

Veterans' Associations

By [Julia Eichenberg](#)

Summary

Veterans' associations formed an influential social movement during the interwar period. They provided the platform for former soldiers to commemorate the war and their fallen comrades and to discuss their post-war problems. The associations merged the voices of the soldiers who joined them and, as a group, acquired political and social influence, which they used to promote ex-servicemen's interests and needs. The following article aims to reconsider the rise and fall of the veterans' movement and reflect on its short-term failures and its long-term impact.

Table of contents

[1 Introduction](#)

[2 The Transnational Experience of War and the Genesis of the Veteran](#)

[3 National Veterans' Movements: Origins, Composition and Output](#)

[4 Political or Apolitical? The Role of Veterans and Veterans' Associations in Politics](#)

[5 International Veterans' Movement](#)

[6 Conclusions: The Rise and Fall of the Veterans' Movement? Short-term Failure and Long-term Results](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

"We still think veteranly, and we are sorry to have to say that around us too many comrades obstinately want to think politically in the bad sense of the term."¹

"But the best and most efficient manner of consolidating peace consists in maintaining the solidarity of all those who won the war side by side and who have created an equitable Europe."²

Introduction

The 1914-1918 war led to a level of military mobilization never before seen in Europe:

it made military service an experience shared by millions; and it made the nation's armed forces an inescapable political and social presence. The army was personified not only by

professional soldiers in fancy uniforms, but by crowds of nervous young men on their way to basic training, village boys home on leave, and veterans who gathered on Saturday nights to talk about their common military experience.³

Almost everyone was affected, if not personally, they had a father, a brother, a son, or at least an uncle, cousin or neighbour, who volunteered or had been conscripted. When the war ended with armistice on 11 November 1918, military [demobilization](#) began in most countries. Front lines were dissolved, troops were called to withdraw, arms recollected and soldiers sent home. This process was very different depending on the geographical region and did not affect all men in the same way.⁴ A significant number joined associations where they met their peers, men who also had fought in and returned from the war. Through the groups, former soldiers were able to commemorate the war and debate their post-war problems, acquiring political and social influence with which to promote their interests and needs. Additionally, the men believed that the experience of war and the sacrifice of the health and lives that soldiers – they as well as their fallen comrades – had made, endowed them not only with a cause, and a mission to defend the interests of ex-servicemen, but also with the moral authority to do so. This moral authority, based on their previous sufferance, was expanded beyond their immediate material interests to more abstract ideas: the commemoration of the war and the dead, and the consequential attitude toward future political and military conflicts. Veterans thus tried to promote their own interpretation of the war and its meaning to politics and society. Depending on their individual political tendencies, these attitudes varied from internationalist and pacifist to radical-nationalist and fascist. But most importantly, the common experience of war was the vanishing point of their feeling of entitlement.

The following article aims to present the origins and genesis, the work and goals, as well as the successes and failures of these veterans' associations. To do so, it will first discuss how a soldier became a veteran (or an invalid). In the second part, it shows how veterans' associations emerged as a mass movement in the aftermath of the First World War. In part three it will discuss the political impact of these associations who so often claimed to be apolitical. The fourth part will show how international networking and the emergence of inter-Allied and international veterans' organizations underlined the transnational aspect of the movement. This section will also discuss conciliatory and [pacifist](#) attitudes of veterans' associations. Finally, the article will reconsider the rise and fall of the veterans' movement and reflect on its short-term failure and its long-term impact.

The Transnational Experience of War and the Genesis

of the Veteran

Ex-servicemen referred to their joint experience of war and camaraderie, which they sought to continue after the war, as the major foundation of veterans' associations. As has been pointed out by memoirs, but also in recent historical work on morale and coping mechanisms, the peer group of a soldier was essential to the survival of the war.

On the battlefield, the nation seemed far away, and patriotism empty and abstract; what mattered most were the men with whom a soldier fought, on whom he depended, and for whom he would, if necessary, suffer and die.⁵

Communication with the home front, with the loved ones, was sometimes complicated by the very different experience of daily life. Those who were not able to communicate the violence they experienced had to rely on allusions and indirect expressions of [feelings](#).⁶ The longer the war endured, the deeper the gap felt between the soldiers and civilians back home. At the same time, the soldiers' experience of war and violence was transnational, transgressing national frontiers in its resemblance.⁷ Accordingly, the experience of returning from war, trying to re-integrate into the respective societies and labor markets, trying to deal with physical, psychological and emotional strains from the war, was a transnational experience, too, shared by former combatants from almost all over the world.

The solution for these problems, however, was initially sought on the predominantly national level. For most men, this demobilization was far from a return to their previous lives. Young men who had dropped out of school or their professional education were faced with the difficulties of finding a job in the weakened post-war economies. Formerly established, older men returning from war now saw themselves in professional and economic competition with younger men as well as women. Furthermore, the war had inflicted physical or psychological harm on most of its participants. Physically injured veterans had to fight to regain as much of their health as possible, but also for recognition and compensation, for benefits and a chance to be reintegrated into the labor market. This often involved being trained for a new job as they were no longer physically fit to do their old one. In addition, most men were, to a different degree, [psychologically harmed by the war](#), which was not always visible and thus harder to prove. Only with time a medical recognition of "shell shock" – what would today be diagnosed as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) came to be medically acknowledged. The problems ex-servicemen brought with them were manifold – and so were the problems of the societies to which they were returning. War had taken its toll on all sides. This made the (re-)encounter and the following political, social and legal interaction between returning soldiers and home societies all the more complicated.

The national background was crucial: it had significant impact on the experience of war itself, but even more on the ways soldiers were demobilized and joined organizations, and on the way the respective veterans' movement formed and functioned. However, the common war experience and the impression that this experience was not or only partly understood (and acknowledged) by civilians, led the former soldiers to feel connected to their peers, even beyond national borders, sometimes even beyond front lines.

