

BETWEEN DREAM AND REALITY: THE REHABILITATION OF WAR-DISABLED BELGIAN SOLDIERS, 1914-1921^α


*Entre el sueño y la realidad: la rehabilitación de los soldados
belgas inválidos de guerra, 1914-1921*

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Abstract. In this article we aim to contribute to the growing interest in disability history, the history of education for people having a disability, and the existing historiography of the Great War. We will focus on the rehabilitation of Belgian blind and physically disabled soldiers. The article will take the ceremony for the Unknown Soldier, which was organized in the early twenties, as a starting point. Although everyone is familiar with the Congress Column of Brussels and the eternal flame burning at the tomb of the unknown soldier, few people know that it was a war blinded man who played an important role in the burial ceremony and that it were eight physically disabled soldiers who carried the unknown soldier to its final resting place. At this ceremony, a successful image of rehabilitation and re-education was implicitly created, showing that disabled soldiers could play a meaningful role in society again. This image will be shattered by a close study of a variety of sources preserved in Flemish and Brussels archives, including the State Archives, the Archives of the Royal

^α This article has been translated from Dutch to English by Emmeline Burdett. Although we do re-take a topic that recently led to the publication of another article in the Catalan journal *Educacio i Historia* – focusing on the re-education of Belgian blinded soldiers during WW1 – we have substantially broadened the scope of this article by including the rehabilitation of Belgian physically mutilated soldiers and adding a different theoretical perspective. Pieter Verstraete, «Remastering independence: The re-education of Belgian blinded soldiers of the Great War, 1914-1940», *Educacio i Historia* 32 (2018): 257-277.

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Palace, the archives of the Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and Military History, the archives of the Belgian National Institute for Veterans and Victims of War and, the archives of the London St. Dunstan's Institute. By referring to photographic material and personal files of Belgian disabled soldiers we will demonstrate that rehabilitation was definitely not «a walk in the park» and that for a number of soldiers rehabilitation simply was not possible. More specifically our presentation will zoom in on the ways in which the concept of rehabilitation took form in Belgian rehabilitation institutes such as the one in Boschvoorde for blind soldiers and the school of Port-Villez (France) for all disabled soldiers.

Keywords: Rehabilitation; Disability history; The Great War; Invalid soldiers; Belgium; Vocational training; Prosthetics.

Resumen. *Este artículo pretende contribuir al creciente interés por la historia de la discapacidad, la historia de la educación de personas con discapacidad y la historiografía existente sobre la Gran Guerra. Se centrará en la rehabilitación de los soldados belgas ciegos y físicamente discapacitados. El artículo toma como punto de partida la ceremonia del Soldado Desconocido, que se celebró a principios de los años veinte. Aunque a todo el mundo le resulta familiar la Columna del Congreso de Bruselas y la llama eterna que arde en la tumba del soldado desconocido, pocos son los que conocen que fue un hombre ciego quien jugó un papel importante en la ceremonia fúnebre y que fueron ocho soldados físicamente discapacitados los que llevaron al soldado desconocido a su lugar de descanso final. En esta ceremonia, se creó implícitamente una imagen exitosa de rehabilitación y reeducación que mostraba que los soldados discapacitados podían volver a jugar un papel significativo en la sociedad. Esta imagen será desmenuzada a través de un estudio en detalle de las diversas fuentes que se preservan en los archivos de Flandes y Bruselas, incluidos los Archivos del Estado, los Archivos del Palacio Real, los del Museo Real de la Fuerzas Armadas e Historia Militar, los del Instituto Nacional Belga para los Veteranos y Víctimas de Guerra y los del St. Dunstan's Institute en Londres. A partir del material fotográfico y los expedientes personales de los soldados discapacitados belgas, se demostrará que la rehabilitación no fue en absoluto un «paseo por el parque» y que para un número de soldados sencillamente no fue posible. Más específicamente, nuestra presentación se centrará en las maneras en que el concepto de rehabilitación tomó forma en los institutos de rehabilitación belgas como el de Boschwoorde para soldados ciegos y la escuela de Port-Villez (Francia) para soldados discapacitados.*

Palabras clave: *Rehabilitación; Historia de la discapacidad; Primera Guerra Mundial; Soldados inválidos; Formación profesional; Prótesis.*

11 November 1922. It was on this day when, in imitation of other Allied Powers such as Britain and France, the Belgian Unknown Soldier was finally laid to rest.¹ The place of interment was the Congress column in Brussels, where the eternal flame would afterwards also be lit, and the fact that the chosen pall-bearers were eight war-disabled Belgian veterans lent the event an even greater degree of symbolism. The four pall-bearers on the left-hand side were missing their right arms, whilst those on the right-hand side were missing their left arms. In addition, Raymon Haesebrouck, the man who had originally chosen the coffin which would become that of the Unknown Soldier, was himself a disabled veteran of the Great War.² Haesebrouck was a war-blinded Belgian soldier who, during a visit to the trenches by the Belgian king Albert I, had thrown himself over the king to protect him when sudden gunfire was heard. Whatever else, the 10th November found Haesebrouck at Bruges station, indicating with his white stick which one of the five coffins on display would be sent by train to Brussels to become that of the Unknown Soldier.

