

There has never been a single and unified masculine ideal that has persisted over the centuries. On the contrary, while looking from a historical perspective, it can be concluded that masculinity has always been a category prone to transformation. It has been a reflection of economic, political, social, and cultural changes, which have undergone periodic phases of collapse and transformation. However, the postmodern definition crisis, which dates back to the last century and continues to this day, seems to have resounded the loudest. Ever since researchers began to study masculinity, it has become increasingly clear that masculinity, contrary to popular opinion, is not a monolithic construct.

TRANSFORMATIONS OF MASCULINITY IN THE 20TH CENTURY

For centuries, there have been certain patterns of masculinity dominating specific eras. One of the most prominent was the one fusing hegemony with militarism. We are talking about the idea of a soldier, and earlier a knight or a warrior. The soldier, honourable and loyal to his homeland, is the embodiment of the 'proper' masculinity, while the army, as a largely masculine institution, has significantly influenced the shape of European political and social consciousness since the dawn of time.

The symbolism of the soldier's body and uniform did not lose its relevance in the context of the outbreak of the Great War – the first large-scale conflict which saw a mass mobilisation of soldiers to form them into gigantic, masculine 'machines' taking part in the war that was sometimes justly referred to as a 'meat grinder'. For this reason, the 20th century, even if it was the age of war, was also

the age of the devaluation of military activity in the West and thus the devaluation of the soldier myth. When it became apparent that the male body, previously hidden beneath a tough 'muscle armour' (Klaus Theweleit's words), was 'mutilated', the fundamental belief in a man cast in bronze was called into question. The Polish imagery, however, differs from that of the West – the dominant narrative is one that praises the fighting legionaries, and the war is followed by an apotheosis of heroic death. The Polish vision of the Great War is rather associated with a 'little war' or a 'trooper western' (in the words of literary historian Maria Janion).


The explanation for the above perspective should be sought in the period immediately following the war. At that time, the newly established Second Republic of Poland, which had not previously existed as an independent state,


had to face additional problems; it was systematically dissociating itself from the reality preceding the war. However, this did not change the fact that its future citizens often participated in it as soldiers.

A permanently crippled soldier, unless he returned to the front again, would begin a new life with a prosthetic limb, no longer fulfilling an honourable role in the social consciousness among the privileged. Instead, he would become a half-man, usually placed right next to widows and orphans in the social hierarchy, because his incomplete body implied issues with the basic masculine competencies: power and the ability to fight or work. The war cripple, therefore, lost out to the strong and healthy body, lost the possibility to have a voice, and to participate in political and social life, as he disrupted the established social order.





 Aleksandra Dębińska, MA

 Aleksandra Dębińska, MA
Institute of Literary Studies
Faculty of Humanities
University of Silesia

American soldier wounded in battle during World War I | Photo: US Library of Congress (ID hec.11310), public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

As a result, war cripples began to search for a space in which they could articulate what could not be expressed in public. These attempts resulted in the formation of veterans' groups of an institutional nature. The largest organisation that attempted to legitimise and stabilise the situation of war disabled veterans was the Association of War Disabled Persons of the Republic of Poland (founded in 1919). The Association tried to support veterans with disabilities in various ways: setting up suitable trolley-stalls to make trade easier for them, mediating in labour matters, and helping to obtain allowances. However, the allowances were not sufficient. Invalids were often condemned to poverty, which led to further consequences – the men were forced to beg on the streets, or to steal. The growing resentment of the society led men with disabilities to intensify the tensions between their feelings and

the shape of the official post-war narrative. Therefore, they attempted to adopt a strategy of inscribing themselves into the broad canon of national and historical memory by claiming that, in fact, their battle wounds may also have contributed to the restoration of independence. The abstract concept of 'regaining independence', however, did not refer to individual sacrifice and suffering, which instead was described quite generally – as the sacrifice of 'multitudes of those most unfortunate who sacrificed their health and the integrity of their bodies for the benefit of the Fatherland'. In no way did the dominant narratives in the discourse satisfy the soldiers with disabilities, who felt ignored and unappreciated. It was not uncommon for them to preach anti-war ideas in order to show the destructive nature of war and, in fact, to draw attention to their harm. To this end, they organised marches, dur-

ing which they manifested their beliefs and feelings. Although marginalised, crippled veterans frequently tried to draw the society's attention and raise its awareness. They were aided by certain institutions and cooperatives, and they could also count on the support from artists who, in prose and poetry, constructed figures of veteran heroes trying to face their disabilities, although often with poor results. For the social definition of disability was always associated with a certain social incompetence, which in turn led to the dehumanisation of the crippled men. War cripples were heroes (they proved their masculinity on the battlefield), but in actuality, from the bodily perspective, they were deprived of this masculinity. Their voice had no influence on the shape of the official war narrative and, above all, on the construction of hegemonic and militaristic masculinity in interwar Poland.