To discuss the phenomenon of the veterans' movement, one firstly has to define the vocabulary that at first seems self-explanatory. A demobilized soldier is not per se a veteran. Rather, he becomes one by adapting a socially constructed and legally defined role and by acceptance of this role through social action and communication. As [John Horne](#) put it,

They [...] sought to construct new lives in the varied settings of the post-war world as they processed the memory of the war. Just exactly how they did this, and what importance they attached to it, was what turned them into veterans, and there was nothing automatic about it.⁸

State demobilization and legislation provided the framework to define the group of veterans from outside. The process of demobilization was meant to re-transform soldiers into citizens, to disarm them and to see them return to their civilian life. Challenged by the masses of soldiers affected and by their demands, the states introduced new laws to deal with the specific problems of demobilization and of former soldiers. A veteran thus was not only a man who formerly fought in the war, but one who belonged to the category that found new significance through state legislation: veterans and invalid veterans. New legislation set up criteria of how to classify these men and how to respond to their needs. As [Michael Geyer](#) has pointed out in his comparative study (probably first of its kind), different states responded differently to this challenge.⁹ [France](#) chose to acknowledge and reward the sacrifice of the citizen. Benefits in [Great Britain](#) were closer linked to military ranks. [Germany](#) and [Austria](#) tended to treat the war as a "colossal industrial accident," determining benefits according to the percentage of the individual's ability to work that had been compromised by the war.¹⁰ By introducing these legal responses to the needs of veterans, state legislation contributed to shape the identity of veterans by legally defining who had rights to what kind of compensation.

However, it was not merely his relation with the state that defined the veterans' identity. David Gerber and others have shown the dangers of reducing veterans' social identities to interactions with the state.¹¹ Discussing the role and agency of African-American veterans in the US, [Jennifer Keene](#) underlines the importance of considering the interconnectedness

between black veterans' identity as part of the civil rights movement and their experiences as disabled men.¹² The fact that former combatants, as everyone else, hold a variety of overlapping social identities has too often been neglected. Veterans and invalids were more than what demobilization or legislation made them. They were also fathers, sons, husbands; they were defined by their professions and/or education, and by their social and geographical environment: "For most former soldiers, it [veteran identity] did not take precedent over class, politics and place or other determinants of their lives."¹³

By joining a veterans' organization, participating in joint events, remembrance and demonstrations, the former combatants accepted and confirmed their – even if not exclusive – identity of a veteran. The thus institutionalized community offered individuals the space to remember and the support to defend their interests as well as to pursue their claim to moral authority based on the common war experience. The formation of veterans' organizations was an important step on the way to define who according to what legislation counted as a national veteran, but, more importantly, it was the way leading to the construction of a veterans' identity. While this identity often started out as a local or national group identity, veterans' organizations lay the ground for the eventual transgressing of borders and the formation of a transnational identity of World War veterans.

One of the central questions of each account of the veterans' movement(s) is the issue of pensions and care for invalid veterans. Invalids played a significant role in the veterans' movement. This was because of their numerical strength, but also, of course, because of the fact that their lives had been significantly (and often visibly) changed by the war – more so than of any other veteran. In many cases, their physical appearance and abilities had changed, and so too had their prospects of jobs, marriage and/or fatherhood, and definitely their relationship to their own bodies.

Some have argued for a separation of organizations of invalids and those of veterans. Most research, however, usually summarizes all veterans, including those physically maimed and physically fit (in most cases this means convalesced). Even where it explicitly deals with disability, the term disabled, handicapped or invalid veteran is usually preferred. Those who argued that invalid associations should be regarded separately from other veterans' organizations underlined that their experience and their interests were different. This, however, ignores the fact that while many invalid veterans did indeed feel neglected and had good reason to engage in special interest associations, the narrative of being one of the First World War soldiers was central and vital to their self-perception, to their associations, and to their demands.

Some have argued that the split was caused since veterans' organizations failed to reach out

to disabled veterans. On the other hand, however, invalid veterans acted as core agents in the veterans' movement. They believed that their sacrifice gave them a special right to act on the behalf of the First World War combatants. In many cases, the fact that they were no longer able to pursue their previous careers also meant that an active engagement in the veterans' movement gave their lives new destinations. Finally, and not to be neglected, while states failed to meet their invalid ex-servicemen's needs in many ways, most supplied them with free or significantly reduced travel on railways, meaning these men were in a position to travel to reunions and meetings across the country and sometimes beyond, thus committing their manpower to the veterans' movement.

National Veterans' Movements: Origins, Composition and Output

While veterans' organizations spread quickly in most countries, membership differed greatly – especially with regard to the number of potentially eligible former combatants of the war.¹⁴ The most active veterans' movement of the First World War was the French, where between 41.9 percent and 48 percent of all eligible ex-servicemen registered in an association.

Numbers of active veterans in France came up to almost 3 million.¹⁵ [Jay Winter](#) even speaks of a mobilization rate up to 60 percent among French ex-servicemen.¹⁶ Among the most influential of the French veterans' organizations were the [Union Fédérale](#) and the [Union des Combattants](#) and others.

In [Great Britain](#), the British Legion quickly emerged as the unified national institution to represent veterans' interest, just as the American veterans' movement was dominated by the American Legion, although the Veterans of Foreign Wars association maintained a strong minority. In these two countries, as in some others, the concerns of invalid veterans were represented by the unified veterans' organization in contrast to special invalid interest groups in other countries. The fact that French veterans were so active might have come as no surprise, given its long tradition of a stable national state with an active civil society. Other countries, however, might defy expectations. The British Legion peaked at only 409,011 members in 1938, meaning that only about 10 percent of British ex-servicemen were registered with the Legion at its highest membership.¹⁷ In the [USA](#), where similarly to Great Britain, First World War veterans were represented predominantly (but not only) by one national organization, about one million war veterans joined the American Legion at its peak. In comparison to the nearly 2.5 million eligible world war veterans, however, numbers might look small. The American Legion was furthermore challenged by competition. The "Veterans of Foreign Wars" (VFW), founded in 1899, struggled to maintain a membership of 60,000. However, in 1932, VFW membership went up to 200,000 members

because the organization demanded full and immediate cash payment of the deferred Soldiers' Bonus while the American Legion opposed it. Thus, by challenging federal veterans' policy, the VFW rose out of relative obscurity to become a prominent vehicle for veteran political activism.¹⁸

In 1935, the VFW claimed almost 300,000 members while the American Legion sank to a membership of 700,000, more than 350,000 fewer members than in 1931.

