

Reintegrating Bodies and Minds: Disabled Belgian Soldiers of the Great War

Pieter Verstraete & Christine Van Everbroeck, 2018.
Academic & Scientific Publishers



BOOK REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This is a book review of the 2018 text.

This review gives an overview of the book *Reintegrating Bodies and Minds: Disabled Belgian Soldiers of the Great War* by Pieter Verstraete & Christine Van Everbroeck. It begins by highlighting the key points and arguments of the authors such as the plights of disabled Belgian soldiers, the attempts to help them in their recoveries and other points. It concludes by stressing that while the book gives an audible voice to the almost forgotten plights of the invalid soldiers from Belgium in the Great War, a lot still needs to be done to investigate the experiences of non-European soldiers who fought alongside their Belgian comrades in the Great War.

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In *Reintegrating Bodies and Minds: Disabled Soldiers of the Great War*, Pieter Verstraete and Christine Van Everbroeck (2018) explore the struggles, hopes, and the general conditions of disabled Belgian soldiers of the Great War. The authors give an audible academic voice to the deafening silence that has enveloped the history of the invalid soldiers of the Great War in Belgium for a long time.

The introductory part of the book is devoted to painting a clear picture of key issues, such as the idea of silence, the general background of the Great War, and the condition of medical care in the military at the beginning of the war. The rest of the book is structured into four chapters that cover re-education, medical care, the return of invalid soldiers and their conditions after coming home.

ATTENDING TO PHYSICALLY DISABLED SOLDIERS

In Chapter 1, the authors discuss the evolution of re-education for invalid soldiers. They note that soldiers who were deemed physically unfit for further military service were sent to “care and treatment centres” that were established to nurse Belgian war invalids, which they eloquently referred to as Belgian soldiers, “who had left their health on the battlefield” (p. 22).

Re-training schools were setup in Belgium as well as outside the country, especially given the fact that the country’s seat of government was in France (as an exiled entity) throughout the period of occupation. In the Netherlands, a re-training centre was built in Katwijk aan Zee, while in the United Kingdom, organisations like Chelsea Water Refugee Fund secured employment opportunities for some invalid Belgian soldiers. Of more significance are re-training institutes that were established in Ste-Adresse and another in Port-Villez, both in France. Here disabled veterans were taught basic subjects like mathematics, writing, history, geography, and trades, which were considered part of their therapy and a way of making invalid soldiers “economically profitable once again” for the Belgian state (p. 50).

MENTAL AND NERVOUS BREAKDOWN

In Chapter 2, the authors explore the conditions of soldiers with mental illnesses. The series of mental disorders that bedevilled some of the Belgian soldiers include delusions, hallucinations, and difficulty with sleep, which all resulted into apathy and neurasthenia. Other types of mental and nervous breakdown included partial paralysis of the limbs, shaking, deafness, and convulsion.

Like those who suffered physical disabilities, the soldiers with invisible wounds were also evaluated medically. The assessment resulted in some being discharged considering the extenuating circumstances, such as those who were categorised as fugues, some imprisoned or given harsh treatment for deserting the military as malingerers, and a few deserters executed as exemplified in “the case of Corporal Leopold of Belgium’s 12th Infantry Regiment” (p. 67).

It is important to note that some of the patients who were deemed fully recovered were sent to the training camp at Auvours. Among them, those that were considered fit for renewed military service were ordered to the frontline anew, while the unfit soldiers served in auxiliary positions behind. Those who were extremely unfit after treatment were sent to different facilities such as the abbey of Soligny-la-Trappe, Dury-les-Amiens, St Anne, and Charenton (Paris), Quatre Mares asylum, St Méen, and other centres. Different facilities, such as the one in St Emile hospital, and the neuropsychiatric centre at the military hospital in Le Havre, as well as those in Normandy and Brittany were instrumental. The general treatment of “Belgian soldiers with psychiatric disorders can be considered as eclectic as it was pragmatic: suggestion, hypnosis, electrotherapy, re-education, rest, seclusion, and a strict diet were the most important components” (p. 83).

