

# A Dark Side of Reunification

During World War I, more than 30,000 men from Southern Jutland, Denmark, fought as conscripts in the German Army. More than 6,000 of their number were killed, and even more were wounded – both physically and psychologically.

With the reunion of Northern Schleswig with Denmark in 1920, Southern Jutland once again became Danish territory, and Denmark was committed to the care of the disabled ex-servicemen and surviving relatives of the war-dead from the province.

Medical science was not prepared for the psychological consequences of the war. Diagnosing the mental wounds was difficult and treatment was limited.

This exhibition tells an overlooked story about psychological trauma among Danish war veterans after World War I. It is a story about the horrors of war, the veterans' post-war experiences, life in mental institutions of the day, and struggles for recognition and compensation. It is a story that in some ways is comparable to present-day affairs regarding psychologically disabled war veterans in Denmark.

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## World War I – The Great European Disaster

- World War I lasted from July 28, 1914 to November 11, 1918
- The War was fought by France, Britain, Russia, and their allies against Germany, Austria-Hungary, and their allies
- The trenches would more than anything become symbols of the war
- Machine guns and other new weaponry allowed soldiers to be fired at from relatively safe positions, resulting in a military stalemate and trench warfare
- During the war, roughly 40.000 kilo-metres of trenches were dug
- The war resulted in the deaths of 9-10 million soldiers



*The Southern Jutlander Claus Frederiksen (1899-1972), on the left, went off to war unconcerned at the age of 18. Upon his arrival at the front, he was buried alive by an exploding shell. The experience would affect his mental condition for the rest of his life.*



*German troops advancing near the town of Albert, France, where Claus Frederiksen was nearly killed by an exploding shell.*

*Most of the soldiers from Southern Jutland were Danish-minded, but they were German citizens during the war. Therefore, World War I would become one of the wars in which most Danes have been killed.*



*Technological advancements in the peaceful decades preceding the war led to the development of modern, extremely efficient weapons such as machine guns and heavy artillery.*

*Trenches were often completely destroyed by bombardments in which soldiers suffered violent deaths. Claus Frederiksen survived being buried alive by the impact of a shell.*



*An 8-year-old Claus Frederiksen, on the right, with his brother Frederik in 1907.*

*Back from the war, Claus Frederiksen was no longer capable of managing his job as a farmer. The former elite gymnast now found himself lying in bed for weeks at a time exhausted, weak, and apathetic. After the reunification, he applied for a state disability pension.*



*The everlasting mire would become a symbol of the misery and hopelessness of the war.*

*Shells, machine guns and poison gas took their toll on the soldiers, but the miserable conditions at the front also wore down the troops physically as well as mentally.*

*Some had their feet wrecked by the muddy trench floors, others drowned in the bottomless slush the war had turned the grounds into.*



*North Schleswigers in a fully developed trench in 1917.*



*A rare photograph of the regiments of Schleswig's march through Belgium in the early stages of the war. They are passing a Belgian ammunition convoy destroyed by German artillery.*



*When off duty, the soldiers often stayed in shelters far below ground. The structures offered better protection from shells but could not withstand direct hits. Third from left is Fritz Schwarz from Haderslev.*



*The sustained cold and wet conditions in the trenches led to "trench foot", a case of which is shown here. The condition was another "signature injury" of the war and often resulted in gangrene and amputation.*



*Soldiers at the front line did not only risk being killed or wounded by guns and grenades. There were also good conditions for diseases to thrive in the insanitary trenches.*

*Vermin and rats posed a considerable health risk and were a great source of irritation to the men.*

*Here is the outcome of a rat hunt on the Western front.*

# Trench Warfare

At the front, life in the trenches was governed by routines. Here, the soldiers lived every day with the risk of being wounded or killed.

It was always a relief for the men to be pulled out of the maze-like world of the trenches, where the days were marked by hunger, coldness, sleep deprivation, lice and rats.

There was a big difference between the sectors of the frontline. On some stretches, bombardments lasted for days. Other places were quieter with unofficial truces.

The larger attacks began with sustained and intense bombardments of enemy trenches and wire obstacles. The infantry would then go "over the top" to cross the lethal no-man's land.

Infantry attacks were, however, relatively rare. World War I was primarily fought with artillery, and approximately 60 % of the 9-10 million soldiers who died during the war were killed by shells.