Germany saw the emergence of a broad range of [veterans' associations](#), covering the specter of political views from radical left to radical right. Here, political alignment seems, at least according to historiographical works, to have had a higher impact than other factors (regional background, ranks, physical invalidity or not). Numbers of German veterans' organizations changed significantly during the interwar period, as many members changed alliances and right-wing organizations grew substantially. On the right-wing side, *Stahlhelm* membership peaked in 1932 with about 350,000; the *Jungdeutscher Orden* sported ca. 200,000 in 1921, then dropped to about 100,000 after 1924; the *Kyffhäuserbund*, assembling a range of conservative forces and already strong before the war, rose from 2.2 million in 1921 to 2.6 million in 1929; the increasingly *völkisch*-nationalist interest group of former [prisoners of war](#), *Reichsvereinigung ehemaliger Kriegsgefangener* allegedly held ca. 400,000 in 1921 but only 10,000 members were counted in 1924. On the other side of the political spectrum, the *Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten*, counted ca. 36,000 members in 1924; the social democrat *Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold*, founded in 1924, peaked in 1925/26 with ca 900,000; the invalid association *Reichsbund der Kriegsbeschädigten, Kriegsteilnehmer und Kriegerhinterbliebenen*, founded in 1917, peaked in 1922 with ca. 830,000. Finally, the *Roter Frontkämpferbund*, founded in 1924 and combat league of Communist Party, peaked in 1927 with ca. 127,000.¹⁹

Interestingly, veterans' associations were also strong in countries that had been superseded by new states. In the successor states of the former empires, veterans' associations formed and promoted their rights, even though their members had not fought for the country they now lived in. While Austria and [Russia](#) shared the names with their predecessors, their governments explicitly opposed political responsibility for the participation in war: in the case of Russia even more fervently than Austria. [Poland](#), [Czechoslovakia](#) and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes only became states after the end of the war. Nonetheless, their veterans formed associations promoting the rights of "Polish," "Czechoslovak" and "[Yugoslav](#)" veterans, sometimes breaking it down to ethnic groups (German, Jewish, Czech/Slovak, Croat/Serbian/Slovene), but never, or almost never, publicly referring to the one in whose uniforms and ranks they had actually served: German, Habsburg and Russian.²⁰

Veterans' associations indeed started out as a national phenomenon: but the fact that they predominantly chose the nationality of the state they were about to address for support, shows in how far the identity of veterans was constructed by post-war necessities rather than by battle.

Eastern European ex-servicemen took surprisingly quickly to veterans' organizations. Estimations of the numbers of Polish veterans active in the [veterans' movement](#) vary between 15.6 percent and 23.6 percent.²¹ The fact that this represents only a fifth of the eligible men has been deemed to be a sign of low interest and low self-identification of First World War ex-servicemen among the Polish veterans. However, one should keep in mind that Poland, just as other Eastern European countries, had for over a century not called any state its own; there was no tradition of social and political movements nor joint political culture comparable to that in Western European countries. Still, the Polish Association of War Invalids ZIWRP (*Związek Inwalidów Wojennych Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*) was one of the biggest and most influential interest groups in Poland during the interwar period.²² Membership figures in Poland also corresponded to another overall phenomenon of the veterans' movement in so far as invalids were among its most active members: given the impact war had had on their lives, and their corresponding interest to keep veterans' issues at the heart of political discussion, this might seem only natural. In Great Britain and France, too, disabled veterans stood for up to 75 percent of the organized veterans' movement.²³ It is for these reasons, that a clear distinction between veterans and invalids is not necessarily helpful.

Political or Apolitical? The Role of Veterans and Veterans' Associations in Politics

Much has been said and even more insinuated about the political tendencies of ex-servicemen. Mostly, public opinion as well as histories provide a mere overview on the topic and have been dominated by the same assumptions: in a rather simplified argument one finds the idea that veterans' politics tended to be right-winged and, linked to that, anti-democratic. In a more sophisticated version of this argument, veterans are considered to be reluctant to politics and to support anti-parliamentary views. French veterans are believed to be the only exception, in that they are mostly regarded as having continued a socialist and internationalist tradition. As so often, there is a grain of truth in these assumptions but they have to be put into perspective. An international comparison of veterans' movement opens the view and challenges the idea that all veterans were apolitical, or conservative.

It has been assumed that "among the several [veterans'] organizations, regardless of nationality, [there was] a single thread of conservatism," that either "outside parties,

particularly capitalist and industrial interests, aided veterans' groups and won them over to the conservative cause [or that] a 'veterans' spirit' was present within organizations which took them naturally toward rightist ideology" – and Stephen Ward had found the second option more plausible.²⁴ In his book *The War Generation*, one of the first comparative volume on veterans, he continues this train of thought: "Those who joined organizations were themselves nostalgic for the former military life and sought to perpetuate it."²⁵ The "military way" then became the standard not only for military affairs but for civilian life as well. Quick, forthright decisions, obedience to orders, and selfless commitment to higher causes became purposeful aspirations for the society as large. This approach proved antagonistic to parliamentary procedure and democratic rule, but veterans' organizations, according to this view, tended to view society in this manner. Ward concluded that while veterans often claimed to be apolitical – "the veteran mentality is indeed one of the modern components of the psychology of the man of the Right" – Ward mostly follows this assumption, even though there might be some exceptions from the rule.²⁶

The assumption that veterans or veterans' organizations as such tend to Right-wing views are, however, oversimplified, as research has shown. John Horne underlines that

