Version 1.0 | Last updated 07 February 2022

Life and Death of Soldiers

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While public memory of the First World War in Europe often focusses on the deaths caused by the conflict, soldiers who served not only died in the war; they also lived. That process of living included work, leisure, care for body and mind and contending with the fact of mass death and dying. This article considers primarily how soldiers in the British, French, German and American armed forces lived during and with the war as reflected in letters, diaries and memoirs. It argues that remembering the lives of soldiers is as important as commemorating their deaths.

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Introduction

In Europe, the memory of the First World War is often focussed on death. Commemorations centre on war memorials, cenotaphs and tombs containing unknown warriors.[1] Children – at least in France and the United Kingdom – are introduced to the history of the war through trips to battlefields which include well-preserved war cemeteries, or through researching names inscribed on war memorials.[2] Public memory often centres on the scale of death and loss: nearly 20,000 British dead on the first day of the Battle of the Somme; 300,000 French and German dead at Verdun.

Yet soldiers who served in the First World War did not all die; they also lived. That process of living was, if anything, more important to them than any fear of death, either their own or that of others. This was reflected in the letters they wrote home, the diaries that they kept and, for those who survived, the memories that they held on to and passed on, in memoirs, interviews and family legends.[3] This article explores how soldiers of Britain, France, Germany and the United States lived through the war, considering aspects including work and leisure (at the front and elsewhere), and care for the body and mind. It concludes by considering where death and dying, by the very nature of warfare a central fact of soldiers' lives, fit into this process of day-to-day living.

Work

One of the markers of the First World War as a total war was the extent to which the industrialisation of European societies turned warfare into a form of "work", a social practice where the principles of division of labour, competence, responsibility, statistics, and temporal regimes ruled. The precise nature of the work an individual soldier undertook was contingent on his role, rank and experience. However, the concept of work made the horrors of war comprehensible to those that had to endure it. As early as November 1914, the German captain Harry Graf von Kessler (1868-1937) observed in his diary: “Last Friday, I took part in the 46ers attack on Rudniki […] Under fire they pace heavily and mightily, like workers do when they pass through the alleys of some factory town at the break of dawn.”[4]

While the work of officers included man-management and logistics, for the vast majority, that is the men of the ranks, the work of war most often took the form of manual labour, comparable to that of manual labourers in civilian life.[5] Working parties were a regular aspect of a soldier’s life. They dug trenches, gun emplacements and latrines, repaired fortifications, transported munitions, food and materiel, mended and maintained uniforms and kit. Men of the medical services cleaned hospital wards and dispensed medicines, those in communications manned and repaired telephone lines, while the service corps maintained vehicles and cared for a range of animals. The more managerial roles of officers included planning not only for operations but also for the provision, housing and discipline of their men. Daily work could include liaison with the civilian population over accommodation, inspections for trench foot and the censoring of men’s letters.

The precise nature of the work undertaken by both officers and men depended on their proximity to the front line. For example, the requirements of fighting the Battle of Verdun in 1916 meant that much of the French army cycled through the area throughout that year. General Philippe Pétain’s (1856-1951) *noria* system was designed to ensure that casualties could be spread across the entire army without specific division or corps being annihilated. As a result 2.4 million Frenchmen took part in the battle between 21 February and 31 December 1916, with many making multiple deployments there.[6] The effort of maintaining the defence of the city was exhausting. Second Lieutenant Raymond Jubert (1889-1917) noted in his diary, shortly before his own death, that “They will not be able to make us do it again another day; that would be to misconstrue the price of our effort. They will have to resort to those who have not lived out these days…”[7] More commonly, however, the soldiers of all armies would regularly transition between duty in the front lines and time spent behind the lines either working or resting to allow for recovery.

The regularity of this could differ depending on the area of deployment. For the French, British and German soldiers stationed in or deployed to Africa in the battle over colonial holdings, operations “took on the character of the Victorian imperial campaigns in which so many British professional soldiers had learned their trade”.[8] These were highly dependent on indigenous scouts, mercenaries, and an army of unnamed carriers.[9] Mesopotamia and Palestine were also notable for being campaigns of movement which involved their own forms of labour, much of it related to caring for the livestock that provided transport. On the Western Front, however, some soldiers spent much of the war in a continuous circuit of four days in the trenches and then four days behind the lines.[10] Periods in the front lines, when not participating in any ongoing offensives, were marked by the boredom of waiting or of repairing fortifications.

