

# DISABLED LEADERS

Part Two: 1296 AD - 1770 AD



Disability Action Research Kollektive

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This zine continues from:  
**Disabled Leaders**  
Part One: *34,000 BC - 1185 AD*



**John the blind of Bohemia (1296-1310)** was also King of Poland and spent much of his time involved in international politics in Luxembourg. He became almost completely blind at age 40 from ophthalmia. At the age of 50, while fighting the English during the Hundred Years' War, he said, "I will not flee, take me to the place where the noise of the battle is the loudest. The Lord will be with us. Nothing to fear. Just take good care of my son."

He asked his men to bring him to the front of the battle so he could strike the enemy with his sword. His men tied their horses together to forge ahead as a single unit so they didn't lose him. They fought hard but ended up so far forward that they were all killed.



**Timur the Lame** (1336–1405), also known as Tamerlane, was a Turco-Mongol conqueror who built an empire spanning Persia, Central Asia, and parts of India. He had a debilitating hip injury and two fingers missing from his right hand, likely caused by childhood illness or battle wounds. Timur saw himself as the heir to Genghis Khan and used both warfare and diplomacy to expand his rule through brutal military campaigns, killing an estimated 17 million people (5% of the global population at the time). In one siege, he expected each soldier to bring him two enemy heads. Though infamous for his destruction, he was also a patron of the arts and architecture, transforming Samarkand into a cultural centre. He once proclaimed: “The world is held by the sword.”



