

War Losses (Russian Empire)

By [Alexandre Sumpf](#)

Summary

With about 5.5 million out of 16 million soldiers killed and wounded, the Russian Empire appears to have suffered less than France and Germany. But that does not take into account some other facts: 500,000 soldiers missing, 3 million prisoners of war, 1.1 million disabled, 6 million refugees and tens of thousands of civilian victims. The uncertain nature of these calculations, the delayed national mourning and private mourning hampered by distance and false news made these losses unbearable for the population. Finally, the civil war which followed the Great War made the demographic toll and political significance of these losses far heavier.

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Introduction

With a population of 150 million people, the [Russian Empire](#), seems to have suffered proportionally fewer losses during the war than [France](#) or [Germany](#). However, the Russian army only mobilised some civilians of fighting age. Apart from the Slavs (including the Poles), the Chief of Staff only considered it safe to give arms to Jews (who could not be officers). At most, other nationalities had the right to form small [cavalry](#) units (Caucasia), of [riflemen \(the Baltic lands\)](#) or labourers (Turkestan). In total, 50 percent of the men the army considered fit for service were mobilized. These 16 million soldiers thus represented almost the total number of available men, contrary to the widespread cliché of “the immense Russian reservoir”. Peasants suffered most of the ordeals of the war. The number of soldiers missing in action and civilian losses suffered distinguish Russia from the other warring nations. This was a result of the spatial and temporal nature of the [occupation](#) of the western fringes of the [empire](#). Finally, the 1918 [civil war](#) intensified the terrible human cost of the conflict.

Firstly, the question of figures has sparked a debate which, even with a close study of the available sources, cannot be settled. It is, however, possible, as we shall see, to establish a rough estimate. Secondly, one must assess the types of losses and the causes of the differentials between categories of the population. To conclude, we will try to grasp the social and cultural impact the losses had on Russia during three distinct stages of its history: the empire, [revolutions](#), and the Soviet regime.

A Large and Uncertain Toll on Human Life

Calculating those killed during the Great War was neither easy during that time, nor during the following decades. In 1916, the army Chief of Staff acknowledged more than 5.3 million losses (sick, wounded, missing, killed and taken [prisoner](#)), but with an important variable: Russia reported around 439,396 missing, of whom one-third were probably killed, one-third died during care, and another third were sent to prisoner of war camps.¹ After the war, the Commission on the consequences of the war was unable to provide final figures.² Its mission was to prove that Russia had been a victim of the conflict and of foreign intervention during the civil war. In the 1960s, the Soviet demographer [Boris Urlanis \(1906-1981\)](#) re-assessed the number of military deaths at 908,000, higher than the estimations that until then had been somewhere between 511,068 and 775,369 dead or killed. As we will see, even if he underestimated total casualties by half, he showed that 1915 and 1916, the years of the [war of attrition](#), were more deadly than 1914, when the war was raging. In effect, there were, respectively, 23,000 and 22,000 deaths per month, as against 8,000 in the first five months of the war.³

Today it is still just as difficult to determine how many men were mobilised by Russia between 1914 and 1918, how many fought, how many were in prisoner-of-war camps and how many perished.⁴ It is not a question of a few inaccuracies, but of several tens or even thousands of individuals of whom we know nothing. We can, however, attempt to extrapolate some partial data to determine for example the hotly debated total of war wounded.⁵ Out of 103,194 wounded and subsequently treated in the [hospitals](#) of Petrograd, only 24 percent were sent back directly to the front. Among the others, 27.2 percent were given leave to recover, 25.2 percent were declared unfit, 13.4 percent remained after the war in specialised establishments to complete their recovery and 10.2 percent were transferred to other provinces or institutions. In 1916, the specialists of Zemstvo considered that 22.2 percent of the wounded and sick had permanently lost their capacity to work, 1.3 percent of whom were no longer autonomous.⁶ Thus, with an average figure of 5.15 million soldiers who passed through healthcare services (2,844,500 wounded and 2,303,680 sick), we reach a total of

1.14 million young men more or less handicapped (67,000 of whom were completely disabled).⁷

