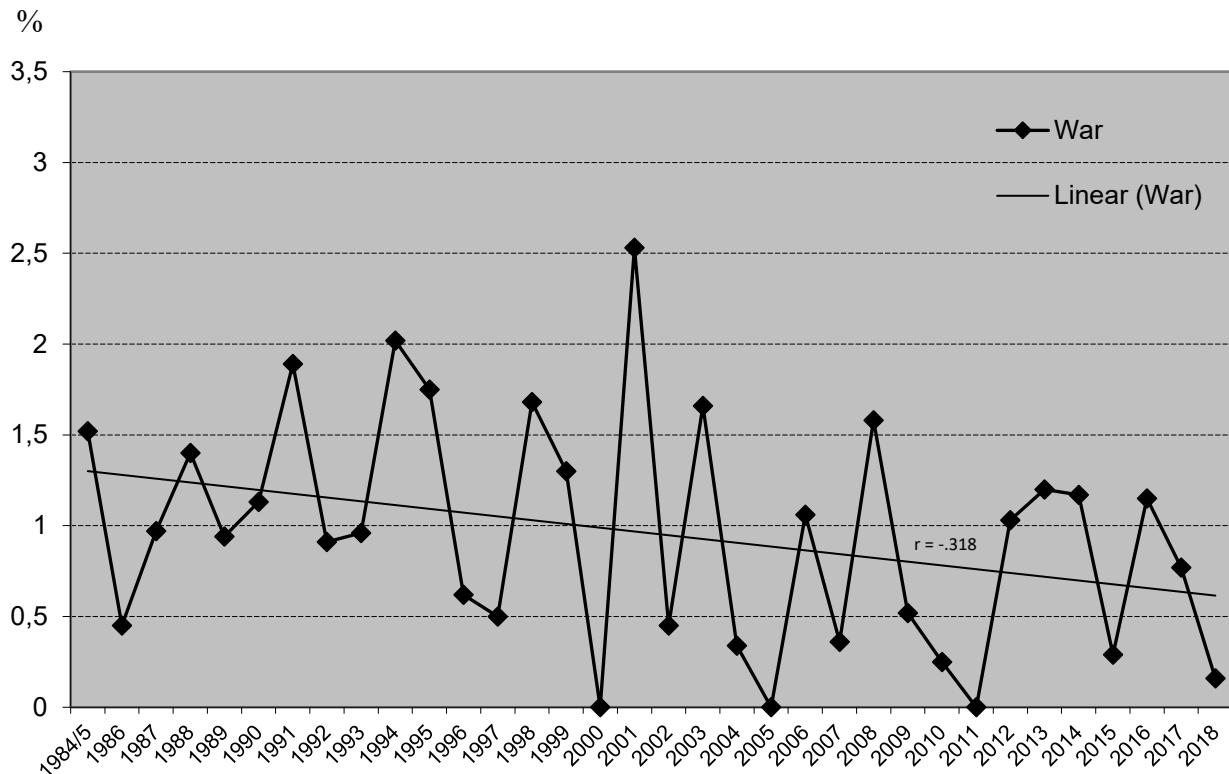


Figure 1. War-related dreams per year.

ate, who has the office in the neighboring building. She is employed to take calls from five different colored phones. She placates people, puts them off, doesn't know anything. I say goodbye to her, go downstairs, it's very intense, she's very close to me, she calls after me again, something like "I love you." (Not clear, but the direction.) It gives me a little pang, what will happen to her. As I enter my house, I see a father and his son opening two cans of Coke that have been forgotten. Unpleasant people. Upstairs, I think about whether I should take another set of sweets with me, there are plenty of them. Chocolate bars etc. But, I don't want to. I take my backpack and leave. I think about whether it's any good because of the nuclear contamination, but I don't want to be buried here under rubble. I am going outside."

