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## **Western attitudes toward soldiers' death: from the early modern period to the present**

**Lorenzo Zambenardi**

History has recorded a large number of different cultural attitudes towards death (Ariés, 1981; Vovelle, 1983; Laqueur, 2015). Yet, no study has ever attempted to reconstruct how attitudes towards soldiers' death have changed over time. This article provides the first reconstruction of how these attitudes have varied throughout history. In order to do so, the inquiry is theoretically informed by Ernest Kantorowicz' (1997) concept of 'the king's two bodies' and empirically organized around two different, yet related, types of evidence: force employment and war commemoration. I will describe how combatants are used in war when they are alive (i.e. the natural body) and how the fallen are remembered and commemorated after death (i.e. the social body). I divide changing attitudes towards soldiers' death into three main stages from the end of the fifteenth century until the present era. I argue that a long period during which soldiers' death was accepted as socially meaningless was followed by a shorter period in which death in war was regarded as a glorious, holy sacrifice for the nation. This was, in turn, followed by a period defined by the sensitivity and aversion towards casualties typical of the era in which we live. I shall refer to these different epochs as *bare death*, *sacrificial death*, and *irrecoverable death*.

The article is organized as follows. First, I discuss how to reconstruct the meaning of soldiers' death through a long-term narrative grounded in Kantorowicz' (1997) concept of 'the king's two bodies'. Next, I discuss the meaning of military deaths in early modern Europe and in the first half of the nineteenth century. Then I examine the modifications that materialized after the 1850s to show that a fundamental change occurred in attitudes towards military casualties. The final part of the

article concerns the latest change, which gradually developed in the decades following the end of WWI and fully emerged in the post-WWII era.

### **Recovering the changing meaning of military deaths**

This study describes how the meaning ascribed to military deaths has changed throughout history. The notion of the ‘king’s two bodies’ provides a convenient starting point to explore the changing meaning of soldiers’ death. In his study on medieval political theology, Ernst Kantorowicz (1997) argued that the concept of the king’s two bodies, a natural one that suffers and dies, and a social (or institutional) one that transcends life and death and operates as a symbol for the political function, ensured the continuity of the monarchy even after the physical death of the king.

Like a king in medieval Europe, a soldier may be conceived as having both a natural and an institutional body. The former refers to the corporeal properties of soldiers as living and functioning combatants. The latter includes the social aspects of soldiers’ bodies after their death. Examining soldiers’ employment in war is helpful in understanding how the ‘natural bodies’ of soldiers have been handled throughout history. How troops are employed on the battlefield tells us about the importance that states and societies attach to their soldiers’ lives. Indeed, the way troops are used in war can shed light on their expendability and, in turn, on how life and death are understood. The battlefield is where the research begins in the early modern period and ends in the current epoch.

The study of commemorative devices is useful to reconstruct the ‘social body’ of combatants, namely, the particular image attached to soldiers after their natural bodies have ceased to function. It seems almost self-evident to point out that how the memory of soldiers is recollected can be quite telling about how their lives are conceived and valued. As American sociologist Bernard Barber (1949, 65) maintained, war memorials reflect ‘the attitudes and values of a community toward those

persons and deeds that are memorialized'. That is why war memorials should be regarded as material devices that convey not only different ways of viewing war, but also different ways of conceiving the life and death of its participants.

Looking at troop employment and commemoration together, we can make sense of the different meanings of military deaths throughout history. As I show below, there is a parallel between the natural and the social bodies of soldiers, between the use of troops and commemorative practices. From the early modern period to the first half of the nineteenth century, the absence of commemoration was coupled with an almost total disregard for soldiers' lives on the battleground. From the mid-nineteenth century to WWII, there is an apparent disjunction between the 'cult of the dead' and the disregard for soldiers on the battlefield, typical of the American Civil War and WWI. However, it must be emphasized that, in this period, ordinary soldiers were during commemorative practices primarily glorified for their military qualities. Soldiers' deaths were portrayed as a meaningful, justified sacrifice for the nation, rather than as a tragic loss of human life. Finally, following WWII, the public representation of the fallen in commemorative artifacts as victims of war rather than perpetrators of violence would be paralleled by military policies trying to minimize friendly casualties.

The three stages do not mark a linear development, and, to some extent, they are arbitrary. Nevertheless, I argue that the three different periods are dominated by a single unifying meaning attached to soldiers' death. While death in the first historical period is a socially meaningless cessation, what I call *bare death*, in the second and third epochs it becomes highly meaningful for societies. However, though attitudes toward soldiers' deaths in the second stage are as socially meaningful as in the third, the two meanings are in complete opposition: while the meaning ascribed to casualties in the second phase of development justifies mass slaughter – indeed the term that

describes such an attitude here is *sacrificial death* – the meaning of the third and latest stage signifies care and protection for one’s own soldiers, what is called *irrecoverable death*.