The organizations through which veterans pursued their aims and expressed their war experience were as varied as the beliefs and backgrounds of their members. They ranged politically from right to left, and socially they reflected both the civilian worlds from which the soldiers came and the military settings in which they had served.²⁷

Richard Carr's work on conservative politics and veterans as Members of Parliament in the United Kingdom serves the point. While the British Legion stressed their apolitical nature, 448 men who served in the First World War became Conservative Party Members of Parliament.²⁸ Carr concludes that "the Conservative Party [seemed]...a comforting source of permanence in a world that had been turned upside down..." and suggests that "these were men who parlayed their radicalization into directions that arguably could not have been foreseen in 1918. [...] What they had failed to achieve on the battlefield – [...] – begat a fervour to achieve something after 1918."²⁹ Carr attributes some success to the lobbying of conservative ex-servicemen, while at the same time contradicts the myth of the apolitical veteran: "Including Attlee, every Prime Minister from 1940 to 1963 had seen active service in the First World War, and every Conservative Foreign Secretary from 1935 to 1955 likewise."³⁰

The same argument can be served by looking at non-conservative groups. In his recent book "Contested Commemorations," Benjamin Ziemann focuses on republican commemorations of

war within the German associations *Reichsbund* and *Reichsbanner*. These associations were deeply influenced by their military experience, and accordingly felt at ease with the display of military symbols, while at the same time regarded their war experience as a reason to object to war, and to work to prevent further war. Ziemann challenges the widespread image of right-winged German veterans by quoting the estimate of one Hermann Schützinger: "about 60 percent of all German war veterans were, as members of *Reichsbund* and *Reichsbanner*, firmly anchored in the republican camp, and represented 'a front of war refusal and reconciliation between the peoples.'" Only 40 percent of all German war veterans were represented by the *Kyffhäuserbund* and patriotic associations such as *Stahlhelm* and *Jungdo*. In France, by comparison, supporters of the left in the *Union Fédérale*, prevailed over the *Union Nationale des Combattants*, with only a minority supporting Communist or radical-nationalist groups.³¹

Another significant difference between the veterans' culture in the respective countries was the numbers of registered veterans and invalids, depicting the policies of the countries to acknowledge the suffering of their ex-servicemen. In Poland, about 150,000 men were registered as invalids in 1931. This number is surprisingly low compared to the number of recognized invalid veterans in other countries which was very probably due to restrictive invalid legislation. France counted about 1,030,000 veterans whose war afflictions had been registered, acknowledged and in one way or another compensated by the French state. It has to be said that France had the most encompassing legislation with regard to invalid veterans. In Germany 761,294 veterans were registered and treated as invalids, Great Britain counted 473,238 and the USA recognized war experience as the cause of the physical and psychological damage of 243,611 men in 1927.³²

Work became a key issue in the debates on veterans' welfare. Veterans' associations stressed the desire to be reintegrated into working life. Veterans and their representatives criticized employers for not providing jobs for the disabled or ex-servicemen in general. Furthermore, veterans blamed the state for failing to provide legal guidelines and financial aid for the reintegration. By the same token, most states chose to introduce a welfare concept that was closely linked to the concept of work. Invalidity was to be defined predominantly by a percentage of disability to work. Additionally, increased social welfare was clearly linked to political needs and objectives. Especially the fear of social unrest, [revolution](#), and the objective of maintaining political stability led to support for the veterans' claims. The return of the ex-servicemen, many of them wounded, called for a rapid processing of their request. A quick settlement was regarded as the best means to prevent and calm social protests in most countries. In Soviet Russia, however, the regime's "almost paranoid fear of 'unbridled associations', in particular those of veterans and disabled

servicemen, led to the banning of all their organizations in 1920.”³³ Veterans deprived of their freedom to form associations were left as “Heroes without a voice.” Instead, the government relied on the quick reintegration into working life no matter what price, and outsourced the remaining problem to charity. Beate Fieseler pointed out that, in line with the social principle laid out in the Constitution of 1918, “He shall not eat who does not work. ...The majority of the 2.7 million invalids of the First World War and [Russian Civil War](#) – predominantly peasants – received no regular financial support from the Soviet government.” The situation worsened in 1935 when the few still existing societies and committees for invalids were disbanded.³⁴

In many countries with an active veterans’ movement, veterans’ associations learned how to use their international contacts to lobby more effectively and professionally – comparing pensions and benefits in different states. Increasingly, not only official state figures on invalid care were compared, but veterans’ associations gathered their own data in order to compare government policies to those of other countries. Articles in veterans’ journals became more critical, questioning the official statements and criticizing downfalls of the benefit scheme. Over and over, the veterans referred to their moral authority as a group rooted in their sacrifice – and to the state’s moral obligation to accommodate them.

To acknowledge how political veterans’ associations were, it is important to look at the exact content of their demands and at the justification provided for them. First World War veterans and invalids wanted more than merely the means to survive and a place to work: more than purely charitable aid. What they demanded was moral and legal acknowledgement by both state and society in compensation for their “work for the state.”³⁵ They claimed not only assistance, but a right to welfare as citizens who had fought for their country. By using these arguments, veterans’ associations were fully political. The reason they claimed to be otherwise – apolitical – was that they knew their political power was based on their numbers. Any division threatened to lessen their voice as a group. Political powers and parties tried to pull on them from all sides, and especially the radical parties welcomed veterans into their midst. These attempts to mobilize veterans, by political camps on all sides, also demonstrates their political impact: they represented a major demographic group in all European countries and as such had the potential to improve the electoral fortunes of any political faction that managed to win them over. The veterans’ claim to be apolitical was an attempt to maintain their companionship through the politically difficult interwar years, and it was the attempt of the less radical veterans to hold together the community against the pulls to left and right. Simply because veterans claimed they were apolitical does not mean they were. Looking at their fight for a right to benefits they were indeed more of a civil rights movement than might have been acknowledged.

