

The Poppy vs. the Pension: Treatment and Remembrance in Interwar Germany and Britain

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When revolution broke out in Russia in 1917 it became clear to the leaders of many of the belligerent nations that proper treatment of their veterans ought to be a matter of concern after the Great War. This war was unlike any other the world had ever seen, mass mobilization, conscription, and total war. Because of that the leaders also had to reform the way soldiers were treated when they returned home, because many were extremely disabled, whether physically or mentally. Germany and Great Britain had two different approaches: Great Britain relied on philanthropic movements and organizations with little government involvement, while Germany laid out a very generous plan, which eventually would fail. They came from two different sides of the war, with Great Britain being the victorious, and Germany the defeated. While some ideas and practices were shared in both, the governments felt different obligations to their veterans, as well as the veterans to their governments based on the fact of whether they won or lost the war as well as how they were treated when they returned. This paper shows that both countries attempted to appease their disabled, and able, war veterans and the different strategies used by both government and society. Then it contrasts how both countries went about remembering their fallen soldiers, and more broadly the war in general. In contrast to the public policies of Germany and the private endeavors of Britain's citizens, remembrance of the fallen was spearheaded by the German people while Britain's government financed many memorials for their fallen heroes.

Germany was one of the best equipped and readiest nations to deal with their veterans after the war. Only forty years earlier, they had participated in the Franco-Prussian War so there was already an extant program to care for returning soldiers, with many veterans already incorporated back into mainstream life. Germany's program consisted of many different groups with major political beliefs. All these groups had similar goals, but they had different ways of going about it, as well as the many different types of veterans participating such as, officer, soldiers who had seen battle, and ones who never left the home front.¹

The groups quickly began to gain power and membership. By the end of the Weimer republic, membership totaled 1.4 million². As the combined membership increased, many of the smaller groups consolidated under one right wing umbrella group called the Kyffhäuser-Bund. The Kyffhäuser was unable to motivate younger veterans to join because it attempted to stay out of the political sphere. Staying clear of politics was common with the older veteran groups; however, the young, returning soldiers were not satisfied with the apolitical stance. Before the war, the government made many promises to the soldiers, and without the fulfillment of these promises, soldiers felt cheated. Further, due to the restriction placed upon Germany after the Versailles Treaty was signed in 1918, the German army was restricted to 100,000 soldiers and only 4,000 officers.³ Many of the officers who had either wanted to or planned on staying in the military were released to allow more experienced officers to take over. Soldiers were left dissatisfied and, often, without options for their future.

One popular group veterans joined after the war was Stahlhelm, or "Steel Helmet", which was a group that was set up to incorporate soldiers who served on the front lines. Initially men had to serve for at least six months to join, but due to other groups relaxing their admission requirements, the Stahlhelm was forced to do so, as well. Like all other groups it started with the intention of bettering veterans' lives and fighting for rights, but it soon slipped into paramilitary action, becoming one of the forces used to win the coming revolution.⁴

The veteran groups were mainly intended for disabled veterans who needed assistance in reintegrating back into civilian life. Younger, middle class veterans had more difficulty with this than working class men, because they had neither the assistance of the trade unions nor skills which could garner them a job. To combat the problem, the republic passed the National War Victims Benefits Law, answering most of the demands of the groups, including very

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¹ Stephan R. Ward, James M. Diehl, Michael A. Ledeen, Donald J. Lisio, and Robert Soucy, *The War Generation: Veterans of the First World War* (London: National University Publications, 1975), 138.

² Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 61-100.

³ James M. Diehl and Stephen R. Ward, *The War Generation: Veterans of the First World War* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1975), 135-181.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

generous pension plans and reintegration help. It included all veterans into the equation instead of just disabled veterans. This change would eventually put a huge strain on the economic system, because with the added eligible veterans more money had to be paid out, as well as more services provided. The benefits package was passed into law with relative ease, and without much debate. What initially seemed a good thing, quickly turned into debating and bickering between different veteran groups, which in turn made groups despise each other even more.⁵

The pension plan paid out according to the level of disability, pre-war income, family size, which was up to three children, as well as the size of city the veteran lived in. The difference based on city might seem peculiar, and it was a hotly debated subject but it seemed necessary to pay people more who lived in larger cities because the standard of living in a city was higher and required more money.⁶

