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Bereavement and Mourning, Commemoration and Cult of the Fallen (France)

By [Rémi Dalisson](#) and [Elise Julien](#)

War victims left a huge vacuum both for their kin and society, which showed signs of weakening. While private bereavement was centered on deep personal grief, the state organized a public cult of the dead to supervise, channel and shape public mourning. As such, France erected unifying national symbols aimed at consoling the bereaved and helped organize a unifying cult of the dead. The relatively apolitical piety of the country's cenotaphs and the tomb of the Unknown Soldier are important examples of this, although they have their limits.

Table of Contents

[1 Bereavement and Mourning](#)

[1.1 Polymorphic Bereavement](#)

[1.2 Private and public mourning: accommodating bereavement and ways of mourning](#)

[2 Commemoration and the Cult of the Fallen](#)

[2.1 The organization of necropolises at the front](#)

[2.2 The significance of war memorials](#)

[2.3 11 November and its rituals](#)

[2.4 The role of the Unknown Soldier](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

Bereavement and Mourning

Talking about war mourning is difficult since mourning, like death and loss, comes in many shapes and forms. While grief and sadness are intrinsic to mass bereavement, many kinds of mourning exist, both private and public – especially in [France](#) where the state is so present. Thus, cultural, political and religious differences are not unique to countries; they also linger in each of us, based on regional affiliation, social class and cultural practices.

Polymorphic Bereavement

In France, the war [killed](#) about 900 soldiers a day over a period of fifty-one months, i.e. roughly 1.4 million people – plus some 300,000 civilians, and more to [Spanish flu](#). Little was known about these civilian deaths: hostages, volunteer nurses, civilians living close to the front who were either collateral damage or specifically fell under attack by enemy forces. On all fronts (the [Eastern](#) and [Western](#) fronts), the [government](#) and even family members were often oblivious to the dead, except for [nurses](#) who became a new archetype of the sacrificial female figure. Could civilian, not military, victims of war also be heroes? For their families, mourning was a strictly private matter and they received very little support from the French government for their grief.

The soldiers killed, and part of the civilian casualties, were men, – husbands and comrades, brothers, fathers, grandfathers and fiancés – and their premature deaths (one third of them were eighteen to twenty-seven year-olds) impacted the regular order of generations. Over 1 million parents lost their sons in the war and about 3 million next of kin were directly affected by a death. The destruction of the workforce (10.5 percent) upset social relations, particularly given the [rural](#) nature of France (farmers accounted for 42 percent of the losses); the subsequent birth deficit is estimated at 1.3 million children. 17 percent of recruits (28 percent of soldiers) were killed, including over 22 percent of officers and 25 percent of infantrymen.

Death in World War I (WWI) was quite unlike previous wars: three-quarters of deaths were caused by [artillery](#) which dismembered, exploded and buried bodies. Many bodies were never found and countless others were unidentifiable. Nearly half the dead could not be identified by their families: 260,000 bodies were not retrieved and 200,000 could not be identified when their identity bracelets proved inefficient.^[1]

French authorities wanted to gather the graves in “clustered necropolises” and refused access to the devastated areas to families seeking to retrieve the bodies of their kin from the battlefield graves.^[2] Under pressure from families, the government was forced to back down and the law of 31 July 1920 finally allowed for the transfer of bodies from the war-zone. To keep control of the operations and treat all families equally, the government organized and funded the transfer of soldiers’ bodies. A department responsible for returning bodies (the *Service de restitution des corps*) was as such created within the registry office of the Ministry of Pensions. From 1922 onwards, 240,000 coffins were returned to family graves, which represented one-third of identified bodies; this was a lot compared to other nations.^[3] Nearly half of the dead had no grave other than the ossuaries.

But the vacuum created by identified soldiers killed on the battlefield existed alongside another created by unknown soldiers, who represented one-fifth of all losses. The bodies of these men could never be returned and no information was available about them. This reality further exacerbated grief and deeply affected the mourning process. These unidentifiable bodies caused thousands of widows to wander the battlefields looking for evidence of their husbands or fiancés, to the point of madly exhuming bodies they thought they recognized. These missing soldiers caused unbearable waiting for families that began when news stopped coming from the front and ended only when the fateful official declaration of death arrived. The types of losses in WWI were as numerous as they were traumatizing and raised the question of burying and acknowledging the dead, two steps essential to both private and public mourning.

