Demobilizing the Mind: France and the Legacy of the Great War, 1919-1939

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In 1926, the French Foreign Minster, Aristide Briand, received the German delegation at Geneva as Germany entered the League of Nations. On this highly symbolic occasion, he declared:

> Is it not a moving spectacle [...] that barely a few years after the most frightful war that has ever convulsed the world, when the battlefields are still almost damp with blood [...] the same peoples which clashed so roughly meet in this peaceful assembly and affirm mutually their common desire to collaborate in the work of universal peace? [...]
>
> *Messieurs*, peace for France and Germany means that the series of painful and bloody encounters that has stained every page of history is over; over too, are the long veils of mourning for sufferings which will never ease. No more wars, no more brutal and bloody solutions to our differences! [...] Away with rifles, machine-guns, cannon! Make way for conciliation, for arbitration, for peace![1]

The speech echoed around the world. It summed up the desire for reconciliation that Briand himself incarnated during his long tenure as Minster of Foreign Affairs from 1924 to 1932 and especially as the architect of the Treaties of Locarno, signed in 1925. By Locarno, Germany accepted its new western frontiers (with the loss of Alsace-Lorraine) and all the signatories agreed to submit any new disputes to arbitration.

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[1] Achille Elisha, ed., *Aristide Briand. Discours et écrits de politique étrangère* (Paris, 1965), 178.

Yet Briand was the Premier who had led France during the epic resistance to the German onslaught at Verdun in 1916. His inaugural speech in 1915 had heroised the nation ("every day [the soldiers'] bravery adds a new ray to France's halo of glory") and promised that the enemy would be resisted to the bitter end ("we have the will to win and we shall win").[2] How did the language of Verdun become the language of Locarno?

The answer which I propose here is that it did so by a process of cultural demobilization, which extended far beyond Briand and necessarily engaged both Germany as the former enemy and the erstwhile allies, Britain and the United States. It is important to bear in mind this element of reciprocity. For it could be argued that what I shall describe in the case of France is a particular example of how societies more generally exit (or fail to exit) from the extreme violence of total war and other forms of all-encompassing conflict, and that the success of such an enterprise depends on dialogue with the other protagonists. But first, some definitions are in order.

Demobilization is normally understood as a military and economic process—as the reversal of wartime mobilization. The soldiers return to civilian activity more or less rapidly while workers turn from producing munitions to physical reconstruction and making good the economic deprivation of the war years. One could also talk in these terms of a kind of political demobilization. Emergency wartime legislation is dismantled fairly quickly and exceptional constraints on opinion and politics are removed. Without such military, economic and political demobilization, peace by definition is impossible since society would remain on a war footing.

Yet if we consider demobilization from a cultural perspective (including political culture) it appears rather different.[3] Seen as a matter of values, attitudes, mentalities—and the way these are codified in word and image—demobilization becomes more complex. *Cultural* demobilization is not automatic. Indeed, the very idea begs its logical opposite—a refusal to demobilize wartime attitudes or their remobilization for future war. The other types of demobilization that I have mentioned were preconditions of peace. Cultural demobilization (or its absence) detemined what type of peace it would be.

1. War cultures.

As with more concrete forms of demobilization, the cultural variety has to be examined in relation to the mobilization of which it is the reversal. Historians have only begun to use "war culture" and the related ideas of "cultural and political mobilization" for war in the last fifteen years or so. These have been particularly fruitful concepts for the Great War, and have been developed especially in French and Anglo-American scholarship, though they are by no means uncontested.[4]

In outline, one might define "war cultures" (and they are better thought of in the plural) as the visions developed by a wartime society of the conflict and of its outcome. Such visions are closely related to the mobilization of cultural and political

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[2] Georges Bonnefous, *Histoire politique de la Troisième République*, vol. 2, *La Grande Guerre (1914-1918)* (Paris, 1967), 97.

