

The Soldier's Death: From Valmy to Verdun

Ian Germani

Introduction

In 1975, André Corvisier published an article in the *Revue Historique* entitled simply "The Death of the Soldier since the End of the Middle Ages."¹ Corvisier acknowledged both the immensity of the topic and the need for an interdisciplinary approach to its study. The claims he made for his own contribution were modest: he had done no more than to establish an inventory of questions, accompanied by a few reflections. The article was more important than these claims suggest. Its insistence upon the need to situate military death in relation to the broader experience of death in western civilization made it an exemplar of what historians were just beginning to refer to as "the New Military History." Furthermore, in its tripartite consideration of the soldier's death – covering, broadly speaking, soldiers' own attitudes toward death, the relationship between military death and mortality in general as well as cultural representations of the soldier's death – the article identified and mapped out for further study several important dimensions of the topic. In particular, as cultural history has become increasingly important, Corvisier's attention to military culture as well as to the representations of the soldier's death in literature and art seems particularly advanced.

Evidently, many other historians have since taken up Corvisier's challenge to consider in greater depth cultural representations of the soldier's death. The First World War, as a conflict marked by unprecedented military mortality, has inspired a number of important histories that address this theme. Jay Winter, Annette Becker, Stéphane

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¹ André Corvisier, "La mort du soldat depuis la fin du Moyen Age," *Revue Historique*, 254, no. 1 (1975): 3-30. Reprinted in André Corvisier, *Les Hommes, la Guerre et la Mort* (Paris, 1985): 367-94.

Audoin-Rouzeau and Leonard Smith, among others, all have something important to say on attitudes toward, images and narratives representing, or rituals commemorating, the soldier's death.² Collectively, they demonstrate that coming to terms with mass death on the battlefield was a central cultural concern for the Great War generation. The soldier's death has understandably attracted less interest for earlier wars, during which the incidence of military mortality was less massive, less publicized and consequently less significant in cultural impact.³ Nevertheless, studies of the culture and military culture of the French revolutionary and Napoleonic wars have also deepened our understanding of how the soldier's death was perceived, represented and commemorated during the last period of general European warfare prior to the First World War. The works of John Lynn, Alan Forrest, Marie-Cécile Thorat, Michael J. Hughes, Joseph Clarke, Antoine de Baecque, Robert Morrissey and Linda Colley all address aspects of this topic.⁴

Few scholars have been as bold as Corvisier in terms of chronological scope. Two who deserve note are Yuval Noah Harari, whose study of soldiers' battlefield narratives extends from 1450 to 2000, and George L. Mosse, whose *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* has a broader scope than its title suggests, reaching back as far as the French revolutionary wars. Both these writers have important things to say about how the death of the soldier has been represented over time. Harari shows how artists, beginning in the late eighteenth century, romanticized the soldier's death as the climactic moment of the battlefield experience. Their vision reflected a radically new understanding of that experience as a moment of revelation bestowing special insight and moral authority on its participants, an understanding of war that has endured down to the present.⁵ Mosse's emphasis is rather different. In his view, the soldier's death was represented as a secular apotheosis, one that functioned to obscure the realities of war and to feed the "Myth of the War Experience."⁶ He insists upon the importance of this myth and its idealization of war, particularly in Germany, following the First World War.

² Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1995); Annette Becker, *War and Faith: The Religious Imagination in France, 1914-1930*, trans. Helen McPhail (Oxford, 1998); Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War, 1914-1918* (Oxford, 1992); Leonard Smith, *The Embattled Self: French Soldiers' Testimony of the Great War* (Ithaca and London, 2007). This list is far from exhaustive and is largely restricted to works pertaining to France.

³ Joseph Clarke, however, has pointed out in an important article that the gulf between the experience of the two periods is not as wide as most historians have assumed. See Joseph Clarke, "Cenotaphs and Cypress Trees: Commemorating the Citizen-Soldier in the Year II," *French History*, 22, no. 2 (2008): 217-40.

⁴ John Lynn, "Toward an Army of Honor: The Moral Evolution of the French Army, 1789-1815," *French Historical Studies*, 16, no. 1 (Spring, 1989): 152-82; Alan Forrest, *Napoleon's Men: The Soldiers of the Revolution and Empire* (London and New York, 2002); Joseph Clarke, *Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789-1799* (Cambridge, 2007); Antoine de Baecque, "Le corps des martyrs et le discours politique," in *La Révolution et la Mort*, Elizabeth Liris and Jean Maurice Bizière, eds. (Toulouse, 1991): 151-61; Robert Morrissey, *The Economy of Glory: From Ancien Régime France to the Fall of Napoleon*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago and London, 2013); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven, 1992).

⁵ Yuval Noah Harari, *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000* (London, 2008), 224-25.

⁶ George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York and Oxford, 1990): 7; 70-106. Also worthy of note is a collective work that explores the theme of the soldier's death from a multi-national, multi-disciplinary perspective. See Christian Benoit et al., *Le Sacrifice du Soldat: Corps martyrisé, corps mythifié* (Paris, 2009).