Private and public mourning: accommodating bereavement and ways of mourning

The great number of war dead left 600,000 widows and nearly 1 million orphans. If we include the various mourning circles (from soldiers to their army comrades, friends and extended family), over two-thirds of the French population in 1919 was affected by a loss, sometimes even by several losses. Mass mourning tended to take different forms and was shaped by the type of loss, social class and families.

At the beginning of the war, private mourning overtook the country. Each family adapted to its grief and, for every soldier killed, over ten next of kin grieved. We can as such refer to “grieving communities” (Jay Winter) comprised of 20 to 30 million people that transformed the French attitude toward death. Bereavement, sorrow and grief affected the whole country and each of its families. Private mourning often started as denial when a soldier stopped sending letters or when family parcels were returned. Families waited anxiously and silently prepared for the worst. Prayers and candles in churches increased before the dreadful announcement came. When a death became official, each family reacted in its own way. The impossibility of recovering the body made mourning impossible, so many families resorted to various substitutes such as poems or prayers to the missing, as well as *ex-votos* on graves or near monuments in cemeteries next to churches (particularly in the south). Prayers, especially *novenas* combining both grief and hope, were the most common and comforting form of private mourning offered by churches. New types of mourning appeared, such as the creation of reliquaries (with mementoes and pictures of the dead), metaphors for the missing bodies. Families also displayed letters or photographs of the dead on their front doors. Celebrated every year, especially on All Souls’ Day or the anniversary of a death, these items were a substitute for the missing graves.

Other less expected forms of mourning included refusing to open parcels returned without explanation and the public reading, often by priests, of letters from the dead.^[4] Some families developed relationships with a dead soldier’s comrades when their loved one’s personal belongings were returned. Families also took pride in the medals and mentions awarded to the dead. Finally, when the time came to identify and exhume a soldier’s body, a cult of “exhumed relics” became quite

common: when a grave was opened, the family might collect objects (wooden crosses, identity plates, rosettes) or even pieces of the skeleton. These relics were then “religiously kept under a glass cover or displayed on furniture”^[5] and worshipped by parents for the rest of their lives.

When bodies were returned with a delay, the family tomb or grave became the place of private worship. The graves of the “*poilus*” in cemeteries were decorated with [photographs](#), medals, enameled plates, decorated hearts in the eastern Pyrenees, and sometimes even personal belongings (helmets, stripes). For those whose bodies could not be returned, the battlefield graves embodied mourning. Personal belongings and French flags were gathered as a semi-private, semi-public form of mourning. Private mourning was also expressed as an attitude: for example, refusing to speak of the dead or attend official ceremonies. Given the vast extent of loss, the question remains as to whether mourning was even possible for families such as Paul Doumer’s, who lost four of his eight children on the battlefield.

For many families, a death certificate was the first step in the public mourning process. Once again, the state played a part in establishing innovative policy regarding war victims, thus shaping public mourning practices. The law of 31 March 1919 provided for the compensation of war victims through the Ministry of Pensions, with support from specific offices (e.g., the National Office of the Nation’s Orphans, the National Office of Disabled Servicemen). The text recognized the rights of war widows, as well as those of orphans and ascendants, at the expense of other groups (unmarried couples, fiancés), ostensibly categorizing compensation (and mourning) based on how a person died and their rank.

Public mourning was further embodied by the black clothing worn by widows – a figure present in many novels between the two world wars^[6]. Many such widows refused to remarry,^[7] a further display of their private mourning in the public sphere. It is true that remarrying might have led to the suspension of a widow’s compensation,^[8] or even to the loss of a reserved job or a woman’s disgrace in her neighborhood. The widow category became an epitome between the two World Wars and extended to fiancées in mourning who were called “white widows.” These women were visited by the comrades of their dead husbands and fiancés, as [Maurice Genevoix \(1890-1980\)](#) stated in *30.000 jours*. This form of mourning was also visible in the black armbands worn by orphans who received financial support from the state starting in July 1917 and March 1919, and who took part in the public ceremonies each November and during the inauguration of war memorials.

Whole communities were involved in mourning when a body was returned to town and a soldier’s name engraved on the local memorial. This turned private mourning into a ritual for handling loss, with new behavior, such as the exceptional unveiling of a black widow when she accepted something (e.g., a medal, death certificate) in her husband’s name. Mourning as such became public and made each family part of a grieving and comforting community.