[3] John Horne, ed., *Démobilisations culturelles après la Grande Guerre*, theme issue of *14-18 Aujourd'hui-Heute-Today,* 5, 2002, esp. 45-53.

[4] Antoine Prost and Jay Winter, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present Day* (Cambridge, 2005), 163-66.

values behind the war effort, not only "from above," by the state or the social and political elites, but also "from below" by much of civil society. The political and cultural mobilization and "self-mobilization" of societies for war thus play a central role in the creation of "war cultures."[5] The most familiar aspect of war cultures is their organization, which has long been part of the study of the world wars—recruitment, propaganda, the press, censorship, schools, intellectuals and so on. More relevant for our purpose, however, is their content.

It may be useful to think of war cultures as emerging along two intersecting lines. *(Fig. 1)* The first axis has at one pole the enemy, imagined as a demonized "other." At the opposite pole is the collective self of the nation, defined positively in various ways. This axis contains sub-sets, e.g. the designation of dissidents and minorities as the "enemy within" and the extension of positive attributes to allies. It produces a manichaean cosmology, which Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker in a controversial book have claimed amounted to a secular crusade.[6]
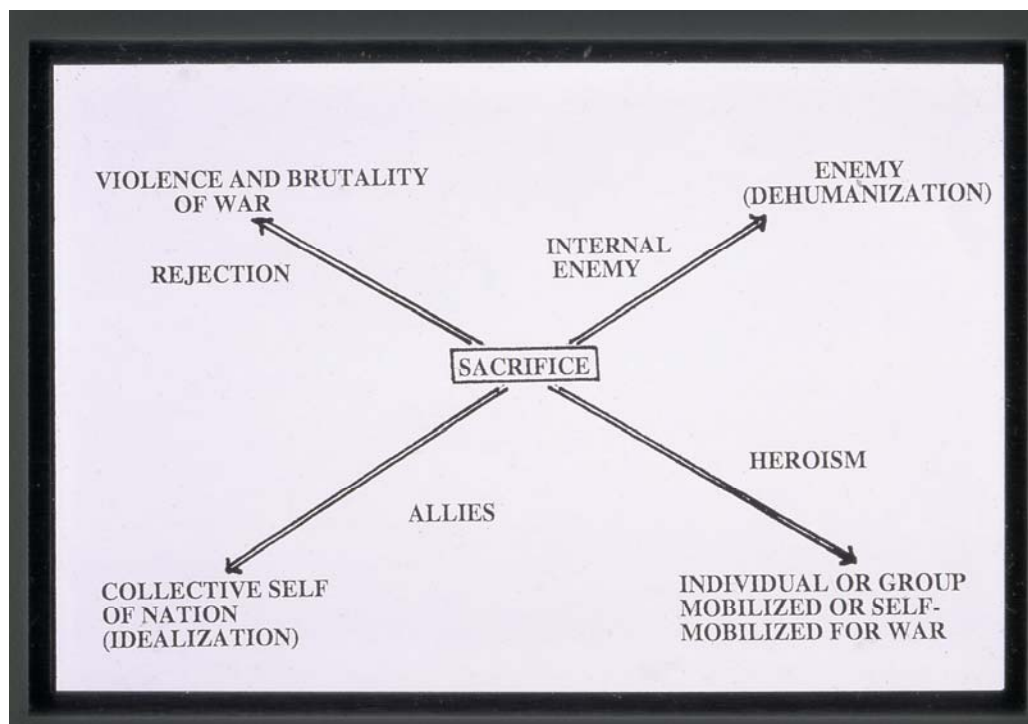

Figure 1

The second axis of the war culture is a necessary qualification of the idea of the crusade. It relates individuals to the violence of war. One pole comprises the assumed right of the state to commandeer individuals and groups for war by reference to a range of identities and ideologies (gender, heroism, patriotism, national salvation, political and religious creeds, and so on). The other pole consists of the violence of war—invasion, occupation, death—and its potential rejection by mobilized citizens, whether soldiers or civilians. Sacrifice is the key value at the intersection of the two axes. Sacrifice was indeed the central motif of war rhetoric in the Great War. It

[5] John Horne, ed., *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War* (Cambridge, 1997), "Introduction," 1-17.