## The Soldiers from Southern Jutland

- As a consequence of Denmark's defeat in the Second Schleswig War of 1864, Southern Jutland became part of Prussia, which then would become part of Germany from 1871 until the reunion of Southern Jutland with Denmark in 1920
- There, a Danish minority lived under German rule when war broke out in 1914
- More than 30,000 men from Southern Jutland were therefore conscripted into the German army during the war
- More than 6,000 of the largely Danish-minded soldiers from the province were killed in the war
- Close ties between Danish and German soldiers were nevertheless established, as good fellowship was crucial to survival in the trenches
- Many soldiers returned home with physical and psychological wounds
- The last surviving war participant from Southern Jutland, Lorenz Pedersen, died in 2004.

# Shell Shock

World War I did not only cause death and destruction on an unprecedented scale. It also brought about psychological reactions among the fighting men previously unseen in war.

Strange fits with paralysis, blindness, muteness, uncontrollable crying, trembling and vomiting spread in the trenches. As many as 200,000 soldiers were treated for "nervous" disorders in the German army alone.

No one was prepared for these breakdowns, so treatment was ad-hoc and involved brutal methods such as the application of electric shocks, icy baths, or isolation.

Doctors and high-ranking officers typically viewed the victims as malingerers seeking an easy way out of the trenches. They feared for the cohesion of the armies, and some cases were shot as cowards and deserters.

Today, the war is widely remembered for its psychological effects. The medical term "shell shock" has been adapted into everyday language, and already shortly after the armistice, the many psychologically disabled soldiers became strong symbols of the human costs of the war.



A British soldier with chronic tremors and walking impairment due to shell shock at King George Military Hospital in 1916.

New cases still occurred after the war, and many psychologically disabled veterans needed care for the rest of their lives. It was a great burden for society.



Lieutenant Johannes Ankersen, in the middle, is served coffee on a quiet sunny day at the Somme front in the spring of 1916.

Officers like Johannes Ankersen also succumbed in great numbers to the stresses at the front. But where the common soldiers typically were labeled as hysterics, officers often received the more honourable diagnosis "neurasthenia", which meant weakened nerves.



Peter Johansen (1898-1981) from Tofthund was a typical war veteran in the sense that he did not talk about his traumatic memories from the war. "When you have stepped on dead buddies to get out of a trench, you don't want to talk about it" – Johansen explained to his family late in life.



This oil painting shows a German attack on a French trench.

It is painted by one of the soldiers from Southern Jutland who probably found it therapeutic to depict the horrors of war with a brush.



War participant Johannes Tjørnelund (1898-1997)

"The nightmares were always about the same, about me being in the midst of all the terrible things again; I couldn't do anything, couldn't get away, and all around me my buddies were being mutilated and killed [...]", Johannes Tjørnelund from Løgumgårde wrote in his memoirs. He had difficulties getting his life back on track after the war.

A lot of the returned soldiers were traumatized after the war, but most of them did not talk about their experiences. They found a way of coping with them.

Only those worst affected sought public help. The soldier's reactions to the traumatic experiences could affect entire families – sometimes for generations.



The Disabled Soldiers Board was situated in the old marine barracks in Sønderborg. The board functioned until 1990, when the care for the disabled and surviving relatives of the war-dead became a municipal matter.

The care efforts were a heavy and long-lasting burden. The last war invalid died in 1996, 97 years old, and the last war widow died in 2007.



The War Invalid School was established in 1920 to counter the issue of unemployment among the war veterans. It was run in a collaboration between the state, the Red Cross, and The Foundation of Southern Jutland.

Here, war invalids that were no longer able to take care of their jobs could be trained in a craft until 1925. The apprentices stayed at the school; the nervous were situated in rooms for five, and everybody else slept in dormitories with room for 25 people.



During the war, a lot of the war disabled Southern Jutlanders got to stay at German field hospitals like the one on the picture. Some were still in German hospitals at the time of the reunification.

There were also mentally ill veterans there waiting to be transferred to Danish hospitals or homes.



Some Southern Jutlanders received a pension for a psychological and a physical wound.

Even those who had lost both legs like this very young man could regain mobility with the aid of prostheses. The prostheses were gradually made longer in order for the body to get used to moving around with them.

No such plan existed for managing psychological wounds.

# Taking Care of the Disabled and Surviving Relatives

Southern Jutland was officially reunified with Denmark on June 15, 1920. By then, the region was exhausted and impoverished after four years of war. A large portion of the male population had either been killed or disabled, and many were left in great need.

The disabled, the 1,500 widows, and 5,000 fatherless children needed care and support. But who were to pay for it?

Denmark insisted that Germany pay compensation for all the damage and losses inflicted on the people who fought its war. However, Germany saw the welfare of the war victims from Southern Jutland as a purely Danish concern.

