

# **‘An Elite Among the Disabled’. The Welfare State and Identity Formation of Disabled Veterans in post-war West Germany**

SEBASTIAN SCHLUND

*Kiel University*

## **Abstract**

This article explores how disabled war veterans received preferential treatment by Federal German social and welfare politics in the first two decades after the Second World War. Based on the case of their ‘sacrifice for the fatherland’, disabled veterans were entitled to a generosity not experienced by persons disabled since birth, by an accident or illness. Powerful war victims’ associations successfully lobbied parliament and the architects of social and labour politics in order to secure significant privileges for the war-disabled. These related not only to state-funded programs of physical rehabilitation, but also to integration into the recovering West German economy.

To explain these benefits, the article will analyse the interaction of various privileges awarded by both Federal politics and West German society as a whole with the identity formation of disabled veterans. Their understanding of war disability as a ‘badge of honour’, and their upholding of an inherently masculinistic concept of camaraderie created a strong sense of belonging, which enhanced their negotiating position with regards to state-funded rehabilitation programmes and re-integration into the workforce. Against the backdrop of economic and moral reconstruction, disabled veterans successfully navigated the ambivalence of being regarded as a ‘symbol of defeat’ and self-identifying as victims of a war they had fought on the frontlines.

## **I**

In the broad panorama of physical, mental and psychological impairments – often summarised under the simplifying term ‘disability’ – war disability has occupied a special place within various historical contexts. This applies in particular to the age of world wars, when war disability became a tragic mass phenomenon in numerous countries, increasingly treated and, if possible, alleviated with the help of medical experts and welfare state rehabilitation programmes.<sup>1</sup> From the perspective of disability history as an analytical tool, the physical

<sup>1</sup> For example, see Heather Perry, ‘The Thanks of the Fatherland? World War I and the Orthopaedic Revolution in Disability Care’, in Hofer, H.-G., Prüll, C.-R., and Eckart, W. (eds.), *War, Trauma and Medicine in Germany and Central Europe (1914–1939)* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 2011), pp. 112–38.

impairment of disabled veterans of the Second World War was characterised by the fact that it was caused externally during fighting.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the factor of 'innocence' had a relevance that should not be underestimated, since, at the time, society often attributed congenital impairments attributed to harmful behaviour on the part of the mother during pregnancy and disabilities resulting from accidents were considered a sign of carelessness.<sup>3</sup> Disabled soldiers were not only free from such insinuations, they even claimed a special respect for themselves, since their wounding in war was acquired in service to the 'fatherland'. In this sense, war injury could be reinterpreted as a kind of badge of honour, a symbol of special courage, an embodiment of heroism, soldierly toughness and a specific idea of masculinity.<sup>4</sup>

Although all these values were strongly reminiscent of the ideology of the National Socialist regime, whose terrible legacy the young Federal Republic had to painfully confront, the self-image of West German maimed veterans as we will see in this article, was reflected in their comparatively privileged social position. The history of the privileged position of war-disabled people vis-à-vis people who had been disabled since birth or by illness or accident, between the founding of the Federal Republic in 1949 and the end of the 1960s, is thus also the paradoxical history of a coming to terms with the past. Here my focus is therefore on how the self-image and the exclusive identity formation of the disabled war veterans corresponded with their preferential treatment by the welfare state. I will argue that veterans successfully navigated the paradoxical situation of being both personally complicit as former soldiers, as well as potential 'victims' of war, given their impairment. They achieved this balancing act by developing a highly adaptable strategy of self-victimisation.

The fate of maimed soldiers returning from war has been the subject of various subdisciplines of German historical scholarship for several decades. Academics used to focus on the actions of the welfare state towards war-disabled persons, on military comradeship, on the body and the psyche as well as the heroic mystification of injured soldiers in the period between the world wars.<sup>5</sup> Recent studies have enriched the field

<sup>2</sup> See here and following Maren Möhring, 'Kriegsversehrte Körper. Zur Bedeutung der Sichtbarkeit von Behinderung', Waldschmidt, A. and Schneider, W. (eds.), *Disability Studies, Kultursociologie und Soziologie der Behinderung. Erkundungen in einem neuen Forschungsfeld* (Bielefeld, 2007), pp. 175–97, here p. 175.

<sup>3</sup> Referencing Eliot Freidson's research on prejudices towards disabled persons, German sociologist Günther Cloerkes conducted surveys on the specific perceptions of disability in West Germany. One finding was the prevalence of the notion that disabled persons themselves were responsible for their impairment. See Günther Cloerkes, *Soziologie der Behinderten. Eine Einführung* (Heidelberg, 1997), 131 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Sebastian Schlund, 'Kompensation des 'Makels'? Der organisierte Sport kriegsversehrter Männer in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1950 bis 1968', in Gotto, B. and Seefried E. (eds.), *Männer mit 'Makel'. Männlichkeiten und gesellschaftlicher Wandel in der frühen Bundesrepublik*, (Munich, 2017), pp. 49–61.

<sup>5</sup> From a comparative perspective of social history: Martin H. Geyer, 'Ein Vorbote des Wohlfahrtsstaates. Die Kriegsofferfürsorge in Frankreich, Deutschland und Großbritannien nach

with new perspectives, though. Most significantly, disability historian Jan Stoll has dealt with the topic of the representation of the interests of disabled people in the Federal Republic of Germany, shedding new light on the work and self-image of war victims' associations in the young Bonn Republic.<sup>6</sup> Stoll's dissertation was written as part of a larger research project on the history of disabled people in Germany, which examines disability from the perspective of social and cultural history, and as a transformable and constantly (re-)constructed and negotiable category of social inequality. This makes it possible to capture disabled veterans as a very large and politically influential subgroup within the disabled population of the Federal Republic. In addition, these recent studies in German disability history not only analyse the extent to which disabled veterans saw themselves as disabled people, but also why they were able to occupy a comparatively privileged position among disabled people in a nation that was marked by political, economic and moral reconstruction.