[6] Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18. Retrouver la guerre* (Paris, 2000), 109-95.

measured the differential impact of the violence on various groups and expressed moral claims for compensation as well as renewing hostility towards the enemy. Overall, it is clear that war cultures entail experiences, not just representations. They are fuelled by passions—hatred, loyalty, grief, vengeance—and are subject to potential rejection.

One further observation: war cultures should not be thought of as something that withers when it comes into contact with combat. There is nothing in the horrors of extended industrial warfare that makes war cultures impossible. The solidity of both German and Soviet morale in the face of appalling conditions on the eastern front during the Second World War (which displayed many of the features of the western front in the First World War) shows this clearly. Moreover, in 1914-18 the idea that war was horrible—that it involved physical destruction, brutality to civilians and the separation of families—was incorporated into the mobilization of national sentiment. In both world wars, the mounting toll of suffering proved a compelling reason not for stopping the conflict, but for continuing it in order to justify the sacrifice already made.

2. Victory and the culmination of French war culture.

The physical violence, for most contemporaries, finished in November 1918, though in some places nationalist conflict and revolutionary strife dragged on for several years. But how could the war be ended at an imaginary and symbolic level? By what processes could the mental violence be dispelled and the wartime frames of mind be dismantled? These questions dominated much of French life in the 1920s.

Paradoxical as it may seem, peace in "total" conflicts is not the opposite of war but rather its culmination. If war cultures depict the enemy as totally evil and the struggle as one for moral, ideological and even physical survival, compromise peace is nearly impossible. Peace means forcing the vanquished to accept the victor's ideology and his view of history. Cultural demobilization and reconciliation then take place on that basis. Peace in Europe and Asia after 1945 was of this type—in two conflicting variants, democratic and communist.[7]

In this regard, however, the Treaty of Versailles was based on a fundamental misunderstanding. For the western Allies, Germany had been beaten in the field. It was compelled by the peacemaking process in Paris (to which the Germans were not invited) to accept responsibility for the outbreak of the war and also for the way in which the war had been conducted. Germany was accused of committing war crimes—during the invasion of Belgium and France (the "German atrocities" of 1914), the harsh occupations in east and west Europe and the naval conflict. Although peacemaking consisted of much else, this moral and political condemnation of the former regime in Germany lay at the heart of the Treaty of Versailles. It was stated clearly in the "responsibilities clauses" (articles 227-30)—known as the "shame clauses" in Germany—which called for the extradition of the Kaiser and alleged war criminals for trial in Allied countries—and by article 231 which established Germany's legal obligation to pay war reparations. Guilt, war crimes trials and financial liability were furiously resisted by much of German public opinion, including the army and the old elites, which considered that Germany had not been

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[7] John Horne, "Defeat and Memory since the French Revolution," in *Defeat and Memory: Cultural Histories of Military Defeat in the Modern Era*, ed. Jenny Macleod (London, 2008).

defeated but had concluded a cease-fire and that peace-making should be based on dialogue and compromise on the model of the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Peace by "diktat," and above all the incrimination of the army, were inadmissible. A campaign to resist and then revise the Allied peace terms began as the war ended and continued until Hitler cancelled Germany's signature of Versailles in 1937.