Boredom was even more of an issue at sea where the division of labour and spatial distance from the enemy characterised combat to a much higher degree. Here the problem for morale was not combat but its absence. Class segregation, drill, maintenance work, boredom, and the deteriorating living conditions aboard gnawed at sailors’ confidence. On the other end of the spectrum were the crews of submarines. They worked in an extreme physical environment and suffered the highest losses. The servicemen of the naval artillery, naval air services or marines shared the realities of combat on land and in the air.[11]

In the combat zone, soldiers established their own rules – rules that were not necessarily in accordance with the Hague Convention and that were not openly talked about after the war. The informal Christmas Truces of 1914 are an example of combatants' agency (*Eigensinn*). The decision by German and British units to cease fighting and fraternise in various sectors on a day deemed in both nations to be a holiday reflects the extent which warfare was understood by soldiers on both sides as part of the wider rhythms of working life. This understanding appears to have been even more widespread in the French army relative to the German. In quiet locations of the trenches where there was little action, some French regiments came to informal truce agreements with the Germans opposite to maintain the peace. British soldiers who took over these sectors were greatly perturbed to discover that such truces did not extend to them.[12]

The fact was that no soldier and no unit could or would be combat-ready 24/7. As a consequence, informal rules developed between opposing units for rescuing the wounded from no man’s land; sniping; patrolling; and engaging in local bombardments.

Officers could order *pro forma* shots at a particular time of the day to demonstrate vigilance. In the heat of battle, soldiers could kill a wounded enemy in cold blood, but they could also leave him or grant relief with a sip of water or a cigarette. They would shoot at fleeing enemies or let them go. Enemies who violated these informal customs, those who used weapons like dum dum bullets or bayonets with saw-teeth, could expect no mercy. The same was true for soldiers who feinted a surrender and took up arms again. A British officer in an American training camp gave a "censored interview" to the camp newspaper *The Wadsworth Gas-Attack* that soldiers should only take prisoners "if it's safe to do so; but don't leave a living German behind you … Experience has proved that it can't be done. The first man who stuck me had 'surrendered'."[13] Further sources for bitterness were the deliberate killing of prisoners of war; the mutilation of corpses; setting of booby traps; or utilising scorched-earth tactics in a particular area. However, the brief moments of individual clemency and informal truces would be over very quickly when the juggernaut moved into action mode again and attacks were ordered. Soldiers – at least in the European theatres of war and at sea – respected each other in principle as peers and as conjoint sufferers on one day, but this would not prevent them from attacking each other on the next.[14]

Leisure

Fighting might have been the purpose of soldiering, but most time was spent in keeping their "work place" in order and organising resources. Over time, the dugout or the cabin became a habitat. The schedule of days without combat was orientated along the lines of basic human needs: securing the perimeter with sentries; organising bodily care and food; maintaining the dugouts, trenches or ships; being visited by superiors, clergy and medical staff; cleaning and repairing weapons and gear; bringing up supplies; disposing of litter, faecal matter and corpses; and experiencing or enforcing discipline. An ever-growing part of the daily work, at least for officers and NCOs, became the much-hated administrative paperwork of industrial warfare, or what the Germans termed *Papierkrieg*. Ernst Jünger (1895-1998), then a junior officer in a Western Front regiment, later complained:

> [W]hen one reads all these minute instructions, extending from the designs of latrines and the collection of cartridge-cases and corks of bottles to the right season for docking horses' tails, one is astonished at the torrent of energy and organization that runs to waste in this way.[15]

When the work of trench life was done, there was time for leisure activities. These could include letter and diary writing, the creation of trench art, gambling, vermin hunting for both lice and rodents, singing and sleeping.[16] Trench journals were a source of entertainment as well as a leisure activity for those who created and produced them.[17] Civilian hobbies, such as birdwatching and gardening, could be pursued in quiet sectors and behind the lines. Not all activities were necessarily benign, however, with soldiers using their leisure to forage and otherwise steal from the local populace to supplement their rations.