The following article builds on this reorientation in the history of disabled German veterans of the Second World War and looks at the specific identity construction of this group focussing on their relatively privileged status in the first two decades of the Federal Republic of Germany. Specially I examine how their preferential treatment within the welfare state's physical rehabilitation programmes, on the labour market and in the allocation of pensions was intimately bound up with the self-image of the war-disabled, which in turn was based on their self-perception as victims of the war. Throughout the period of observation, roughly from 1950 to 1970, when the legal and financial privilege of disabled veterans began to diminish as a result of more egalitarian social policies towards disabled people, the disabled veterans had to deal with a paradox: on the one hand, they were the embodied symbols of the lost war of a criminal regime whose dark history West German society only hesitantly began to come to terms with. On the other hand, they derived a claim to the 'thanks of the fatherland' from the sacrifice they had made for the Nazi war - both morally and materially.<sup>7</sup> How to treat men who had literally taken a bullet for fascist Germany, a totalitarian regime whose dark legacy necessitated not only economic, but also moral reconstruction in the decades after 1945? How to treat men who were integral parts of a criminal war effort, yet at the same time could be seen as victims of

---

dem Ersten Weltkrieg', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 9/2 (1983) pp. 230–77; Thomas Kühne, *Kameradschaft. Die Soldaten des nationalsozialistischen Krieges im 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 2006); Nils Löffelbein, *Ehrenbürger der Nation. Die Kriegsbeschädigten des Ersten Weltkriegs in Politik und Propaganda des Nationalsozialismus* (Essen, 2013); Sabine Kienitz, *Beschädigte Helden. Kriegsinvalidität und Körperbilder 1914–1923* (Paderborn, 2008); Stephanie Neuner, *Politik und Psychiatrie. Die staatliche Versorgung psychisch Kriegsbeschädigter in Deutschland 1920–1939* (Göttingen, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Jan Stoll, *Behinderte Anerkennung? Interessenorganisationen von Menschen mit Behinderungen in Westdeutschland seit 1945* (Frankfurt am Main/New York, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> James M. Diehl, *The Thanks of the Fatherland. German Veterans after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill, 1993).

a war they had helped to fight? In approaching these questions, I first show how the war-disabled were given preferential legal treatment by the state compared to so-called civilian disabled people in the first two post-war decades. Then I move on to explore the role played by the organised interest groups of war victims in the formulation of these laws, to show how the self-understanding and identity formation of the war-disabled interacted with the sphere of legal privilege.<sup>8</sup>

## II

The unequal treatment of different groups of disabled persons in legal terms, their varying chances with regard to physical rehabilitation, vocational training and finally taking up employment, are referred to in German historiography as '*Kausalprinzip*': after the Second World War, disabled persons were categorised in a hierarchy based on the cause of impairment, with disabled veterans at the top. Until the end of the 1960s, all socio-political measures aimed at improving the living situation of disabled people in the Federal Republic were guided by the conviction that the 'sacrifice' of war-disabled people was of higher moral value than the impairment of civilian disabled people. This 'case of personal sacrifice' (*Aufopferungstatbestand*) strongly influenced the thinking of political parties and ministerial administrations and was repeatedly emphasised by the lobbying of influential war victims' associations.<sup>9</sup>

At the beginning of the 1950s, a nationwide census put the number of war-disabled persons at about 1.5 million.<sup>10</sup> About half of the state-recognised war-disabled had a reduction in earning capacity of more than 50 per cent, and almost one in ten were considered severely disabled with a reduction in earning capacity of more than 80 per cent. The most common injury was amputation of one or more limbs (over 200,000 persons). At the beginning of West Germany's forty-year history, about 70 per cent of all disabled people were war-disabled. However – and this had a major impact on the topics dealt with here – the proportion of war-disabled people in the group of men between the ages of 25 and 45, who were particularly relevant for the labour market and the

<sup>8</sup> The article only examines the history of disabled veterans in the Federal Republic of Germany and thus excludes those who lived in the German Democratic Republic. The self-image, organisational ability and social status of disabled veterans in East Germany were decisively influenced by the socialist reappraisal of National Socialism and therefore in many respects can hardly be compared with the situation of West German war veterans.

<sup>9</sup> Hans-Walter Schmuhl, 'Menschen mit Behinderungen im Spannungsfeld von Exklusion und Inklusion Vorüberlegungen zu einer notwendigen Erweiterung der Sozialgeschichte Deutschlands im 20. Jahrhundert', in Cantow, J. and Grüber, K. (eds), *Eine Welt ohne Behinderung – Vision oder Alptraum?* (Berlin, 2009), 24–50. Here 40. Also see Wilfried Rudloff, 'Überlegungen zur Geschichte der bundesdeutschen Behindertenpolitik', *Zeitschrift für Sozialreform* 49/6 (2003), pp. 863–86, here p. 867.

<sup>10</sup> Wilfried Rudloff, 'Rehabilitation und Hilfen für Behinderte', in Schulz, G. (ed.), *Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1949–1957. Bewältigung der Kriegsfolgen, Rückkehr zur sozialpolitischen Normalität* (Baden-Baden, 2005), pp. 515–57, here p. 522.

reconstruction of the economy, was as high as 90 per cent.<sup>11</sup> These data not only demonstrate the large number of people in need of care, but also the extraordinary weight that the concerns of the war-disabled portion of the German population could have when their interests were systematically represented. Moreover, the statistics show that the phenomenon of disability was, in contemporary terms, closely linked to the ability to work. This is by no means a German specificity: already after the First World War, this categorisation was a common practice, especially in industrialised nations, as the comparative approach of Martin Crotty, Neil Diamant and Mark Edele has recently highlighted.<sup>12</sup> States categorised their disabled citizens according to utilitarian criteria, and who was considered disabled and to what degree was diagnosed by medical experts and legally defined by the state.

