

FOTOGRAFIA I HISTÒRIA DE L'EDUCACIÓ

Remastering independence: The re-education of Belgian blinded soldiers of the Great War, 1914-1940

Remodelació de la independència: la reeducació dels soldats cecs belgues de la Gran Guerra, 1914-1940

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RESUM

En aquest article, la història de les iniciatives reeducatives dels soldats cecs belgues de la Gran Guerra, i l'impacte social que tenien aquestes iniciatives en el període d'entreguerres, està relacionada amb una reinterpretació contemporània del paper central atribuït a la independència quan parlem i tractem de persones amb discapacitat. En primer lloc, s'argumentarà que les iniciatives educatives –molt més que les iniciatives educatives anteriors per a persones amb discapacitat visual– es van centrar en la consecució de la independència econòmica. L'ideal fou restaurar completament els soldats mutilats a la vida econòmica. Després d'haver descrit les iniciatives concretes que es van implementar per assolir aquest objectiu discursiu, en segon lloc, es demostrarà que aquest somni de la independència va ser desafiat des de diferents vessants. No només hi havia les circumstàncies concretes de la vida dels mateixos soldats cecs que sovint van contradir el somni d'una plena autonomia. També va existir un discurs

que, en comptes de promoure la independència, va fer èmfasi en la situació miserable en què es trobaven els cecs. Juxtaposant la instal·lació d'un nou discurs centrat en la independència i la reactivació d'una tradició de parlar en termes de compassió i impotència, l'article defensa una imatge més matisada del paper que tingué la Gran Guerra en la forma en què es parlava de les persones amb discapacitat visual a Bèlgica i en tractades.

PARAULES CLAU: reeducació, soldats cecs, Primera Guerra Mundial, Bèlgica.

ABSTRACT

In this article the history of re-educational initiatives for Belgian blinded soldiers of the Great War –and the societal impact these initiatives had in the Interwar period– is connected to a contemporary re-interpretation of the central role attributed to independence in the way we talk about and deal with persons with disabilities. In order to do so, the Great War, first of all, will be described as a watershed in the way one talked about and dealt with persons with visual disabilities in general. In particular it will be argued that the re-educational initiatives –much more than earlier educational initiatives for persons with visual disabilities– focussed on economic independence. The ideal was to restore the mutilated soldiers completely to economic life. After having described the concrete initiatives that were deployed in order to realize this discursive goal, it, secondly, will be demonstrated that this dream of independence was challenged from different sides. Not only were there the concrete life circumstances of the blinded soldiers themselves that often contradicted the dream of full autonomy. There also co-existed a discourse that instead of promoting independency emphasized the miserable state blinded persons were said to find themselves in. By juxtaposing the installation of a new discourse focussing on independence with the revival of a long-standing tradition of speaking in terms of pity and helplessness, the article argues for a more nuanced picture of the role played by the Great War in the way one spoke about and dealt with persons with visual disabilities in Belgium.

KEY WORDS: re-education, blinded soldiers, Great War, Belgium.

RESUMEN

En este artículo, la historia de las iniciativas reeducativas de los soldados ciegos belgas de la Gran Guerra, y el impacto social que tenían estas iniciativas en el periodo

de entreguerras, está relacionada con una reinterpretación contemporánea del papel central atribuido a la independencia cuando hablamos y tratamos de personas con discapacidad. En primer lugar, se argumenta que las iniciativas educativas —mucho más que las iniciativas educativas anteriores para personas con discapacidad visual— se centraron en la consecución de la independencia económica. Lo ideal fue restaurar completamente a los soldados mutilados en la vida económica. Después de haber descrito las iniciativas concretas que se implementaron para alcanzar este objetivo discursivo, en segundo lugar, se demostrará que este sueño de la independencia fue desafiado desde diferentes vertientes. No sólo había las circunstancias concretas de la vida de los mismos soldados ciegos que a menudo contradijeron el sueño de una plena autonomía. También existió un discurso que, en vez de promover la independencia, hizo énfasis en la situación miserable en que se encontraban los ciegos. Al yuxtaponer la instalación de un nuevo discurso centrado en la independencia y la reactivación de una tradición de hablar en términos de compasión e impotencia, el artículo defiende una imagen más matizada del papel que jugó la Gran Guerra en la forma en que se hablaba de y se trataba a las personas con discapacidad visual en Bélgica.

PALABRAS CLAVE: reeducación, soldados ciegos, I Guerra Mundial, Bélgica.

We live in confusing times.¹ This of course is not a new phenomenon in itself. Human beings, one definitely could argue, have always struggled with how to give shape to their lives, how to organize their world and how to model their relationships to the people that surround them. The universal characteristic of people's struggle with life, however, does not mean that nothing changes. On the contrary, what people have questioned, the precise nature of their relationship with other human beings, as well as their intimate longings and aspirations, continuously shifted over time.

One of things that emerged at regular intervals in time has been the place occupied by independence in our life aesthetics and conceptions about social life. It was especially in the wake of the Enlightenment that values like independence, autonomy and self-sufficiency gained ground and moulded personal convictions as well as ideas about social life. A good illustration of

¹ A first version of this article has been presented in 2016 to the occasion of a visiting scholarship at the research unit *CERLIS/Centre de Recherches des Liens Sociaux* of the University Paris-Descartes. The author would like to thank in particular Prof. Rebecca Rogers for her thoughtful comments on the piece. The author equally would like to thank both Mona Gleason and Jason Ellis for their valuable comments upon a first draft of the final manuscript.

this can be found in Immanuel Kant's seminal essay *What is Enlightenment* where he in 1804 urged mankind to start thinking for themselves, and not anymore be lead by some external religious, medical or juridical authority.²

Although already in earlier time-periods the value of independence had been emphasized the turn of the 19th century definitely led to an increase in the belief that people needed to be able to think for themselves, to be critical, able to earn a livelihood for their own and their offspring as well as move around independently.³ Not being able to fulfil these requirements resulted in one being relegated to the margins of society or at least being looked at suspiciously. That is of course not to say that issues of vulnerability, dependence and frailty were necessarily associated with a state of being underneath the threshold of social acceptance. But discourses that focussed on these human characteristics by and large stood in the shadow of a dominant liberal interpretation of what is was to be a real human being: one who was able to think rationally, to contribute to economic life and move around independently without having to rely much on others.

