

War Losses (France)

By [Alexandre Lafon](#)

Summary

When the fighting came to an end in late 1918, military losses for France were in keeping with a prolonged industrial conflict involving the loss of a huge number of combatants on extremely deadly battlefields. In this context, the way the state handled the casualties, both in actual as well as symbolic terms, rapidly proved difficult yet necessary. Coverage concerning how the state reacted in the aftermath of the war was subject to manipulation and censorship. In the years that followed the war, public and private memories focused on the final casualty count of 1,400,000 persons. This number contributed to the crystallization of tensions related to national identity. Recent research has reevaluated the number of civilian casualties resulting from the war. Though the number of civilian casualties is not as high as the number of military casualties, the recently revealed high number of civilian deaths does serve to enhance the weight of bereavement and trauma within the communities affected, thus leaving an even deeper mark on the already diverse memories of the conflict.

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War losses: an issue in the global assessment of the war

Despite intensive research by historians, there does not exist – and there will never exist – a final exact count of the casualties inflicted throughout World War I. We can only provide an estimate about military deaths, estimated to be in the range of around 10 million according to the highest estimates.¹ This estimated body count hints at the drama lived by the societies who were engaged in the war and points to the brutal transition towards an industrialized mass war. This approximate figure also reveals the difficulty encountered in attempting to count the number of dead, and in defining precisely what is meant by war casualties when conducting a global assessment of the war. It raises the question of how the different societies engaged in the war decided how are the dead numbered during the conflict. This is a central issue, which affects the construction and used of war statistics within the nations after the war. Beyond the mere count of the casualties affected, this issue is part of a larger quantitative approach to studying the conflict. Quantitative approaches question the way in which the war was conducted and why reparations were required from Germany when the peace treaties were signed. It also probes why it was so difficult for those who were advocating for a fair peace settlement after the war to have their voices heard. Rough estimates of the number of war casualties also demonstrate the difficulty in “counting the dead” and what the words “[war losses](#)” mean exactly when attempting to conduct a global assessment of the war. With regard to [France](#), several recent studies have contributed to refining the data through tackling simultaneously the reality, distribution and management of those losses. For counting the losses is significant not just in terms of how high the number of casualties was relative to the number of individuals involved in the war, but also in terms of how the states involved handled the effects of the losses on their populations.

The first issue addressed in this article is what the notion of war casualties can refer to, both for contemporary and historical assessments of war. For the High Command, the casualties represent the men out of action, either dead, wounded, missing or taken as [prisoners of war](#). Here, war casualties are defined as the civilians and the military personnel who died as a result of military operations. Thus, even though the First World War was on this count a war carried on by regular armies, facing each other, it was also a theatre of violence inflicted upon civilian populations as a result of invasions, forced [migrations](#), and strategic bombings afflicting some territories outside of the combat zones.² All of this despite the successive [treaties of The Hague](#) and Geneva, which had tried prior to the war to better protect the separation between the military war and civilian life.

The perception of the number of deaths affects memories of the conflict retained by the

members of the communities affected by the war to varying degrees. Local archives, for instance, show how mourning communities, such as city councils, contributed to counting their war casualties and how they intended to honour them. It is interesting to consider how these differences in assessing the number of dead affect the ways that communities remember the conflict today, one hundred years after it began.

Assessing military and civilian casualties: Policy regarding how to handle military casualties

The delicate management of the number of troops

The 1914-1918 war showed the involvement of 8 million French soldiers belonging to several age groups for over four years, 7 million of which were working in the combat zones. On average, nearly 900 men were killed every day. Yet, although this figure does reveal the significant number of casualties, it does not reflect how difficult it is to assess them.

War years	Losses recorded
1914	301.000
1915	349.000
1916	252.000
1917	164.000
1918	235.000

Table 1: French military war losses 1914-1918³

As table 1 shows, the number of recorded casualties vary throughout the conflict. There were large differences in the number of combatants killed in action during the different war years. Losses reach a peak during great offensives and defensive battles. Between 20 August and 27 August 1914, the French army lost 40,000 men, 27,000 of which were killed on 22 August alone. Losses between 16 April and 25 April 1917 amounted to approximately 30,000 killed. During the early days of General [Robert Nivelle \(1856-1924\)](#) offensive on the “Chemin des Dames”, there was a death rate which was superior to that of the first week of the [battle of Verdun](#). In fact, 1915 was the most deadly year of the war. Still, the battle front is continuously marked by the deaths of combatants mainly killed on the spot, which corresponds to a drastic change in the way those deaths are distributed.