### **Bare death**

In one of his Reith Lectures, military historian John Keegan remarked the high standing veterans enjoy today. He noted that soldiers are not only considered heroes, but they are often portrayed as victims of war (Keegan, 1999). This perception is worlds apart from the reality and public view of the common soldier in the early modern period as an unmitigated scoundrel, a drifter, and a social drop-out. Indeed, those who wrote or commented on soldiers could not help providing a harsh depiction of them and of their lives. For example, Louis de Jaucourt (1704-1779), a major contributor of the *Encyclopédie*, wrote that ‘soldiers in the countries of Europe are truly ... the most vile portion of the subjects of the nation’ (in Lynn, 2011, 96). Likewise, Claude-Louis de Saint-Germain, a French general and then Minister of War under Louis XVI, pointed out that ‘the army must inevitably consist of the scum of the people’ (in O’Connell, 1989, 153). With similar words, Wellington described soldiers as ‘the scum of the earth ... enlisted for drink’, social outcasts that only ‘punishment and repression’ (in Blanco, 1965, 126) could hold in check.

The idea that the soldier deserves societal respect because he risks death in war is either an ancient or a recent belief, but it was not the way commoners were perceived in early modern Europe. This disparaging image was partly deserved. At that time, armies were formed by a diverse humanity including experienced mercenaries, volunteers, a relatively small portion of conscripted recruits, and an assortment of marginalized and disadvantaged people seeking to make a living by supplementing a steady salary with plunder. Although not all soldiers in early modern Europe came from the lowest

social strata, it is not an overstatement to state that soldiering was considered an occupation for those men who had little to offer to society.

At that time, the social standing of those killed in battle largely shaped reaction to combat deaths (Laqueur, 2015, 378-382). The death of commoners was perceived as a minor event, met with a mixture of indifference and pleasure. Historian J.R. Hale reminds us that Charles the Bold ‘laughed off the slaughter of a third of his men when after the debacle at Murten (1476) they were shot in the trees where they had taken refuge’ (Hale 1985, 84). If there was any humane concern it was for the ‘men of birth’, not for commoners. This class-conscious distinction is also apparent in Charles V’s response to the loss of his soldiers through disease at the disastrous siege of Metz in 1552. Once the Duke of Alba assured the Holy Roman Emperor that the dead were all ‘poor soldiers,’ the latter declared that ‘it makes not matter if they die, comparing them to caterpillars and grasshoppers which eat the buds of the earth’ (Parey, 1825, 62).

The fact that the death of ordinary soldiers elicited no social response on the part of the political and military leadership does not amount to suggesting that commanders were uninterested in the life of their men. In order to reduce casualties, they tried to cover and hide troops by exploiting the advantages of the terrain and the topography of the battlefield. And as weapons became more and more lethal, armies gradually modified their tactics in order to minimize the killing potential of enemy weaponry. Protection from enemy fire was certainly important in this age, but commanders in early modern Europe were not shy in sacrificing their combatants if the exigencies of war required it. The life of a soldier was relatively insignificant in and outside the battlefield; the only importance being his capacity to fight. Soldiers were viewed mainly as *fighting tools*. Indeed, tactical innovations in the early modern period did not hold the protection of human life on the battlefield as one of their primary concerns. For example, the passage from squares to line, which can be considered as one of the principle tactical innovations of the epoch, was largely meant to exploit the new lethality of

firearms regardless of the protection of one's combatants. In this type of linear and flat warfare, discipline and drill were the key to success because soldiers had to be prepared 'to remain whole in the face of death, regardless of casualties' (Black, 1999, 18). As a matter of fact, soldiers in linear formations were very much exposed to enemy fire. Drills and training were not only meant to teach men how to move on the battlefield and to handle weapons, but rather to turn soldiers from emotional human beings into coldblooded automata with no natural fear of death provoked by the feeling of being shot on the battlefield. This is especially true in the light of the fact that soldiers, given the inaccuracy of muskets, were told in moments of great danger not to fire first (Lynn, 2011, 93-94).

While it is true that governments spent money and time on building and quartering soldiers in barracks and on providing them with medical services, preoccupation with soldiers' welfare and health still lay in the military performance they could offer on the battlefield, since more soldiers meant more fighting power. The primary goal of medical treatment in this period was to return the largest number of men to the killing fields as quickly as possible. This was, for example, the aim of what historian Geoffrey Parker (2004, 141) considers the first permanent military hospital on European soil, which was opened in 1585 at Mechelen by the Spanish Army of Flanders.

In sum, death in war was perceived as a natural aspect of the order of things. As Jeremy Black (1999, 2) observes: 'Killing was not seen as unnatural, but was, instead, generally accepted as necessary, both for civil society, against crime, heresy and disorder, and in international relations'. Black's description of the major role violence played in early modern Europe needs only a small amendment: not only was killing seen as something natural and unproblematic, but dying in war was also viewed in similar terms.

*The asocial body of soldiers: when the war dead were not worthy of commemoration*



After describing how the natural bodies of soldiers were handled, let us turn to their 'social bodies'. Although memorials in the early modern period were erected for commemorating war, only very special casualties were remembered in these monuments, primarily military and political commanders like *condottieri*, generals, kings and emperors. For example, the famous equestrian monuments by Donatello to Gattamelata in Padua and by Francesco Mochi to Alessandro Farnese, Duke of Parma, in Piacenza, commemorate military commanders, not commoners or ordinary soldiers. The construction of statues and memorials was to honour 'great men' and extend their social standing beyond natural death, but no sites of memory were built for ordinary soldiers, whose deeds were not considered worth recording.