Since the 1960's this focus on independence, autonomy and self-sufficiency has been challenged by a number of academic, societal and political transformations. First of all, and in the wake of the work being carried out by scholars such as Irving Goffman and Michel Foucault, the underlying discriminatory processes of this idealization of independence have been exposed.⁴ By integrating the abnormal body and mind in the philosopher's as well as historian's toolbox these critical interpretations of the world and its past lead –at least in theory– to a new consciousness about those who did not fit within the dominant framework for thinking about the 'normal' human being. Bodies, in other words, were not longer being considered as being born «abnormal». The alleged abnormality was now considered the outcome of social, political, cultural and economical processes. Secondly, paralleling this theoretical evolution, was a societal move towards the need for deconstructing all those barriers that prevented several groups of people from participating in

² KANT, Immanuel. *An answer to the question «What is Enlightenment»*. London: Penguin Books, 2013 [1804].

³ The origins of this shift towards independency, productivity need to be located at the crossroad of religious thinking and the rise of capitalism –as has been demonstrated by the sociologists Weber. WEBER, Max. *The protestant ethic and the rise of capitalism*. London: Routledge, 1992 [1930].

⁴ For a more philosophical contextualization of this shift see for example the opening paragraph of chapter 8 «Assembling ourselves» in Nikolas Rose's book *Inventing our selves: psychology, power, and personhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

society. This process had already, of course, started in the nineteenth century, with important events such as the class struggle and the emancipation of women. The twentieth century would continuously see emerge similar movement like for example the Civil Rights movement and the emancipation of persons with disabilities.⁵

Each in their own respect, these different societal movements pointed towards the injustice of thinking about oneself, the world, and the other in terms of dominance, supremacy and independence. Not being white, male, middle class or physically able increasingly was interpreted, not as failure, but as a sign of an alternative identity.⁶ If this in itself of course was not the ultimate antidote against a discourse that focussed enormously on the ability of voicing out, acting independently and living autonomously, it nevertheless lead to some cracks to appear in the dominant (neo-)liberal interpretation of life.⁷ When one looks around today one cannot deny that something of a counter-discourse is making its way, although it needs to be said that it indeed still is in its infancy. Things like the «shared economy» for instance, where people buy a lawn-mower together instead of each one purchasing one of their own, indicate that being independent is no longer considered –at least by some– as the ultimate goal.⁸

What I would like to do in this article is to zoom in on one particular fragment of our educational past in order to demonstrate the role played by the Great War in the catalyzation of the discourse of independence. The particular subject that will be explored is the re-education of Belgian blinded soldiers. It will be shown that the re-educational discourse and experiences during the war –and its immediate aftermath– re-directed the focus of educational initiatives for the blind in general towards the ability to work. At the same time, however, the representations of Belgian blinded soldiers during wartime also amplified enormously the utterances of pity that already had been around for ages when it came down to the representation of persons with visual disabilities. What should not be forgotten, however, is that in between

⁵ See for instance: SHAPIRO, Joseph. *No pity: people with disabilities forging a new Civil Rights Movement*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1993.

⁶ In disability studies this is described as «Disability pride» –see chapter 6 in BARNES, Elizabeth. *The minority body. A theory of disability*. London: Routledge, 2017.

⁷ For a theoretical discussion about the tension between emancipation and identity see VERSTRAETE, Pieter. *In the shadow of disability*. Opladen: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2012.

⁸ See also for example the commons-movement: BOLLIER, David; HELFRICH, Silke (Ed.). *The wealth of the commons. A world beyond market and state*. Armherst: The Common Strategy Group, 2012.

that discourse of independence and the one focussing on pity –and this will be the central argument of this article– are real human figures who sometimes simply could not live up to what was expected of them and/or sometimes did not want to live up to those expectations.

The article is based on archival research in several Belgian collections. In particular the documents held by the Archives of the Royal Palace in Brussels that document the emergence and functioning of the Royal Institute for the Belgian war blinded were extremely helpful in order to reconstruct this neglected part of Belgian history. In addition to this primary source material, I made use of a wide range of sources, from newspaper articles, books dealing with rehabilitation in general, and postcards/art reproductions representing Belgian blinded soldiers. Taken together, this source material, of course, does not enable us to render a faithful and complete reproduction of the life circumstances that the blinded soldiers faced in the Interwar period. It nevertheless makes us sensitive to the rich variety of lives that were affected by the Great War and its impact on how blinded persons in Belgium were represented and dealt with.

I. WAR BLINDNESS AND THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF MASTERING INDEPENDENCE

On August 4th 1914 the German army crossed the Belgian border in order to attack France from the North. The so-called Von Schlieffen plan eventually ended up in a long and dreadful frontline that went from the North Sea up to Turkey. It was among other things the inundation of the Yser-plane in the West of Flanders that stopped the German rush in October 1914. By that time the Belgian army was already fragmented with wounded soldiers being brought to the North of France and Great Britain, many being captured by the German troops or having crossed the border with the Netherlands where most of them would be interned for the remainder of the war. Of the 170.000 men that the Belgian army counted in August 1914, only 70.000 found themselves back in or behind the West-Flemish trenches who would separate the Central and Allied forces for the coming four years.⁹

Immediately after the outbreak of the war, just like the other belligerent countries, Belgium was also confronted with the presence of invalid

⁹ For an excellent history of Belgium and the Great War see: DE SCHAEPELDRIJVER, Sophie. *De Grootte Oorlog. Het Koninkrijk België tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*. Amsterdam: Atlas, 1997.

soldiers.¹⁰ It has been estimated that after the end of the war in 1918 a total of approximately 10 million men would return home permanently disabled. Given the size of the number it will not come as a surprise that almost all belligerent countries very soon deployed an elaborate network of institutions, publications and conferences that sought to return the men as soon as possible back to their pre-war economic state.¹¹ Although exact numbers of disabled soldiers cannot be determined for the Belgian case, there are some publications and sources that do give us some clues about the size of the «problem» –as the presence of the invalid soldiers would be called.