The nature of peace-making (never mind its terms) was thus seen in sharply divergent ways. Not surprisingly, this prolonged mutual enmity and the reciprocal cultures of wartime. In the French case, public opinion—including that of the soldiers as they marched into Germany or awaited demobilization—favoured the punishment of those responsible for the war and its conduct and by and large backed hard terms against Germany in the interests of security.[8] Only a minority on the left demanded a more conciliatory approach. The culture of wartime proved tenacious. At its core lay the sacrifice of the *poilus*, with 1.4 million war dead and 900,000 handicapped veterans. This could only be justified if victory over the enemy was permanent and indisputable. After the war, the sacrifice was recalled constantly. This occurred not only through the ritual of the 11th of November and the burial of the unknown soldier under the Arc de Triomphe in 1920, but also through the thirty thousand monuments erected at the front and across the country by the mid-1920s. Each one of these monuments was solemnly inaugurated with ceremonies of individual and collective mourning.[9]

The reconstruction of the "devastated regions" (with their "villes martyres") added a further register of sacrifice. Ten French departments had suffered extensive physical damage both from the fighting (which in the west had largely taken place on French soil) and from German occupation policies. Cultural monuments of national significance, such as Rheims cathedral, were devastated, symbolizing enemy barbarity. *(Ill. 1)*[10] The German army stripped French industry and conducted a scorched earth policy as it withdrew to the Hindenburg line in February 1917 and during its long retreat in the final months of the war.[11] It was axiomatic for much of French opinion that Germany, which had escaped the war physically intact, would pay for the destruction it had caused. National security also had to be achieved—and this was next to impossible with the disappearance of France's main pre-war ally, Russia (now in the hands of the Bolsheviks), and with the Anglo-American refusal to maintain the wartime alliance. For the war culture to be dismantled, the enemy had to admit defeat and make amends and a new war had to be made impossible. For much of French opinion in the immediate post-war years this was simply not the case.

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[8] Pierre Miquel, *La Paix de Versailles et l'opinion publique française* (Paris, 1972), 236-42; Margaret Macmillan, *Peacemakers. Six Months that Changed the World* (London, 2001), 180-84; and Bruno Cabanes, *La Victoire endeuillée. La sortie de guerre des soldats français (1918-1920)*, (Paris, 2004), 60-70.

[9] Avner Ben-Amos, Funerals, *Politics and Memory in Modern France 1789-1996* (Oxford, 2000), 212-24; Annette Becker, *Les Monuments aux morts. Mémoire de la Grande Guerre* (Paris, 1988); Daniel Sherman, *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France* (Chicago and London, 1999).

[10] Painting of Rheims cathedral as a "Parthenon," or monument to enemy brutality.

[11] Michael Geyer, "Rückzug und Zerstörung 1917," in Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich and Irina Renz, eds., *Die Deutschen an der Somme 1914-1918* (Essen, 2006), 163-78.

CATHÉDRALE DE REIMS
ÉDITÉ PAR LA Cⁱᵉ DES CHEMINS DE FER DE L'EST

Illustration 1

This is not to suggest that the occupation of the Ruhr in 1923 was a renewal of war by the French. The Premier, Raymond Poincaré, was trying to force a diplomatic solution to the reparations question in part by reinvolving the British and Americans.[12] But for many in France, the episode amounted to a final burst of the war culture. Germany, masked by Weimar democracy, was seen as the same enemy so

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[12] John Keiger, *Raymond Poincaré* (Cambridge, 1997), 274-311.

bitterly fought during the war. France again seemed betrayed from within—by the French Communist Party, which opposed the occupation. The desire to rebuild the wartime Anglo-American alliance was clear. Poincaré's terms of reference remained those of the struggle for survival in 1914-18, during which he had been President of the Republic.

<p align="center">3. Cultural demobilization—the process.</p>

After the end of the Ruhr occupation, however, French attitudes towards the war changed dramatically. This was expressed most clearly in the work of Briand as the architect of the Treaties of Locarno in 1925. Locarno re-established normal diplomatic relations between the former enemies premised on the kind of conciliation and arbitration symbolized by the new League of Nations. Of course, we must take care not to confuse political reality with cultural representation—which of course is no less real. The Briand of Locarno was no more a pacifist than Poincaré in the Ruhr was a militarist. He, too, was concerned with alliances and national security (e.g. the Maginot line). But as we have seen his *language* was that of cultural demobilization, and this above all explains his popularity. His attempts at Franco-German reconciliation were endorsed by a majority of the more than three million organized veterans and by much of the French press. For many, by the time of his death in 1932, he had become the "apostle of peace."

