Casey on Sumpf, 'The Broken Years: Russia's Disabled War Veterans, 1904-1921'

Review published on Friday, December 23, 2022


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Printable Version: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=58053

Disabled veterans often hold a central position in research within disability studies by virtue of the greater number of documents that exist relating to them and their medical conditions. This new book by Alexandre Sumpf turns that dynamic on its head by examining a group of veterans so obscure that many of his readers will know little or nothing about them. Those veterans are the survivors of tsarist Russia’s war with Japan and participation in World War I. Sumpf’s study demonstrates two of the main causes of this obscurity. One is the lack of a coordinated effort in tsarist Russia to create a system for the aid of disabled veterans. The other is the series of revolutions that eventually led to the collapse of the tsarist regime and its replacement with the Bolshevik government of the Soviet Union.

The lack of a coordinated effort by tsarist Russia to aid its veterans is the focus of the initial four chapters of the book. Here Sumpf describes public messaging used to mobilize civilians, especially those from the upper classes, to donate time, money, and expertise to address veteran disability. This aid came in the form of medical knowledge, hospital space, and rehabilitative programs. Because of the lack of coordination, these programs varied in quality and duration. Sumpf demonstrates, however, that all these programs shared a common goal of rehabilitation that would make the former soldier useful again as a civilian worker. Photographs included in the book show rehabilitative spaces designed to remake the wounded male soldier’s body in such a way that he could be proud and productive in his home community upon leaving the hospital.

The second issue, that of the Russian revolutions, is present throughout the pages of this study out of necessity as the reader will no doubt anticipate the role of the October Revolution before even opening the book. Here Sumpf analyzes the Bolshevik shift in emphasis from wounded soldiers to the social class of disabled workers. The Bolsheviks used the wounded tsarist soldier as a negative example associated with a failed imperialist war and as proof of the tsarist state’s inability to provide for the basic needs of its citizens in any consistent way. This pushed back against nascent efforts by disabled veterans to advocate for their interests in the public sphere. Sumpf shows how disabled veterans, including those of the Bolshevik Revolution, tried and failed to create pressure groups to ensure their needs were met. Instead, the Bolsheviks built upon the social assumption that all men, even those wounded in war, had a right and a duty to work. Disabled veterans thus joined the crowded ranks of all disabled men who were made useless by a failed state and would regain their usefulness
under the new regime.

The overall message of the book is summed up nicely by Sumpf in chapter 5. There he writes, “The right to be healthy and to (re)gain work capacity was a true legacy of the Great War in Russia. The rights of the disabled as a legitimate minority were indeed born out of the revolution, but out of the February revolution” (p. 213). Here the author tries to salvage something positive out of what is mostly a depressing story of wounded men struggling to survive in an indifferent nation. Sumpf contends that from the political turmoil and uncoordinated efforts to help tsarist veterans of World War I, a system to help all disabled people emerged. Of course, he then qualifies this observation by limiting it to the February Revolution of Alexander Kerensky and not the October Revolution that brought the Bolsheviks to power. A vestige of this goal remained after the Bolsheviks took power, but Sumpf suggests that the new Soviet government rhetorically touted the right to be healthy while supporting it as unevenly as their tsarist predecessors.

Sumpf’s study brings together a large body of material from Russian archives that would be inaccessible to most scholars due to language barriers as well as politics. This is one of the great contributions of his work. Before reading The Broken Years, I was unfamiliar with the 1916 short film Reborn to Life, which offers some of the earliest cinematic depictions of disability and social attempts to address it. Sumpf spends a good portion of chapter 2 analyzing the film’s depiction of a wounded soldier supplied with a prosthetic device. This book is also valuable as part of a comparative study on how nations interact with wounded soldiers. Much of the tsarist experience compares closely to that of other nations faced with a large group of maimed combat veterans. In particular, the struggle to create systems large enough and coordinated enough to help these soldiers compares closely to that of the United States in the period before World War II. The social ambivalence toward these disabled veterans is an issue that remains relevant to every nation up to the present.

One caveat for readers of this book is that it was not written for those unfamiliar with at least some Russian history. Sumpf does not spend much time contextualizing the political climate in Russia before and during the period this book examines. Nor does he provide a summary of the structure of the tsarist state. On more than one occasion I needed to look up the term zemstvo to remind myself that it refers to an institution of local government under the tsar. The generalist reader of this book would, therefore, be well advised to have an encyclopedia handy while reading, or to read a book on Russian history beforehand. For experts on Slavic studies, this book will address a fascinating what-if question. Namely, what would Russia have looked like if disabled veterans of the tsarist army had been able to form a pressure group and participate as a collective in national politics? It also provides a useful point of comparison for scholars examining the aftermath of Russia’s other wars.


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