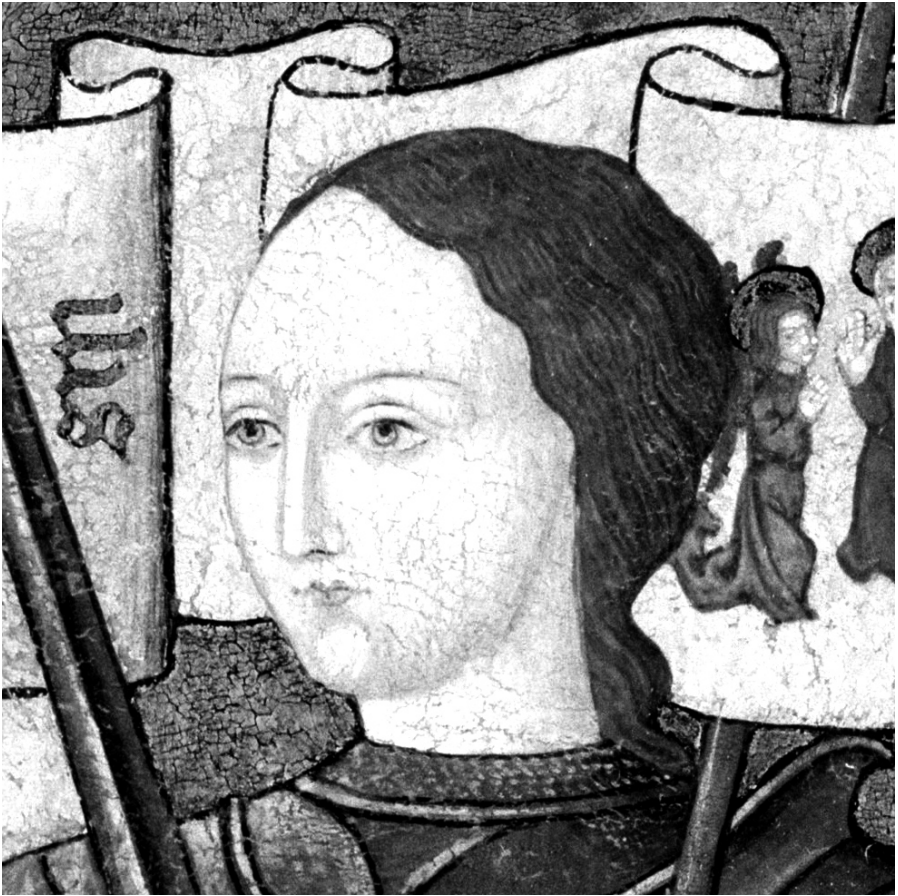


**Lidwina of Schiedam** (1380-1433) was a Dutch woman who became disabled after breaking her rib in an ice skating accident as a teenager. She became a 'mystic', advising people (particularly about healthcare), and dedicated herself to a life of prayer. She was eventually canonised in 1890. Lots of disabled saints were described as grateful for their impairments, and Lidwina did see her pain as important to her religious experiences. But she also sometimes expressed sadness for not being able to play outside like other girls. She was also mischievous. Once, she asked a priest to give her some fat, so she could apply a dressing to an ulcer, but he refused. In response, she commanded a cat to eat up the fat, and the cat promptly did!



**Saint Roch** (1348 - 1376) was a Majorcan Catholic ascetic who was canonized as the patron saint of disabled people, bachelors, the falsely accused, and dogs. His mother was said to be infertile and so his birth was seen as a miracle. He also had a cross shaped birthmark on his chest. He gave up a governorship, joined the church and gave his family money to the poor when his parents died. Roch worked in hospitals for the sick and is said to have performed miraculous healings.

He became ill himself and began living in the forest, a nobleman's dog would bring him bread and eventually lead its owner to rescue Roch. His uncle had him accused of being a spy and sent to prison where he eventually died.



**Joan of Arc (1412–1431)** was a French military leader who was victorious over the English during the Hundred Years' War. She may have had epilepsy, migraines, or another neurological condition that caused her reported voices and visions. As a 16-year-old peasant during a time when women were not allowed in warfare, she convinced the authorities to let her meet with King Charles VII and let her lead his armies. She liberated France, claiming divine visions guided her.

Captured by the Burgundians and handed over to the English, she was tried for heresy and cross-dressing and burned at the stake at 19. Centuries later, she was canonised as a saint. She declared, "All battles are first won or lost, in the mind"



**Henry VI** of England became king in 1422 when he was only nine months old. During his reign, England began to lose the Hundred Years' War with France which had started in 1337. In August 1453 Henry had a severe episode of mental illness and was unable to rule. During this time his son, Edward, was born, but he was unable to recognise him. As a result of Henry's illness, England descended into civil war, with his faction (known as the 'Lancastrians') headed by his queen, Margaret of Anjou and the other faction (known as the 'Yorkists') led by the duke of York. Henry recovered in December of 1454, but his side eventually lost the 'Wars of the Roses'. Henry was captured in 1471 and probably murdered a few weeks later.



**Wallpaya** (1427-1527) was the uncle and regent of Wayna Qhapaq, who became the leader of the Inka Empire (Tawantisuyu) in around 1493. Before becoming regent, Wallpaya was the Governor of Qusqu (Cuzco), the capital of Tawantisuyu. Some Spanish chroniclers, writing in the late 1500s, said that Wallpaya was a k'umu, someone with kyphosis. According to Inka chronicler Guamán Poma, writing in 1615, k'umukuna were part of the hank'akuna, a life stage in Inka society for people of all ages with various disabilities. Hank'akuna worked however they could, often serving the Empire in elite or spiritual roles. Wallpaya was executed after his failed coup against Wayna Qhapaq. Whilst such political machinations are common across history, it is notable that Wallpaya may have had his prestigious role in part because he was disabled, not in spite of it.



**Richard III (1452-1485)** became king of England in a dramatic way, after his brother, Edward IV, died in 1483. Edward had two sons, but Richard instead had himself crowned king, and his nephews disappeared in mysterious circumstances. He was killed at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485 by the forces of Henry Tudor (Henry VII, father of Henry VIII). Richard was often described as having a “hunchback”, particularly in William Shakespeare’s play *Richard III*. But some historians argued that the description was made up by his enemies. However, when archaeologists working with Philippa Langley discovered Richard buried underneath a car park in Leicester in 2012, his skeleton indeed showed he had scoliosis. Scoliosis is a condition where the spine is curved.



