

Excavating Soldier Deaths: A Study of Changing Burial Practices

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This study argues that warfare is permeated by attitudes toward death, and that the history of war is also a history of these changing attitudes. By focusing on body disposal and burial practices, the article traces when and how soldiers—once regarded as simple military instruments—started to be conceived as individuals qua individuals, eventually becoming the hardly expendable beings that we know today. Although a focus on disposal and burial practices might sound fanciful, how corpses are dealt with can suggest whether, and in what ways, individuals are important to the living. It can also shed light on the origins of a variety of current phenomena, such as casualty sensitivity, post-heroic warfare, and risk-transfer militarism.

In his controversial *Medical Nemesis*, social thinker Ivan Illich (1976, 172) famously argued that all “disease is a socially created reality.” Without having to fully agree with such a contentious assertion, we can suggest that life and death are also social constructions, in that the physical reality of dying has taken on a variety of meanings across time and societies. Along with modifications in meaning, practices toward life and death have also changed—take, for instance, the major ethical issues of abortion, birth technology, suicidal assistance, genetic engineering, and capital punishment. One of these changing practices regards how states fight in war. It is the main argument of this paper that warfare is permeated by attitudes toward death, and that the history of war is also a history of these changing attitudes.

The main goal of the article is to trace when and how Western soldiers—once regarded as simple *fighting tools*—became the hardly expendable beings that we know today. I argue that such a major transformation is largely the result of a shift in the social meaning attached to soldiers’ deaths. By looking at death as a cultural artefact whose meaning has historically changed, this inquiry intends to partially fill a void in International Relations (IR) theory by marking out a field of research that has so far received little attention. As Jessica Auchter (2015, 129) rightly noted, one of the greatest paradoxes of IR theory lies in the fact that its “primary objects of study,” “namely, conflict and war, produce dead bodies en masse, yet” IR has failed “to examine dead bodies in their complex potential.”

Author’s note: This study is part of a broader inquiry on the changing meaning of soldiers’ death. For extensive comments on the overall research, I’d like to thank Ted Hop, Konstantin Vössing, and Alex Wendt. A previous version of this article was delivered at the Annual Conference of the Italian Standing Group on International Relations (SGRI), Fondazione Bruno Kessler, Trent, Italy (June 23, 2016). I am thankful to Michele Chiaruzzi for inviting me to contribute to the panel “Questioni di suprema importanza” and to the other participants, especially to Filippo Andreatta. I also owe particular thanks to Lelio Pallini for his helpful suggestions. Thanks also to the editors of *International Political Sociology* and to two anonymous reviewers for their insightful criticisms. Funding was provided by the Ministero dell’Istruzione, dell’Università e della Ricerca (2015FR7MKM).

Zambernardi, Lorenzo (2017) Excavating Soldier Deaths: A Study of Changing Burial Practices. *International Political Sociology*, doi: 10.1093/ips/olx012
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As a matter of fact, although experts of international politics have explored the problem of counting and explaining casualties in armed conflicts (e.g., [Valentino 2004](#); [Lacina and Gleditsch 2005](#)), they have so far disregarded the study of death—a fertile and promising area of inquiry.¹

The present study is situated in the field of the sociology of war, whose basic proposition is that in order to understand war it is necessary to keep society and armed conflict within the same analytic framework ([Kestnbaum 2005](#); [Malešević 2010](#); [Wimmer 2014](#)). By interpreting war as an extension of society, this area of research regards warfare as something more than technological, tactical, and strategic processes. Unlike some works in the field, however, this paper does not look at the generative and transformative power of war over social relations, but rather it explores how changing notions of the subject (i.e., the soldier) at the social level have shaped the conduct of war.

The research moves back and forth between sociology and anthropology and between cultural and military history; it is an interdisciplinary work of synthesis, drawing together research from fields that have hitherto not been able to communicate adequately. In particular, the analysis relies on the theoretical contribution offered by the flourishing sociological and anthropological literature on “the body” and “death.” In this fast-growing area of study, many investigations focus on the psychological relationship between the living and the dead, on the dying process, on grief reactions, and so on. Other studies, in turn, look at more political issues, such as the role of death in the construction of social order ([Verdery 1999](#); [Crossland 2000](#)), as a key element in the building process of the colonial state ([Lomnitz 2005](#)), and as a tool to reinforce racial segregation ([Dennie 2009](#)).

Within this multifaceted field of analysis there is also a growing body of work inspired by Foucault’s notion of biopolitics (2003), Agamben’s idea of thanatopolitics (1998), and Achille Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics (2003), which shows how one of the crucial factors of modern sovereignty is the creation of various types of subjectivities characterized by different degrees of exposure to death ([Doty 2011](#); [Robben 2014](#); [Steputtat 2014](#); [Ferrándiz and Robben 2015](#); [Squire 2016](#)). Although this important scholarship looks at how lives are framed as “disposable,” its perspective can also help us understand what can be seen as the reverse process through which Western soldiers have been turned from “expendable” beings into individuals whose lives must be protected in war.

