

FI??? The Memory of the First World War, 1919–1931

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Keywords

Maginot Line, Verdun; veterans associations; war memorials

Q. What impact did the First World War have upon France in terms of the numbers killed and wounded?

A. Though France emerged victorious from the First World War, the scale of her casualties, proportionally the heaviest of any of the Western belligerents, made this, in one very central respect, a largely Pyrrhic victory: of 8 million soldiers mobilized, almost 1.4 million were killed, roughly double that number were wounded, of whom 300,000 suffered serious and permanent degrees of incapacity and mutilation (the *gueules cassées*). In the immediate aftermath of war, and in overall population terms, these losses were partly offset by the return to France of Alsace and the Mosellan Lorraine, annexed by Germany in 1871. The impact on the labour force was attenuated to some extent by immigration, by the peculiarly French balance between primary, secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy, and by the wartime modernization and relocation of key industries; once post-war inflation was brought under control, the mid to late 1920s were a period of prosperity. However, France's population had been in long-standing decline, discernible for two or three decades before 1914, and the loss of a significant element of the active male population accentuated the demographic deficit, leading by the mid-1930s to the dismally celebrated *années creuses* when more French citizens were dying than being born. War losses also made French society older and less dynamic, and accentuated the defensive military psychology which acquired concrete expression in the Maginot Line, ultimately rendered irrelevant by new developments in warfare. On the eve of the Second World War, France's population of 42 million was dwarfed by Germany's 70 million. State family allowances were introduced by the Daladier government in 1939 and family policy was significantly reinforced by the reactionary wartime Vichy regime. Demographic *hantise* continued to make its effects felt on collective French psychology, and influenced social policy, into the post-Second World War period.

Q. How did French society come to terms with these losses?

A. At the collective level, French society dealt with its war losses in a number of ways, symbolic and practical. Victory had been secured, and France, in the person of allied Commander-in-Chief Marshal Foch, had been a key member of the allied coalition, with a major voice at the Versailles Peace Talks. The losses, though grievously high, were the price of victory. Providing the nation ensured that the fruits of victory were not lost, and that Germany could never again embark on aggressive conquest, the debt of honour to the fallen would be respected and their achievement perpetuated. A national focus for remembrance was created with the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Arc de Triomphe in 1920, and the establishment in 1922 of the annual Armistice Day observance on 11 November. The flame above the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, rekindled every day, was first lit on 11 November 1923. Over 36,000 war memorials were erected in towns and villages in every *département* in France and in parts of her colonial territories. Further 'closure' was achieved with the reconstruction of the ten devastated battlefield departments along France's north-eastern and north-western borders, and the creation of four national necropolises (military cemeteries) in each of the main sectors of the front: at Notre-Dame de la Lorette (Pas-de-Calais), Dormans (Marne), Douaumont (Meuse, near Verdun), and Hartmannswillerkopf (Bas-Rhin, in

Alsace). The French State paid over a million widows' pensions and over 2 million invalidity pensions, and made 6 million fatherless children *pupilles de la Nation*. Housing for the majority of the population continued to be cheap, if sub-standard – a rent freeze decreed in Paris and larger cities at the beginning of hostilities helped with the cost of living but offered little incentive to renew the housing stock. There is some evidence of a return to religious belief under the impetus of the war and near universal loss. The wartime *union sacrée* (sacred union), though to some extent exaggerated for propaganda purposes, helped to dispel some of the more extreme politico-religious antagonisms of the pre-war period, marked by deeply divisive episodes such as the Dreyfus Affair. The war experience found expression in major literary works by ex-servicemen authors such as Barbusse, Dorgelès, Duhamel, and Giono, which contributed to the dissemination and distillation of war-related themes and images, though their general social, cathartic influence cannot be measured directly. In the more popular medium of cinema, Abel Gance's challenging silent *J'Accuse!* (1919) tapped into an anti-war current which re-surfaced almost two decades later in Jean Renoir's memorable *La Grande Illusion* (1937).

