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Prosthesis for the body and for the soul: the origins of guide dog provision for blind veterans in interwar Germany

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This article addresses an episode in the history of the First World War and its immediate aftermath that has previously been overlooked: the establishment of professional guide dog training in interwar Germany. The brutal, mechanized nature of warfare produced some of the most gruesome injuries ever seen. A significant number of blind veterans suffered no physical injuries other than the loss of their eyesight; they were still young, relatively fit and eager to return to work. It was this group in particular which stood to benefit enormously from the implementation of guide dog training. Under this scheme, which the German state initially made available to war veterans in 1916, dogs became helpers, and, furthermore, equal partners to disabled soldiers. This article shows how the resultant cooperation between guide dogs and their owners placed the human–animal bond on a new footing. It evaluates the significance of guide dogs both within the narrow context of ‘prosthesis production’ and the wider context of the rehabilitation system adopted by the Weimar Republic. It also seeks to contribute to the history of animals by emphasizing the significance of the war as an *interspecies* moment. Within this context, this article demonstrates how the partnership of mutual trust forged between guide dogs and their human companions had its roots in wartime, when soldiers often came to regard animals almost as an extension of themselves. This article reveals that guide dogs performed a variety of roles. On a mundane level, they fulfilled an economic function, reducing the burden on paid attendants, spouses and friends, and enabling their masters to get to their workplaces independently. They were mobility aids – living prostheses – who effectively replaced the eyes of blinded soldiers, albeit figuratively. They also provided companionship and emotional support in a way that was reminiscent of the comfort nurses gave injured soldiers during the war. Significantly, the social, economic and emotional impact of guide dogs went far beyond the partnership they forged with their owners; it affected those in their immediate environment and society as a whole. The common experience of guide dog ownership led to the development of a distinct identity and ‘emotional community’ among blind ex-soldiers, as well as boosting their self-confidence, which in turn inspired them to assert their rights and negotiate their citizenship in new ways. Even more remarkable is the broader significance of the German experiment, which acted as a catalyst for the successful employment of guide dogs on a global scale, enabling thousands of blind people – the majority of whom were civilians – to benefit from the scheme.

Keywords: guide dogs; blind; veterans; independence; rehabilitation; mobility; Germany

The stirring works of the German artist and social critic Otto Dix are regarded as one of the most powerful expressions of the brutality and human consequence of the First World War. One of Dix’s iconic paintings, entitled Match-seller (*Streichholzhändler*, 1920),

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presents a sardonic portrayal of disabled veterans' gruelling experiences in the turmoil of interwar German society. At the centre of the painting is a veteran sitting on the pavement. His dark glasses indicate blindness, he is missing both arms and his two leg stumps are attached to short wooden prostheses. All three passers-by in the painting are striding away from him. To further emphasize the veteran's isolation and helplessness, a dachshund is shown lifting its leg to urinate on him.¹ Dix's painting also symbolized the unprecedented casualties of the First World War: in addition to an extraordinary death toll of 9.5 million people and 7.7 million who were unaccounted for, approximately 8 million people returned home permanently disabled.² The cessation of hostilities thus left governments with the enormous task of rehabilitation.

This article addresses a hitherto overlooked episode in the history of rehabilitation practices: the origins and implementation of the professional training of guide dogs for the blind. Under this scheme, which the German state initially made available to war veterans in 1916, dogs came to play a significantly different role to that depicted in Dix's painting: they became helpers, and, furthermore, equal partners to disabled soldiers. Drawing on a wide range of sources – including contemporary journal articles, yearbooks, dog training manuals and the so-called 'self-reports' (*Selbstberichte*) – this article reveals that guide dogs filled a gap in the rehabilitation system. It also shows how the resultant cooperation between guide dogs and their owners placed the human–animal bond on a new footing. In addition, this article contributes to the history of animals by demonstrating how the partnership of mutual trust forged between guide dogs and their human companions had its roots in wartime, when soldiers often came to regard animals almost as an extension of themselves.

In this context, it is noteworthy that in recent years a plethora of new accounts have emphasized the significance of the war as a theatre of intercultural experience that considerably altered class, gender and race relations. By comparison, scant attention has been paid to the war as an *interspecies* moment, and the portrayal of animals' participation in the war has rarely extended beyond heroic accounts of extraordinary courage. It is only very recently that new perspectives have supplemented the traditional glorified status of animals as *combatants*.³ These new studies point to a multiplicity of intentions and attitudes, ranging from the proliferation of activities for animal protection (for example animal welfare societies' efforts to extend the protection offered by the Geneva convention to wounded horses) to the consumption of those same animals during times of hunger.⁴ Moreover, in addition to emphasis on the new configurations that emerged from the cataclysm of the war, continuities in experiences before, during and after wartime have also attracted recent scholarly interest. Pointing to such continuities, this article evaluates the significance of guide dogs both within the narrower context of 'prosthesis production' and the wider context of the rehabilitation system adopted by the Weimar Republic.

Last but not least, by highlighting the significance of the camaraderie between veterans and their guide dogs, and emphasizing the therapeutic power and identity-forming potential of these animals, this article also explores the history of emotions. Within this context, it resonates with contemporary calls to investigate the emotional regimes of specific communities, situated on the intermediary stage between individuals and society at large.⁵

The challenges of rehabilitation

The rehabilitation of disabled soldiers after the First World War posed a particularly serious challenge for governments and societies. Improved sanitary conditions enabled returning veterans to survive for much longer and in far larger numbers than ever before.

For example, between 80% and 90% of German soldiers who were seriously injured in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871 died of infections and other complications. Those who survived received meagre pensions from the government, which often left them with no other option than to turn to begging or selling matches and other inexpensive products on the street. Following the First World War, 2.7 million disabled or chronically ill veterans in Germany alone had to find a *modus vivendi* within society after their return from the battlefields.⁶ By this time not only did advances in medical science enable many more soldiers to survive injuries that would formerly have been fatal, but improvements in rehabilitation technology also made it easier for them to return to work.