In order to avoid being accused of resorting to an excessively anecdotal approach, this study is organized around a specific type of evidence that can help us reconstruct the changing meaning of soldiers’ deaths: disposal and burial practices and the related funerary rites. Although such a focus might sound fanciful, how corpses are dealt with offers interesting evidence on how life and death are thought of and valued. Indeed, while arranging a proper burial is not necessary for the dead themselves, how disposal and funerals are organized suggests whether, and in what way, individuals are important to the living. The narrative emerging from this empirical evidence will show that the story about attitudes toward soldiers’ deaths is one of a gradual, increasing process of individualization in the social meaning attached to human loss in war.

Before describing the structure of the paper, two further points are worth mentioning. First, though there are remarkable and interesting variations in the attitudes toward death in different cultures, the emphasis here is placed on the historical variation in Western Europe and the United States. As far as the history of soldiers’ death in war is concerned, this geographical area appears to show profound cultural homogeneity. Second, the whole period is not meant to be surveyed with equal attention. Rather than aspire to any systematic account of

¹Notable exceptions are [Zehfuss \(2009\)](#); [Wasinski \(2008, 2011\)](#); and [Levy \(2012\)](#).

attitudes toward death, the present analysis focuses on the salient stages where a certain practice emerged. For obvious reasons of space, telling the whole story is hardly possible in one article. Thus, differences in emphasis and discussion of particular periods reflect their relevance for the phenomena at issue.

The article is organized as follows. In section one, I discuss the importance of disposal and burial practices for reconstructing the social meaning of soldiers' deaths. Relying on a growing scholarship on the corpse, this part will provide a few theoretical insights into the ensuing historical analysis. Section two is concerned with attitudes toward soldiers' deaths in the early modern period. This first episode of the story, up until the nineteenth century, is relatively uncomplicated: commoners were conceived as an anonymous collectivity and their death as a socially meaningless cessation. In section three, the changes that took place in the mid-nineteenth century will be discussed to argue that a radical modification took place in the meaning attached to soldiers' deaths. It was in that period that the death of soldiers ceased to be socially meaningless and started to have public importance. During and after the American Civil War, the Franco-Prussian conflict, and WWI, not only did a veritable "cult of the war dead" develop but, when possible, the fallen were identified and then buried in an individualized way. It should be stressed that soldiers were not merely lamented in funerary practices, but primarily glorified and celebrated. At that time, combatants' death was portrayed as a beautiful act of love for the good of the nation, rather than as an unforgivable loss. Finally, section four focuses on the second and most recent significant change in attitudes toward soldiers' deaths, a change that gradually developed in the decades following the end of WWII and fully emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. In this period, not only can we observe an increased focus on, and care for, combatants' human remains, but we can also record a view of the soldier as a unique being with a particular, distinct identity that needed to be preserved after death.

It should be emphasized at the outset that this contribution is not a mere historical study. Besides offering a novel perspective from which to understand the familiar phenomenon of death in war, the article will show how Western warfare has been shaped by the development of soldiers' individualization. By tracing the process through which soldiers have been turned from an amorphous collectivity into distinct individuals, the present research sheds light on the origins of a variety of phenomena that significantly affect war in the current world, such as "casualty sensitivity" (Mueller 1973), "post-heroic warfare" (Luttwak 1995), "risk-transfer militarism" (Shaw 2005), and the range of military practices that are meant to minimize friendly casualties (Smith 2008).

Recovering the Changing Meaning of Death

Human societies have been ambivalent toward the corpse. It has been seen as polluting and burdensome trash to get rid of, a sacred body to be honored and worshipped (Laderman 1996), a commodity with monetary value (Scheper-Hughes and Wacquant 2002), and a part of nature that should simply return to the earth and foster the food chain (Plumwood 2008). Whether the corpse is something important and meaningful or totally insignificant for a particular community is generally a social outcome, not a natural occurrence. The body always goes back to nature, but how the transition takes place is a human decision, usually rooted in culture. Indeed, the disposal of human bodies before they decay is also a social and cultural turning point. As recent scholarship on the body has shown, the study of corpses is a potentially rich avenue for social and political inquiry. Especially today, as Foltyn (2008, 99) points out, the "human corpse, and its social meanings and how it should be valued, discussed, disposed of, imaged, and used,

is a critical subject, generating public debate, enormous media attention, and corporate interest.”

Alongside disposal practices, important clues to the meaning attached to death are also given by grave markers and cemeteries; despite differences among cultures and societies, these remain loci for mourning and remembrance. Cemeteries are complex human and cultural creations, which express via their location, shape, inscriptions, and symbols certain attitudes towards the dead. As Eva Reimers (1999, 150) suggests, a cemetery can be read “as a cultural text about society and the individuals that have found their last place of rest in its burial lots.”

Funerals are also complex events that range from a purely private rite of mourning for family and friends, to a public ceremony meant to affirm particular values such as authority, political hierarchies, and social bonding (Huntington 1973). Although the dead person is at the center of the funeral, the focus of the latter is directed from the deceased to the world of the living. Funerals, especially in the modern era, have been organized more to reassure the bereaved than to stand by the dead. This is especially true for state funerals, which are theatrical rituals with important political effects. They are generally characterized by solemn ceremonies exalting heroic and civic virtue and the deeds of great men or women. By bringing the nation together, these *fêtes funèbres* are intended to create unity, to renew the social pact, and—as an educational tool—to inculcate citizens with values of national identity.