In the first two post-war decades, the state's categorisation had a very practical consequence. The basic structure of war victims' welfare in the Federal Republic strongly resembled the mechanisms that had already been established after the First World War: 'alms recipients' became taxpayers.<sup>13</sup> Now the guiding principle was the slightly rephrased, yet similar in substance 'rehabilitation before pension'.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, a strong continuity can be observed across the three political systems of the Weimar Republic, National Socialism and the early Federal Republic, first with regard to the orientation towards the ability to work, and second with regard to the preferential treatment of war-disabled persons over civilian disabled persons.<sup>15</sup> Although the Western Allies had severely restricted the preferential treatment of war-disabled persons during their occupation, not least in order to break the militaristic tradition and relevance of war victims' associations, this levelling effort was soon reversed in the legislation of the Federal Republic: the legal milestone of the Federal Care Act (*Bundesversorgungsgesetz*) of 1950 enshrined unequal treatment between disabled people categorising them on the basis of whether or not they had acquired their impairment through wartime service.<sup>16</sup> As a result of this legislation about four million people ultimately benefited from the *Bundesversorgungsgesetz*, many of them the widows, orphans or relatives of war-disabled men. However, we need to understand these individuals as sitting as a significant subset within the total group of disabled

<sup>11</sup> Walter Fandrey, *Krüppel, Idioten, Irre. Zur Sozialgeschichte behinderter Menschen in Deutschland* (Stuttgart, 1990), p. 195.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Crotty, Neil J. Diamant and Mark Edele, *The Politics of Veteran Benefits in the Twentieth Century. A Comparative History* (Ithaca, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Petra Fuchs, *Körperbehinderte zwischen Selbstaufgabe und Emanzipation. Selbsthilfe - Integration - Aussonderung* (Neuwied, 2001), p. 138.

<sup>14</sup> Elsbeth Bösl, 'Integration durch Arbeit? Westdeutsche Behindertenpolitik unter dem Primat der Erwerbsarbeit 1949–1974, *Traverse. Zeitschrift für Geschichte = Revue d'histoire*, 13/3 (2006), pp. 113–24, here p. 119.

<sup>15</sup> James M. Diehl, 'Change and Continuity in the Treatment of German Kriegsopfer', in Moeller, R. G. (ed.), *West Germany under Construction. Politics, Society, and Culture in the Adenauer Era* (Ann Arbor, 1997), pp. 93–108, here pp. 96–7.

<sup>16</sup> Wilfried Rudloff, 'Überlegungen', p. 867.

people: managing the physical effects of war generated significantly more intensive state support than the consequences of an accident, an illness or a congenital impairment. The decisive factor for the provision of health care and the financing of rehabilitation programmes was therefore not the impairment itself, but its cause.

According to the *Bundesversorgungsgesetz*, war-disabled persons were entitled to free medical treatment, which was intended to alleviate physical suffering as far as possible, to prevent it from getting worse and to ensure that they were able to return to work as quickly as possible. As part of this, roughly 600,000 disabled veterans or people wounded by bombing were to be provided with prosthetic aids at the expense of the state, by 1957 more than 550,000 people who were classified as war-disabled wore a prosthesis, mostly prosthetic legs and orthopaedic shoes.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the state also provided disabled veterans with wheelchairs or even motorised two-wheelers to guarantee the necessary mobility to participate in everyday and professional life.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the primary goal of reintegrating war-disabled people into the booming German labour market, the Federal Ministry of Labour, which was responsible for this policy, formulated another aspect of physical rehabilitation, one that was revealing of German society's perception of war disability: in so-called walking courses, leg amputee veterans were trained to use their prostheses. They were to be taught to walk 'as inconspicuously as possible', indeed, the everyday use of the prosthesis was to appear so natural that the disabled veterans were even supposed to be capable of dancing again.<sup>19</sup> This desire for veterans to have an inconspicuous gait – apparently intended to make it easier for the impaired person to conceal the 'physical damage', and at the same time implied the assumed feelings of inferiority – requires explanation. Programmes of physical rehabilitation and occupational integration were always accompanied by a kind of coming-to-terms with the past and the attempt to make disability as invisible as possible in everyday life. In fact, the visibility of physical impairment was a main trigger for negative attitudes towards non-disabled people, which is why the hiding of the 'stigma' was a comprehensible contemporary strategy to avoid social exclusion.<sup>20</sup>

To further support the rehabilitation of disabled veterans, the architects of the *Bundesversorgungsgesetz* included options for vocational training or further education as part of their treatment. Thus, there was a smooth transition from physical rehabilitation to a job in a workshop for disabled people, where they were prepared for the competitive labour

<sup>17</sup> Elsbeth Bösl, *Politiken der Normalisierung. Zur Geschichte der Behindertenpolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Bielefeld, 2009), p. 258.

<sup>18</sup> Crotty, Diamant and Edele, *Veteran Benefits*, pp. 70–1.

<sup>19</sup> Federal Ministry of Labour, Re: Orthopädische Versorgung der Kriegsbeschädigten, 7.12.1951, LAV NRW, NW 565 Nr. 78.

<sup>20</sup> Günther Cloerkes, *Einstellung und Verhalten gegenüber Körperbehinderten. Eine Bestandsaufnahme der Ergebnisse internationaler Forschung* (Berlin, 1980), pp. 177–79.

market.<sup>21</sup> This work was further supported by the second significant law of the Federal German disability policy, the severely disabled persons act (*Schwerbeschädigtengesetz*) of 1953, which also aimed at improving the occupational situation of disabled veterans in particular. At that time, all persons with a reduction in earning capacity of more than 50 per cent were considered severely disabled – as a rule, these were disabled veterans. Social historian Walter Fandrey highlights the discrepancy in the perception of war-disabled people and people who had been disabled since birth already came to light during the debate on the details of the legal text, noting how people who had been disabled from birth were considered ‘non-genuine’ severely disabled people. They could only apply for preferential treatment on the labour market if they had the same reduction in earning capacity, whereas the war-disabled automatically benefited from this under the severely disabled persons act.<sup>22</sup> The law also standardised regulations on the compulsory hiring of severely disabled persons by companies that had previously differed in the occupation zones. Ultimately, the law prescribed a hiring quota of 8 per cent, although this was reduced to 5.5 per cent in the first few years after it came into force in 1953.<sup>23</sup>

All in all, the benefits that disabled veterans of the Second World War received from the welfare state in West Germany are rightly described, by Crotty, Diamant and Edele, as ‘remarkable’. For international comparison, with Soviet veterans for example, against whom the majority of German soldiers had fought for over four years, the former foot soldiers of Hitler’s war could be sure of their existence.<sup>24</sup> But even within the rapidly recovering West German society, war veterans occupied an extremely privileged position. Paradoxically, this also applied to the issue of pensions, even though the mantra of the 1950s had been ‘work before pension’: after the *Bundesversorgungsgesetz* had been revised several times, the full pension for maimed soldiers and surviving dependants (*Kriegsopferrente*) was an astonishing 80 per cent of the general average monthly salary in the Federal Republic.<sup>25</sup>

### III

How can it be explained that the young Federal Republic launched some of its most significant and comprehensive legislative initiatives for the welfare of disabled veterans, and what role did the organised interests of the war victims’ associations play in this? The two most influential associations of war victims were the *Reichsbund der*

<sup>21</sup> Rudloff, ‘Rehabilitation’, p. 528.