How, in such a context, could the military administration cope with the management of the casualties? In the wake of the doctrine of “big battalions” which had led France to adopt the 1913 law raising the duration of military service to three years in order to counter the development of reserves within the German army. In the early war years, the fundamental question of how to handle the problem of troops arose very quickly. In a sense, authorities had to improvise how they would handle the alarming number of casualties. The regimental record books show abundantly how difficult it was to number the casualties on the battlefield. When private [Henri Despeyrières \(1893-1915\)](#) died during a German attack on the sector held by his regiment on the Argonne in September 1915, that unit lost one third of its men. However, the list of “casualties” from this encounter is incomplete, including only those who were reported “missing”.⁴ The latter, an estimated 300,000 for the whole of the army and the duration of the conflict represent, after crosschecking, 250,000 individuals whose fate remained unknown throughout the course of the conflict. Symbolically, these men represent the weight of the grief felt by French society before and after the conflict, caused by the fact that their bodies were never found. Because it was impossible for the authorities to provide reliable statistics on the proportion of men killed in action, wounded or taken prisoner, it was necessary to resort to the counting undertaken by medical units. Another source was the High Command, who in 1916 really began to tackle the subject of casualty counting by introducing a more systematic follow-up of the numbers released by the troop depots. This way of collecting data, although more accurate than previous counts, did not enable military authorities to have a regularly updated view of the proportion of military losses.

Yet, it was from this statistical data from the beginning of the war that was reexamined and revised from 1916 onwards. It was this data that [Louis Marin \(1871-1960\)](#), a conservative member of the [French Parliament](#) for Meurthe-et-Moselle, relied on when, between 1919 and 1920, he produced an epoch-making report in which he worked out a total number of 1,357,800 killed in action, which included the 252,000 mentioned previously who had been reported missing. [Antoine Prost](#), who reviewed all the data and took into account those who died from their wounds after leaving combat, came up with an estimate of 1,325,000 military losses for the whole of the French population. When foreign and colonial soldiers are added to this count, the total is increased to 1,400,000.

To these totals, one should also add the soldiers who had returned to civilian life after the fighting, or who had been declared unfit for service during the war, and who died later as a result of their war wounds. Also, the losses sustained by the natives of [Alsace and Lorraine](#) who had been drafted into the German army, and who were killed in action. Also important is the fact that the annexation of Alsace and Lorraine reduced the population of the territories recovered by France after the war.

Order not to communicate the figures

Because of their supposed importance and of their approximate nature, the statistics pertaining to the number of war casualties, although incomplete, were kept by the authorities as a well-guarded secret. This is because they had the potential to influence the morale on the front. For this reason, very little information was communicated to civilian authorities, and the general population, although both were eager for news.

As [Abel Ferry \(1881-1918\)](#), a war veteran who was Secretary for Foreign Affairs, wrote on 15 January 1915 in his "Secret Notebooks": "the High Command refuses to reveal the importance of our losses to the Government."⁵ As a result, the most fantastic figures were circulated both on the battlefield and inland by military authorities, or simply through rumours. Still, as early as September-October 1914, when there was a massive arrival of wounded men, and correspondence of any kind was interrupted, families and the local city councils who had been notified of the deaths of soldiers began to realize the number of casualties was likely great. The men on the front also had some idea of the extent of the losses simply through witnessing the significant number of comrades missing within their ranks. Harsh debates took place during the conflict about the impact of some military operations on the population, the most intense being those which followed the failure of the offensive on the "Chemin des Dames" in the spring of 1917. However, there were still no reliable statistics produced during the conflict, and the figures that were disclosed were kept very confidential.⁶ Civilians did manage to get some information by talking to wounded soldiers returning from the war, observing the number of soldier death in the hospitals behind the lines, and the public death notifications that were released locally in villages and towns.

Civilian losses due to the war

In addition to military deaths, the war also caused civilian casualties. Several researchers have dealt with the particular fate of civilian populations during the initial invasion during the summer 1914, and the difficult conditions of the occupation. The masterly study of [John Horne](#) and [Alan Kramer](#) attempts to provide an authoritative answer as to the number of transported persons during this period, without having to rely on estimates. But civilians also sustained losses during the whole duration of the war in the ever-changing combat-zones and particularly in such cities as Reims, Verdun, Soissons, Amiens and Dunkirk, which were all hit by long-range guns. Between March and August 1918, Paris was regularly the target of air-raids or of shelling by a [long-range German gun](#) positioned about eighty miles away from the French capital. These attacks caused about 1,000 deaths among the Paris population.

Other elements must also be taken into account in determining civilian losses, for example

the casualties in the “red zone” after the war, and civilians who “died for France”, such as auxiliary nurses. One must also not forget that the so-called [Spanish Flu pandemic](#), which caused approximately 210,000 civilian and soldier deaths. In addition, it is possible to calculate an approximate population deficit of about 1,500,000 births resulting from the premature death, and absence during the war, of young men who were of marrying and reproductive age.

What was symbolically and materially at stake with war casualties?