International Veterans' Movement

On the international level, the two most important international veterans' organizations of the interwar period were the *Fédération Interalliée des Anciens Combattants* (FIDAC) and the *Conférence Internationale des Associations de Mutilés et Anciens Combattants* (CIAMAC). These two umbrella organizations assembled veterans' associations from different countries. A network of contacts and transfer had developed from the collaboration of World War One veterans in international ex-servicemen's associations to form a new transnational infrastructure. Annual meetings, lively correspondence and personal contacts created a transnational community. Even ex-combatants who fought each other only a short time before now cultivated a joint commemoration of the dead and became engaged to pursue common interests. Initiated by the mostly pacifistic French ex-servicemen, FIDAC was founded in 1920 as an assembly of veterans who had served the armed forces of the allies. FIDAC wanted to provide a forum for an inter-allied commemoration of war and the dead, to organize inter-allied assemblies and thereby conserve an inter-allied comradeship of ex-servicemen. Membership was restricted to veterans of the allied forces. This, among other reasons, set the need for the foundation of a second organization. CIAMAC went one step further and aimed to unite all ex-servicemen and war invalids of the Great War, including the former enemies Germany, Austria, and Bulgaria. Again the idea of founding the organization was initiated by French veterans' associations. Both the ILO (International Labour Organisation) and the [League of Nations](#) supported the cooperation of ex-servicemen, also, but not only, because they saw the opportunity of cooperation with its network.

Both FIDAC and CIAMAC stated as their principal aims the protection of material and moral interests of war victims and former combatants. The material interests meant welfare and supply, the moral interests referred to an active engagement against war. The majority of FIDAC members eventually decided to join CIAMAC (the most famous exception being the British Legion), but despite this and their frequent collaboration the two organizations remained fundamentally distinct in their world-views. While CIAMAC promoted international reconciliation to an extent that eventually led it close to appeasement, FIDAC was based on the belief in the continuity of wartime alliances into peacetimes. However, both collaborated to pursue their principal aims: to fight the case of First World War veterans. Their shared past motivated the ex-servicemen to unite in transnational organizations to fight a common battle: for the legal right to benefits and against the threat of a new upcoming war. Not just in spite of, but because of being ex-servicemen, they thought of themselves as morally able, responsible and justified to stand up for peace:

Because as ex-service men we are really the best qualified representatives of our respective nations to defend peace bought at so dear a price; because we speak in the name of thirteen

million of our dead who fell on the field of honour on both sides of the front.”³⁶

Not surprisingly, CIAMAC with its programmatic reconciliation with former non-Allies and the proximity to the League of Nations was the most pacifistic. But FIDAC with its continuity of wartime alliances stated disarmament and arbitration in international and bi-national conflicts as one of its major policies.

Veterans' organizations used their moral capital of being war victims and ex-servicemen in the discussion on war and peace. The common interest of preventing another war became fundamental to the formation of a transnational community of veterans. In defending these interests and their transnational communities, the veterans' organizations even turned against their respective national governments. The aim of the transnational veterans' movement to support demands for disarmament, peaceful conflict solutions and pacifism, provided a dilemma for most of the participating former combatants. Veterans chose a pragmatic approach to [pacifism](#) that rejected [militarism](#) and supported any form of peace building, but allowed defense.

Veterans were well aware of the limits and especially of the temporality of their impact. Considering concepts for the future was therefore part of the work of most veterans' associations, both militarist and pacifist. Youth work and the passing on of lessons learned in the war to the younger generation was an integral part of their work. Radical associations such as the *Stahlhelm* dedicated themselves to recruiting younger members, thus maintaining a war-prone spirit promoting revisionism and the need for re-armament. By the same token, pacifist and conciliatory veterans' associations focused on youth work as the only way to consolidate and maintain peace in Europe.

Pacifistic education of children was regarded as a founding stone of moral disarmament and as the most important way to pass on the internationalist's veterans' message to future generations. Crucial to its formation was the conviction that “the idea that conflicts between states and nations cannot be solved by violence [...] has to be strengthened in the hearts of humankind, starting with school children.”³⁷ The question how to secure “world peace” became the topic of a FIDAC-sponsored writing competition for veterans. As the winner, a French soldier, pointed out in his essay, the crucial challenge would be “to make children learn to resent war.”³⁸ On a similar note, CIAMAC discussed plans to integrate youth into their pacifistic activities³⁹ and included a passage into their disarmament resolution to appeal

not only to the delegations of the governments, but to public opinion, to contribute to a joint and loyal reconstitution and retaining of international trust as a basis for moral disarmament,

which again is the indispensable precondition for material disarmament.⁴⁰

Conclusions: The Rise and Fall of the Veterans' Movement? Short-term Failure and Long-term Results

What does the study of veterans' associations tell us? And how can we estimate the impact of their movement? In order to respond to these two questions, it is helpful to break them down to different aspects of their work. Firstly, the social and cultural impact of the veterans' associations and the veterans' movement should be considered. After the First World War, returning soldiers statistically constituted a significant part of the population. Veterans' associations were formed to advocate their social, medial and cultural interests. The associations gave a platform for those men who not only experienced the war, but also decided to express how this experience had changed them and their lives. Just as numbers of returning soldiers far exceeded those of former wars, the functions of veterans' associations multiplied. They provided a space to commemorate the experience of war and camaraderie – among peers and among allies, eventually even among all soldiers who shared this experience including former enemies. They also provided space for the commemoration of the fallen. At the same time, they offered to bundle the veterans' voices and speak for their interest, to lobby their case with politics, to demand that the state felt responsible for its citizens who had suffered through war – even if, as in Eastern Europe, they had not necessarily fought for the state they now lived in.

While the percentage of membership (eligible men / members of veterans' associations) differs, it is safe to say that veterans' associations after the First World War constituted a significant social movement in most countries involved. France might safely be regarded as the country where the veterans' movement was strongest and most active. The reasons for and the effects of this are various. However, it was not a singular case. Joining associations to promote their view of the war, to demand a right to have their sacrifice recognized by state and society, and to receive financial and political support, was considered helpful by a significant number of men who fought the war. Additionally, just as it is true for many other social movements, it should be remembered that the social and cultural impact of associations reaches far beyond the actual membership. Social movements have an impact on civil society in general. The battles they fought for veterans and invalid legislation benefited not only their members, but also anyone who applied for it.