Compared to Britain, where most veteran support came from philanthropic organizations, Germany's republic prided itself on being able to support veterans. Philanthropic organizations were seen as threatening to the legitimacy of the republic. The existence of philanthropic organizations made the government's plan look weak. The government essentially had to consolidate all the different organizations until there was essentially one umbrella organization giving out very little money. This backfired on the government when inflation began to destroy the German economy around 1923. Worsening the situation was the Great Depression of 1929 which sent the entire world into financial problems. The inflation made it difficult to pay all the pensions. The rift that had been growing between the citizens and the veterans over losing the war, made the people who had money reluctant to give it away. The people who had the money were so frustrated with the actions of the veterans that they were hesitant to give their money out.⁷

All in all, the German veterans probably did have the best pension plan in all of Europe. However, the veterans were not satisfied with just money. They wanted to be recognized by their people and their country, who they had risked their lives for, but that was not the case. The older veterans, who were mostly in the *Kyffhäuser*, would occasionally build a monument, but for the most part the Republic refused "to award a commemorative medal to veterans," and failed "to create a national monument honoring the nation's war dead."⁸ In victorious countries, veterans were honored and looked at as heroes, but in Germany this was not the case. People resented the veterans and look at them as greedy or self-absorbed due to their pension plans and perceived attacks on the Republic through their groups.⁹

While the people felt resentment towards the veterans, many of the veterans had a feeling of *Dolchstosslegende*, or "stab-in-the-back-theory," due to the promises made by the government before the war regarding the length and severity of the war.¹⁰ The government had promised a quick war, they would be back to harvest their crops, which was not the case. The soldiers felt betrayed because they knew they never lost a battle yet they were considered the losers. These feelings were heightened when pension money became scarce, the government refused to memorialize them, and the citizens turned on them. Whether it is true or not is difficult to tell, but it became a rallying cry for the veterans that felt snubbed.¹¹

Although this resentment was common in most German veterans, there are notable exceptions. Veterans from the countryside did not exhibit the same sort of activism or resentment as others, especially veterans from Bavaria in southern Germany. Most of these veterans' participated in the paramilitary actions, like drilling and marching, but only one in six joined a veterans group.¹² Benjamin Ziemann, author of *War Experiences in Rural Germany*, says that "the notion that soldiers were undefeated in the field and the stab-in-the-back myth promoted by the nationalist right found no expression in the way returning rural soldiers were honoured."¹³ Given the rural community, it makes sense because the job market would not have been as oversaturated, and most of the veterans simply went back to their prewar occupation of farming. There were fewer fights or debates about the reintegration of veterans, which led to the common citizens' acceptance of them, unlike the strife and resentment in the larger more populated cities.

Germany was in a transition period politically, with the Nazi party gaining popularity. While a majority of veterans did not agree with Hitler's policies, the veterans were indirectly guilty for the coming of the Third Reich. One thing all of the veterans groups had in common, except for *Reichsbanner*, the right wing veteran group, was a loathing for the Republic. With the voices of 1.4 million people, all of whom had sacrificed for their country, speaking out

⁵ Cohen, *The War Come Home*, 61-100.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ James M. Diehl, *The Thanks of the Fatherland: German Veterans after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-30.

¹⁰ Diehl and Ward, *The War Generation*, 157.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Benjamin Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany 1914-1923*. (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007), 240-252.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 216.

against the current government, people, no matter how disgruntled or frustrated with veterans, started to listen. Hitler was able to take advantage of a very ripe situation and capitalize on peoples' anger. This is not to say that this was the veterans fault or intended purpose, but as a result of their insubordination, the Republic grew weaker and Hitler grew stronger. To say that veterans did not participate in the Third Reich would be false because many did, especially in leader positions, but even if veterans did not agree with his actions or policies they "went over openly to Hitler and the Nazis or enthusiastically applauded their success."¹⁴ Hitler forced all the veterans' groups to either dissolve or join the Third Reich. The only exception was Stahlhelm, because their leader was in Hitler's cabinet.¹⁵

