

Version 1.0 | Last updated 08 January 2017

Post-war Societies (France)

By [Victor Demiaux](#)

French post-war society had to face the consequences of a mass death experienced on an unprecedented scale. Reintegrating the demobilized soldiers into civil society also constituted a major challenge in the immediate context of the post-war economic reconversion, which resulted in the birth of an original mass movement, the veterans' movement. Beyond the return of the men, dismantling the wartime representations which had pervaded the whole society proved a long process which would not end until the mid-twenties.

Table of Contents

[1 Introduction](#)

[2 The impact of mass death](#)

[3 From demobilization to association: the reintegration of the veterans](#)

[4 Between war and peace: the cultural demobilization](#)

[5 Conclusion: A successful cultural Demobilization?](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

Introduction

Hardly any feeling was so prevalent throughout French society in the wake of the November 1918 armistice as the desire to resume pre-war life. This, however, was doomed to prove illusory, so massive was the death toll and the cultural impact of the conflict. [Commemorating](#) the dead, organizing the demobilization, and dismantling the bellicose representations that had been forged during the four years of [total warfare](#) remained crucial stakes for French society into the mid-1920s.

The impact of mass death

The [human cost](#) of the First World War proved particularly high for [France](#). While military mobilization had resulted in the raising of more than 8 million men, losses amounted to 1.4 million dead, approximately 3.5 percent of the pre-war population. This proportion – unmatched among the West-European belligerents – explains the ghostly presence of the war that pervaded the French society throughout the interwar period. No less than 2.5 million people had lost a father or a husband. But even this grimly impressive figure fails to capture the numerical significance of the bereaved. Taking into account those who were mourning a son, a brother, or a member of their close relationship circle, it is also the case that French society as a whole was a mourning society. Moreover, the [Spanish flu pandemic](#), in 1918 and 1919, had resulted in approximately 450,000 dead. The fact that this fact was largely neglected in French collective memory tells much about the cultural centrality of war death, whose specificities contributed to making the mourning process highly problematic^[1]. All throughout the interwar period, it was hardly possible for the French to escape the grim presence of the Great War. The reminders of the massacre were everywhere to be found in the collective, as well as in the individual experiences. War remained present not only in the profusion of commemorative traces, but also in the daily lives of 760,000 orphans, 600,000 [widows](#) and 1.2 million disabled. A common feeling experienced by these different categories of war victims was a sense of social exclusion. This was grievously felt by many war orphans at the end of the war who were unable to take part in the collective rejoicing of the rest of the society in that they revived their grief. In the same vein, the wearing of mourning clothes, a practice still in force in all social classes in France at the time, was felt by some of those who were mourning as a way of setting them apart from the rest of the community. Such a feeling of exclusion also applied to the 1.4 million [refugees](#) who had fled from the German armies. Subject to marginalization during the war itself, they were most the anxious to return home, even to the most devastated areas. For many of them, the return to a normal life would not occur until many years had passed, after reconstruction that would last a decade.

From demobilization to association: the reintegration of the veterans

Demobilizing 5 million men was a highly complex operation.^[2] Contrary to their British and Italian counterparts, the French authorities had not really anticipated the operation and it was not until December 1918 that a sub-secretary of state for demobilization was set up. The operation was carried out in two main phases, the first between December 1918 and April 1919 (2.5 million men), the second between July and September 1919 (2 million men). The political culture propagated since 1870 by the Third Republic was already well established and for the most part these soldiers considered themselves first and foremost citizens in arms. From the moment the armistice was signed, they considered the war to be over and they pushed very hard not to be released immediately. Following the British example was tempting for the authorities, which favored the release of professionals who were most in need in the [post-war economy](#). However, they could not

overlook a feeling that was deeply rooted in French republican principles and that was widely held in the civilian population. Demobilization was therefore organized according to a fundamentally egalitarian principle. The order of release was mainly determined by the time spent in the army, the number of dependent children also being taken into account. This measure did not entirely meet expectations, and vandalism was commonly practiced in the trains driving the men to their reveals: in early 1919, about 13,000 broken windows and 400 damaged doors were reported monthly. Though, if compared to the mutinies of British soldiers in Calais and Folkestone, demobilization in the French army can be deemed a rather smooth process.