One of the sources that can be used is the official overview of activities conducting by the health services of the Belgian army. In that overview, the head of the military health services during the war mentions that in April 1918 the Belgian army would have counted approximately 5.000 invalided soldiers –of which 44 would have been blinded.¹² Taking into account other historical source material it immediately becomes clear that these numbers were an understatement of the actual reality. Not only does a document that is kept at the Archives of the Royal Palace in Brussels contain a list of 88 officially recognized blinded soldiers.¹³ The number of soldiers who applied for an invalid pension and/or were member of the National Association for Mutilated Soldiers was also much higher than that mentioned by the statistics to be found in Mélis' overview.¹⁴ The membership number of the *Fédération*

¹⁰ In recent years scholars have become increasingly interested in the history of disabled soldiers resulting in an ever-growing amount of literature that focuses on divergent aspects of the way disabled soldiers were taken care of during the war and were integrated in society in the Interwar years. Here are some introductory readings: BOURKE, Joanna. *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996; PERRY, Heather. *Recycling the Disabled: Army, Medicine and Modernity in WWI Germany*. London: Oxford University Press, 2014; ANDERSON, Julie; PEMBERTON, Neil. «Walking alone: aiding the war and civilian blind in the inter-war period», *European Review of History. Revue européenne d'Histoire*, xiv, 4 (2007), p. 459-479.

¹¹ REZNICK, Jeffrey. «Material culture and the 'after care' of disabled soldiers in Britain during the Great War», CORNISCH, Paul; SAUNDERS, Nicholas (Eds.). *Bodies in conflict: Corporeality, materiality & transformation*. London: Routledge, 2013.

¹² MELIS, Leopold. *Contribution à l'histoire de service de santé de l'armée au cours de la guerre 1914-1918*. Bruxelles: Institut Cartographique Militaire, 1932.

¹³ On a population of 267.000 men who had been mobilized the Belgian counted 88 blinded military men. France had to deal with 3.000 blinded men on a total amount of 8.3 million soldiers and Great-Britain had 2.000 blind men on a population of almost 9 million men. These numbers are mentioned in the article *Walking alone, marching together* written by Julie Anderson & Nick Pemberton (2007) and where gathered from several documents found at the Archives of the *Association Valentin Haüy* in Paris.

¹⁴ DE BLOCK, Stefan. *Erkenning voor «onze helden van den Ijzer»? De Oud-Strijders van de Eerste Wereldoorlog en de Belgische Maatschappij (1918-1923)*. Niet-gepubliceerde Licentiaatsverhandeling.

Nationale des Mutilés de Guerre for instance would grow to 38.000 in the Interwar period.¹⁵

Despite the vagueness about the exact number of invalid soldiers, the Belgian government from the onset was rather clear with regard to the direction it wanted to take to create a solution for this ‘problem’. Just like in other countries, the focus almost immediately came to be on returning the mutilated men as quickly as possible to economic productivity. Almost immediately after a private initiative had been taken in 1914 by Senator Schollaert in favour of «the poor human wrecks» he encountered on a daily basis in St-Adresse, the Belgian Ministry of war, de Broqueville, asked Léon De Paeuw, who at that time was Inspector-general for Primary education, to look out for an appropriate spot in order to erect a rehabilitation institute.¹⁶ In 1917, after one year on the job, De Paeuw looked back upon what he had realized in Port-Villez, the town where the institution had been erected. The Institute for Professional Re-education of War Mutilated Soldiers and the corresponding relentless activity of rehabilitation that had been going on there over the past year was described by him as a national duty. Not only had most of the soldiers taken up arms freely in order to defend their country, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the country faced enormous difficulties once the war had ended. It indeed would have to deal with an enormous shortage of manpower and so what was favoured by the discourse of rehabilitation was a combination of economic restoration and national duty, or as described by De Paeuw himself: «After the war, which will have made so many gaps in the ranks of the workers, every energy will be required to rebuild our ruins and to recover our former prosperity. Therefore let us strive to restore our maimed soldiers their former economic value. What we will do will be of double profit to the nation because we shall on the one hand augment the sum of our available force and, on the other, diminish the number of those unfortunate beings who, by their helplessness, place a heavy charge upon society. Thus

Faculteit Letteren, UGent, 2009, p. 29.

¹⁵ In total there 267.000 men had fought under the Belgian flag during the war. Due to the hostilities 40.000 had been killed. The members of the National Association of Mutilated Soldiers also contained soldiers who became ill after the war and whose illness had been officially linked to the hostilities.