Even though Britain was victorious, unlike the defeated Germany, there were similarities in how veterans' affairs were handled. Like in Germany, early on there were many veteran organizations that sprung up all with essentially the same goals. However, in Britain in 1921 the Officers Association, or OA, brought them all together to form one powerhouse group. The British Legion, another veteran group, worked for all veterans regardless of how long they served or if they were able or disabled. Unlike Germany, Britain was not accustomed to taking care of civilian veterans. Before the war, Britain had a professional army which took care of itself during both war and peace. Due to conscription, normal civilians were returning home war heroes with no reintegration plan or monetary help. With the influx of veterans returning after the war, something serious had to be done to take care of them and The Legion became the instrument for action. A group of veterans with similar ideas and desires banded together. The rules were simple: it was to be a democratic group with no political affiliation. Many veterans felt that, "political involvement among organized ex-servicemen was neither desired nor to be tolerated."¹⁶ Unlike veterans groups in Germany, the British groups were not created to start social or political upheaval.¹⁷

The Legion grew exponentially in the years between wars. The number of branches in 1922, one year after the group started, was 2,089; by 1939 this number had more than doubled to 4,412. Membership also grew in leaps and bounds: in 1922 there were 116,433 veterans in The Legion and by 1939, membership had more than tripled to 399,300.¹⁸ Still, even at the height of its membership, the membership accounted for only ten percent of eligible veterans. While many who felt snubbed at the fact that veterans were not running the country, most had no interest in leadership and just wanted to come home and return to their pre-war lives.¹⁹

One of the unique privileges Britain could offer to many of their returning veterans was the ability to move. The British Empire spread to all corners of the world to places like Australia, South Africa and Canada. The government was prepared to set up returning servicemen with plots of land in their territories around the world. Around 42,000 men took advantage of this opportunity rather than fight unemployment lines back at home. In most places, the local and indigenous people in the surrounding areas would even buy the land for the veteran and he would have to work in order to pay off the debt.²⁰ It is interesting that more men did not take advantage of this opportunity because there was no guarantee of returning to a job after the war, and even if a veteran did find a job, the work would likely be mindless.²¹ While 42,000 men is not insignificant, many of the men who stayed behind could not rationalize moving around the world and leaving their families, friends, and livelihoods behind.

Pension plans in Britain were neither as generous nor as reliable as they were in Germany. George N. Barnes, who took over as the Pensions Minister in 1916, called the situation in the Pension Ministry a "chaotic condition,"²² and with even more soldiers returning from war within the next two to three years it definitely would not improve. Initially veterans were only supposed to be paid for twenty-six weeks after demobilization, but the time period was later lengthened by another thirteen weeks because the pension pay was so inadequate. Adding to the problem, in the early stages "poor fellows waited weeks or months for their pensions,"²³ said Sir Arthur Griffith-Boscawen, who worked under George N. Barnes in the Ministry for Pensions. Another big difference between Germany and Britain was that British employers were not obligated to hire veterans. Unlike in Germany, there was no such law in Britain, though it was a hotly debated topic. The best the government could do was the King's Roll, which encouraged business owners to hire veterans, but did not reward them for it. This left the veterans doing menial jobs, such as mopping the floor of a

¹⁴ Diehl and Ward, *The War Generation*, 179.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁷ Niall Barr, *The Lion and the Poppy: British Veterans, Politics, and Society 1921-1939* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 194.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26

¹⁹ Diehl and Ward, *The War Generation*, 42.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Douglas G. Marshall, "Soldier Settlement in the British Empire" *The Journal of Land & Public Utility Economics* 22, no. 3 (1946): 256-259.

²² George N. Barnes, *From Workshop to War Cabinet* (Redhill: Athenaeum Printing Works, 1924), 140.

²³ Arthur Griffith-Boscawen, *Memories* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1925), 196.

billiards hall, like Private Edward White did upon his return.²⁴

Where the government fell short supporting their veterans, society and philanthropic organizations were very generous. Prosperous people all around the United Kingdom stepped up and pitched in. Hospitals, homes, and medical care were paid for by people and organizations designated to help disabled veterans. Such groups started even before the war ended and “rare was the disabled ex-serviceman who, by the end of the war, had not come into contact with some form of charitable enterprise.”²⁵ Some donations were anonymous, and some were only a pound or two. The important thing was that people donated whatever they could. Some attached sayings like “One who is grateful,” or “I am just over the age.”²⁶ Such small contributions added up to around six million pounds per year, although the government still paid out eight and a half to twelve and half times that number. Without these charitable enterprises the disabled would not have had nearly the same care as they got, in the means of care, homes, and prosthetic limbs.²⁷ Even the Legion itself did its part to help its own cause. Every year on Armistice Day they would sell poppies to women, children, or anyone who would buy one. While the poppies were sold fairly cheaply, the Legion would sell millions of pounds worth, which went right back to the veterans, and the organization. Not only did the sales serve as a remembrance, but they also legitimized the group and kept it relevant to the care of veterans.²⁸