Leisure activities when out of the front line could be more extensive, with opportunities for bathing and fishing alongside more organised sporting activities. Armies instituted regular athletic and gymkhana events behind the lines, along with inter-unit football and boxing matches, as a way of keeping men occupied as well as providing informal physical training.[18] French and German authorities also opened a series of brothels for their men near the fighting fronts.[19]

Periods of rest seldom felt as such to soldiers as they were seen by the military authorities as training opportunities. Many American officers deployed to France found much of their free time taken up by instructional schools devised by the British and French to bring them up to speed as quickly as possible.[20] After the war, soldiers in the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) were given the opportunity to remain in Europe and take up study at a variety of British and French colleges through the AEF university programme.[21] Soldiers also received training while in rest, whether in the form of lectures on first aid from their regimental medical officer or periods spent on specialist courses such as "bomb school" or machine-gun handling.

Care for Body and Mind

Whether in the front line or resting, certain aspects of soldiers' lives remained consistent. Accommodation, for example, was central to daily experience. Starting with foxholes covered with tarpaulins, shelter at the front developed with the trench system. Foxholes became dugouts, and later, in some places concrete blockhouses or underground galleries provided shelter from bad weather and artillery bombardments. The Germans were viewed by the Allies as having particularly sophisticated dugouts.[22]

Officer Peter Jackson, for example, recalled a German officers' dugout that he visited during the Christmas Truce of 1914:

> I'd never seen anything so fantastic in my life as the German dugouts. Ours, we simply had no dugouts they were just mud and filth. But the Germans' dugouts were about 20 feet deep and they had electric light in there, they had everything![23]

By contrast, British soldiers, particularly in 1914 and 1915, often complained that the French were dirty and poorly dressed, and that their trenches were unfit for habitation. In September 1915, British soldier C. Reuben Smith remarked that:

> we reached the firing line and found it in a weak state of defence, this line had been held by the French, and the trenches were in a bad condition, the mines they had laid were useless as they were too shallow and did very little damage.[24]

The accusations regarding the poor state of French trenchworks rested on a difference in opinion regarding the nature of the war in its early years, when the French high command intended their forces to be regularly on the offensive and therefore not in need of deep and well-maintained defensive trenches.[25] The ruins of villages, wine cellars and ancient caverns were also used as shelters.

Wherever soldiers settled down, they tried to make it a home. They timbered bunks, organised stoves and collected wood. They dragged building materials and furniture from nearby villages. British signaller Cyril Thomas Newman described one billet to his fiancée, Winnie, as:

> sheets of tin "scrounged" from an R.E. dump for the roof and built up walls from debris … We formed a window span and doorway, made a chimney and round part of a cooking stove … We have installed our table and chair and made a shelf, on which our "china" is set out including a cut-glass decanter rescued from rubbish inside a blown up house … On the table an earthenware jar – a one time container of Devonshire Cream, in which are two sunflowers. So you see how cosy we are.[26]

As George R. Barlow wrote to his aunt Alice, "however one moves, the new hut or tent becomes a sort of representation of home."[27] This sensibility took on concrete form through the naming of particular trenches or strongpoints after the regional affiliation of their units (*Schwaben-Feste*) or prominent commanders (*Gallwitz-Riegel*). The British had Piccadilly Circus and the Australians Monash Valley.

In the rear area, soldiers lived in camps or were billeted among the local population. For the soldiers of occupying armies in particular, billeting was the most intimate contact they had with enemy civilians. However, billeting remained a strain for the population even with their own or Allied soldiers. It meant constriction and unease, but sometimes the birth of temporary partnerships of convenience that were not always seen with approval by the authorities.

Even more important than accommodation, however, was food and drink, topics which were the constant focus of servicemen of all the armed forces throughout the war. Food – its lack, monotony, methods of preparation, and particular items of home cooking fantasised about – were common topics in letters home. It was also a source of considerable official concern. According to Rachel Duffett, "Calories were critical, but there was also a recognition that food, or lack of it, had a psychological as well as a physiological impact."[28]

Thus, with the advent of trench warfare, the world's biggest catering system evolved. Military food logistics comprised farms, butcheries, bakeries, breweries and mess halls. Field kitchens provided food close to the frontline, and the last mile was covered by runners. The diet was unvaried and it deteriorated in quantity and quality over the years. Through combat patrols, shopping trips during rest periods, requisitions, and poaching small game in the surrounding areas, soldiers improved their menus.

