

# Bereavement and Mourning (Belgium)

By [Laurence van Ypersele](#)

## Summary

World War I claimed the lives of approximately 60,000 Belgian civilians and soldiers. Belgium was uniquely situated in the middle of the conflict and suffered civilian massacres in August 1914 and the occupation of the territory up to 1918. All of these factors had a direct impact on mourning rites both during and after the war. The renewal of mourning rites such as funeral masses in occupied Belgium, the invention of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and national funerals for patriots after the war shows an equal consideration for civilian and military deaths.

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## Introduction

The [death](#) of roughly 10 million people during World War I confronted the belligerent societies with [bereavement](#) on a mass scale. Death during war has tragic specificities: the inability of loved ones to accompany the dying during his or her last moments, the frequent absence of a body for burial, the official idealization of death, and the thinning out of the young generation.<sup>1</sup> All of these complicate the already difficult bereavement process and lead to evolving mourning rites both during and after war. Traditional rites include: caring for the body of the deceased as if he or she were still alive (closing the eyes of the dead person, embracing him or her and dressing him or her in elegant clothes), keeping vigil over the body, the finality of funerals and a return to life despite grief. These traditions do not simply disappear during wartime but are, in fact, renewed. Some are simplified, while others fall by the wayside and new rites appear.<sup>2</sup> This evolution takes place while each passing day brings more death and mourning widows become part of the daily surroundings. Still, the invention of new mourning rituals seems to resist the banality of death by asserting the individuality

and larger importance of the sacrifice of the deceased.

The unique position of [Belgium](#) during the worldwide cataclysm that was the Great War had a direct impact on mourning rites. During the invasion of August 1914, numerous Belgian, French, British, and German soldiers died on the battlefield and were buried hastily where they fell. Similarly, almost 6,000 civilians were slaughtered and buried without consideration of their families. After the battlefield stabilized, Belgian families had no further access to information about their relatives and the corpses of those who died. Furthermore, in [occupied Belgium](#) almost 300 patriots were executed during the war because of their clandestine actions, 2,600 deportees died away from home, others died upon their return and an undetermined number of civilians met their deaths during bombardments, mainly in 1918.

## During the War

As soon as the battlefield was stabilized in the fall of 1914, identification and reburial of the corpses of soldiers and civilians killed during the invasion became a priority for many families. Identification of the bodies allowed relatives to face the painful reality of death, to offer the deceased a decent grave and to begin the mourning process. Furthermore, the identification of corpses allowed widows and orphans to be recognized as such so that they might benefit from charities which were being rapidly established and, in the case of widows, obtain a pension.

Yet, the task of identification proved complicated. Numerous corpses of civilians were [disfigured](#) or burnt and, therefore, remained unidentified. The same applied to the bodies of soldiers pulverized by [artillery](#) or entombed in the ruins of fortresses. The German occupiers considered the civilians who perished to be *franc tireurs* (snipers or unauthorized gunners) and, as such, they did not deserve consideration or ceremonies. The inscription of “martyr” was prohibited on monuments, graves and in print, and even the use of coffins was forbidden in Dinant, which was the most important “martyr city”, where 674 civilians were killed. Thus, it is clear that identification of civilian corpses and reburial in decent graves was not supported by the occupiers.

Soldiers who had died during the phase of mobile warfare were given more consideration than civilians. Their deaths were, to a certain degree, methodically listed and their bodies assembled in cemeteries by the occupiers, who took mainly care of the German soldiers, local authorities and particular charities which took care of the Belgian, British and French soldiers who died in the battles. For example, [Jeanne Orianne \(1865-1951\)](#), an inhabitant of Londerzeel, created a charity called “L’Oeuvre de Jeanne Orianne” or “The charity of Jeanne Orianne” that was dedicated solely to “the exhumation and identification of Belgian soldiers.” It was active between 1914 and 1916 and had the support of the occupiers who granted all

the required authorizations.<sup>3</sup> This charity identified almost 1,000 Belgian soldiers to be buried in well marked graves.

