

War Losses (Germany)

By [Robert Weldon Whalen](#)

Summary

2,037,000 German soldiers were killed in World War I. These losses were a military and demographic catastrophe which had enormously important political, social, economic, and cultural consequences.

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German losses in World War One

Calculating the exact number of Germans who were killed, wounded, or went missing in the First World War has been a contentious and complex task. Even the German military, in 1918, did not know quite how many casualties it had suffered. Part of the problem, no doubt was that harried company clerks, armed with pencil stubs and typewriters, were hard-pressed to complete the army's multitude of standard forms, and their colleagues at each higher headquarters were just as swamped by waves upon waves of reports. However, a greater reason for the confusion was that German soldiers were killed, wounded or went missing in such enormous numbers, and whole units were destroyed so quickly, that no one could hope to tally the losses. John Keegan, for example, notes that during the [Ludendorff Offensive](#), the "Kaiser's Battle," which was fought between 21 March – 4 April 1918, the Germany military suffered 303,450 casualties, about one-fifth of troops available. In April 1918, in Flanders, the German army suffered about 120,000 losses in less than a month.¹ Such shocking casualty rates were not typical, but when they did occur, they made the precise calculation of casualties almost impossible.

The general European-wide trajectory of war deaths after 1870 is, to be sure, quite clear, as Mark Mazower notes in *Dark Continent*. For all belligerents in each war, Mazower writes, "in the 1870-1871 Franco-Prussian War the death-toll was 184,000; in the First World War, it was

above 8 million, and more than 40 million Europeans – half of them civilians – died in the Second World War.”² What made the First World War so catastrophic compared to the earlier Franco-Prussian War was not the proportion of combatants killed, but the vast scale of the killing in the Great War. John Keegan’s estimates of the wartime dead are:

Germany	2,000,000
France	1,700,000
Russia	1,700,000
Austria-Hungary	1,500,000
British Empire	1,000,000
Italy	460,000

Table 1: War Dead, 1914-1918³

Mazower and Keegan actually underestimate the First World War’s death toll; according to Rüdiger Overmans’ definitive calculations, the First World War caused 9 million combat deaths, and 6 million civilian deaths.⁴

Approximately 13 million Germans served in the military during the Great War; 2 million were killed, that is, roughly 15 percent. As Keegan notes, this percentage is equally shocking when the numbers of war dead are calculated as a percentage of the relevant male cohort; that is, men born between 1880 and 1899 (prime candidates for service in the war). Of German men from these year groups, approximately 13 percent were killed between 1914 and 1918.

Among young French men, the percentage was even higher – 17 percent.⁵

There are scores of other estimates of German losses. Dietrich Orlow counts 1.6 million German dead.⁶ V. R. Berghahn suggests a much higher figure – 2.4 million.⁷ A summary of World War I casualties, compiled by the U.S. Public Broadcasting Service, lists 1,773,700 German war dead, 4,216,058 wounded, 1,152,800 [prisoners](#), for a total of 7,142,558 casualties, an amazing 54.6 percent of the 13,000,000 soldiers [Germany](#) mobilized for the war. Based on these estimates, Germany’s total casualty figure is second only to [Russia’s](#) 9,150,000 killed, wounded, [prisoners](#) and missing.⁸

German army units lost, on average, about 3 percent of their strength each month, or over a third of their strength each year. Typically, each month, about 2.4 percent of a unit's strength was wounded, 0.4 percent were killed, and another 0.4 percent were reported missing. Boris Uralnis calculates the yearly number of German war dead, by year, as follows:

1914	142,502
1915	628,445
1916	963,501
1917	1,271,273
1918	1,621,035
Adjusted total as of 1933	1,900,876

Table 2: Cumulative Total German war dead⁹

This total does not include some 34,836 sailors or some 1,185 German soldiers killed fighting in the colonies. When these 36,021 additional deaths are added to 1,900,876, one reaches a total of 1,936,897.¹⁰

Where did these various estimates originate? A basic source is the *Reichswehrministerium's Sanitätsbericht über das deutsche Heer* published in three volumes between 1934 and 1938.¹¹ Recent scholars, notably Rüdiger Overmans, James McRandle, James Quirk, and [Antoine Prost](#) have revised the *Reichswehrministerium's* estimates upwards and have calculated what is, currently, the most accurate tally of German losses.¹² According to their best estimates, German military deaths in the First World War came to 2,037,000.