**Gottfried Berlichingen von Hornberg (1480-1562)**, also known as Götz of the Iron Hand, was an Imperial Knight, a mercenary and poet. He lost his hand to cannon fire and had two prosthetics made; one was an iron spike and another had articulated fingers which could grip objects like reins, shields, or quills. Götz continued to be actively involved in many battles for another 41 years. Supposedly against his will he once led a German peasants uprising, but found them difficult to control and abandoned them. He wrote an autobiography and has had plays written about his life by Goethe, Sartre and Arden. When invited to surrender by an enemy general he responded with "He can lick my ass!" which became a popular phrase.



**Henry VIII** of England (1491-1547), probably England's most famous king, was injured in his leg (and possibly also his head) in a jousting accident at the age of 44. Henry also experienced gout and painful chronic ulcers. As a result, he sometimes used a wheelchair or a walking stick, and used a hoist and pulley system to get upstairs. Henry ruled England until his death in 1547, after an eventful reign including his famous six marriages. Henry also changed the religion of the kingdom, setting up the 'Church of England', which had huge implications for England and elsewhere. Three of his children ruled after him: Edward, Mary, and Elizabeth. Mary, who ruled from 1553 to 1558 experienced chronic health conditions as well.





**James I** (1566-1625) of England and Ireland, was also known as James the VI of Scotland, advocated unifying the different parliaments to form Great Britain. James sponsored the translation of The Bible into English, known as the King James version. He was a prolific writer, his theological book "Daemonologie" influenced Shakespeare's representation of witches in Macbeth. During his reign the colonisation of America began and Guy Fawkes was involved in the gunpowder plot to blow up parliament. James learned to walk at age five and as an adult had an unusual gait, couldn't stand for long and had people on each side to help him walk. He enjoyed hunting but had to be tied to his saddle. He once said "If I were not a king, I would be a university man."



**Philip II** of Spain (1527-1598) united Portugal and Spain. He began the Spanish Golden Age, having territories on every continent known to Europeans at the time. Philip was a leading power in the Catholic Counter-Reformation, using the Spanish Inquisition to violently suppress Protestantism. While there was an influx of silver and gold from the Americas, his reign was beset with expensive wars, mounting debts, and internal revolts. In his later years he had severe gout and developed a wheeled throne. The wheelchair had castor wheels that would have needed to be pushed by another person, but the adjustable back and foot rest was able to lie entirely flat. He once said "I would rather lose all my lands and a hundred lives than be king over heretics."



