



Deborah Cohen. *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939.* Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2001. Xii + 285 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-22008-9.



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The Social Benefits of Private Philanthropy

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Wars seldom end when history textbooks say they do. This happens not only because actual fighting continues in many cases in “minor” theaters of war or by para-military means (often with as many casualties as in the main theater of operation) nor only because the issues that led to the commencement of armed conflict are not resolved completely or at times even partially by warfare. It also occurs because those who participate in wars—civilian and military alike—cannot switch from “war” to “peace” as easily as governments can declare a formal cessation of hostilities. Rather, war participants carry with them physical, mental, social and economic predicaments that make war palpable and present for many years. >From the perspective of eighty million veterans of the Great War, the war did not end on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918, but rather continued in various guises and forms throughout the interwar period. In particular, veterans with wounds and disabilities carried a physical burden that threatened their chances of re-integration into “normal” civilian life. How these disabled veterans fared in

Great Britain and Germany is the focus of Deborah Cohen’s compassionate and erudite book, *The War Come Home*.

Cohen’s starting point is a historical conundrum: the Weimar Republic provided for its 1.5 million permanently disabled veterans like no other state in interwar Europe. Yet, rather than being grateful for the solid economic, professional and legislative package offered by the republic, German disabled veterans harbored bitterness and deep resentments toward the state and society. In Britain, on the other hand, the state treated its 750,000 permanently disabled veterans parsimoniously, offering them very little in terms of professional training and protective legislation. Still, British veterans and their organizations became politically quiescent to a degree that astonished their continental colleagues. Why should that be the case? Why did the Weimar Republic attract such ire despite a multitude of programs for the disabled, whereas Britain experienced nothing of this veteran rage although the state provided relatively little for its heroes? One obvious explanation would seem the different outcome of the war for the two societies. However, Cohen makes

short shrift of this argument: German disabled veterans became incensed well before the war's end, whereas the apex of British veteran activism occurred immediately after winning the war in 1918-1920. Rather, argues Cohen, the difference between the two reactions lay in the role played by philanthropic activity in the two countries. The British government not only permitted but actually encouraged a multitude of private philanthropic organizations to become involved in the rehabilitation of disabled veterans. In fact, writes Cohen, "every prominent initiative for the long-term treatment of disabled servicemen was in private hands, including the country's largest artificial limb-fitting center at Roehampton and St. Dunstan's Hostel, which provided care for the nation's war-blinded men" (p. 29). In 1918, 6,000 charities catered to the disabled veterans and in 1936 more than 500 were still in existence. As Cohen illustrates through numerous examples, volunteers took charge of occupational programs and rehabilitation efforts, while the state limited itself to providing modest pensions. The participation of so many of their fellow citizens in their rehabilitation "led veterans to believe that their fellow soldiers honored their sacrifices. Voluntarism brought about a reconciliation between disabled veterans and those for whom they suffered" (p. 7).

Wartime Germany saw also many charitable endeavors by concerned and empathetic citizens. However, the increasing regulation of the German economy and society during World War I, brought about by the wish to manage funds more efficiently and justly (among other things), led to the clamping down on small charities. A decree issued by the *Bundesrat* on February 15, 1917 stipulated that all organizations founded after the outbreak of the war were to be regulated (except religious and political organizations). All membership and fund-raising campaigns were forbidden and local police forces were instructed to enforce this decree. After the collapse of the Second Reich the Weimar government tightened the noose still further and sanctioned the activities of only six major philanthropic organizations such as the Catholic Caritas and the Protestant Inner Mission. Other associations were either starved of funds or regulated tightly from the center. As a result, disabled veterans had to deal with bureaucracies and administrators without what Cohen considers the healing touch of volunteers and sympathetic fellow citizens. Veterans in the Weimar republic did not feel the gratitude and recognition they had so desperately craved, while German civilians grew angry from the relentless accusations of disgruntled veterans. Thus, although it spent around twenty percent of its national

budget on veterans during the interwar years (in comparison to Britain's "measly" seven percent) and despite giving veterans a prominent role in the administration of welfare, the Weimar Republic never managed to win their loyalty. The various veteran organizations, including the huge SPD-affiliated *Reichsbund der Kriegsbeschädigten*, became anti-State in its rhetoric even when the Socialists were in charge of welfare.

Despite making a very strong case for the social benefits of private philanthropy, Cohen leaves the reader with the impression that she may have overstated her argument. After all, the British charities presented in *The War Come Home* were big-time operations with huge budgets. Maybe they were not as enormous as the six organizations sanctioned by Weimar Germany, but they were nonetheless armed with big bureaucracies and regulations. Cohen herself provides ample evidence to the effect that British philanthropists tolerated little dissent from the ranks of disabled veterans. Those who refused to play by the rules of a specific philanthropic organization were shown the door and left to their own devices. Disabled veterans in Britain were expected to put on happy faces and exhibit their gratitude, while keeping resentments bottled up. As Cohen demonstrates in many places, British disabled veterans were marginalized and muted, rather than healed and taken care of; hardly a blue ribbon for private philanthropy. In the same vein, one is left to wonder what role the big six Weimar philanthropic associations played in this story. They were active in many places and on many levels, receiving considerable funds from the state. The fact that they were big does not necessarily mean that they could not engender a sense of caring on the local level. Similarly, it is not quite clear whether different political traditions did not play a role in shaping the behavior of disabled veterans: whether the paternalistic tradition in Germany, coupled with many decades of military conscription prior to World War I, raised the expectations of German soldiers, whereas the more "minimal" approach of British governments before World War I and the fact that until 1916 all soldiers serving in the British army were volunteers lowered the hopes of the latter.

The War Come Home tells a gloomy story. It relates the sad fate of a multitude of disabled veterans who returned to societies that did not quite know what to do with them. It provides important clues for understanding the political behavior of millions of veterans and suggests another reason why the Weimar Republic collapsed. Deborah Cohen has written a valuable study that vividly presents the social and political ramifications of modern

warfare. It is highly recommended to social historians of interwar Europe.

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