The food provided to French soldiers was often a bone of contention. One of the complaints by French soldiers who mutinied in 1917 was that the food they were served was terrible. Upon taking the situation in hand, General Philippe Pétain ordered additional training for the army cooks, renewed supplies of fresh fruit and vegetables, and increased levels of food stocks organised within divisional cooperatives so that men could buy them instead of alcohol.[29] This latter change also helped combat an issue the French soldiers had been having in Allied sections of the line since the war's earliest days. With British soldiers earning twice the pay of their counterparts, prices for food in shops behind the line often increased noticeably in a way that a *poilu* (an informal term for a French soldier) was unable to afford.[30]

While in training, many American recruits began to gain weight because of the quantity of food being prepared for them, although the quality of the food did not always match the quantity.[31] However, those soldiers who, once abroad, were supplied by the British, soon had cause to complain about both the paucity and apparent lack of edibility of the food provided to them. Particular complaints crystallised around the provision of tea rather than coffee, the overuse of onions in stew that caused flatulence, and serving sizes which led some Americans to worry they were being starved to death.[32] The British, meanwhile, complained of the monotony of their diet, with its emphasis on protein, in the form of bully beef, and carbohydrate, in the form of potatoes. Preserved fruit, in the form of jam, and tins (such as Maconochie's meat and vegetable stew) provided some variety, but the former was the source of much complaint given the repetitive appearance of plum and apple jam on the menu.[33]

Drinking was in some ways even more important than food. Water, soup, coffee, and tea were daily drinks, with preferences according to national traditions. Alcohol was rationed and deliberately issued immediately before assaults. The relationship between the French *poilu* and the *pinard* wine ration attracted an enduring level of fame both during and after the conflict. *Pinard* itself was a fairly low-grade red wine, but it constituted a key part of the French soldier's daily rationing. At the outbreak of the conflict each man was permitted a quarter of a litre of the liquid which would increase steadily throughout the war.[34] An equally profound national stereotype existed in relation to the British and tea, with six pints a day the official ration, supplemented by canteen purchases. Innovative methods of heating water for brewing were used, while complaints about the flavouring of the water with petrol, from the tins used to transport it to the front line, and chloride of lime, used to treat stored water, were common.[35]

The supply of food and drink was a significant military issue not only in terms of the maintenance of morale, but also because it formed the basis of men's physical fitness. By 1914:

> a combination of experience gained in earlier difficulties and recent developments in nutritional science resulted in the [British] army – at least on paper – professing a thorough and conscientious approach to the feeding of the rankers. *The Manual of Military Cooking and Dietary Mobilization*, the key reference book for army cooks, was updated and reprinted three times during the war, and numerous supplementary pamphlets were produced. Additional army instructions repeatedly made it clear that the provision of regular hot food and drinks to the men was a central aspect of an officer's role … In order to fight, a soldier had to be physically strong.[36]

The British calculated annual ration scales by calorie, ensuring that men serving in the front line received a higher number of calories than those on the line of communication. The French field ration had a slightly higher calorie intake than the British equivalent, due to the *pinard* ration, while the Americans received 500 calories a day more due to their increased allowance of potatoes. The Germans, meanwhile, received just over half the amount of meat as the British and Americans, although, along with the French and Italians, they received a larger bread issue.[37]

Sustenance was, however, only one part of the day-to-day care for the body that soldiers received. Wartime living conditions created constant serious risks of ill health. The hygiene and sanitary conditions of French soldiers have often been misunderstood, especially by their allies. The very nature of the *poilu* identity partially required French soldiers to immerse themselves in the soil of *la patrie* and the growing of beards became a symbol of masculine devotion to France and the war effort.[38] However, the fundamentals of trench sanitation were of as much concern to French military medical authorities as those of other nations. In particular, the siting of latrines in relation to any water supply was a serious concern for all military medical corps. Specialist hygiene units were deployed to construct and manage these, with British soldiers additionally receiving regular lectures on sanitation from their regimental medical officers.[39] American considerations of sanitation, meanwhile, often led them to try to remove the manure piles of French farmers because they viewed them as unhygienic. This caused ongoing problems between the American army and French civilians who, in the eyes of the Americans, seemingly treasured those manure piles above all else.[40]

In spite of such precautions and the conflicts they caused, infection was a common hazard in the trenches where fleas, lice, bugs and rodents were permanent living companions and bearers of disease. Dangers also arose from the weather conditions, with frostbite and trench foot common perils from damp and exposure in the trenches, as well as in the mountains of the Salonika campaign. The hygienic conditions and consequent diseases also differed according to the theatre of war:

> in Salonika French and British troops were ravaged by malaria; in Eastern Europe typhus claimed the lives of countless German, Austrian, Russian and Serbian soldiers; in Gallipoli, East Africa and Mesopotamia, a host of diseases – among them malaria, dysentery and typhoid – drastically reduced the fighting strength on all sides.[41]

Men were subjected to regular physical inspections, with particular care given to boots and feet. More intimate inspections, known as “dangle parades” by the British and New Zealand troops and the more euphemistic “short-arm parades” by the Australians, were designed to combat the spread of venereal disease. If diagnosed, these could result in painful treatments and punishments for self-mutilation by the military courts. However, the fear of punishment was never enough to prevent soldiers from putting themselves at risk. As a response, the Australian Army Medical Services developed a far more pragmatic medicalised system of prevention and treatment, involving the supply of prophylaxes and private inspections, as well as regular reporting by the medical authorities and lectures on purity.[42]

Wounds were as much of a danger as disease, as much from accidents and daily shell and sniper fire as during periods of action. As with sanitation, soldiers were given responsibility for elements of self-care in treating wounds. Soldiers were provided with First Field Dressings and received regular lectures on the appropriate use of them by medical officers.[43] However, the majority of wounds required trained medical intervention by the military medical services. In addition to the preventative measures of sanitation and inspection, these units were responsible for providing curative and rehabilitative treatment and clearing the wounded from the battlefield.

In the early days of the war, lack of sufficient medical transport resulted in a large number of serious wound infections. Pre-war medical planning, based around the assumption that most of the wounds suffered would be from rifle bullets, dictated that most wounded men would, after passing through regimental and divisional medical officers, be evacuated by train to the *zone de l’arrière* or British home military hospitals for further treatment. In August 1914 however, there were only five designated medical trains in the French army for these evacuations, and the personnel of six ambulance trains and three hospital ships for the British Expeditionary Force. Much of the overflow had to be taken by converted passenger and, eventually, livestock trains. The British were also reliant on French-controlled train lines and could do little to speed up train journeys which could take between twelve and thirty hours from the front line to base.[44] The resulting delays, and the fact that many men were dealing with wounds from artillery, led to outbreaks of tetanus and gangrene.[45] In Britain, reports of delays and failures in evacuation, by ambulance waggon and car as well as by train, led to public outcry in the press.

By 1918, the Allied medical services had been revolutionised. The previous plan to evacuate to the interior and Britain was abandoned because of the strain it placed on transport logistics but also the increased danger of infections caused by even short delays in treatment, although men suffering from serious wounds and illnesses continued to be evacuated home. New hospitals were built alongside railway lines to expedite the transfer and treatment of wounded men. The British developed a system of medical evacuation through dressing stations, casualty clearing stations and base hospitals which allowed multiple points of exit where men could be sent to command depots for rehabilitation and eventual return to their units. These systems were adopted and adapted by British imperial and dominion forces across theatres of war.[46] These developments increased the rate of recovery and the chances of soldiers being recycled through the military medical system and rapidly returned to action.[47]

The Americans, arriving later in the conflict and seeking to learn lessons from the experience of their allies, organised their medical treatments and processes around a system of evacuation hospitals near to the front lines and the key railroads. Each one would be commanded by a lieutenant colonel and the hospitals would work in conjunction with, and resupply, various field hospitals that were closer to the fighting and would provide the first line of care.[48] The Americans, similarly to the British, preferred to undertake surgical interventions behind the lines. In fact many of the American procedures regarding their medical setup came from collated British and French experiences in the war’s earlier years.[49]

Soldiers also provided preventative self-care in the form of vernacular medical practices, ranging from “chat” (louse) and rat hunting, to the provision of medical advice and even markets in patent medicines.[50] While some of these practices were undoubtedly designed to circumvent men “swinging the lead” (avoiding the trials and dangers of war service through malingering),[51] many were genuine efforts in personal and community self-care. Self-care could also take the form of masturbation, both individual and mutual, and other same-sex encounters, as a way of addressing sexual desire in all-male spaces. These could involve “complex homosexual subcultures”, as in the ranks of the American services, particularly the navy, where men “carefully constructed their ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ identities based on how they engaged in sexual relations with other men”.[52] Such encounters were only one form of the range of physical intimacies that soldiers engaged in as part of the emotional bonding that made comradeship and *esprit de corps* central to their experiences of war.[53]