“Dead for France”: the right to compensation

Antoine Prost very aptly remarked that the French parliamentary member Louis Marin who was at the head of a statistical review of war casualty numbers, also worked on an ad hoc parliamentary report investigating what the burden of paying pensions to the survivors of the war would be for the state. This concern lay at the heart of the claims of veterans who expected a fair compensation from the state and the Republic for the efforts they had made.

Working towards national recognition

Both the state and the French citizenry recognized that the sacrifices made for the war extended beyond the number of military dead. Symbolically, the institution called “Dead for France” recognized prisoners of war and civilians who had died on enemy territory as war casualties of the war from 2 July 1915 onwards. There was also material recognition of these newly interpreted casualties of war. From 1919 onwards, the legislative framework recognized war orphans, as well as [war widows](#), who were permitted to receive pensions from the state.⁷ The fate the pensions owed to between 250,000 and 260,000 soldiers reported missing (despite the wearing of dog-tags by all soldiers) was to be largely settled by court orders in the inter-war period. In general, the recognition of all the different types of war casualties implied having an accurate perception of the casualties and a policy concerning the restitution of bodies. Since it was impossible to repatriate all the bodies of those who had fallen, they were gathered in cemeteries and necropolises as a testimony of the sacrifice they had accepted. In return for accepting on-the-spot burials for their loved ones, the state bore the cost of burials abroad on behalf of the bereaved families, and also made tentative promises to try to return the bodies to France eventually.

The state’s concern for the bereaved was also illustrated by the erection – in keeping with a movement supported by city councils and the “various communities in upon mourning” – of war memorials and other monuments, which covered the battlefields and large part of France between 1920 and 1924.

Important disparities between the various categories of soldiers

Proportionally, all the categories of drafted military men did not suffer the same amount of casualties. Casualties varied depending on a soldier's exposure to battle fire and the duration that they spent on the front lines. There were also large disparities between different age groups and the different services performed, and the ranks held, by soldiers. Men killed in 1912, 1913, and 1914, were respectively in percentage 27.7, 29.2 and 27.8 percent. Gross figures for each age group of approximately 300,000 dead paid the highest tribute for they made up the bulk of the infantry battalions in 1914 and 1915, the deadliest years of the conflict.

As would be expected, the last contingents drafted suffered fewer losses because they were engaged in the war for a shorter period of time and because a higher proportion of them were spared from going to the front line. Infantrymen also experienced more losses than [artillery](#) men, 22.9 percent of which were actually engaged in the war, compared to only 6 percent of artillery men. On average, infantry losses would reach between 16 percent and 17 percent according to the figures recorded. Furthermore, Jules Maurin's statistical review also demonstrated that war losses were greater for those soldiers that were recruited by military centers in Southern France: 38 percent of twenty-year old soldiers recruited at the Mende recruitment centre in 1915 were killed and this number was 26 percent from the Béziers recruitment centre.⁸ Junior officers who led the men into battle suffered the heaviest casualties. The testimony of the writer [Maurice Genevoix \(1890-1980\)](#) clearly highlights the slaughter among the ranks of lieutenants at the start of the war and at "Les Eparges" between February and April 1915.⁹ The large number of casualties amongst junior officers necessitated an almost continuous train of replacements and this situation deeply marked the minds of the survivors.

It is not possible to know what occupations the soldiers held before their participation in the war. As [André Loez](#) shows, despite the mention of the occupation in many of the soldiers' passbooks, it is not possible to identify the original occupations of the conscripts because the various categories mentioned are not clearly defined. The birth and death registries from the village of Lot-et-Garonne¹⁰ demonstrates the complexity of the occupations of the different rural components of the population, and points to the predominance of craftsmen and small farmers in the ranks. Yet, one should remember that the rural population, mainly drafted into the infantry sustained, on the whole, more casualties than the other army services. This was also true of state employees, such as elementary schoolteachers (a little over 7,000 were killed), high school teachers and teachers in training, who more exposed than others as junior officers or non-commissioned officers. Persisting statistical gaps are thus due to the

correlation between the soldiers' assignment, rank and social origin.

Bereavement

The power of the veterans as a social category

For the many soldiers returned to civilian life after their [demobilization](#) between 1918 and 1921, their new identity as war veterans was shaped by their awareness of their own sacrifices and deaths of their [comrades](#). Without forming a social group properly speaking, they drew their legitimacy from their memories of those who never came back.

