early twentieth century reveal the empowering effect of lifelong intimate relationships that encompassed both a female lover and a support network of lesbian couples. Other men and women collapsed under the weight of social opprobrium, engaging in violent antisocial behavior, falling into insanity, or delivering themselves into the hands of doctors in the hope of a cure. In trying to maneuver the narrow space between extreme self-hate and external troubles, the majority probably managed to escape the latter, but at the price of internalizing a negative view of their sexual identity.  

For some, particularly gay men and women in the largest cities, the 1920s and 1930s brought a modest easing of their difficulties. There was more open discussion of sexuality in sophisticated circles; and in cities such as New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, a small but stable group life was forming. Neither of these developments ameliorated society's hostility to homosexuality, but at least the chances of sharing one's predicament were increasing. Although participation in an urban gay subculture remained exceptional in the period between the two world wars, it suggested the shape of things to come.

On the eve of World War II, contradictory forces structured the phenomenon of same-sex eroticism in America. On the one hand, cumulative historical processes—the spread of capitalist economic relations, industrialism, and the socialization of production, and urban growth—were shaping a social context in which homosexual desire might congeal into a personal identity. As men and women who were inclined toward their own sex took on a self-definition as homosexual or lesbian, they searched for others like themselves and gradually created a group life. On the other hand, a pervasive hostility, expressed through religion, law, and science, kept homosexuality submerged and constrained gay people from openly acknowledging their presence in society. Restrictions on public discussion of homosexual eroticism inhibited coming out, making it difficult not only to formulate a self-definition as gay but also, more importantly, to locate the inchoate subculture of lesbians and homosexuals. For men and women who surmounted these hurdles and managed to stumble upon collective manifestations of gay life, the prevailing ideology imposed a burden of self-hate and encouraged them to interpret their sexuality in individualistic terms as an aberration, a flaw, or a personal failing. Few would have predicted the launching at mid-century of a gay emancipation movement.


FORGING A GROUP IDENTITY: 
World War II and the Emergence of an Urban Gay Subculture


The mobilization of American society for victory during World War II seriously upset patterns of daily life. Following in the wake of a depression that saw both marriage and birth rates drop precipitously, the war further disrupted family stability and social relations between the sexes. It uprooted tens of millions of American men and women, many of them young, and deposited them in a variety of nonfamilial, often sex-segregated environments. Men left home as conscripts or volunteers to spend years in the armed forces, while millions of women entered the paid labor force for the first time. The relocation of civilians of both sexes to the burgeoning centers of defense industry typically involved a shift from rural and small-town residences to impersonal metropolitan areas. Young adults who in peacetime might have moved directly from their parents’ home into one with their spouse experienced instead years of living away from kin and away from settings where easygoing intimacy with the opposite sex led to permanent ties. Families endured prolonged separations, divorce and desertion occurred more frequently, and the trend toward greater sexual permissiveness accelerated.

In releasing large numbers of Americans from their homes and neighborhoods, World War II created a substantially new "erotic situation" conducive both to the articulation of a homosexual identity and to the more rapid evolution of a gay subculture. For some gay men and women, the war years simply strengthened a way of living they had previously chosen. People who had already come to a self-definition as homosexual or lesbian found greater opportunities during the war to meet others like themselves. At the same time, those who experienced strong same-sex attraction but felt inhibited from acting upon it suddenly possessed relatively more freedom to enter into homosexual relationships. The unusual conditions of a mobilized society allowed homosexual desire to be expressed more easily in action. For many gay Americans, World War II created something of a nationwide coming out experience.2

I

Men and women felt the impact of the war in different ways. For men, the demands of the armed forces shaped their experiences. The Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 led to the immediate registration of more than 16,400,000 males between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-five. As teenagers came of age and the limits were extended to include both older and younger men, others came into contact with the military apparatus. At their peak strength the services held more than 12 million men. Although the military cast a wide net in order to meet its manpower needs, it preferred men who were young, single or with few dependents: a population group likely to include a disproportionate number of gay men.