This paper revisits the topic of Corvisier's article by considering representations of the soldier's death in France, with particular reference to the wars of the French Revolution and the First World War. It acknowledges David Bell's argument that the two eras, at least in terms of their language and in their vision of "total war" as an apocalyptic, redemptive struggle, had much in common, but it also points to some of the differences, both in reality and in representation.⁷ Although it refers to the work of all the scholars mentioned above, it considers representations of the soldier's death in the writings of soldiers themselves, as well as in contemporary media, most notably the newspaper press, painting and engraving. The paper argues that the cult of voluntary self-sacrifice on behalf of the nation, though originating under the old regime, came into its own during the wars of the French Revolution, with public tributes celebrating the acts of patriotic devotion performed by citizen-soldiers. These tributes referenced the military heroes of pagan antiquity rather than those of the medieval or monarchical past. Nevertheless, although temporarily eclipsed during the most radical phase of the Revolution, an essentially aristocratic code of honor resurfaced under the Directory and Napoleon; representations of the deaths of prominent generals were a synthesis of old regime and revolutionary values. The ideals of a glorious death and of patriotic self-sacrifice survived down to the First World War, when they were subjected to bitter attack by writers such as Henri Barbusse, who gave voice to the *poilu's* anger against those "at the rear" who persisted in imagining the possibility that a soldier's death could ever be beautiful.⁸ In the aftermath of war, many artists and sculptors recoiled from realistic representations of the soldier's death, offering consolation to the bereaved by continuing to insist upon its transcendence. It was left to a minority, notably Otto Dix, to provide a visual counterpart to Barbusse's unflinchingly disenchanting vision.

Death Close Up

La Mort de près – "Death close up" – is the title of a memoir written by Maurice Genevoix, one of the best known witnesses to the French soldier's experience in the First World War.⁹ This memoir, first published in 1972, is a useful starting point for any study of the soldier's death, because of its straightforward assertion that the topic is one concerning which we have no first-hand testimony. For such testimony to exist, the dead would have to speak from beyond the grave; or, in Genevoix's words, it would be necessary for the soldier to "experience his own death, and survive."¹⁰ Genevoix goes on to explain that he came as close as anyone might to accomplishing this impossible feat, on three harrowing occasions during his time in the trenches. On one of these occasions, he was convinced he had been eviscerated by a shell blast that killed comrades on either side, but which left him completely untouched, hardly believing the evidence of his own shattered senses.¹¹ His statement that "The wounds, the deaths of others, however much we are moved by them, however closely the horror of their presence forces us to reflect on our own mortality, can actually only be *other*," is a reminder that to represent the

⁷ David Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It* (Boston and New York, 2007), 313.

⁸ Henri Barbusse, *Under Fire*, trans. Robin Buss (London, 2003), 302.

⁹ Maurice Genevoix, *Ceux de 14* (Paris, 1998), 1011-62.

¹⁰ Genevoix, *Ceux de 14*, 1014.

¹¹ Genevoix, *Ceux de 14*, 1042.

soldier's death always requires an act of imagination.¹² There is indeed a considerable body of testimony, from both the revolutionary wars and the Great War, which bears close witness to the experience of war-time death and which reveals how a variety of contemporaries – including soldiers themselves, as well as reporters, publicists, writers and artists – anticipated, perceived, remembered and imaginatively recreated the soldier's death.

The essential stimulus to this imagining was, of course, the unprecedented incidence of battlefield death. There were important differences between the two periods. Although the Frenchmen who died during the First World War were roughly equal in number to those who died in the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, their deaths were concentrated within a much shorter time period, four years, rather than twenty-three. Furthermore, while the overall mortality of soldiers who fought in the revolutionary wars was double that for the First World War (approximately one third of all soldiers mobilized as opposed to one sixth), the proportion that died as a result of wounds sustained in combat was far inferior.¹³ The majority of deaths during the revolutionary wars were caused by disease, although officers had a greater likelihood of meeting a warrior's death on the battlefield than did their men. During the Napoleonic wars 11.5 percent of officers died in combat, 6 percent from illness. For soldiers, the proportions were reversed: 5.6 percent died in battle, 15.6 percent from illness.¹⁴ During the First World War, just over one tenth of all deaths were a result of illness.¹⁵

Despite these differences, which reflected the dramatic changes in warfare that had taken place over a hundred years, there were significant similarities. In both conflicts, the vast majority of wounds were caused by firearms. During the revolutionary wars, 90 percent of wounds were caused by firearms of one sort or another.¹⁶ For the First World War a more precise breakdown is available: a recent study calculates 60 percent of wounds were caused by artillery shells, 34 percent by bullets and 2.1 percent by grenades. Edged weapons and flame-throwers combined to account for fewer than 4 percent of wounds.¹⁷ The smooth-bore artillery and muzzle-loading muskets of the revolutionary wars may have lacked the destructive power of the explosive shells and machine guns of the First World War, but they still caused horrific injuries which, even if they were not immediately fatal, often led to the eventual demise of the victims as a consequence of shock, or of the onset of infection or tetanus.