These higher survival rates meant that disabled veterans were now more visible in the public sphere, and in a different way, than had previously been the case. Moreover, the war created disabled people from all social classes, and consequently, providing for them could no longer be primarily viewed as a charitable endeavour for the poor (as it had been before the war).⁷ However, in Germany (as in other countries), a large number of veterans remained social outcasts or objects of charity, leading their lives hidden away by their families or as invalid ‘crippled beggars’ on the street, as illustrated by Dix’s painting. Yet, at the same time, the rehabilitation system introduced by the Weimar Republic enabled a large number of disabled people to live as independent tax-paying citizens, by providing them with competent medical care and rehabilitation, which equipped them to return to work. Despite its inadequacies, this system evolved into the most advanced and effectively organized scheme in the interwar world. The state accepted responsibility for the damage done to its soldiers: it was, after all, in the name of the *Reich* that Germans were expected to make sacrifices in the first place.⁸ Moreover, the generous financial support it provided for rehabilitation was based on the premise that this would not only benefit disabled veterans themselves, but would benefit society as a whole.⁹ As contemporary rehabilitation expert, Konrad Biesalski asserted:

we face a problem of great ethical and economic significance ... we cannot allow these men to rove around as beggars; we must therefore ensure that they become upstanding, self-sufficient men once more, as they were before the war, and this means that we must create work and a free, independent existence for them.¹⁰

This was also desirable because sending veterans back to work could prevent the exhaustion of the national economy and welfare system.¹¹ During and immediately after the war, the patriotic zeal of the public also yielded generous financial and moral support, and veterans were thus able to secure a more favourable position in the hierarchy of disability than their counterparts whose impairments were congenital or caused by industrial accidents. However, this attitude changed with the advent of the economic crisis in 1929. Financial collapse triggered increasing hostility towards veterans, who were no longer viewed as heroes, but as welfare scroungers, and therefore a burden on the nation. This shift also became evident in changes to the pension system: veterans lost their ‘deserving’ status and were placed on par with poor people, accident victims and civilian invalids.¹² This loss of status led to their increasing alienation and rendered them likely candidates for Nazi recruitment.

However, opportunities for rehabilitation also varied depending on the type of impairment men had suffered. The brutal, mechanized nature of warfare produced some of the most gruesome injuries ever seen, and hence, in the public image as well as in art and literature, disabled veterans typically featured as horribly disfigured, helpless victims, with grotesque facial wounds and amputated limbs. Yet, in reality, the majority of disabled veterans did not have obvious injuries or severe wounds, and consequently, their condition was not necessarily clearly visible to the public. Changes and innovations in

weaponry – the use of artillery, hand grenades, gas attacks and small-arms fire – resulted in eye injuries. The war also became a ‘site of chemical destruction’, the use of poison gas (which did not involve a firearm or face-to-face combat) had a crushing effect on soldiers’ morale and left tens of thousands of victims blinded.¹³ A significant number of blind veterans had no physical injuries other than the loss of their eyesight; they were still young, relatively fit and eager to return to work. Nevertheless (unlike soldiers who had lost limbs and could be provided with prostheses to help them get to their places of work), the mobility needs of those who ‘had sacrificed one of their most precious possessions for the fatherland – the ability to move around freely in public spaces, in the crowded streets, among unknown people’ – remained unresolved.¹⁴

The influence of the war on the human–animal bond

It was this group of blind soldiers in particular which stood to benefit enormously from the establishment of professional and institutionalized guide dog training. While the new initiative was prompted by the unprecedented atrocities of the war, it also built on widespread experiences involving the ‘intuitive’ use of dogs as treasured companions and protectors of the blind. Numerous images and documents attest to the fact that the blind man and his dog had been familiar figures since ancient times. This can be seen in an early wall painting from Pompei, and in a thirteenth-century Chinese scroll painting. They feature in Thomas Gainsborough’s painting *Blind Man on the Bridge*, and on an illustration in Thomas Benwick’s once celebrated *A General History of Quadrupeds* (1790), a book that remarks upon ‘this creature’s sagacity . . . in directing the steps of the blind man’.¹⁵ Moreover, evidence that guide dogs had a different legal status from that of domestic pets can be found in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British tax regulations, which exempted the owners of guide dogs from paying dog tax.¹⁶ The earliest surviving description of a systematic method of guide dog training was published in 1819 by Johann Wilhelm Klein, the director of the Institute for the Blind in Vienna. Established in 1804, this organization’s mission was identical to that of Valentin Haüy’s trendsetting Paris Blind School founded 20 years earlier: to promote blind people’s integration into wider society through education. Klein’s *Lehrbuch zum Unterrichte der Blinden* (Textbook on the Instruction of the Blind, 1819) described a method of training poodles and sheepdogs to guide the blind using a rigid stick tied to the dog’s collar. Leading the dog with a solid stick instead of a flexible strap had the benefit of allowing the blind person to immediately perceive when the dog was standing still. No evidence survives about the extent to which Klein’s method was implemented (if at all), but the stiff handle evolved into a standard component of guide dogs’ equipment.¹⁷

Thus, the innovative element laid not in the intrinsic use of dogs for guiding the blind, but in the institutionalized and professionalized nature of training, which would have been almost impossible without the manifold experiences amassed by the German police and army through the use of dogs prior to the war. Within this context, the founding of the *Deutscher Verein für Sanitätshunde* (German Society for Ambulance Dogs) in 1893 (on the initiative of an animal painter, Jean Bungartz) represented a significant development because it professionalized the training of ambulance dogs whose role was to find wounded soldiers on or near the battlefields. These experiences were based on newfound knowledge of canine psychology, familiarity with which was necessary in order to refine and perfect guide dog training techniques. Favourable societal attitudes to ‘working’ dogs were also necessary, and, as shall be shown, the overwhelming majority of the German public were receptive to the idea of dogs performing complex and responsible tasks on

a daily basis. Last but not least, the perseverance of the schemes initiators and the availability of sufficient funding were equally essential for the scheme's success.