In order to appreciate the importance of disposal and funerary practices for understanding attitudes toward death, it is necessary to move beyond the notion of death as the “Great Leveler.” Apart from emergency situations—such as epidemics—when bodies piled up, death has never been a condition for the erasure of social and political differences. While everyone is doomed to die and the socially undifferentiated universality of death cannot be denied, mortality has always affected people unevenly. Moreover, and interestingly for the present account, the way the body has been disposed of, and the related funeral rites, have all been historically unequal. Although literary critic Robert Pogue Harrison (2003, xi) justly contends that to “be human means above all to bury,” how burials have been carried out and arranged has greatly varied throughout history and across societies. With a few distinctions, burials and funerals have always signified the social identities and walks of life of the deceased and have been employed to commemorate their worldly success or failure (Llewellyn 1991, 60). Hence, disposal and funerary practices reflect the unspoken but visible status of individuals in different times and across societies. Likewise, they appear to provide evidence for the changing status of the soldier. In fact, it might be suggested that the way the bodies of fallen soldiers are dealt with is a mirror of how their lives are regarded and valued.

On the basis of this brief analysis of body disposal and the related funerary rites, we can make sense of the way soldiers’ corpses have been treated in the early modern and contemporary ages. Thus, the broad trends that have characterized attitudes toward soldiers’ deaths over the course of history can now be described, with details of their changes and continuities.

Like Animal Carcasses: Soldiers as an Anonymous Collectivity

In the summer of 1750, during a visit to the battlefields of Flanders, Voltaire noticed the absence of markers of burial places and remarked that there “was nothing there anymore; everything was covered by the most beautiful wheat in the world; the Flemings danced as if nothing had ever happened” (in Troyansky 1987, 121). No indication of carnage was visible, no crosses, no reminders of the conflict, nothing at all. This was not a time when the battlefield was a landscape

of memory and remembrance; in fact, it was remarkable only for its pastoral serenity. Not much was owed to the ranks when alive, and nothing, as far as Voltaire could tell, when they were dead: not even a tomb.

Almost two centuries later, Edward Steere (1948, 149), who was engaged in research in the Historical Section of the US Office of the Quartermaster General, lamented that although “many glorious memorials have been erected in ancient and modern times to commemorate the fame of great statesmen and soldiers, it is a melancholy fact that only within the past hundred years has any government been willing or able to assume the obligation of identifying and burying in registered graves the remains of all who gave up their lives in war.” Indeed, before the mid-nineteenth century, the war dead were not buried in individual, registered graves in military or civilian cemeteries. Rather, they were hastily interred either in the proximity of the battlefield in individual unmarked burials or, most often, in shallow mass graves. At best, burial of the war dead was regarded as a problem of sanitation, rather than a social requirement. Corpses were thrown into a pit and tumbled together into complete oblivion. There were no military cemeteries, just excavated holes where bodies were simply left to rot without causing miasma. If the victorious army did not take charge of burial operations, then the local population was supposed to provide the service. In these cases, by the time soldiers were buried, their bodies had already rotted. Soldiers were regarded as “food for worms” and battlefields were receptacles of putrefying human flesh.

Even the heroes of the American Revolution—men who had fought to establish the first democracy in the “new world”—did not deserve the privilege of individualized burials (Cox 2004, 163–98). During that conflict, as in early modern Europe, most of the war dead were buried in trenches and mass graves and such a “gruesome and nauseous job was done with haste rather than reverence” (Robertson 1998, 225). Even outside the battlefield, soldiers’ deaths remained unnoted. For instance, at Valley Forge, the site of the camp of the American Continental Army during the harsh winter of 1777–1778, none of the 3,000 soldiers who died of starvation and disease were buried in individualized, marked graves.²

In the first half of the nineteenth century, mass graves were still the most common type of burial employed in war. In countless instances, the war dead did not receive an orderly or dignified disposal. For example, after the battle of Austerlitz, in 1805, the 18,000 victims were interred in twenty-five mass graves (in Rigeade 2008); likewise, after the epic clash of Waterloo, as the English novelist William Makepeace Thackeray lamented, commoners were “shoveled into a hole . . . and so forgotten” (in Blunden 2003, 232–233).

The alternative to mass graves was not individual burial, but rather destruction through fire. Such a practice, which belongs to a long history of emergency situations such as epidemics, natural disasters, and—obviously enough—war, was used in the early modern period and even during the second half of the nineteenth century. After the battle of Sedan, for instance, the Belgian government dispatched Colonel Creteur to cremate the decaying cadavers of German soldiers who were covered only by a thin layer of soil (Erichsen 1887, 136–38).

As a result of mass burials and mass cremation, most men from the ranks perished anonymously. The absence of military cemeteries and individualized graves does not imply that families were unmoved by the death of their loved ones, but it was certainly clear that marking the location of the physical remains of the war dead was regarded by states as utterly unimportant.³ Moreover, disrespect for the

²According to Thomas Laqueur (1994, 158), only the burial of a lieutenant from Rhode Island was marked.