At the same time, the battles they fought for including their own interpretation of the war into the national narrative, introduced the strong voice of ex-servicemen into the discussion. By doing so, it challenged (in both good and bad ways) the ways politicians, high-ranking militaries or the civil societies remembered the war. Finally, their attitude on war and peace

proved to have a significant impact on the political atmosphere in civil society during the interwar period. Radical veterans challenged the state and parliamentary politics with protests and resistance, thus undermining their authority. At the same time, internationalist veterans promoting peace and reconciliation helped to create hope and belief in a peaceful co-existence, supported the League of Nations, and raised hopes that this might have been “the war to end all wars”. Unfortunately, as we know, they failed. This however does not belittle the importance of their deeds nor their significant impact on social and political structures in the post-war and interwar period.

Julia Eichenberg, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin

Notes

1. Quote in Prost, Antoine: *Republican Identities in War and Peace. Representations of France in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*, Jay Winter and Helen McPhail (translators), Berg: Oxford 2002, p. 296. [↑](#)
2. Górecki, Roman: *New Poland*, in: FIDAC, *Special Polish Number*, 7 (1930), pp. 9–20, p. 20. [↑](#)
3. Sheehan, James J.: *Where have all the Soldiers gone? The Transformation of Modern Europe*, Boston et al. 2008, p. 20. [↑](#)
4. While states like France and Great Britain were able to control a steady and comparably quick process of demobilization, the fall of the Russian, Habsburg and Ottoman Empires meant their former soldiers were predominantly not demobilized in a controlled way, but rather withdrew on their own, sometimes joining new military formations to fight for a more desirable outcome of the war. Additionally, the Russian revolution and independence wars led to further fighting. Soldiers of the defeated German Empire, especially in the East, mostly abandoned their former troops, handed over their arms to the native population or paramilitary formations, and tried to make their way back home on their own, sometimes joining revolutionary formations on their way. [↑](#)
5. Sheehan, *Where have all the Soldiers gone?*, p. 78. [↑](#)
6. See for example Roper, Michael: *The Secret Battle. Emotional Survival in the Great War*, Manchester 2009; Watson, Alexander: *Enduring the Great War. Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914–1918*, Cambridge 2008. This was, however, not the only experience. For accounts of more candid communication between soldiers and their families, see Ziemann, Benjamin: *War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914–1923*, Alex Skinner (translator), Oxford 2007. [↑](#)
7. Frevert, Ute: *Europeanizing German History*, *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, 36 (2005), pp. 9–31, pp. 13–15. [↑](#)

8. Horne, John: *Beyond Cultures of Victory and cultures of defeat?*, New York 2013, p. 210. [↑](#)
9. Geyer, Michael: *Ein Vorbote des Wohlfahrtsstaates: Die Kriegsopferversorgung in Frankreich, Deutschland, und Großbritannien nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, GG 9 (1983). [↑](#)
10. Whalen, Robert Weldon: *Bitter Wounds. German Victims of the Great War, 1914–1939*. Ithaca/London 1984, pp. 88–89. [↑](#)
11. Gerber, David A.: *Disabled Veterans, the State, and the Experience of Disability in Western Societies, 1914-1950*, *Journal of Social History* 36/4 (2003), pp. 899-916. [↑](#)
12. Keene, Jennifer: *The Long Journey Home: African American World War I Veterans and Veterans' Policies*, in: Ortiz, Stephen (ed.): *Veterans' Policies, Veterans' Politics. New Perspectives on Veterans in the Modern United States*, Gainesville 2012, pp. 146-170. [↑](#)
13. Horne, *Beyond Cultures*, p. 210. [↑](#)
14. The following comparisons are based on calculations in Eichenberg, Julia: *Kämpfen für Frieden und Fürsorge. Polen und die internationale Veteranenbewegung in der Zwischenkriegszeit*, Munich 2011, pp. 42-44, as well as on numbers collected in Eichenberg, Julia / Newman, John Paul (eds): *The Great War and Veterans' Internationalism*, Basingstoke 2013. [↑](#)
15. Prost, Antoine: *Les anciens combattants et la société française, 1914-1939*, volume 2, p. 3, Paris 1977. A more accurate number was 2.886.900: calculations subtract those who signed up to two or more associations. *Ibid.*, volume 2, p. 53. [↑](#)
16. Winter, Jay: *Veterans, Human Rights, and the Transformation of European Democracy*, in: Elizabeth Kier / Ronald R. Krebs (eds.): *In War's Wake. International Conflict and the Fate of Liberal Democracy*, Cambridge 2010, pp. 121–138, p. 122. [↑](#)
17. Niall Barr: *The Lion and the Poppy: British Veterans, Politics, and Society, 1921-1939*, Santa Barbara pp. 57-58) mentions that the League itself gives numbers of up to 560,000 members, a number he questions. Even if it were right, it would make a only minor change to the percentage. Membership in cities was as low as 2 percent. [↑](#)
18. Ortiz, Stephen: *Rethinking the Bonus March: Federal Bonus Policy, Veteran Organizations, and the Origins of a Protest Movement*, in: Ortiz, *Veterans' Policies*, pp. 173-198, p. 193-194. [↑](#)
19. Ziemann, Benjamin: *Contested Commemorations. Republican War Veterans and Weimar Political Culture*, Cambridge 2013, p. 15. [↑](#)
20. One significant exception being the German War Victims Associations in Czechoslovakia. See Stegmann, Natali: *Social Benefits and the Rhetoric of Peace in Czechoslovak Veteran Organisations*, in: Eichenberg/ Newman (eds.), *The Great War and Veterans' Internationalism*, pp. 118-135. [↑](#)
21. Since numbers for the individual associations are often vague, these numbers are