<sup>22</sup> Fandrey, *Krüppel*, p. 196.

<sup>23</sup> Rudloff, ‘Rehabilitation’, p. 540.

<sup>24</sup> See Crotty, Diamant and Edele, *Veteran Benefits*, p. 71.

<sup>25</sup> Susanne Schleiermacher, ‘Restauration von Männlichkeit? Zum Umgang mit Kriegsgeschädigten in der frühen Bundesrepublik’, in: Gotto and Seefried (eds.), *Männer mit ‚Makel‘*, pp. 24–36, here p. 32.

*Kriegs- und Zivilbeschädigten, Sozialrentner und Hinterbliebenen* (Federation of war disabled and civilian disabled persons, social pensioners and surviving dependants, *Reichsbund*) and the *Verband der Kriegsbeschädigten, Kriegshinterbliebenen und Sozialrentner Deutschlands* (Association of war disabled, surviving dependants and social pensioners, *VdK*).<sup>26</sup> At the beginning of the 1950s, both associations represented the interests of a total of more than two million people, making them the largest interest groups in West Germany after the trade unions, still highly influential at the time. Although both the *Reichsbund* and the *VdK* also included people with civilian disabilities in their ranks, at that time they mainly acted on behalf of war-disabled people - simply because of their numerical distribution. The most active and visible in the public sphere was the *VdK* that, for example, organised a demonstration in 1953 with over 50,000 participants to draw attention to the needs of the war-disabled. Hans Nitschke, the association's chairman, stressed that the welfare of veterans served not least to preserve the 'internal peace' of the Federal Republic.<sup>27</sup>

In their political, denominational and ideological orientation, both *Reichsbund* and *VdK* initially adopted the greatest possible neutrality, although the *Reichsbund* can be said to have been closer to the Social Democrats in the first two post-war decades, while the *VdK* was more conservative.<sup>28</sup> The fact that these two organisations repeatedly accused each other of communist infiltration in the 1950s can be understood as part of a power-political struggle for supremacy in the landscape of war victims' associations. Several negotiations for a merger, which would have made possible a more effective alliance representing the interests of people with disabilities, eventually failed due to this competition.<sup>29</sup> As far as the political orientation of the associations was concerned, the *BDDK* in particular attracted suspicion. As Jan Stoll has pointed out, the *VdK* attested to the *BDDK*'s 'political radicalism' towards the right. But it is not only through its openness to former supporters of National Socialism that the *BDDK* appears from today's perspective to be a radical war victims' association. It also took drastic positions when it came to distinguishing war-disabled from civilian disabled people: Their community was created by the 'common experience of war service and a soldierly comradeship' that could not be shared with accident victims

<sup>26</sup> In addition to these two organisations with the best connections to the highest state offices, there were up to one hundred war victims' associations, some only locally active, sometimes with openly right-wing leanings, and that often consisted entirely of disabled veterans, like the *Bund Deutscher Kriegsbeschädigter und Kriegshinterbliebener* (Federation of German War-Affected Persons and War Survivors, *BDDK*), which at times had over 70,000 members. See Stoll *Behinderte Anerkennung*, p. 35.

<sup>27</sup> *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 27 1953, *Die Kriegsoffer fordern Linderung ihrer Notlage*.

<sup>28</sup> Elsbeth Bösl, 'Bundesdeutsche Behindertenpolitik im „Jahrzehnt der Rehabilitation“ – Umbrüche und Kontinuitäten um 1970', in Lingelbach, G. and Waldschmidt, A. (eds.), *Kontinuitäten, Zäsuren, Brüche? Lebenslagen von Menschen mit Behinderungen in der deutschen Zeitgeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main/New York, 2016), pp. 82–115, here p. 91.

<sup>29</sup> Stoll, *Behinderte Anerkennung*, p. 52.

or people who had been disabled since birth. Especially towards the latter group, extremely dismissive, prejudiced views were widespread in the *BDDK*.<sup>30</sup> To a certain extent, these stereotypes were certainly based on the direct Nazi past, when a distinction was made between 'valuable' and 'unvaluable' life of disabled people and the social status of war-disabled people as 'honorary citizens of the nation' and 'damaged heroes' differed even more drastically from the disdain for persons who were disabled since birth.<sup>31</sup>

What ultimately united the arguments of the various war victims' associations, despite their different accentuations, was the emphasis on the *Aufopferungstatbestand*, the sacrificial nature of war disability. To a certain extent, this overshadowed the recognition by politics and society of the special achievements of disabled veterans and their self-image as a group of disabled people who were entitled to preferential treatment. Without the political will to privilege the war-disabled, the lobbying of the war victims' associations would not have achieved such resounding and lasting success.

Thus, after the adoption of the *Bundesversorgungsgesetz* in 1950, a high-ranking member of the *VdK* boasted of the central role his association had played in the conception of the text of the law: 'If it were not for the *VdK* and its functionaries, we would not have a *Bundesversorgungsgesetz* today because of the incompetents in the administration of the ministries'.<sup>32</sup> Although the self-praise and the insult to the ministerial administration was exaggerated, the influence of the war victims' associations on the formulation of legislative initiatives prior to their discussion in parliament can hardly be underestimated. Representatives of the *Reichsbund* and the *VdK* were centrally involved in advisory bodies in the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of the Interior and were thus able to introduce the particular interests of the large war victims' organisations into legislative proposals at an early stage.<sup>33</sup> The *VdK* in particular benefited from a broad network of social counsellors who assisted war-disabled people at the local level in applying for state benefits. At the same time, these advisors collected valuable details about the wishes and grievances of the disabled that they passed on within the *VdK* and thus provided its lobbying with important information from the bottom up.<sup>34</sup> Wilfried Rudloff even speaks of an 'iron triangle' with regard to the close interweaving of ministerial bureaucracy, parliamentary

<sup>30</sup> See *ibid.* pp. 55–56.