As the war progressed, the death toll continued to rise. The families remaining in occupied territory sought desperately for news of those away fighting. Even though the Belgian army was broadly protected by [Albert I, King of the Belgians \(1875-1934\)](#) refusal to join the great offensives, the soldiers and their families remained without news from each other. Families heard little more from [prisoners](#) or deported civilians (the only correspondence available was through the [Red Cross](#)). They would occasionally hear that a relative had died either through the irregular, clandestine post that existed between the battlefield and the occupied territory or through Red Cross reports published by the censored press. They had no access to the bodies of the deceased and had no knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the death of their loved ones.

The case of executed patriots is slightly different. Until 1916, the occupiers announced executions via posters to dissuade any resistance. The execution of these patriots was a lonesome event. The condemned had to find solace in the presence of religious authorities (priests and rabbis) who were the only people allowed at the execution. Families were denied access to the dead bodies after the fact.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, the posters did not have the desired dissuasive effect and were discontinued. Families then had to rely on compassionate chaplains for information or, on some unfortunate occasions, the discovery of a loved one's fate after the date of execution. Given all these deaths, it was necessary to invent new rituals or to renew traditions so as to honor the dead and to help families begin to mourn.

In the occupied territory, the population turned to traditional Catholic rites as the public expression of their bereavement. Since the onset of the war, All Saints Day had provided an occasion to pray for both civilian and military deaths. Everywhere, masses were celebrated for the souls of those who had died. The traditional visit to lay flowers on the cemetery tombs turned into a sober tribute to war deaths: the tombs of soldiers, even unidentified ones, were decorated with flowers by the majority of the population. Masses were also celebrated in Catholic schools for former students who had died on the battlefield and in villages where civilians had been killed in August 1914. Above all, when a soldier or a patriot's death was announced, even in the absence of a corpse, funeral masses were organized by loved ones and close relatives in order to express both pain and hope, to reaffirm the social and personal links that bound mourners together. These ceremonies attracted considerable crowds throughout the war. The clandestine press also paid tribute to the deceased, largely civilians, which served as a written testament to their sacrifice.<sup>5</sup>

Mourners could find some comfort in these public gestures, especially as they expressed solidarity with widows and orphans. Indeed, since the war's onset, the plight of orphans had given rise to numerous private charities.<sup>6</sup> The orphan, formerly disregarded, became a sacred cause because the orphan, as a child, represented the nation's future and, as a victim, the martyrdom of that same nation. The [Comité national de Secours et d'Alimentation](#) (CNSA), in many respects a substitute for the absent government, dedicated one of its sections to the aid of war orphans (whether their parents were civilians or the father had been a soldier). The Belgian Orphan Fund also provided the CNSA with international aid. This aid was not limited to money, food, and clothing. Each orphan, boy or girl, was given a tutor whose job it was advise and see to the gender appropriate "morals" of each orphan. Overall, 12,000 [children](#) were under the aegis of the CNSA, 1,000 of whom were housed in boarding schools for girls or boys which had gender-specific curricula.

The CNSA also helped families who had lost their financial support as a result of war. In 1916, the Le Havre government opted to aid soldiers' widows as well. However, this aid would only be available once the war was over. Behind the Belgian front, finances were also mobilized in order to support Belgian children, orphans in particular. [Elisabeth of Bavaria, Queen of the Belgians \(1876-1965\)](#) took a special interest in this initiative and, as a result, the famous "Queen's schools" scheme was born where orphans' school education was financially supported by the Queen.

On the front line, Belgian bereavement rites followed the same pattern as those of the other combatants. When possible, corpses were identified and buried under a simple wooden cross. Funeral masses, mainly Catholic, attracted crowds of soldiers, despite the poor attendance of Sunday masses. Companions in arms acted as a surrogate family and they were the first to plunge into mourning. New gestures appeared in the face of the violence of war: some placed letters written by the soldiers in the grave, others laid a helmet on the cross; trench newspapers published eulogies and poems to commemorate the deceased.