- estimations. Jabłonowski, Marek: Sen o potęgę Polski. Z dziejów ruchu byłych wojskowych w II Rzeczy-pospolitej 1918–1939 [Dreams of Power over Poland. The History of the veterans' movement in the II. Republic 1918-1939], Olsztyn 1998, p. 103. Until their final demobilization in 1922, about 800,000 soldiers joined the ranks of the Polish Army during the Independence Wars, not all of whom had seen active battle. Ibid., p. 20. ↑
22. Jabłonowski, Sen o potęgę Polski [Dreams of Power over Poland], p. 34. ↑
 23. Barr, The Lion and the Poppy, p. 63. Prost, In the Wake of War, p. 45. ↑
 24. Ward, Stephen (ed.): The War Generation. Veterans of the First World War, Port Washington et al. 1975, p. 5. ↑
 25. Ward, The War Generation, p. 5. ↑
 26. Ward, The War Generation, p. 5. Referring to Remond, René: Les anciens combattants et la politique, Revue française de science politique, 5/2 (1955), pp. 267-290. ↑
 27. Horne, Beyond Cultures, p. 212. ↑
 28. Carr, Richard: Veteran MPs and Conservative Politics in the Aftermaths of the Great War. The Memory of all that, Farnham et al, 2013, p. 1. ↑
 29. Carr, Veteran MPs and Conservative Politics, pp. 191-193. ↑
 30. Ibid., p. 1. ↑
 31. Ziemann, Contested Commemorations, p. 93. ↑
 32. Eichenberg, Kämpfen für Frieden und Fürsorge, pp. 112-113; Winter, Jay, "Demography", in: Horne, John (ed): Companion to World War I, Oxford / West Sussex 2010, p. 249. ↑
 33. Fieseler, Beate: The Soviet Union's "Great Patriotic War" Invalids: The Poverty of a New Status Group, in: Natali Stegmann / Katrin Boeckh (eds.): Veterans and War Victims in Eastern Europe during the 20th Century: A Comparison. Comparativ 20 (2011) H. 5, pp. 34-50, p. 48. ↑
 34. Ibid. ↑
 35. Geyer, Ein Vorbote des Wohlfahrtstaates, pp. 230-277. ↑
 36. Górecki, Roman: Declaration of General President of the F.I.D.A.C., in: International Assembly of Ex-Service Men and War Victims in Geneva, 19 and 20 March 1933. Official Report published by THE CIAMAC and THE FIDAC, pp. 8-12, here p. 8. See also: Pichot, Henri: Des guerriers contre la guerre: «Par la guerre, notre génération a marqué grandement et douloureusement sa place dans l'histoire. Ceux qui sont morts ont parachevé leur tâche. Les survivants ont une âme à sauver : qu'ils travaillent à faire la paix», in: Viala, Léon: Les relations internationales entre les associations des mutilés de guerre et d'anciens combattants Paris 1930, p. 10. ↑
 37. Berkelhammer, W.: Propaganda Pokoju [Peace Propaganda], in: Inwalida Żydowski [The Jewish Invalid] 3, 01.08.1928, p. 1. ↑

38. Paradis, Gabryel: Jak zapewnić pokój światowy [How to secure World peace], in: Ociemniały Żołnierz [The Blind Solider] 7 (1931), pp. 4-6. ↑
39. Anonymous, Międzynarodowe manifestacje inwalidzkie w obliczu zagadnień wojny i pokoju [International Manifestation of Invalids regarding questions of war and peace], in: Ociemniały Żołnierz [The Blind Soldier] , 3 (1932) pp. 3-4, pp. 3-4. ↑
40. Paragraph 5 of the CIAMAC resolution, Disarmament Conference 1932, in: Anonymous: Międzynarodowe manifestacje [International Manifestation], pp. 3-4. ↑

Selected Bibliography

- [Barr, Niall: **The lion and the poppy. British veterans, politics, and society, 1921-1939**, Westport, 2005: Praeger Publishers.](#)
- [Boeckh, Katrin / Stegmann, Natali, Boeckh, Katrin / Stegmann, Natali \(eds.\): **Veterans and war victims in Eastern Europe during the 20th century. A comparison. Introduction**, in: *Comparativ* 5/10, 2010, pp. 7-17.](#)
- [Carr, Richard: **Veteran MPs and conservative politics in the aftermath of the Great War. The memory of all that**, Farnham; Burlington, 2013: Ashgate Publishing.](#)
- [Cohen, Deborah: **The war come home. Disabled veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939**, Berkeley, 2008: University of California Press.](#)
- [Eichenberg, Julia / Newman, John Paul \(eds.\): **The Great War and veterans' internationalism**, Basingstoke; New York, 2013: Palgrave Macmillan.](#)
- [Eichenberg, Julia: **Kämpfen für Frieden und Fürsorge. Polnische Veteranen des Ersten Weltkriegs und ihre internationalen Kontakte, 1918-1939**, Munich, 2011: Oldenbourg Verlag.](#)
- [Horne, John \(ed.\): **Démobilisations culturelles après la Grande Guerre. Dossier de la revue 14-18**, in: *14-18 Aujourd'hui, Today, Heute* 5, 2002, pp. 45-53.](#)
- [Keene, Jennifer D.: **The long journey home. African American World War I veterans and veterans' policies**, in: Ortiz, Stephen R. / Mettler, Suzanne \(eds.\): *Veterans' policies, veterans' politics. New perspectives on veterans in the modern United States*, Gainesville 2012 University Press of Florida, pp. 146-170.](#)
- [Mosse, George L.: **Fallen soldiers. Reshaping the memory of the world wars**, New York, 1990: Oxford University Press.](#)