But the argument can be framed more widely. In the second half of the 1920s, France underwent a veritable demobilization of its wartime cultures. Again, the nature of the change can be suggested diagrammatically. *(Fig. 2)* Crucial was the abolition of the dehumanized enemy defined in opposition to the collective self of the nation, which we saw was the first axis of the war culture. This was replaced by reconciliation between the enemy nations—by the dismantling of the very category of the enemy—and by a mutual rejection of war. War was now seen as the real enemy and its horror was made explicit. The Allies (and the rhetoric of wartime common endeavour) were downgraded. Equally, the internal enemy was rehabilitated. After a long campaign, parliament pardoned many of the soldiers who had been executed by military justice during the war (the so-called *fusillés pour l'exemple*).[13] And several notable politicians who had been scapegoated as quasi-treasonable owing to their alleged sympathy for a negotiated peace had returned to office in the mid-1920s. This was the case with Caillaux and Malvy.[14]

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[13] R. G. Réaud, *Les Crimes des Conseils de Guerre. Avec une préface de Henri Gurnut, secrétaire général de la Ligue des Droits de l'Homme* (Paris, 1926); and Nicolas Offenstadt, *Les Fusillés de la grande guerre et la mémoire collective (1914-1999),* (Paris, 1999), 69-107.

[14] Malvy was reelected deputy for the Lot in 1924; Caillaux served briefly as Minister for Finances in 1925.
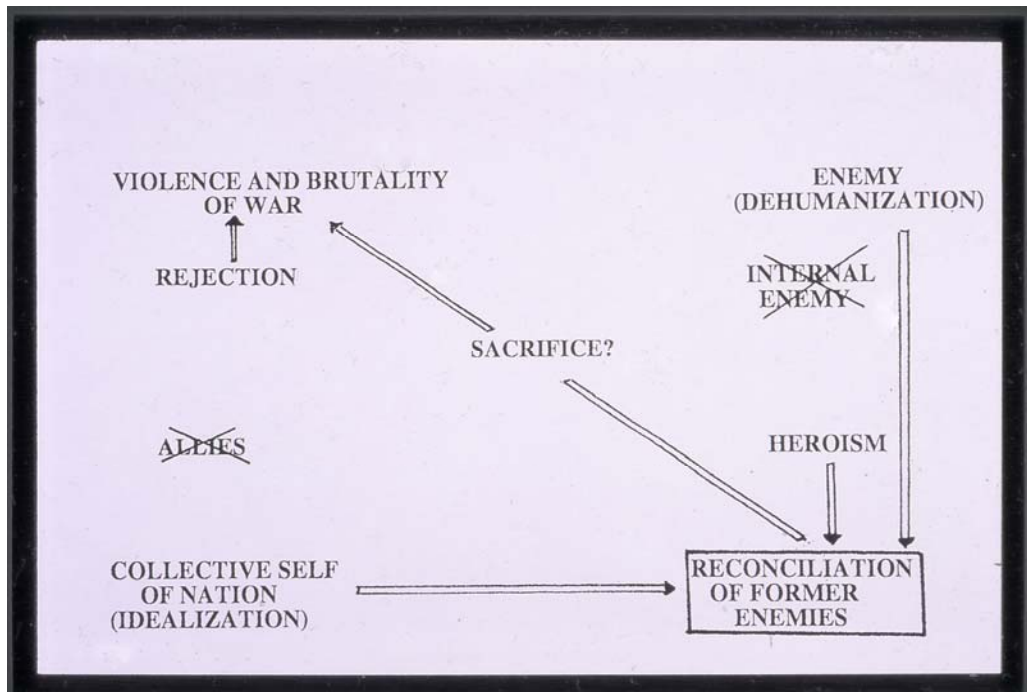
Figure 2

 The war culture itself was explicitly rejected. The German atrocities of 1914 were minimized or even dismissed as Allied propaganda.[15] French primary school teachers severely criticized their own wartime role in mobilizing opinion.[16] Scepticism towards the press for its wartime propaganda (the *bourrage de crâne*) became widespread. It fostered new kinds of journalism—that of the investigative reporter (such as Albert Londres) and the probing satire of the *Canard Enchaîné* (founded in 1916)—as well as the professional self-organization of journalists.[17] Yet dismantling the culture of wartime turned on the sacrifice that had been its pivot. Unless the soldiers' sacrifice in particular could be reinvested in peace, the process would remain fundamentally problematic.