The memoirs of surgeons provide an important insight concerning the effects of these weapons on the human body and the realities of the soldier's death. Dominique-Jean Larrey accompanied Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1798. He calculated that

¹² Genevoix, *Ceux de 14*, 1027.

¹³ It is estimated that during the wars of the Revolution, between 400,000 and 500,000 men died, roughly a third of those who served. Another 800-900,000 died during the Napoleonic wars. See Jean Delmas, ed., *Histoire militaire de la France*, vol. 2, *De 1715 à 1871* (Paris, 1992), 2: 328-29; During the First World War, France mobilized 8.7 million men, of whom 1.35 million died. See Anthony Clayton, *Paths of Glory: The French Army 1914-1918* (London, 2003), 222.

¹⁴ Jean Delmas, ed., *Histoire militaire de la France*, 2: 328-29.

¹⁵ Antoine Prost, "Compter les vivants et les morts: l'évaluation des pertes françaises de 1914-1918," *Le Mouvement social*, 222 (2008): 41-60; 56-58.

¹⁶ Jean-Paul Bertaud, et al., *Atlas de la Révolution française*, vol. 3, *L'Armée et la guerre* (Paris, 1989), 44.

¹⁷ Prost, "Compter les vivants et les morts," 47. These figures do not include soldiers whose injuries were caused by accidents or gas. Prost indicates that of the 2,754,724 wounded for whom records exist, 127,569 were victims of gas and 573,971 of accidents.

during the siege of Acre two thousand men from the French army were wounded: "In general, all the wounds were severe, double or triple, and suffered at close range." He and his colleagues performed seventy amputations. Two soldiers who each had a leg removed at the hip subsequently died; one contracted the plague, while the other died "as a result of the severe concussion caused by the cannon ball." Of six soldiers whose arms were removed at the shoulder joint, "four were healed completely; the two others died from concussion." Of seven whose skulls were trepanned, five survived. General Caffarelli was one of Larrey's patients who did not survive. At the General's own insistence, Larrey amputated his left arm, which had been shattered by a musket ball. "He endured it with great courage, and perhaps with too much concentration, for he uttered not a word. Very much attached to this general, I operated upon him with all possible speed to shorten his suffering." The wound was apparently healing well when, thirteen days later, Caffarelli was struck by a fever that only intensified. "Nineteen days after the operation, the patient's glorious career came to an end."¹⁸

Larrey was not always as sympathetic toward the officers he treated as he was to Caffarelli. In the midst of a passage in which he discusses his success in treating gunshot wounds to the lower abdomen, he writes, "General Bon is the only one who died from this type of wound, because he would not allow his wounds to be debrided, nor that a probe [*sonde*] be inserted within the bladder."¹⁹ The spread of urine soon resulted in gangrene, the progress of which was encouraged by the subject's stoutness."²⁰ Larrey discusses the fate of several generals who were wounded in the second battle of Aboukir, fought in a losing cause against the English. General Lamuse, struck in the knee by a small caliber ball, was informed that he required amputation of the limb to save his life. "He refused, not wishing to survive this unhappy day, as he told me." Nevertheless, eight hours later, Larrey did indeed perform the operation, which took three minutes; its purpose, however, was no longer to save the general's life, but simply to ease his suffering as he died. General Baudot, likewise, refused amputation of his leg, "and, after several days of horrible torment, he died of gangrene."²¹ These cases suggest that a slow, agonizing death in hospital was far more likely than a quick, heroic one on the battlefield. Of course, the insalubrious state of many hospitals rendered such a fate even more likely. Baron Percy described the military hospital at Zurich in 1799: "It is a very bad place and the very costly repairs that were carried out have made it larger, but no more salubrious. Not one seriously wounded person has been cured, not one amputee; the wounded survive for ten or twelve days; then they get hospital fever and die."²²

Medical science and treatment had advanced significantly by the time of the First World War, with the result that of approximately three million men who were wounded, fewer than fifty thousand died in hospital.²³ Since a majority of those wounded were injured by explosive artillery shells, however, a great many of them suffered appalling

¹⁸ Dominique-Jean Larrey, *Mémoires de chirurgie militaire et campagnes de D.J. Larrey*, 4 vols (Paris, 1812-1817), 1: 306-07.

¹⁹ Given the context, one presumes this is a reference to a catheter.

²⁰ Larrey, *Mémoires de chirurgie militaire et campagnes de D.J. Larrey*, 165.

²¹ Larrey, *Mémoires de chirurgie militaire et campagnes de D.J. Larrey*, 260-61.

²² Pierre-François Percy, *Journal des Campagnes du Baron Percy, Chirurgien-en-chef de la Grande armée*, 2 vols (Paris, 1986), 1: 45.

