

Kienitz, Sabine: *Beschädigte Helden. Kriegsinvalidität und Körperbilder 1914-1923*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag 2008. ISBN: 978-3-506-76537-6; 381 Seiten

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„Deutschland will nicht wieder bettelnde Kriegsbeschädigte in den Gassen der Städte und auf den Landstraßen sehen! Es schätzt die Fähigkeiten und Kenntnisse, die du dir in deinem Beruf erworben, und es hat Ehrfurcht vor dem Helden in dir. Darum muß jetzt dein guter Wille zur Arbeit siegen!“ (p. 62)

So wrote Hans Würtz, an influential German expert on education for disabled ex-servicemen, in his publication „Dein Wille“! In so doing, he touched on a number of themes and discourses addressed by Sabine Kienitz in her excellent new study of war-related paralysis and ‚body images‘ in the years 1914 to 1923. As she shows, the heroisation of disabled soldiers in the early part of the conflict soon gave way to a more hostile reception as numbers rose and fears grew of a massive financial burden to the state. By 1919 disabled veterans even came to symbolise Germany’s geographical dismemberment and supposed moral deformation as a result of defeat in the war. Yet some positive images remained alongside these negative ones; while for pacifists the pitiful sight of disfigured faces and destroyed bodies served as a reminder of the horrors of war, medical experts continued to regard these same patched-up and in part artificial bodies as a demonstration of the marvels of modern day (German) science and of the machine age (pp. 153, 222).

Of course, there are many previous studies which have sought to examine the position of disabled ex-servicemen in post-war Germany from a social history perspective. At the centre of investigation here has been the relative success and ultimate failure of welfare measures designed to bind veterans to the new republican state.¹ Yet in Kienitz’s view disabled veterans wanted not just material benefits but ‚moral recognition‘ (p. 19). Examining how this claim to recognition was negotiated and contested involves, for her, en-

tering the world of discourse and experience, or ideology and communication, rather than taking official government statistics and statements by medical organisations as a reflection of social reality. It also involves acceptance of the claim that social reality can be continually (re-)constructed and experienced through the materiality of the body (p. 152). In this sense the war-injured body was itself a ‚Medium der Sinnstiftung‘, an agent for endowing (post-war) life with meaning and purpose (p. 212).

On a discursive level, war invalids became ‚lebende Kriegsdenkmäler‘, as the Austrian journalist and novelist Joseph Roth called them, especially in a country which saw little destruction to its physical landscape or industrial infrastructure during the war (p. 22). Before November 1918 they were seen as a danger to morale on the home front, and after November 1918 to the depiction of the war as a heroic, worthwhile struggle. There was also a fear that their disabilities could make them ‚asocial‘ or pathological and therefore a threat to post-war ‚normalisation‘ (p. 133). Positive images in 1914/15 indeed quickly gave way to more hostile or ambivalent ones. Thus while the war dead were eulogised and emphasis was placed on their ‚intact‘ characters as opposed to their mutilated, destroyed bodies, the war disabled could present the exact opposite – destroyed, mutilated bodies as evidence of an immoral character (or – as in the paintings of Otto Dix – as a mirror exposing a morally corrupt society which failed to look after its veterans properly) (p. 82).

In a material sense, war cripples were also perceived as a potential threat to dominant wartime and post-war ideologies of masculinity, heroism and patriotic self-sacrifice. Thus they challenged the idea of (a) the perfect male body; (b) the claim of modern science to be able to ‚heal‘ and ‚cure‘; (c) the collective ‚nerve‘ of the German people which was considered to be crucial to ‚holding out‘ in the 1914/18 war or to rebuilding the Wehrhaftigkeit of the nation, its ability to fight

¹ The best studies are Robert W. Whalen, *Bitter Wounds: German Victims of the Great War*, Ithaca 1984; Richard Bessel, *Germany After the First World War*, Oxford, 1993; and Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939*, Berkeley, 2001.

future wars, after 1918 and (d) the modern work ethic which frowned upon all forms of welfare dependency.