¹⁶ See for a detailed account of the foundation of both institutes VERSTRAETE, Pieter; VAN EVERBROECK, Christine. *Verminkte stilte. De Belgische invalide soldaten van de Grootte Oorlog*. Namen: Universitaire Pers Namen, 2014 (for the French edition see: *La silence mutilé. Les Soldats invalides Belges de la Grande Guerre*. Namur: Presses Universitaires de Namur).

self-interest is joined to duty. Reason leads to the same conclusions as the heart».¹⁷

Of those Belgian soldiers who became disabled due to the Great War and needed to be restored to economic productivity, the blind were amongst the ones who attracted the most attention – and definitely the most money. As a consequence of the unhygienic circumstances of the trenches and the life behind the front-line, the use of toxic gasses in the military conflict from 1916 onwards, the seemingly endless stream of bullets and exploding shells, many Belgian soldiers indeed became blinded. At the very beginning of the war they were taken care of in a French *Hospice* and so separated from their disabled Belgian comrades. Given the observation –and reporting– that that particular environment did not stimulate the blinded soldiers to get out of their beds and start «the new battle for restoration» it was soon decided that the blinded soldiers would be transferred to Port-Villez.¹⁸

Given the scarcity of source material with regard to the functioning of Port-Villez it is difficult to get a detailed view on what precisely was being done for these soldiers in the Institute for Professional re-education of Mutilated Soldiers. It might be guessed that just as with the other soldiers, everything was being done in order to restore them as good as possible to economic productivity and societal integration. That is at least also what immediately pops up emerges when taking a closer look at the *Royal Institute for Belgian War Blinded* that was erected in 1919 at the instigation of the Belgian Queen Elizabeth. One of the letters kept at the Archives of the Royal Palace accounts for the early start of this centralized institution where all blinded soldiers who were eligible would be able to be re-educated. In that letter reference is made to a conversation between the Minister of Economic Affairs and Queen Elizabeth.¹⁹

The conversation clearly reveals the different ideas that existed at that time with regard to how to deal with the presence of blinded individuals, but also points towards the fact that the rehabilitative approach –with its emphasis on work, energy and independence– was rapidly gaining ground. According

¹⁷ DE PAEUW, Léon. *The vocational re-education of mailed soldiers*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1918, p. 7.

¹⁸ VERSTRAETE, Pieter. «Disability, Rehabilitation and the Great War: Making Space for Silence in the History of Education», DEPAEPE, Marc; SMEYERS, Paul (Eds.). *Educational Research: The Importance and Effects of Institutional Spaces*. Springer, 2013, p. 107.

¹⁹ Letter of the Secretary of the Queen Mister Velge to the head of the Cabinet of the Ministry of Economic Affairs (Minister Jaspar)/ Archives of the Royal Palace/Archives Secretary n. 134, Brussels.

to the letter the Minister of Economic Affairs would have been satisfied with the idea that some philanthropic ladies would be sent to the blinded soldiers in order to distract them a little bit by playing music and reading aloud to them. This proposition apparently did not please Queen Elizabeth at all for she vehemently pleaded for the erection of a centralized institution where the blinded soldiers would be able to learn Braille, to learn a new trade, and move around independently.²⁰

The ideal of returning the blinded men to independence can not only be grasped from this foundational conversation, but also becomes clear when taking a closer look at the different images representing the institution and its inmates that have been preserved up to today. In a postcard collection that was sold shortly after the erection of the Royal Institute for the Belgian War Blinded in 1919 one sees the blind at work in the orderly and calm environment that was made accessible by several physical modifications like wooden pathways and pillows that needed to prevent the blind man from hurting himself when moving around.²¹ Besides learning and working the postcards also depict the blind men while dancing and reading. In short: the postcards add to the general impression that the ideal of independence was within reach. The same can be observed when glancing through the collection of art-reproductions of the drawings that the Flemish artist Samuel De Vriendt had published in favour of the re-educational institute for the blinded soldiers. Again the spectator encounters images of blinded soldiers energetically performing particular professions. Adding to these images was the introductory text written by De Vriendt that again emphasised the ideal of restoring the blinded soldiers to economic life and giving them back the ability to enjoy life: «With the intention of enduring the memory of those who, during the war, sacrificed the light of their clear eyes to the Holy of the Fatherland, we send this art album out the world. That it might witness to the people how badly mutilated the War blinded are; But also how, in pursuit of effective retraining under the motherly protection of Her Majesty the Queen, they are re-shaped into active citizens, capable of enjoying a broad degree of joy of life».²²

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Œuvres de S. M. la Reine. Institut des Aveugles de Guerre. *Oorlogsblindengesticht. Boitsfort Boschvoorde. Une promenade dans l'institut. Een bezoek aan het gesticht*. Private collection PV, not paginated/dated document.

²² DE VRIENDT, Samuel. *Croquis, schetsen, sketches*. Boitsfort: Institut des Aveugles de Guerre, 1919 [Translation from the Dutch original provided by author].

2. THE GREAT WAR'S RE-EDUCATIONAL LEGACY IN BELGIUM

The re-educational initiatives that were deployed for blinded soldiers were definitely not the first educational initiatives taken with respect to persons with visual disabilities in Belgium. From 1834, in fact, educational institutes for blind children had been founded, leading to a rather widely established educational network towards the end of the nineteenth century.²³ What characterized these educational institutes the most probably was its private character. With the exception of one all of the educational institutes that existed towards the end of the Nineteenth century had been founded by religious orders. The result of which was an educational regime that of course aimed at enabling the blind children –for it were only children who were accepted– to perform a particular trade after their graduation from the institute. But the biggest emphasis was laid upon the infusion of religious thoughts into the minds of those who otherwise were said to be «eternally lost».²⁴

If educating individuals who could not see was not new around 1914, the Great War definitely changed the outlook, direction and visibility of these efforts. Indeed, the enormous visibility²⁵ that the blinded soldiers had attracted during the War and in its immediate aftermath and the successful re-educational experiences made it abundantly clear that something also needed to be done for the adult Belgian population who could not see. Again, this was not entirely new. Also in the course of the 19th century the educational institutes gradually had enlarged their radius by also establishing initiatives for those who had graduated from the institute. But what happened in the immediate aftermath of the Great War is that several new associations emerged that primordially focussed on adult persons with visual disabilities.²⁶

²³ There does not yet exist an encompassing history of the education for persons with visual disabilities in Belgium; there are, however, some good Master Theses that already have unveiled this history to a certain extent: CLAES, Gerda. *Blindenonderwijs en blindenzorg in België (1835-1880)*. Niet gepubliceerde Licentiaatsverhandeling, Faculteit Psychologie en Pedagogische Wetenschappen, KU Leuven, 1972.