The soldiers being demobilized were also deeply concerned about their return to civil life. What reception would they get from civilians who, they thought, would misunderstand their wartime experience? How would they reintegrate into a daily life that they had left for several years? Reassuming a civil identity involved several delicate steps which involved reengaging with civil society as well as interacting with other demobilized men. Even the return of the fathers to their individual intimate spheres was at times very difficult for the [children](#) who were sometimes unable to recognize their fathers, many of whom had changed physically or morally.^[3]

Returning to work was also a key moment that in many cases proved difficult. Frequently, the mobilized had been replaced. A law was passed in November 1918 obliging employers to re-hire their mobilized employees, but it was rendered largely ineffective by administrative restrictions. The veterans were therefore particularly affected by the unemployment crisis provoked by the post-war economic reconversion. True, after the armistice, many war factories complied with the government appeal to dismiss the female workers they had hired since 1914. These measures failed, however, to solve the unemployment levels being experienced by the veterans. Such a situation challenged the very basis of the moral economy of gratitude,^[4] a concept encompassing all the procedures through which civilians show their gratitude to veterans for the sacrifices endured. Contrary to this objective, the difficulties of the economic situation contributed to sharpen in the veteran community a feeling that they were misunderstood and underappreciated in the wider society. This was an important driving factor in the powerful wave of social protest that developed during the spring of 1919, mainly as a reaction against inflated food prices and insufficient wages. The role of the veterans was particularly prominent in the large demonstrations, which had apparent success in cities such as Perpignan and Marseille. One should nevertheless notice that the veteran protests of did not assume a separate form but merged with a more pervasive social discontent, triggered by the economic reconversion and the laying off of thousands of war workers. The failure of the great strike of May 1920 marked the apex, but also the reflux, of this wave of protests.

Whatever the veterans' own perceptions may have been, the civilians shared a similar attitude to theirs', within the context of the moral economy of gratitude. In his investiture speech at the Chamber of Deputies on 20 November 1917, Prime Minister [Georges Clemenceau \(1841-1929\)](#) proclaimed that: "they have rights over us". This statement was often repeated during this time and appropriately captures the general state of mind in the wake of the armistice. The urge to express gratitude found

an outlet in an intense ritual activity between 1918 and the early 1920s: victory celebrations, festivals for the returned regiments and gratitude festivals were organized at national as well as local levels. For the sole department of Puy-de-Dôme, no less than 321 peace and victory festivals were organized between May and December 1919.^[5] These rites of reincorporation symbolically reunified communities separated by the war by staging an idealized return of the mobilized. Whereas in reality demobilization had only very gradually freed individuals from their wartime obligations, the rites enacted a collective return, symmetrical to the mobilization of 1914.

The French moved *en masse* to attend military celebrations held in garrison towns. The largest of these celebrations occurred in Paris on 14 July 1919, with participants coming from all over the country. On that day, the capital city's population grew from 2 to 4 million. The celebration featured a great military parade passing under the Arc de Triomphe symbolizing the homecoming of the troops on a national level. The very symbolism of all these rituals, and the massive affluence they provoked, suggests that representing the demobilization as a collective experience was crucial. In a sense, ritualizing the demobilization was a way to exorcize the anxieties triggered by the uncertainties of peace time.