The intrusion of the military into the lives of American men brought with it questions concerning homosexuality. From the beginning of the war, psychiatrists examined potential inductees to weed out the unfit. Since a history of homosexual behavior or even tendencies toward it constituted grounds for exclusion, medical personnel interrogated recruits about their sexual inclinations. In an era when silence most typically characterized society's approach to same-sex eroticism, the military medical examination was a significant exception. For gay and nongay men alike, it represented the first and perhaps the only time that they faced such inquiries in a public setting.3

Although intended in part to keep homosexuals out of the armed forces, psychiatric screening proved relatively ineffective in doing so. Given the patriotic fervor that the war elicited and the stigma attached to a rejection for neuropsychiatric reasons, few gay men willingly declared themselves in order to avoid service. Moreover, the medical questioning averaged only a few minutes in duration and depended upon the most superficial signs of homosexuality. As their means of identification, doctors often relied on body type or recruits' recognition of homosexual slang. In general, only the most effeminate, those with arrest records, or those especially worried about the strain of living in an all-male environment with stringent sanctions against homosexual behavior found themselves rejected because of their sexuality. In evaluating the success of the screening process, Doctor William Menninger concluded that, "for every homosexual who was referred or came to the Medical Department, there were five or ten who never were detected." Other authorities estimated that the proportion who served without discovery was much higher.4

Even for those gay men who slipped by the psychiatrists, the experience brought their sexuality into bold relief. Anticipation of the examination bred anxious introspection, and afterward the screening remained a vivid memory. Troubled by his sexual inclinations, Merle Miller had made strenuous efforts at concealment, including participation in attacks upon "queers" in his campus newspaper, The Daily Iowan, to divert suspicions. The induction procedure worried him. "I was afraid I would never get into the army," he recalled, "but after the psychiatrist tapped me on the knee with a little hammer and asked how I felt about girls, before I really had a chance to answer, he said 'Next' and I was being sworn in." The brief encounter stayed with him, however, and Miller spent his four years in service carefully masking his identity. For homosexual soldiers, induction into the military forced a sudden confrontation with their sexuality that highlighted the stigma attached to it and kept it a matter of special concern.5

The sex-segregated nature of the armed forces raised homosexuality closer to the surface for all military personnel. Soldiers indulged in buffoonery, aping in exaggerated form the social stereotype of the homosexual, as a means of releasing the sexual tensions of life in the barracks. Such behavior was so common that a towel company used the image of a GI mincing with a towel draped around his waist to advertise its product. Army canteens witnessed men dancing with one another, an activity that in peacetime subjected homosexuals to arrest. Crowded into port cities, men on leave or those waiting to be shipped overseas shared beds in YMCA's and slept in each other's arms in parks or in the aisles of movie theaters that stayed open to house them. Living


in close quarters, not knowing whether they would make it through the war, and depending on one another for survival, men of whatever sexual persuasion formed intense emotional attachments. In this setting, gay men could find one another without attracting undue attention and perhaps even encounter sympathy and acceptance by their heterosexual fellows. Bob Ruffing, a chief petty officer in the navy, recalled the ease with which he met other homosexuals:

When I first got into the navy—in the recreation hall, for instance—there'd be eye contact, and pretty soon you'd get to know one or two people and kept branching out. All of a sudden you had a vast network of friends, usually through this eye contact thing, some through outright cruising. They could get away with it in that atmosphere. [Emphasis supplied.]

