

FALLEN
SOLDIERS
RESHAPING THE
MEMORY OF THE
WORLD WARS



GEORGE L. MOSSE

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Fallen Soldiers

Acknowledgments

This book grew out of my concern with modern nationalism and its consequences. It seeks to provide a better understanding of, and hopefully new insights into, the cheapening of human life and the mass deaths which have degraded so much of our own century. I owe a great debt to Howard Fertig who, as on so many other occasions, made me refine, focus, and at times rethink my arguments. The constant dialogue with Dr. J. M. Winter of Pembroke College, Cambridge University, has been especially rewarding over the years. My colleague Stanley Payne of the University of Wisconsin read the manuscript and gave me the benefit of his great learning. I have made extensive use of Meinhold Lurze's description of German war monuments for which I am grateful, and I await with anticipation the complete inventory of such monuments which Professor Reinhard Kosseleck of the University of Bielefeld is undertaking. I first started to address the Myth of the War Experience in 1977 when I gave the Charles Phelps Taft Memorial Lectures at the University of Cincinnati. As a fellow in the History of Ideas Unit, Research School of Social Science, Australian National University in 1979, I was able to make use of the excellent First World War collection at the Australian War Memorial. A fellowship at the Institute of Advanced Studies of the Hebrew University in 1986 gave new dimensions to my thinking about the consequences and iconography of war.

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I dedicate this book to David Berkoff who has given me the greatest and most committed support over the years.

Madison, Wisc.
June 1989

G. L. M.

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Fallen Soldiers

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: A Different Kind of War

This book is about how men confronted modern war and the political consequences of that confrontation. The encounter with mass death is perhaps the most basic war experience; it stands at the center of this confrontation and of our analysis as well. Through modern war many met organized mass death for the first time face to face. The history of that encounter is crucial to an understanding of attitudes toward the large-scale taking of life—through war or state-sanctioned mass murder—which has repeatedly scarred our century. The consequences of this confrontation are more far-reaching still, penetrating and polarizing much of public life, marking a new stage in the history of nationalism.

The First World War is the focus of this book, for here the encounter with mass death took on a new dimension, the political consequences of which vitally affected the politics of the interwar years. More than twice as many men died in action or of their wounds in the First World War as were killed in all major wars between 1790 and 1914. Some figures will help clarify the unprecedented extent of the encounter with mass death which dominated the memory of that war. Some thirteen million men died in the First World War,¹ while Napoleon in the war against Russia, the

bloodiest campaign before that time, lost 400,000 men—some 600,000 fewer than fell on all sides in the inconclusive battle of the Somme in 1916. The greatest war in the nineteenth century, the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871), saw 150,000 French dead, while 44,780 Prussians fell in battle.² By the time of the First World War the memory of the great losses in the Napoleonic Wars was fading, and the losses in war in the nineteenth century could not compare with what was to come. The new dimension of death in war called for a much greater effort to mask and transcend death in war than had ever been made before.

The First World War had other important new dimensions as well which influenced how men and women perceived it. This was war in an age of technology, of new and more effective means of communication, all of which helped diffuse its image and stimulate the imagination. However, most important of all, the war introduced a new type of warfare on the Western Front which influenced what meaning the war was to have in most soldiers' lives. Trench warfare determined not only the perception of war of those who passed through it, but also how the war was understood by future generations. The encounter with mass death, as most people experienced it in wartime and after the war, provides the framework for this book. The Western Front with its peculiar and unique style of warfare dominated the prose and poetry, as well as the picture books and films about the war; it decided what contemporaries and future generations would make of it.

From its start in August to November 1914 it seemed as if the war would be fought according to the generally accepted view that it, like so many wars in the nineteenth century, would be mobile and short. But by mid-November the armies were deadlocked and movement was measured in yards, not miles, as each army dug in to hold its positions. Soon a system of trenches was created that was roughly 475 miles long, stretching from the North Sea through Belgium, Flanders, and France to Switzerland.³ This was a system in depth: several trenches, one behind the other, served offense, defense, and supply. Communication trenches linked these trenches, forming a complex network which criss-crossed the landscape. The distance between the enemy trenches, separated by no man's land, varied from one hundred to four hundred yards, though it could

be as little as five yards and as much as a thousand yards wide.⁴ When not on guard duty or moving supplies (mostly during the night), soldiers lived in dugouts usually placed in the second trench down the line. The whole system was more often than not engulfed in mud and slime because of the constant rain and fog as well as the porous soil in which most trenches were dug. The surrounding landscape was more suggestive of the moon than the earth, as heavy shelling destroyed not only men but nature, a devastation that would haunt the imagination of those forced to live in the trenches.