<sup>31</sup> Löffelbein, *Ehrenbürger*; Kienitz, *Beschädigte Helden*.

<sup>32</sup> Hans Nitsche, Vorstandssitzung des *VdK* (Board meeting of the *VdK*), December 16–17 1950, Bundesarchiv N 1011/49, fol. 368–78, here 377. Also see Stoll, *Behinderte Anerkennung*, p. 98. [Translation S.S.]

<sup>33</sup> Stoll, *Behinderte Anerkennung*, p. 88.

<sup>34</sup> Konrad Haas, *Die Praxis der sozialen Arbeit*, in Verband der Kriegsbeschädigten, Kriegshinterbliebenen und Sozialrentner Deutschlands e.V., *Vom Wesen und Wirken des VdK Deutschlands. Eine Festschrift* (Neuwied am Rhein, 1955), pp. 28–34, here p. 33.

experts and vocal interest groups, which decisively shaped social policy towards disabled people during this period.<sup>35</sup>

Following this finding, one can speak of a further 'iron triangle' that remained almost unquestioned until the end of the 1960s, a triangle that exposes the connection between employment, the rehabilitation of disabled men and the prioritisation of war-disabled persons. Both triangular relationships began to dissolve in the mid-1960s, when the target group of disability policy was successively expanded. From this point people with civilian disabilities, especially women and above all children, who received special public attention after the thalidomide scandal, now became the focus of state social policy.<sup>36</sup> This gradual process of levelling out unequal treatment on the basis of the cause of an impairment was finally to manifest itself in law in the years between 1969 and 1974, when a significant change in policy set in.<sup>37</sup> From then on, the privilege of being war-disabled was no longer to prefigure federal German disability policy. The disabled veterans owed the loss of their exceptional position to several factors. These included the health of the West German economy that for two decades had enabling the state to make the extensive benefits for disabled veterans available to other groups of disabled people; a slow social change in the hierarchised assessment of causes of disability, triggered by the thalidomide scandal; and a progressive political reform climate that questioned and began to eliminate social inequalities. However, this did not eliminate the self-perception of the war-disabled as a group entitled to financial and moral privileges. Therefore, the following subchapter will explain how this specific identity emerged and why it was so successful in the first two decades of the Bonn Republic.

#### IV

Although the large war victims' associations, the *Reichsbund* and the *VdK*, were considered 'mixed associations' that on paper represented the interests of all physically disabled people regardless of the cause of their impairment, they were first and foremost associations of disabled veterans. In both organisations, the proportion of disabled veterans was over 80 per cent by the end of the 1960s. However, these figures are not the only indication of the largely prevailing self-image. As Oliver von Wrochem points out, the associations generally saw themselves as a

<sup>35</sup> Wilfried Rudloff, 'Akteurssysteme, organisierte Betroffeneninteressen und sozialpolitische Innovationspfade – Modelle aus der Behindertenpolitik', in Becker, U., Hockerts, H.-G. and Tenfelde, K. (eds.), *Sozialstaat Deutschland. Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Bonn, 2010), pp. 141–59, here p. 143.

<sup>36</sup> Gabriele Lingelbach, 'Konstruktionen von 'Behinderung' in der Öffentlichkeitsarbeit und Spendenwerbung der Aktion Sorgenkind seit 1964', in Bösl, E., Klein, A. and Waldschmidt, A. (eds.): *Disability History. Konstruktionen von Behinderung in der Geschichte. Eine Einführung* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2010), pp. 127–50.

<sup>37</sup> On the stages of social politics for disabled persons in Federal Germany, see Elsbeth Bösl, 'Die Geschichte der Behindertenpolitik in der Bundesrepublik aus Sicht der Disability History', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 48/23 (2010), pp. 6–12.

‘(war) victims’ community’.<sup>38</sup> The emphasis here was on the term ‘victim’ for strategic reasons. It may seem paradoxical, yet it was typical of West Germany’s reckoning with the immediate past that former soldiers, perpetrators, handlers of Nazi aggression, could present themselves as misguided, largely innocent tools of Hitler’s ideology. This self-designation as victims enabled them to wrest a benevolent attitude from the state - and in a certain sense also from West German society - which was fed by a combination of compassion and appreciation. In contrast to the First World War, and mainly due to bombardments of large German cities, German civilians were much more directly affected by the military struggle. Since both psychiatrists and political decision-makers paid a lot of attention to the civilian population affected by the bombing, it was reasonable for the veterans to portray themselves as a military victim group that also merited sympathy, thereby appearing almost like a guilt-free community of victims. Svenja Goltermann quotes a psychiatrist from Dresden, who in 1946 stated ‘[t]he main victims of the war are the seriously disabled, the surviving dependants of the fallen, the displaced persons and those totally bombed out of their homes’.<sup>39</sup> While cruelly ignoring the true victims of Germany’s war of aggression, this medical expert unwillingly outlined the groups of persons allegedly most deserving of both compassion and state welfare, and the veterans’ organisations would soon learn how to profit from adding themselves to this list.

However, the practice of victimisation remained a delicate matter.<sup>40</sup> Under no circumstances did the war-disabled want to give the impression that they were merely living off the state’s pocket and making a comfortable life for themselves from the war victims’ pensions. All too fresh was the memory of the debates after the First World War about so-called pension hunting, when war victims had to defend themselves against the accusation of illegitimately obtaining state benefits.<sup>41</sup> To prevent these accusations from arising in the post-war period of the Second World War, the key was to combine self-victimisation with the quickest possible physical rehabilitation and professional reintegration.

This balancing act became particularly clear for the disabled athletes who, from 1951 onwards, joined together in an association that, organisationally, had close links to the *VdK*, but ideologically initially showed great continuities with sport and the military under national socialism. People with civilian disabilities had a particularly hard

<sup>38</sup> Oliver von Wrochem, ‘Kriegsdeutungen und gesellschaftliche Transformation. Wehrmachtdiktionen, Sinnstiftung und soldatische Identitäten in Westdeutschland’, in von Lingen, K. (ed.), *Kriegserfahrung und nationale Identität in Europa nach 1945. Erinnerung, Säuberungsprozesse und nationales Gedächtnis* (Paderborn: Schöningh 2009) pp. 189–205, here p. 193.