At a basic training camp in the Midwest, several young homosexual soldiers in their teens and early twenties quickly formed a tight circle of friendship that solidified their emerging gay identities and sustained them through the stress of the ensuing years. Though the military officially maintained an anti-homosexual stance, wartime conditions nonetheless offered a protective covering that facilitated interaction among gay men.4

The diary of Donald Vining reveals how the war years affected male homosexual life. Born in 1917, the precocious Vining accepted his homosexuality early in his adolescence, yet when the war started he had had few homosexual experiences and had made only one gay friend. A pacifist by inclination, after much soul-searching he finally chose to admit his homosexuality to his draft board, since his mother needed his earnings, and they could not afford the cost of his placement in a camp for conscientious objectors. Early in the war, Vining hinted at its sexual significance. "The war is a tragedy to my mind and soul," he confided to his diary, "but to my physical being, it's a memorable experience. I can understand how Walt Whitman felt when nursing during the Civil War." Moving from his small-town residence in New Jersey to New York City, he found employment at Sloane House, a YMCA on 34th Street, and worked as a volunteer in the Stage Door Canteen. Diary entries record erotic encounters in New York and for a time in Los Angeles.

Vining had affairs with soldiers, sailors, and marines as well as with civilians. Many of them took place at Sloane House, where 60 percent of the residents were military personnel on leave; but he also met men at the canteen, in movie theaters on 42d Street, in Pershing Square in Los Angeles and Central Park in New York, on the street, and in gay bars filled with men in uniform. Many of his partners were self-acknowledged homosexuals, who told Vining stories about their gay friends and lovers in service; others, usually heterosexually inclined, willingly shared Vining's bed for a night of physical intimacy. The war years drastically altered the shape of his life. By 1945 he had an active sex life, several gay friends, and knowledge of homosexual meeting places and of a spectrum of gay lives; and he was embarking on a relationship that would become permanent. His diary suggests that countless other gay men underwent equally significant transformations.

Although fewer than 150,000 women served in the armed forces during World War II, the military played an especially prominent role in fostering a lesbian identity and creating friendship networks among gay women. The Well of Loneliness, already a classic among many self-acknowledged lesbians, created an almost magical aura around military life through its description of the experience of Stephen Gordon, the book's heroine, in the women's ambulance corps in World War I. In an era that frequently associated homosexuality with the reversal of gender roles, the Women's Army Corps became the almost quintessential lesbian institution. As its official historian ruefully admitted, the WACS labored under a "public impression that a women's corps was the ideal breeding ground" for lesbianism. Ironically, military policy contributed to a situation that it took pains to deny. Recruitment centered on a population group statistically likely to include a disproportionate number of lesbians and women whose sexuality was most malleable: in mid-1943, 70 percent of the women in the WACS were single; 83 percent were childless; 40 percent were under twenty-five years of age, and 67 percent were under thirty. Anxious to counter its reputation of moral laxity, the military sought to avoid unwanted pregnancies by keeping its female personnel segregated, often having women-only nights at canteens or providing separate space for women to socialize. A training manual for officers praised the desire for intense "comradeship" in service as "one of the finest relationships" possible for women. But with emotional attachment serving as a powerful stimulus to female eroticism, such bonding might lead toward unintended results. Taken together, popular stereotypes, army policy, and the special conditions of military life may have kept women of confirmed heterosexual persuasion away from enlistment, while drawing in an unusually large proportion of lesbians.4

Pat Bond’s experience illustrates the configuration of forces that drew lesbians to the military. Raised in Davenport, Iowa, she became aware of “gay feelings” while in high school. She “practiced” necking with a girl friend, developed a crush on her French teacher, and then suffered through an unrequited love for a somewhat older woman who soon married. Having read The Well of Loneliness, and weighed down by what she called “the certain knowledge that most gay women have: that you are forever alone,” Bond decided to “escape into the Women’s Army Corps.” She received a taste of what was in store for her at the Blackhawk Hotel, where the recruiting sergeant reminded her of all her “old gym teachers in drag. Stockings, little earrings, her hair slicked back and very daintily done so you couldn’t tell she was a dyke, but I knew!” Many of the women whom she saw there were extremely “masculine” in appearance and dress. The army psychiatrists asked recruits whether they had ever been in love with a woman, but denial brought the questioning to an end. It did not take Bond long to find other gay women. During her tour in the Pacific, most of her friends and associates, including several officers, were lesbians. From the “certain knowledge” that her homosexuality doomed her to isolation, Bond had moved in short order to participation in a community of gay women.9

