

The Failed Reintegration of “War Cripples” after the Great War: The German Example

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Introduction¹

Disabled veterans had been a frequent occurrence in any postwar period, even though low standards in the treatment of wounded combatants and the ignorance and incompetence of medical practitioners reduced the chance for heavily wounded soldiers to survive and return home in times before the Scientific and Industrial Revolution. As a result, crippled and disabled veterans had been quite an oddity in pre-modern societies.² This changed in the course of the industrialization of warfare as the examples of the American Civil War, the Crimean War or other examples emphasize. The First World War or Great War was the crucial turning point, when field hospitals and rehabilitation clinics had to deal with an unprecedented number of bodily and mentally wounded and crippled soldiers. When thousands of these mutilated invalids returned from the battlefields, the relevant expert groups started to discuss the reintegration of these “cripples”. This chapter aims to exemplify the associated tasks, practices and the theoretical background of the protagonist by examining the utilization of photography as a didactical tool for the reintegration of disabled veterans in the German *Reich* during and after the Great War.

The Problem of “War Cripples”

From the very start of the Great War, when the German *Reich* attacked Belgium and even before the trench warfare at the Western Front began, masses of soldiers have been killed or wounded and their number even grew during the war when inhuman and hardheaded politicians and generals tried to overcome

1 The images related to the present chapter can be found at: <https://www.global-geschichte.de/publikationen/war-and-veterans/>.

2 Franz J. Lemmens, “Zur Invalidenversorgung unter Friedrich II von Preußen – Zwischen Notwendigkeit und Menschlichkeit,” *Wehrmedizinische Monatschrift* 4 (2013), 106.

the stalemate by simply repeating and enlarging dysfunctional strategical concepts. The resulting war invalids – or “war cripples” as they have been called by themselves and by the contemporaries – were not a totally new experience.³ Mutilated and burdened by post-traumatic mental wounds veterans returned home during all wars. With the growing centralization of Early Modern States, the responsibility to take care of these victims of warfare was no longer a central responsibility of families, communities or religious institutions, but was occupied by the state.⁴ Especially belligerent leaders invested in the social security of their soldiers and the institutionalization of their well-being. This was a phenomenon closely connected to the emergence of standing armies.⁵ With impressive buildings with accordingly generous financing like the Hôtel Royal des Invalides in Paris from 1670⁶ or an elaborated pension scheme like in England from 1593⁷ the governing elites tried to manipulate the public opinion and the perception of the state among their soldiers in a positive way by emphasizing the patriarchic responsibility to care for those, who gave their health for their nation. But very soon these institutions and practices proofed to be unfit to actually solve the problems of poverty, alcoholism and the resulting social instability among veterans.

This can be interpreted as direct results of the growth of armies in the course of the changes in Modern Warfare. In states like France, England and Prussia welfare institutions were founded to house and care for veterans and the possibility to smoothen the reintegration of veterans into work life through stately interventionism was frequently used, but even these early attempts on a small scale – in relation to the developments in the 20th Century – weren't capable to integrate all veterans. Furthermore, the potential danger of large groups of dismissed soldiers has been a concern for the authorities.⁸

3 Jörn Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora: Geschichte des Ersten Weltkrieges* (München: Beck, 2014), 574.

4 Martin Guddat, *Handbuch zur preußischen Militärgeschichte 1688-1786* (Berlin: Mittler u. Sohn, 2001), 56.

5 Lemmens, “Zur Invalidenversorgung unter Friedrich II von Preußen,” 101.

6 Isser Woloch “A Sacred Debt: Veterans and the State in Revolutionary and Napoleonic France,” in *Disabled Veterans in History*, ed. David A. Gerber (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 146.

7 Geoffrey L. Hudson “Disabled Veterans and the State in Early Modern England,” in *Disabled Veterans in History*, ed. David A. Gerber (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 120.

8 Geoffrey L. Hudson “Disabled Veterans and the State in Early Modern England,” in *Disabled Veterans in History*, ed. David A. Gerber (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 119.