¹ Stéphanie Claisse, *Du soldat inconnu aux monuments commémoratifs belges de la guerre 14-18* (Bruxelles: Académie Royale de Belgique, 2013).

² See the Bruges City Archive [Raymon Haesebrouck Bequest] and the private archive of the Van Eenooche family.



Image 1. Raymon Haesebrouck and his wife © Private archive of the Van Eenoghe Family.

That the role played by Belgian war-disabled soldiers in the ceremonial funeral of the Unknown Soldier is almost unknown, both in the academic world and in society at large, is indicative of the specific position afforded to impaired persons in existing Belgian historical research. It is often the case that disability history is regarded as being a topic of little interest or importance – although there are of course exceptions to this.³ The contribution we would like to make to this is to show how the oft-cited quotation by the American historian Douglas Baynton is also applicable to the situation in Belgian historical research: «Disability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it, but conspicuously absent in the histories we write».⁴ Although the impact of the Great War on the

³ Some of these exceptions are Patrick Devlieger, Ian Grosvenor, Frank Simon, Geert Vanhove and Bruno Vanobbergen, «Visualising disability in the past», *Paedagogica Historica* 44 (2008): 747-760 and Liesje Raemdonck and Ingeborg Scheiris, *Ongehoord Verleden. Dove frontvorming in België aan het begin van de 20ste eeuw* (Ghent: Fevlado-Diversus, 2007). There have been similar developments within the history of medicine. See for example Joris Vandendriessche, «Ophthalmia Crossing Borders: Belgian Army Doctors between the Military and Civilian Society, 1830-1860», *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis. Journal of Belgian History* 46 (2016): 48-71. What is still very much needed, however, are approaches which incorporate the perspective of the disabled person him or herself into the analysis.

⁴ Douglas C. Baynton, «Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History», in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, eds. Paul Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: New

Belgian army in terms of deadly casualties and mutilated bodies/minds, this in comparison to the other Allied and Central Forces, has been described as relatively limited, the Belgian case nevertheless deserves to be studied and this at least for the following two reasons.⁵ Belgium, first of all, was the only belligerent country which needed to take care of its mutilated soldiers abroad. Besides this particular challenge, Belgium is also portrayed in the primary literature with regard to the rehabilitation of disabled soldiers as a «pioneering country» when it came down to tackling what was called the problem of the invalid soldiers.⁶

In order to find out what was to become of men who, before the outbreak of war, had been a baker, a tram driver or a builder, but who, thanks to an exploded shell, an illness or a bullet-wound, had now lost both legs, we will examine the pedagogical component of the medical, juridical and political measures taken both during and after the Great War to address the ‘problem’ of Belgian war-disabled soldiers. This pedagogical element was described as either re-education or retraining.⁷ The first part of this paper will look at the initiatives that were developed

York University Press, 2001), 52; for an introduction to disability history, see Cathy Kudlick, «Disability history. Why we need another “other”», *The American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 763-793.

⁵ The Great War disabled 8.5 million soldiers. Of the approximately 6 million mobilized English soldiers, 750.000 became disabled (12.3%). Germany had to face 1.5 million disabled soldiers after the Armistice was signed (11.6%). According to one official document dated December 1918 it was said that of the 170.000 mobilized Belgian soldiers 5200 became invalid due to the military conflict (3.06%). It needs, however, to be emphasised that this official number is an underestimation of the real impact of the Great War as in the 30's almost 37.000 men were member of the Belgian National Association for Disabled Soldiers. Since the 1990s – and partly in response to the previously-described growing interest in disability history – an increasing number of historians have dedicated themselves to uncovering the history of disabled war veterans. It would be impossible to provide an exhaustive list within the confines of this paper, but the following works will serve as a good introduction: Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Suzannah Biernoff, «The Rhetoric of Disfigurement in First World War Britain», *Social History of Medicine* 24 (2011): 666-685; Heather Perry, *Recycling the Disabled: Army, Medicine and Modernity in WWI Germany* (London: Oxford University Press, 2014); Julie Anderson and Neil Pemberton, «Walking alone: Aiding the war and civilian blind in the inter-war period», *European Review of History – Revue Européenne d'Histoire* 14 (2007): 459-479.