 One root of this new orientation lay in the war itself. War-weariness and bitter hostility to the generals' failure to resolve the costly deadlock of trench warfare had generated words and acts of revolt on both the home and fighting fronts—culminating in the mutinies of the late spring and summer of 1917. Views vary as to the scale and significance of this dissent. In my view, it marked the limit to popular consent for the war rather than its outright rejection.[18] Few were prepared to contemplate defeat and any idea of a negotiated peace proved illusory. In the last eighteen months of the war,

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[15] John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914. A History of Denial*, (London and New Haven, 2001), 366-75.

[16] Mona Siegel, *The Moral Disarmament of France. Education, Pacifism and Patriotism, 1914-1940* (Cambridge, 2004), 123-59.

[17] The Syndicat des Journalistes, founded in March 1918. See Thomas Ferenczi, "Les transformations du journalisme," in *Traces de 14-18. Actes du colloque de Carcassonne*, ed. Sylvie Caucanas and Rémy Cazals (Carcassonne, 1997), 59-66.

[18] John Horne, "Entre expérience et mémoire: les soldats français de la Grande Guerre," *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 60, no. 5 (2005): 903-19, for the argument regarding the soldiers.

more effective military tactics, a better-coordinated Allied war effort, the renewed menace of German victory and the cultural remobilization of France for the war all had the effect of stabilizing the commitment to the national effort under Georges Clemenceau.

Nonetheless, a current of discourse had emerged among soldiers and civilians that condemned the war as a meaningless and de-personalized slaughter—"boucherie" and "carnage." This language was given political shape by a nucleus of dissident socialists and pacifists who in effect culturally and politically demobilized themselves while the conflict was going on. After the war, they blamed the Allies as much as the Germans for the catastrophe and turned war into the absolute enemy. From 1925, one of their leading figures, Victor Margueritte, ran an influential campaign for "moral disarmament"—which in effect meant the demobilization of the mind. *(Ill. 2)*[19]

These were the extremists. The more main mainstream language of pacifism (what the Canadian historian Norman Ingram has termed "old-style pacifism") was that based on arbitration, collective security and international law.[20] Such ideas were not new. They were rooted in nineteenth-century liberalism and had received their first, timid enactment at the Hague Peace Conferences of 1899 and 1907. They fuelled the short-lived messianic fervor that greeted Woodrow Wilson at the end of the war and the setting up of the League of Nations. On the Allied side, at least, it was perfectly possible to see such principles as a prime reason for having had to fight the war. But if their endorsement did not mean rejecting the Great War, it did mean repudiating *future* war and all that might give rise to it.

There was considerable overlap between the two currents of pacifism. And if we think of them as discourses, imagery and indeed as memory—rather than as card-carrying political movements—they shared a good deal and enjoyed a wide influence. Both were infused by the experience and passions of the Great War—for "old-style" pacifism after the war (as it influenced someone like Briand) was far more urgent and resonant than before. For many in the western democracies it was no longer possible to think of war—or at least of war between the great powers—as anything but a solution of last resort that risked renewing the catastrophe of 1914-18 (colonial conflicts continued to be placed in a separate box). In the 1920s and early 1930s the League of Nations seemed to provide an alternative approach for avoiding war to national security and the armed balance of power—a view captured by a 1932 electoral poster of the French League of Nations Association. *(Ill. 3)*[21] Vitally, both forms of pacifism believed that to make the world safe, wartime mentalities had to be dismantled and peace built on a new basis. They converged on cultural demobilization.