Soldiers' immediate and long-term proximity to animals and their experiences of the valuable service they provided led to the deepening of the human–animal bond during the war. Despite the increased mechanization of warfare, all combatants relied heavily upon animals. This included the employment of canines in a variety of roles, such as assisting with ambulances and medical aid, and providing a messenger service.¹⁸ Other dogs were recruited to carry ammunition and light guns, while certain breeds were enlisted to combat the hordes of rats that often infested the trenches. Dogs could move four to five times faster than soldiers, were easy to camouflage and possessed an innate ability to navigate through the labyrinth of trenches.¹⁹ The fate of animals often ran parallel to those of their handlers. They too were conscripted and expected to be back by Christmas, they were wounded, gassed, recovered owing to advanced veterinary care, were shot and drowned in the mud. The high degree of interdependence between soldiers and their animals was also intensified by the absence of their families. Under such circumstances soldiers often befriended the animals working with, and for them, and the bond sometimes proved so strong that they even took them home after the war.²⁰ This situation found humorous expression in a field service postcard depicting two images referred to as 'dream' and 'reality'. The first image showed a soldier dreaming about kissing his wife, the second portrayed a dog licking the soldier.²¹

Morale was also boosted by the presence of animals and particularly ambulance dogs. Soldiers on the front lines were in constant fear for their lives, and they derived some comfort from the knowledge that they were surrounded by dogs capable of rescuing them. Most ambulance dogs worked at night, relying on their sense of smell, rather than sight, to track down wounded men. During the first year of the war alone they saved 8000 lives.²² If the soldier could not move or was unconscious, the dog would return to its handlers and lead them to the soldier's location. However, soldiers often simply held on to the dog for a short time, drawing succour from a brief moment of companionship before dying.²³ Military combat brutalized its participants, and human sensibilities were sacrificed in the process of turning men into machines designed to kill and to be killed.²⁴ In this situation the companionship of animals could help soldiers to rediscover their humanity. Soldiers were expected to endure and control their emotions, not only in moments of extreme fear and stress, but also when confronted with the horrors of warfare on a daily basis.²⁵ Such 'compulsory resilience' could put a huge strain on already traumatized combatants, who came to challenge the dominant image of the 'steel-nerved' emotionally restrained warrior, and altered masculine norms to better reflect the trench experience. Expressions of emotions and vulnerability, once perceived as feminine traits, were more acceptable in the trenches.²⁶ Nevertheless, animals gave soldiers an outlet for their emotions even when they felt obliged to adhere to the hegemonic 'warrior ideal'. This was because showing affection or emotional sentiment towards animals did not violate any behavioural codes, nor did it pose a danger of 'emasculatation' through sentimental conduct.

It was against this background that the professional training of guide dogs was promoted, and according to anecdotal evidence, Geheimrat (Privy Councillor) Gerhard Stalling (the initiator of the idea) was motivated by his experience supervising the mobility training of blinded soldiers. It was alleged that on one occasion he was called away from the field and upon his return saw a blind soldier who was just about to walk into a pit, when a nearby German Shepherd suddenly appeared and chaperoned him away from danger. In reality, however, the idea of providing veterans with guide dogs emerged simultaneously in different countries, and was championed by both medical experts and by

veterans themselves. The first official proposition came from Leopold Senefelder, a Viennese doctor who also acted as deputy head of the Austrian Doberman society, which bred dogs for the military and the police.²⁷ The Austrian authorities initially had misgivings, and thus did not grant approval until 1919, when a modest scheme was launched.²⁸ Previously, in 1916 some Hungarian blinded soldiers who had served in the Austro-Hungarian army requested the provision of guide dogs from the Royal Office of Veterans, in order to help them to earn a living.²⁹ Their request was seconded by the Association of Hungarian Dog Breeders, and the National Association for Animal Protection, which suggested the use of two Hungarian breeds, the Puli and Kuvasz.³⁰ The cooperation between guide dog advocates and dog breeders (witnessed by the Austrian and Hungarian cases) was based on mutual reliance and became a permanent feature of the guide dog movement. Dog breeders were motivated not just by the anticipation of material benefits (and in some cases not at all), but also by an altruistic sense of satisfaction with the beneficial consequences of their activities. The Hungarian authorities' patronizing response to the request portrayed guide dogs as anachronistic. Although they acknowledged Senefelder's initiative, they nonetheless adhered firmly to their own principle that blind people must become self-reliant without any form of external help. As they put it: 'the most practical, the most economical, and constantly available guide of the blind person is himself'.³¹ The Hungarian authorities were not alone in their belief that full independence for blind people – to allow them 'to walk alone' – was a realistic expectation. The rehabilitation of ex-servicemen in Britain, for example, was informed by similar ideology. It may therefore seem unsurprising that even British rehabilitation experts initially rejected the use of guide dogs, although their resistance was later easily overcome.³²

The preconditions and the fundamentals of guide dog training

The financial investment made by post-war states into rehabilitation also depended on the degree of responsibility that they were willing to bear for their veterans. As we have seen, in interwar Germany the state considered the care of disabled veterans its primary obligation. Employment was regarded as crucial to the restoration of veterans' dignity and self-esteem; work was regarded both as a duty and a right, and a prerequisite for full participation in society.³³ It is unlikely that the training of guide dogs could have come to fruition without the authorities' decision to fund the costs of training and looking after dogs by incorporating them into the welfare provision budget. However, the persistence of the movement's founder Gerhard Stalling also proved vital to secure financial support, because even the German authorities were initially sceptical and showed a lack of understanding. It is likely that Stalling's success was at least partially due to the status of blindness in the hierarchy of war injuries. Of all the senses, vision was considered to be of the greatest value. This was also clear from the official definition of disability: blindness entailed a 100% disability, while by comparison, deafness and the loss of a limb were quantified as a 50% disability, and facial mutilation ranked only as a 20–50% disability.³⁴ Consequently, medical experts, veterans and the general public alike regarded blindness – the burden of 'having to live in eternal darkness' – as one of the most difficult and debilitating conditions. Some of them even concluded that 'it would perhaps be better to be dead than blind' or 'better to lose both legs and arms than become blind'.³⁵ Although veterans frequently resisted becoming objects of pity, they simultaneously used their condition as social capital in the competition for the 'public purse'. This was particularly the case when their status was challenged by the Association of the Civilian Blind in 1919.