- [Newman, John Paul: **Yugoslavia in the shadow of war. Veterans and the limits of state building, 1903-1945**, Cambridge, 2015: Cambridge University Press.](#)
- [Ortiz, Stephen R. / Mettler, Suzanne \(eds.\): **Veterans' policies, veterans' politics. New perspectives on veterans in the modern United States**, Gainesville, 2012: University Press of Florida.](#)
- [Pencak, William: **For God & country. The American Legion, 1919-1941**, Boston, 1989: Northeastern University Press.](#)
- [Prost, Antoine: **Les anciens combattants et la société française, 1914-1939, 3 volumes**, Paris, 1977: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques.](#)
- [Stegmann, Natali: **Kriegsdeutungen, Staatsgründungen, Sozialpolitik. Der Helden- und Opferdiskurs in der Tschechoslowakei 1918-1948**, Munich, 2010: Oldenbourg.](#)
- [Viala, Léon: **Les relations internationales entre les associations de mutilés de guerre et d'anciens combattants**, Paris, 1930: Dourdan.](#)
- [Ward, Stephen R. \(ed.\): **The war generation. Veterans of the First World War**, Port Washington, 1975: Kennikat Press.](#)
- [Whalen, Robert Weldon: **Bitter wounds. German victims of the Great War, 1914-1939**, Ithaca, 1984: Cornell University Press.](#)
- [Ziemann, Benjamin: **Contested commemorations. Republican war veterans and Weimar political culture**, Cambridge; New York, 2013: Cambridge University Press.](#)

Citation

Julia Eichenberg: Veterans' Associations, 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 2014-10-08. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10270](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10270)

External Links

- [Asmuss, Burkhard: Der "Stahlhelm, Bund der Frontsoldaten", 8 June 2014 \(Lebendiges Museum Online\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Feu, Jenny du: Factors Influencing Rehabilitation of British Soldiers After World War I, 2009 \(Historia Medicinae\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Gerber, David A.: Disabled Veterans, the State, and the Experience of Disability in Western Societies, 1914-1950 \(The Free Library\) \(Article\)](#)
- [La Voix du combattant, Paris, 1919-1940 \(Gallica\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Official website of The American Legion \(Article\)](#)
- [Official website of The Royal British Legion \(Institutional Website\)](#)
- [Official website of the Union fédérale \(Article\)](#)
- [Official website of the Union nationale des Combattants \(UNC\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Official website of the United States Veterans of the Great War \(Article\)](#)
- [Official website of the Związek Inwalidów Wojennych Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, ZIWRP \(Polish Association of War Invalids\), in Polish \(Article\)](#)
- [Official website of Veterans of Foreign Wars \(Article\)](#)
- [The Nobel Peace Prize 1968, René Cassin \(Official Site of the Nobel Peace Prize\) \(Article\)](#)
- [UK Organizations Related to WW1 Remembrance, Research and Study \(The Great War 1914-1918\) \(Article\)](#)

Metadata

Regional Section(s)

[Central Europe](#) > [Germany](#)

[Eastern Europe](#) > [Poland](#)

[North America](#) > [USA](#)

[Western Europe](#) > [France](#)

[Western Europe](#) > [Great Britain and Ireland](#) > [Great Britain](#)

Thematic Section(s)

[Post-war](#)

Subjects

[Economy](#) > [Labour](#) > [Unemployment, during and after war](#)

[Economy](#) > [Post-war economy](#) > [Demobilisation, post-war](#)

[Memory and historiography](#) > [Commemoration, cult of the fallen](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [Post-war politics](#) > [Demobilisation](#)

[Society](#) > [Post-war society](#) > [Invalids](#)

[Society](#) > [Post-war society](#) > [Veterans](#)

Author Keywords

veterans; invalids; veterans' associations; social benefits; internationalism

GND Subject Headings

[Weltkrieg \[1914-1918\] ; Veteran](#)

LC Subject Headings

[World War, 1914-1918 ; Veterans ; Societies](#)

Rameau Subject Headings

[Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\) ; Anciens combattants](#)

Key Person(s)

Key Location(s)

Title

Veterans' Associations

Author(s)

[Julia Eichenberg](#)

Article Type

Handbook Article

Classification Group

Survey Article (Thematic)

Articles That Link Here

[Moral Norms and Values](#); [Extra-European Theatres of War](#); [Post-war Societies \(France\)](#); [Demobilization](#); [Non-European Soldiers](#); [Centenary \(New](#)

[Zealand](#)); [Museums](#); [Commemoration, Cult of the Fallen](#); [Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War \(Canada\)](#); [Destruction of the Ecosystem](#); [Cattaro, Mutiny of](#); [The Military at Home](#); [Centenary \(Australia\)](#); [Media Discourse after the War](#); [1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War. Introduction](#); [Post-war Societies \(Czechoslovakia\)](#); [Rural Society](#); [Literature \(USA\)](#); [State, Civil Society and Relief Organizations for War](#); [Prisoners of War](#); [Post-war Turmoil and Violence \(Yugoslavia\)](#); [Orlando, Vittorio Emanuele](#); [Commemoration, Cult of the Fallen \(Union of South Africa\)](#); [Arditi](#); [Historiography 1918-Today \(USA\)](#); [Verdun, site of memory](#); [Commemoration and Cult of the Fallen \(Canada\)](#); [Controversy: War Culture](#); [Croix de Feu](#); [Mourning and Cult of the Fallen \(Italy\)](#); [Religion \(USA\)](#); [Commemoration, Cult of the Fallen \(Belgium\)](#); [Post-war Societies \(Austria\)](#); [Anzac Memorial, Sydney](#); [Mémorial Interallié](#); [Centenary \(France\)](#); [Mémorial de Verdun](#); [Russian Expeditionary Force](#); [Union fédérale \(UF\)](#); [Centenary \(Canada\)](#); [Comradeship \(France\)](#); [Post-war Societies \(South East Europe\)](#); [Commemoration, Cult of the Fallen \(East Central Europe\)](#); [Veterans' Organisations \(Germany\)](#); [German Immigrants \(Brazil\)](#); [Union nationale des Combattants \(UNC\)](#); [Centenary \(South Africa\)](#); [Genevoix, Maurice and 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War. Introduction](#)