Even the commemoration of the American Revolutionary War, apart from few exceptions, did not include the average soldier, but rather great heroes such as General Richard Montgomery, George Washington, and Joseph Warren. Tellingly, in the first Navy memorial of American history, dedicated to the First Barbary War (1801-1805), there is a list of names of the fallen, but again they refer either to dead officers or to those who contributed to the erection of the monument (Piehler, 1995, 23). Likewise, the French Revolution did not innovate much in the area of war commemoration. Although the extension of military service to all able-bodied citizens and the glorification of soldiers were simultaneous, this rhetoric was not translated into monuments and memorials. Indeed, no common soldiers' names are to be found in the most important monuments dedicated to Napoleon's victories, neither in the *Arc de Triomphe*, whose inscriptions only refer to Napoleon's generals and battles, nor in the other numerous monuments dedicated to the *Grande Armée* (Troyansky, 1986, 351).

This point must be emphasized because it shows that the political transition from the French absolute monarchy, based on the idea of the divine right of kings where people were subjects and soldiers were a mere property of the armies, to the mass-based regime born with Revolutionary

France, ideologically and politically based on the will of the nation, did not change attitudes toward military deaths. Indeed, while the French Revolution and Napoleonic campaigns changed many aspects of war in the old continent, like the size of armies, their organization, the political commitment of troops, it should be concluded that the French Revolution did not contribute to radical transformations concerning the social meaning ascribed to soldiers' death. Moreover, not even the great memorials of the first half of the nineteenth century, such as *Nelson's Column* in London and the *Walhalla* near Regensburg, paid tribute to the combatants killed in war, but rather to their generals and rulers. In this respect, memorials and monuments are important not only for what they represent, but also for what they exclude from representation. In a way, the most interesting memorials of the time were those that had never been built and never been meant to be erected.

The absolute lack of a wish to commemorate commoners in monuments stands out as one of the most important testimonies for the unproblematic nature of ordinary soldiers' death in war and of their lack of a social body. Armies were considered anonymous collections of men and commoners as passive instruments of statecraft that could be replaced by other human flesh. Their death was regarded as a purely physical and military event, devoid of any social meaning; it was nothing but *bare death*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Disposal and burial practices concerning common soldiers showed a similar lack of regard. Until the first half of the nineteenth century, mass graves were the most common type of burial employed for the war dead. As Zambarnardi (2017, 296) notes, before the mid-nineteenth century, burial 'of the war dead was merely regarded as a problem of sanitation, rather than a social requirement. Corpses were thrown into a pit and tumbled together into complete oblivion'.

## **Sacrificial death: a miserable, but glorious death**

For the purpose of this investigation, the period that separates the Napoleonic wars from the Second World War is an epoch of transition in which contradictory trends coexist. On the one hand, combat was still based on the apparent indifference for the sufferings and lives of soldiers, who were treated like an amorphous mass that could be sacrificed according to the exigencies of the particular conflict. On the other, there was an important change regarding the social body of soldiers: ordinary soldiers were brought to the spotlight in the process of war commemoration. It is indeed to the second half of the nineteenth century that we can trace back the incorporation of common soldiers in commemorative practices. As we shall see, it is a paradox of mid-nineteenth century warfare and WWI that while on the battlefield soldiers were treated as highly expendable beings, they were instead glorified and even sanctified in death.

In order to show both continuity and change in the social meaning ascribed to military deaths, some of the most important conflicts of the nineteenth century will be outlined, especially the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War. In relation to the first half of the twentieth century, the article will focus on WWI. As the message to be conveyed about the decades at issue has to do with gradual changes and not unbroken continuity, the narrative concerning the two types of evidence is still organized thematically within this section, but it is also given as a chronology to show how the meaning attached to the natural and social bodies of soldiers historically evolved.

### *Warfare in the second half of the nineteenth century*

In the several minor and the few major wars of the nineteenth century, European and American statesmen and generals alike continued caring little for their men as individual human beings. As a

result, the protection of soldiers' lives on the battlefield was not a primary concern. Notwithstanding important developments such as the creation of the International Committee for Relief to the Wounded (1863) and the approval of the first Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field (1864), when a trade-off between humane consideration toward soldiers and military exigency materialized, no real dilemma existed: the priority of the latter trumped the importance of the former.

The American Civil War is a striking example of the indifference to soldiers' lives that characterized political and military leadership in the second half of the nineteenth century. The conflict was long, ferocious, and exhausting. Approximately 620,000 soldiers died from 1861 to 1865, though like in previous conflicts, the majority of men died from disease and exposure. 'A similar rate, about 2 percent, in the United States', writes historian Drew Gilpin Faust (2008, xi), 'would mean six million fatalities' today. The war was fought in a variety of ways depending on the theatres of operations and the development of the conflict itself but, as a general trend, it got costlier and more devastating as it progressed.