Cultural productions, such as the two versions of the film *J'accuse* by [Abel Gance \(1889-1981\)](#), released in 1919 and again in 1938, or [Roland Dorgelès \(1885-1973\)](#) book *Le réveil des morts*, published in 1923, both portray missing soldiers who return from the dead to hold the living who have failed to stay faithful to their memory to account. In addition, numerous war testimonies, referred to as "Monuments to memory", were published and were often accompanied by dedications to missing comrades. The war books by Maurice Genevoix are all stamped by a seal representing the survivor who only sees himself through his comrades-in-arms laid to rest on the battlefields. The meeting-point between the massive number of military casualties and the greater sensitiveness of French society to the idea of "[bereavement](#)" thus amplifies the idea of "mourning", and also fueled the rise of the pacifist movement among a part of the population and some war veterans throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

Identity at stake from the interwar period until today

The importance of the casualties recorded within the context of the increasing individualization of societies and of their more complex relationship to death, accelerated the process of commemoration of victimhood in the interwar period. Many communities and organizations discovered that, through the significance accorded to the large number of casualties, they were able to mobilize public opinion. Depending on the intended purpose, the large number of deaths, and the meaning imparted to them would change. The lack of reliable and statistically verified data allowed for the political and instrumental use of the supposed military casualties in a kind of "competitive remembrance" which developed throughout the 1920s. For example, the myth of the "250,000" Bretons killed in action during the war was echoed by the republicans or the separatists from the five *départements* of Brittany. Yet the losses incurred by the Breton conscripts relative to the national population is more important, namely 21.9 percent and 17 percent, respectively, and the actual number of Bretons killed was likely closer to 130,000. Other regions also proclaim themselves casualties of the Jacobin management of the army. For example, Corsican *départements* were

supposedly the victims of discriminatory decisions made by the High Command and troops coming from the colonies were supposed to have been more put at relatively more risk than other soldiers. Historical research has since demonstrated the falsity of both of these claims.

Thus, from as early as the beginning of the war until its aftermath, one can speak of a remobilization around the issue of the war casualties. Some “Places of remembrance” initiated by the state and war veterans quickly overshadowed all the others. Verdun, where 160,000 French and 140,000 Germans lost their lives, eclipsed many other significant war episodes, such as the [battle of Charleroi](#) in 1914, or [Champagne](#) and Artois in 1915, which are for many years were not prominent in French collective memory. This despite the fact that historians demonstrated very early that the losses incurred by the French army in 1914-1915 were far superior to those sustained in 1916.

There is another aspect of memory that has been gaining prominence over the last twenty years concerning those soldiers who were sentenced to death by [military justice](#). Several historians have been trying to figure out the number of casualties incurred at the hands of military justice, estimated to be between 600 and 650.¹¹ Again, there was a higher proportion of executions during the autumn of 1914 and throughout 1915 than for the rest of the war. Some researchers account for this difference by pointing to the learning curve experienced by court martials as they adjusted to the rhythm of the war, while others stress the fact in the early years of the war, it was necessary for military authorities to resort to coercion in order to manage an army made up of conscripts who were unwilling to fight. Importantly, the number of executions is less important than the condemnations of death, because of the many political interventions, in particular between 1915 and 1916, which commonly altered the outcome of martial decisions.

Finally, that historiographical look back upon the statistical nature and reality of the military casualties feeds on contemporary debates about the tenacity of the combatants and about a war that has come to appear “incomprehensible” when thought of contemporarily. Sentiments such as these can lead to a reassessment of the civilian dead.

Reassessing the impact of civilian dead on the population

For a long time, historiography concerning France’s experiences during the war focused on the fighting and armed mobilization, rather than on France’s war veterans. As a result, the appropriation of the memory of the war by the veteran lobby after the war, focused on the conflict as a confrontation between armies, in which only the military contributed to the sacrifice. Yet, the First World War was also the cause of several thousand civilian casualties who were killed either in the course of the fighting, or who died as a consequence of the lack

of food or other liberties. In the early 1990s, Guy Pedroncini, evaluated those civilian deaths to be about 40,000. More recent estimates revise this figure upwards.

The First World War could be characterized as mass death. Yet it is not the final statistical body count we must remember, but the impact of the war casualties and bereavements on remembrance and the image of the war. In view of its prewar population, France was one of the countries which paid the heaviest tribute to the war in terms of population sacrifice; the counting of one's dead on both sides contributed to justifying the conflict. It also became a means for veterans' associations to assert their moral authority on European society. There does not exist, nor will there ever be, more reliable data concerning the number of war dead. Nonetheless, as Antoine Prost points out at the end of his article, "there was no need to count to be convinced of the immensity of the bereavement."¹² The First World War is indeed a turning point and this was felt as such by the contemporaries involved. For many societies, the aims of the war were eventually obliterated by the trauma experienced by societies. There remains without any doubt the need to provide a more accurate assessment of the total number of war dead across French society and within various social categories as a way to aid in our understanding of this lingering trauma.

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Notes

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External Links

- [Huber, Michel: La population de la France pendant la guerre, Paris 1931 \(HathiTrust\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Trouillard, Stephanie: World War I death count 'too low by one million', France 24, 22 January 2014 \(France 24\) \(Article\)](#)

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