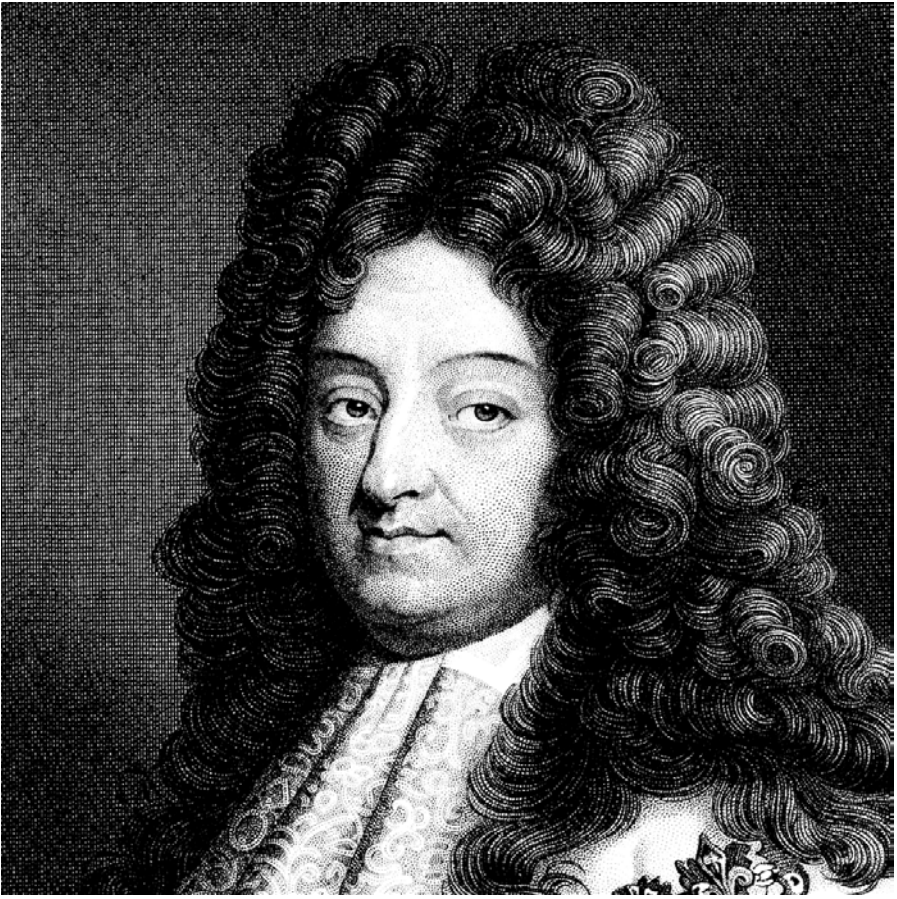
**Thomas Fairfax (1612-1671)** was a major figure in the English Civil War as a military leader for the anti-monarchists. Fairfax was a moderate, choosing not to participate in Charles I's trial and execution. Like other wealthy army generals, he was unsupportive of the proto-communist groups that sprung up at the time, suppressing both the Levellers and the Diggers. He is also known for saving York Minster from destruction during the war, now the oldest stained glass in the country. As a young man, he fell ill, and had flare-ups for the rest of his life. War wounds, kidney stones and gout reduced his mobility in his 50s, and he began using a wheelchair. He once said "I now believe that all crowns corrupt those who wear them"



**Charles I** of England (1600-1649) tried to enforce religious conformity which led to the English Civil War. He was also unpopular because he believed in the divine right of kings and attempted to levy taxes without parliamentary consent. He was defeated and refused to negotiate becoming a constitutional monarch. Charles was subsequently tried for treason and executed. His death led to the temporary abolition of the monarchy and the reign of Oliver Cromwell. Charles learned to walk independently at age seven, he had “weak legs and ankles” like his father, and wore splints and reinforced boots. He also had macroglossia, which is an enlarged tongue, which affected his ability to speak, eat, and drink. He once said “Democracy is the power of equal votes for unequal minds”.



**Charles II** of Spain (1661-1700) is one of the better known disabled monarchs. He spent lots of time hunting, and was involved in negotiations with diplomats. Modern scholars contend his disabilities may have been exaggerated. Spain was declining during his rule; the Hapsburgs wanted to keep their power and possessions consolidated within the family which ultimately led to sixteen generations of inbreeding and the end of their dynasty. Some of Charles's health problems included a "Habsburg jaw", which is when the lower jaw is too far forward, making chewing and speech difficult. He also had an enlarged tongue, restricted growth, paranoia, hallucinations and was infertile. The infertility was a significant political issue as he was unable to produce children to continue the royal line.



**Louis XIV** of France (1638-1715) had the longest reign of any monarch in history. He built France into a dominant military power, waging war, and expanding territories. He also supported artists and made France a cultural centre, popularising their style of art and architecture. Louis ruled as an absolute monarch, consolidating power from the nobility, taxing the aristocracy, and ending the tolerance for Protestants. Smallpox and measles left him with facial scars and lifelong health problems. Louis had frequent intestinal and urinary tract infections, chronic diarrhea, and recurring fevers. Later in life he developed rheumatism and gout, which impaired his mobility, and he eventually died of senile gangrene. He had many frequent medical treatments throughout his life including bleedings and enemas. He once said "It is legal because I wish it."