Not only were deadly battles characterized by mass assaults, like at Antietam (17 September 1862), unavoidable, but inflicting major casualties on the opponent was seen by both sides as the best strategy to end the war quickly. In pursuit of a decisive victory, General Robert E. Lee tried brutal frontal attacks in the three-day battle of Gettysburg on July 1-3, 1863. As 1864 was an electoral year, Lee hoped that a large number of dead and wounded men in the ranks of the Union would convince the Northern population not to re-elect Lincoln. Such a strategy failed because the North was willing to accept great sacrifices and sustain heavy casualties to achieve victory. General Ulysses S. Grant was not shy in expending his men and, having a larger number of troops than Lee, was not greatly preoccupied with taking losses. That does not equate to suggesting that both sides in the conflict unreasonably sacrificed their men. As in prior wars, soldiers were spread out on the battlefield and

ordered to take advantage of cover whenever possible. Actually, the innovations in weaponry in the Civil War made cover from enemy fire even more important than before. However, because a few entrenched men could hold in check a more sizeable enemy, the attacking forces had to resort to mass assaults in order to prevail. In a series of battles that took place in the summer of 1864 just before the siege of Petersburg, the Union lost 65,000 soldiers, dead or wounded, which almost totalled the size of Lee's army (Clodfelter, 2008, 310). Such a large number of Union casualties resulted from suicidal infantry assaults against Southern trench fortifications. Thus, if the exigencies of war required it, Union forces were as much expendable as their European counterparts.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, changes in logistics and military technology significantly affected warfare on the European continent, too. With more and more deadly weapons, close formation had to be temporarily substituted for dispersion. During the Franco-Prussian war, in order to reduce the target for French firepower, the Prussians employed their men in disperse formations that could outmanoeuvre the thicker and slower French columns and lines. However, soldiers' expendability remained high in that conflict too. For example, at 'Morsbronn, the French cavalry was slaughtered in a single charge; and on 6 August at Froeschwiller, those killed or wounded exceeded 20,000 on the two sides' (Capdevila & Voldman, 2006, 41). Beyond brute figures, Michael Howard's (1961, 138) vivid portrayal of the battle at Gravelotte-St-Privat on 18 August 1870 can give an impressive glimpse of the carnage entailed in late-nineteenth-century warfare:

So the skirmishing lines of the [Prussian] Guard, with thick columns behind them, extended themselves over the bare fields below St-Privat and began to make their way up the slopes in the face of the French fire ... The result was a massacre. The field officers on their horses were the first casualties. The men on foot struggled forward against the *chassepot* fire, as if into a hailstorm ... All formations disintegrated ... No more urging could get the survivors ...

The casualty returns were to reveal over 8,000 officers and men killed and wounded, mostly in twenty minutes; more than a quarter of the entire corps strength.

As this historical account illustrates, war implied taking whatever casualties one could successfully sustain. Thus, notwithstanding innovations in tactics and military technology, the degree of soldiers' expendability remained high. Not coincidentally, the Franco-Prussian War brought about the extermination of 300,000 men in a period of only six months. What is more, despite heavy losses, tactical regulations after the war emphasized the importance of close-order formation rather than dispersion over the zone swept by enemy fire (Holmes, 2005, 232).

Not only in the American Civil War and in the Franco-Prussian conflict were soldiers freely expended, but killing and sacrificing as many enemy combatants as possible became one of the central tactics in WWI. Although no battle was identical, the typical WWI fighting was organized in two main stages: pre-battle artillery bombardment, which could last for hours or even for a few days, and then repeated charges against enemy lines. After the initial artillery bombardment, which was meant to neutralize enemy fire, special units were sent toward enemy trenches in order to destroy barbed wire with cutters. Then, soldiers were ordered to fix their bayonets and advance in dispersed formations with no cover in open field. Because long artillery barrages preceded massed infantry attacks, surprise was virtually impossible. Thus, by leaving the trenches, soldiers' bodies were completely exposed to the mortal danger posed by enemy fire. This was the greatest trial of battle in the Great War, when soldiers' vulnerability was total and their martyrdom almost inevitable.

Despite the tactical dilemma faced by generals in an age where the balance between defence and offense had been tipped in favour of the former, the way soldiers were treated and expended on the battlefields of WWI is illustrative of the cynical attitude of their political and military

commanders. Verdun, the Somme, Loos, the eleven offensives on the Isonzo River, and many other battles were epic clashes and some of them military disasters in which soldiers had more than done their duty. Apart from a few truces and mutinies, especially in the French ranks, the degree of soldiers' devotion was only second to the degree of indifference shown by their commanders, who displayed no mercy in the way they employed their men.

Despite remarkable improvements in the legal protection of the wounded and the significant work of the different national sections of the Red Cross, the disregard for soldiers in combat was almost the same as that for the injured. It was standard policy to pick first the less seriously wounded and to take them to the casualty clearing stations. The rationale was to provide medical assistance to the men that could be put back on the killing fields. 'In the same spirit', wrote Dennis Winter (1978, 196), 'priority of movement in the trenches went first to ammunition, second to reinforcements', and only then to the injured. Because truces to evacuate the wounded were hardly tolerated by commanders, thousands of combatants died owing to lack of immediate medical treatment. The priority was winning the war, not saving and protecting the lives of individual soldiers. Humane considerations were still secondary to military objectives.