The war also created pressures that temporarily suspended the normally harsh military attitude toward female homosexuals. Officers in the WACS received careful instructions not to engage in “witchhunting or speculating,” to ignore “hearsay,” and to approach the problem with an “attitude of fairness and tolerance.” A training manual eschewed menacing stereotypes and minimized the differences between heterosexuals and lesbians. “They are exactly as you and I, except that they participate in sexual gratification with members of their own sex.” When incontrovertible evidence of homosexual activity did surface, officers were advised to counsel rather than punish, and only those “not amenable to successful guidance” were to receive discharges. Sometimes officers ignored even these directives. Rita Laporte joined the WACS in 1943. Previously she had viewed her sexual desires as “criminal,” but she reevaluated them in the service when she fell in love with another woman and her passion was reciprocated. After her lover’s transfer to a distant base and her own failure to obtain an assignment in the same location, Laporte tried to secure a discharge by confessing her homosexuality to her commanding officer. The tactic failed. “We argued. I pleaded. But it was useless,” she recalled. An acknowledged lesbian, she remained in the service for the duration of the war. The army needed women in its ranks. It could not afford either the loss of personnel or the scandal that would result from stringent enforcement of its own regulations. For a time, many women in the military enjoyed a measure of safety that permitted their sexuality to survive relatively unharassed.10

The military provoked dramatic, intense changes in the sexual lives of many of its female recruits, but the economy’s production requirements affected far more women. The female paid labor force rose by more than 6 million during the war years. For the first time, white married women and mothers of young children left their homes in large numbers to take remunerative employment. Two million women filled jobs, normally available only to men, in war-related heavy industries; they crowded the expanded payrolls of factories, offices, and retailers that traditionally employed females. Women made up the bulk of the civilians who migrated during the war. They moved to distant cities, away from the watchful eyes of male kin, lived in makeshift residences that accommodated the influx of laborers, worked night shifts, and in general engaged in a range of activities that marked their independence and signaled their departure from the normative female role.11

Focusing attention on the large-scale entry of white married women into the work force and on Rosie the Riveter, who labored alongside men in typically male endeavors, has obscured the significance of the home front experience for women of lesbian inclination. With millions of males in the armed forces and with many more women earning wages, a female world beyond the confines of household and family spread enormously during the war years. Some women assembled aircraft and built ships, but the numbers employed in traditionally female work places, in clerical jobs and consumer industries, showed a greater absolute increase. Women who relocated to answer the call of an impersonal labor market often found residence in boarding-houses, trailer parks, and apartment complexes filled with other women. The dearth of young men that conscription imposed necessarily encouraged many women to structure their social lives around their female companions. This shift toward sex segregation may or may not have affected the erotic focus of women with a long history of heterosexuality. But, by expanding the social space in which women pre-dominated, the war opened possibilities for lesbians to meet at the same time that it protected all-female environments from the taint of deviance.12

One woman who benefited from the temporary changes induced by the war was “Lisa Ben.” Growing up on a ranch in northern California during the 1920s and 1930s, she lived in relative isolation, with the nearest neighbor a quarter mile away. In high school she developed a “mad crush” on a girl friend


10. War Department, Sex Hygiene Course, pp. 24–28; Rita Laporte, “Living Propaganda,” Ladder, June 1965, pp. 21–22; and Bérubé, “Marching to a Different Drummer.”


12. On the expansion of female sex-segregated occupations, see Milkman, “Women’s Work and the Economic Crisis.”
but was "too naive" at the time to appreciate its implications for her sexuality. The war gave her new opportunities for social activities. "I used to hitchhike to San Francisco to see a movie," she recalled. "Nobody thought of hitchhiking in the terms they do today. There were no men around then, it was wartime, and so I'd wait till a carload of women came by and I'd extend my thumb." Episodes like these made her desirous of more freedom from parental control.