They felt insulted by this organization's attempt to belittle the impact of their wartime experiences by equating their disability to a peacetime 'accident'.³⁶

The first guide dog training school in the world opened its gates in 1916 in the Germany city of Oldenburg. The location of which was chosen because it already housed the headquarters of the aforementioned *Deutscher Verein für Sanitätshunde* (German Association for Ambulance Dogs). In 1921, the school relocated to Potsdam, and several branches were opened throughout the country. Guide dogs were initially provided exclusively for war veterans, and, accordingly, they were called guide dogs for the war blind (*Kriegsblindenführhund*). It was thought that unmarried veterans and those who already kept dogs as pets would derive the greatest benefit from the scheme. Medium-sized, 'intelligent', respectable-looking dogs with good sensory skills were deemed most suitable to become guide dogs. The training methods used for army and police dogs could prove helpful, but only to a limited extent because guide dogs undertook more complex and sophisticated tasks. Working dogs typically relied on their instincts when performing their jobs. By contrast, in order to be able to lead their masters safely, guide dogs needed to learn to control their natural urges and resist temptation or distraction, whether this be the smell of other dogs and cats, or the enticement of discarded food. Moreover, whereas other working dogs were expected to obey unconditionally, guide dogs needed to learn to *disobey* commands which might expose their owner to danger. Guide dogs also needed to learn to extend their personal space in order to make allowances for their owner's height and width. This was necessary because dogs would usually be able to easily negotiate obstacles – such as an open window, a half-open door or the edge of a kerb – that might present a hazard for humans.³⁷ It was one of the most original (and also one of the most controversial) German scientists of the interwar era, Jacob von Uexküll (1864–1944) who pioneered a specific technique for the teaching of this skill, by constructing a so-called *Führwagen*, a carriage which approximated the space occupied by the blind person. At the initial stage of training, when a dog trainer was still being used, this carriage was attached to the dogs, so that they could tackle obstacles under conditions that simulated a real-life situation.

The fundamentals of guide dog training were laid down by experts in the Weimar Republic and hardly changed in the following decades. The dogs were first given obedience training, which involved standard commands such as *sit!*, *forward!*, etc. Thereafter, they continued with obstacle training, which was initially undertaken on the premises of the guide dog school. Many schools had an 'obstacle garden', where typical obstacles that dogs and their owners might encounter, such as kerbs, ladders, letter boxes, bridges, etc., could be gathered in one place. Once the dog displayed sufficient confidence, practise with the trainer continued out on the roads so that the dogs could get used to the traffic conditions. Only at this stage was the dog matched with a blind person and this 'unit' then practised together for another two to three weeks. On completion of this phase they took an exam in obedience and traffic work in which they were always judged as a 'team', rather than on their individual performances. If they passed the exam, the blind person was allowed to take the dog home, where some further training followed.

Guide dogs as prosthesis

The aim of disabled veterans' rehabilitation was not only to strengthen the wounded body by augmenting it with prosthesis or improving it by surgery, but also to distract the patient's mind from his misfortunes and restore his masculinity.³⁸ Recognizing the

Janus-faced nature of technology (which opened up previously unimaginable possibilities, but also threatened to unleash undreamed horrors on the world), rehabilitation experts paradoxically appealed to technology itself to alleviate the damage that it had wrought.³⁹ Rehabilitation was typically undertaken with the help of prostheses and/or surgical operations, and was based on the assumption that the disabled body could be likened to a machine or an engine, and could therefore be reconstructed in mechanical ways. The aim of cosmetic surgery and the use of prostheses aimed to camouflage impairment, and hence to achieve an ‘outcome’ which resembled the original as closely as possible, as if nothing had ever happened.⁴⁰ These interventions were also intended to heal the wounds inflicted by the war in a more symbolic sense: they signalled a transition from the military to the civilian sphere, transforming former soldiers into citizens.⁴¹ Moreover, while the ‘crippled body’ denoted financial constraints (which could threaten to undermine the state), the ‘restored body’ signalled productivity and was thus dedicated to upholding the state.⁴²

Guide dogs were widely considered (albeit unofficially), as a type of prosthesis, and as we shall see, attempts were made to grant them this official status. Adjusting prosthesis to fit its owner (for example attaching it to the body of a soldier who had lost his limbs) was of crucial significance; its success guaranteed the ‘ensoulment’ (*Beseelung*) of the prosthesis. In the same way, great care was taken over the matching of the blind person with a dog, and this required knowledge about both the psychology of canines and of the blind. While the physical attributes of dog and master needed to correspond (a tall, fit person was typically matched with a larger, energetic dog), in psychological terms the choice of dog was intended to complement the blind man’s character. Thus, insecure people were matched with confident dogs, nervous people with calm dogs and placid people with lively dogs.⁴³ Although official propaganda never failed to emphasize the life-changing impact of prosthetic technology, the reality was often more grim. It soon became obvious that the human body was not a machine with mechanically replaceable parts, and in many cases disabled people not only found their prosthesis itself alienating, but also felt that it alienated them from their own bodies. The mechanical nature of the prosthetic ‘industry’ turned prosthesis into a metaphor for the artificiality and hollowness of the bureaucratic state and the alienation of workers ensnared in a rigid, capitalist machinery. In artistic representations prostheses often represented the crisis, the ‘inner crippling’ (*Verkrippelung*) of post-war society, as for example in Martin Hoerle’s *Monument to the Unknown Prosthesis* (1930).⁴⁴ By contrast, the guide dogs project was a lot more successful, precisely because dogs were not mechanical and were therefore much more adept to attuning themselves to the needs of the disabled people they assisted. There was also no need for camouflage (although blind veterans were occasionally mistaken for sighted people walking their dogs), because it was the very *difference* made by the addition of the dog to the blind person that rendered the scheme so appealing.