²⁴ See for instance CARTON, Charles-Louis. *Rapport a monsieur le ministre de l'intérieur et des affaires étrangères, sur les améliorations introduites et a introduire dans l'instruction des aveugles*. Bruges, 1837.

²⁵ Ironic as it may sound, the presence of the war blinded during the Great War and in its immediate aftermath was made abundantly clear by means of innumerable postcards, posters, news paper articles and drawings that often were sold in order to gather money that could be used in order to sustain the rehabilitative efforts.

²⁶ In between 1918 and 1923 at least 4 different associations focussing on adult persons with disabilities saw the light: La Ligue Braille, Licht en Liefde, Oeuvre Nationale des Invalides, Algemeen

What is remarkable is that for each of these associations there is a direct link to be drawn to the re-educational war initiatives for the blinded soldiers. This link could consist of a blinded soldier being the founder of the association like was the case with the *Oeuvre Nationale des Aveugles*, or could consist of an explicit reference being made in the journal that was published by the association, as can be found in the journal *L'Alexandre Rodenbach*.

One indeed can refer to the Franciscan priest Agnello Vanden Bosch who in 1925 founded what would become the *Oeuvre Nationale des Aveugles* in order to demonstrate the Great War's immediate impact on the post-war situation of persons with disabilities in Belgium. Vanden Bosch was stationed at one of the forts neighbouring the Walloon city of Namur in 1914 when he apparently was asked to take the lead in the surrender of the Fort –as it no longer could stand the German attacks.²⁷ As the story goes Vanden Bosch would have suffered from that time of a serious eye-illness that was not taken care of properly and eventually turned the priest completely blind at both eyes. In 1920 Vanden Bosch was one of the soldiers who was re-educating at the Royal Institute for the Belgian War Blinded at Bosvoorde. In what was considered a touching radio-interview, Vanden Bosch looked back upon his re-educational experiences and explicitly referred to these as being foundational for his subsequent work: «La rééducation que notre Reine m'a procurée ainsi qu'à tous les aveugles de guerre, m'a prouvée clairement que l'aveugle peut être réadapté à la vie sociale».²⁸

Vanden Bosch was certainly not the only one referring to the war experiences when it came down to legitimizing the necessity and hesitant reality of a renewed approach to the blind in Belgium. In the first issue of the newly founded journal, *L'Alexandre Rodenbach*, for instance reference was made to a global typhological movement that was on its way to improve the awful situations the blind still often had to face. Again the wartime experiences had

Blindenverbond van Vlaanderen. For a detailed account of several of these associations see: VAN DEN BRANDE, Annelies. *De geschiedenis van het blindenwezen in Vlaanderen tijdens het Interbellum*. Niet gepubliceerde Licentiaatsverhandeling, Faculteit Letteren en Wijsbegeerte, UGent, 2005.

²⁷ There's not much information to be found with regard to the life of Vanden Bosch except for a short biography written by a member of the same religious order Vanden Bosch belonged to: AGNELLO, Frère Jacquemin. *Le père Agnello Vanden Bosch 1883-1945*. S.l.: ONA, S.d.; In World War Two Vanden Bosch was active in the Belgian resistance against the German occupier and enabled the resistance to transmit messages to London by means of a transmitter that was hidden in the Library of the Oeuvre Nationale des Aveugles. After this had been discovered by the Gestapo, Vanden Bosch was sent to several concentration camps and eventually died in Dachau.

²⁸ ANONYMOUS. «Un émouvant interview», *Vers la Lumière*, vv, 56 (1931), p. 196.

proven decisive according to the author of the piece, who described himself as «Un aveugle de guerre»: «The vast number of war blinded self-evidently drew the attention of the population of the belligerent countries to the blind in general. Everyone competed to make, by means of “re-ducation” and other helpful initiatives, the heavy endurances of being blind less painful. All the issues that concerned the interests of the blind were discussed again and, through the interception of several social works that were founded during the war, received, if not a complete, at least a provisional solution».²⁹

If both the *Oeuvre Nationale des Aveugles* and the journal *L'Alexandre Rodenbach* were clear signs of the renewed interest in the situation of persons with visual disabilities in Belgium they could not meet up with the radical ideas promoted by the organisation *Algemeen Blindenverbond Vlaanderen*. Founded by the blind musician and former pupil of the Royal institute for the blind at Woluwe (Brussels), Franz Fiten in 1928, this organisation clearly strove for the emancipation of the blind. Although not much information still exists that can help us reconstruct the history of this organization we still have access to some numbers of the journal they published. What arises from these pages is a language of rebellion, upheaval and a loud plea for radical change in terms of the treatment of the Belgian blind in general. One of the issues that time and again was touched upon was the economic discrimination that the blind experienced on a daily basis. Not only was there the exploitation of the poorer classes by the rich, in the case of the blind there also was the fact that they were discriminated against due to their impairment. In order to make their argument clear, the members of the association often made use of the figure of the war blinded. In a speech delivered on 12th May 1929 for instance, Bert De Visschere vehemently unveiled the injustice being done to the civilian blind –when compared to the officially war blinded: «In Flanders there are about 2,000 blind people, only 88 of whom are officially recognized as such. 2,000 blind people who, inside themselves, undoubtedly condemn the capitalist society that herds people to the battlefields and whose patriotic “elite” is proud when she can announce in her war-media (which one easily can call murder-media) that there were 5, 10 or 15.000 deaths and 20, 30 or 40.000 wounded. The patriotic caste is proud when she is able to announce, during the war, that there were thousands of deaths and wounded. Even