³It should also be noted that the ordinary fallen were not included in commemorative practices, as testified by the total absence of monuments dedicated to commoners in the early modern period. As J. R. Hale (1985, 84) maintained, in early modern Europe we “are not to expect village war memorials, let alone tombs for the ‘unknown soldier.’”

dead was such that bodies were not only regularly robbed of their personal effects, but physical parts such as teeth were also removed and sold on the market (Summers 2010, 11). At the time it was considered perfectly normal to pick up a tooth on a battlefield and embed it into the mouth of another man, as happened in January 1816 to the war correspondent and diarist Henry Crabb Robinson (Semmel 2000, 9). It was also considered perfectly normal that, after the battle of Waterloo, “English contractors collected the bones of the dead from both sides, ground them up, and sold them to fertilize English gardens” (Ignatieff in Gray 2003, 218).

That was a time when human life was worth very little and indifference to death in war was the norm. Preserving the life of commoners was not a guiding principle in military decisions and tactics. Although more soldiers meant more combat power, commanders wantonly sacrificed their men to slaughter if military necessity required it. War was a “royal sport” and expending soldiers was one of its basic components. To borrow a popular chess analogy, one might argue that the survival of the pawns was not, in itself, important, but only in order to succeed in the great game of war. Indeed, in spite of the stereotype that describes eighteenth-century warfare as restrained, war in that age was far from limited in terms of casualties (Strachan 1983). Available figures suggest that the eighteenth-century ratio of combat deaths to the total population of Europe was seven times as high as the rate recorded in the nineteenth century (Showalter and Astore 2007, 67). If there were any limits or instances of “fair play,” they were mainly reserved for the world of gentlemen. The “commendable practices” of warfare and the “high degree of courtesy” exhibited in war, noted in a variety of distinguished sources, were, in fact, limited to the officer corps.

In the early modern world, the only bodies that mattered were those of the most illustrious and politically important dead. In contrast, commoners were social outcasts who were marked, even in death, as socially worthless individuals and whose corpses were disposed of in ways similar to animal carcasses. Soldiers’ decomposing bodies were regarded with total indifference by society, an attitude that would be considered ruthless and socially unacceptable by present-day standards.

As mentioned, the only concern in burial practices was “to sort our noble from our common men”—as the French asked Henry V after the battle of Agincourt (1415) (in Blunden 2003, 232–233). Such a discriminatory practice was still in use in the eighteenth century, as can be extrapolated from the orders of Lieutenant-Colonel Hans Friedrich von Leming. Thus, in 1726, von Leming requested his higher command both to prevent “the dead from being plundered because wounded officers are sometimes killed so that they may be stripped of their possessions” and to “inform the enemy that the dead are to be buried so that they may come and look for high-ranking individuals who have been declared missing” (in Capdevila and Voldman 2006, 39).

In a strictly hierarchical society, some individuals mattered more than others, and some bodies were more bodies than others. Members of the officer corps maintained in death the privileges of wealth and rank they possessed in life. Thus, it is not at all surprising that the first military category who were granted single graves were those “men of birth,” generals and officers, who had been their commanders’ only real concern when alive. In the United States, where the aristocracy of birth was replaced by the aristocracy of money, only wealthy families could finance the return of their loved ones during, and in the aftermath of, armed conflicts such as the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the Seminole Wars (Sledge 2005, 32). While death has often been portrayed as a leveler of human beings, the way in which the corpses of ordinary soldiers were dealt with was significantly different to the affluent dead. Commoners, largely recruited

either from the countryside (Hale 1985, 124–25) or from the laboring masses in the towns, were perceived as the scum of the earth and treated accordingly: as an anonymous, amorphous collectivity.

This disjuncture between attitudes toward the death of a commoner and that of a military commander was also strikingly visible during funerary rites. In early modern Europe there was a sharp contrast between the care displayed at the death of a member of the officer corps and the brutal disregard for the remains of an ordinary soldier. Ceremonies for generals in particular could be incredible displays of splendor and riches. Suffice to mention one of the most startling military funerals ever organized, that of the Duke of Wellington in 1852. Over a million people thronged the streets of London (Holmes 2003, 298) in a spectacular ritual of public grief in which the British people gave the last salute to the “savior of Europe” and “the greatest of living men,” as Wellington was known at the time of his death.

That the powerless and lower orders were written out of the historical record is not surprising, but it should be noted that the social status of the common soldier in early modern Europe reached one of its lowest levels in history. In France, the *Decree of 23 Prairial, year XII* (June 12, 1804), rendered the common soldier’s status even lower than that of the poor; the decree made it compulsory for each civilian corpse to have a coffin and required that bodies buried in mass graves, including those of paupers, be placed side by side rather than on top of each other (Ariès 1981, 516–20). Thus, when it came to mortuary practices, soldiers in the early modern period were treated as the poorest of the poor. Having had a miserable life and a miserable death, they did not deserve better than a miserable disposal.

The Rise of the Cult of the Fallen

In 1847, the remains of forty-two American soldiers who had fallen in the war with Mexico (1846–1847) were recovered from their battlefield graves and laid to rest in the state cemetery of Frankfort, Kentucky. Three years later, in 1850, the first American war cemetery was created in Mexico City, where the bones of officers and common soldiers were moved from the city garbage dump and buried in a mass grave (Piehler 1995, 40–41). Notwithstanding these significant examples, it was the American Civil War that led to a radical break in the history of the disposal of soldiers’ corpses. While only six percent of the fallen in the Mexican war were retrieved and reinterred, the issue of locating the dead, identifying their remains, and burying their corpses in military cemeteries was a central policy during the Civil War and its aftermath.