**Stephen Hopkins (1707-1785)** was a revolutionary, civil servant and founding father of America. He had cerebral palsy and when he signed the Declaration of Independence he said “My hand trembles, but my heart does not.” He ran an ironworks that produced cannons during the Revolutionary War. When he was governor of Rhode Island he banned the importation of slaves and passed a law saying anyone born there could not ever be enslaved.

He once wrote “Liberty is the greatest blessing that men enjoy, and slavery the heaviest curse that human nature is capable of;” However, despite pressure from his religious community, he failed to allow all of the people he held as slaves to be free during his life.



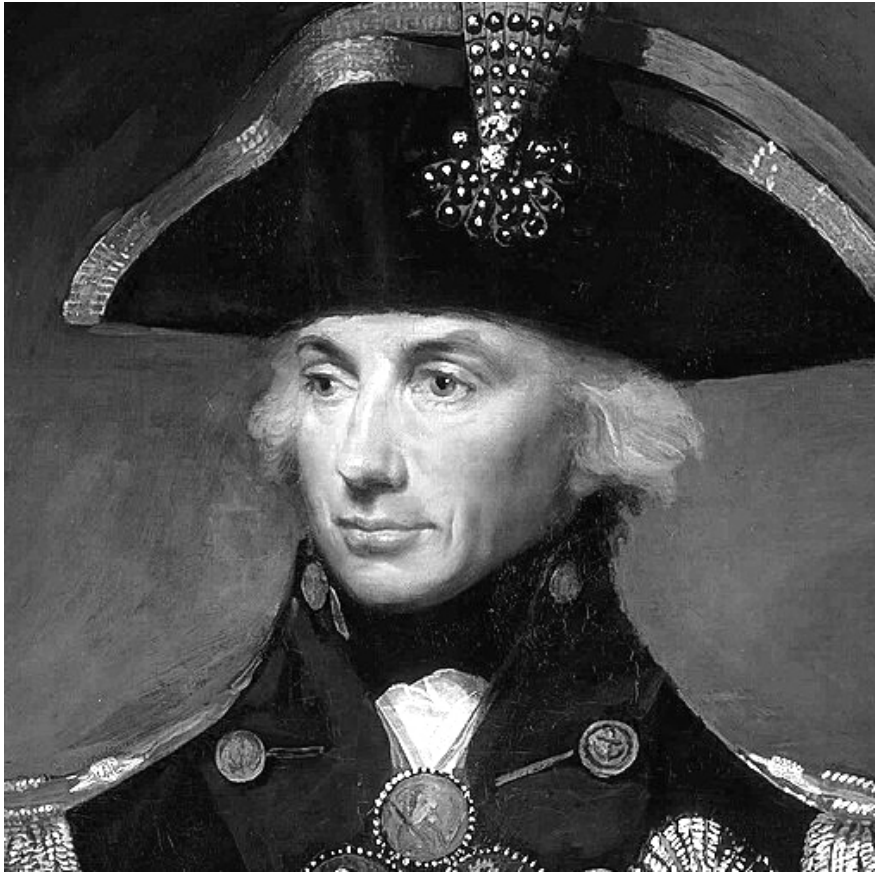
**Empress Elisabeth Christine Brunswick Wolfenbuttel (1691-1750)** was a Holy Roman Empress and Queen of Hungary and Bohemia. She was an excellent shot, contributed to charities, helped immigrants, and introduced silk cultivation to Prussia. She and her ladies-in-waiting would sometimes dress up as Amazons while hunting or playing billiards. She had depression, insomnia, and had difficulty breathing. Elisabeth was subjected to various 'treatments' to encourage her to produce a male heir. Some of these included a diet of rich foods, drinking large amounts of alcohol, and decorating her bedchamber with erotic imagery of male beauty. As a consequence of the rich diet, her weight increased to the point where she was unable to walk and began using a hoist to transfer. Her plushly upholstered wheelchair may be one of the most beautiful and elegant ever made.







