“Technology has opened up to us unimaginable possibilities, but in this war it has also given rise to undreamed of horrors. This is no longer a struggle of man against man, but rather has become the exploitation of all the terrifying war materiel that industry and technology have created in this world. Industry and technology quickly and adeptly put themselves in the service of the fatherland in order to create all this war materiel, and now it is also their duty to take on the task of alleviating as much as possible the damages that have been caused by them. Above all, it is important for industry to make the disabled once again capable of work.”

Paul H. Perls, Siemens Factory engineer, 1917

In 1916, Friedrich Syrup, an engineer working in the Prussian industrial inspection office, published a pamphlet outlining the optimal use of labor in Germany’s factories. In this work, he offered guidelines on how to maximize the efficiency of worker movements and best to distribute workers around the factory floor. His goal was clearly to help mitigate the wartime labor crisis that German factory managers were experiencing, but he also wanted to ensure that each worker was placed in a position most suited to his individual needs. What makes Syrup’s publication noteworthy is not its focus on increasing worker efficiency, nor is it unique in its description of how to increase wartime production. By 1916, most belligerent nations in Europe had developed nationwide programs and founded governmental agencies to facilitate the efficient and rational production of war materials. Rather, what makes Syrup’s pamphlet remarkable is that his sugges-

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1 This essay is drawn from my forthcoming book, Recycling the Disabled: Army, Medicine, and Society in WWI Germany (Manchester, forthcoming). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

tions, strategies, and studies were geared not toward optimizing the labor of new factory recruits, but instead were meant as guidelines for employing physically-disabled Germans.

Syrup’s war-time pamphlet, The Welfare for War-Disabled Industrial Workers, was written to instruct factory managers on how best to make use of—even maximize—the “bodily capacity” of disabled soldiers and civilians. Moreover, not only did it focus on how the remaining limbs of amputees or the senses of the blind might best be utilized for optimal industrial production, he also pointed out for which positions a one-legged man or double amputee was ideally suited. He noted the prosthetic devices invented for facilitating this return to the labor force while arguing passionately that nearly every disabled soldier was still capable of earning a living and should be returned to productive economic work. Yet, he added, it was up to the leaders of German industry to hire these men, and he deplored the fact that many factory foremen balked at the idea of hiring the “sickly.” He admonished them that “the war has necessitated that we un-learn things in certain areas.” Part of this un-learning included re-evaluating the immediate benefits versus the potential costs of employing the war-disabled. Hiring the disabled, Syrup argued, was not just patriotic, it was crucial to the national economy.3

The manpower shortage experienced by all belligerents in the First World War is well-documented. As both sides along the Western front dug their trenches and settled into the long war of attrition that has come in many ways to define the military experience of the soldiers in World War I, governments across the continent struggled with how to manage their increasingly valuable (and diminishing) human capital. The total mobilization of soldiers and civilians became key to this wartime organization in Europe. Germany was, of course, no exception.4

The German experience of ‘total war’ and ‘total mobilization’ is increasingly well-researched. In addition to the compulsory military

3 Friedrich Syrup, Die Fürsorge für kriegsverletzte gewerbliche Arbeiter (Düsseldorf, 1916). Friedrich Syrup (1881-1945) would eventually serve as president of the National Employment Bureau [Reichsanstalt für Arbeitsvermittlung] from 1927 to 1939. He also served as Labor Minister during Kurt von Schleicher’s brief chancellorship from December 1932 through January 1933. Under the Nazi regime, Syrup was State Secretary in the Labor Ministry [Staatssekretär im Reichsarbeitsministerium] from 1938 to 1942. No doubt Syrup’s war-time experience with factory and labor management must have contributed to his later career advancement.

4 The classic study is Gerald Feldman, Army, Industry and Labor in Germany, 1914-1918 reprint. (Providence, 2004).