RETURNING HOME

In Chapters 3 and 4 the authors describe the processes involved in the repatriation of Belgian soldiers back to the homeland. This is especially significant since some of the health facilities and other institutions that were used to assist invalid and injured soldiers from Belgium were located outside the country alongside the seat of government. Hence, the homecoming for Belgian soldiers was mostly in the literary sense of returning to the fatherland.

The Department of War and the Ministry of Economic Affairs played crucial roles in the beginning. Back in Belgium, disabled soldiers were made to continue their re-education in different forms for their new professional lives. The *Fédération Nationale des Invalides et Mutilés de Guerre* was formed to protect the interest of the disabled soldiers as a pressure group. The group, with its membership of 36,000 disabled veterans, represented 75% of the mutilated veterans in the country at the time, which stood at 48,000. Overall, the authors imply, through historical sources that “For many disabled soldiers, the end of hostilities did not mean the end of their struggle ... they simply faced new struggles” (p. 105). More importantly and noteworthy, the authors describe the conditions of soldiers with psychiatric

problems as “often-faced with all-embracing silence and collective oblivion” (p. 107). Their stories range from those who had to be interred for extended periods and those who were discharged and reunited with their families to start their new lives. It became clear that returning home occurred in two ways. The first was to the homeland in Belgium, usually in various rehabilitative institutions. The latter, to their paternal or marital homes, which represented a new layer of challenge for some mentally ill ex-soldiers.

The authors conclude with thought-provoking remarks that encourage historians to “maintain awareness of those voices which have grown fainter with the passage of time. Only then will their mutilated silence be in a position to be heard and considered once more” (p. 132).

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

The authors have beamed an academic light on parts of the struggles of disabled soldiers of the Great War in Belgium—a struggle that could be described as hitherto covered in the darkness of history. In doing so they make a significant contribution to the body of work on veterans studies that pertain to the Great War. Although, they concede that they “have not been totally successful in breaking the silence surrounding remembrance of these physically and psychologically damaged Belgian soldiers” (p. 27). The authors hope instead that their work “will inspire others to carry out further research” in this area (p. 27).

One of the areas not covered in this book is the activities of non-Europeans and their contributions to relief efforts at a time when Europe was at war with itself. For example, it has been noted that “during the war Nigerians contributed thousands of pounds to various British charities, including: Aeroplane, Red Cross, Meat, Prince of Wales, Belgian Relief, Widows and Orphans, Princess Mary and Lord Roberts Memorial Workshop for Disabled soldiers and Sailors” (Matthews, 1981, p. 13). Yet, how non-Europeans might have helped Belgium during the war has received no attention in this work.

At a time when we struggle to comb the archives for the silent and forgotten parts of the Great War, it is expedient that we also seek to understand the humanitarian contributions of the peoples of the global south beyond the sending of conscripts to assist Europeans (Njung, 2019). With this we may have insights into whether others from outside Europe have contributed to helping the war invalids. The activities of Congolese volunteers (such as Joseph

Adipanga, Albert Kudjabo, and others) in Belgium during the Great War (Brosens, 2014); how racial factors and discrimination might have influenced their rehabilitation (Matthews, 1982; Owino, 2018), and their presence or absence in the symbolic commemoration of the war are important historical conundrums that are missing.

Apart from the above, and beyond the provision of historical accounts as it was expertly done by the authors, it may be useful that they explicitly instruct, or at least suggest how best to commemorate the psychologically disabled veterans, since they are often overshadowed by the fact that “disability remains a discredited identity” (Verstraete & Van Everbroeck, 2018, p. 132). Alongside the annual commemoration of the Great War, the psychologically impaired Belgian soldiers deserve to be seen even long after they have left this world. But how to do this in art and aesthetics would be an interesting suggestion to have in a book of this nature.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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