Despite their reintegration into civil society, many veterans considered their war-time experiences as part and parcel of their specific identities. This contributed to the birth of the [veterans' movement](#), a new mass movement in French society. This broad grouping would gather up to half of the 6.5 million formerly mobilized. A galaxy of innumerable organizations, the movement was dominated by two large associations, the [Union Fédérale des mutilés](#) (UF) and the [Union Nationale des Combattants](#) (UNC). The UF had its origins in a coming together during the war of a number of local associations working to meet the new needs of disabled veterans. At its climax, in the early 1930s, its membership would amount to 800,000. The actions of the great law Professor [René Cassin \(1887-1976\)](#) at its head contributed to make the UF a very reliable partner for the state authorities. Cassin's role proved paramount in the elaboration of a new kind of legislation aimed at protecting the rights of the war victims. The drafting of a law of 31 March 1919 on this subject illustrates the decisive part played by the veterans' movement as a forerunner of the Welfare State in France. Conversely, the UNC resulted from a national initiative. It benefited from powerful sponsors (it even received permission from the government to promote itself in the barracks), and its inception in March 1919 provoked government concerns about the challenges veterans could constitute for public order. More right-wing than the UF, the UNC would soon emerge as the largest association of the veterans' movement, with up to 900,000 members. The development of this unprecedented mass movement responded to a double need. On the one hand, it was about defending the specific interests of ex-servicemen, especially when they had been hurt or maimed in battle. From this point of view, veterans associations proved immediately effective. The military pensions act, adopted by Parliament on 31 March 1919, was indeed particularly liberal in comparison with the legislation previously in force. On the other hand, veterans were understood to be the bearers of a specific set of values related to their wartime experiences that needed promotion. Maintaining the memory of their fallen [comrades](#) was at the core of these values and was a central message of the veterans'

movement. [Pacifism](#) was another value increasing in prominence over the years, but the denunciation of war did not challenge the righteousness of the sacrifices made during the Great War for the country's defense. The new pacifism was actually a "patriotic pacifism".^[6] By contrast, veterans assumed that the Great War had been waged against war. Any return to it would have meant the negation of their experience and of the sacrifices of their comrades. This idea would come to be the core of the "civil religion" for which veterans would become the priests on every [11 November](#) throughout the interwar period, at the 36,000 war memorials held throughout the country.

The part played by the veterans in the radicalization of French politics during the 1930s has been a controversial topic for historians, particularly because of the anti-parliamentarianism they often promoted. However, this was essentially a rhetorical anti-parliamentarianism which did not intersect with the anti-republicanism also being professed during this time by nationalist groups. Similarly, the paramilitary character assumed from the mid-twenties onward by the newly formed leagues (*ligues*) stood in sharp contrast to the veterans' self-representation. No more than 1 percent of them took part in the Croix-de-Feu, a league founded by Colonel [François de La Rocque \(1885-1946\)](#) whose ideology rested on martial values. In the same vein, when the president of the UNC took part in the riotous demonstration on 6 February 1934, which tried to storm the Chamber of Deputies, he was quickly relieved of his responsibilities within the movement.

Between war and peace: the cultural demobilization

Far from marking a clear-cut limit between wartime and peacetime, the armistice and the signing of the [Versailles Treaty](#) constituted the beginning of a blurred era during which the potent aspirations for a return to pre-war normalcy were deeply intertwined with the legacy of [total warfare](#). The length of the conflict, the depth of the cultural and social mobilization to which it had given rise, implied that: "demobilizing the mind" would be a complex and lengthy process.^[7] Among the intellectuals, the academics were particularly reluctant to renounce representations they had actively contributed to forge. They did not resume professional contacts with their German peers until the mid-1920s and an undercurrent of defiance never vanished during the interwar period. Thus, many French physicists looked down at length on quantum physics as "German science". Others, notably in the literary milieus, sooner attempted to challenge the impact war had had on intellectual activity.

From a broader perspective, the mid-1920s can be considered as a major turning point. During the November 1919 general elections, the victory of the *Bloc National* demonstrated the prominence of representations inherited from the conflict. This newly formed coalition allowed the Right to take advantage of the large appeal of the notion of [Union sacrée](#). The political climate was characterized by a shift in the pre-war political divisions. The militant Republican anticlericalism, which had profoundly marked the first forty years of the Third Republic, was left aside, as if the external enemy overshadowed the previous historical cleavages, which had at length opposed the two "Frances" that had emerged from the Revolution. The raising of the festival of [Joan d'Arc \(1412-1431\)](#) – a symbol of catholic patriotism and resistance to foreign invasion – to the rank of a national celebration in 1920,

along with the Republican Bastille Day, was symbolical of this. On the contrary, the German enemy remained a paramount political representation. Returning to normalcy implied reconstructing the devastated areas and solving the huge debts accumulated to finance the war effort. Having Germany pay the reparations imposed by the Versailles Treaty was then a central issue for the public during this time and the firm policy set up by Prime Minister Raymond Poincaré (1860-1934) in this direction received strong popular support, including when it led to the [military occupation of the Ruhr region](#) in 1923, as a retaliation against Germany's delayed installment.