²³ Prost, "Compter les vivants et les morts," 47.

mutilations. Again, the testimony of surgeons is eloquent. Georges Duhamel operated behind the lines at Verdun:

The guns employed by the enemy for the destruction of men caused frightful wounds, assuredly generally more cruel than those we had witnessed during the first twenty months of a war that was pitiless from its inception.... Many men came to us with one or more limbs completely torn off, and they arrived still living. Some bore not one, but sometimes thirty or forty wounds, or even more. We examined each body methodically, going from one sad discovery to the next. They reminded us of crippled boats taking on water everywhere.²⁴

The advent of trench warfare, although it ended the most deadly phase of combat during the First World War, diminished even further the prospects – which clearly had never been good – for a quick, clean death in the open field.

A Fine Death

Such a death was indeed the ideal of the French Revolution. It was an ideal that owed much to antiquity, beginning with the *Iliad*, and to the Greek and Roman association of glory, honor and immortality with a youthful death on the field of battle.²⁵ In principle, such a death should occur at the climax of the battle and be rewarded by the sight of the enemy's defeat. It was exemplified by the death of General Dugommier, killed by a shell which struck him full in the chest while fighting the Spanish in November, 1794.²⁶ Dugommier's death, "was very happy," said one eulogist, comparing it to the death of Epaminondas, the Greek hero who, defending Thebes against the Spartans, "had the joy of dying while fighting them, and gave up his last breath only after seeing his companions crowned with the victor's laurels."²⁷ The death of Latour d'Auvergne, the "First Grenadier of the Empire," was idealized in the same way: "This Hero so worthy of our deepest sorrow, fell pierced to the heart by a lance, but his dying eyes were rewarded by the sight of the fleeing enemy; he died content."²⁸ And General Desaix, the hero of Marengo, was supposed to have enjoyed the same reward: "Oh Desaix! Your eyes, before they closed, saw the Austrians put to flight by the arms of your valiant comrades."²⁹ But even if, like General Marceau, the dying hero was not fortunate enough to see his sacrifice crowned with victory, his fate was still deemed to be a happy one. General Jourdan, recounting the death of Marceau at Altenkirchen in 1796, reported the hero's

²⁴ Georges Duhamel, *Vie des martyrs et autres récits des temps de guerre* (Paris, 2005), 100-01.

²⁵ See Jean-Pierre Vernant, "La 'Belle Mort' d'Achille," in *Entre Mythe et Politique* (Paris, 1996), 501-10. Robert Morrissey has traced the subsequent evolution of this ideal from pagan antiquity to the eighteenth century, showing how it provided the basis for an "economy of glory" under Napoleon. Morrissey, *The Economy of Glory*, 11-113.

²⁶ Larrey stated that Dugommier was dead before he could arrive to give medical aid: "The shell had penetrated his chest cavity and destroyed the principal organs within." Larrey, *Mémoires*, 1: 96-97.

²⁷ Antoine-Esprit Gibelin, *Eloge funèbre de Dugommier, Général en chef de l'Armée des Pyrénées Orientales* (Aix, n.d.), 9-10.

²⁸ Anon., *Vie Politique et Militaire de Latour-d'Auvergne, Descendant du Grand Turenne, Premier Grenadier des Armées françaises, tué à la bataille de Neuborg, le 9 Messidor an 8* (Paris, Year 8 [1799-1800]), 14.

²⁹ Simon Despréaux, *Précis de la Vie, Eloge funèbre du Général Desaix* [sic] (Paris, 1801), 52.

last words: "General, my friends, why do you weep? I am happy to die for my country."³⁰

Such happiness was deemed to be a function both of the manner in which the hero died and of the cause to which he gave his life. To die on the battlefield put the seal of glory on the career of a warrior. Latour d'Auvergne supposedly rebuked a friend who suggested that, at the age of fifty-seven, he had fought enough: "What! he cried. You too?... [Y]ou are upset to see me die a glorious death!"³¹ The death of a hero like General Hoche, who died of illness, away from the battlefield, was a less enviable fate. A funeral song in Hoche's honor addressed a complaint to Death, asking, "Why did you not take him / Fighting our enemies[?]"³² The spectacle of the battlefield death was irresistible, particularly to artists. There was little option, perhaps, but to represent Hoche dying in bed. (Fig. 1) But the painter Le Barbier, in depicting the death of Marceau, did not worry that the young general had actually died in Austrian captivity, watched over by his doctors. Rather, he resituated Marceau's final moments on the battlefield where he was wounded. (Fig. 2) Similarly, Albert-Paul Bourgeois, painting "the final moments of Marshal Lannes" on the battlefield of Aspern-Essling for the Salon of 1810, gave no hint that Lannes had actually died in a fevered delirium nine days after the battle, after enduring the amputation of his left leg.³³ The Marshal's terrible injuries, caused by a cannon ball striking both his legs, were tastefully concealed by the artist (Fig. 3)

³⁰ J. -B. Jourdan, *Discours de Jourdan ... Sur la Pétition de la Mère du général Marceau* (Paris, Year V [1795-96]), 3-4.

³¹ Anon., *Le Premier Grenadier des Armées: Notice sur Corret-Latour-d'Auvergne* (Paris, Year 9 [1801]), 33-34.

³² Leveau, "Chant funèbre sur la mort du général Hoche," (n.p., n.d.).