⁶ Garrard Harris, *The redemption of the disabled. A study of programmes of rehabilitation for the disabled of war and of industry* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1919).

⁷ These two terms will, in this article, be used interchangeably. They both indicate the way in which attempts were made to fit disabled soldiers for a new trade or profession. Given that these were purely professional initiatives, an incredible amount of emphasis was placed on explaining them in terms of morality – viz. the resurgence of specific norms and values – which were explained in terms of ‘education’ and ‘training’.

to assist physically impaired soldiers. The second part will do the same with regard to those who had been blinded as a result of their war service. In order to get a better view on the history of the Belgian disabled soldiers we made use of the following sources and archives: local (digitised) newspapers, city and district archives, the memories of the children and grandchildren of disabled soldiers, the archives of the Royal Museum of War and the Armed Forces, the Archives of the Royal Palace, and the Documentation Centre of the In Flanders Field Museum.

RE-EDUCATION, PROFESSIONAL REORIENTATION AND PROSTHETICS

By the first months of the war, the ‘invalid question’ had already made it onto the Belgian political agenda. In November 1914, Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies Frans Schollaert supported the creation of a home and re-educational institute for disabled soldiers in Sainte-Adresse (Normandy) – the latter being the temporary capital of Belgium throughout the First World War. In June 1915, Minister of War Charles De Broqueville decided to set up another re-educational institute nearby, in Port-Villez (Île de France). Physically impaired soldiers could follow a course of professional re-education in these institutes, which was supplemented by general training lessons and medical gymnastics or physiotherapy sessions.

While these two schools were being built, another re-education institute was being set up in occupied Belgium, viz. in Woluwe, a suburb of Brussels. It was the brainchild of an offshoot of the Belgian Red Cross: the *Oeuvre Aide et Apprentissage aux Invalides de Guerre* (Organisation for the Assistance and Training of War Invalids).⁸ From 1919 the buildings became the responsibility of the State, which left the day-to-day operation to the *Nationaal Werk voor Oologsinvaliden* [*Oeuvre Nationale des Invalides de la Guerre*; National Employment Organisation for War-Invalids].⁹

⁸ [Anonymous], *L'oeuvre d'aide et apprentissage aux invalides de guerre durant l'Occupation* (Brussels, 1918).

⁹ Brussels and the Surrounding Area, BIM [Brussels Institute for Conservation], «The Parmentier Park», *Infofiches over de Groene Ruimten in het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest*. 4 January 2011. <http://>

The aims of these retraining initiatives were twofold. Firstly, to ensure that as many war-disabled soldiers as possible would eventually be able to return to work, despite their physical limitations. Their work-related difficulties were described as a national problem to which an effective solution needed to be found. Both within Belgian politics and within the press, the idea that the country owed these disabled war veterans a debt of gratitude for their service and proven sacrifices at the Front gained considerable currency. Secondly, to create as many workers as possible to assist in the reconstruction of the devastated fatherland.¹⁰

The following pages will use photographs and concrete examples to give a flavour of what retraining was actually like for the soldiers of Port-Villez, Saint-Adresse and Woluwe. It will be based upon publications from Belgian newspapers, on publications by the soldiers themselves, on information contained in their personal archives, as well as on publications dealing directly with war and invalidity. Examples of the latter include *De Belgische Gebrekkelijke* (later *De Belgische Verminkte/Invalide Belge*), which were the periodicals of the study group of disabled soldiers of the Belgian institute for re-education in Port-Villez during the war and were taken over by the advocacy association *Nationalen Bond der verminckte en invaliden Soldaten van den Oorlog* [Fédération Nationale des Militaires Mutilés et Invalides de la Guerre; National Federation of War Disabled Soldiers] from 1919. The association originated from the study group and different unions set up in occupied Belgium during the war. The organisation quickly became the only veterans' association uniting most disabled ex-servicemen. These periodicals give a unique insight into the lives of war-disabled Belgian soldiers during and after the First World War and are a fantastic source for anyone wanting to begin researching the topic. The periodicals can be consulted at the Royal Museum of War and the Armed Forces in Brussels. By far the most comprehensive study of the retraining institute at Port-Villez is Léon de Paeuw's 1917 work

document.environnement.brussels/opac_ccs/elecfile/IF%20EV%Parcs%20Parmentierparc%20NL (14 August 2017).