As well as care derived through the comradeship and *esprit de corps* of the trenches, men also received care from those at home. Mail formed an integral part of military service and was a form of mass media, with the number of items sent calculated at around 10 billion for the French and 27 billion for the German armed forces.[54] Depending on circumstances the post could be irregular but as the war continued the postal service became a crucial and sophisticated link between soldiers at the front and those at home. During 1915, the French army handled over 4 million letters through a sorting office in Paris.[55] By 1917, the British army was sending home nearly 9 million letters a week. American soldiers made similar use of the postal service with paper for correspondence being widely supplied by the American YMCA. The distances involved in transporting post often meant there could be considerable delays in hearing from home. A temporary stoppage of postal delivery, meanwhile, was one indication for soldiers of imminent military action.

Soldiers sent and received not only postcards and letters. Parcels from home – *Liebesgaben* – contained convenience goods of all kinds. The supplementing of rations by goods sent from home was an important aspect of the maintenance of morale. Indeed, British officers deliberately used food sent from home in this way, as in the case of Charles Reginald Chenevix Trench (1888-1918) who wrote to his wife requesting specific items such as dried kippers for his men.[56] Newspapers and journals were part of the mail, allowing men to maintain important contacts with communities at home. Families and friends also sent protective items, ranging from the practical, such as socks, through the speculative, such as body armour, to the spiritual, including a wide variety of charms, mascots and talismans.[57]

Until 1916, all military authorities had organised some kind of postal control. This was legitimised by military security as well as by the urge to limit any detrimental influences on the rank and file and a general wish to monitor their spirit – *la morale*, *die Stimmung*. During 1916, General Joseph Joffre (1852-1931) expanded the powers of the French postal censors in a bid to track and restrict reports of indiscipline within the ranks of the army, but also as a sophisticated way of gauging the opinions of French soldiers on a whole raft of topics including “hygiene” and relations with their allies.[58] As soldiers were well aware of these limitations, they found ways to circumvent control by commissioning comrades on leave to deliver letters. The British were provided with monthly “green envelopes” which were supposed to be uncensored, allowing men to communicate personal matters to their families.

In addition to mail, soldiers were able to maintain contact with home through leave, although such visits were an ongoing source of difficulty and dispute during the war for French soldiers. In July 1915, new procedures were introduced to provide soldiers with three periods of leave lasting three to ten days each year, which was better than the German equivalent.[59] However, these leave periods could often be postponed during ongoing offensives and, when they were undertaken, conditions in the trains could often be dirty and painfully slow, with some soldiers taking days to reach their destinations.[60]

The inequalities of the leave situation were one of the primary complaints amongst French soldiers who mutinied in 1917. To win these men over, Pétain introduced new leave rules providing seven to ten days every four months with travel time built into the equation.[61] Inequalities of and delays to leave also afflicted the British army, although dissatisfaction never rose to the heights of mutiny. The perception that officers got more leave than men was, however, a universal one, and a cause for considerable complaint in letters home. Americans on leave were unable to return home, as were British imperial and dominion troops, due to distance. They took leave in nearby cities, sometimes causing official concern over disruption to civil-military relations due to their behaviour. In 1915, two riots, dubbed “the Battle of Wazzir” took place in Cairo, involving British, Australian and New Zealand troops on leave. Voluntary organisations, such as the YMCA, ran huts designed to provide these men with a “home from home” and keep them out of trouble. These provided spaces where men could write letters, borrow and read books, play games and listen to music.[62] Talbot House, run by Reverend Neville “Tubby” Clayton (1885-1972), was one of the best-known of such institutions, providing a Christian space that specifically eschewed the distinctions of rank, with a sign over the door reading “Abandon rank, all ye who enter here.”

The work of men such as Clayton was part of a wide range of formal and informal religious and spiritual practices which soldiers engaged in throughout the war. While many soldiers did not regularly engage with formal religious practice, faith remained an important source of emotional strength.[63] All engaged with practices that can be defined as superstitious or quasi-religious. These included rituals, such as Charles Carrington’s (1897-1990) need to enter and leave his dugout by a certain door, or the practice of a French soldier who would ritually kiss a small wooden crucifix given to him by a nun whose brother had been killed.[64] Many men carried physical objects, such as *Schutzbriefe* (letters with religious or magical formulae), and other talismans for luck, while fatalism, the belief that if a shell had your name on it there was nothing you could do to avoid it, was almost universal.[65]