²⁹ UN AVEUGLE DE GUERRE. «Un mouvement mondial ou synthèse typhologique», *L'Alexandre Rodenbach*, vi, 1 (1923), p. 11.

now, after the war has ended, the mutilated still are being used for charity-purposes». ³⁰

The association of the *Algemeen Blindenverbond Vlaanderen* clearly stands out with regard to the radical emancipatory pleas they uttered with regard to the education of and care for the blind. It, however, seems right to say that all of the associations founded in the immediate aftermath of the war favoured a discourse that focussed on independence and placed a large emphasis on work as an important means to integrate the blind in society. All of this was much in line with what can be gathered from an important event that took place in 1921, namely the official burial ceremony for the Unknown Soldier. Like other Allied countries, including France and Great Britain, Belgium also had decided to organize an official burial spot for all the soldiers who had disappeared during the war or could not be identified. ³¹ In order to create a space where the sacrifices these unknown soldiers had made for their home country could be remembered, the Belgian government had decided to erect a monument in the city centre of Brussels.

On 11th November 1921 five coffins were exhibited on the square just in front of the train station of Bruges. The coffins all contained remains of soldiers gathered from the different places where the Belgian army had fought between 1914 and 1918. What is remarkable for the ceremony surrounding the Belgian Unknown Soldier –and this definitely distinguishes the Belgian case from the French or the British– is that the person who was asked to designate the coffin that would be brought to Brussels by train that day was a mutilated soldier. Adding greatly to the symbolic nature of the scene that took place that early morning was indeed the blinded soldier Raymon Haesebrouck who, as it was said, was asked by the King himself to walk along the five coffins and designate the one that consequently would be transferred to Brussels.

After having been wounded at the battlefield and becoming blind, Haesebrouck, just like most of the other blinded Belgian soldiers, had been re-educated at the Royal Institute for the Belgian War Blinded. For those

³⁰ DE VISSCHERE, Bert. «Spreekbeurt van Bert De Visschere», *Algemeen Blindenverbond van Vlaanderen*, VII, 6 (1929), p. 83.

³¹ For an introduction to the history of the unknown soldier see WITTMAN, Laura. *The tomb of the unknown soldier, modern mourning, and the reinvention of the mystical body*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. For the Belgian case see: CLAISSE, Sophie. *Du soldat inconnu aux monuments commémoratifs belges de la guerre 14-18*. Bruxelles: Académie Royale de Belgique, 2013.

witnessing the event that November morning it would not have been difficult to immediately classify Haesebrouck as belonging to that special category of «great war invalids». Two clues would have been visible. First of all, there was the black eyepatch that completely covered Haesebrouck's right eye. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly there was the stick by means of which he moved around and eventually pointed towards the fourth coffin starting from the left in order to identify the one who contained the remains of the «real» Unknown Soldier.³² If the event leading to the identification of the Unknown Soldier definitely referred to a long-standing belief in the supernatural powers of the blind,³³ it added another layer of symbolic meaning to the scene: the belief that if only having been able to experience re-education, having learned a new trade and being introduced to the world of the walking-stick, the blind would be capable to live a good life. Rehabilitation, so the scene seemed to suggest, made everything possible again, even figuring in one of the most loaded happenings that ever took place since Belgium's Independence in 1830.

3. BEYOND THE DISCOURSE OF INDEPENDENCE: PITY, PERSONALITY AND THE FRAGILITY OF LIFE ITSELF

To reduce the history of the blind in Belgium in the interwar period to a mere story of success, as suggested by the burial ceremony held in 1921, however, would just be a bridge too far. Although the Great War definitely, as described above, led to substantial changes in the way persons with visual disabilities were spoken about and taken care of, not everything changed for the better for blinded Belgians. Going through the articles that were published by the different blind associations for instance immediately reveals that the blind still encountered –just as was the case before the Great War– a lot of incomprehension, discrimination and sometimes even mere bullying behaviour from members of the community in which they lived.

In 1923 for instance the journal *L'Alexandre Rodenbach* featured an article written by «a war blinded soldier» focussing on all the social harm that was

³² Haesebrouck's white stick as well as some other items who once belonged to Haesebrouck himself, like his Braille watch and the red priority card he could use in order to avoid queuing for bread, meat or train tickets, currently are being preserved by the City Archives of Bruges.

³³ MOSCHE, Bosche. *Blindness: The history of a mental image in Western thought*. London: Routledge, 2001 & ROSE, Martha. *The staff of Oedipus. Transforming disability in Ancient Greece*. University of Michigan Press, 2003.

being done to the blind.³⁴ The author of the piece «*quatre fois victime de l'opinion*» stated that although the war clearly had produced beneficial effects on the blind the general public still considered them to be the most unhappy among all human beings. According to the author the blind suffered a lot due to these misunderstandings that could be reduced to four prejudices that hung as a Damoclean sword above the heads of the blind. First of all, it was often assumed that the blind could not be happy. Secondly, they could not move around. Thirdly, they could not learn. And finally, the blind were not able to perform a profession of any kind. Taken together these prejudices prevented the blind from being able to emancipate themselves and participate more fully in Belgian society.