<sup>39</sup> Svenja Goltermann, *Negotiating Victimhood in East and West Germany 1945–2005*, in Withuis, J and Mooij, A. (eds.), *The Politics of War Trauma The aftermath of World War II in eleven European countries* (Amsterdam, 2010), pp. 107–40, here p. 111.

<sup>40</sup> On victimisation, see Svenja Goltermann, ‘Kriegsheimkehrer in der westdeutschen Gesellschaft’, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 47/36–37 (2009), pp. 34–9, here p. 35.

<sup>41</sup> Sebastian Schlund, *„Behinderung“ überwinden? Organisierter Behindertensport in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (1950–1990)* (Frankfurt am Main/ New York, 2017), p. 58.

time finding a place in the veteran-dominated associations and were discriminated against by war-disabled athletes for an astonishingly long time.<sup>42</sup> Thus, at the end of the 1960s, the *Versehrtensportverband* (Sports Association for the Disabled) with its more than 60,000 members can be described as a peculiar association of disabled veterans. The disabled athletes had enjoyed their privileged position since the *Bundesversorgungsgesetz* of 1950 (and in particular a reform of this law in 1956), when disabled sports became financed by the state as part of physical rehabilitation, only for war-disabled persons. Although their status meant that they were able to enjoy state-funded and medically supervised sport, at the same time they had to make it clear that this was always therapy and not sport in the sense of competition and fun. After all, they saw the danger of being branded as ‘pension hunters’ who had their leisure time fun financed by the taxpayer by demonstrating their physical fitness. Sometimes this fear of social ostracism led to curious incidents. For example, the board of the *Versehrtensportverband*, in consultation with the responsible Federal Ministry of Labour, banned bowling for disabled athletes.<sup>43</sup> This was due to the fact that traditionally so much alcohol was consumed and so many cigarettes were smoked while bowling that it could no longer be considered a therapeutic method. As this example shows, privilege and pride could also enter into a complicated relationship: under no circumstances should the privilege granted by the state hurt the pride of the war-disabled; under no circumstances should the impression arise that they were lazy and not working hard enough on their physical training with the aim of restoring their working capacity.

The episode proves that the privilege of preferential treatment – in this case free therapy under sporting conditions – was granted by the state, but that this concession had to be repaid by correspondingly compliant behaviour in the form of purposeful work on one’s own physical rehabilitation. In its own assessment of this connection, the *Versehrtensportverband* attributed to itself the fulfilment of a ‘socio-political state assignment’.<sup>44</sup> This mission had found its legal basis in the recognition of sports for the disabled as a form of curative therapy under the *Bundesversorgungsgesetz*. Accordingly, the war-disabled athletes considered it illegitimate when civilian disabled persons joined them in the sports communities. As there was no funding for them under the *Bundesversorgungsgesetz*, war-disabled people belittled them as ‘parasites’

<sup>42</sup> Above all, resentment and stereotypes towards mentally disabled people were deeply rooted. This can also be seen as a consequence of National Socialist eugenics and euthanasia. As late as 1969, about two thirds of the people surveyed agreed with the statement that children should not be kept alive by all means if a disability was diagnosed during pregnancy. See Heinrich Becker, *Behinderte Kinder werden abgelehnt. Das erschreckende Ergebnis einer sozialpsychologischen Untersuchung*, *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 9 September 1969.

<sup>43</sup> Sebastian Schlund, ‘Dis/ability and Gender im westdeutschen Behindertensport. Eine intersektionale Analyse über die Konstruktion und Gegenwartsrelevanz zeitgeschichtlich wirkmächtiger Ungleichheitskategorien’, in Nolte, C. (ed.), *Disability History Goes Public – Praktiken und Perspektiven der Wissensvermittlung* (Bielefeld, 2020), pp. 153–80, here p. 157.

<sup>44</sup> Schlund, ‘*Behinderung überwinden*’, p. 161.

who had to be 'dragged through' financially by the disabled veterans.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the inequalities in the care of war-disabled and non-war-disabled people reinforced the hierarchies between different groups of disabled people based on the cause of their impairment.

It is noteworthy that large sections of war-disabled sportsmen associated this mandate for appropriate physical rehabilitation, which seemed to apply exclusively to them, with an obligation that also distinguished them morally from non-war-disabled people. Thus, leading officials of the disabled athletes repeatedly emphasised that they had to distinguish themselves from the 'miserable, dubious cripples who flaunt their injured limbs and can be found begging in the streets or as outcasts at the main railway station at night'.<sup>46</sup> Such comments illustrate how contemporary prejudices against disabled people as supplicants who fed off the charity of the state and society had largely been internalised by numerous war-disabled athletes. They reacted prophylactically to these attributions with a physical as well as mental compensatory performance: through commitment and willpower, the fate of impairment could be overcome as far as possible. By being tough on themselves, by fighting against the so-called 'cripple' complex (*Krüppelkomplex*), that is, the feeling of inferiority due to physical impairment, they were able to come as close as possible to the supposed norm of the non-disabled person.<sup>47</sup>

In this sense, the veterans organised in associations – and especially the war-disabled athletes – liked to emphasise how important camaraderie was against this backdrop. The concept of camaraderie had been widespread since the first half of the twentieth century, both for those who played sport together and among soldiers – military and sporting language had influenced each other, especially after the First World War.<sup>48</sup> The ideal of camaraderie suggested a mutual relationship of trust, support and help in times of need, thus creating a sense of community. In addition, the feeling of camaraderie gave comfort to a community of wounded veterans who shared their physical and mental impairment as well as the 'otherwise so meaningless war experience'.<sup>49</sup> As Thomas Kühne has shown in his ground-breaking studies on the soldiers of the National Socialist regime, veterans' organisations linked retrospective sense-making and present-oriented communalisation. In this way, they transcended the shared experience of war to a certain extent:

<sup>45</sup> Bernd Wedemeyer-Kolwe, *Vom 'Versehrtenturnen' zum Deutschen Behindertensportverband (DBS). Eine Geschichte des deutschen Behindertensports* (Hildesheim, 2011), p. 158.