Q. How did ordinary French people cope with their grief?

A. War reverses the natural order, insofar as parents and grandparents have to grieve their children and an older generation is called upon, paradoxically, to remember a younger one. What differentiated the First World War from previous conflicts such as the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871 was the almost industrial scale of the four-year carnage; and in a regime which based its armed forces policy on universal male conscription, also a vector of nationhood and Republican identity, its impact on the lives of countless ordinary families was inescapable and profound. How, and how well, they coped with grief are difficult to answer meaningfully. It should be remembered that for some individuals and families, grieving began with the first casualties in August 1914 and continued each year for the duration of hostilities. The context in which mourning took place, the prolongation of the hostilities and the intermittent periods of doubt and self-interrogation – was victory possible? could anything justify the sacrifice, individual or collective? – impacted on the individual's ability to deal with grief. By the same token, some mourning occurred after the war, as former soldiers died of war-related injuries or conditions, including the long-term effects of gassing.

Apart from documented cases involving inconsolable loss leading to denial, depression and suicide, and the fragmentary evidence available randomly from correspondence, it must be assumed that in France as elsewhere, people coped with the loss privately, in a variety of family, social, or religiously inflected ways; no social stratum, political group and or religious creed was untouched. Belief, if not in some divinely ordained plan which the very enormity of events seemed to confound, at least in the promise of individual salvation, doubtless helped many of the bereft as, conversely but more visibly, it helped those whose prayers for loved ones were answered: many French churches have fading plaques bearing the words '1914–1918. Vœux exaucés'. More work remains to be done on the extent to which the informal support systems of gender – mothers, grandmothers, aunts, godmothers, etc. – helped to mediate family grieving, much of which, in the typically more repressed society of the time, was not publicly articulated. In the Beauce, a woman whose husband and three sons were killed, died of grief. The sister of a combatant killed herself on her brother's grave. A family in Brittany lost three of their eight sons; another three were seriously wounded, and a son-in-law posted 'missing'. Similar losses were recorded in Britain and Germany. The daily agony of families who had several sons in uniform, and the human tragedy, if not the contemporary narrative, behind Spielberg's film about the Second World War, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), were familiar to the communities of 1914–1918.

The armistice and subsequent peace settlement ushered in a new phase in public as well as personal mourning by codifying and ritualizing forms of national remembrance mentioned earlier.

A law passed on 31 July 1920 authorized the state-funded return of the bodies for local burial; some 300,000 were exhumed from battlefield graves and reinterred in towns and villages. These processes were difficult for the authorities as well as the families: the problem of locating and identifying the remains was the subject matter of Bertrand Tavernier's celebrated 1989 film *La vie et rien d'autre*. However, they undoubtedly helped many to achieve a degree of 'closure' denied to those whose dead were unidentifiable, or never found, or the families of the 20,000 men who died in captivity in Germany. Whatever the circumstances, the sense of bereavement was almost universal. A war memorial at Castelnau-Fayrac (Dordogne) shows an elderly couple sitting on either side of the empty *foyer* whose duality of meaning (hearth = metonymically, home) emphasizes the absence already conveyed in visual and spatial terms.

Q. What role did war memorials play in helping people face up to bereavement?

A. War memorials (*monuments aux morts*) played a number of important complementary roles. They enabled an identification to take place between the local and the national community, which constituted the over-arching justification for the sacrifice of the 'enfants de la commune morts pour la France' or 'pour la patrie' (these memorial dedications were also legally sanctioned terms) or 'tombés au champ d'honneur'. In the many cases where it proved impossible to return the bodies to families for burial in the local cemetery (French practice differed in this respect from British, which was to bury the dead where they fell), some memorials offered a particularly significant locus and focus for grieving. Since they were raised by local public subscription, with a pro rata state contribution, they enabled all members of the community, whether they had lost loved ones or not, to contribute to the process of commemoration. And as they were usually commissioned and erected by the local council (*conseil municipal*), headed by the mayor, they had a significant civic dimension which sometimes involved an element of rivalry with neighbouring communities regarding the size and type of memorial chosen, the sobriety or extravagance of the motifs, or the prestige of the artist.

