

War Widows

By [Peggy Bette](#)

Summary

One third of the 9.7 million soldiers killed or declared missing during the Great War left behind a widow. The mourning of these women was conditioned as much by the social conventions practiced during the time of peace as by the new constraints brought by war. Although many nation states tried to help them materially, they were often looking for political and social control in return.

Table of contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Social Conventions of Mourning](#)
- [3 Material Support for Widows](#)
- [4 Social and political control of Widows](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Introduction

The total number of women widowed as a result of the First World War is estimated to be 3 to 4 million. According to the historian [Jay Winter](#), one third of the total 9.7 million military personnel [killed](#) or missing in the war left behind, on average, a widow and two children. The number of German, British and Italian widows after the war, compared to the relative number of soldiers lost in these countries corroborates this estimate. For example, in 1920, there were 525,000 widows in [Germany](#) and 2,040,000 military men killed or missing; in [Great Britain](#), there were 240,000 widows and 750,000 military men killed or missing; and in [Italy](#), there were 200,000 widows and 650,000 military men killed or missing. [France](#), on the other hand, presents an exception with the number of war widows reaching half the number of total losses: 700,000 widows and 1,400,000 military men killed or missing.

Social Conventions of Mourning

The conventions these women were subjected to were no different from those applying to widows in general. They had to wear mourning attire and respect a several month period of widowhood. The funeral rituals were, however, more specific to their situations, due largely to the temporary or definitive absence of a corpse. Those who did not respect these rituals or

conventions ran the risk of being seen as unfaithful widows. The concept of the unfaithful widow had existed before the war, but regained popularity during the conflict due in large part to soldiers who feared being betrayed or forgotten, and moralists who saw widowed women as a possible source of [social disorder](#) that could potentially contribute to the military defeat of their respective countries.

Conventions of mourning were also affected by the different types of legislation regulating military burials within each country, which greatly affected mourning and [commemoration](#) rituals. In Britain, where there was a strict policy concerning burying fallen soldiers *in situ*, widows had to go abroad, whilst in Italy, France or [United States](#), there was the possibility of recovering remains at the end of the war.

Material Support for Widows

The belligerent states promoted, or confirmed, legislation aimed at materially supporting war widows. Most of them granted a war pension (with a supplement for the [children](#)), although pension amounts, as well as the attribution criteria varied from one country to another. Pensions were partially or totally lost by the widows in the case of remarriage. Even in their full capacities, these pensions were insufficient to cover the daily needs of the widows, many of whom topped up their incomes by working, or relied on help from their families or new spouses. Some of the poorest widows also had recourse to charitable associations. In exchange for this help, the public powers allowed themselves to exercise fairly strong control over war widows.

Social and political control of Widows

War widows were restricted by considerable social and political constraints. Because of this, it is possible to infer that many women were downtrodden and easily manipulated by their [governments](#) for [propaganda](#) purposes. Speeches and pictures from the time illustrate the ambiguous position of the war widow who was expected to remain faithful to her fallen husband, whilst also contributing to the renewal of future generations for the nation.

Several studies reveal that widowed women were not only aware of their contradictory situation but also learnt, either individually or collectively, to turn these constraints to their advantage, or to challenge these constraints through their actions. In France, for example, certain widows exploited their status during the war making use of their mourning attire to encourage [pacifist](#) ideas. Although these actions were repressed by authorities during the conflict, they were rarely sanctioned afterwards. In [fascist](#) Italy, during the interwar years, many war widows resisted the mystified maternal figure created by the regime. In Germany, women artists faced with high death tolls also communicated ambivalence towards their loss.

They felt unable to adhere to the figure of the patriotic women for whom loss should be worn with pride, and instead they exposed their feelings by adopting the motif of the disconsolate mourner.

Peggy Bette, Université Rennes 2

Selected Bibliography

- [Bette, Peggy: **Veuves françaises de la Première Guerre mondiale. Statuts, itinéraires et combats**, thesis, Lyon, 2012: Université Lyon 2.](#)
- [Kuhlman, Erika A.: **Of little comfort. War widows, fallen soldiers, and the remaking of nation after the Great War**, New York, 2012: New York University Press.](#)
- [Lomas, Janis: 'Delicate duties'. **Issues of class and respectability in government policy towards the wives and widows of British soldiers in the era of the Great War**, in: Women's History Review 9/1, 2000, pp. 123-147.](#)
- [Siebrecht, Claudia: **The aesthetics of loss. German women's art of the First World War**, Oxford, 2013: Oxford University Press.](#)
- [Wingenter, Anne M.: **Le veterane del Dolore. Mothers and widows of the "fallen" in fascist Italy**, thesis, Chicago, 2003: Loyola University of Chicago.](#)
- [Winter, Jay: **Sites of memory, sites of mourning. The Great War in European cultural history**, Cambridge, 2000: Cambridge University Press.](#)