¹⁰ Pieter Verstraete and Christine Van Everbroeck, *Verminkte Stilte: De Belgische invalide soldaten van de Grootte Oorlog* [*Mutilated Silence: Les soldats invalides belges de la Grande Guerre*] (Namur: Presses Universitaires de Namur, 2014), 46-47.

entitled *La Rééducation Professionnelle des Soldats Mutilés et Estropiés*.¹¹ Thanks to De Paeuw, this article can give a much fuller picture of life at Port-Villez than would otherwise be possible. De Paeuw's study is also an excellent source for anyone who wants to learn more about the world of soldiers disabled in the Great War, more specifically, about those who attended the Port-Villez re-training institute. It is illustrated, and paints an extremely detailed picture of the day-to-day running of the institute. The archive of the school at Port-Villez also worth investigating, even though many of its documents have been lost over time. In its current state the archive comprises a trio of boxes concerning the setting-up and running of the institute. It also contains a limited number of documents concerning the schools of St-Adresse and Woluwe.¹²

The first candidates for re-education arrived at Vernon station near Port-Villez on 21 August 1915. These wounded men had, until very recently, been at the Front. As far as De Paeuw was concerned, this could only be an advantage. Men who had spent a long time being looked after were less motivated to learn, «for nothing is more injurious to men's mentality and character than a prolonged period of 'dolce far niente' [sweet idleness]». ¹³ Nevertheless, the school was built in an oasis of calm, at a respectable distance from the Front. De Paeuw wrote that the nerves of many invalids could easily be put on edge, as a result of the terrible conditions they had endured in the trenches. It was necessary for their recovery to ensure that these men did not become over-stimulated.¹⁴

After their arrival at Port-Villez, all the 'pupils' underwent a comprehensive medical, pedagogical and work-related examination, the purpose

¹¹ Léon De Paeuw (1873-1941) was inspector general of Belgian primary education when the war broke out. He then became Cabinet Manager of the Ministry of war (Minister de Broqueville) and would, in the Interwar years, play an important role in the reception of Montessori-education in Belgium. In 1915 de Paeuw was entrusted by de Brocqueville with overall responsibility for the Port-Villez project.

¹² The archives of the retraining institutes form part of the Moscow Archive, so called because it had been transported to Moscow by the Russian troops who liberated Berlin in 1945. It was only recently returned to Belgium, as a gift from the Russian authorities. It can now be found in the Royal Museum of War and the Armed Forces, Brussels.

¹³ Léon De Paeuw, *La Rééducation Professionnelle des Grands Blessés de Guerre et l'Institut Militaire Belge de Rééducation Professionnelle de Port-Villez-les-Vernon (Eure)* (Port-Villez: 1916), 23.

¹⁴ De Paeuw, *La Rééducation Professionnelle des Soldats Mutilés*, 48-50; Verstraete & Van Everbroeck, *Verminkte Stilte*, 55.

of which was to map out their previous history. To this end, every one of the wounded men had to appear before the Vocation Guidance Committee, which would determine which job workshop each of them should be assigned to. Wherever possible, the Committee took the invalid's own wishes into account, provided that his choice was physically and economically feasible.

In addition, the Committee was driven by three guiding principles, which were also kept in mind in the Sainte-Adresse and Woluwe institutes. The first and most important question to be considered was that of whether or not a physically impaired soldier would be able to resume his former occupation, albeit with some degree of adaptation. When this was found to be possible, the soldier was allowed to follow his choice. At Port-Villez were developed various applications designed to mechanise work-processes. Indeed, the school received international praise for its sewing-table, which used an electric motor for the benefit of tailors who had a paralysed left leg.¹⁵



Image 2. Sewing-table made at Port-Villez for disabled tailors. The table enabled a tailor with an injured pelvis and a paralysed left leg to work at a sewing-machine without straining his body.¹⁶ (Illustration from *La Rééducation Professionnelle des Soldats Mutilés* by Léon de Paeuw, 1917 © Universiteitsbibliotheek KU Leuven).

¹⁵ De Paeuw, *La Rééducation Professionnelle des Soldats Mutilés*, 105.

¹⁶ Emile Galtier-Boissière, *Larousse Médical illustré de guerre* (Paris: 1917), 317-318.

In situations when adjustments were insufficient, the Committee instead tried to find an alternative trade or profession for a disabled soldier. They tended to recommend work which contained or actively used skills which the soldier had used in his pre-war work. An example of this given by de Paeuw involved the construction sector. During their time at Port-Villez, various disabled soldiers chose to retrain as architects or structural engineers.¹⁷ The last of the three key principles was that a disabled soldier should be in a position to earn a sufficient living from his chosen profession or trade.