The local war memorial offered a public commemorative space which quickly became the site of the annual Armistice Day anniversaries on 11 November (the majority were inaugurated in the period 1919–1924, though some much later). The whole community gathered on these occasions, led by veterans (*anciens combattants*) association members and schoolchildren. Some memorials were located near the local primary school, as part of the continuity of remembrance and civic duty which the Republic sought to impart to its future citizens. The injunction to 'remember' is often encapsulated in memorial form, with a soldier and child (Fig. 1), or a mother and child (Fig. 2) or children laying flowers on a father's grave. In some communities, religious services preceded the armistice celebration, and, depending on the location of the memorial, with processions from the church or the *mairie* (town hall). The presence of an important invited political or military figure at the inauguration ceremony reinforced the national significance of the occasion, as did speeches linking the war to examples of France's heroic past, from Joan of Arc in the fifteenth century to Valmy in 1792. In addition to standard forms of dedication, many memorials had a couplet from France's national (and Republican) poet Victor Hugo (1802–1885) originally written to celebrate the revolutionaries of 1830.

Statistically the most common, though for the student of iconography the least interesting, memorial type was the stone stela or obelisk. Depending on location, in the cemetery or in a main square, park or thoroughfare, and on additional ornamentation, memorials can be considered funerary or patriotic, religious or civic. Serially produced attributes such as the Gallic cockerel, the national flag, or heroically advancing *poilus*, sometimes trampling a German spiked helmet underfoot, celebrated Victory. Many of these memorials incorporated allegorical figures symbolizing Victory, the Republic, France, Liberty, but realistic statuary is also common – a grieving *pleureuse* (Fig. 3) or Mater dolorosa, a dead or dying soldier – and some combined both

the realistic and the allegorical (Fig. 2). Some represent the soldier with an interceding or pieta-like figure, though under the secular legislation of 1905 which separated Church and State, the use of explicitly religious iconography was not permitted on monuments erected in 'public' space. Some memorials celebrated freedom and the reassertion of the rule of law, identified with the republican, democratic and civilizing traditions of France compared with Wilhelmine Germany which in fact, in word and in popular mythology, was portrayed as a lawless aggressor. In the same thematic though a different iconographical register, some memorials present the military figure in a resolute but defensive posture ('ils ne passeront pas'), protecting family and home. Curiously, however, except in the liberated territories themselves, memorials make comparatively little reference to the recovery of Alsace-Lorraine, which had been an ostensible, though effectively rather remote, French war aim. In most cases, the reality of war is sanitized, the dead idealized, and only a very few ally grief to anger about the war, or express overtly anti-militarist or pacifist sentiments. In such cases, in addition to the local controversies to which this choice sometimes gave rise, historians have questioned the extent to which these memorials facilitated the grieving and healing process.

Q. Why did Verdun become a focus of pilgrimage for veterans and families who had lost loved ones?

A. In the litany of 1914–1918 battlefield names and dates on many French memorials – the Marne, the Yser, the Argonne, Champagne, the Vosges, Le Chemin des Dames – Verdun occupies a pivotal position (1916) and a distinctively symbolic one. Its ten-month duration accounted for 377,000 French casualties, of whom 162,000 were killed (German losses were 337,000, of whom 143,000 were killed). Although other engagements were more murderous, including the calamitous offensive on Le Chemin des Dames between Reims and Soissons in April 1917, and the final victorious offensive of 1918, it is Verdun that has passed into French folk memory, popular culture, and indeed the language itself. For the British army, the Battle of the Somme in 1916 (200,000 casualties) represents an approximate symbolic human and moral equivalent to Verdun. That it became a commemorative focus for veterans associations and families was very largely due to the length and nature of the battle and the resources committed to it, and these in turn are related to the explanations, real, partial or putative, that were offered at the time or have since been adduced for its strategic or symbolic importance.

Though only a *sous-préfecture* (sub-prefecture) in 1914, Verdun had significant historical and cultural credentials. It was one of three historic bishoprics (Metz, Toul, Verdun) incorporated into France in the sixteenth century and fortified by Vauban as part of her eastern frontier defences. Following the disastrous loss of Metz, together with Alsace-Lorraine, in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871), Toul and Verdun were important garrisons and defensive strong points with further fortifications, including the subsequently celebrated fort Douaumont, though for reasons which have been the subject of much historical comment, Verdun's armament had been considerably reduced on the eve of the First World War. That, more remotely, Verdun was the site of the treaty of 843 which established the approximate geographical contours of western Europe's future nation-states, has also been deemed significant by some historians, though this may have loomed larger in German than in French calculations and was probably unknown to the majority of the French combatants and the wider civilian population.