Therefore official images of the war disabled had to counteract all of these negative associations. This was achieved partly through the pamphlets produced by Würtz and others, which attempted to reclaim the word ‚cripple‘ and turn it into something more positive and heroic. Women were expected to play a crucial role in the reconstruction of masculinity, especially in terms of the ‚Selbstüberwindung‘ and ‚Opferbereitschaft‘ demanded of them in their relations with disabled or disfigured husbands and boyfriends returning from the war (p. 248). Finally wartime exhibitions, photography and films were also intended to provide ‚ein lebendes Bild der vollen Leistungsfähigkeit‘ of disabled war veterans for the general public. Particularly popular were images of amputees doing ordinary ‚manly‘ things like lighting a cigar or opening a bottle of beer with a prosthetic arm; or blind men working alongside fully-sighted workers at machines in scientifically-managed, modern units of production (pp. 194-7).

In the Weimar years the same message was directed by the nationalist right to the German people as a whole – if they had the will, the strength of character, then they would again become wehrhaftig, capable of defending themselves against external aggressors and of asserting themselves on the world stage. Germany, it was also claimed, had won the war in the field of technology, even if it had lost the war of nerves. The fitting of disabled veterans with up-to-date prosthetic limbs, enabling them to return to work, therefore symbolised hopes for economic and national recovery in the wake of the defeat of 1918 (p. 153). Or, to put it another way, if the individual body was ‚rekonstruierbar‘ (p. 210), then so too was the Volkskörper, the body of the nation.

The negative side of this was that the heroic status of disabled veterans was conditional – it had to be constantly re-affirmed and re-enacted (pp. 93-4). Ex-soldiers also had to accept that their bodies were no longer their own, but a ‚medizinisches und technisches Lern- und Experimentierfeld‘ (p. 168). This

placed them in a double bind. In order to gain moral recognition as heroes they were expected to play down their injuries, to go back to work, and to put the war behind them. But equally, in order to retain their pension rights under the new Reichsversorgungsgesetz of April 1920 they had to play up their disabilities and prove a direct link to the war. The only way out of this dilemma was to stress that they were kriegsbeschädigt, with the emphasis on the positive yet by now supposedly forgotten Krieg rather than the negative but still very visible beschädigt. This in turn made them more prone ‚sich an der heroischen und revanchistischen Mythenbildung in der Weimarer Republik zu beteiligen, (p. 340).

Overall, then, Kienitz has written a methodologically innovative and empirically rich study which adds enormously to our knowledge of the cultural history of the years 1914 to 1923. Particularly praiseworthy is her attention to detail and her careful reading of sources, such as photographs and medical records, ‚against the grain‘. But for all that her findings are remarkably similar to those already reached by the more conventional social histories: Weimar politicians failed to find a formula for moving Germany from a ‚post-war‘ into a ‚peace society‘, and the legislation they passed with respect to the war disabled in particular led to an estrangement of this group from republican norms and values.² Indeed, such a conclusion is inescapable, even if Kienitz succeeds in demonstrating the more complex, multi-faceted nature of this process of alienation and self-alienation, which took place ‚auf unterschiedlichen Ebenen - Behörden vs. Kriegsbeschädigte, Kriegsbeschädigte vs. Bevölkerung sowie Bevölkerung vs. Behörden‘ (p. 348).

A bolder approach might have been to compare the situation of disabled veterans with that of other groups of former combatants who also felt they had been marginalised in commemorations of the war, or treated unfairly by civilian welfare officials. For instance, ex-POWs also demanded moral recognition and a restoration (Wiedergutmachung) of their status as former front-line fighters, as

² See Bessel, *Germany After the First World War*, pp. 275-81 and 283.

Rainer Pöppinghege has shown.³ But more than this, one cannot help wanting an explanation for the failure of the left to capitalise on the chances it had in 1918-23 to re-build Germany according to principles of peace and social justice. Thus Kienitz repeatedly refers to the fact that it was the SPD, the KPD and the trade unions who championed the cause of the disabled veterans in the early 1920s. She also makes several references to the pacifist campaigner Ernst Friedrich and his publication of a collection of anti-war photographs, including images of severely disfigured soldiers, in 1924. But we get little idea of the reception of his work among disabled veterans themselves. The re-emergence of heroic narratives of the war in the late 1920s is an important issue in its own right; but equally interesting is the period before this, when there was still a real chance for peace and democratic change in Germany.

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³Rainer Pöppinghege. „Kriegsteilnehmer zweiter Klasse?“ Die Reichsvereinigung ehemaliger Kriegsgefangener 1919-1933, in: Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift 64/2 (2005), pp. 391-423.