Guide dogs as ‘nurses’

Various breeds were trained, including Airedale Terriers, Giant Schnauzers and Newfoundlanders. However, the majority of dogs came from the German Shepherd family, which had been created through the selective breeding of local sheepdogs by a retired Prussian cavalry captain, Max von Stephanitz, in 1899.⁴⁵ The stellar, if contested reputation of the German Shepherd, was boosted by conscious manipulation on its proponents’ part, as they endowed the breed with the purportedly German qualities of loyalty, bravery, strength and intelligence. Moreover, they were also responsible for the

construction of the wolf-like image of the breed, which was particularly emphasized in Imperial and Nazi Germany and proved a serious hindrance when advocates of guide dog training subsequently wanted to introduce the scheme in their respective homelands. Given the emphasis on this breed's masculine traits, it appears somewhat ironic that German Shepherds used as guide dogs were cast in the role of 'nurses'. The fact that nearly all guide dogs were bitches led a veteran to conclude that

the German Shepherd dog is, even by God's design, destined to be a nurse. It may be that because of her history as a shepherd she has something pedagogical, something caring in her. And even in this situation it is evident that above all, females are suited to performing the role of nurses (...), they are more reliable and caring.⁴⁶

It is common knowledge that nurses were of immense psychological importance for soldiers, both on the fighting front and after the war. Suffering was rendered more bearable through a woman's soothing words and gentle touch and by the realization that gentleness and compassion still existed.⁴⁷ Nursing was also regarded by many as a kind of resistance or antidote to the physical and spiritual destruction wrought by war.⁴⁸ Like nurses, guide dogs were endowed with the virtues of empathy, sympathy and compassion. Like women, they were believed to be naturally good at understanding and feeling what others felt, were compassionate and benevolent, and less interested in their own well-being than that of others.⁴⁹

Blind veterans could benefit from the services of these 'nurses', because they had to learn to come to terms with their altered condition psychologically, and this distinguished their experience from that of the congenitally blind. It also meant that they often found themselves treated like children after the onset of their blindness.⁵⁰ Such infantilization was also the result of rehabilitation policies, which expected wives and mothers to do their utmost to care for their injured menfolk, to make their everyday lives easier so that they could focus on returning to work. Disabled veterans without families were often assigned 'foster mothers' from more affluent backgrounds, who were expected to look after them out of patriotic duty. In fact, in regard to soldiers, all women were perceived as potential mothers, a message that was conveyed in the form of a secular Pieta motif within a Red Cross poster designed to recruit nurses.⁵¹ The 'nursing potential' of guide dogs proved a valuable counterweight against societal expectations for traumatized veterans to quickly regain their masculinity and behave like 'proper men'. It is widely known that the First World War not only had a deep impact on the sensorium of combatants, but also effected profound changes in relation to emotional norms.⁵² This manifested itself not only in the challenging of the dominant masculine ideal of the self-restrained, disciplined soldier, but also in soldiers' social relationships. Due to loneliness, the inadequacy of language, and a sense of alienation from home, moments of intimacy were often shared with relative strangers.⁵³ Animals numbered among these 'relative strangers', and the partnership between veterans and their guide dogs developed this emotional bond a stage further. During the war, the touch of a nurse became a response to soldiers' sensory degradation. After the war, the bond that blind veterans formed with their guide dogs took on both psychological and physical characteristics. Tactile contact – stroking, looking after and playing with dogs – was an essential element of this partnership.

Attitudes to guide dogs by veterans and by the public

The first German guide dog owners were generally satisfied with their dogs, although they were unable to draw comparisons with experiences elsewhere. In the introduction to

a collection entitled *The War Blind and their Guide Dogs: Self-Reports*, Gerhard Stalling also expressed his pleasure that the mobility problem of those who sacrificed their sight in the service of the fatherland had finally been solved. In the same chapter he emphasized the economic advantages of the scheme. Until blindness became a mass phenomenon, most blind people would rely on a paid human attendant whose availability and reliability depended on several factors, and which left the blind person constantly vulnerable to the vagaries of his helper.⁵⁴ In the new post-war situation, the use of paid attendants on a large scale was no longer viable. Demand for the services of these 'domestic servants' was always higher than the supply in German society, and this situation was exacerbated after the war because so many working-class people who could have filled these positions had lost their lives in the atrocities. But far more significant than the cost of the paid attendants was the economic gain arising from the blind person's opportunity to return to work, made possible by the presence of adaptable and reliable dogs. The high costs of breeding, training and maintaining dogs could thus be offset by the taxes that a rehabilitated veteran in employment paid to the state.

Success was also contingent on its reception by wider society, and the majority of the German public seemed to readily accept the service provided by guide dogs which was perceived as similar to the work performed by sheepdogs and horses. By contrast, in other countries the public response was more hostile. When the scheme was introduced in Britain in the 1930s, many people were scandalized by the 'torturous treatment' of animals when they encountered guide dogs training on the street.⁵⁵ Even in Germany, members of emerging animal protection organizations occasionally voiced protest, but their objections were usually directed at the misuse of untrained or inadequately trained 'begging dogs'. Some blind people used their untrained dogs exclusively for begging, which meant that the dogs were forced to lie in the same place all day. Animal protection activists regarded attempts to incite pity in this way 'a shocking truculence', and noted that many of the beggars in question were not war veterans, nor in some cases were they blind, while some made such a good income that they should have been able to afford a 'two-legged companion'. Nonetheless, they never failed to emphasize that properly trained dogs delivered valuable service as 'useful members of human society who improved the blind person's difficult existence'.⁵⁶ In those cases, all they asked was that dogs be treated considerately.