The cynical treatment of the infantryman in WWI shows that attitudes toward the natural body of soldiers changed little from previous centuries, with no real distinction between democratic and non-democratic regimes. It should also be emphasized that the type of military recruitment did not affect attitudes toward soldiers' lives. Not only did most democracies waging WWI use forms of conscription without being sensitive to casualties, as testified by the suicidal tactics employed by democracies on the Western Front, but the case of Britain, a democracy who entered the war with a volunteer army and introduced conscription in 1916 with no apparent change in aversion to her fallen soldiers, casts serious doubts on the common-sensical idea that the political regime in itself or the type of military recruitment actually affect attitudes toward soldiers' death. As we shall see below,

the great paradox of warfare in the second half of the nineteenth century and in WWI can be expressed in the following terms: when soldiers were alive, they were treated with no or little care; in death, instead, their social body was held in high esteem.

*The emergence of the social body of soldiers*

It is now standard practice to interpret the Great War as the time when the modern commemoration of the war dead was generated (Fussell, 2000; Winter, 1995). However, this widely held conviction does not stand historical scrutiny. The construction of war memorials dedicated to ordinary soldiers was not a product of the shocking tragedy caused by the Great War but, rather, it antedated this conflict. WWI was merely the climax of commemorative practices that gradually developed in the second half of the nineteenth century and finally boomed during the conflict and its aftermath. In particular, apart from a few previous monuments, it is in the second half of the nineteenth century, especially in the last thirty years, that memorials dedicated to ordinary soldiers were erected in the US and in Europe alike. In both continents, statues of common soldiers began to appear near battlefields and in town squares.

After the American Civil War, for example, several monuments commemorating the service of ordinary soldiers were erected. The basic formula for these memorials was a single infantryman standing up on a column or pedestal with a rifle in his hands. Especially local monuments emphasized not only victory, but also the human cost of war and often listed the names of the community's war dead (Savage, 1997, 162).<sup>2</sup> With a clear political aim, the Germans erected 200 hundred monuments

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<sup>2</sup> It was the American Civil War that led also to a radical change in the disposal of soldiers' corpses.

On the policies regarding the location of the war dead, the identification of their remains, and the



in Alsace Lorraine in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War to remember their soldiers (Becker, 1997, 660). Within only seven years from the end of the conflict, in a struggle over memory that can be truly described as a ‘war fought with other means’, the French responded by building 457 memorials in honour of the war dead and many others in the following years (Varley 2008, 104). The statue of Louis Bogino in Mars-la-Tour, which features an allegory of France supporting a wounded soldier, is illustrative of a combination of traditional themes such as the country and the new one of the ordinary fallen. Further examples of this new attitude toward the commemoration of common soldiers are to be found in the late-nineteenth-century memorials erected by European armies to remember their dead in colonial wars. For instance, a monument dedicated to the Italian soldiers killed in the battle of Dogali, Eritrea, was erected in 1887 in front of the railway station in Rome. In Britain as well, a great outburst of memorial construction occurred after the Boer War, which resulted in the creation of more than 900 monuments in many British cities and villages (Watson and Patrick Porter, 2010, 150).

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burying of their corpses in military cemeteries during the Civil War, see Faust (2008). More generally, from the second half of the nineteenth century soldiers’ body disposal and military funerals have been conducted according to an ambiguous combination of civilian and military rites, the former originating in funerary practices of society at large and the latter in pompous patriotic pride based on nationalist ideology. This epochal shift in soldiers’ body disposal and funerary rites appears to be linked to a more general change in attitudes toward death, which took place since the late eighteenth century, visible in the new location and structure of burial sites (Rugg, 2000, 264), in the new cult of the dead, and in the unprecedented degree of public display of mourning (Ariès, 2009, 67).

Whereas the origins of the cult of the fallen is to be found in the second half of the nineteenth century, the decade after the Great War can truly be described as an age of commemoration. While the state had always created and revered its sacred heroes, the family of holy ancestors was now entirely open to humble and poor combatants. Great generals and war leaders were still honoured, largely through statues, but their number was nothing in comparison to the memorials dedicated to the ordinary fallen. Apart from the sheer number of constructions, a major feature of WWI memorials, which speaks significantly for the new social body of soldiers, is the inscription of combatants' names in the monuments. With the names and sometimes with brief biographical notes, these memorials include the individual life story of the war dead in the collective narrative of the nation. By showing the names of common soldiers, they represent a radical change from the war monuments typical of early modern Europe when only officers enjoyed the privilege of having their names inscribed. The 'hyper-nominalism' to be found in WWI memorials seems to have been affected by a more general strain of sensibility of a social nature, aptly summarized by Thomas Laqueur (1996, 127): 'everyone has a memorable life to live, or in any case the right to a life story'. In other words, whereas combatants used to be considered as mere uniforms and numbers, they were now turned into distinct individuals.