This disturbing figure only partly includes the neurosis and psychosis caused by the war. In this case, statistical incertitude was due to the progress in Russian and international psychiatry which was both sensitive and much-debated. During the war, debates within [psychiatry](#) questioned the terminology and the role of the war in causing psychiatric illnesses. Did the events of the war reveal illnesses which were already present, or did they produce specific pathologies? Associations between psychosis and physical injury were also discussed.⁸ In 1924, the psychiatrist Sergej A. Preobrazhenskii, who spent the war treating soldiers at the central hospital for the mentally ill (*dushevno-bolnye*) of the Petrograd Committee of the Union of Towns, estimated the total number of disabled ex-servicemen from the two wars to be 1.8 million. Some 80 percent (1.5 million) still suffered from neurosis or confusion (talking nonsense, loss of memory or hearing), or had even become mentally ill in the proper sense of the term. According to Preobrazhenskii, all were deprived of treatment.⁹

Chronic illnesses represented a significant proportion of the cases of disability. If tuberculosis was considered a disability, the common pathologies that were due to extreme fatigue or poor food struggled to be recognised as such in Russia during the war. Yet many captured soldiers developed neurosis or became chronically ill: 650,000 were counted in [Germany](#) alone.¹⁰ At the end of the war, N. M. Zhdanov estimated that 11.9 percent of sick prisoners had been maimed to such a degree, tuberculosis affecting almost one in five patients.¹¹

Between 2.5 and 3 million soldiers of the Russian Empire shared the experience of captivity during the First World War, especially in Germany.¹² [Austria and Hungary](#), but also in [Turkey](#), [Romania](#) and in [occupied France](#). About 15 percent of all the soldiers mobilised thus found themselves expatriated, brutally separated from their families and their comrades, shunted from one camp to another in cattle wagons or on foot. The Russians suffered from far less favourable conditions than the French or the British. On the one hand the geographical distance, the lack of clear information and insufficient resources meant that family assistance could not be developed the way it was in [France](#). Above all, the lack of interest from the [government](#) for the prisoners, who were suspected of having giving themselves up, representing too great a financial burden for Russia which was on the edge of the abyss – was never sufficiently compensated for by the mobilization of the [Red Cross](#), the [Union of Towns and the Zemstvos](#) (Zemgor), imperial or municipal committees for philanthropic help and civilian associations.

Lastly, the most unique factor from the perspective of Russian military losses is the astounding number of those “unaccounted for”. A calculation made after the fall of the Soviet Union estimated the number at 439,369: one-quarter of the 1.89 million deaths in battle.¹³ This figure is by nature very variable. The army updated its lists as well as it could, and sometimes communicated its results.¹⁴ Communication with families and public communication had to be viewed with skepticism: the lists published in the local and national press did not always correspond to the calculations made by military or health-service statisticians. The tendency of the former to minimize losses, and of the latter to exaggerate the quality of treatment for the sick and wounded by particular institutions was accentuated by the distortion owing to temporal and geographical distance.

There are classic explanations for this unusual phenomenon, the first of which is the destructive nature of mechanical [warfare](#): the power of the [artillery](#) which buried or blew men up sometimes leaving no trace, especially for an army whose soldiers had no identification tags. Nevertheless, the incertitude was due above all to structural factors, the first of which was the tangle of institutions whose job it was to estimate the losses. Military, civilian, national and local institutions established these lists according to differing aims and methods. The units had to continually assess and account for losses and *hors-de-combat*, which justified the demand for more supplies of men. The statistics published by healthcare organisations related both to space (care on the spot, immediately behind the lines or evacuation) and time (return to combat, convalescence, discharge). Finally, Russia’s delay in setting up institutions to deal with prisoners of war was a major factor throughout the conflict, in spite of the insistence of each institutional player on the importance of information for families.

Thus, the assessment of military losses in the Russian empire depended on how these figures were used at the time or after the war. Beyond what was at stake for the army itself, the autocracy and the [provisional government](#) were already encountering severe criticism for imposing a “great slaughter” (*velikaia boinia*) on the Russian people.