In the German case, only a single comment published in a 1934 journal characterized the work of guide dogs as the 'systematic torture of animals', and contrary to the innate nature of dogs. It vented its anger on the blind beggars and street vendors who exploited dogs in this way and declared that 'false pity toward them has no place in the Third Reich'.⁵⁷ This solitary reference to the Third Reich should not lead to unjustified generalizations; however, it reveals the conduct witnessed under national socialist ideology, whereby great attention was paid to the welfare of animals, while millions of people were butchered. The editors of the newspaper vehemently defended the purpose and value of guide dogs: 'Hands off the blind! Sighted people disappoint them all the time; even when they offer their help, they let them down soon after, because they cannot bear the idea of being another person's servant. Guide dogs are willing to do that. They do not talk about their daily heroic deeds; they fulfil a duty'.⁵⁸

Guide dog owners as a new 'emotional community'

Ownership of a guide dog created such a strong bond that masters often ascribed a distinct identity to their dogs journals provided a vibrant platform for the expression of

this identity. These included *Blindenführhund*, a publication exclusively aimed at guide dog owners, and *Kriegsblinde*, the forum for blind veterans, which also included generous coverage of their concerns. A significant stumbling block that had to be overcome in order to ensure the safety of guide dogs was that ‘humans [knew] close to nothing about the inner life of the dog, this unbelievably sophisticated creature’.⁵⁹ To help remedy this situation *Kriegsblinde* regularly published a column entitled *Aus der Praxis für die Praxis* (From the Praxis to the Praxis), which attempted to answer guide dog owners’ practical questions, including ‘how do dogs understand human words?’ and ‘is a dog capable of estimating the speed of an approaching car?’⁶⁰ These questions were then forwarded to a professor of canine science and a dog trainer, so that the problem could be approached both from a theoretical and a practical point of view. It is remarkable how often the two answers contradicted each other.⁶¹ These discrepancies warranted new research into canine behaviour and cognition, and the implications of the discoveries they yielded extended well beyond guide dog owners’ needs.

Between 1923 and 1929 some 5700 dogs were trained, and in 1929 the ‘German Working Group for the Provision of Guide Dogs for the Blind’ announced a prize competition that involved answering the question: ‘Why do I hold my guide dog in such a high esteem?’ The first prize was worth 75 marks, the second prize 50 marks and the third prize 25 marks. The competition attracted 99 submissions, including short reports, poems and even an entry ‘written’ in the first person by a guide dog called Bella. A short leaflet containing a selection of these submissions reveals that the most frequently hailed virtue of dogs was that they released their owners from the ‘prison’ of blindness and emancipated them from their childlike status. Many people also reported regaining their enthusiasm for life, while some described how their dogs had helped them or even saved their lives in dangerous situations.⁶²

Guide dogs became familiar figures not only in the street, but also featured on a series of *Notgeld* (emergency money that replaced small coins) issued in Oldenburg in 1921. The set consisted of six pieces, worth 50 Pfennig each and were valid for three months. The front of the notes featured the caption ‘Deutscher Führhund für Kriegsblinde’ (German Guide Dogs for the War-Blinded’), while the back of the notes showed six different aspects of a working blind man’s life assisted by his faithful hound: going to work to earn his daily bread (a factory scene); being guided safely across the road (a traffic scene); being protected from danger (a quayside scene); being helped up and down steps; being led adeptly so as not to collide with anything; and having the services of an attentive and friendly servant.⁶³ Another form of acknowledgement was a bronze monument, erected in the Berliner Zoologischer Garten in 1931, which was sponsored jointly by the *Deutscher Tierschutzverein* (German Association for Animal Protection) and the *Deutscher Blindenbund für Führhunde* (German Association of Guide Dogs for the Blind). The monument bore the inscription: ‘To the German guide dog from the grateful German blind people’.

Because veterans viewed their guide dogs not as a special favour from the state, but as something that they had earned, they did not shy away from voicing their dissatisfaction or criticism if they felt it was justified. The limited provision of dogs constituted a serious problem. Because German Shepherds were in such high demand, many breeders capitalized on this fact and tried to breed too many dogs too quickly rather than focusing on the quality of the dogs.

Another problem stemmed from the traditional association of blind people begging on the street while accompanied by dogs. As mentioned previously, the status of disabled

veterans was often misused, and during a ‘mass epidemic’ of military beggars in 1919–1920, the welfare authorities unmasked several disabled civilians or non-disabled people who hoped to receive larger handouts by wearing a uniform.⁶⁴ At some stage guide dog owners found it necessary to appeal to the Berlin police because they felt that blind beggars (or those who claimed to be blind) ruined their reputation and therefore asked the authorities to draw a clear distinction between them.⁶⁵ Moreover, because guide dogs, despite their special status, did not physically differ from dogs that were kept as domestic pets, they were frequently denied access to trams, restaurants and parks. In 1928, the blind veterans’ official journal published a complaint by a veteran whose dog was forbidden from entering a hotel room where he was staying near a railway station. The author argued that guide dogs had already been granted access to trains, and so it was time for hotel managers too, to recognize that ‘a guide dog is not a dog in the ordinary sense of the word because it replaces its master’s eyes’.⁶⁶ On the basis of such experiences another reader suggested that the legal status of guide dogs should be regulated by granting them certain privileges which were already enjoyed by other special categories of canines, such as hunting dogs.⁶⁷

Positive experiences with guide dogs inspired calls for their provision to be extended to civilians. In 1930, the director of the Imperial German Blind Association delivered a speech at a congress dedicated to welfare for the blind. He defined the association’s goal as ‘the improvement of the mental and economic condition of blind people’ and pointed to the crucial role played by guide dogs in the achievement of these objectives. In addition to enabling blind veterans to return to work, the opportunity that guide dogs gave them to walk around spontaneously and to make short trips was deemed a great improvement.⁶⁸ The director therefore suggested that not only war veterans, but also the country’s 36,000 civilian blind, or at least those 15,000 who were between the ages of 18 and 60, and thus presumably in relatively good health, should become eligible. In 1928, free guide dog provision was extended to victims of industrial accidents.⁶⁹ At the same time, the deteriorating financial situation led to various restrictions, such as those on the feeding and health-care cost of dogs. These expenses were initially covered by the state, but now became the owners’ responsibility.