Where Britain excelled at remembering and commemorating their veterans, remembrance and commemoration was a source of contention for German veterans. They felt that they were not commemorated by their government or the people they fought for. While the British did make commemoration by awarding medals, even this became a contentious issue among veterans. Older veterans would stop wearing their medals because they felt the meaning was diminished due to the relative ease with which medals were handed out to younger veterans. Soldiers who served short terms or never saw the line of fire were rewarded with Medals of Honor.²⁹

As in Germany, Britain saw the emergence of a fascist movement in the early 1930's. Some historians blame this on the “Lost Generation” myth, which was an idea about how an entire generation of men had been wiped away because of the war, but it seems to be just a trend that occurred throughout Europe during this time. Oswald Mosely, a veteran himself, started the British Union of Fascists, or BUF. Like Mussolini, Mosely called on the youth to rise up and take charge of the government. He saw this as the only way Britain could recover and rebuild to become a stronger nation. Unlike in Germany, the fascist movement never caught on, probably for several reasons. It started too late; by the time it began, most British veterans had either settled down or moved on from their military lives. The once heated passion veterans had upon their return home was cooling, and along with the sharp decline in new members in The Legion there was not an atmosphere for social or political upheaval. Also some historians argue, along the lines of the “Lost Generation,” many of the people that would have joined in the movement died in the early years of the war. Whatever the case, the fascist movement never caught hold like it did in Central Europe.³⁰

Along with examining the way the individuals themselves were treated, it is important to examine the way the fallen soldiers and the war were remembered in the two countries. Germany, who introduced such generous and strong veteran support, fell short when it came to remembering their dead. The problem with building monuments or memorials, which they did do, was that the government could not afford to build, or maintain these shrines.³¹ Therefore private companies had to take charge of the construction and leading to the question of how they would go about doing this. The focus would be on smaller more individual shrines that were constructed by either private companies, or by the individual towns themselves. The government would try to hold memorial ceremonies, but these “kitschy ‘memorial days’” were often walked out on because they were planned by the German interior minister.

There were, of course, different ways citizens wanted to go about remembering their fallen soldiers. Cemeteries were a common choice, but smaller monuments were also quite popular in the German countryside. One interesting idea was presented by Bruno Taut, a German architect, who felt that war memorials should be reading rooms. He feared that all these memorials and graveyards were in some way glorifying war and death and felt people should read about the atrocities rather than have a memorial be a stop on a commercial tour.³² Unfortunately Taut's idea never

²⁴ Richard Van Emden, *Britain's Last Tommies: Final Memories from Soldiers of the 1914-18 War in Their Own Words* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 2005), 303.

²⁵ Cohen, *The War Come Home*, 32.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 46-60.

²⁸ Diehl and Ward, *The War Generation*, 45.

²⁹ Barr, *The Lion and the Poppy*, 19-50.

³⁰ Diehl and Ward, *The War Generation*, 47.

³¹ George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 1990), 82.

³² Rudy Koshar, *From Monuments to Traces: Artifacts of German Memory, 1870-1990* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 15-79.

caught on and people favored cemeteries instead, where multiple soldiers could be buried and remembered, at little expense but a lot of anonymity.

German cemeteries displayed the popular feeling that “death itself was no longer conceived of as the arrival of the grim reaper, but as tranquil sleep with nature.”³³ Because so many men had died during the war, massive graveyards were required in order to comply with the Treaty of Versailles that stated every man needed a proper burial. Cemeteries were simple in design and often contained no names, along with uniform headstones. This was by order of the communities who paid for the commemoration rather than the families of the fallen. Flowers were not allowed to be planted in cemeteries because they were too costly, and also because “unlike the English or French, the Germans do not disguise the tragic and heroic death of the fallen by planting colorful flowers.”³⁴ Germany did not have the luxury of making their fallen into heroes, as Britain did, because German citizens still felt some animosity towards the soldiers and veterans, so their glorification after death was not as acceptable.