These figures, moreover, only count the military dead. After the war, the [German government](#) argued that approximately 763,000 German civilians died during the war because of the [Allied blockade](#); another 150,000 died of the war-related [Spanish Influenza](#).¹³ Total German losses, then, military and civilian, during the Great War, thus approach 3 million.

During World War I, German army doctors treated more than 19 million cases. The cases consisted of the following:

Type of case	Number of cases	Cases as a percentage of total cases
Combat wounds	4,807,568	24.7
Stomach/intestinal disorder	4,138,384	21.3
Dermatological disease	2,605,738	13.4
Contagious diseases	1,785,718	9.2
Lung diseases	1,728,241	8.9
Orthopedic injuries	1,325,647	6.8
"other"	652,185	3.4
Heart/circulatory disorders	461,560	2.4
Injury to reproductive organs	356,227	1.8
Eye disease/injury	350,604	1.8
Ear disease/injury	337,543	1.7
Neurological disorders	313,337	1.6
"for observation"	288,199	1.5
Venereal disease	283,313	1.5

Table 3: Cases treated by German army doctors during World War I¹⁴

About 465,000 German soldiers died each year of the war. German losses were worst in 1914, the first year of the war, and September 1914 was the bloodiest month of the whole war, when German units suffered losses of about 16.8 percent. In August and September 1914, according to the *Sanitätsbericht*, 54,064 German soldiers were killed, and an astonishing 81,193 went missing.¹⁵ In 1914, losses on the [Eastern Front](#) were actually higher than on the [Western Front](#), though very quickly the situation was reversed, and deaths in the west were regularly higher than in the east. [Jewish Germans died at the same rate as non-Jewish Germans](#) (this would become a heated issue in the 1930s) – about 12,000 Jewish Germans died in the war. Death by bayonet was very rare; [poison gas](#), that terrifying new [weapon](#), killed about 3,000 German soldiers. [Artillery](#) was by far the greatest killer in the war; about 58.3 percent of German deaths were caused by artillery and about 41.7 percent by small arms.¹⁶ By far the bloodiest battle, for Germans, during the war was the set of battles known as the "*Kaiserschlacht*," the "Kaiser's Battle," or the "Ludendorff Offensive" in the

spring of 1918, when the German army suffered 303,450 casualties in a matter of weeks. [Verdun](#) was the second bloodiest battle, when the German army lost, killed and wounded some 200,000 troops.¹⁷

The dead, in total numbers, were overwhelmingly enlisted men; after the war General [Constantin von Altröck \(1861-1942\)](#) estimated that some 97 percent of those killed in action were common soldiers. Common soldiers made up most of the army, so it's not a surprise that they also made up most of the casualties. If one considers percentages, though, a different picture emerges. According to Altröck's calculations, about 14 percent of all enlisted men were killed, but about 23 percent of officers. Germany's enemies targeted officers as did the Germans themselves; since German officers, especially junior officers, led from the front, casualties among them were heavy. The worst death rate was among regular officers, the pre-war professional officer corps; about 25 percent of them were killed during the war.¹⁸

The Great War produced a distinctive phenomenology of death. Death is not always simply death. Those peculiarities of death in World War I, so well described by [Paul Fussell \(1924-2012\)](#) – death on the Western Front's bizarre moonscape, death become utterly routine, death in shockingly mass numbers – apply not only to Fussell's British soldiers but also to their German counterparts.¹⁹ The single most distinctive quality about soldiers' deaths in the First World War was its technological quality. Soldiers were killed by [machine gun](#) fire and especially by artillery; death was anonymous, random, unpredictable, and brutal. Machine guns and artillery do absolutely ghastly things to human bodies. Fussell writes that the grotesque death images typical of [German war literature](#), in the work of [Ernst Jünger \(1895-1998\)](#) and [Erich Maria Remarque \(1898-1970\)](#) for instance, owed a great deal to "the frenzied machinery of Gothic romance,"²⁰ and no doubt he is partly right. At the same time, the German writers' grotesque death images owe as much to the specific killing machinery of World War I, and the things such machines could do to human beings.

