

Christine Van Everbroeck, Pieter Verstraete. *Verminkte stilte: De Belgische invalide soldaten van de Grootte Oorlog*. Namur, Belgium: Namur University Press, Namur, Belgium, 2014. 200 pp. EUR 35.00, ISBN 978-2-87037-786-4.

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The Sound of Silence

Virtual exhibitions, pilgrimages, reenactments, a dozen movies, even more books, and an incidental Facebook page for educational purposes: if the First World War has not yet left its mark on the collective memory of the Belgian nation, then by the end of 2018 it surely will have. Because of the one hundredth anniversary of the Great War, a federal organization has been appointed to guide and assist all activities that revolve around the commemoration in Belgium. One of the three main themes that have been identified by the government is that of collective remembrance, which emphasizes the memory of all the people who made personal sacrifices for the war effort, and the importance of passing on the lessons learned to future generations. Much has been said and written about the value, the pitfalls, the practices, and the meaning of collective memory, but one of the most important questions that perpetually remains to be asked is: whose voice will be heard?

In many cases, it is the voices of people who died in the trenches and that remind us of the danger of industrial warfare. Other times it is the voices of the families that had to deal with the loss of loving relatives, or the voices that give insight to the struggles of daily life in hospitals run by often inexperienced nurses. Memories like these stress that the Great War was indeed horrible, but might also show that we have moved on and grown stronger. Memories do not deny the horrors of war, but they balance it out with an uplifting vision of a brighter future. In *Verminkte stilte. De Belgische invalide soldaten van de Grootte Oorlog*, Pieter Verstraete and Christine van Everbroeck state that it is this tendency to focus on the utility of the Great War and its use for contemporary political and socioeconomic purposes that causes a smothering of voices that make us uncomfortable.[1] The voices that are plagued by history and do not provide for improvement; those are the voices that are deleted from collective commemoration. Verstraete and Everbroeck suggest that this is why the stories of disabled soldiers are often neglected in both public and academic discourse. By focusing on the future, people who carried the past with them (whether it was through the loss of limbs or being left with horrific nightmares) were left behind and forgotten. They were silenced by a rhetoric of reconstruction.

In the introduction the authors state that *Verminkte Stilte* is an attempt to break this silence and give disabled soldiers a voice. By way of extensive and thorough archival research, interspersed with several poems, the authors try to shed new light on the memory of the Great War while raising public attention to disability history. This two-layered focus is the strength as well as the weakness of this beautifully written monograph. This because, while the book brings disability history to the center of attention, it does not always succeed in cancelling the noise in which individual stories disappear.

The book is divided into two sections. The first two chapters deal with disabled soldiers during the war, and the third and fourth are concerned with the postwar or interwar period. Each section contains a chapter on the situation of physically disabled and a chapter on mentally ill soldiers. The book presents an elaborate overview of organizational and institutional infrastructure and reflects on the different ways in which society treated disabled veterans. It evaluates their place in a Belgian society that was highly concerned with reconstruction and mourning its lost ones, and the authors make convinc-

ingly clear that disability was considered a complicating factor in this rhetoric of recovery. The attempt to give disabled soldiers a voice is in itself already a very important contribution to research on the First World War. However, the monograph does not entirely live up to the expectations raised in the introduction. We only sporadically get a glimpse of how individuals thought of themselves and their situation, and in particular the section on mentally ill veterans is more concerned with the perspectives of relatives than the actual soldiers themselves. This could of course be the result of a lack of autobiographical sources available. Nonetheless, it perpetuates a discourse in which mental illness is primarily seen as something that burdens relationships. Another factor that causes noise pollution is that “madness” is often seen as fundamentally different from other clinical classifications, and this book offers no exception. Although there were differences in the treatment of men suffering from loss of sight and soldiers dealing with panic attacks, the distinction between mental and physical illness that is often made does little justice to individual experiences of war veterans. This is especially so in the cases of shell shock that are central to the chapters on mental illness. This division is challenged because people experienced physical pain and impairment.

However, the monograph is not intended to give an exhaustive overview of the history of disability in the Great War. Instead, it aims to initiate a discussion on the inclusiveness of memory, and can be considered a starting point from which additional historical research and public awareness of disability history can arise. The au-

thors are clear about how the voices of disabled soldiers can be heard. They state that it is much more instructive to listen to what cannot be said than to focus on particular language. Verstraete and Van Everbroeck try to pull the stories of disabled soldiers out of the rubble, and they do so by making effective use of metaphors and poems. It is with a lyrical style that the authors make room for non-rhetorical expressions. This prevents the reader from overanalyzing, and breaks a tendency to combine all stories into one broad narrative. By not analyzing the poems or directing the individual stories too much, the authors respect individual perspectives. The lyrical style, the poems and metaphors are references to experiences that words cannot, or can only peripherally, describe.

This book offers a new perspective on the memory of war in which uncomfortable stories should be included. While previous publications from Verstraete stand out for their theoretical reflection, this book is a tour de force in historical craftsmanship. With its heavy emphasis on the description of very valuable and varied source material, it will reach a broad audience and thus help to highlight the silenced histories of disabled soldiers. Furthermore, it brings critical reflection on the in- and exclusiveness of memory to the domain of public history. If there is an important lesson to be learned from disability history, that will hopefully be passed on to future generations, it is that breaking the silence is done by listening.

Note

[1]. The title translates in English to *Mutilated silence: The disabled Belgian soldiers of the Great War*.

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