Commemoration and the Cult of the Fallen

The organization of necropolises at the front

The presence of soldiers' bodies at the front turned the war grounds into commemorative sites which became covered with military cemeteries and large battlefield monuments. France was unique in this respect given that most of the Western front was located on its territory. French citizens killed in the war were buried in their homeland; but there was also a large number of foreign – both allied and enemy – soldiers killed. Article 225 of the Treaty of Versailles states: “The Allied and Associated Governments and the German Government will cause to be respected and maintained the graves of the soldiers and sailors buried in their respective territories.” The French government was very engaged in transforming its land, particularly given that it had *carte blanche* to do so as it pleased.

In military cemeteries, the graves of Allied soldiers were marked with a white stele. The graves of French soldiers were all identical and contained a standard inscription. In the vast majority of cases, the monument was a cross, but the stele could bear another confessional or non-confessional emblem (Star of David or an inscription in Arabic; France also created a stele for agnostics and free-thinkers). The uniformity of graves was to ensure the equality of all in their sacrifice while also recalling that the dead were in a way still mobilized; their army would stand guard over a symbolic frontier. The French government used dark crosses to mark the graves of defeated soldiers; it sought to avoid their dissemination and thus grouped them in immense necropolises. Lastly, the remains of non-identifiable victims were gathered in ossuaries.^[9]

The significance of war memorials

Regardless of whether or not their names were on their graves, the names of the war dead were in any case engraved elsewhere, in the context of their previous civilian lives. Indeed, naming was a central part of the rituals that were created. During the war, lists began to be compiled with the names of the dead. These lists were written out on honor rolls and in visitors' books before being engraved on commemorative plaques and memorials; they found an oral counterpart in the roll calls read out during commemoration ceremonies. The names were most often listed in alphabetical order; thus rendering a great sense of equality. The names were a way to address mass death without specifying its significance, but also a way to recall the uniqueness of each death.

In connection with the desire to name the deceased, the number of war memorials quickly flourished: most village memorials were inaugurated before 1922, while their completion in cities took somewhat longer^[10]. These memorials were *cenotaphs* since the bodies were buried elsewhere. They were nonetheless an important part of the complementarity that connected the front lines and home front through the commemoration of the dead: while celebrating the memory of the fallen, they overtly recalled the front and the bodies left behind. Graves were as such frequently represented on these monuments; numerous memorials also contained an urn filled with earth from the battlefield.

The memorials were initiated by different communities for whom they provided an opportunity to reconstruct the past based on their present. This made them both objects by which to remember the

dead and sites to help the living overcome their grief. The widespread building of memorials is a sign that they addressed an existential need for the population.^[11] While some memorials were subsidized (notably by the state under the Law of 25 October 1919 on municipal memorials, or by town councils and general councils), this was done as a show of official support more than as decisive financial support or as a means of control by public authorities.^[12]

War memorials were often characterized by their simplicity and sober nature, particularly the majority erected in the immediate post-war years. It is based on these sober memorials, without any sculpture, that [Antoine Prost](#) has described the central nature of memorials in French villages as primarily civic, generally set in a public space dominated by the town hall or a school. Next to churches and cemeteries, funerary-type memorials were inspired by symbols of consolation drawn from Christian iconography and sometimes the sacralisation of death in war. In some cases, the memorials also more or less overtly referred to soldiers' attributes: helmets, [weapons](#), the War Cross. The symbolism used in sculptures and the allegory and rhetoric found in inscriptions also needed to recall honor, glory and heroism to give the memorials strong patriotic value.^[13] And yet the memorials visible in town squares were only one part of commemorative expression in the 1920s: the name of each soldier killed was engraved in his town, but also at his school, company or government department, and potentially in his parish or religious community too. Parish memorials were most prominent in regions with a strong Catholic tradition, like Brittany, where they could even be mistaken for municipal memorials located in a cemetery or next to a church; they were most discreet in de-Christianized regions and large cities, where they represented the tribute of a smaller proportion of the population.^[14]

In general, French memorials oscillated between grief and pride. The war's victory appeared nonetheless to add an additional facet to commemorative memorials. It notably allowed for the use of triumphant allegorical female figures (e.g., France, the homeland, the Republic, victory) that were more tolerable than a representation of death alone. The war's victory also liberated the way reality and the tragedy associated with the war could be represented: the exodus, work in the fields and factories appeared on some low relief; whereas widows, orphans and parents of the dead were frequently represented on memorials' statuary. The diversity of memorials nonetheless began to dwindle as 11 November emerged as a civil liturgy for the dead: [Remembrance Day](#) worked to unify the significance of memorials beyond their physical reality and the main intentions behind their creation.