³³ Larrey, *Mémoires*, 3: 278-84.



Figure 1 L. F. Labrousse, “Mort du général Hoche : puisque la République triomphe je meurs content. 2.e jour complement. an 5” (1796-1805?). © Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF).



Figure 2 Le Barbier l’Ainé, “Les Derniers instants du général Marceau” (1800) © BNF.



Figure 3 Albert-Paul Bourgeois, *Derniers moments du Maréchal Lannes à la Bataille d'Essling* (1809-12) © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, New York.

But the degree of glory obtained depended not just upon the manner of the hero's death. To die for the *patrie*, for the Republic, for the Revolution and its principles, was exceptionally meritorious. "To die fighting valiantly, was seen by all peoples in all times, as the most glorious end for a great man" stated one eulogist, but "to die conquering, defending, preserving the Liberty of his country, is the highest degree of happiness and glory."³⁴ *La Soirée du Camp*, the newspaper published by Lazare Carnot in 1794 for the indoctrination of the young pupils of the École de Mars, was filled with the inspirational last words of dying soldiers confessing their happiness to die for liberty. Agricol Viala, the youth hero struck down by a musket ball as he sought to deny the enemy passage across the Durance River by cutting the ropes to a bridge, was reputed to have said: "They have hit me. I don't mind. I die for freedom."³⁵ The words of a captain, dying from a musket ball to the chest, were also reported: "*I am going to die*, he said to those around his bed, *but the Republic will live; I am glad to sacrifice my life to it. If only I had a thousand lives to give.*"³⁶

The words of the dying captain are revealing. His willingness to lay down his life was determined by the cause for which it was to be sacrificed. Only for the sacred cause

³⁴ Gibelin, *Eloge funèbre*, 1.

³⁵ *La Soirée du Camp*, 10 Thermidor II (28 July, 1794).

³⁶ *La Soirée du Camp*, 13 Thermidor II (31 July, 1794).

of the Republic, whose emblem was of course Liberty, were men ready to be so careless of their lives. Indeed, as the *Soirée du Camp* insisted, love of the republican *patrie* was able to inspire unheard-of prodigies of valor and self-sacrifice. Speaking through the voice of *Va-de-Bon-Coeur*, a fictional veteran of the American revolutionary wars, the newspaper stated that feats unimaginable under the monarchy had become commonplace; indeed, they exceeded even those of Greek and Roman antiquity. *Va-de-Bon-Coeur* compared the exploit of a corporal from the Army of Italy to the three Horatii who had defended Republican Rome. Whereas only one of the latter had emerged triumphant from an equal struggle with three Curiatti, the French corporal had triumphed single-handedly in rescuing a fallen comrade from three enemy soldiers: “It took him but an instant to rush toward them, sword in hand, striking one to the head, another to the heart, and bringing down the third with a shot from his rifle.”³⁷ In recounting heroic anecdotes of this sort, the *Soirée du Camp* was satisfied to report that on many occasions the hero was granted the reward of his life, even as he expressed his willingness to die. This was the case with respect to Dandurand, a sergeant who, the newspaper reported, received thirty-one gunshots and twelve sword cuts in a single engagement in the Vendée. Called upon to proclaim “Vive Louis XVI” by his captors, upon pain of death, Dandurand responded by shouting “Vive la République!” He then gathered his strength and broke free from his captors. But the hero did not always survive. The anecdote of Dandurand was immediately followed by another in which Sauveur, a republican official, also refused to declare his loyalty to the crown and was shot as a consequence: “a cruel death is the price of his unshakeable attachment to the cause of freedom.”³⁸

Such heroes, according to revolutionary publicists, did not die in vain; inspiring others by their example, they continued to serve the Republic from beyond the grave. “Thus it is that, far from completely dying,” said one eulogist, “they survive themselves to remain useful to the motherland.”³⁹ Reciting the supposed last words of General Joubert, killed at Novi in 1799 – “Advance, advance, you are fighting for the Republic!” – the deputy Dominique-Joseph Garat affirmed that they would continue to provide inspiration to republican soldiers. “Yes, the blood of heroes,” he went on:

makes, so to speak, seeds of heroes of the very dust it waters and honours. Generous and happy shades of Dugommier, of Marceau, of Hoche, of Laharpe, of Chérin, of Joubert! No, in ceasing to live you will not cease to defend freedom and the Republic. Our legions, forever aroused by the memory of your patriotic virtues and your great feats of arms, will forever see you surrounding their flags; your sacred names will eternally be a great part of the forces of the French Republic!⁴⁰

The hero was promised the double happiness, therefore, of achieving immortality in the national memory and of continuing, through that memory, in perpetual service to the Republic.

³⁷ *La Soirée du Camp*, 3 Thermidor II (21 July, 1794).

³⁸ *La Soirée du Camp*, 5 Thermidor II (23 July, 1794).

³⁹ Mortier-Duparc, *Rapport*, 2.

⁴⁰ Dominique-Joseph Garat, *Discours prononcé par Garat, Après le message qui a annoncé la mort de Joubert* (Paris, Year VII [1798-1799]), 2-3.