Citation

Peggy Bette: War Widows, in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer D. Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2015-12-18. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10792](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10792)

External Links

- [Arbeitsausschuss Kriegerwitwen und Waisenfürsorge \(ed.\): Frauenerwerb und Kriegswitwe: Referate, Berlin, 1916 \(Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Bette, Peggy: Veuves françaises de la Première Guerre mondiale. Statuts, itinéraires et combats, thesis, Université Lumière-Lyon 2, May 2012 \(Université Lumière Lyon 2\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Contamine de Latour, Patrice: Le droit des veuves de guerres, des femmes de mobilisés, Paris 1919 \(Gallica\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Journal des veuves de guerre: Organe de la Fédération des veuves de guerre \(Gallica\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Loi du 25 Octobre 1919, Relative à la commémoration et la glorification des morts pour la France au cours de la Grande Guerre \(Réseau Canopé\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Lomas, Janis: Delicates Duties: Issues of Class and Respectability in Government Policy Towards the Wives and Widows of British Soldiers in the Era of the Great War, in: Women History Review 9/1, 2000 \(Taylor & Francis Online\) \(Article\)](#)

Metadata

Regional Section(s)

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

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

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

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

Thematic Section(s)

[Home Front](#)

[Post-war](#)

Subjects

[Memory and historiography](#) > [Bereavement and mourning](#)

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

[Society](#) > [Demography](#) > [War losses, military](#)

[Society](#) > [Post-war society](#) > [Post-war moral values](#)

[Society](#) > [Post-war society](#) > [Post-war social conflicts](#)

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

Author Keywords

War Victims; Mourning; Pensions; Social Politics; Representations

GND Subject Headings

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

LC Subject Headings

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

Rameau Subject Headings

[Veuves de guerre ; Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\)](#)

Key Person(s)

Key Location(s)

Title

War Widows

Author(s)

[Peggy Bette](#)

Article Type

Encyclopedic Entry

Classification Group

Concepts, Practices and Policies

Articles That Link Here

[Post-war Societies \(Belgium\)](#); [Warfare 1914-1918 \(Canada\)](#); [Post-war Welfare Policies](#); [Post-war Economies \(New Zealand\)](#); [Women's Mobilization for War \(Belgium\)](#); [Post-war Societies](#); [Post-war Societies \(Australia\)](#); [Bereavement and Mourning \(USA\)](#); [Post-war Societies \(France\)](#); [Labour, Labour Movements and Strikes \(Ottoman Empire/ Middle East\)](#); [Post-war Welfare Policies](#); [Migration and Mobility](#); [Germany](#); [Germany](#); [Social Costs of War](#); [Women's Mobilisation for War \(Germany\)](#); [Propaganda at Home \(Austria-Hungary\)](#); [Women's Mobilization for War \(Ottoman Empire/ Middle East\)](#); [Germany](#); [Bereavement and Mourning \(New Zealand\)](#); [Centenary \(Czech Republic\)](#); [War Losses \(Russian Empire\)](#); [War Losses](#); [Lascar](#); [War Letters: Communication between Front and Home Front](#); [War Losses \(France\)](#); [War Losses \(Germany\)](#); [State, Civil Society and Relief Organizations for](#)

[War; Sexuality, Sexual Relations, Homosexuality; Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War \(Austria-Hungary\); Northern Africa; Nitti, Francesco Saverio; Poland; Bereavement and Mourning \(Belgium\); Bereavement and Mourning, Commemoration and Cult of the Fallen \(France\); Commemoration and Remembrance \(USA\); Commemoration and Remembrance \(USA\); Schools and Universities; Commemoration, Cult of the Fallen \(Germany\); Bereavement and Mourning \(Germany\); Women's Mobilization for War \(France\); Private Life \(France\); Children and War \(Italy\); Women's Mobilization for War \(Russian Empire\); Commemoration, Cult of the Fallen \(East Central Europe\); Bereavement and Mourning \(Russian Empire\); Post-war Societies \(Germany\); Bishops and Chaplains \(Italy\); Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Rome and Polish Legionaries Union](#)