

Sabine Kienitz. *Beschädigte Helden: Kriegsinvalidität und Körperbilder 1914-1923.* Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2008. 381 pp. EUR 39.90, cloth, ISBN 978-3-506-76537-6.



Reviewed by Sebastian Weinert

Published on H-Disability (October, 2010)

Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

World War One, the first modern technological war in Europe, not only caused millions of deaths, but also disabled soldiers on a scale previously unknown on the continent. In late Wilhelmine Germany, and in the new Weimar Republic, there were approximately 2.7 million war invalids for whom politicians and the social system had to care. This study by Sabine Kienitz, professor of cultural anthropology at the University of Hamburg, deals with the situation of disabled veterans in Germany between 1914 and 1923. It focuses on the different meanings that were ascribed to the disabled bodies of the soldiers by the public and by medical experts as well as by the disabled soldiers themselves. Furthermore, she endeavors to show how the image of the invalid soldier was shaped as “war victim” or “war hero” by various discourses about the disabled body. In this perspective the “Kriegsinvaliden” (war invalid) was not just a product of the war but of diverse interests, social practices, and discourses that had to be renewed on a regular basis. Thus the actual meaning of the disabled body changed over the

course of time. Lastly, Kienitz examines how the image of the body in the 1920s was influenced by the emergence of the industrial production of prostheses and extensive interventions on the wounded body of the male soldier.

In her study Kienitz seeks to address two major questions. First, she concentrates on the attitudes of war veterans towards the Weimar Republic. Despite being offered a privileged situation and quite generous financial support, the veterans very quickly developed extremely negative perceptions of the democratic system. Focusing on the symbolic meaning of the disabled body of the veteran, Kienitz tries to explain the reasons for the *Entfremdung* (alienation) between disabled veterans and the new democracy. Secondly, Kienitz looks at the transformation of the understanding of masculinity caused by World War One and the treatment of the war invalids. The monograph consists of two major chapters, each divided into three subchapters. A short summary closes the analysis. The book is highly readable, but because it is arranged thematically it can be chal-

lenging for the reader to maintain chronological awareness between 1914 and 1923, the time period covered by the author. It would have been interesting to read at least a short analysis of the final decade of the Weimar Republic to 1933.

The first major chapter, entitled “Body and Morality,” is about the shifting meanings attached to the body of the war invalid. In this chapter Kienitz points out that during the war, the invalid had already become a symbol of the war experience. In this case, images and discussion of the wounded body were a way to communicate the nature of the war to those who hadn’t participated directly in the hostilities. An interesting finding in the study is that only invalids with certain disabilities enjoyed public interest and sympathy. Some injuries, for example internal or facial wounds, were seldom represented to the public. But Kienitz also makes clear that this attention did not last long. She shows how the war invalid was honored as a hero during the war but marginalized after 1918. The invalid was expected to make himself invisible by integrating within society. This was primary understood as taking up employment and not relying on financial support from the public. In this process, wounded soldiers were no longer viewed as heroes who had made sacrifices, but as victims. The invalids themselves insisted on their dual status as victims as well as heroes who deserved public attention and support.

The second major chapter, “The Materiality of the Body,” is about the interventions of professionals to adjust the bodies of war invalids to physical norms. The most important technique of this normalization was the replacement of lost limbs with prostheses. Therefore the bodies of the soldiers had to be modulated according to the needs of the industrially produced prostheses. Probably the most influential groups in this process were experts from the health professions, especially surgeons, and the “Krueppelfuersorge” (Orthopedic Society), who dominated the German

discourse about physical disability. The author points out that the prostheses were styled according to either aesthetic norms (the body of the war invalid should look as natural as possible), or economic norms (the body of the war invalid should be adjusted to his job-related requirements). On the other hand, as well as addressing the demands of the public, Kienitz focuses on the responses of the war invalids to prostheses. In so doing, she shows how they tried to assert their agency by refusing to use prostheses or by demonstrating in the streets to promote their points of view. Lastly, Kienitz examines how the widespread presence of war invalids challenged gender relations insofar as newly acquired physical disablement changed the male identity of the war invalid.

Sabine Kienitz has submitted an interesting and innovative addition to the ongoing discussion about disability in the Weimar Republic and the outcomes of the World War One. The most important result is to show how war invalids were confronted with two contrary demands by the German population. On the one hand they were forced to emphasize their disabilities to get financial and moral support; on the other hand they were forced to hide their disabilities to avoid public exclusion. While Kienitz sometimes overemphasizes the intentions of the experts who dealt with the war invalids and perhaps overstates the exploitativeness of their behavior, her book is nevertheless an important study of physical disability during the Weimar Republic, a subject which deserves greater attention in the future.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-disability>

Citation: Sebastian Weinert. Review of Kienitz, Sabine. *Beschädigte Helden: Kriegsinvalidität und Körperbilder 1914-1923*. H-Disability, H-Net Reviews. October, 2010.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30229>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.