All too often, it was said, these misunderstandings resulted in a pitiful attitude of the general population and the politicians who went over their case. Instead of creating educational and working opportunities for the blind, what was being done was the mere collecting of alms that were given to the blind. For the *Algemeen Blindenverbond Vlaanderen*, for instance, the situation was painfully clear: instead of alms and pity, what the *typhological question*³⁵ of that time required were politicians who «had the guts» to extend obligatory education also to blind children. Indeed, if the Belgian government had decided in 1914 to make education obligatory for children up to the age of 12, there was an important article that could be used to exempt disabled children from the law.³⁶ The organisation even targeted the existing institutions and accused them of not doing enough for the blind in order to emancipate them. In a 1929 talk delivered by the previously mentioned Bert De Visschere, one of the most active members of the *Algemeen Blindenverbond Vlaanderen*, this sounded as follows: «[...] the blind do not want to be pitied. They do not ask to be complained, they demand and claim what is their right. They claim that the State also extends to them the favor and merits of compulsory education that exists for those who see, and for which one has fought for more than a quarter of a century. They demand that also the blind could start enjoying the benefits of this law. What, will you say, is that then not the care? Well,

³⁴ UN AVEUGLE DE GUERRE. «*Quatre fois victime de l'opinion*», *L'Alexandre Rodenbach*, VI, 3 (1923), p. 56-61.

³⁵ The term «*typhology*» refers to the scientific study of blindness in general (including psychological, sociological and educational approaches) and was commonly used in the Interwar period.

³⁶ See for an overview of the history of obligatory education and why –compared to other European countries it was introduced so late in Belgium: DE VROEDE, Mauritz. «*De weg naar de algemene leerplicht in België*», *BMGN/Low Countries Historical Review*, 75 (1970), p. 141-166.

no, dear readers, it is not [...]. Yes, there are charitable institutions for the blind, mostly under the control of monasteries or nuns. But these institutes have very little in common with a truly modern approach. It are institutes where the blind usually are made even more unhappy than they are, and this only because these institutes are obsolete and only exist due to the charity of important persons, who find it all very well that the blind only are taught to endure their fate and have to face their infortune. Well, the whole modern approach towards the blind is opposed to that conviction, for what really can make the blind happy, and what really can make them forget their awful destiny, precisely is to do for the blind whatever is possible to enable them still to perform as good as seeing people do».³⁷

The interwar period then, so it seems, cannot be seen as a time where the discourse of independence easily overrode older existing ways of looking at persons with visual disabilities. On the contrary, what becomes clear from the sources is a huge clash between modern visions and along-standing tradition, between independence and charity, between progress and backwardness. A major conclusion to be drawn from all of this is that [Concluding from all of this that] the Great War would only have contributed to the rise of –or better stated: the catalyzation of the discourse of independence– once again, however, would not be entirely correct. Indeed, it easily can be demonstrated that the discourse with regard to the rehabilitation of blinded soldiers was intimately connected to and built upon the older ideas about blindness as being the worst thing that could happen to a human being. Both the words and the images surrounding the emergence and spread of the rehabilitation initiatives for blinded soldiers indeed swiftly made use of the pity-argument in order to raise society's awareness –and money– for their fate. Although coming from a different context, the call of the Queen of England? English Queen launched towards the blinded soldiers of the Allied forces can be considered a good case in point: «Vous et vos camarades des Armées Alliées, vous avez offert tout ce que vous possédiez: il a appartenu à Dieu de choisir quel sacrifice Il exigerait de chacun. Et à vous, mes amis, Il a demandé le sacrifice qui semble le plus dur de tous à des êtres jeunes et vigoureux. Il vous a privé du spectacle de la

³⁷ DE VISSCHERE, Bert. «Voordracht van Bert De Visschere, op den "Philips"-avond van 7-9-1929 te Antwerpen, zaal Uilenspiegel, Diepestraat 81», *Algemeen Blindenverbond van Vlaanderen*, VII, 8 (1929), p. 158-159.

beauté du monde et des visages qui vous sont chers. La Reine et moi, nous entons l'étendue de votre perte et nous ne l'oublierons jamais».³⁸

In words and images alike the Great War therefore did not only catalyse the idea that the blind could become independent citizens, just like anyone else. It equally amplified a discourse of pity by emphasising the blind soldiers' pitiful existence in order to raise money and initiate the rehabilitative institutes; something actually also could be encountered in the way the blinded soldiers themselves tried to realize their ambitions. One of the things that the already mentioned blind priest Agnello Vanden Bosch, for instance, had been pleading for was the establishment of a home for little blind children. These children could not yet enter the regular educational initiatives and they were prone to neglect and sometimes were even abandoned by their parents. In order to boost his idea and get the necessary funds together needed for the realization of his dream Agnello Vanden Bosch was interviewed by the Catholic radio station of Brussels. On 26th July 1933, at 8.45 pm, the listeners of that radio station could hear Vanden Bosch pleading for his cause along this line: «En décembre dernier, on déposait dans mes bras un petit garçon de 3 ans, seul sur la terre, sans père ou mère connus, sans ressources, sans même de trousseau, n'ayant sur lui, pour tout effet, qu'une pauvre petite robe de chambre, toute déchirée et rapiécée. Il avait l'air si malheureux et penchait si tristement sa petite tête sur mon épaule comme pour y trouver un refuge [...] Nous l'avons donc accepté immédiatement. Après quelques minutes, on me l'enleva pour le laver, le peigner et l'habiller tout de neuf, et il reparut tout rayonnant, plus heureux qu'un petit prince».³⁹

The Great War's discourse of independence thus clearly cannot be disconnected from that other perspective which focussed more on dependency and the pitiful character of the blind. Both seemed to be intimately intertwined with one another and were definitely mutually related. But perhaps even more important than the boundaries set for the discourse of independence by another discourse, is what can be called the fragility of life itself that sometimes made it difficult if not impossible for the ideal of independence to be realized by the blinded soldier. This at least is what becomes clear from the few personal records of blinded soldiers that are kept in the Archives of the

³⁸ ANONYMOUS. *Un message de sa majesté le Roi Georges V. aux soldats aveugles dans les armées des alliés*. S.l., 1919, p. 4-6.