In 1862, when warfare was intensifying and casualties were mounting, Congress empowered the president to purchase burial grounds for those who had perished in combat. In the same year, the War Department requested the Quartermaster General to supply military hospitals with appropriate forms so that the war dead could be recorded. The goal was twofold: first, to give proper, dignified burials to the dead, and second, to identify their mortal remains.

Alongside commanders in the field, charged with identifying and burying fallen soldiers, the introduction of the Graves Registration Service in July 1864 (Steere 1948, 151–56) saw the disinterring, collection, and identification of the war dead and the relocation of their remains become a governmental responsibility and a federal policy; this in turn created a massive program of reburial and the establishment of several national cemeteries. As only single burials could secure the identities of the deceased and their remembrance, in 1866 Congress established that all Union soldiers were to be buried in a permanent, individual way (Piehler 1995, 168). Thanks to that innovation, graves in Civil War cemeteries are

numbered and the individuality of the dead, when known, is preserved in written records of the names of the buried.

When the conflict was over, however, a huge number of bodies remained unidentified: approximately 170,000 Union dead were either missing or unnamed at the end of the recovery operations in 1871. The sheer quantity of corpses, combined with the unpreparedness of the administrative machine, made it impossible to increase the numbers identified and decently buried. The fact that both North and South failed to keep records of the dead and to offer respectful burials for many of the fallen proves that this was due to a lack of administrative capacity rather than the traditional disregard for the war dead (Faust 2008, 65). Despite administrative shortcomings, improvements in the treatment of soldiers' corpses were striking when compared with the past. Decently disposing of, and burying, the war dead in identifiable ways was a social demand that governments could not escape. In the aftermath of the Civil War, more than ever before, Americans were not willing to accept the disregard that characterized the policy the authorities had hitherto followed. Even grave markers had to be adapted to the new sensibility. As Union James J. observed in 1866:

Public opinion seems to be turning to a more permanent mode of marking the graves than by wooden head-boards, and I would respectfully give it as my opinion that the sentiment of the nation will not only sustain the expense of marble or other permanent memorial, but, moreover, that it will be likely to demand it in a few years, if not now established. (Steere 1948, 160–61)

Nineteenth-century Americans displayed an unprecedented interest in a respectable burial for their fallen relatives. Governmental agencies, hospital nurses, and members of the Sanitary Commission and the Christian Commission tried their best to secure proper, decent entombments. Overall, in the decade following the end of the conflict, 300,000 corpses were reinterred. As Quartermaster Edmund B. Whitman rightly noted, such “a consecration of a nation’s power and resources to a sentiment, the world has never witnessed” (in Poole 2009, 72). Although Civil War soldiers were highly expendable on the battlefield, recording their names marked out the oneness of each of the known dead, turning them from mere uniforms and numbers into persons with a right to be remembered as individuals.⁴

Military Cemeteries in Western Europe

In the second half of the nineteenth century, a similar process of individualization can be recorded in Europe. In particular, as a result of the Franco-Prussian war, Prussia established its first military cemetery (Grant 2005, 510). During the German wars of liberation against Napoleon, a few cemeteries “were made here and there,” but there was no systematic policy for the disposal of the war dead. For, as “late as the Franco-Prussian war the bodies of soldiers were usually left to decay where they had fallen, or their bones collected in a nearby charnel-house” (Mosse 1990, 8). From the start of the Franco-Prussian war, though, it was the non-democratic Prussia that planned to offer a decent disposal for her fallen men. Unlike France, the Prussian army provided soldiers with identity tags in order to identify the dead more easily (Elliot 1999). During the war, soldiers’ burials were marked with improvised crosses and, when known, the names of the fallen were written on paper and stuck on crosses with sealing wax. Moreover, the

⁴The emerging “democracy of death,” however, did not completely erase social differences between officers and enlisted men. In the Civil War, too, officers received privileged treatment in comparison to the average soldier (Faust 2008, 80). Furthermore, racism affected the removal of the dead and the return of bodies; even the reburial program of the Union discriminated between races. Finally, it should be noted that the reburial policy largely concerned the fallen for the Union (Neff 2005, 132).

Treaty of Frankfurt between Prussia and France at the end of the conflict established, in Art. 16, the mutual respect and maintenance of soldiers' graves (Becker 1997, 659).

Thus, by the eve of WWI, despite many shortcomings, the practice of burying soldiers in military cemeteries had been introduced in Europe. Unsurprisingly, finding soldiers' corpses and interring their remains became a major issue in all the countries that fought in the Great War. Right from the start of the war, Britain established a set of policies for the disposal of the dead. In 1914, Kitchener created a mobile unit with the task of searching for, identifying, and marking the corpses of the fallen. By March 1915, the Red Cross units in charge of body disposal were reorganized as the Graves Registration Commission (Laqueur 1994, 153). In 1916, as the number of casualties mounted, combatants were buried where they had fallen, but a year later a number of measures were implemented to simplify the concentration and identification of the fallen from Britain, the Dominions, and the Empire. It was one of the main goals of these policies to record the names of the dead and preserve their identities.⁵

Initially, relatives' requests for individualized burials were not part of the agenda of the French political and military leadership. At the beginning of the war, French military regulations for the burial of enlisted men envisaged the use of common graves, which they regarded as an appropriate way of dealing with the corpses of the war dead. However, French society was outraged by the idea and stood up against it. The disposal of soldiers' bodies was to conform to civilian practices in peacetime, which meant that corpses should at least be placed in single coffins after identification. Only after "bitter negotiations between the society at large and the civil and military authorities" (Capdevila and Voldman 2006, 46) did the government meet citizens' demands.