To this end, the Committee took account of the type of place in which the soldier proposed to practice the work for which he had trained. They were conscious that, in some respects, a different type of workforce was required in towns as opposed to in the country. Disabled soldiers could count on assistance from the institutes in finding a suitable job at a trustworthy employer once they had completed their retraining. They were strongly encouraged to keep in contact with the institute, «for they are not discharged from the army, they are simply on leave without pay and can be recalled for any misbehaviour».¹⁸

The men at Port-Villez had the option of choosing from 73 professions as well as from various administrative specialisms.¹⁹ Those who wanted a university education were sent to Paris, where they stayed at the Belgian Home Universitaire de Paris, which had been set up with support from Charles de Brocqueville, the Minister for War. Twenty and fourteen vocational training courses were available in Woluwe and Sainte-Adresse respectively. The majority of soldiers with physical impairments of the lower limbs chose to retrain as cobblers, tailors or basket-makers, as these were all trades which could be carried out sitting down, and were needed just as much in the country as in towns. Standing for long periods whilst wearing a prosthetic leg was not possible for everyone, De Paeuw wrote:

¹⁷ De Paeuw, *La Rééducation Professionnelle des Soldats Mutilés*, 114-116.

¹⁸ De Paeuw, *La Rééducation Professionnelle des Soldats Mutilés*, 228.

¹⁹ Until February 1916, those training for administrative careers were taught in the Institut militaire belge d'instruction des grands blessés de guerre at Blanche Abbey in Mortain. From October 1916, this section was combined with the technical École des métiers at Port-Villez.

among the men [in Port-Villez] with perfected artificial legs 48 per cent manage very well; 18 per cent manage fairly well, and 34 per cent dislike it and do not use it. Of the others who have had a leg amputated, 34 per cent manage very well with a peg leg; 26 per cent manage fairly well; 6 per cent dislike it, and 34 per cent do not possess one.²⁰

The orthopaedic workshop at Port-Villez also developed a to skilful workmen who keenly wished to continue their former trade. On the other hand, De Paeuw warned that artificial limbs were far from an ideal solution:

because one man may have succeeded in using an artificial arm, it does not follow that every man who has lost an arm, if given this apparatus, will be able to employ it for any trade he may wish to practice. The truth is quite different. These perfected arms are not only very costly, but too delicate and intricate to use working in a shop. Moreover very few men are dexterous enough to manipulate these arms properly. [...] In most cases it would be much better to re-educate the man as he is, with the limbs that he still possesses, and to choose a profession adapted to his physical limitations.²¹



Image 3. Disabled soldiers with a work-prosthesis in an adjustment workshop at Port-Villez, 1917. © Pieter Verstraete Private Collection.

²⁰ De Paeuw, *La Rééducation Professionnelle des Soldats Mutilés*, 147.

²¹ De Paeuw, *La Rééducation Professionnelle des Soldats Mutilés*, 139-140.

Soldiers who had a disabled arm often chose a profession requiring little in the way of physical strength or hard manual work, and some of them chose to retrain for a profession in the arts sector. At both Woluwe and Sainte-Adresse, for example, men could train to be decorators or artistic painters. Others chose a non-technical job in the public or service industries, such as postman or telegraph-operator, and sat recruitment tests set by the authorities.



Image 4. This disabled soldier was a 27-year-old named Martin, and before the war he had been an agricultural worker. He came to the Woluwe retraining institute in 1915, having been wounded in his right arm. He retrained as a draughtsman. He could only use his left arm.²² (press photo from the weekly magazine *L'Événement Illustré*, 22 March 1919 © Universiteitsbibliotheek KU Leuven).

As well as their practical retraining, disabled soldiers received daily medical gymnastics or physiotherapy and general training, in order to maximise their physical capabilities.²³ There was a general conviction

²² Henri Liebrecht, «Une visite à l'Oeuvre de l'Aide et Apprentissage aux Invalides de la Guerre», *L'Événement Illustré* 178 (1919): 106-110.

²³ F. Thiébaud, *La Rééducation Professionnelle des Invalides de la Guerre à l'Institut Militaire Belge de Port-Villez* (Port-Villez, 1918), 84-85.

that a healthy and thoroughly-taught disabled soldier would stand a much better chance both in the job market and in getting used to his new profession.²⁴ The general training offered by the institutes comprised mainly language and arithmetic lessons. Men who had an impairment in their right hand or arm took special lessons in order to learn to write left-handed.



Image 5. M. Charlier, an inmate of Woluwe in 1919, had his right hand amputated. After several months, he had learnt to write with his left hand. His first attempts were somewhat illegible, but after two months of hard work, he had developed a much steadier hand and neat handwriting²⁵ (press photo from the weekly magazine *L'Événement Illustré* of 29 November 1919, © Universiteitsbibliotheek KU Leuven).

The closure of the retraining institutes in Northern France began in 1919, a few months after the Armistice. Those disabled soldiers who remained there were transferred to retraining institutes in Belgium. Besides that in Woluwe, there were two more re-education institutes in

²⁴ Van Avermaet, «Jongens! leert goed uw vak», *De Belgische Gebrekkelijke*, 1 oktober 1917, 3; Alleman, «Port-Villez. Technisch Onderwijs II», *De Belgische Verminkte*, 15 April 1918, 1.