The Social Consequences of German Losses

What did German wartime losses mean? They meant, to begin with, a demographic catastrophe for German society. In Germany, as throughout Europe, when men left the factories to go off to war, [women](#) replaced them. The shift in workforce was striking. [Jürgen Kocka](#) estimates that the percentage of adult males working in factories employing ten or more persons dropped by some 25 percent during the war, while the percentage of adult females rose by about 52 percent.²¹ To be sure, this percentage increase is a bit misleading, since it reflects a sudden jump from a very low level. Still, the sudden presence of large numbers of women in the workplace was remarkable. Most of the men returned and wanted

their jobs back; battles between men and women over increasingly scarce jobs exacerbated the gender confusion and gender wars of the 1920s, contributing to the increasingly angry, gynophobic, and fascist "*Männer-phantasien*" (male-fantasies) among a small but raucous number of German veterans described by Klaus Theweleit.²²

For German women in the doomed cohorts born between 1880 and 1899, war losses meant transformed lives. For many young German women in the 1920s, marriage and family were not possibilities; there were no young men available. This, to be sure, produced a kind of autonomy for the women affected, but, for those who had hoped for marriage and family, wartime deaths meant a lifetime alone.

The most unanticipated social consequence of the wartime losses were the enormous numbers of disabled veterans and [war widows](#) and orphans desperately in need of care and often unable to care for themselves. In 1919, the newly formed Weimar Republic, on the verge of wild inflation, bankruptcy, and political chaos, discovered that it was suddenly responsible for some 2.7 million disabled veterans, 1,192,000 war orphans, and 533,000 widows.²³ Almost all of these people were younger than thirty; the new German Republic might be responsible for them for another half-century or more.

Caring for these war victims proved to be an endless nightmare. Simply calculating the cost for war victims' care was bitterly contentious. How much exactly, in Marks, was a missing leg worth? Was an eye shot out worth more than a shattered hand? Should compensation be based on medical condition alone and ignore social class, so that former bankers and former farmers each received the same pension for the same medical condition, or should compensation take social condition into account and be designed to help keep pensioners in the social class from which they came and thus help stabilize the existing class system? Eventually, the latter became government policy.

Should the veterans' pension system be autonomous or should it be merged with the already existing social welfare system? Eventually the two were merged, much to the outrage of many veterans who thought that being placed in the same category as welfare recipients was demeaning. Did psychiatric illnesses – combat fatigue and what later generations would describe as post-traumatic-stress-disorder – merit compensation? Generally, the answer throughout the 1920s was "no." Even after the *Reichsversorgungsgesetz* (National Pension Law) of 1920 was adopted, and the pension costs were calculated, the angry debate about war victims continued to rage. By 1923, for example, the National Pension Court, which was supposed to decide controversies about pensions, had a backlog of 43,186 cases.²⁴

War victims – disabled veterans, widows, and orphans – tried to organize themselves into a

single pressure group, but given the fractures of Weimar society, that proved impossible. Social-Democratic, Communist, and Nationalist groups emerged; sometimes they cooperated with each other; more often, they did not.²⁵ War victims' bitterness contributed to Weimar's free-floating bitterness; eventually the Nazis merged war victims groups into a single national group, but the situation of war victims in the Nazi years was little better than their situation during Weimar.²⁶ [Otto Dix's \(1891-1969\)](#) gruesome paintings of dreadfully disabled war veterans became icons of the Weimar Republic.

The Cultural Consequences of German Losses

German losses in World War I were not only a military and demographic phenomenon. To be sure, specific casualties had specific military consequences, and those military consequences had dire political outcomes. German losses in the "*Kaiser's Battle*" on the Western Front in the spring of 1918 led directly to the buckling of the German army in the west that fall and Germany's desperate call for an armistice.²⁷ The diplomatic, political, social, and economic ramifications of that failed spring offensive are well known. Two other consequences of Germany's wartime losses are just as crucial: Germany's encounter with mass death and its post-war inability to mourn.