During the last year of the war, Lisa Ben moved to Los Angeles, found work as a secretary, and lived in a boarding house populated by women. There she made her first acquaintance with lesbians. She and her neighbors, she reminisced,

were all sunbathing on the garage roof, and they got to talking . . . and I thought, "Gee, I wonder if these are some of the girls that I would very dearly love to meet"—because by that time I realized . . . exactly what I want . . . I started talking and finally they asked me, "Do you like boys, or do you go out strictly with girls?" and I said, "If I had my ration's I'd go out strictly with girls." . . . It was like a Victorian melodrama!

Her new friends took her to a women's softball game and soon brought her to lesbian bars in Los Angeles—The If Club, The Flamingo, and another on Pico Boulevard. That, she said, "was when I met lots of girls."11

These new opportunities coexisted with old forms of trouble. In the course of the war, Donald Vining was arrested twice and spent four nights in jail, though he was guilty of nothing but sitting on a park bench. "It was obvious that [the police] just had to make a few arrests to look busy," he protested in his diary. "It was a travesty of justice and the workings of the police department." Active cruising carried other risks. One sexual partner ("trade," as Vining described the man) robbed him, while on another occasion he narrowly avoided serious injury when someone tried to assault him after engaging in sex with him. Pat Bond too experienced good and bad. Stationed in Japan among the occupying forces in the months after the war, she found herself swept up in a massive purge of lesbians. Bond used the escape hatch of a marriage of "convenience" to a homosexual to obtain a speedy separation from the service, but scores of women whom she knew fell victim to the witchhunt. Throughout the war and its aftermath, gays continued to face the laws, attitudes, and dangers that ordinarily plagued their existence.12

Heterosexuality, moreover, continued as the predominant form of sexual expression. For every GI away from home who experienced a same-sex erotic relationship, many more turned to women, whether prostitutes or women whom they met during leaves at home and abroad. Pinups of Hollywood stars like Betty Grable, Lana Turner, and Rita Hayworth provided the material for a rich heterosexual fantasy life. Correspondence kept alive ties with fiancées and wives. Many women also remained faithful to husbands and sweethearts, while some took advantage of their independence and mobility to initiate new intimate relationships with men. Others no doubt simply refrained from erotic activity. Though the war disrupted old sexual ways, the change cannot primarily be defined as a shift from heterosexuality to homosexuality.

Yet, despite both the persistence of antihomosexual oppression and the continuing dominance of male/female sexuality, the social conditions of wartime profoundly affected same-sex eroticism. The war temporarily weakened the patterns of daily life that channeled men and women toward heterosexuality and inhibited homosexual expression. Some Americans could react to the new situations in which they found themselves by embarking upon gay relationships. For men and women conscious of a strong attraction to their own sex but constrained by their milieu from acting upon it, the war years eased the coming out process and facilitated entry into the gay world. Finally, the war allowed men and women who already identified themselves as homosexuals or lesbians to strengthen their ties to a gay life.

II

The return of peace could neither undo nor immediately halt these changes. Vining, for instance, remained in New York, and Lisa Ben in Los Angeles. Excited by "how open" gay life was in San Francisco when he passed through during the war, Bob Ruffing settled there after his discharge from the navy. Rather than return to Iowa, Pat Bond also sank roots in San Francisco, along with many of the other women ejected from the WACS. During the day she worked in a factory alongside other lesbians and at night participated in the subculture of lesbian bars. Vining's lover-to-be, a man in his mid-thirties, abandoned his sexually ascetic prewar existence. On joining the service, he left the small Maine community where his Yankee ancestors had resided for generations. After demobilization, he moved to New York. Three years away from home and savings from his military pay gave him the freedom to embark upon a new life, and he plunged eagerly into the gay social activities that the city offered. Many other homosexuals and lesbians who had savored the pleasures of self-discovery and companionship during the war also found ways in peacetime to maintain their ties with their own kind. In particular, they swelled the gay population of port cities or centers of war industry, such as Los Angeles, New York, and the San Francisco Bay area, to which the war years had exposed them.13

The transformations induced by the war added up to more than the sum of the individual lives involved. Homosexuals and lesbians in association with


The Homosexual in America


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Introduction

The term "homosexual" is often used to describe individuals who engage in sexual activities that are not considered normative by society. However, the concept of homosexuality has evolved significantly over the years, and its definition and understanding have changed greatly. This document explores the various aspects of homosexuality in America, providing a comprehensive overview of the subject.