11 November and its rituals

Although there was consensus when the war was won that its end needed to be celebrated, it was not until 24 October 1922 that 11 November was made a national and public holiday.^[15] This official recognition was not actually driven by public authorities, however, but rather by veterans. They wanted and imposed the holiday on the anniversary of the war's end to commemorate the end of combat rather than the victory itself, thus giving it a funerary tone. As such, 11 November is not a

nationalist or complacent celebration. Setting the public commemoration on 11 November allowed for the creation and construction of an original and secular commemoration of the war dead based on rituals that were shared across France and repeated yearly.

In some municipalities, the Church – most often Catholic – held a mass in association with the commemoration ceremony; this did not stop it from paying a specifically religious homage to the war dead during liturgical All Souls' Day celebrations on 2 November. By participating in the public commemorations, churches and religious institutions further asserted their place in the nation. In any case, on 11 November, participants walked in a procession to the war memorial. The procession was comprised of representatives from the local government, war veterans, school children, local clubs (that often provided the music), fallen soldiers' families and the general public. Once at the memorial, various wreaths were laid and a national tribute was paid to war veterans for their service. This was followed by the call of the dead, met with a "*Mort pour la France*" ("Dead for France") after each name called, usually said by a child. Military reviews were rare since the horror of war and the merits of peace were the themes underpinning these ceremonies. These topics were the focus of most speeches by elected officials and veterans, which were particularly aimed at the numerous children present. Elsewhere, it was those who commissioned memorials that addressed victims' families: veterans or, in some cases, a company owner or school principal, for example. Really, the government organized the country's commemoration of the war in accordance with civil society. The war was recalled in an educational manner that was diffuse with pacifism and was part of a civic Republican culture upon which it also managed to leave its mark.^[16]

The role of the Unknown Soldier

In France like elsewhere, the First World War fostered an emblematic invention in the Unknown Soldier.^[17] Unlike war memorials, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier honors a combatant who gave everything, including his name, but whose body was recovered. Given the large number of dead whose bodies could not be identified, the Unknown Soldier needed above all to be a symbol with which people could identify and serve as a substitute grave. This archetypal body had to represent all missing bodies on the one hand; and, on the other hand, this sense of hope had to be contained in an actual place, a tomb where people could seek solace. The burying of the Unknown Soldier thus symbolically replaced the burying of fathers, sons and husbands for whom no last respects could be paid. It was as such a palliative relic to dull the pain of families hoping to find the body of a missing soldier. It served as a symbolic shortcut inviting families to mourn vicariously. And yet beyond missing soldiers alone, the Unknown Soldier also needed to represent all of the war's dead. And its significance tended to be broadened further to recall all those, dead or alive, who fought for their country.

The funeral of the French Unknown Soldier was held on 11 November 1920. The lead-up to the ceremony was marked by strong political discord. The government's plan was indeed to encompass in a single commemorative event the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Third Republic and the

anniversary of the war's end. This polysemous commemoration risked upsetting people on both the left (who feared that celebrations of the Republic would be overshadowed by the army and general staff) and on the right (who believed the nation would not identify with the Unknown Soldier's burial in the Pantheon). In the end, the tribute was divided into two parts: [Leon Gambetta's \(1838-1882\)](#) heart accompanied the body of the Unknown Soldier for most of the day on 11 November, but the former was taken to the Pantheon while the latter was laid to rest at the Arc de Triomphe.

The body of the Unknown Soldier was chosen the day before among eight anonymous corpses from the different combat zones brought to a bunker in the citadel of [Verdun](#). A young volunteer private first class whose father had gone missing in action placed a bouquet of flowers from the battlefield on one of the caskets. The casket was draped with a French flag and adorned with all of the military's decorations; it was then transported directly to Paris and put on display Place Denfert-Rochereau for people to pay their respects throughout the night. The next day was the official ceremony during which a long procession travelled through the capital. Mounted on a cannon carriage, the casket was surrounded by disabled servicemen and accompanied by a fictitious family: a father, mother, widow and orphan of non-identified soldiers represented the Unknown Soldier's family and French families affected by the war more broadly. This enactment further blurred the lines between an address to the nation and one to individuals personally suffering a loss. The Unknown Soldier was permanently buried with military honors on 28 January 1921, under a tombstone with the solemn inscription: "*Ici repose un soldat français mort pour la patrie. 1914-1918*" ("Here lies a French soldier who died for the homeland. 1914-1918").