As in the previous epoch, however, mass graves also had to be used in WWI, especially when surviving comrades interred the dead in what was termed *burial d'urgence*. However, in WWI *fosse commune* were considered temporary gravesites and the survivors were expected to handle each corpse as carefully as possible. Thanks to the use of identity discs, cadavers interred in temporary burials were expected to be relocated to proper military cemeteries at the end of hostilities. The fact that the bodies of the fallen in WWI cemeteries were sometimes buried in communal graves, with headstones arranged in rows to give the false impression that each man had his own individual burial (Fussell 2000, 6), is telling about how the reality of anonymous death in war needed to be reconciled with the social requirements of a proper, individualized grave. Even in the case of the German Totenburg, where the fallen were buried in mass graves under constructions that resembled medieval fortresses (Mosse 1990, 86), the names of the individual dead were nevertheless listed.

The issue of military cemeteries was prominent in the postwar period as well and, significantly, was given some space in the Treaty of Versailles, whose Art. 225 specifies that "Allied and Associated Governments and the German Government will cause to be respected and maintained the graves of soldiers and sailors buried in their respective territories." In most warring nations, the search for, and identification of, dead soldiers continued long after the conflict ended. Corpses were exhumed, then named and, when feasible, reinterred individually. After the war, the US government arranged for its fallen soldiers to be exhumed and shipped back home if their families wished it. Those who were not reclaimed and buried on Allied soil were concentrated in eight permanent cemeteries. In the summer of 1919 the British, instead, decided to forbid exhumation of their soldiers' remains, to build war cemeteries abroad, and to erect war memorials at home where

⁵Despite the egalitarian attitude of British burial and commemorative policies, outside Europe the Imperial War Graves Commission discriminated on the basis of "race and creed" (Barrett 2014).

relatives could mourn their loved ones (Longworth 2003, 14). Burial policies in France were far more complicated. While during the war the French government had forbidden exhumation of soldiers' remains, in 1920—after a period of illegal exhumation (Sherman 1998, 451)—the government recognized families' right to claim the bodies of their loved ones at state expense. By the beginning of 1923 the process was finally completed, with 240,000 coffins returned to the families—that is, only thirty-four percent of the approximately 700,000 identified fallen soldiers whose relatives were entitled to repatriation (Smith, Audoin-Rouzeau, and Becker 2003, 73).

New and Old: Individualization of Death and Glorification of War

Suggesting, as I have done so far, that changes in combatant burial practices reflected general modifications in social sensibilities toward the dead does not equate to contending that funerary rites were simply a mirror of civilian practices. Although the individualization of burials manifested the societal need to mourn the fallen, the process was framed within the collective narrative of the nation. Through specific funerary rituals and commemorative functions, the war dead were turned into martyrs whose death took on a noble, political meaning. As a matter of fact, American Civil War, Franco-Prussian war, and WWI cemeteries embody both a type of mourning centered on the individual and a narrative focusing on the collective and political meaning of war.

Military burial grounds were not simply meant as places for the disposal of corpses and mourning; they were also supposed to teach the living about fallen heroes. In war cemeteries, individual loss was strictly interpreted as a collective sacrifice for the common good. Indeed, while the individuality of the dead soldier had now achieved public acknowledgment, we need to keep in mind that it remained secondary to the theme of the nation. Gettysburg, for example, was “in form and conception designed to commemorate not the individual, but the nation,” as historian Susan-Mary Grant points out (2005, 513). Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address on November 19, 1863, which appealed to the principle of equality by defining the United States as “a government of the people, by the people, and for the people,” was delivered during the inauguration of the Soldiers' National Cemetery. In his speech, Lincoln declared that “We have to dedicate a portion of [the] field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that [the] nation might live.” Thus, war cemeteries were not only intended as decent places of interment but also as cultural institutions conveying a political, didactic message to future generations. This point was emphasized by James A. during the first Memorial Day (1868) ceremony at Arlington, when he stated that for “love of country” soldiers “accepted death” and “made immortal their patriotism and their virtue” (in Underhill-Cady 2001, 62).

Likewise, the military cemeteries built after WWI were not only designed to offer peaceful resting spots for the remains of the fallen, they were also devised as physical constructions with strong political connotations meant to foster a particular reading of the war. In combatant countries, burial and funerary practices were largely meant to dignify the nation's war effort and the nobility of the warrior's ethos (Mosse 1990). The individual soldier was recognized as a significant participant in war, and his death was understood as meaningful, justified sacrifice, not as unforgivable loss.