<sup>46</sup> Ernst Dieckhöfer, 'Hier spricht der VSG-Vorsitzende als einer für viele!', *Der Versehrtensportler* 12/11 (1962), pp. 172–73.

<sup>47</sup> The word 'Krüppel' was widely used at this time, only later being criticised (and adapted in ironic, self-affirmative fashion) by the German Disability Movement. Klaus-Dieter Thomann, 'Der „Krüppel“: Entstehen und Verschwinden eines Kampfbegriffs', *Medizinhistorisches Journal* 27/3–4 (1992), pp. 221–71.

<sup>48</sup> Christiane Eisenberg, *'English Sports' und deutsche Bürger. Eine Gesellschaftsgeschichte 1800–1939*, (Paderborn, 1999), p. 322; Schlund, *'Behinderung' überwinden*, p. 41.

<sup>49</sup> Karl Mierke, 'Der Kameradschaftsgedanke im Versehrten sport', *Der Versehrtensportler* 2/3 (1952), pp. 1–2.

The mutual care in securing one's livelihood actualised the memory of wartime camaraderie and proved that it was a benefit for one's whole life. That was the reason for all the relationships between veterans: to ensure continuity in the turmoil and upheavals between war and post-war.<sup>50</sup>

For disabled veterans, these 'turmoils and upheavals' extended even further into the post-war period than for soldiers who had to reshape their lives (physically) unharmed. Many disabled veterans saw themselves in a continuing 'struggle for life and existence' due to their impairment and the resulting disadvantages in everyday and professional life, in line with the contemporary interpretation of disability as a stroke of fate, as a tragic phenomenon that marks the affected person as deviant.<sup>51</sup> As Maren Möhring has explained, disabled veterans carried with them a 'stigma' visible to the majority of non-disabled society, which, following Erving Goffman, symbolises deviation from a norm and can lead to irritation, rejecting attitudes and discrimination in everyday life.<sup>52</sup> Correspondingly, the associations of war victims saw themselves as communities of fate, which together fought against stigmatisation, isolation and self-abandonment. In this context, supposed characteristics, such as a 'cripple soul' were largely internalised. The physical impairment, regardless of the cause, was seen at that time as a deviation from a norm that could be alleviated or even overcome through therapy, but above all through the strength of will of the disabled person themselves.<sup>53</sup> This undoubtedly created a great deal of pressure on disabled people, which is why the behaviour of the war-disabled seems completely understandable in retrospect from a social-psychological point of view.

In the war victims' associations, camaraderie made it possible to create an exclusive community that united the disabled veterans as a group and gave each individual the feeling of being part of a network of mutual help. However, this offer of inclusion was also accompanied by a mechanism of exclusion, because only those who had acquired their impairment during the war could be fully accepted members. In this context, the two large war victims' associations, the *Reichsbund* and the *VdK*, showed a certain discrepancy between the formal openness to persons with civilian disabilities and the widespread view of the superiority of the cause of war disability. Thus, in 1952, an official communication of the *VdK* justified the fundamental distinction between disabled veterans and non-war-disabled persons by pointing out that one 'cannot get around the truth that one group of the people has done and sacrificed more than another'.<sup>54</sup> It is therefore not surprising that both organisations primarily pursued a

<sup>50</sup> Kühne, 'Kameradschaft', pp. 214–15.

<sup>51</sup> Schlund, 'Behinderung' überwinden, p. 144.

<sup>52</sup> Möhring, 'Kriegsversehrte Körper', p. 175. Also see Erving Goffman, *Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, 1963).

<sup>53</sup> See Thomann, 'Krüppel', p. 256. In a thoroughly utilitarian manner, disabled persons were ascribed feelings of uselessness owing to their physical impairment, eventually 'crippling' their soul as well.

<sup>54</sup> Max Wuttke, 'Das Recht der Schwerbeschädigten', *VdK-Mitteilungen* 2/1 (1952), pp. 1–13, here p. 5. Also see Stoll, *Behinderte Anerkennung*, p. 57.

policy of patronage for war-disabled people in the decades relevant here and only changed to representing the interests of all physically disabled people when the strategic argument of preferential treatment lost weight from the mid-1960s onwards.

In a field that has so far received comparatively strong attention from researchers, the comrades self-image of disabled veterans, their work on physical rehabilitation and the motives of the social state's privileging of war-disabled men overlap in a particularly vivid way in the so-called re-masculinisation of German post-war society.<sup>55</sup> This comprehensive process took place against the background of the psychological coping with the 'war defeat', the long absence of men due to war service and imprisonment, the resulting presence of women in 'male professions' and the contrasting image of the well-fed Allied occupation soldiers.<sup>56</sup> Susanne Schleiermacher has explained how these consequences of the war required a 'restoration of masculinity' – and that war-disabled men were particularly affected by this because of their supposedly deficient physicality.<sup>57</sup> As the Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell points out in her pioneering studies on constructions of masculinity, the functional restoration of the body to the greatest possible extent can be seen as a central coping strategy of disabled men to satisfy hegemonic notions of masculinity and prevailing performance standards.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, injured veterans were not only under pressure to rehabilitate their bodies, but also their masculinity. On the one hand, in the course of demilitarisation, a new ideal of masculinity was to prevail that, in contrast to National Socialism, was not oriented towards soldierly toughness, but towards the virtues of a citizen, head of the family and breadwinner. Any support for war-disabled men that served the goal of professional reintegration was therefore also based on the goal of promoting the ideal of a nuclear family with a working man at the head.

The interplay between the state's interest in this specific form of re-masculinisation and the concerns of the war victims' associations was demonstrated at a regional conference of the *VdK* North Rhine-Westphalia in 1959. A representative of the state pension administration explained that the concept of rehabilitation encompassed all assistance from the state that enabled the war-disabled 'to care for themselves and their relatives again as soon and as completely as possible and to become an equal and respected citizen of the state'.<sup>59</sup> The war victims' associations

<sup>55</sup> Robert G. Moeller, 'Heimkehr ins Vaterland. Die Remaskulinisierung Westdeutschlands in den fünfziger Jahren', *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift* 60/2 (2001), pp. 403–36.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 404. Also see Frank Biess, 'Männer des Wiederaufbaus – Wiederaufbau der Männer. Kriegsheimkehrer in Ost- und Westdeutschland, 1945– 1955', in Hagemann, K. and Schüler-Springorum, S. (eds.), *Heimat-Front. Militär und Geschlechterverhältnisse im Zeitalter der Weltkriege* (Frankfurt am Main/New York, 2002), pp. 345–65, here p. 352.