This persistent defiance towards the enemy had parallel implications in domestic politics. The condemnation in 1920 of Joseph Caillaux (1863-1944), a former Minister falsely accused of "defeatism" during the war, indicated the persistent suspicion that existed amongst many towards all kinds of anti-patriotic behavior. The 1919 spring and summer labor unrest, which was perceived by the state as a revolutionary danger fueled by an alien ideology – bolshevism – largely contributed to the victory of the *Bloc National*. The government reacted with great energy against the breaking out of a massive industrial protest in the spring of 1920.

This political mood profoundly changed in a very few years, as testified in the 1924 electoral campaign which ended up with the victory of a left-wing coalition – *le Cartel des gauches*. This marked the reactivation of the political fault lines that existed prior to 1914. For the first time since the war, the religious question and the Republic itself were at stake again. The figures of the internal enemy also faded away, illustrated by the reelection of Caillaux in the Lot. The new foreign policy set up by Aristide Briand (1862-1932) was justified by a spirit of conciliation with Germany which resulted in the welcoming of Germany at the League of Nations under the auspices of France, in 1926. Significantly, Briand became the object of a general worship by public opinion in the following years. True, the memory of the losses and destructions caused by the Great War remained paramount in this new cultural configuration, but they were henceforth given a different meaning. Promoting peace no longer implied denouncing a warlike enemy, but rather securing reconciliation.

Conclusion: A successful cultural Demobilization?

By 1924-1925, the French had begun to realize that their wish to come back to the pre-war era could not be fulfilled. The perceived failure of the Ruhr occupation revealed that wartime means were henceforth unable to solve peacetime issues in the long term. By the same token, it cast a tragic doubt over the usefulness of the sacrifices made during the war and contributed to the further establishment of pacifism at the heart of French political attitudes in the interwar period.

Broadly speaking, the demobilization of French society can be deemed a successful process, as opposed to the Italian and German post-war experiences. As in [Britain](#), the memory of the Great War did not result in major conflicts and political violence remained marginal. This should not obscure the fact that seeds of radicalization were not totally absent from French politics at the outset of the war. As the comparison with the Italian case shows, this did not remove from post-war societies the temptation to pursue extreme political solutions. In this regard, the reasons for France's relatively

successful demobilization might lie in the history of the society's nationalization and modernization that occurred throughout the 19th century.

Victor Demiaux, Independent Scholar

Section Editor: [Nicolas Beaupré](#)

Notes

1. † See the article Dalisson, Rémi, Julien, Elise: Bereavement and Mourning, Commemoration and Cult of the Fallen (France), 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: <http://dx.doi.org/10.154633/ie1418.10378>. Translated by: Serveau, Jocelyne (retrieved: 25 November 2015).
2. † Cabanes, Bruno: *La Victoire endeuillée. La sortie de guerre des soldats français, 1918-1920*, Paris 2004, pp. 277-333.
3. † Pignot, Manon: *Allons enfants de la patrie . Génération Grande Guerre*, Paris 2012, p. 355.
4. † This concept has been defined by Cabanes, Bruno: *La victoire endeuillée: la sortie de guerre des soldats français, 1918-1920*, Paris 2004, pp. 354-368.
5. † Fryszman, Aline: *La Victoire triste? Espérances, déceptions et commémorations de la victoire dans le département du Puy-de-Dôme en sortie de guerre, 1918-1924*, Paris 2009.
6. † Prost, Antoine: *Les anciens Combattants et la société française, 1914-1939*, Paris 1977.
7. † Horne, John: *Demobilizing the Mind. France and the Legacy of the Great War, 1919-1939*, in: *French History and Civilization. Papers from the George Rudé Seminar 2* (2009), pp. 101-119.