A Society Deeply Affected by the Conflict

The total figures give the wrong impression of the social significance of the losses. As elsewhere, the great majority of soldiers killed, wounded, missing or captured came from the [infantry](#), where the peasant class, which at the time represented 80 percent of the population of the empire, was predominant. The devastation wrought by the first months of the war shook up the staffing of the units: the professional officers, aristocrats or not, were replaced by a stratum of clerks and educated peasants, closer to the troops as they had come from their ranks. The gulf between the Chief of Staff and high-ranking officers became larger,

making the general mutiny in 1917 and the organisation of the [Red Army](#) in 1918-1920 possible.

Following a consideration of these questions, the large number of civilian victims must be emphasized. 16 percent additional deaths were counted in towns in 1915 and 1916, while the number of deaths in [rural areas](#) dropped to 89 and 82 percent compared with 1913.¹⁵ This can be explained by the growth of the [urban population](#) with the arrival of [refugees](#), the wounded and sick, and the high level of infant [mortality](#). Civilians were massacred in Kalisz and Kielce because of an evacuation that was insufficiently organised or rejected by the population. When considering the mortality rate during the Great War, we must distinguish between the population under Russian administration and that trapped behind enemy lines. With the Great Retreat in the summer of 1915, whole countries ([Poland](#), [Lithuania](#)) found themselves intensely exploited by the German army. German repression and requisition caused increased mortality in these areas.¹⁶ Nearly 6 million [refugees](#), for the most part non-Russian, surged into Russia at the same time, suffering all the ups and downs resulting from a chaotic expedition and total destitution.¹⁷ The poor hygiene and meagre [food](#) supplies, the hostility of the local populations as well as fatal accidents made an exact number of victims difficult to establish – a foretaste of the civil war to come.

Several [pogroms](#) and mass repression reignited the political and ethnic fractures in the empire. If the anti-German riots of May 1915 in Moscow, directly linked to the war, only caused a few deaths,¹⁸ the same is not true of the revolt against mobilization in [Turkestan](#).¹⁹ The unrest first grew in the oasis zone before reaching the towns in July. Violent protests and raids on the institutions of the Russian colonizers and the colonial administration set up in the 1860s ensued. In response, army attacks and retaliation on the part of the colonizers caused more than 1,000 deaths among the native population. The repression extinguished the revolt within a month in Turkestan, but it continued among the neighbouring Kazakh nomads. In August 1916, detachments of Kazakh horsemen swept down on the Russians around Lake Issyk-Kul, killed the men, carried off 1,500 women and children as hostages and burned everything in their path. Around 2,000 settlers, ten times more than in Turkestan, lost their lives in a new anti-colonial war.

Finally, the [Jews became scapegoats](#) in explanations for the series of defeats suffered by the Russian army on the western limits of the empire. Furthermore, they were used as outlets for the frustrations of the “white” units during the civil war. The imperial army was traditionally a hotbed of antisemitism. In September 1914, an army commander evicted the entire Jewish population in the Polish fortress of Pulawy, only allowing them twenty-four hours to leave. Continually accused of helping the enemy, the Jews found themselves up against all sorts of

discrimination and were even taken as hostages.²⁰ During the Great Retreat of the summer 1915, the army evacuated all the populations considered to be a potential threat for the immediate rear of the retreating units. Only a strong resistance on the part of the civilian authority stopped the operation degenerating into death marches like those of the [Armenian genocide](#). The violence of the Great War created a heavy legacy in which white military authorities enforced a whole range of forced displacements and ethnic segregations. The civil war was particularly violent in the old Pale of Settlement – the western regions of the empire where the tsarist laws had confined the Jews from 1791 onwards, forbidding them to enter the main towns and villages. In [Ukraine](#) during the civil war, they were the target of the riots against “speculators”; approximately 150,000 men, women and children fell victim to the series of pogroms from 1918 to 1920.²¹

At the turn of 1920, Russia entered its seventh year of war. All the elements joined forces to cause a serious crisis, the climate being only partly responsible. Because of the war, production had been disorganised, depriving the countryside of workers and [animals](#), which were not replaced either by refugees, who were too weak, or by prisoners of war, who were too few. The loss of Ukraine deprived red Russia of its granary. The civil war saw pillage and requisitioning develop, especially as uncontrolled floods of migrants hindered the redistribution of agricultural products between regions that over-produced and regions that consumed. The food crisis reached its peak in the latter regions during 1917, 1918 and 1919, then hit the agricultural provinces, including the towns, in 1920 and above all in 1921. Two terrible droughts affected at least thirty-six provinces of European Russia, that is to say 26 million Russians and 9 million Ukrainians, according to the International Red Cross. In fact, more than half the Soviet population was affected. While famine caused over 6 million extra deaths between 1914 and 1922, the various epidemics ([Spanish flu](#) in 1919, typhoid in 1920-1921 and cholera in 1922) caused about 7 million and the fighting in the two conflicts directly caused 5 million.