Of more immediate military significance was the fact that Verdun, by its geography and topography, constituted an obvious salient in the front line which it made sense for the German commanders to try to reduce, if necessary by committing significant resources to it (the idea of using Verdun to 'bleed the French army dry' may have been a retrospective rationalization). The French decision, after an initial series of reversals, to hold Verdun at all costs, the successive attacks and counter-attacks in which Douaumont changed hands, and near-constant artillery

bombardment (one shell on every square centimetre), earned it the nickname 'l'enfer [Hell] de Verdun'. Under the system devised by the sector commander, General, subsequently Marshal, Philippe Pétain, 3,500 trucks travelled round the clock, seven days a week, up the only access road, subsequently known as the 'voie sacrée' to keep the garrison supplied and units regularly reinforced and relieved; by some estimates, 15,000 tons of supplies and 90,000 men were transported each week. Almost every regiment in the French army, apart from those engaged elsewhere in the European theatre (the Balkans), and troops from every major town and city from Arras to Montpellier and Lorient to Chambéry, as well as colonial units from Senegal and Algeria, served at Verdun. When Douaumont was definitively re-taken, the battle represented a moral as well as a military victory to which almost every French family had contributed and in which many had paid a blood sacrifice. For those who had lost loved ones, for those whose final resting place might never be known, and for those who had fought and survived, Verdun quickly became the obvious place of pilgrimage. Dominating the landscape, the submarine-like 'ossuary' at Douaumont, the most celebrated of the four national necropolises erected after the war, was inaugurated in 1932. It houses the unidentified remains of over 130,000 French and German dead and in the summer of 1936 was the site of a brief but poignant ceremony in which French, German and Italian veterans swore publicly to work for peace and reconciliation. Half a century and another war later, in September 1984, a French President and a German Chancellor shook hands symbolically on the site of the battlefield thereby helping to close a major chapter in twentieth-century European history.

Q. How was the memory of the First World War used by different political groups in France?

A. When the war ended in November 1918, there was a widespread desire and perhaps indeed expectation in France and in Britain that, whatever the legitimacy of the settlement imposed on Germany, 1914–1918 should be the 'war to end all wars' or 'la der des der' (from *dernière*, last). Given the universality of loss which touched all social classes and all political formations (personalities as different as the right-wing general De Castelnau and the centrist Senator and future President Paul Doumer each lost four sons), such feelings transcended the purely political. With some 3 million members, the veterans associations were a powerful lobby with genuinely mass appeal; both profoundly patriotic – they had secured victory – and hopeful that peace would prevail, it was they who forced the government to accept the anniversary of 11 November as a day of remembrance, not nationalist triumphalism. In the immediate post-war 'khaki' election of 1919, the 'Chambre bleu horizon' contained not only a nationalist majority but also a substantial representation of former soldiers, so it was felt that ex-servicemen's views and values would be given a voice in the affairs of state and public policy. However, it proved impossible to maintain the wartime 'sacred union' and political divisions, exacerbated by the perceived new threat of Soviet communism, reasserted themselves between the broadly right-wing 'Bloc National' and the 'Cartel des gauches'. Some strands of opinion were amenable to political groups which sought to exploit the memory of war either towards making Germany pay (similar opinion was expressed in Britain), making France so impregnable that no future German attack would be contemplated (the Maginot Line) or to propound policies of reconciliation which would render war unnecessary. Pacifist positions were adopted by the influential primary schoolteachers federation, the Syndicat National des Instituteurs, 30,000 of whom gave their lives in the conflict, and by some women's organizations, including the Association des Veuves et des Orphelins de Guerre. As Frenchwomen were still disenfranchised, their role in the voluntary arena offered an important forum for the articulation of alternative points of view. After the abortive French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923–1924, French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand, the 'pilgrim of peace', pursued a strategy of reconciliation with Germany under the aegis of the League of Nations. Briand's death in 1932 marked a symbolic moment in the evolution towards further conflict less than a decade later.

Despite their distrust of politics and politicians, the veterans associations also divided partly along political lines, and these divisions would grow as the political climate deteriorated in the 1930s.

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Figures attached.

Fig 1 = Lelude

Fig 2 = Grammat

Fig 3 = Bretonne



Photo: SURPA



Photo: SURPA