The "little world of the trenches," as one veteran called it,⁵ was a self-contained world, as communications with the rear were often difficult and dangerous. Soldiers fought in small units as they held their segment of the trench: the Germans used twelve men and a corporal, and other nations used groups of a similar size. These squads were part of a platoon of somewhat less than a hundred men commanded by officers who also patrolled the trenches. Members of a squad were thrown upon each other's company, often for weeks at a time, bored with interminable guard duty, sniped at from the opposite trenches, and sometimes forced to go over the top. Life in the trenches contained periods of a tacit truce, interrupted by massive and dramatic battles, such as those of the Somme, Verdun, and Paschendaele, as each side attempted to break out of the stalemate. However, life and death in the trenches went on all of the time; that was the daily reality of war.⁶

Death was always present, confronted not only in battle but also in no man's land and in the trenches themselves. Soldiers used ~~unburied corpses as support for their guns~~ and as markers to find their way in the trenches; they sometimes took off those boots of fallen soldiers that were in better condition than their own.⁷ At the same time, while the men confronted mass death everywhere, another aspect of life in the trenches impressed them: the camaraderie of soldiers in a squad living together and depending upon each other for survival. This was seen as a positive experience at war's end, for even before the war many people had longed for some sort of meaningful community in the modern world as an ~~antidote to a pervasive feeling of loneliness~~. Of course, in the midst of destruction camaraderie was by itself not sufficient to overcome

the fear and sadness in the face of all-present death. Both at the front and at home there was scarcely a person or a family who had not suffered an irreparable loss.

Mourning was general, and yet it was not to dominate the memory of the First World War as it might have done. Instead, a feeling of pride was often mixed in with the mourning, the feeling of having taken part and sacrificed in a noble cause. Not all people sought such consolation, and yet the urge to find a higher meaning in the war experience, and to obtain some justification for the sacrifice and loss, was widespread. This need was greatest among veterans. They were often torn between their memory of the horror of war and its glory: it had been a time when their lives had taken on new meaning as they performed the sacred task of defending the nation. The only thorough study of the diaries and letters of soldiers who had fought in the front lines and then came home is that of Bill Gammage, who concludes that while some veterans wanted to forget the war years as quickly as possible, others remembered the security, purpose, and companionship of war—and some even considered those tragic years the happiest of their lives.⁸ Gammage's study covers only a tiny percentage of the returning veterans, and it comes to us not from Europe but from Australia. Yet these attitudes were common among soldiers of most nations who articulated their war experiences, who made them public rather than keeping them private or sharing them only with family and friends.

Such accounts of the war had great impact: these men had risked their lives for the cause. The memories of those veterans who saw the war as containing positive elements, and not of those who rejected the war, were generally adopted by their nations as true and legitimate—after all, the war had been fought for national glory and national interest. During and especially after the war, national commissions took over the burial of the war dead and the commemoration of war. The function of consolation was performed on a public as well as on a private level, but in remembrance of the glory rather than the horror of war, its purposefulness rather than its tragedy. Those concerned with the image and the continuing appeal of the nation worked at constructing a myth which would draw the sting from death in war and emphasize the

meaningfulness of the fighting and sacrifice. They found support in the prose and poetry which had come out of the war, as well as in the celebration of the war dead. The aim was to make an inherently unpalatable past acceptable, important not just for the purpose of consolation but above all for the justification of the nation in whose name the war had been fought.

The reality of the war experience came to be transformed into what one might call the Myth of the War Experience, which looked back upon the war as a meaningful and even sacred event. This vision of the war developed, above all, though not exclusively, in the defeated nations, where it was so urgently needed. The Myth of the War Experience was designed to mask war and to legitimize the war experience; it was meant to displace the reality of war. The memory of the war was refashioned into a sacred experience which provided the nation with a new depth of religious feeling, putting at its disposal ever-present saints and martyrs, places of worship, and a heritage to emulate. The picture of the fallen soldier in the arms of Christ (Picture 1), so common during and after the First World War, projected the traditional belief in martyrdom and resurrection onto the nation as an all-encompassing civic religion. The cult of the fallen soldier became a centerpiece of the religion of nationalism after the war, having its greatest political impact in nations like Germany which had lost the war and had been brought to the edge of chaos by the transition from war to peace.