The site became a mainstay for commemorative ceremonies. And yet some found that something more was still needed to avoid the site becoming too conventional. In 1923, right-leaning veterans led the initiative to install a flame on the tomb. The flame was lit on 11 November 1923 and was to recall the flickering soul of the dead, be a reminder never to forget as well as an invitation to introspection. Since 1924, there has been a nightly ceremony to rekindle the flame. This ceremony is based on the principle that to remain alive, a memory must be rekindled by an action renewed daily; it must also be handed down, hence the presence of a new delegation of veterans each evening. This ritual is a voluntary tribute paid daily to the Unknown Soldier by his brothers in arms; it comes in addition to all official state celebrations.

In addition to the above, there is a third facet to activities surrounding the tomb of the Unknown Soldier: the Arc de Triomphe also became a private site of remembrance which drew numerous visitors. Roughly 4,000 people visited the Arc de Triomphe daily at the end of the 1920s, primarily as an act of remembrance and introspection.^[18] The question nonetheless remains as to whether celebrating the Unknown Soldier helped dull the pain of those in mourning; it may also have simply remained an abstract idea. The power of the Unknown Soldier is most likely rooted in a combination of its different facets: the tomb is a site for both state ceremonies and private emotions.

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Notes

1. ↑ It was not until 1916 that soldiers had two identity tags, one that was returned and the other that was left on the body. Starting in December 1915, soldiers were entitled to an individual grave paid for by the state.
2. ↑ Pourcher, Yves: *La fouille des champs d'honneur. La sépulture des soldats de 14-18*, in: *Terrain 20* (1993), pp. 37-56.
3. ↑ Jauffret, Jean-Charles: *La question du transfert des corps 1915-1934*, in: *Caucanas, Sylvie/Cazals, Rémy (eds.): Traces de 14-18, Carcassonne 1997*, pp. 133-146.
4. ↑ This was done, for example, by Minister Jules Déjarnac at Sainte-Marie Bercy, on the first of November 1914.
5. ↑ Naegalen, Raymond: *Les suppliciés. Histoire vécue*, Baudinière, 1927, pp. 162-163.
6. ↑ See for example Yole, Jean: *Sa veuve*, published in 1918; Flamant, Paul: *Le Réveil des vivants*, published in 1924; and Girard, Renée: *Les étincelles*, published in 1931, a love story between a widow and a "Gueule Cassée" (veteran with facial injuries).
7. ↑ According to Stéphanie Petit, 58 percent of French widows from the Great War did not remarry.
8. ↑ While a widow's pension was for life, it could be suspended; these pensions were discontinued for remarried women in 1941. (Contamine de Latour, Patrice: *Le droit des veuves de guerres, des femmes de mobilisés*, Paris, Picard, 1919).
9. ↑ The largest of these ossuaries is the Ossuary of Douaumont, near Verdun, which houses the remains of about 130,000 French and German unknown soldiers.
10. ↑ Prost, Antoine: *Les monuments aux morts. Culte républicain Culte civique Culte patriotique*», in: *Nora, Pierre (eds.), Les lieux de mémoire I. La République*, Paris 1984, p. 199.
11. ↑ Winter, Jay: *Sites of Memory, sites of Mourning. The Great War in European Cultural History*, Cambridge 1995.
12. ↑ Julien, Elise: *Paris, Berlin, la mémoire de la guerre 1914-1933*, Rennes 2010, p. 94.
13. ↑ Prost, *Les monuments* 1984, p. 200-207.
14. ↑ Becker, Annette: *Les monuments aux morts. Mémoire de la Grande Guerre*, Paris 1988.
15. ↑ Julien, *Paris, Berlin* 2010, pp. 114-121; Dalisson, Rémi: *11 novembre. Du souvenir à la mémoire*, Paris 2013.
16. ↑ Prost, *Les monuments* 1984, pp. 207-215.
17. ↑ Jagielski, Jean-François: *Le Soldat inconnu. Invention et postérité d'un symbole*, Paris 2005; Le Naour, Jean-Yves: *Le soldat inconnu. La guerre, la mort, la mémoire*, Paris 2008.
18. ↑ Damit, Gérard: *Sous l'Arc de triomphe*, in: *Journal des mutilés*, 22 septembre 1929, quoted by Jagielski: *Le Soldat inconnu* 2005, pp. 146-147.

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