The sudden and violent death of some 2 million young men confronted Germans with that peculiar 20th century phenomenon, mass death. While death in large numbers is hardly unprecedented, the industrial scale of 20th century killing was something new. [Edith Wyschogrod \(1930-2009\)](#) is a pioneer explorer of what she refers to as the "kingdom" of mass death; mass death, she writes, profoundly altered everything – ideas about love and life, meaning and the future.²⁸ This "death world" was something new in human experience; its scale, its technological relentlessness, its "man-made" quality, were unprecedented. Mass death, the "devastation and dehumanization of World War I,"²⁹ accelerated pre-war expressionist apocalypticism and triggered distinctly post-war trends, such as the eschatological turn in both Christian and Jewish theology.³⁰ What Engelhard Weigl refers to as the "apocalyptic experience of 1914-1918,"³¹ coupled with defeat, [revolution](#), and civil war, engendered what [Theodor Adorno \(1903-1969\)](#) called "absolute despair"³² and that obsession with messianism, apocalypse and redemption³³ characteristic of Weimar Germany's culture and politics.

The second consequence of Germany's wartime losses was post-war Germany's inability to

[mourn](#).³⁴ During the war, in a brief essay entitled “Mourning and Melancholia,” [Sigmund Freud \(1856-1939\)](#) identified grieving as a complex, painful, and psychologically crucial process which had become, because of the war, an immense social problem.³⁵ [Jason Crouthamel](#) has explored the psychiatric dimension of this enormous trauma;³⁶ [Jay Winter](#) places German grieving within a European context.³⁷ For Germans, during and after the war, simply finding the bodies of the dead, and burying them properly was a vast problem. Most of the German dead had died outside Germany and were either [buried in unmarked mass graves](#) or their graves were, after the war, in the hands of Germany’s former enemies. Innumerable local monuments were erected in honor of the war dead, but creating a national day of [mourning](#) with appropriate national rituals and symbols proved impossible in the politically torn Weimar Republic,³⁸ and that would have devastating consequences for the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic and for German political culture.

Conclusion

Mark Mazower calculates that during World War I, the belligerent nations suffered a total of some 8 million dead, over 6,000 deaths each day of the conflict. If deaths by illness and post-war revolutions and civil wars are included, Mazower estimates that some 13 million Europeans died during the Great War and Mazower’s figures may be an underestimate. Rüdiger Overmans, for instance, estimates that some 9 million soldiers and 6 million civilians died in the war.³⁹ The Great War marked the beginning of the terrifying career of what Mazower calls the “Dark Continent.”⁴⁰ German losses were central to this wider disaster. German losses are, of course, a demographic and military phenomenon. To understand German losses, however, one must go beyond military and demographic statistics. One needs to understand the experience of death itself, both for soldiers and the loved ones back home. One needs to understand the medical, social, economic, and political dimensions of those losses. Finally, one needs to understand the symbolic and ultimately metaphysical consequences of those losses, one needs to explore the peculiar “death world” that those losses created, the “death world” which first emerged during the Great War but, alas, did not end there.

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Notes

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12. See: Overmans, "Kriegsverluste" 2004, especially the Kriegsverluste chart, p. 665. Also, McRandle James/Quirk, James: "The Blood Test Revisited: A New Look at German Casualty Counts in World War I," The Journal of Military History 70 (July 2006), pp. 667-702; Prost, Antoine: "The Dead," in Winter, Jay (ed.): The Cambridge History of the First World War, Volume III, Cambridge 2014, Chapter XX. ↑
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23. Whalen, Bitter Wounds 1984, p. 95. ↑
24. Whalen, Bitter Wounds 1984, p. 143. ↑
25. Whalen, Bitter Wounds 1984, pp. 155-165. ↑
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40. Mazower, *Dark Continent* 1999, pp. 78-79. ↑

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External Links

- [Deutschland, Deutsches Reich / Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion \(ed.\): Ehrenliste der Gefallenen, Vermißten, an Verwundung oder Krankheit verstorbenen Sanitätsoffiziere des Deutschen Heeres, vol. 1, Berlin 1935 \(Universitätsbibliothek Frankfurt am Main\)](#)

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- [Freud, Sigmund: Mourning and Melancholia, London 1957 \(University of Pennsylvania\) \(Article\)](#)
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