## After the War

On 22 November, 1918, the "*Joyeuse Entrée*" (Joyous Entry) of King Albert into Brussels symbolized the end of the war for the Belgian people. Belgian and Allied troops were cheered by the crowd as they marched through the capital while the presence of the royal family generated indescribable scenes of enthusiasm. The King delivered a speech in which he paid tribute to his army and the soldiers who had died in battle. He also commemorated the civilians who had died in front of a firing squad, during deportation or during the August 1914 massacres. In addition, the King granted suffrage to all men of twenty-one years or older and [war widows](#). Thus, the most prestigious authority in the country affirmed the heroism and

sacrifice of Belgium, recognized the mourners, and proclaimed his confidence in the future.

After the war, a narrative was constructed in the public discourse to confer meaning on the sacrifices made during the conflict. This narrative deferred to conceptions developed during the war: those who died in battle would remain [alive in memory as heroes](#); barbarism had been defeated in the name of civilization; and the hated enemy would pay for the harm done. Thus, individual deaths deserved eternal commemoration while the sacrifices made by the Belgian people demanded reparations.

This will to remember was not only orchestrated by the defenders of official memory, such as public officials, but also by the populations that had been most affected by the war. In

Belgium, veterans,<sup>7</sup> associations of prisoners and deportees and mourning families would even dictate the course of treatment for the war dead to be followed by national authorities. As soon as the war was over, the world of the combatants was organized through various associations such as the National Federation of Combatants, the Socialist Veterans Association, and the *Vlaamse Oud Strijders* (the Old Flemish Warriors). Political prisoners and deportees had their own similar associations. Though they had very different philosophical and political sensitivities, these associations became pressure groups which claimed rights for the survivors and recognition for their companions who had died on the battlefield or in front of a firing squad.

It was thus under pressure from mourning families supported by veterans associations that, in 1920, the government eventually agreed to repatriate the bodies of soldiers to their community of origin at the latter's expense. The government had originally wished to keep the bodies on the battlefields for reasons of public health and to highlight that all are equal in death. In order to appease families and to allow them to have access to the tombs of the deceased, the authorities chose to make mourners exempt from or receive a reduction in any transport fees incurred while visiting the resting place of a loved one.<sup>8</sup> The number of circulars prohibiting exhumation is testimony to the refusal of many individuals to respect the government's policies.

Families continued to argue that the bodies should be reinterred in their hometowns. On the battlefields, graves fell progressively into disrepair.<sup>9</sup> Eventually, in April 1920, when the US government decided to repatriate the bodies of its fallen soldiers if the family so wished, the Belgian government began to change its position. From December 1920 onwards, the families could request the repatriation of a body at the expense of their community. From 1921 to 1923, most identified corpses were solemnly repatriated and reburied in their place of residence. Unidentified or unclaimed bodies were carefully assembled in military

cemeteries on the battlefield and became the charge of the Ministry of Defense.

Unlike the families of deceased soldiers, the families of those executed by firing squads did not have to wait to meditate at their loved ones' graves and, eventually, they organized real, public funerals. As soon as the conflict was over, various associations as well as communal authorities and schoolchildren paid tribute to the fallen at the places of their execution by placing simple wooden crosses which bore only a number and no name. These homages were conscientiously reported in the local press which experienced a rapid resurgence after the war. From 1919 onwards, at the request of families or communal authorities, the bodies of executed patriots were exhumed and reburied solemnly in their community of origin. The re-appropriation of the heroes' bodies by the communities, which took responsibility for the expenses incurred, went apparently without saying. The burial of [Gabrielle Petit \(1893-1916\)](#) in Schaerbeek rather than in her native Tournai caused an outcry in the Tournai press, as the bodies normally transferred to the community of origin. The rapid wave of homages reached a peak in 1919 with numerous collective national funerals honouring civilian heroes. In Antwerp, [Brussels](#), Schaerbeek, and Liege, the national and local authorities, the high clergy, numerous associations and a crowd of common people joined in the same glow of commemorative enthusiasm.<sup>10</sup> It is noteworthy that, although funerals were collective, various patriots were individualized by accounts published in newspapers.

