

Contested Memories of Traumatic Neurosis in Weimar and Nazi Germany

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Using letters written by mentally traumatized men to welfare and government officials between 1919-1935, this paper examines the memory of 'war neurosis' from the perspective of psychologically traumatized German veterans after 1918. How did psychologically disabled veterans respond to political constructions of 'traumatic neurosis' on both the political left and the right? How did 'war neurotics' themselves define psychological trauma and the memory of the war? Psychiatric discourse on 'psychosis' and 'hysteria' took on a crucial role in political debates over memory, welfare and national recovery after 1918. Left-wing groups appropriated ideas about mental trauma to articulate their views on the psychological origins of the war and the causes of Germany's defeat and social and political fragmentation. Social democratic activists argued that war neurosis was the perfect wound for understanding the trauma inflicted by total war –mental injuries allegedly united soldiers and civilians, men and women, shattered by combat, poverty, and other ills inflicted in the modern industrial age. However, the political left lost credibility among mentally disabled veterans during pension wars and budget cuts in the wake of the Great Depression. During these years when the already polarized Weimar democracy completely broke down, the National Socialist party seized the opportunity and appealed to physically damaged war victims. According to Nazi ideologues, 'war neurotics' were unmanly and outsiders in the *Front-* and *Volksgemeinschaft*. The origin of 'war neurosis' was not the war at all, but defeat, revolution, the rise of democracy and the welfare state. Traumatized men were portrayed as hysterical 'pension neurotics' who drained the national community, threatened Germany's racial fitness, and contaminated the memory of 'true' veterans who were hardened by the war experience.

These politicized narratives on war neurosis, however, did not reflect the subjective, individual memories of 'hysterical men.' The central argument of this paper is that despite medical and political attempts at constructing a collective, or national, memory, there was no hegemonic memory of traumatic neurosis. The letters of men suffering from neurosis reveal that their memories of the war are much more complex and elusive than the political left or right claimed. This subjectivity is illustrated in the complex ways in which veterans defined their masculinity in relation to the war. The interwar period was dominated by a discourse on dominant 'martial masculinity,' found especially in the rhetoric of veterans' political organizations on the right, that envisioned the soldier as a hardened 'real man' who conquered weakness with

'comradeship' and 'sacrifice.' However, this conception of veterans' masculinity was heavily critiqued by 'war hysterics' who had very different interpretations of the front experience. Traumatized men often asserted that there was nothing 'unmanly' about breaking down under the stress of modern war. Traumatized men thus exerted agency in trying to define 'war neurosis' according to a narrative that did not strictly adhere to dominant political, medical, socio-economic paradigms, but rather according to more subjective conceptions of themselves as victims of the brutalizing effects of war.