A lengthy back-and-forthing ended with the Danish state having to foot the bill on its own. In order to manage the burden, the "Danish Disabled Soldiers Board" was established in 1920. The Board's task was to determine the size of pensions and to take care of all problems related to the disabled and surviving relatives.

In 1924, pensions amounted to DKK 4.9 million, equivalent to 1.2 % of the state budget that year. In 1946, a total of DKK 90 million had been paid out in welfare checks. In total, approximately 10,000 people from Southern Jutland made claims for benefits, including 6,596 war veterans. The case files on disability pension alone currently occupy 140 linear metres in the Danish National Archives.

## The Danish Disabled Soldiers Board in Sønderborg

- The Danish Disabled Soldiers Board was established in the town of Sønderborg after the reunification in June 1920
- Around 4,000 veterans from Southern Jutland are believed to have received a disability pension – approximately 5 % due to mental disorders
- The pension was very important for the disabled, and even a small monthly payment could keep a person out of poverty
- If the claimants disagreed with the decisions of the board, they could file a complaint to the Danish Disabled Soldiers Council in Copenhagen.



# Case Handling with Eyes Everywhere

Procedures in the Danish Disabled Soldiers Board were lengthy and complicated. The ambiguity surrounding the mentally disabled veterans' sufferings led to lengthy discussions and repeated medical examinations.

There were many actors involved in the cases; doctors and specialists, German and municipal authorities, relatives, and witnesses from the local area. This also prolonged the cases.

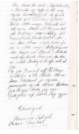
The cases show major differences in what it took to convince the board about the connection between the war service and a mental disorder.

Some applicants were asked to proof that certain traumatic events had happened, others were not. Some were required have suffered injuries to the head or other physical harm, others were not.

Much concern was given to the risk of fake applications and potential malingerers. Veterans admitted for observation at mental hospitals were secretly watched, and local police were asked to obtain statements from neighbours and other people from the local community.

## A Light in the Darkness

- The psychologically wounded veterans were far from passive victims
- The disability council was often in favour of those who complained. This could significantly increase a disability pension
- The degree of permanent injury recognized ranged from 0 to 100 %
- The degree was subject to adjustments and could be both raised and reduced
- The average degree of disability recognized for all the approved war invalids was approximately 40 %
- The average degree recognized for the psychologically wounded was approximately 35 %
- Those who were still admitted to mental hospitals at the time of the reunification were quickly registered as 100 % disabled by insanity
- There were significantly better welfare prospects in Denmark compared to France and Germany.



A letter for The Disabled Soldiers Board from one of the relatives.

The relatives played an important role in negotiating the illnesses. They took part in consultations and continuously asked for care stays, pension raises etc. on behalf of the invalids. And the authorities listened to them.



A photograph from a re-examination at The State Hospital in Sønderborg.

Businessman Antoni Hansen (1874-1941) from Aabenraa was one of the many who pointed out one specific incident as cause for a neurosis – the chock from an exploding shell near the town of Ypres in December 1916. He had a 20 % degree of permanent injury approved for traumatic neurosis.



Sometimes neuroses were accepted as war-related injuries although the applicants believed to suffer from other types of disorders. Jes Pedersen (1889-1971) applied for a pension on the basis of a heart and stomach disease but ended up receiving benefits for neurasthenia.



Jørgen Nissen Hansen (1877-1945) photographed at a re-examination at The State Hospital in Sønderborg in 1926.

"My health is ruined", Hansen stated. He had difficulties living with his actions in the war and contemplated suicide.

Hansen received a 33 % pension for traumatic neurosis but had to settle for 10 % after the examination in 1926.



Rudolph Brodersen (1896-1948) from Frøslev, 6th from the left in the front row, included several incidents in his illness narrative. During a "massive French artillery barrage", he "started shaking all over, fell to the ground, threw up". During an enemy attack a few days later, he had another fit: "It came from the heart, rushed to the head, everything was swimming before his eyes, and he couldn't go on. He became weak because he knew that he would die. He couldn't move", says the medical record.



With the aid of German army and medical records, the Danish authorities were able to inspect closely the applicant's situation and case history.

A recurrent question was whether or not the conditions had already existed prior to the war, and – if they in fact had – had been worsened by the service. Here, a German "Krankenblatt" from the period of conscription is shown.



The Southern Jutlander Christian Valentin was one of those war veterans who had to fight for compensation. A line of diagnoses appears in his case including "neurosis", "hysterical war neurosis", "traumatic neurosis", "pension neurosis", "hysteria" and "psychopathy" – not to mention the "laziness" he was also thought to suffer from.