In 1922, the Belgian government, under pressure from veterans and families, finally agreed to adopt the memorial practice (Tomb of the Unknown Soldier) inaugurated two years earlier in Unknown Soldier Tomb in Paris and London. Initially, the Belgian government wanted to affirm the specificity of Belgian "martyrdom and heroism" with the erection of a gigantic monument to honour civilian and military deaths. This project was delayed by endless discussions while families and comrades in arms of the dead soldiers lost patience. As result, many Belgians attended the solemn inhumation of an unknown soldier under the Congress Column in Brussels. The soldier to be interred was selected by a blind soldier out of five bodies recovered from various Belgian battlefields. This practice was adopted on a national scale and was an invention unique to the commemoration of the First World War at the time. These funerals were intended to embody a response to the violence of industrial war, mass death, the definitive absence of bodies<sup>11</sup>. Anonymity signified equality among all heroes and gave space for the mourning, including by those unable to find a relative's body. From then on, every 11 November, national authorities, veterans, schoolchildren, and families in mourning would come to meditate, express their sorrow as well as their gratitude for the "fallen of the fatherland."

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the local monuments engraved with the names of the

dead, and the perfect alignment of graves in military cemeteries were attempts to preserve the memory and honor the sacrifice of those killed during the war. In the same vein, a whole set of hagiographic literary works – mainly by Catholic writers for a wide audience – appeared after the war which paid tribute to the dead. Furthermore, some deaths even had the big privilege of being mentioned in schoolbooks, a rare feature at the time. Yet, the question remains whether these collective practises actually helped families with their grief.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, there was a double-edged quality to the memorial monuments and the official speeches. The monuments depicted the dignity and glory wartime sacrifice and this official recognition may have helped in the mourning process. The monuments were also inescapable physical reminders of the pain of a huge and irreparable loss.

Ostentatious collective bereavement might have ultimately obscured intimate, individual pain. However that may be, public gestures and ceremonies organized around monuments during the interwar years and even beyond, demonstrate a collective will to avoid oblivion, to give meaning to death and to maintain solidarity among mourners. The solidarity engendered during the war made it possible for local and private charities to last well beyond the conflict. For instance, the CNSA section devoted to orphans was preserved by the edict of 19 June, 1919 and became known as the Institute for War Orphans.<sup>13</sup> The law of indemnity adopted in 1919, put the widows of soldiers and civilians who died for reasons related to the war on equal footing in terms of pensions. Additionally, some charities which had lost their wartime purpose now found new objectives. This was the case for the charity The Adoption which had been devoted to war prisoners was henceforth dedicated to assisting orphans, mentally handicapped children, and schools.

## Conclusion

The First World War caused the death of almost 60,000 Belgian civilians and soldiers out of a population of 7.5 million inhabitants. For four years, sorrow was omnipresent. In some villages, especially those struck by the August 1914 massacres, only widows, orphans and the elderly remained. Because the majority of men were killed either in these massacres or at the front, women were left in charge and bereavement was generalized. As soon as the front stabilized, those living under occupation tried to identify their dead and bury them with dignity. With their lines of communication cut off, families attempted to obtain information on the fate of their relatives who either had been deported or were on the front lines. Without delay, the Catholic Church offered support to those in mourning. All Saints Day, for instance, was transformed into a quiet homage to those who died for the fatherland. Funeral masses were celebrated in parishes and schools in memory of war deaths in general or for a particular deceased. The Church, local and private charities, and local communities provided

aid to families who had lost a member, especially widows and orphans who had lost their major means of support.