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Conclusion

The understanding and acceptance of homosexuality in America continue to evolve, reflecting broader societal changes. This document highlights the complexities and challenges faced by homosexual individuals and the broader society in embracing diversity and equality.
society's perception of its own behavior. Nothing like them had ever appeared before. Using the technique of face-to-face interviews, Alfred Kinsey and a small, carefully trained staff collected the erotic histories of more than 10,000 white American men and women. Scientists detailed for America, in charts, graphs and tables, the frequency and variety of its sexual experiences—inside and outside of marriage; alone and with others; in youth and old age; with the same sex, the opposite sex, and animals. Kinsey treated his sensitive subject in the matter-of-fact manner more typical of the bug collector than of the writer on sex. Although his data challenged many dearly held, almost sacred beliefs about American manhood and womanhood, the stance of dispassionate scientific objectivity that Kinsey adopted allowed him to assert that his book offered value-free facts devoid of moral content.20

No other books on sex in the twentieth century had received as wide a circulation as the Kinsey reports. After commissioning a market analysis of the book's potential audience, the publisher ordered a first run of 5,000 copies of Sexual Behavior in the Human Male. But the huge demand for the 804-page tome brought the number of copies in print to 185,000 within two weeks of its official publication date of January 3, 1948. Both volumes spent several months high on the New York Times bestseller list, and each sold almost a quarter of a million copies. The male study stimulated more than 200 major symposia among professionals in 1948 and 1949, while more than fifty other books capitalized on the notoriety of the Kinsey reports. The Indiana zoologist appeared on the cover of Time, newspapers made headlines out of critiques of his work, and a Hollywood producer tried to secure movie rights to the scientific treatises. "Kinsey" became a household word, almost synonymous with sex itself and symbolic of what seemed to be a relentless push toward the liberation of human sexuality from the constraining morality of a Victorian past.21

For those who explored behind the headlines, the picture Kinsey provided of the sexuality of ordinary white Americans must have been startling. Among men he found that masturbation was a nearly universal practice, that virtually all had established a regular sexual outlet by the age of fifteen, that half of the husbands in the survey engaged in extramarital intercourse, and that 95 percent of white American males had violated the law in some way at least once along the way to an orgasm. After studying the sexual experiences of women, Kinsey concluded that, contrary to prevailing belief, females were no slower in responding to physical stimuli than males. Ineffective techniques of male partners, rather than innate female biological characteristics, accounted for the differences between the responses of men and women. He labeled the vaginal orgasm, identified by psychoanalysts as the mark of female sexual maturity, a "biologic impossibility"; minimized the significance of the penis in women's sexual arousal; and asserted that male and female orgasms were essentially similar physiological phenomena. Kinsey reported that 90 percent of American white women had engaged in premarital petting, half had had premarital intercourse, and 25 percent of American wives had had extramarital sexual relations. Moreover, the study identified a trend toward greater incidence of each of these activities among younger women. Kinsey presented all of his findings in dry, unsensational prose, without a trace of moral disapproval for the sexually active, regardless of their source of sexual outlet.22