Another way individual families mourned their lost relative was to design iron nail memorials. They were used simply as table ornaments, draped over a sculpture, or hung on a door. They were made of materials that were commonly around and were often made in schools or by youth organizations for “patriotic undertakings.” The Iron Cross, the German equivalent to the Medal of Honor, was the most common design. These were unique to Germany, and nothing like this has been found in other countries after the war.³⁵

As the war faded away from public consciousness and fell into memory, and the Weimer Republic started to show signs of failure, the monuments became more nationalistic. German architect Robert Tischler “preferred centralized monuments and mass graves,” because such things showed that the men were “not only comrades but above all members of the nation rather than individuals.”³⁶ These monuments were called Totenburgen, literally meaning “the fortress of the dead.”³⁷ Unlike the German cemeteries, these monoliths were normally a single building with thick walls and an altar-like podium in the middle of a central room, under which was a mass grave with soldiers buried underneath. This could not be more different than the cemetery approach because instead of being able to recognize and remember each individual soldier, soldiers were grouped together and the memory was more about the war and the country. These were more popular during Hitler’s rise to power, because he emphasized nationalism and the nation as a whole, so remembering a single soldier would go against the ideology he was working to promote.

Britain and Germany had very few similarities in their methods of memorializing the war and fallen soldiers. Britain had a uniform design for cemeteries, built around a Cross of Sacrifice and a Stone of Remembrance. In some cases the stone was replaced with a Chapel of Resurrection. As the names state, the monuments focused on remembering the fallen soldiers and the belief in their resurrection. Unlike in Germany, where all the gravestones were uniform, British families petitioned and won the right to put an inscription on their loved ones’ headstones. Where Germany used mass produced, cheap materials, Britain preferred to use local materials and planted flowers wherever possible.³⁸

Like Germany’s Bruno Taut, Britain had an architect, Sir George Frampton, who felt memorials should be more than just a simple monument. He said “Sometimes a carved oak seat, placed where the view is fine, may be worth all the statues in the world.”³⁹

One monument built by the British government is not located in the United Kingdom, but is widely known. The Menin Gate, located in Ypres, Belgium, was on the road which led the Allied soldier to the front lines. It was designated for soldiers who never returned home. This prompted mixed reactions from veterans, such as Siegfried Sassoon who voiced his opinion in the poem “On Passing the New Menin Gate.” He opines “Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime; Rise and deride the sepulcher of crime.”⁴⁰ Inscribed on the sides of the memorial are the names of the entire lot of soldiers who never made it back from battle. It was a very comforting site, as it said to family members: “He is not missing, He is here.”⁴¹

The British government also wanted to create a time where everyone, not only in the United Kingdom, but in the entire Commonwealth, could remember their fallen friends or family members. The government decided on the eleventh hour, of the eleventh day, of the eleventh month, or eleven o’clock on November 11th, to hold a moment of

³³ Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 80.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

³⁵ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of The University of Cambridge, 1995), 78-116.

³⁶ Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 85.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

³⁹ George Frampton, “Our Shrines of Memory” *Quiver* (Apr. 1919), 427.

⁴⁰ Siegfried Sassoon, *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1983), 153.

⁴¹ Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 53.

silence. This was the anniversary of the armistice signed in 1918, so it was fitting and appropriate time to remember the fallen. The silence was put together only a week before the first anniversary and was intended to commemorate; “first, the bereaved, characterised significantly as women; second, children for whom the silence was intended to be pedagogic; third, the men, by which it is clearly mean veterans, to whom the silence was both a tribute and a reminder of fallen comrades; finally, the dead.”⁴² While this may have caught on in different countries, Britain started it; notably, Germany never adopted the practice.

It should be clear how very different these two countries approached the treatment of their veterans and fallen. As Henry Allingham, who served in the Royal Flying Corps, put it, “I’ve let people know so that the truth could be a warning to them. When the war was going on, its horrors were kept quiet and the full display of dreadful things only came out afterwards.”⁴³ When the soldiers returned home and they started to tell stories, a real picture of war could be painted. Each country had a different approach to taking care of their veterans, and veterans were looked at differently in each country. When it came to remembering the fallen both countries felt obliged to do so but did it in very different ways. There is no equation on how to do it properly but each country felt as if they were doing it the right way.

⁴² Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919-1946* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994), 10.

⁴³ Max Arthur, *We Will Remember Them: Voices from the Aftermath of the Great War* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2009), 264.