The importance of the common soldier is also strikingly represented by the "invention" of the Unknown Soldier, who was buried in the *Westminster Abbey* in London on Armistice Day, 1920. Before being entombed, the body was brought across the country and at each stop people paid homage to the unnamed combatant. Finally, his corpse was placed next to kings and queens. The same ceremony, on the same day, November 11, 1920, took place in Paris, where the *tombe du Soldat Inconnu* was housed under the Arc de Triomphe. Before then, the outpouring of grief was strictly reserved for 'great men', but now there was a nameless soldier at the centre of public mourning.

These commemorative devices and practices dedicated to common soldiers marked a profound fracture with the past. With the American Civil War, the Franco-Prussian War, and World War I especially, soldiers ceased to be anonymous collection of men and became individuals with a story to be told. On such an epochal shift, Jay Winter (1995) famously argued that WWI memorials were not erected primarily to glorify the dead but rather to soothe the pain of those who had survived. Somehow, according to Winter, they were similar to cenotaphs in that they were empty graves meant to comfort grieving families. However, the objects and rituals of remembrance cannot be reduced to mere mourning practices. In all combatant countries, commemoration was still a political statement aimed to glorify the nation and the greatness of killing and dying in war. Indeed, most WWI memorials are monuments to battle and combat. As George Mosse (1990, 6) explained: ‘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’. WWI memorials celebrate ancestral warlike values highlighting the nobility of dying and killing for the national cause. Moreover, the glorification of the warlike ethos is expressed in a deliberately traditional language. For example, both the Cross of Sacrifice in the Tyne Cot Cemetery near Passchendaele and the Yarmouth memorial visibly embody the association of sacrifice and war, symbolized by a Christian cross and a bronze sword respectively. Likewise, the Douaumont Ossuary in Verdun, where the remains of more than 130,000 French unidentified soldiers were concentrated, is shaped as an artillery shell whose conference is linked by four crosses.

Despite touching the chords of mass bereavement, war memorials extended to common soldiers the old, conventional view of the nobility of arms. In doing so, they did not subvert the time-honoured approach to commemoration; there was no rejection of a long-established language, but rather an extension of the social body to human beings who were previously excluded from its domain. In other words, the individual was not yet elevated above the nation.

## **Irrecoverable Death**

After WWII, numerous memorials were erected all over the world: in capitals, cities, villages, and on major battlefields like at Great Yarmouth where a new monument was built next to the one constructed for WWI. By and large, WWII commemorative practices, like those in the aftermath of the Great War, placed the emphasis on the ordinary fallen. Actually, WWI memorials were often rededicated and adjusted by adding further panels with the names of the new generation of fallen soldiers. Thus, in terms of memory the two world wars seem to be part of a single story whose language and representation did not vary considerably.

In the decades following WWII, however, changes in the nature and form of commemorative practices became evident. The theme of sacrificial death in the symbolic representation of war does not completely disappear after the conflict, but is gradually marginalized. While before the mid-1800s the general notions embodied in war memorials were power and victory through the representation of ‘great men’ and in WWI the death of common soldiers was glorified, now commemoration is largely centred on death as an unforgivable loss. Post-WWII memorials rarely show enemy-killing actions and, more generally, belligerence. Indeed, the iconography of war has shifted from a representation emphasizing violence, aggressiveness and the positive function of blood to one focusing on the sufferance of individual soldiers and civilians alike. As Reinhart Koselleck (2002, 322) noted, post-WWII memorials are ‘negative’ monuments or, as Nathan Glazer put it, they are ‘mute monuments’ (Glazer, 1997, 27). There is comparatively little depiction of combat or potential aggressiveness, and when it is present the human cost of war is never forgotten. In terms of visual representation, war as a glorious killing enterprise has been replaced by a depiction of war centred on pain and grief. In H el ene Puiseux’s words: ‘In the course of two centuries, the representation of war has changed from a heroic depiction of conflict to a heroic depiction of loss, then to the loss of heroism

and to the loss of any meaning' (in Capdevila & Voldman 2006, 15). Not only have victims supplanted warlike heroes, but soldiers' death is no longer presented as a source of national salvation and, as a result, Western soldiers are portrayed as the victims of violence rather than its active, noble perpetrators.

The downgrading of the sacrificial theme in favour of the mourning for the fallen is clear if one looks at recent war memorials in European countries. For example, in the *UK Armed Forces Memorial*, located in Staffordshire and officially dedicated in October 2007, no weapon and combat are in sight. The two main sculptural groups that form the monument show only a fallen man helped by his comrades (i.e. The Gates) and a wounded one being carried by soldiers in the presence of a grieving family (i.e. The Stretcher Bearers). Here, war is portrayed merely as an event of pain and loss rather than as a noble fight for the country. This memorial shows that the myth of sacrificial death in war, once regarded as the supreme and most noble sacrifice, has been replaced by images of soldiers as victims of war. Further examples of this attitude to war commemoration are too numerous to be presented in much detail, but, as we shall see below, nowhere is this approach crystallized more effectively than in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM) located in Washington, D.C.