Patriotic representations of the soldier's death from the First World War echoed many of the same themes. Maurice Barrès, writing in *L'Echo de Paris* during the autumn of 1914, had a great many deaths to report, among them those of fellow writers (and Catholics), Ernest Psichari and Charles Péguy. Péguy was killed on 4 September, "arms in hand, in the face of the enemy." "This dead man," wrote Barrès, "is a guide; this man is more alive than any other today."⁴¹ Psichari, who was killed on 22 August while serving an artillery battery, had himself idealized the soldier's death in his pre-war writings, evoking the model of "these young heroes of Greece, beautiful as gods, who entered into death, crowned with lilacs, and smiling."⁴² Barrès represented Psichari's death in similar terms, insisting that he and his comrades had gone unflinchingly to their deaths once their ammunition had been expended. He reported the words with which he consoled Psichari's father for the loss of his son: "Our children, my dear friend, went to save France and among them your son, by his death, put himself in the first rank, adding to the glory of your illustrious family." "Crowned by death," wrote Barrès, Psichari had gone to join his illustrious grandfather, Ernest Renan, whose work, by his heroic death, he was deemed to "complete, perfect, dare I say it, repair." Like the revolutionary heroes before them, Psichari and Péguy were presumed to have gone to their deaths consoled by the assurance of victory: "This certitude which filled them and which consoled them in their sacrifice will allow their friends, even their mothers indeed, always to imagine these young heroes with their faces peaceful in death."⁴³

A Terrible Death

Soldiers' own writings might be expected to paint a rather different picture of death in battle, given their authors' direct experience of the realities of life and death on the battlefield. Nevertheless, soldiers were themselves the consumers of official and patriotic propaganda. Many of them held tenaciously to what consolation it offered for the miseries and dangers they endured. Soldiers of the Revolution, in particular, while sometimes acknowledging that they were unsettled at witnessing the deaths of comrades, rarely placed much emphasis upon those deaths in their *carnets de route* or letters home. Philippe-René Girault admitted to experiencing "an unpleasant feeling" at the Battle of Valmy upon witnessing wounded soldiers for the first time; "but I soon saw so many of them," he wrote, "that I became used to it and was inured to it for a very long time."⁴⁴ Girault testified to the devastating effects of cannon-fire at Valmy, describing how a single shot had dispatched twenty-one men in the front rank of his formation, spattering his uniform with the brains of a nearby officer.⁴⁵ Rather than expressing horror or fear at such experiences, soldiers' letters home more commonly insisted upon their courage in the face of danger or even rebuked worried relatives for expressing concern for their safety. Etienne Joliclerc wrote to his mother to say that her anxieties on his behalf pained him more than all the hardships he had to endure. "Rejoice on the contrary," he wrote. "Either you will see me come home covered in glory, or you will have a son worthy of

⁴¹ *L'Echo de Paris*, 17 Sept., 1914.

⁴² Ernest Psichari, *Les Voix qui Crient dans le Désert: Souvenirs d'Afrique* (Paris, 1920), 216.

⁴³ *L'Echo de Paris*, 13 Nov., 1914.

⁴⁴ Philippe-René Girault, *Mes Campagnes Sous la Révolution et l'Empire* (Paris, 1983), 17.

⁴⁵ Girault, *Mes Campagnes Sous la Révolution et l'Empire*, 17.

the name of French citizen, capable of dying for the defence of the motherland.”⁴⁶ All the same, Joliclerc’s letters did not conceal the close proximity of death. At times, his attitude was one of self-deprecating humor. He owed his life, he said on one occasion, to the bowed legs that were a family trait. “But for that shape I would have been done for. A cannon ball, which killed a comrade who was behind me, passed between my legs and only slightly bruised my two thighs, close to my knees.”⁴⁷ At others, he was more fatalistic. “I expect death from one day to the next,” he wrote in May, 1794: “I have already seen so many brave comrades die beside me (who were surely worth more than me) that I believe I will pass into the next world without fear.”⁴⁸

Some soldiers were evidently deeply affected by the deaths of comrades. *Canonnier* Bricard recounted in his memoirs desperately searching the battlefield for his brother following a defeat during the retreat from Belgium in March, 1793, weeping as he did so for the death of another comrade. He learned subsequently that his brother had also been killed. Overcome by grief and the effects of three days without food or sleep, Bricard was loaded onto an artillery wagon to continue the retreat. “Existence was hateful to me,” he wrote of its aftermath; “separated forever from a brother, from a friend; reduced to the most extreme misery, half naked, having no change of shirt and covered in vermin.”⁴⁹ Writing long after the fact, Sergeant Faucheur could not recall without deep emotion the death of his friend Trébuchet at the Battle of Lutzen, in 1813. Returning to the site of the battle with his daughter, in 1850, Faucheur was shown a ditch filled with the bones of soldiers who had died in the battle. The reflection that the remains of his friend might be among them inspired in him, wrote Faucheur, “most unpleasant thoughts..., and I began to curse the ambition of conquerors who sacrifice to a vain glory the life and happiness of peoples.”⁵⁰

These somber reflections pale in comparison to those expressed by French veterans who survived the Great War. A disillusioned representation of the soldier’s death began to emerge in soldiers’ writings during the war itself. One can see it evolving, for example, in the *Journal de Campagne* of Paul Rimbault. Already, by the end of September, 1914, Rimbault’s description of a night action – “It is hell in all its horror” – plaintively pointed to the gulf between the real war and the war of his earlier imagination: “Alas, we are far from the war in lace ... from the fine *images d’Epinal* ... from the incredibly embellished stories.”⁵¹ For Rimbault, the ideal of a “fine death” did not long survive the encounter with reality.