**George III (1738-1820)** was king of England and Ireland, and created the United Kingdom. He was the first British king to study the natural sciences and was actively involved in modernising agriculture and industry. During his reign the American colonies were lost but various other military campaigns in Europe were successful. George likely had severe bipolar disorder with mania. He experienced periods of extreme agitation, insomnia, rapid and incoherent speech, inappropriate behavior, abdominal pain, vomiting and fever. His joints would hurt so much that couldn't walk without a stick. During one episode he demanded to be wheeled around the house, and another time stole and burned somebody's wig. Some of his 'treatments' involved wearing a straight jacket and being bound to a bed.



**Horatio Nelson (1758–1805)** was a British naval hero who secured victory at the Battle of Trafalgar but suffered lifelong injuries. He had malaria as a youth and lost sight in one eye in 1794 and his right arm in 1797. He continued to command fleets of ships. In one battle, he ignored a signal to retreat, mockingly miming putting the telescope to his blind eye and saying he didn't see it. His disobedience led to a victory, capturing or destroying 17 of 18 enemy ships.

His final triumph at Trafalgar secured British naval dominance, though he was fatally shot in battle. He once said "I could not tread these perilous paths in safety, if I did not keep a saving sense of humor."



**Henry William Paget (1768-1854)** was the 1st Marquess of Anglesey, a soldier and a politician. He was involved in many battles but is most famous for a decisive cavalry charge at the Battle of Waterloo, which marked the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Near the end of the battle he lost a leg to cannon fire, while it was being amputated without anesthesia, he smiled and said “I have had a pretty long run. I have been a beau these 47 years and it would not be fair to cut the young men out any longer.” He had an innovative new artificial leg constructed which included a hinged knee and ankle, a design which became known as an “Anglesey leg”. He continued riding and being in active military service, rising to field marshal, Master-General and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland.



**Georges Couthon** (1755–1794) was a French revolutionary and key figure in the Reign of Terror, serving on the Committee of Public Safety alongside Robespierre. He had a progressive neurological disease, possibly polio, which left him paralysed from the waist down. Unable to walk, he used a custom-built wheelchair. He was carried to the National Convention, where he advocated for radical Jacobin policies. Georges played a decisive role in shaping revolutionary France before being executed during the Thermidorian Reaction. He has a mixed legacy as he was a champion of revolutionary ideals and a key figure in accelerating the Terror, which oversaw mass executions. Regarding his work to strip accused of legal counsel, he said “The guilty have no such right and the innocents do not need any.”



**Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821)** was a French military general and statesman. He rose to power during the French Revolution, became known as one of the greatest military commanders of all time and eventually crowned himself Emperor. He established universal education and his legal codes influenced legal systems worldwide. The Napoleonic code involved eliminating feudal and royal privileges, introducing equality before the law, and secular authority and property rights. Napoleon had seizures, impotence, and recurrent respiratory and stomach problems, which may have been caused by syphilis. Some have speculated he may have been autistic due to his impressive memory, intense focus and hypersensitivity to touch. He once said "If we could read the past histories of all our enemies we would disregard all hostility for them."



**Andrew Whiston (1770-1826)** was known as the 'King of the Beggars' after succeeding Billy Waters. He was born in Dundee, but spent most of his life in London, where he was somewhat of a celebrity, with his exploits frequently making the newspapers. He had achondroplasia and paraplegia, and used crutches to push his cart. He was said to have an "irascible disposition", considerable physical strength, and was able to drink 30 glasses of gin in a single sitting. Police described him as a "great nuisance" as "He was very prone to insult females as they passed, using towards them some of the lowest and most indecent expressions of which the English language was capable." After his death his landlord tried to sell his body but police intervened to give him a proper burial and defended his body from being stolen by resurrectionists.

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