Of all Kinsey's statistics, none challenged conventional wisdom as much as his data on homosexuality. He uncovered an incidence of homosexual behavior that dwarfed all previous estimates of its prevalence. Among males he found that 50 percent admitted erotic responses to their own sex, 37 percent had had at least one postadolescent homosexual experience leading to orgasm, 4 percent were exclusively homosexual throughout adulthood, and, in one out of eight cases, same-sex eroticism predominated for at least a three-year period. For women the proportions, though lower, still revealed extensive lesbian activity. Twenty-eight percent responded erotically to their own sex, and 13 percent had experienced orgasm with another woman, while the percentage of women either exclusively or primarily homosexual in orientation was between one-third and one-half of the corresponding male figures. The data disputed the common assumption that all adults were permanently and exclusively either homosexual or heterosexual and revealed instead a fluidity that belied medical theories about fixed orientations. To highlight these variations, Kinsey constructed a seven-point rating scale, ranging from exclusive heterosexuality at one end to exclusive homosexual behavior at the other.23

Kinsey's findings on homosexuality departed so drastically from traditional notions that he felt compelled to comment on them. In his male study Kinsey acknowledged that he and his colleagues "were totally unprepared" for such high incidence data and "were repeatedly assailed with doubts" about their validity. Checking and cross-checking their tabulations only widened the distance separating their results from the estimations of others. "Whether the histories were taken in one large city or another," Kinsey wrote,


23. For the findings on homosexual behavior, see Kinsey, SBHM, pp. 610–66; and SBHF, pp. 446–501.
whether they were taken in large cities, in small towns, or in rural areas, whether they came from one college or from another, a church school or a state university or some private institution, whether they came from one part of the country or from another, the incidence data on the homosexual have been more or less the same. ... Persons with homosexual histories are to be found in every age group, in every social level, in every conceivable occupation, in cities and on farms, and in the most remote areas of the country. 24

The evidence from personal interviewing forced a repudiation of physical stereotyping, while the information volunteered by many male respondents with homosexual histories indicated that a dearth of information about where to make contacts severely limited their sexual activity. The prevalence of homosexual behavior “in spite of the severity of the penalties that our Anglo-American culture has placed upon it through the centuries” led Kinsey to suggest that “such activity would appear in the histories of a much larger portion of the population if there were no social restraints.” Dismissing views of homosexual behavior as abnormal, unnatural, or neurotic, he concluded that it represented instead an “inherent physiologic capacity.” 25

Not surprisingly, Kinsey came under heavy fire from many quarters. Some critics disputed the adequacy of his sample or expressed doubts about the reliability of his statistical method. Others, like the literary scholar and humanist Lionel Trilling, dissented in a reasoned way from what appeared to be a two-dimensional approach that reduced human sexuality to an “outlet,” something one could comprehend through numbers alone. But much of the reaction took the form of moral outrage. Harold Dodds, president of Princeton University, likened the male report to “the work of small boys writing dirty words on fences”; the head of Union Theological Seminary in New York, Henry Van Dusen, viewed Kinsey’s statistics as evidence of a “degradation in American morality approximating the worst decadence of the Roman era.” Both volumes aroused indignation, but the female study unleashed the most intense emotional outbursts. Louis Heller, a New York congressman, charged Kinsey with “hurling the insult of the century against our mothers, wives, daughters and sisters” and, though he had not read the book, urged the postmaster general to ban it from the mails. Kinsey stood accused of aiding world communism, and in 1954 a congressional committee singled out the reports as examples of scientific research that produced “extremely grave” social effects. 26

25. Ibid., pp. 637, 632, 659–60; and SBHF, p. 447.

Forging a Group Identity

No amount of vilification, however, could erase the impact of Kinsey’s work on postwar American culture. He had mapped the unsurveyed sexual landscape of the nation. Kinsey provided the most complete, detailed picture of white American sexuality yet recorded. By revealing the wide divergence between ideals and actual behavior, he informed ordinary men and women that their private “transgressions” marked them as neither deviant nor exceptional. In this respect, Kinsey implicitly encouraged a revision of existing norms to correspond to common practice. Opinion polls indicated that his research met with approval from the vast majority of Americans who believed that sexual behavior was a fit subject for scientific investigation. Newspapers discovered that articles about sex did not provoke an outraged response from the majority of their readers. Ironically, the barrage of criticism as much as the reports themselves hastened the demise of Victorian taboos that still limited public discourse about the erotic life of men and women. The outpouring of words about the reports legitimated sexuality as a topic of discussion in the popular, mass-circulation press. 27