Civilian pleas were often supported by veterans, one of whom proposed legal changes to facilitate the extension of the scheme, suggesting that guide dogs should be granted the official legal status of prostheses, similarly to artificial limbs, as long as they were necessary for vocational training or to enable their owners to lead ‘ordinary lives’.⁷⁰ Others emphasized that guide dogs could also be of service to blind women, even if they did not necessarily require them for work. In addition, there were health-related reasons as to why guide dogs were considered beneficial, namely that tuberculosis was widespread among blind men and women, partly because their limited mobility prevented them from getting enough fresh air.⁷¹ Others pointed out that the spouses of blind veterans were equally benefited from the work of guide dogs, because dogs fulfilled a function that they would normally have been expected to perform. The aforementioned director of the Imperial German Blind Association concluded his speech with a call for ‘a guide dog for every blind person!’, and proposed that the necessary funds should be covered by public and private insurance companies.⁷² To that end, the Association submitted a proposal for the legal improvement of blind welfare provision to the Imperial Ministry of Work, suggesting that guide dogs should be classified as a ‘necessity of life’ (*‘notwendiger Lebensbedarf’*), a legal category which would make them available to every blind person.⁷³ When this proposal was rejected, one veteran condemned the decision by

reminding authorities that ‘the guide dog is not only a guide, but often all that life has to offer to a blind person’.⁷⁴

The overall impact of guide dogs in Germany and beyond

The guide dogs project was a great success in interwar Germany and its significance was frequently compared to the breakthrough achieved by the invention of Braille. All in all, guide dogs combined an impressive variety of roles. At a mundane level, they fulfilled an economic function, reducing the burden on paid attendants, spouses and friends, and enabling their masters to get to their workplaces independently. They were mobility aids – living prostheses – who effectively replaced the eyes of blinded soldiers (albeit figuratively). They also provided companionship and emotional support, in a way that was reminiscent of the comfort offered to injured soldiers by nurses during the war. Significantly, the social, economic and emotional impact of guide dogs went far beyond the partnership they forged with their owners, affecting those in their immediate environment (typically family members) and society as a whole. The common experience of guide dog ownership led to the development of a distinct identity and ‘emotional community’ among blind ex-soldiers. Moreover, it boosted their self-confidence, which in turn inspired them to assert their rights.

Perhaps surprisingly, as ‘prosthesis with a soul’ guide dogs proved far more capable than their artificial counterparts, which were often viewed as the heralds of technological advancement. While during the war, animals helped soldiers to retain their humanity in the face of brutality, in its aftermath, guide dogs helped to transform soldiers into citizens. In this context, the work of guide dogs can be likened not only to artificial limbs, but also to other technological devices, for example radios, which were offered for free to blind veterans in interwar France. Radios were defined as ‘prosthetic’ technologies that could metaphorically replace the damaged eyes of the war blind and provide a ‘sonic vision’ to eliminate the ‘dark worlds’ created by physical limitation or depression.⁷⁵ As we have seen, guide dogs too functioned as prostheses that replaced the eyes of their owners and liberated them from the prison of darkness. The campaigns for French veterans to be exempted from the annual radio licence fee were justified by the rehabilitative potentials of radio: access to it was deemed to constitute a social right of citizenship equivalent to a pension. This was because the radio offered more than mere entertainment; it provided a means for disabled men to participate in national life.⁷⁶ By the same token, German guide dog owners derived not just satisfaction from pet ownership, but also pragmatic benefits: their ‘prostheses’ helped them to return to work and regain their citizenship. For this reason, they were exempted from dog tax.

The psychological advantages of the independence made possible by guide dogs were manifold. Improved mobility usually led to a greater degree of integration, improvement in living standards and a greater sense of satisfaction with life. Guide dogs also acted as attention magnets and ‘icebreakers’ in the dialogue between veterans and the public. People would often feel uneasy about instigating communication with blind people, but did so willingly if they were accompanied by dogs. Disabled veterans exemplified the destructiveness of the war; their bodies were living ‘sites of memory’. Typically, this involved scars, disfiguration and prostheses. However, veterans came to believe that the presence of their ‘prosthesis’ in the form of guide dogs, while recalling the grimness of the war, made them appear more attractive. Guide dog owners together with their dogs became members of a specific emotional community, with common interests and values. This remained a distinctly male community, which nevertheless bridged certain

Figure 1. German Notgeld.

class differences. The concerns of this emotional community both overlapped and conflicted with those of other groups, including the civilian blind, non-blind veterans and non-veteran dog owners.

Even more remarkable is the broader significance of the German experiment: it acted as a catalyst for the successful employment of guide dogs on a global scale, which enabled thousands of blind people – by that stage predominantly civilians – to benefit from the scheme. From its outset, the German achievement attracted the attention of foreign guests. Some of these visitors contributed to the introduction of similar schemes in their home countries. The journals of blind veterans published reports on these initiatives, for example readers were informed that in Britain, earlier mixed feelings towards the idea of ‘forcing dogs to work’ had finally been overcome, enabling the first cohort of blind people to acquire their guide dogs in 1931.⁷⁷ Another article, ‘The Seeing Eye’ by Dorothy Eustis, the founder of the first guide dog training institution in the USA, explained that the training methods used there had to take into account the particular challenge posed by the volume of traffic in big cities.⁷⁸ The article proudly concluded that: ‘it can no longer be denied that guide dogs have commenced their triumph throughout the world!’⁷⁹ Such accounts of developments abroad already hinted at a variety of cultural and social attitudes towards dogs and blind people in different countries. In addition, national differences in the traditions of rehabilitation and philanthropy, and in concepts of citizenship, exerted an impact on the way in which guide dog training was undertaken. One such difference was that nowhere else in the world was guide dog training so generously supported by the state as it was in Germany; in other places, charities contributed to the scheme through fundraising. In some countries guide dogs were initially either available exclusively for