Selected Bibliography

[Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane / Becker, Annette: **14-18. Retrouver la guerre**, Paris 2000: Gallimard.](#)

[Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane: **Cinq deuils de guerre, 1914-1918**, Paris 2001: Noesis.](#)

[Audouin-Rouzeau, Stéphane / Prochasson, Christophe \(eds.\): **Sortir de la Grande Guerre. Le monde et l'après-1918**, Paris 2008: Tallandier.](#)

[Beaupré, Nicolas: **Les grandes guerres, 1914-1945**, Paris 2012: Belin.](#)

[Beaupré, Nicolas: **Le traumatisme de la Grande Guerre, 1918-1933. Histoire franco-allemande, volume 8**, Villeneuve d'Ascq 2012: Presses universitaires du Septentrion.](#)

[Becker, Annette: **La guerre et la foi. De la mort à la mémoire, 1914-1930**, Paris 1994: A. Colin.](#)

[Cabanes, Bruno: **La victoire endeuillée. La sortie de guerre des soldats français, 1918-1920**, Paris 2004: Seuil.](#)

- Demiaux, Victor: **La construction rituelle de la victoire dans les capitales européennes après la Grande Guerre (Bruxelles, Bucarest, Londres, Paris, Rome)**, Paris 2013: Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales.
- Fryszman, Aline: **La victoire triste? Espérances, déceptions et commémorations de la victoire dans le département du Puy-de-Dôme en sortie de guerre (1918-1924)**, Paris 2011.
- Horne, John: **Defending victory. Paramilitary politics in France, 1918-1926. A counter-example: War in peace. Paramilitary violence in Europe after the Great War**, Oxford 2012, pp. 216-234.
- Horne, John: **Demobilizing the mind. France and the legacy of the Great War, 1919-1939**, in: French history and civilization. Papers from the George Rudé Seminar, 2009, pp. 101-119.
- 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.
- Jagielski, Jean-François: **Le soldat inconnu. Invention et postérité d'un symbole**, Paris 2005: Imago.
- Julien, Élise: **Paris, Berlin. La mémoire de la guerre, 1914-1933**, Rennes 2010: Presses universitaires de Rennes.
- Kéchichian, Albert: **Les Croix-de-Feu à l'âge des fascismes. Travail, famille, patrie**, Seyssel 2006: Champ Vallon.
- Martin, Benjamin F.: **France and the après guerre, 1918-1924. Illusions and disillusionment**, Baton Rouge 1999: Louisiana State University Press.
- Pau-Heyriès, Béatrix: **Le transfert des corps des militaires de la Grande Guerre. Étude comparée France-Italie, 1914-1939**, Montpellier 2004: Université Montpellier III.
- Pignot, Manon: **1919. Retour des hommes et invention des pères?**, in: Piketty, Guillaume / Cabanes, Bruno (eds.): **Retour à l'intime. Au sortir de la guerre**, Paris 2009: Editions Tallandier.
- Prost, Antoine: **Les anciens combattants et la société française, 1914-1939**, Paris 1977: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques.
- Sherman, Daniel J.: **The construction of memory in interwar France**, Chicago; London 1999: University of Chicago Press.
- Siegel, Mona L.: **The moral disarmament of France. Education, pacifism, and patriotism, 1914-1940**, Cambridge; New York 2004: Cambridge University Press.
- Tison, Stéphane: **Comment sortir de la guerre? Deuil, mémoire et traumatisme, 1870-1940**, Histoire, Rennes 2011: Presses universitaires de Rennes.
- Wirsching, Andreas: **Political violence in France and Italy after 1918**, in: Journal of Modern European History 1, 2003, pp. 60-79.

Citation

Demiaux, Victor: Post-war Societies (France) , 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/ie1418.10540](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10540).

License

This text is licensed under: [CC by-NC-ND 3.0 Germany - Attribution, Non-commercial, No Derivative Works](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/de/).