A Missing War?

Several obstacles prevented the reconstruction of a [memorial](#) of the Great War immediately after the conflict.²² In other nations, such memorials were focussed on collective grief. In Russia, the first obstacle was the absence of an Unknown Soldier, of a national memorial that would make sense of the sacrifice that had been enforced. The second was that the memory of this conflict, although instrumentalized by the Bolsheviks for a short time, could not be that of mass deaths: epidemics, civil war, famine, the Great Terror and the Second World War diluted what in France and in Great Britain appeared as the massacre of massacres, the sacrifice of sacrifices. Finally, this remembrance was necessarily curtailed on account of the

scattering of the Tsar's subjects in several nations and the exile of an important part of the social élite between 1918 and 1922.

There did exist in Soviet Russia a memory not only private, but intimate, did of the losses suffered during the Great War. At the front, the soldiers saw their comrades disfigured by [technical warfare](#), but the mass deaths soon made these scenes banal and mourning became mechanical. Behind the lines, the death of a family member remained abstract, taking the form of an emptiness felt after a long separation, but also the sudden loss of support and a prosperous future. The thanksgiving services conducted by the priest of the village only offered a mediocre consolation and could not prevent a reflection on the conflict and the political system responsible for it. If the collapse of political authority was the main factor in the revival of the peasant commune (*mir*) during 1917, the death of hundreds of thousands of peasants in their prime, heads of smallholdings or older sons who were to become such, also played a role. The peasantry took the opportunity to unite against all non-peasants and solve conflicts over land and other [social conflicts](#) themselves. A vindictive majority thus imposed a return to the collective organisation of agriculture and actions against the privileged: noble landowners or ecclesiastics and "separator" peasants enriched by the commercialisation of their produce. The litany of deaths announced in the village contributed to the outburst of violence which had been smouldering since the first [revolution of 1905](#): assassinations and fires laid waste to the countryside behind the lines just as efficiently as did an army on the march on the frontlines.

The collective mourning for those lost, fundamental for maintaining the unity of the population, largely failed to take shape in Russia. There was a project to create a memorial day for the soldiers, like that of 2 November in France, but this never eventuated. On 24 December 1916, [Nikolai V. Ruzski \(1854-1918\)](#) proposed 11 May, the feast of SS Cyril and Methodius, but the church authorities preferred the day of the Holy Spirit.²³ Ruzski made his request just before the February Revolution occurred. Later, a national memorial to remember the victims of the Petrograd repression was proposed. Peace and the delayed demobilization, the choices of the civil war, the evacuations that were more or less consented to, rendered the collective initiatives for commemoration after the war almost impossible. Moreover, the plurality of confessions was too briefly taken into account by the principal decision-makers, all of whom belonged to the orthodox majority. It is therefore not surprising that among the nations derived from the splitting up of the Romanov empire, plenty of problems of collective and individual memorials, public and private, linked by the Great War, arose, and which, taken all together, explain its absence from national histories.

Conclusion

To die in the ranks of the Tsar's army represented a giant step towards oblivion: the insufficient preparation of the Russian health and mortuary services, a somewhat unprepared statistics bureau and the localisation of the battles on the borders of the empire put the seal on the transient character of burial places. Situated outside Russia itself, then outside the USSR, the latter by necessity gradually, although only marginally, became part of the history of European pacifism and the history being built of the new nations born of the war. Beyond the figures that are still debated, war losses threw whole groups that were important to the empire off balance: the professional army, the Slav peasants, the western territory with its rich agriculture and developing industry, the colonies of Central Asia and the Jews in the Pale of Settlement. The wounded, the disabled, the [widows](#) and orphans were taken care of less by a state administration going bankrupt than by philanthropic societies and the Zemgor. The mistakes of the tsarist regime, the Bolshevik party and Soviet Russia caused countless deaths during the war. Forced to react to the civil war, Soviet Russia turned into the most ambitious welfare state of the immediate post-war years.