Karl Heinrich Scheel (1877-1941) received several diagnoses but was compensated for traumatic neurosis.

Throughout his case, he strongly felt like he was under suspicion, and his approved degree of permanent injury never exceeded 10 %. On several occasions, he was referred to as "a pension neurotic" and "a pension hunter".



Doctor Johannes Burmeister (1863-1940) from Nordborg on the island of Als with his family in 1912.

When the veterans sought for disability compensation, doctors from the local community often had valuable knowledge of the applicants' medical records from before the war. Doctor Burmeister wrote among other things that Claus Frederiksen had been a healthy and happy boy throughout his upbringing. It was useful information when Claus Frederiksen applied for a pension on basis of a mental condition.



"For 3 years I suffered among the Germans, have I not waited and suffered long enough, and wouldn't you please help me soon?", Laurids Møller (1873-?) from Agerskov wrote in a letter to The Disabled Soldiers Board in 1921. Often the cases on physical as well as psychological wounds were prolonged and repeatedly led to complaints and frustrated applicants.

The picture is from a re-examination of Laurids Møller in 1927.

# Diagnoses and definitions

When the care for veterans with psychological wounds became a Danish responsibility, doctors were diagnostically at a loss. The terms were many and imprecise.

Doctors turned to the neuroses of the nineteenth century, and diagnoses such as "traumatic neurosis" and "neurasthenia" were frequently used. When in doubt, doctors would frequently use less distinct terms such as "mental illness".

The diagnosis given was of great importance to the disabled. Especially "hysteria" and "pension neuroses" bore a stigma as hysteria was closely linked to women's sexuality and pension neurosis covered symptoms thought have been caused by a desire for social benefits.

There were many theories at play when determining the cause of the disorders. Some conditions were thought to come from heredity, some from head injury and others from over-exertion or shocks.

Precisely the question of whether the disorders were rooted in physical or psychological factors was decisive in the disability cases. Both doctors and the disability board were more prone to accept disorders with a physical explanation.

## A Nervous Century

- At the start of the twentieth century, it was fairly common to have "bad nerves" and to be nervous
- "Neurosis" was the popular clinical term for nervousness in the eighteenth century
- During World War I, the mental breakdowns among the troops were known as "war neuroses"
- "Pension neurosis" was a condescending term associated with war veterans who were after social benefits.



# Symptoms and affects

The state of the psychologically disabled veterans was generally inconstant with various periodic attacks. Their conditions were complex, and their sufferings included headaches, nightmares, nausea, fatigue, tremors, memory loss, shortness of breath, insomnia and hypersensitivity towards loud noises and commotion.

"Nervousness" and "bad nerves" appear repeatedly in application forms and medical records. Some lost touch with reality, others became suicidal.

The men had had different experiences in the war. Many singled out one particular incident as the cause for their sufferings, others just pointed to "the hardships of war". However, they all agreed on the fact that the war had made them sick.

The relatives played an important role in the lives of the invalids. Many were unable to function socially and needed assistance in requesting for care stays, pension raises etc.

It was hard to be a relative. Wives and children were often exposed to what is now called "secondary traumatization". This is when a person close to a traumatized person also experiences the trauma by taking over some of the powerlessness and developing similar symptoms. This process also occurs today and can continue through generations.



Some of the psychologically disabled veterans were admitted for observation or treatment in mental hospitals in Augustenborg, Vester Vedsted, and Middelfart. Treatment of the veterans mostly consisted of sedatives, gardening or shopwork, diets and hot baths.



Tenant farmer Mathias Petersen (1881-1940) from Haderslev photographed during an admission to The State Hospital in Sønderborg in 1934.

One October morning in 1936, Mathias Petersen was found in a coma at the hospital, lying in a pool of blood with an open gash in his wrist.

Just before that, he had seen "his whole life flashing by and found that it was all wrong and that he had to make an end of it".



Theodor Ipsen found himself at the edge of the law several times after the war. Among other things, he threatened to shoot his parents and sister with a revolver.

He was diagnosed with psychopathy. A diagnosis that – along with hysteria, pension neurosis, and hypochondria – bore negative connotations, but not necessarily ruled out the possibility of a disability pension.

Theodor Ipsen was permanently admitted to Middelfart Mental Hospital in 1923 before being transferred to Augustenborg in 1932.