#### *The pre-eminence of individual mourning*

In its original version the VVM consisted only of the Memorial Wall on which the names of the American fallen are inscribed. The names are listed in chronological order by date of casualty; no information about rank and unit is provided. The VVM was a purely funerary monument which, by showing only the names and dates of death of the fallen, called attention only to grief without presenting any visible justification of the war. Not surprisingly, the purely funerary nature of the VVM was interpreted as questioning war itself and created a torrent of criticism (Wagner-Pacifici &

Schwartz, 1991, 395). Political pressure forced the US Commission of Fine Arts to modify the original project. Thus, in 1984, two further components were added to the memorial originally erected: an American flag and a statue of three soldiers returning from patrol. With these additions, not only death was represented, but also traditional images of the nation and potential combat.

Such a return to WWI-like commemoration is certainly a departure from what seemed to some as a pacifist bias of the original version of the VVM. However, even the second and final version does not imply a real revival of the patriotic certainties of the past. Firstly, soldiers are not in the martial or attacking posture of many WWI monuments. They are simply tiredly advancing over the open field looking at the wall (i.e. at the dead). There is neither a depiction of active combat nor a representation of actual violence. Secondly and more importantly, the three soldiers have been placed at a distance from the memorial, and not at the apex, as Frederick Hart, the sculptor of the three *Fightingmen*, suggested and as it was fairly common in WWI monuments. Soldiers and weapons could still be represented, but no more at the centre of the memorial.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Unlike the VVM, both in the Korean War Veterans Memorial and in the National World War II Memorial the conflicts are commemorated through conventional patriotic devices (e.g. statues of soldiers, military service seals, panels depicting the mobilization of American society, granite arches representing victory, etc.), which appear to subordinate the individual soldier to the nation. Although such an approach seems to contradict the post-WWII ‘negative’ culture of commemoration, these two memorials are not monuments to the beauty of dying on the battlefield. The scenes of warfare and potential engagement represented in the memorials provide a descriptive account of the war effort, but they do not portray war as a glorious killing enterprise. The classical architecture of the National World War II Memorial may appear at first glance as a tribute to the American nation (Doss, 2008),

By referring only to the dead without a noble cause for the supreme sacrifice, the VVM appears to embody the latest stage of development in war commemoration, which in the early modern period excluded rank and files and now virtually refers only to their death. While the original cult of the fallen was closely linked to the nation, it progressively lost its traditional meaning after WWII and is now primarily related to grief and loss for a life that came to a premature end. Thus, the VVM and other recent memorials should be understood not as a peculiar way to commemorate war, but rather as the latest chapter in the changing meaning of the social body of soldiers. As we shall see in the following section, such a change in attitudes is visible also in how Western states use the natural bodies of soldiers in war. In particular, combatants are no longer considered as mere instruments of statecraft, but rather as ends in themselves whose precious life must be protected on the battlefield.

### *The Rise of Casualty Sensitivity*

When the Great War came to an end with nearly nine million dead and thirty million wounded, a widespread revulsion against war emerged in countries like France, Britain, and the United States, in which the prospect of another military catastrophe seemed utterly unthinkable. Yet, twenty-one years later, World War II broke out. For the theme of this research WWII looks like a period of transition with the first signs of a new way of fighting based on the removal of soldiers from the battlefield. As Adrian Lewis (2007, 42) argues, the shift toward greater use of firepower during the conflict was primarily meant ‘to reduce casualties and save lives’.

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but there is none of the exaltation of martyrdom typical of WWI monuments.

Although it would be an overstatement to argue that long-range bombing and nuclear attacks in WWII were early instances of what is now termed casualty sensitivity – for, both the US and some of its allies sacrificed large numbers of combatants to defeat the Axis powers –, Lewis appears to be perfectly right when he argues that WWII started a process of transformation that would ultimately lead to the marginalization of ground forces on the battlefield. As a matter of fact, in the decades following WWII the sacralization of soldiers did not merely concern their dead social bodies but also their natural, living bodies. As the Cold War proceeded, Western states became gradually more sensitive to friendly casualties and increasingly concerned with the protection of their soldiers. That does not imply that a handful of friendly casualties are considered intolerable by Western states and societies, but it does mean that casualties have become a paramount and unprecedented concern.

While the number of wars waged by Western states show that casualty sensitivity does not seem to have reduced the proclivity toward the use of force abroad, it has, however, had three main effects on how warfare is conducted: a preference for waging war from a safe distance, the reliance on indigenous forces when land warfare is inevitable, and finally the use of force protection measures to safeguard soldiers' lives when the use of ground troops cannot be avoided.

### *Irrecoverable Death in War*

Since the Korean war, Western states have heavily relied on air power in order to reduce military fatalities. After the conflict, as Lewis (2007, 84) noted, the 'citizen-soldier Army of the United States would never again fight a major war with offensive strategy and doctrine. In 1951, major limited wars came to mean a strategically defensive ground war in which the Army was not supposed to produce victory'. In the following years air power has gradually become the US favourite instrument of



strategic offense. Not coincidentally, the US Air Force dropped seven million tons of explosives over Vietnam, roughly five times the amount discharged by Anglo-American forces during WWII.