veterans, or they could acquire guide dogs more easily. Nevertheless, it was only in interwar Germany that the fate of guide dogs and their owners became so inextricably linked that veterans perceived their dogs as a form of compensation for the loss of their eyesight in the war.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. McGreevy, *Bitter Witness*, 212.
2. Cohen, *The War Come Home*, 1.
3. See for example Pöppinger, *Tiere im Krieg*.
4. Bell and Weaver, *Horses in Warfare*, 10–11.
5. Frevert, 'History of Emotions,' 75.
6. Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*, 9.
7. Poore, *Disability in Twentieth Century German Culture*, 3.
8. Eghigian, *Making Security Social*, 199.
9. Poore, *Disability in Twentieth Century German Culture*, 9.
10. Biesalski, *Die ethische und wirtschaftliche Bedeutung*, 4. Cited in Perry, 'Militaryizing the Disabled,' 271, my translation is based on, but not identical to, that of Perry.
11. Perry, 'Recycling the Disabled,' 11.
12. Hong, *Welfare, Modernity and the Weimar State*, 95.
13. Eckart, *Medizin und Krieg in Deutschland*, 76; Anderson and Pemberton, 'Walking Alone,' 461.
14. *Der Kriegsblinde mit Führhund. Selbstberichte*, 4.
15. Robson, *The Complete Guide Dogs for the Blind*, 15.
16. Tague, 'Eighteenth-Century English Debates on a Dog Tax,' 919.
17. Ireson, *Another Pair of Eyes*, 12–13.
18. Lemish, *War Dogs*, 15.
19. Gardiner, *The Animals' War*, 88.
20. Klan, *Der Deutsche Verein für Sanitätshunde*, 211.
21. *Ibid.*, 75.
22. *Ibid.*, 242.
23. Lemish, *War Dogs*, 12.
24. Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*, 350.
25. Meyer, *Men of War*, 142.
26. Crouthamel, *An Intimate History of the Front*, 171.
27. Hoffmann, *Kriegsblinde in Österreich*, 128.
28. Jähnl, *Die österreichischen Kriegsblinden der beiden Weltkriege*, 144–50.
29. 'Felterjesztés a királyi rokkantügyi hivatalhoz a vak katonákat vezető kutyák tárgyában,' *Állatvédelem*, June 1916, 53–4.
30. 'Vakokat vezető kutyák,' *Állatvédelem*, May 1916, 34.
31. 'Vakvezető kutyák,' Királyi rokkantügyi hivatal vakok intézete, *Állatvédelem*, September 1916, 64.
32. Anderson and Pemberton, 'Walking Alone,' 474.
33. Cohen, *The War Come Home*, 301.
34. Hong, *Welfare, Modernity and the Weimar State*, 94.
35. Kienitz, *Beschädigte Helden*, 103.
36. 'Unglücksfall'. Kienitz, *Beschädigte Helden*, 293.
37. *Ibid.*, 51–2.
38. Perry, 'Militaryizing the Disabled,' 279.
39. *Ibid.*, 267.
40. Kienitz, *Beschädigte Helden*, 171.
41. *Ibid.*, 23.
42. Perry, 'Recycling the Disabled,' 180.

43. Brüll, *Der Blindenführhund*, 27.
44. Poore, *Disability in Twentieth Century German Culture*, 34.
45. Stephanitz, *Der Deutsche Schäferhund in Wort und Bild*.
46. *Die Hundewelt*, 15 January 1925, 81.
47. Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell*, 111–12.
48. Higonet, *Nurses at the Front*, Introduction, XX.
49. Frevert, *Emotions in History*, 149.
50. Knipfel, 'Meine Erfahrungen mit einem Blindenhund,' 205.
51. Kienitz, *Beschädigte Helden*, 261.
52. Das, *Touch and Intimacy*, 111.
53. Ibid., 114.
54. Gerhard Stalling's introduction to *Der Kriegsblinde mit Führhund. Selbstberichte*, 4.
55. Stephanitz, *Der deutsche Schäferhund als Diensthund*, 2 and 4; 'Der Führhund in England,' *Kriegsblinde*, 1930: 14, 128.
56. Renger, 'Gesellschaftliche Debatten,' 73.
57. 'Es gibt Menschen, die so schamlos sind,' *Mensch und Hund*, 1934: 2, 18, quoted in Renger, 'Gesellschaftliche Debatten,' 77.
58. Renger, 'Gesellschaftliche Debatten,' 77.
59. *Blindenführhund*, 1928: 2, 2.
60. *Blindenführhund*, 1929: 3, 2.
61. Ibid.
62. *Der Führhund, Ein Freund und Helfer der Blinden*.
63. See Figure 1. German Notgeld.
64. Poore, *Disability in Twentieth Century German Culture*, 16.
65. *Kriegsblinde*, 1928: 1, 2.
66. Ibid., 1, 109 (lifted from the *Berliner Morgenpost*).
67. Knipfel, 'Meine Erfahrungen mit einem Blindenhund,' 209.
68. Oheil, 'Ist der Führhund ein Gegenstand des notwendigen Lebensbedarfs?,' 3.
69. Ibid.
70. *Die Blindenwelt*, 1930, Nr. 2, 42.
71. 'Führhunde für Friedensblinde,' *Blindenwelt*, May 1922, 66–9.
72. Ibid., 8.
73. Oheil, 'Ist der Führhund ein Gegenstand des notwendigen Lebensbedarfs?,' 37.
74. *Kriegsblinde*, 1928: 2, 10.
75. See the article by Scales, 'Radio Broadcasting,' 643–78.
76. Ibid., 672.
77. 'Der Führhund in England,' *Kriegsblinde*, 1930: 14, 128.
78. 'Der Führhund in Nordamerika,' *Kriegsblinde*, 1930: 14, 159.
79. Ibid., 159.

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