<sup>57</sup> Schleiermacher, 'Restauration'.

<sup>58</sup> Raewyn Connell, *Der gemachte Mann: Konstruktion und Krise von Männlichkeiten* (Opladen. 1999), p. 106. Original title: *Masculinities* (Cambridge, 1995).

<sup>59</sup> Stoll, *Behinderte Anerkennung*, p. 62.

knew how to use this objective of the Federal Republic's social policy for their own benefit and on this basis formulated their demands for the privileged treatment of war-disabled men in their integration into the labour force. In this context, however, preferential treatment was not understood in relation to people with civilian disabilities, but in relation to women; the state's measures were not only intended to emphasise the special position of disabled veterans, but also the special position of able-bodied men vis-à-vis women. As Elsbeth Bösl has pointed out, until about the mid-1960s, war-disabled men were the emblematic target group of any social policy for people with disabilities – and here the emphasis is on both 'war-disabled' and 'men'.<sup>60</sup>

The *VdK* recognised the strategic potential of a contribution of the war victims' associations to a socially and politically desired 'normalisation' of the economic, familial and gender order of the Federal Republic. In official communications of the association – as well as of the *Reichsbund* – references to the restoration of a supposed 'normal family' appeared again and again. For example, the war victims' associations spoke out against the promotion of employment for war widows, as this would call into question the 'significance of the profession of housewife and mother'.<sup>61</sup>

The disabled veterans did not only derive their self-image from the fact that they were disabled in the war, which gave their group a collective memory and identity. They also constructed their self-image based on their gender, which was linked to certain obligations as the family breadwinner and head of the family, but equally to the view that the state had to work towards establishing and maintaining this gender role in its social policy. A complete analysis of the specific identity formation of disabled German veterans of the Second World War must therefore necessarily include the intersections that arose between the categories of disability and gender. After all, the behaviour of the war-disabled men, all their demands on the state for medical and professional rehabilitation, were permeated by both self-positionings as war-disabled and as men.

## V

At first glance, the history of war veterans of the Second World War in the young Bonn Republic shows contradictions and ambivalences that can only be explained against the backdrop of contemporary understandings of disability, the prevailing gender order and the early stages of confronting the cruel history of Nazi Germany. In aiming to 'overcome' their disability, which in the 1950s and 1960s was still interpreted as a personal deficit, the disabled veterans conformed to a culture of individual, moral and economic reconstruction. As long as this phase of reconstruction lasted, the identity construction of the disabled

<sup>60</sup> Bösl, *Politiken der Normalisierung*, p. 220.

<sup>61</sup> Max Wuttke, 'Die Kameradenfrau in der Arbeitswelt', *VdK-Mitteilungen* 3/9 (1953), pp. 385–93, here p. 386. Also see Stoll, *Behinderte Anerkennung*, p. 65.

veterans as war victims in need of rehabilitation and work corresponded excellently with the political project of a new beginning for society as a whole. Accordingly, war victims were the most obvious and prominent target group of the national coming to terms with the recent past, which also included those men who had served at the front for the Nazis.

As Crotty, Diamant and Edele have recently argued, one of the main reasons for the extraordinarily generous social appreciation of former Wehrmacht soldiers was their symbolic and material recognition as war victims.<sup>62</sup> For disabled veterans, this applied even more strongly than for those who had returned from the war psychologically damaged but physically largely unharmed. For disabled veterans had the status of war victim inscribed on their bodies for the rest of their lives. The shift from a policy for war victims to a disability policy that included (almost) all groups of disabled people also marked the end of the disabled veterans' privileged status. They could now no longer argue with the case of personal sacrifice since the financial privileges were discontinued in the course of the reform era of the social-liberal coalition under Willy Brandt. In addition, it is impossible to overestimate the long-term impact of the thalidomide scandal on public perceptions of disability. From the late 1960s on, dealing with the phenomenon of disability meant campaigning for the social participation of all disabled people, for example through educational work and supporting charity organisations like '*Aktion Sorgenkind*'.<sup>63</sup>

Only reluctantly did many war-disabled persons accept these trends and the resulting formal equality with non-war-disabled persons. In particular, many disabled veterans did not want to be equated with mentally impaired people, about whom they, like many other people in the Federal Republic, had strong reservations and prejudices.<sup>64</sup> However, such positioning was no longer opportune in a new climate of social policy. In the first two post-war decades, the disabled veterans owed their privileges to a contemporary dominant interpretation of war disability as a personal sacrifice that went hand in hand with great social recognition. Yet, in a West German society that was undergoing a transformation in values that brought liberality, egalitarianism and pacifism to the fore, the particular interests and the self-image of the disabled veterans, which was still based on military camaraderie, no longer appeared to be in keeping with the times. Furthermore, it was also clear to the war victims' associations that demographic change would not stop at their membership structure: all organisations advocating for the interests of disabled people had to deal with the fact that there was no longer any new supply for the group

<sup>62</sup> Crotty/Diamant/Edele, *Veteran Benefits*, p. 156.

<sup>63</sup> *Sorgenkind* roughly translates as 'child that causes worries and requires special care'. The organisation was founded by public broadcasting network ZDF and – to this day – focusses on social inclusion of disabled persons.

<sup>64</sup> As late as 1979, a disabled sports official from south-west Germany reported that war-disabled people did not want mentally impaired people to join them in sports. One could 'not measure everyone by the same yardstick'. See Schlund, '*Behinderung*' *überwinden*', p. 285.

of war-disabled people. Many disabled veterans were now of retirement age or had already died, which is why it increasingly seemed politically and economically pointless to favour war-disabled persons over civilian disabled persons. The pride and self-image of disabled veterans therefore no longer corresponded to a privilege granted by the state and accepted by society. Disabled veterans were now simply disabled people, no more and no less.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

## PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/1468-229X.13321>