Soon after the conflict, with some hesitancy, the state and the local authorities agreed to the wishes of families and veterans' associations and allowed the repatriation of the bodies to their community of origin, multiple solemn funerals for civilians and soldiers alike, the inhumation of the Unknown Soldier and the erection of war memorials in nearly every village. Ceremonies were organized during the interwar years to maintain the memory of the heroic dead. Veterans, always present during these commemorations, became the main keepers of memory. In addition, charities which had been set up during the war remained active in the commemoration of the deceased. Mourners were helped in their grief materially and symbolically by these public displays of bereavement and the aid of multiple charities. It remains to be seen whether this provided meaningful support to individuals in mourning or if, in contrast, the public expression of suffering obscured intimate grief.

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## Notes

1. There is no specific term for mourning parents. In contrast, a new term was invented a betrothed in mourning: white widow. Becker, Annette and Audouin-Rouzeau, Stéphane: 14-18, retrouver la Guerre, Paris 2000, p. 201. ↑
2. Hardier, Thierry and Jagielski, Jean-François: Combattre et mourir pendant la Grande Guerre (1914-1925), Paris 2004. ↑
3. Claisse, Stéphanie: Ils ont bien mérité de la Patrie! Monuments aux soldats et aux civils belges de la Grande Guerre. Mémoire(s) et Reconnaissance (1918-1924), Louvain-la-Neuve, Thèse de doctorat UCL (inédit) 2005-2006, pp. 41-49. ↑
4. van Ypersele, Laurence and Debruyne, Emmanuel: De la Guerre de l'ombre aux ombres de la guerre. L'espionnage de 14-18 en Belgique occupée. Histoire et mémoire, Brussels 2004, pp. 107-112. ↑
5. Winter, Jay: Entre deuil et mémoire. La Grande Guerre dans l'histoire culturelle de l'Europe, Paris 2008, p. 112. ↑
6. Jacques, Catherine and Piette, Valérie: Une grande bataille: sauver l'enfance. In: Une Guerre totale? La Belgique dans la Première Guerre mondiale, Brussels 2005, pp. 171-182. ↑
7. Colignon, Alain: Les anciens combattants en Belgique francophone 1918-1940, Liège 1984. ↑
8. Moniteur belge, 6 avril 1919, pp. 1384-1385. ↑

9. Claisse, Ils ont bien mérité de la Patrie! 2006, pp. 116-119. ↑
10. van Ypersele and Debruyne, Ombres de la guerre 2004, pp. 120-134. ↑
11. Becker, Le culte des morts, entre mémoire et oubli 2004, pp. 1099-1111. ↑
12. Becker and Rouzeau, 14-18, retrouver la guerre 2000, pp. 197-258. ↑
13. Jacques and Piette, Sauver l'enfance 2005, pp. 171-182. ↑

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- [Claisse, Stéphanie / van Ypersele, Laurence: \*\*Du soldat inconnu aux monuments commémoratifs belges de la guerre 14-18\*\*, Brussels, 2013: Académie Royale des Sciences.](#)
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- [Debruyne, Emmanuel / van Ypersele, Laurence: \*\*Je serai fusillé demain. Les dernières lettres des patriotes belges et français fusillés par l'occupant, 1914-1918\*\*, Brussels, 2011: Racine.](#)
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- [Tallier, Pierre-Alain / Nefors, Patrick \(eds.\): \*\*Quand les canons se taisent. Actes du colloque international organisé par les Archives de l'État et le Musée royal de\*\*](#)

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## External Links

- **[De Schaepdrijver, Sophie: The Long Shadow of the "German Atrocities" of 1914, 29 January 2014 \(British Library\) \(Article\)](#)**
- **[Fin 1914: Création du Comité national de Secours et d'Alimentation, CNSA \(Portail de la Wallonie\) \(Article\)](#)**
- **[Majerus, Benoît: La mort à Bruxelles, 1914-1918 \(Centre for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Contemporary Society\) \(Article\)](#)**
- **[Sculpture publique en Belgique \(Sculpture publique en Belgique\) \(Image\)](#)**
- **[Tixhon, Axel / van Ypersele, Laurence: Du sang et des pierres, Les monuments de la guerre 1914-1918 en Wallonie, 2000 \(Centre for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Contemporary Society\) \(Article\)](#)**

## Metadata

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