Through the myth which came to surround it the war experience was sanctified. Yet at the same time, the war was confronted and absorbed in a radically different way, by being trivialized through its association with objects of daily life, popular theater, or battlefield tourism (Picture 2). Here the war experience could be distorted and manipulated at will. Veterans deplored such trivialization; it was those who had stayed at home or were too young to have fought who were apt to indulge in it during and after the war. Nevertheless, the trivialization of the war had less political effect on the civic religion of nationalism than did the war experience.

The Myth of the War Experience was not entirely fictitious. After all, it appealed to men who had seen the reality of war and sought to transform and at the same time perpetuate the memory



1. *The Apotheosis of the Fallen*. A soldier resting in the arms of Christ in the hall dedicated to the winners of the *Medaglie d'Oro* (Italy's highest military decoration) at the military cemetery of Redipuglia, constructed in 1938.

of this reality. These were most often men who had felt enough ~~enthusiasm to volunteer~~ at the outbreak of war. To be sure, those too old to have fought also sought to glorify war and in doing so to deny its effects, but it was the accounts of the volunteers which were most apt to become part of the national canon. Volunteers who bared their feelings were a small minority even so, but as other volunteers remained silent, it was the minority's poetry and prose which attracted attention. Men like the writer Ernst Jünger in Germany were no doubt sincere in their recollections of war, and their works became part of a patriotic canon legitimizing the conflict. The Myth of the War Experience was shaped and perpetuated by what volunteers thought of war, and it will therefore be necessary to ~~analyze their attitudes~~. Writing about the creation of the Myth of the War Experience means writing about the history of volunteers in war as well.



2. *War kitsch*. "Hindenburgitis, or the Prussian House Beautiful."
 (From *Mr. Punch's History of the Great War* [London, 1919], p. 119.)

The articulation of the myth by the volunteers of the "generation of 1914" must occupy us—what it was they did and with what effect—but we will be just as concerned with the development of the myth's tangible symbols: military cemeteries, war monuments, and commemorative ceremonies for the dead.

Yet, for all this, the book begins not with the trench warfare generation but a century earlier. The First World War was not the first conflict in which mythifying the war experience made reality easier to bear. The wars of the French Revolution (1792–1799) and the German Wars of Liberation against Napoleon (1813–1814) saw the origins of the Myth of the War Experience, which fulfilled a need that had not existed in previous wars—wars which had been fought by mercenary armies with little stake in the cause for which they fought. The revolutionary wars were the first to be fought by citizen-armies, composed initially of a large number of volunteers who were committed to their cause and to their nation. Those who fell in these wars were comrades in arms, the sons or

~~brothers of someone one could have known; it was necessary to legitimize and justify their sacrifice. The volunteers played their role as mythmakers for the first time in these wars. Indeed, those who rushed to the colors in France or Germany were a new breed of soldier, for few had volunteered in mercenary armies for other than professional or monetary reasons. The first modern wars saw the birth of the Myth of the War Experience.~~

The mythmakers of the First World War made use of an already existing myth and built upon it to meet the new dimensions of modern war. The building blocks of the Myth of the War Experience either were already in place by 1914 or were being widely discussed: how the war dead should be honored and buried, what symbolism war monuments should project, and how both nature and Christianity might be used to assert the legitimacy of death and sacrifice in war. The role of the volunteers in propagating the myth was set and did not change from the Revolution to the generation of 1914.

The power and appeal of the Myth of the War Experience varied from nation to nation, not so much during the First World War as after it. ~~Much depended upon victory or defeat, upon the transition from war to peace, and upon the dynamic and strength of the nationalist Right.~~ Germany proved most hospitable to the myth, where it informed most postwar politics. Germany's defeat, the traumatic passage from war to peace, and the stress on the social fabric, all worked to strengthen nationalism as a civic faith and with it the Myth of the War Experience. Here the effects of the myth are most easily discerned. ~~But the myth was important elsewhere as well, and though Germany is at the center of our analysis, examples are also drawn from Italy, France, and England.~~

The Myth of the War Experience is crucial to an understanding of the interwar years, but did it remain active after the Second World War? That war, as we shall see, also marked a vital stage in the myth's evolution, and thus we must go forward beyond the First World War, just as we must look backward to the myth's origins. Men had confronted mass death since the beginning of modern warfare in the revolutionary period, though not to the extent and all-encompassing reality of the First World War. Such confrontation was part of a historical process which must be un-