Trench newspapers bear witness to a similar process of disillusionment. *L’Argonnaute* provided a vehicle for the work of one poet, in particular, whose reflections on the soldier’s death became increasingly dark. A collection of poems by Henry-Jacques was published in a special issue of September, 1917. One of these poems, entitled “Complainte” represents the reflection of a *poilu* who, blown up by a shell burst, lies helplessly waiting, not knowing whether he will live or die. The soldier compares his

⁴⁶ Etienne Joliclerc, *Joliclerc, Volontaire Aux Armées de la Révolution: Ses Lettres (1793-1796)* (Paris, 1905), 103.

⁴⁷ Joliclerc, *Joliclerc, Volontaire Aux Armées de la Révolution*, 121.

⁴⁸ Joliclerc, *Joliclerc, Volontaire Aux Armées de la Révolution*, 171.

⁴⁹ Bricard, L. -J., *Journal du Canonnier Bricard, 1792-1802*(Paris, 1891), 48.

⁵⁰ Jacques Jourquin, ed., *Souvenirs de Campagne du Sergent Faucheur: Fourrier dans la Grande Armée* (Paris, 2004), 166.

⁵¹ Jourquin, *Souvenirs de Campagne du Sergent Faucheur*, 183.

fate to Christ's martyrdom, expressing the existential agony of every *poilu*, helplessly situated in a no-man's-land between life and death.

Like the Good God on his wood
 Here I am nailed to my cross
 Weary! Neither wife nor mother
 To weep for my misery.
 Here I am nailed to my cross
 Nobody to weep for me.

Will my torment come to an end?
 Life or death, but no more suffering.
 My being is torn apart
 And yet, I am still breathing.
 Life, death ... no more suffering.
 Does one suffer much to die?⁵²

Henry-Jacques returned to the trope of Christ's crucifixion in a poem entitled "un Christ...." Soldiers passing a roadside Calvary address a prayer to the crucified Christ. "We understand better now, / Your three days of torture" they say. "Ours has lasted three years / And is not yet done."⁵³

Henry-Jacques's evocations of the soldier's death as a Christ-like sacrifice were not untypical. Annette Becker and Leonard Smith have both commented upon the importance of religious ideas and images in helping French combatants and their families come to terms with death in the Great War.⁵⁴ War-time postcards depicted the figure of Christ offering consolation and immortality to the martyred soldier. (Fig. 4) François Robichon notes that after the war artists often resorted to religious imagery to represent the death of the soldier as a Christ-like sacrifice.⁵⁵ In "Aux Eparges", painted by Georges Leroux in 1939, a very earth-bound battlefield burial acquires transcendence through the artful arrangement of its humble components in the iconic form of a descent from the cross (Fig. 5). Even such apparently secular works as Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire* resorted to religious imagery in order to give meaning to the soldier's death. "Full of religious imagery," writes Smith, "*Le Feu* told a secular story of sin, damnation, and redemption."⁵⁶ Repeatedly, Barbusse resorts to the imagery of crucifixion and the language of sacrifice in order to make his point that it is the soldier's body that will pay the price of saving the world. In the final chapter of the novel, wounded and dying men converse about the war, groping towards the realization that their real enemy is war itself and all those who glorify it. That their suffering is deemed to be a redemptive sacrifice is evident from the way the mud-encrusted soldier who becomes an oracle for this revelation is described: "He was wounded beneath his foul armour of mud and was

⁵² *L'Argonnaute*, no. 36, Sept., 1917.

⁵³ *L'Argonnaute*, no. 36, Sept., 1917.

⁵⁴ Becker, *War and Faith*, 7-59; Smith, *The Embattled Self*, 62-72.

⁵⁵ François Robichon, *La peinture militaire française de 1871 à 1914* (Paris, 1998), 206-07.

⁵⁶ Smith, *The Embattled Self*, 71.

bleeding onto the ground. When he had finished speaking he stared wide-eyed at the ground and all the blood he had given to heal the world.”⁵⁷



Figure 4 *Gloria Victis*, Postcard. n.d. © Collections BDIC / morts: B066.



Figure 5 Georges Paul Leroux, “Battle of Les Eparges: Soldiers burying their fellow combatants by moonlight” (1915) © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Image © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, New York.

⁵⁷Barbusse, *Under Fire*, 318.