Death

The life of soldiers in the First World War was thus complex – often monotonous, uncomfortable and occasionally terrifying, but also involving periods of comfort, comradeship and pleasure. All soldiers’ experiences, however, were set within the day-to-day context of mass deaths. The sheer scale of death indicates its quotidian nature. Elizabeth Greenhalgh declares the figure of 1,383,000 French dead and missing as being of a “magnitude [that] almost defies belief”.[66] Of these deaths 454,000 came in the period of August to November 1914 and give an indication of the disastrous nature of the Battle of the Frontiers and French strategy in the war’s earliest months.[67] The majority of French fighting, and therefore casualties, was restricted to the Western Front. However, French soldiers did participate in sideshow theatres such as the Dardanelles Campaign at the cost of nearly 10,000 dead and a total of 27,049 casualties by the evacuation in 1916.[68] Losses from the German Empire are even more staggering, at 2,037,000. British losses were 761,000, with an additional 198,000 dominion losses and 959,000 losses for the empire as a whole.[69] The relatively brief period that American soldiers were involved in the fighting meant that the casualties sustained by the AEF were relatively light in comparison to its principal allies. However, David Woodward’s examination of the figures shows that two of every 100 Americans who participated in the conflict were either killed in action or died from other causes, disease amongst them.[70] The United States incurred 50,300 battle deaths, out of a total of 116,000dead, with the majority of them coming during the final six weeks of the war including the Hundred Days Offensive.[71]

Similarly to the losses of other nations, many of these men were killed by artillery fire. However, the various means of death were manifold and were not limited to the front. Soldiers were shot or torn apart by grenades. They were stabbed, strangled, or beaten to death. They could be buried alive or burnt. They suffocated from smoke or gas. They drowned or simply died from strokes, heart attacks, or general adynamia. Disease, accidents and suicide can be added to this list.

The commonality of death meant that commemoration of the fallen became a routine part of soldiers' lives. Sometimes this took on a facetious, even mocking tone, which could be read by civilians as a lack of respect for the dead. Such attitudes reflected the fatalism and black humour that men found necessary to maintain psychic composure in the face of so much violence and mortality. Even when discussing death in the abstract in mocking vein, soldiers treated the deaths of their known comrades with respect and sobriety.[72] Attendance at funerals behind the lines was a regular occurrence for soldiers of all combatant nations. Many kept lists of the fallen in their diaries and maintained extensive correspondence with the families of these men.[73] Medical orderlies and chaplains along the chain of evacuation acted as gravediggers and funeral officiants, jobs which they took seriously and undertook with care and solemnity.[74] Where they could, men tended the graves of fallen comrades, returning whenever they were posted to the relevant sector.[75]

Despite language difficulties, French soldiers and their British allies would sometimes hold shared memorial services for their fallen comrades.[76] But whereas the Imperial War Graves Commission made post-war plans for the creation of multiple cemeteries, in many cases the French authorities preferred large-scale ossuaries, although some families were able to identify the bodies of their lost loved ones for reburial closer to home.[77] Most German soldiers also remained in foreign soil. The German military authorities did not support the repatriation of fallen soldiers during the war. Following the defeat, the policy was regulated by the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles and bilateral agreements. The US government gave families the opportunity to repatriate the bodies of their loved ones for reburial in America.

Conclusion

In the war's aftermath, death and bereavement came to be the overwhelming narrative of war experience, with soldiers who survived often marginalised by governments seeking to rebuild and realign themselves. Yet for the survivors, the years of the war could become a defining period of their lives, a turning point and moment when they not only witnessed but were a part of history.[78] The lives they lived during the four-and-a-bit years of war were marked by labour, monotony, fear, danger, discomfort, illness and pain. Yet they could also, in retrospect, be understood and constructed as dutiful, life-changing, sociable, even heroic. This was true of soldiers from all nations, not only those of the four key combatant nations focussed on here.

Throughout the century that followed the end of the war, soldiers would tell and retell the stories of the lives they had lived and the deaths they had witnessed, publicly and privately, as fact, fiction and a mixture of both.[79] In doing so, they strove to ensure that the life as well of the death of soldiers would become an integral part of the history of the conflict.

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Citation

Meyer, Jessica, Kempshall, Chris, Pöhlmann, Markus: Life and Death of Soldiers , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2021-12-28. **DOI**: 10.15463/ie1418.11598.

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