The reliance on air power for reducing friendly casualties is even more evident in the post-Cold War period. It is no coincidence that in every major recent intervention involving Western countries, from Bosnia to Libya, the use of long-distance missiles launched by land, sea and air has played a dominant role. Moreover, in operations such as Deliberate Force, Infinite Reach, Desert Fox, Allied Force, and Unified Protector the exclusive reliance on air power made it possible to keep Western combatants outside the war zone. For attacking from afar makes it possible to have fewer soldiers exposed to danger and, thus, few or no casualties. As unambiguously stated in the *Kosovo/Operation Allied Force After-Action Report* (2000, 108) to the United States Congress, the ‘paramount lesson learned from Operation Allied Force is that the well-being of our people must remain our first priority’.

The possibility of putting the living flesh of soldiers out of harm’s way seems also one of the main reasons behind the increasing use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), popularly known as drones. Like ballistic missiles and all types of remote warfare, UAVs avoid a direct link of reciprocity between those who trigger the weapon and the target. As an Air Force officer put it, ‘[t]he real advantage of unmanned aerial systems is that they allow you to project power without projecting vulnerability’ (in Chamayou, 2015, 12).

Removing troops from the battlefield by means of air power is not the only way to limit casualties. When land combat is inevitable, Western states heavily rely on indigenous forces to carry out their military operations. Although they advise, train, and supply most of the heavy weaponry, it is up to local actors to provide forces on the ground. Indigenous forces, in alliance with Western states, played a major role in many post-Cold War conflicts: the Croatian army and Bosnian militias in former Yugoslavia, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) against Milosevic’s Serbia, the Northern

Alliance in Afghanistan, and *Peshmerga* and Iraqi forces in the conflict against ISIS. Indigenous forces are advantageous not only in view of their familiarity with the local terrain, but because they put up with the suffering which Americans and Europeans are not ready to bear. In a comment on General Frank's decision to employ the Northern Alliance against the Taliban, US general Michael DeLong was unequivocal in emphasizing this reason: 'from our perspective, it was still less than it would have cost to put even one U.S. battalion on the ground. In that sense, it was a bargain – and more important, it would help keep thousands of U.S. soldiers out of harm's way' (in Buley, 2008, 115).

Finally, minimizing casualties is also attempted when Western troops are used on the ground. For, deploying ground troops is not the same as exposing them to lethal danger. As a matter of fact, soldiers can be employed in a variety of ways that minimize the probability of being killed and injured. As soldiers are no more regarded as cannon fodder, their protection is not automatically withdrawn when they are sent into the war theatre. The third main feature of current Western warfare is, indeed, the use of force protection measures. While in the past this policy mainly used to deal with the defence of military installations and bases, with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan force protection has been turned into a major mission in combat operations too. Force protection is an overall notion that covers all those measures that are taken to minimize soldiers' exposure to enemy fire. Above all, it implies a separation or at least a distancing between ground troops, who live in relatively safe and well protected compounds and military bases, and the civilian population who is constantly at risk of being targeted by enemy combatants and insurgents. By limiting contacts with the local population, the possibility of surprise attacks, ambushes and hostile "hit and run" assaults is greatly reduced for Western soldiers. Force protection might also concern major tactical devices regarding rules of engagement (e.g., checkpoint protocols, targeting, urban combat) and decisions on weaponeering. In

particular, it ensures rules of engagement regarding checkpoint protocols and urban warfare, which can lower the threshold for the use of force (Smith, 2008).<sup>4</sup>

Finally, it should be noted that behind many ongoing and future developments in the military industry there lies a force protection logic. Automation of warfare through UAVs, UCVs (unmanned combat vehicles), and robotic weapons systems is the latest chapter in the attempt to remove soldiers from the battlefield. As one American official wrote in 2005, the whole rationale ‘is that the President will wake up some day and decide he doesn’t like the cut of someone’s jib and send thither infinite numbers of Myrmidons – robotic warriors – and that we could wage a war in which we wouldn’t put at risk our precious skin’ (in Coker, 2007, 119).

These three military policies have made it possible to reduce casualties to extremely low levels. In present-day conflicts the death tolls for American and European countries went from zero in Kosovo and Libya, where only airpower was used, to a few thousands in Iraq and Afghanistan. This may seem a large number by today’s standards, but, in actual fact, it is an extremely low human cost in historical terms.

## **Conclusion**

This inquiry has offered an insight into how the Western soldier has been turned from a mere fighting tool into a precious individual. Tracing the origins and development of this process is not only an important chapter in modern and contemporary history. Indeed, the perspective on the soldier’s two bodies can broaden and enrich our understanding of the nature of the present Western way of war

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<sup>4</sup> As noted by a number of scholars (i.e. Shaw 2005), force protection has moved the burden of war from (Western) soldiers to civilians in the zone of war.

and, in particular, lend us an interesting perspective on current phenomena like casualty sensitivity, post-heroic warfare, and the increasing reliance on casualty-avoiding methods of warfare. Moreover, the analysis does not only advance the knowledge in an understudied area of inquiry, but it also opens several avenues for future research, especially within a comparative perspective with those cultures that diverge from the developments described above.

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