One of the main inconsistencies of mid-nineteenth and early twentieth-century warfare lies in the fact that living soldiers were treated with little or no care. In death, however, their corpses were handled with great consideration. As Denis Winter (1978, 260) wrote in relation to WWI: “It seemed that no effort was too much to care for the bodies of men who had been handled with so little regard

while they had been alive.” Indeed, the military tactics employed during WWI still showed that generals and statesmen had little or no regard for their men. Both the trained willing and the drafts of less trained conscripts were treated like chess pieces that could be moved and sacrificed at whim, not like human beings with a right to the protection of life in war. From this viewpoint, the historical period described in this section marks a transition embodying contradictory trends which, as we shall see, would only be overcome in the second half of the twentieth century.

Leave Nobody Behind: Soldiers’ Death as Unforgivable Loss

During WWI, a military padre maintained that the “soldier’s business is to kill the enemy . . . and he only tries to avoid being killed for the sake of being efficient” (in Bourke 1999, xiii–xiv). This is certainly an accurate description of how commanders employed soldiers for much of the modern epoch. However, such a martial characterization of combatants does not describe Western warfare in the current world. Indeed, the traditional attitude that saw soldiers’ deaths as politically, socially, and morally unproblematic appears to differ significantly from the present approach, where protecting the lives of combatants seems to be a necessary requirement for their deployment. As shown below, such an attitude appears connected with a profound change in the societal meaning attached to a soldier’s death, which is now perceived as a grievous human tragedy.

As noted above, recovering the bodies of the fallen was an important issue during the American Civil War and for virtually every European country since WWI. Burial policies during, and in the aftermath of, WWII were informed by a similar concern. To a considerable degree, Western countries employed the rituals and organizations created for WWI. Obviously, there were significant improvements in the management of disposal policies and many new cemeteries were created in the various theaters of war, but no great alteration in approach took place. Even the United States, whose casualties were 5.4 times higher than those of WWI (Leland and Oboroceanu 2010, 2), did not devise innovative ways to deal with the war dead. As the concentration of corpses proceeded, temporary cemeteries were either closed or transformed into permanent burial sites. Several large graveyards were established overseas for the concentration of the dead in “friendly soil,” such as France, Italy, England, and the Philippines. Finally, families were given the ultimate decision on the repatriation of their loved ones, though the government had decreed that graves had to be marked by uniform tombstones (Piehler 1995, 130–31).

A similar policy was pursued in France, where a 1946 law required the armed forces to offer free delivery and transportation of corpses to their families. But here we can record a significant change in the relation between the living and the dead. In the aftermath of WWII, as Philippe Ariès (1981, 556) noted in his monumental study on death, “the French people refused to turn their dead soldiers over to the large national cemeteries like those of World War I; they preferred to keep them in family graves.” Not only did such a decision show an increasing attachment of the families to their loved ones, it also revealed a relative weakening of the collective narrative and glorification surrounding the fallen described above. Thus, French families made explicit that the dead belonged to them rather than to the state.

The treatment of the earthly remains of the war dead in the post-WWII period attests to this significant shift. As compared with the burial policies of previous wars, a characteristically different set of beliefs appears to be at work in the decades following WWII. While the original cult of the fallen was closely linked to the idea of national sacrifice, it is now primarily related to the human loss of the

families. The emphasis is no longer on the collective sacrifice for the country, but rather on the individual life, prematurely ended.

Soldiers' corpses have now become the focus of a great deal of attention, and much effort and cost is spent on retrieving and identifying the remains of the war dead. While the main concern during the Civil War and the two world wars focused on marking the plots of fallen comrades in temporary cemeteries, since the wars in Korea and, especially, Vietnam, a true obsession with leaving no body (dead or alive) behind has emerged. In Korea, the United States abandoned battlefield burials after December 1950 and adopted the policy of Concurrent Return: the war dead were not to be buried in provisional grounds, but concentrated at collection points and then sent to Kokura, Japan, to be identified and eventually returned home. In order to prevent mistaken identification, the process of recovery was conducted as rapidly as possible. A similar course of action was adopted in Vietnam where, thanks to improvements in equipment and logistics such as the use of helicopters, the bodies were recovered soon after death, embalmed in mortuaries located in Da Nang and Tan Son Nhut, and sent home within seven or ten days (Sledge 2005, 57, 80). Only 1,620 of the American soldiers fallen in the Vietnam war are still unaccounted for, in comparison to the 73,640 of WWII and the 7,896 of the Korean war; this relatively small number bears witness to the great efforts that the federal government made to recover and identify its war dead.

Since the Vietnam conflict, the US military has organized an even more sophisticated system for retrieving the bodies of the fallen and returning them to the next of kin (Samet 2005). Moreover, thanks to the introduction of dental records, DNA analysis, and other sophisticated techniques, the process of identification has become more and more effective, almost an exact science.

In 2003, contrary to the traditional policy of burying the war dead in the country where they fell, Britain also decided that all service personnel who die during military operations abroad should be repatriated at the government's expense. British families are also allowed to choose whether to have the Ministry of Defence service headstone or to opt for a personal design (Summers 2010, 51–52)—showing once more how the increasing individualization of soldiers is paralleled by a shift in the ownership of the war dead, from the state to families. Indeed, by allowing families to personalize the burial of their loved ones, national worship becomes secondary to the private mourning of single individuals.