#### 4. Discussion

The present findings indicate that war dreams do occur in persons who were not directly exposed to war (currently or in the past). As expected, the frequency of war dreams was considerable lower compared to persons with war experiences (Barrett & Behbehani, 2003; Bulkeley, 2004; Qouta et al., 2016; Rogowska & Pavlova, 2023; Schredl & Piel, 2006). References to specific wars that occurred during the period the dream diary was kept were rare, indicated that war-related media content might have an effect on dreams on persons in countries far from the war zone (see also dream example about war and media), but the effect seems rather small. Thus, the question remains why war dreams occur: Are they related to war-related worries and/or are metaphorical and dramatized version of personal issues?

The major limitation of the study is that the findings are based on only one male participant. However, other studies also indicated that war-related dreams occur in persons who never experienced war (Schredl & Pallmer, 1998; Schredl & Piel, 2006) and, thus, the occurrence of war-related dreams in persons without actual war experiences seems to be valid. However, one might speculate whether the content of war dreams might be different in other persons, e.g., whether women would also dream quite often about being a soldier. A clear advantage is that the analysis was performed after the dreams were recorded, that is, the dreamer was not biased towards war-related dream themes.

Overall, the frequency of war dreams in this dream series is relatively low (about 1%); a much lower figure compared to persons who actually experiencing or experienced war (Barrett & Behbehani, 2003; Bulkeley, 2004; Qouta et al., 2016; Rogowska & Pavlova, 2023; Schredl & Piel, 2006). Only a very small percentage of these war dreams (3.7%) were related to wars in other countries that occurred during the dream diary period (Gulf wars, wars in former Yugoslavia). This might indicate that media reports have affected the dreams in this person; supported by research demonstrating that media have a considerable effect on dreams (Moverley, Schredl, & Görizt, 2018). Based on this line of thinking, the decline of war-related dreams over the years might parallel the fact that wars close to home (within Europe) occurred at the beginning of the diary period but not since then. Within this context, it would be interesting to study whether war-related dreams are increasing in European countries due to worries associated with the war of Russia on the Ukraine; see findings in Poland (Kamierczak et al., 2023). This would support the assumption that some

war-related dreams might reflect worries about possible wars in the future (see dreams about World War III and even World War IV).

Most war dreams did include wars without any specification or World War II. One could argue that World War II dreams might also be an indicator of media effects including films/books etc. on the dreamer as World War II is, of course, still an important topic in Germany. However, being a soldier in World War II (see dream example) would not directly fit into this line of thinking. This would lead to the idea that war-related dreams are – like other dreams – metaphorical (cf. Malinowski & Horton, 2015); the theory would be that a waking-life topic is depicted in a very graphic and dramatized way in dreams (Schredl, 2015). An example would be that a dream of being chased depicts the basic pattern of avoidance behavior (having fear and not confronting the challenge) in a very exaggerated way (Schredl, 2015). This exaggeration can also be seen in the war dreams in this series, in about two thirds of the dreams, the dreamer experienced the fear of being killed; a fear that did not occur in this intensity in the dreamer's waking life. In addition, being a soldier within the dream is also an exaggeration, as the dreamer was never trained as soldier. The fact that the conflict within the dream is not solved also points in the direction of dramatization: "It never ends." In order to test this theory, it would be necessary to correlate waking-life anxieties with the occurrence of war-related dreams – similar to a study by Schredl (2008) who was able to demonstrate that falling dreams (also dreams that feature death anxiety) was associated with higher neuroticism scores.

To summarize, war-related dreams can reflect war-related media reports, war-related worries, and/or topics of the person's life (in a dramatized way). Even though many dream researchers (Domhoff, 2022; Malinowski, 2021; Schredl, 2018) focused on the idea that dreams mainly reflect personal concerns and waking-life experiences of the dreamer, there is an increasing number of studies showing that political issues, e.g., international conflicts, politicians, fraud, political scandals, can also be incorporated into dreams (Kern et al., 2014; Noveski, Schredl, & Göritz, 2016). It would be very interesting to study in more detail how political topics like worries associated with climate change (Bergquist & Warshaw, 2019) or war-related worries (European Commission, 2022) affect dreams. In this case, dream research can expand the methodology of political psychology.

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