²⁵ [Anonymous], «Une question sociale d'après-guerre: la Rééducation des Mutilés», *L'Événement Illustré* 214 (1919), 707.

Belgium, both of which had been set up before the outbreak of war, and which were intended specifically for young men with physical impairments, both congenital and those sustained in work-related accidents.²⁶ Next to be set up – on 11 October 1919 – was the *Nationaal Werk voor Oorlogsinvaliden*, which the authorities tasked with supporting the war-disabled in finding retraining opportunities and work. It was also responsible for organising re-education at the Woluwe institute.²⁷ This school remained open until the end of 1924. No-one knows the total number of men who studied at the institutes. The *Nationaal Werk voor Oorlogsinvaliden* documented the re-education and reintegration of war victims, but unfortunately there are no surviving archives for the early interwar years. It is, however, possible to find some stray figures in the publications and archive material of the institutes, and to use these to build up a picture of just how many men were assembled in these schools. For example, we know that, in 1916, there were around seven hundred and 1500 disabled soldiers in Saint-Adresse and Port-Villez respectively.²⁸ Woluwe re-trained an average of 148 disabled soldiers per year during the war.²⁹

Next to re-education, the *Nationaal Werk voor Oorlogsinvaliden* would offer several other work-related services to stimulate disabled soldiers' reintegration into society as re-training was only a partial solution to the «problem of the invalids». Examples of these services include assistance in finding a job in the industrial, commercial or public sector, loans to buy a property or work equipment, reimbursements of medical costs and permissions for orthopaedics and wheelchairs. In addition, the *Nationale Bond der verminkte en invalieden Soldaten van den Oorlog* strove for worthy disability pensions to allow every veteran to live well together with his family. After all, not each disabled soldier could be helped by the emancipatory initiative of orthopaedical and

²⁶ These two schools were called: l'École Provinciale d'Apprentissage et Ateliers pour Estropiés et Accidentés du Travail de Charleroi (opened 1908) and l'Institut Provincial Pour Estropiés du Brabant in Brussels (opened 1916).

²⁷ [Anonymous], «L'Oeuvre Nationale des Invalides de la Guerre», *L'Invalide Belge*, 1 June 1920, 1; *Œuvre Nationale des Invalides de la Guerre, 25 ans d'activité 1919-1945* (Liège, S. d.).

²⁸ De Paeuw, *La Rééducation Professionnelle des Soldats Mutilés*, 197; De Paeuw, *La Rééducation Professionnelle des Grands Blessés de Guerre*, 16.

²⁹ Royal Museum of War and the Armed Forces, Moscow Archive Box 1814 185-14-1441.

vocational rehabilitation. Some required constant nursing help or assistance with day-to-day activities for various reasons such as, continence problems, great difficulties moving around on their own and the loss of more than two limbs.³⁰

BLINDNESS AND THE IDEAL OF INDEPENDENCE

Just as was the case with physically disabled soldiers, so the rehabilitation discourse around blind soldiers also emphasized that the ultimate goal was to return these men to full economic productivity. Reconstructing the way in which retraining was discussed is not easy. What is still more difficult is to find out what the disabled soldiers themselves thought about their re-education. The sources that can be used for this are scattered and very incomplete. A keen researcher can look in the archives of the institute for war-blinded soldiers which are housed in the Royal Archives (Secretary Queen Elizabeth) in Brussels. Further sources of information include the periodicals for a blind readership which were published during the inter-war period – *Vers La Lumière*, *L'Alexandre Rodenbach*, and the *Roomsche Licht*, for example. Finally, where possible, a researcher can try to track down the children and grandchildren of disabled soldiers, and use their memories as a basis upon which to build up a picture of the lives of disabled soldiers.

In 1932, Léopold Mélis, who had been Inspector-General for Healthcare in the Belgian army during the war, claimed that there would be 47 war-blinded Belgians. We can, however, be fairly confident that, at the end of hostilities, there had been 88 war-blinded military servicemen.³¹ This group received a great deal of publicity, just as they did in other countries, and both during and after the war, they were the public face of charitable campaigns to «improve their circumstances». One good example of this is the art portfolio brought out by Samuel De Vriendt in 1919 to benefit war-blinded men. In Introduction to these reproductions of

³⁰ Stassen, «Ontwerp voor inrichting in België van een Nationalen Dienst voor Verminkten en Gebrekkelijken van den Oorlog», *De Belgische Verminkte*, 10 May 1919, 2.