³⁹ ANONYMOUS. «Le père Agnello à la Radio Catholique de Bruxelles – 26 juli 1931 à 20 heures 45», *Vers la Lumière*, vvi, 68 (1931), p. 204.

Royal Palace in Brussels as well as the Archives of the London St-Dunstan's institute who also rehabilitated Belgian blinded soldiers during the war.

There undeniably were Belgian blinded soldiers who were successful in building up a new life after having been blinded on the battlefield or due to an accident behind the front line. But there equally were to be encountered blinded soldiers who, due to particular family circumstances, were not eager to go to the centralized spot in Brussels in order to be rehabilitated or who, due to the accumulation of several disabilities, simply could not live up anymore to the expectations that came along with the discourse and reality of rehabilitation. In the report of a home visit that had being paid to him in the early 20's, for instance, the blinded Belgian soldier Isidore Van Vlasselaere was described as a courageous man of good moral character.⁴⁰ According to the reporter he seemed perfectly happy at home and occupied himself with the studies of his son. He would have been happy to go to Brussels in order to be re-educated in the Royal Institute for the Belgian War Blinded were it not for the fact that he would have to leave his wife and son behind. So if it had not been for his wife and his son he would have been eager to leave. The report finally stated that if circumstances would allow it, Van Vlasselaere voluntarily would come to Brussels.

Besides enabling us to peek a little in to the life of blinded soldier Van Vlasselaere, the Archives of the Royal Palace in Brussels also can be used to reveal the vicissitudes of life for another Belgian soldier, namely Julien Dhont. The report states that a year and a half before the war had broken out in August 1914 Dhont, who worked at that time as a forge, had been married and at the time of the report had a little girl of 6 years old. The chance that Dhont had ever seen his daughter is rather small for during the retreat of the Belgian army from Antwerp in October 1914 he had attracted several injuries of his feet and head. Although the injuries in itself were not that serious, they grew out into something very malignant: a brain infection that ended up in several nervous centres being affected. As a consequence of this brain injury «Dhont est devenu successivement aveugle, aphasique et paralytique. Le côté et les membres droits sont entièrement immobile et insensible».⁴¹ The report then continues by emphasising the terrible state the blinded soldier Dhont

⁴⁰ Personal file Isidore Van Vlasselaere; Archives of the Royal Palace; Archives of Queen Elizabeth n° AE 806; Brussels.

⁴¹ Personal file Julien Dhont; Archives of the Royal Palace; Archives of Queen Elizabeth n° AE 806; Brussels.

was in: «Sa vie qui est celle d'un emmuré, est extrêmement pénible: tant au point de vue moral que physiquement; il jouit de toute son intelligence, entend tout mais ne sait plus communiquer par aucun moyen avec le monde extérieur: ni par la parole, ni par l'écriture, il ne sait exprimer un désir, ni faire connaître ses besoins naturels». ⁴²

After having been taken care of in several French and English hospitals Dhondt had been send home during the war where he wife had taken care of him until he died. If Dhondt's life story probably is to be considered an exception and cannot be generalized to all blinded soldiers, it nevertheless urges the historian to be careful in presenting the discourse of independence that the Great War put forward in order to solve what was called at that time «the problem of the disabled soldier». One should never forget that behind all discourse are to be found human beings of flesh and blood who sometimes did not have the will and sometimes simply were not capable of attuning to the sound of independence. What the stories of Van Vlasselaere and Dhondt tell us –despite all the differences that distinguish the two cases from one another– is that the circumstances as well as the fragility of life itself cannot be left outside the picture when one aims to assess the impact of particular words and events.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Since the end of the 1990's the field of disability history has ever been growing. By now innumerable studies have appeared that deal with the history of persons with disabilities from a scientific as well as activist point of view –or a combination of both. These studies can be considered invaluable in light of the changes that have occurred in the West in how persons with disabilities are dealt with, the way their voices have been represented and the extent to which they actually can participate to society. What is remarkable, however, is that most studies have tend to focus on categories of disability that rather easily can fit within an overarching framework of independency, autonomy and productivity. To a much lesser extent, so it seems, studies have tried to include also those persons who suffered from multiple disabilities and could not fulfil the expectations that come along with the (neo-)liberal self –as promoted from the end of the eighteenth century onwards in the West.

⁴² Ibidem.

Convinced of the idea that a truly inclusive society needs to invest more in the «promotion» so to say of vulnerability and fragility as positive forms of life, I would like to plea for an increased attention for those voices who barely can be heard, those bodies that cannot be provided with prosthesis, those minds that cannot be «fixed», etc. Perhaps it is better to say that what is needed, is not exactly more scholarship that dives into the histories of these lives, but scholarship that connects these histories to a different interpretation of the dominant –and politically loaded– concepts as inclusion, emancipation and participation. That is precisely what I have wanted to do in this article: reconstructing the history of the re-educational initiatives for Belgian war blinded –and its Interwar heritage– in such a way that we start to become more sensitive for those who have not been able to profit from all the emancipatory processes that have been deployed up till now. The life vicissitudes of people like the blinded soldier Julien Dhondt indeed do confront us with the fact that despite all good intentions, words like «independency», «autonomy» and perhaps even «identity» will never lead us to the conception of a society where everybody can just *be*.

In a way what happened to the persons with visual disabilities in Belgium in the Interwar period of course cannot be generalized. Probably in other countries other things will have taken place and these cultural differences definitely need to be taken into account by historians of disability and education. Nevertheless, what the Belgian case described above pointed towards is something that can be taken up by politicians, scholars and activists alike in order to perhaps re-think the gist of their political, scientific and activist pleas. Therefore the most important thing to be remembered from the historical overview rendered here is not so much that the Great War played an ambiguous role in the Interwar discourse used to talk about and act in favour of the blind in Belgium. It is more that history time and again can point us towards ideas that urge us to rethink who we are, what we do and how we want our future to look like.