Not only do Western countries recover the dead of current wars but, since the mid-1970s, great efforts have also been made to search, retrieve, and name the unaccounted of past wars. In order to carry out this policy, technically termed “historical recovery” (Sledge 2005, 82), the Central Identification Laboratory Hawaii (CILHI) was created in the United States and assigned this new mission in 1976.⁶ In Britain as well, identifying the unnamed of past wars has become an important, sensitive issue for both the government and private individuals. For example, in 2009, during the largest operation undertaken in the post-WWII period by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, the remains of two hundred fifty British and Australian soldiers were exhumed near the village of Fromelles, France, from an unmarked mass grave dug by the Germans in July 1916. Thanks to DNA tests, a number of the dead were positively identified, including seventy-five Australian soldiers (Pegram 2010).

Devotion to the war dead appears even more remarkable if one considers that states invest significant administrative and financial resources in historical recoveries. The US government, for example, spends approximately one hundred million dollars annually on the search for its missing (Allen 2009, 2). Although

⁶In 2003, CILHI and the Joint Task Force-Full Accounting (JTF-FA) were merged into the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC).

recovering, repatriating, and identifying the remains of the war dead is a costly scheme, it is regarded as a sacred obligation and, as such, justifies all financial efforts, a position that has found bipartisan support from both Democratic and Republican administrations (Wagner 2015, 167). Furthermore, despite the common use of the word “bodies,” what is often at stake here is just tiny fragments of corpses, such as portions of skeletons and teeth (Hawley 2002, 50); these bear little resemblance to a person but are nevertheless grieved over by the families (Wong 2005).

From this viewpoint, the story of the American Unknown Soldier of the Vietnam War is emblematic of the relationship between the living and the war dead in the contemporary Western world. Entombed as unidentified in 1984, the remains of the soldier “known but to God” were disinterred in May 1998 after the “forceful pleas” of an American family who believed that the Unknown was their loved one shot down in Vietnam in 1972 (Wagner 2013, 641). The remains were then identified as belonging to First Lieutenant Michael J. Blassie and, finally, transported to his surviving relatives in Saint Louis, Missouri. Although, as Wagner (2013, 647) rightly maintains, the traditional narrative of death in war as the ultimate sacrifice for your country is far from disappeared—Blassie’s remains were reinterred with full military honors at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery—this family’s successful struggle against the political authorities nevertheless indicated a shift away from a sacrificial notion of death in war to an emphasis on the pain and suffering borne by the deceased and their families.⁷

Doubtless, advances in the technology of identification have made it possible to enact this type of individuated remembrance. But technology does not fully account for the unprecedented care toward the bodies of the fallen. Indeed, the example of the Vietnam Unknown’s identification and the policies and practices discussed above also attest to a deeper change in the societal meaning attached to soldiers’ deaths: from the collective cult of national heroes, we have moved toward a more individualized understanding of death as a private tragedy. This is also apparent if one looks at military obituaries on the web, which often report not only information on how death occurred, but also biographical details of the marital status, family situation, hobbies, and past hopes of the fallen soldier. These obituaries construe the dead as irreplaceable human beings and are meant to convey the uniqueness of the dead. In the telling words of a British widow, commenting on her decision to issue a biographical obituary on her husband who was killed during Operation TELIC in March 2003: “I have decided to issue this statement because I feel strongly that I should make clear that Matty wasn’t just another number added to a casualty list” (in Zehfuss 2009, 430). The emphasis is no longer just on the military qualities of combatants but rather on their human character. It is no longer, and not only, a tale of states and armies, but rather of individual people with stories to be told.

Such a shift in attitudes toward death appears to have contributed toward turning soldiers from mute, sacrificial objects into individuals with a right to life, even in that “marketplace dedicated to the exchange of casualties” (Keegan and Holmes 1985, 31) that we call war. For, while death in the field of battle used to be either glorified or devoid of any social value, present-day governments and military authorities are determined to avoid such a situation, turning the cult of the fallen soldiers into an attempt to foster the preservation of their lives on the battlefield. The point is that individual life is deemed to be valuable beyond a

⁷The presence of a variety of attitudes and values attached to the corpse of the fallen is not surprising. As Verdery (1999, 28) explained, human remains are “concrete, yet protean; they do not have a single meaning but are open to many different readings.” However, what we can record is a shift in the balance of meanings. While the state’s attempt to appropriate the death of soldiers persists, at the societal level their death is not primarily interpreted as a beautiful act of sacrifice for the nation, but rather as a tragic human loss.

soldier's fighting potential. Thus, the dominant changes in Western attitudes toward soldiers' deaths has been from insignificance to a sacrificial attitude and, finally, to aversion.

Conclusion

This study has offered a narrative of how the soldier—once regarded as a simple “instrument of war”—has become the hardly expendable being that we know today. Since such a reconstruction was largely undocumented—apart from a few piecemeal, unconnected accounts—the research has shown how the current loss-centered bereavement discourse about soldiers' deaths in war has developed. By focusing on body disposal and funerary rites, the article has illustrated how the study of war can be enriched beyond those important, but incomplete, strategic and technological considerations that dominate contemporary international relations theory. In doing so, the paper has suggested a possible way of developing a sociology of war capable of connecting changes in social meaning to transformations in warfare. Although attitudes toward soldiers' deaths are obviously far from clarifying the pattern of modern war in its entirety, they do bring out one of its most significant features by highlighting how human *matériel* is considered and valued.

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