³¹ The archives of the Royal Palace contain a list, dated 1 April 1938, in which every war-blinded man who was then known, is listed by name: Liste des Aveugles de Guerre (Liste au 1er avril 1928)// AE806//Archives Royal Palace). This list only contains the names of war-blinded military servicemen, although undoubtedly there were also civilians who became blind as a result of their war-service. We have not been able to find any further information about this.

drawings by blinded ex-servicemen, De Vriendt referred to both the severity of the men's impairments and the chances which re-education offered them, stressing:

We offer this art album to the world, and in so doing, it is our earnest hope that the world will continue to think of these brave men, who so willingly sacrificed their sight in defence of their beloved Fatherland. It proclaims the severity of their handicap, but is also a testament to how appropriate re-education, under the motherly gaze of Her Majesty the Queen, can prepare them to enjoy life once again as useful and productive members of society.³²

The above quotation shows how, during the First World War, blind people were still seen as individuals who, unlike sighted people, struggled to be happy. This was a widespread misconception, and one which those who set up the first institutes for blind people, had made full use of in order to justify the taking of this step.³³ During the nineteenth century, blindness was certainly regarded as being one of the severest impairments that it was possible to have. The very visual nature of society meant that blind people had little chance of being able to compete on anything like equal terms. So the enormous sacrifice that the war-blinded had made to repel the German invader made them amongst the most conspicuous of all the country's heroes.

³² Samuel De Vriendt, *Croquis, schetsen, sketches* (Boitsfort: Institut des Aveugles de Guerre, 1919).

³³ For an introduction to the history of blindness in France see Zina Weygand, *Vivre sans voir: les aveugles dans la société française, du Moyen Age au siècle de Louis Braille* (Paris: Creaphis Editions, 2003). Up till now no comprehensive history exists with regard to the history of blindness in Belgium.



Image 6. Sketch 8 of Samuel de Vriendt's sketches – La toute petite amie/Het vriendinnetje/ Making friends © Pieter Verstraete Private Collection.

The war-blinded soldiers were seen as heroes, albeit as vulnerable heroes who, without professional care and re-education, were doomed to lead lives full of difficulty and suffering. Specific measures were taken with regard to them from the beginning of the Great War. Initially, war-blinded soldiers were sent to the Saint-Victor hospice in Amiens. It was only later that they were sent to Port-Villez, where the majority of physically disabled soldiers were brought for retraining. From official documents pertaining to the transfer of war-blinded soldiers, it appears that this happened because the advance of German troops meant that the situation in Amiens was becoming too dangerous.³⁴ However, it can be inferred from a document in the Royal Museum of War and the Armed

³⁴ [Anonymous], «Bij onze blinden soldaten», *De Belgische Verminkte*, 15 May 1918, 3.

Forces that the war-blinded soldiers had no real desire to engage in re-training, and that they had instead succumbed to depression.³⁵

There is not a great deal of information that can be found regarding the rehabilitation of war-blinded soldiers during the period of the First World War. Unlike those with physical impairments, war-blinded soldiers care was centralized, at the institute for the war-blinded at Bosvoorde. This was run under the auspices of Queen Elizabeth, and was headed by Captain Delvaux. The institute was set up in opposition to the prevailing idea that rehabilitating blind people was of no benefit to society as a whole. There are documents in the Royal Archives which show that, as far as the Minister for Economic Affairs was concerned, it would be quite sufficient merely to ensure that war-blinded soldiers had some degree of diversion.³⁶ If it was up to him, the war-blinded soldiers would be looked after by women who would read aloud to them and play music to them. Fortunately, Queen Elisabeth – probably influenced by the experiences of her father who was himself an ophthalmologist – took a far more sensible view of the situation. She fought hard for a centralized rehabilitation institute where war-blinded soldiers could learn a new profession, could learn to drive independently, and could learn to read Braille.

The sources give us little concrete information about the running of the institute. We do know that it existed from 1919 to 1921, and that it functioned with the help of generous gifts from abroad. One of the photographs of the institute shows the Kesslerzaal, or Kessler Room. This functioned as the main classroom for the war-blinded men, and was named after the American industrialist George Kessler, whose ‘Permanent Blind Relief War Fund’ had donated a substantial subsidy to the institute.

³⁵ Pieter Verstraete, «Disability, Rehabilitation and the Great War: Making Space for Silence in the History of Education», in *Educational Research: The Importance and Effects of Institutional Spaces*, eds. Paul Smeyers and Marc Depaepe (Amsterdam: Springer, 2013), 107.

³⁶ Letter from the Queen’s private secretary to Mijnheer Velge – Cabinet Chief of the Ministry of Economic Affairs (Minister Jaspar)/Secretariaat Elizabeth Archive no.134/Royal Archives/Brussels.