Kinsey’s studies had contradictory effects upon attitudes toward homosexuals and lesbians. Kinsey himself used his statistics to suggest that such a common sexual activity ought not be punished. Resting on the misinformed view that homosexual behavior was confined to a small number of individuals, society’s treatment of homosexuals, he argued, was socially destructive. As with the rest of his findings, his data on homosexuality seeped into popular consciousness. At the time, however, the information served not to ameliorate hostility toward gay men and women, but to magnify suddenly the proportions of the danger they allegedly posed. Yet in the long run the information provided by Kinsey would become an important element in the rationale for law reform. 28

Among homosexuals and lesbians themselves, Kinsey had a more clearly beneficial impact. Scientific evidence appeared to confirm what many gay people in the 1940s were experiencing—the sense of belonging to a group. Moreover, by revealing that millions of Americans exhibited a strong erotic interest in their own sex, the reports implicitly encouraged those still struggling in isolation against their sexual preference to accept their homosexual inclinations and search for sexual comrades. In effect, Kinsey’s work gave an added push at a crucial time to the emergence of an urban gay subculture. Kinsey also provided ideological ammunition that lesbians and homosexuals might use once they began to fight for equality.

IV
The disruptive social conditions induced by World War II did not last long after demobilization. In the succeeding decade, personal life returned to time-honored patterns. After fifteen years of depression and war, many Americans wanted little more than to construct a tranquil family environment. Especially among the young, traditional sex roles were reasserted. GIs shed their khakis and became breadwinners as they took back the jobs that women had filled during the national emergency. Millions of men and women married. The birth rate, having declined for more than a century, shot upward as the war came to a close. Generous educational benefits and home-buying arrangements gave millions of veterans the wherewithal to marry and support a family at a younger age than usual. A barrage of propaganda from business and government informed women that, with the war ending, they must relinquish their places in the work force to make room for returning soldiers. Opinion surveys indicated that most women in heavy industry wanted to keep their jobs, yet employers routinely dismissed them in the months after VE Day. In the media, pictures of sparkling, well-equipped kitchens occupied by young mothers with babies in their arms replaced images of women in hard hats surrounded by heavy machinery. Popular psychology books and women's magazines equated femininity with marriage and motherhood. In the baby boom years of the late 1940s and 1950s, the man or woman choosing to pursue same-sex intimacy was more than ever going against the grain. The reaffirmation of normative gender roles and stable heterosexual relationships made those who lived outside them appear more clearly deviant.

Still, one can scarcely overestimate the significance of the 1940s in restructuring the social expression of same-sex eroticism. The war years allowed the almost imperceptible changes of several generations, during which a gay male and lesbian identity had slowly emerged, to coalesce into a qualitatively different form. A sexual and emotional life that gay men and women previously experienced mainly in individual terms suddenly became, for the war generation, a widely shared collective phenomenon.

World War II promoted this transformation not so much by permanently encouraging more homosexual behavior, a proposition that in any case would be impossible to prove, but by shifting its location and changing its context. As the Kinsey studies demonstrated, same-sex eroticism could be an exclusive lifetime commitment, the preferred form of sexuality for a few years, an occasional activity over decades, or a rare event. Because the war removed large numbers of men and women from familial—and familiar—environments, it freed homosexual eroticism from some of the structural restraints that made it appear marginal and isolated. Many of the nongay men with whom Donald Vining enjoyed physical intimacy during the war resumed a heterosexual existence in peacetime, but the occurrence of what for them was an unusual homosexual encounter intensified for men like Vining the sense of being gay. Millions of heterosexual women returned to a domestic environ-