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Notes

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2. Gran, M.M.: «Opyt izučenija sanitarnyh poseldstvij vojny 1914-1917 v Rossii», Trudy komissii, pp. 7-46. [↑](#)
3. Uralis, B.C.: Istorija voennyh poter' [History of war losses], Saint Petersburg 1994, pp. 144-146. [↑](#)
4. The works of M. Krivošeev in Rossija i SSSR v vojnah XX veka. Poteri vooruženyh sil [Russia and USSR in the 20th century wars. Losses of the armed forces], Moscow 2001, are still the most complete, but their weakness is that they try first to establish an average, then to extrapolate from figures whose size varies considerably, because of the incomplete character of the statistics and their use in the ideological struggle around the memory of the conflict between emigrés and soviets. [↑](#)
5. Sumpf, Alexandre: «Une société amputée. Le retour des invalides russes de la Grande Guerre, 1914-1929», Cahiers du monde russe, 51/1 (January-March 2010), pp. 35-64. [↑](#)
6. Ob učastii Vserossijskogo zemskogo sojuza v dele okazanija pomošči uvečnym i

poterjavšim trudosposobnost' voenam [About the participation of the Union of Zemstvos in assisting mutilated soldiers and soldiers having lost their ability to work], Moscow 1916, p. 62. [↑](#)

7. Krivošeev, Rossija i SSSR v vojnah XX veka. Poteri vooruženyh sil, p. 101. This figure does not take into account the wounded who were not evacuated, which would bring the total to 3,813,827. Uralnis, Istorija voennyh poter', p. 148. [↑](#)
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9. Preobraženskij, S.A.: «O pomošči nervno-psihičeskim invalidam» report to the Panrussian congress of psycho-neurologists, Petrograd, 3 January 1924, GARF, f. 4347 (Vserokompom), op. 1, d. 853, l. 6. [↑](#)
10. O. Nagornaja, quoting the estimations of Levickij for the distribution of invalids in the Russian provinces, Drugoj voennyj opyt. Rossijskie voennoplennye Pervoj mirovoj vojny v Germanii (1914-1922) [Another war experience. Russian prisoners of war in Germany, 1914-1922], Moscow 2010, p. 361. [↑](#)
11. Ždanov, N.M.: Russkie voennoplennye v mirovoj vojne 1914-1918 [Russian prisoners of war during the world war, 1914-1920], Moscow 1920, p. 77. [↑](#)
12. Nagornaja, Drugoj voennyj opyt. Rossijskie voennoplennye Pervoj mirovoj vojny v Germanii (1914-1922) [Another war experience. Russian prisoners of war in Germany, 1914-1922]. [↑](#)
13. Krivošeev, Rossija i SSSR v vojnah XX veka. Poteri vooruženyh sil, pp. 100-106. [↑](#)
14. The first inventory of the archives of the bureau of the number of losses on the fronts of the world war keeps the lists by unit. The third inventory is organised according to type. See RGVIA, f. 16196, op. 3, d. 25 (losses), 26 (returns to camp), 45, 56, 62, etc. (deaths). [↑](#)
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17. Gatrell, Peter: A Whole Empire Walking. Refugees in Russia During World War I, Bloomington 1999. [↑](#)
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External Links

- [Russia in the 1914-1918 World War, in figures \(in Russian\), Moscow 1925 \(ISTMAT\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Schuster, Frank M.: Between all fronts: The impact of World War I on Eastern-European Jewry, in: Medaon 10/18, 2016, pp. 1-12 \(Medaon\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Sumpf, Alexandre: L'historiographie russe \(et soviétique\) de la Grande Guerre, in: Histoire@Politique. Politique, culture, société 22 \(January-April 2014\) \(Cairn\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Sumpf, Alexandre: Une société amputée. Les retours des invalides russes de la Grande Guerre, 1914-1929, in: Cahiers du monde russe 51/1 \(2010\), pp. 35-64 \(OpenEdition\) \(Article\)](#)
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