Middelfart Mental Hospital took care of patients from Funen and the southern part of Jutland. It opened in 1888 and was run as a small confined city with a building for patients, park areas, a church, a cemetery, and its own gas and water works.

At the reunification in 1920, some of the psychologically disabled veterans were admitted there, but the hospital lacked room for patients.



With the reunification in 1920, more patients needed psychiatric observation or treatment in Denmark. Therefore, the former border station in Vester Vedsted and Augustenborg Palace were turned into mental hospitals in 1923 and 1932 respectively.



Hans Jørgensen (1886-1954) from Oksbøl Mark had difficulties taking care of his job after the war and had to be cared for by his family on the island of Als.

In a letter to The Disabled Soldiers Board he wrote that he suffered from "sleeplessness, mental instability, a liability for rather intense states of depression, fatigue, a lack of enthusiasm and capacity for work, together with general nervousness."

He got to reside in all types of treatment facilities in Denmark after the reunification.



Johan Theede from Arnum by Ribe was sectioned in 1924, at the age of 29, after violent behaviour towards his parents.

Upon his return from the war, he at first appeared as his old self. But he gradually lost his capacity for work as well as his touch with reality, and he probably ended up in a nursing home after several admissions to mental hospitals.



"[...] by the smallest of setbacks, he gets angry and goes to bed. He generally tends to be rather sensitive, prone to crying and despairing" a doctor at Filadelfia wrote about master joiner Johan Melchart (1884-1960) from Toflund in 1930. Such descriptions appear again and again in the cases on the psychologically disabled veterans.



Not only soldiers were affected by the war. It could also be traumatizing having a family member killed or disabled.

In 1917, Maria Gørrigsen from Broagerland received news of her brother's death and could not believe it.

She had visions of her brother being alive but kept as a prisoner of war. She wrote down her visions and illustrated them with more than 100 drawings in colour.



Superintendent at Middelfart Mental Hospital, Th. Holm (1866-1934), had the following to report on Philip Heinz to The Disabled Soldiers Board in 1926: "During his entire stay, he has appeared plaintive and mentally callous when going over him but quite well around the other patients [...] has partaken in strolls and dances at the hospital as a healthy man and haven't shown any signs of memory impairment or psychic callousness in relation to that. On the contrary, he has shown quite an insistency in securing "the best" for himself and in not being passed over during meals or when partaking in amusements etc. "

Most often, the patients would be observed and looked after rather than treated during hospitalizations. There was not much doctors could do for the patients, and it was primarily a matter of determining their illnesses and capability of work.

## When do you think the quotes are from?

"The state takes away our responsibility but cannot ease our grief, we have to carry it alone. It reaches deep within our dreams."

"They exploded, they were blown to bits [...] only fragments were left. I saw what I take to be their heads lying on the ground, and pieces of their jackets and clothes that were hanging in the trees. It was awful. That experience, it has followed me, and I cannot let it go. I have nightmares and dream about it [...]"

"For months I was absolutely crazy [...] I stooped every time I passed a window. I only did my groceries at night. I wore a beret. I had paranoia and suicidal thoughts".

"Not only the clothes were burned, the flesh on the chest was gone too, so that you could see the ribs. On the left side of the chest a piece of clothes was left the size of a matchbox. The ribbon for his iron cross was sewn to it, and it had not been burned. I can still picture it in my head today."

# Psychological war wounds across time

After World War I, Denmark has been hesitant to participate in military operations. However, more than 30,000 Danish soldiers have been sent on international missions since 1992. Roughly the same number of men from Southern Jutland fought in World War I.

Like the veterans from Southern Jutland, many of today's soldiers have been mentally impaired by traumatic experiences in war. PTSD has replaced the term war neurosis and is now the psychiatric diagnosis most veterans are diagnosed with.

There are many similarities between past and present cases. Across time, the same stories are told about healthy men who is changed by the experiences of war.

Like many veterans of World War I, today's veterans find it difficult overcoming social commitments or managing simple tasks in civilian life. Prolonged and complicated cases are not just a thing of the past. Many present-day claims for compensation for psychological wounds also end with refusals.

## Psychologically disabled war veterans today

- Today, the war neuroses have been replaced by the diagnosis PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder)
- According to a study among 3.000 veterans, one in five suffer from psychological after-effects
- A study among 700 veterans of the War in Afghanistan shows that nearly 14 % had developed strong PTSD symptoms
- In 2017, the Danish government passed a new veteran's package especially aimed at improving the conditions for the PTSD affected
- During the first year, only 2 out of 64 veterans with PTSD had their disorders recognized as a work-related injury