Conclusion

The resort to religious imagery is striking in a work that is so bitterly intent upon demolishing the ideas that the soldier's death could ever be beautiful or that it could achieve some kind of immortality. For the soldiers in Barbusse's novel there is no reward. Not even their names, "their poor little nothings of names," will survive.⁵⁸ This point is powerfully made in the chapter describing the visit of one of Barbusse's squad, Poterloo, to the ruins of his home village, behind enemy lines. Presented with a vision of the town's reconstruction after the war, Poterloo has his hopes of participating in the resurrection of his pre-war life literally exploded in a fiery crucifixion as he is blown up by a shell upon his return to the front.⁵⁹ For Barbusse, it is the soldiers' awareness of their inevitable obliteration that is the measure of their sacrifice. Contrary to official propaganda, they are neither careless of their lives nor inflamed by passion. Instead, they are "fully conscious of what they are doing.... They are not the sort of heroes that people think they are, but their sacrifice has greater value than those who have not seen them will ever be able to understand."⁶⁰

The use of religious imagery in representing the soldier's death is one feature that differentiates the experience of the Great War from that of the Revolution. One could explain this simply by saying that the *union sacrée* made available to the Third Republic a symbolism that was denied to the First by dechristianization. The revolutionaries had no choice but to reach back to pagan antiquity in their efforts to make sense of death in battle. Yet, as Robert Morrissey has shown, the revolutionary hero cults represented the democratization of an aristocratic but essentially secular discourse on glory that had its origins in antiquity and which, refracted through the thought of the Enlightenment, was a powerful unifying force within French culture. "By competing with the Ancients, and surpassing them, the French were able to rediscover a national tradition of glory, and to integrate it."⁶¹ The explicit identification of the soldier's sacrifice with that of Christ was a novel feature of the culture of the Third Republic, reflecting both the urge to create a "religion laïque" and the "ralliement" of the majority of Catholics to the Republic. After 1870, images sanctifying the soldier's death as a religious sacrifice became increasingly common, both in the traditional medium of academic painting as well as in the new mass media of the picture post-card and the illustrated magazine.⁶² The readiness of artists, poets and writers of the First World War, including even a committed socialist like Henri Barbusse, to resort to a religious idiom was both a reflection of and a reaction against this development. In conventional, patriotic imagery, religious symbols implied the promise of heavenly reward for earthly suffering, offering consolation to grieving relatives. Employed by other hands, by soldier-writers like Henry-Jacques and Barbusse, those symbols became a potent vehicle for expressing the unprecedented intensity and magnitude of the soldier's suffering as well as its unredeemed finality. What was

⁵⁸ Barbusse, *Under Fire*, 317.

⁵⁹ Barbusse, *Under Fire*, 154.

⁶⁰ Barbusse, *Under Fire*, 223.

⁶¹ Morrissey, *The Economy of Glory*, 92.

⁶² On this theme, see Eric Deroo, "Les représentations du sacrifice sous la IIIe République," in *Le sacrifice du soldat*, 171-76; and François Robichon, "La peinture du sacrifice ou la mort du soldat de 1870 à 1918," in *Le sacrifice du soldat*, 177-82. Robichon argues that a decisive step in the association of patriotic and religious sacrifice came with the exhibition of Jean-Joseph Weerts' painting, *Pour l'humanité. Pour la patrie* at the salon of 1895: Robichon, "La peinture du sacrifice ou la mort du soldat de 1870 à 1918," 179.

particular about Barbusse was his use of a religious idiom to subvert a discourse that employed religious symbols to idealize the soldier's death in the name of *la patrie* and *la gloire*.

The patriotic idealization of the soldier's death was not extinguished by the experience of the Great War. The disenchanting view of Barbusse and others offered little in the way of consolation either to the soldier or to his grieving relatives. Most artists recoiled from realistic depictions of the effects of high explosive on the bodies of young men, a trend particularly apparent in post-war memorial sculpture. In those instances when the dying soldier is represented in bronze or stone, he is physically intact and falls with his face toward the foe, exemplifying the "fine death" of patriotic tradition.⁶³ During the inter-war years, it was left to a German artist, Otto Dix, to give visual expression to Barbusse's hellish vision of the soldier's passion in his triptych, "War." In the centerpiece of this 1932 painting, an impaled soldier, grotesquely parodying the Crucifixion, points an accusing finger at a nightmarish landscape, filled with the debris of war and putrefying bodies. As Jay Winter writes, the painting offers no hint of religious consolation: "Human decency is affirmed, but faith in God is absent."⁶⁴ This vision, insisting upon the horror and finality of the soldier's death, has endured ever since as a powerful antidote to the idealized representations of heroic self-sacrifice that acquired such currency during the wars of the French Revolution.

⁶³ Annette Becker, *Les monuments aux morts: patrimoine et mémoires de la grande guerre* (Paris, 1988), 41-45; Philippe Dagen, *Le Silence des Peintres: les Artistes Face à la Grande Guerre* (Paris, 2012).

⁶⁴ Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 163. As Winter explains, Barbusse's inspiration for Dix was made explicit in the latter's 1936 painting, "Flanders."