Image 7. *Aveugles sortant des salles des cours* [The blind leaving the classrooms]

© Pieter Verstraete Private Collection.

As shown in a collection of postcards given out to drum up financial support for the institute, the war-blinded soldiers were re-educated for traditional trades such as basket-weaving, brush-making, cigarette-rolling, mechanical knitting, breeding chickens and piano-tuning. Although the 88 soldiers at Bosvoorde were expected to be willing participants in their own re-education, archives kept at the Royal Palace demonstrate that this was not always the case. Isidore Van Vlasselaere, for example, was one soldier who was unwilling to leave the comfort of his home and family to spend an extended period retraining in Brussels:

Van Vlasselaere is a brave man whose morale is good, he seems happy and is much engaged with the education of his son. He would be very happy to be re-educated, but is unwilling to leave his wife and child. If circumstances permitted, he would voluntarily come to the institute at Bosvoorde.³⁷

³⁷ Confidential file on Isidore Van Vlasselaere/Archives Queen Elizabeth no. AE 806/Royal Archives/Brussels.

For other war-blinded soldiers, and particularly for those with additional psychological and physical problems, retraining for another profession was simply not possible. Julien Dhont was a case in point, as his dossier clearly shows:

His life is very difficult – like that of an involuntary hermit: both from a physical and a moral point of view; he has all his intelligence, he hears everything but he no longer has any way of communicating with the outside world: neither by speaking nor by writing, he cannot express a wish or make his needs known. Dhont always has a huge appetite and needs extra rations, an ordinary amount of food is not enough for him.³⁸

Clearly, the dream of re-education could not always become a reality. But even for the war-blinded soldiers who stayed in the institute, it was not certain whether, after their release, they would be able to put the ideal of an individual able to live and work independently into practice.

Interviews with the children and grandchildren of disabled veterans of the Great War are one way to shed light on this topic.³⁹ From the interview carried out with the grandchildren of Désiré Stas, who was blinded during his war service, it became clear that Stas did everything he possibly could to avoid being recognised as blind.⁴⁰ Although he did have a white stick, two of his grandsons both said that they never saw him use it in public. And the niece of Maurice Haesebrouck – the war-blinded serviceman who had chosen the Unknown Soldier – clearly remembered that her uncle would never leave the house without a companion, even though he had learnt to find his own way to the adjacent café.⁴¹

The way in which the re-training of war-blinded soldiers was perceived needs to be placed in perspective – just as is also required for the image of war-blinded soldiers more generally. Photographs such as those contained in the collection entitled *Une promenade dans l'institut* [A

³⁸ Confidential file on Julien Dhont/ Queen Elizabeth Archives no. AE 806/Archives Queen Elizabeth/Royak Archives/Brussels.

³⁹ Between February 2012 and 8 April 2015, a total of 15 interviews were conducted with the children or grandchildren of war-disabled soldiers of the Great War.

⁴⁰ Interview with the Stas family, 27 February 2012.

⁴¹ Interview with Maria de Blaere and Martine Van Daele, 23 May 2015.

Stroll in the Institute], in which war-blinded men are shown strolling independently, expressed the dream of rehabilitation, rather than the reality for blind people in the inter-war period.

CONCLUSION

Almost from the very outbreak of the Great War, the large numbers of soldiers whose active service had left them with lasting physical, mental or sensory wounds was described as an extremely pressing problem. The solution to making these men independent and economically productive once again lay, at least in part, in retraining them. In the main, this retraining took the form of either introducing the soldiers to work that would make use of their remaining physical capacities, or of training them to use prostheses to enable them to return to their pre-war job.

In spite of the paucity of source material, we can say with certainty that these aspirations could not always be fulfilled. For soldiers with a physical or sensory impairment, finding suitable work was a process of give and take – a question of finding a balance between their own wishes and physical capabilities on the one hand, and the expectations of society, the authorities, their doctors and families on the other. Many of the available sources – the periodical *De Belgische Verminkte*, the information held at the Royal Archives, and the interviews carried out with the children and grandchildren of war-disabled soldiers – bear witness to the huge gulf which often existed between the ideals of rehabilitation and of how it worked in practice. Following Sarah Rose, who studied the mixed results of the rehabilitation programs for disabled veterans in the United States in the 1910s and 1920s, we could say that «disability and its relation to the labor market proved a far more fluid and complex concept than either the framers of rehabilitation programs or rehabilitation officials had expected». ⁴² Neither, however, is it possible to say that all disabled soldiers lived tormented, troubled lives – further research is needed to give us a nuanced view of the experiences, both of re-education and of life more generally, that the Belgian war-disabled had during the post-war period.

⁴² Sarah Rose, *No right to be idle: The invention of disability, 1840s–1930s* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2017), 221-222.

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