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[19] Poster of the Moral Disarmament campaign, arguing that the place to begin dismantling bellicose mentalities is children's toys.

[20] Norman Ingram, *The Politics of Dissent. Pacifism in France 1919-1939* (Oxford, 1991), 302-49.

[21] Election poster of the French League of Nations Association, 1932, showing that collective action restraining aggression via the League is more effective than war. Cf. Zara Steiner, *The Lights that Failed. European International History 1919-1933* (Oxford, 2005).

Illustration 2

Illustration 3

As a process, cultural demobilization contained several distinctive features. First, as we have seen, abolishing the primary axis of the war culture meant dismantling the enemy, restoring his humanity and meeting him as an equal. This was the point both of Locarno and Germany's entry to the League of Nations. It was dramatized in a highly personal fashion by the relationship between Briand and his German opposite number, Gustav Stresemann, Foreign Minister from 1924 until his death in 1929. Like Briand, Stresemann was a hard-headed realist who was bent on using the new diplomacy to secure an early end to the humiliating Allied occupation of the Rhineland under the Treaty of Versailles and to address other unacceptable

aspects of the peace settlement. However, like Briand he was adamant that the war had been a catastrophe for Europe as a whole and that "defending civilization" meant working with the former enemy to avoid war in the future.[22] The image of friendship between the two men was summed up by their dinner at a Swiss village restaurant at Thoiry shortly after German entry into the League. Deconstructing the enemy meant engaging in the ritual—the liturgy, almost—of breaking bread together. Briand and Stresemann were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1926 for their achievements at Locarno. Contemporaries were acutely aware that they were deliberately reversing the terms of the war cultures—as shown by a 1925 cartoon in the German satirical journal, *Simplicissimus*. *(Ill. 4)*[23]
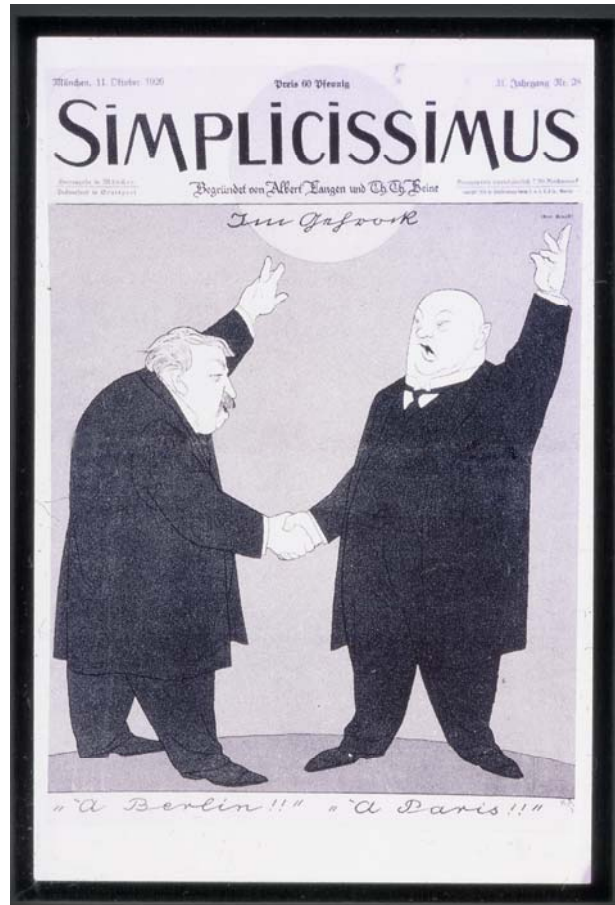

Illustration 4

A second feature was renewing the international communities that had been shattered by the war. We think of Europe in the first half of the twentieth century as dominated by nation-states and nationalism, but it was also embraced by webs of shared ideology and truth-values and common organizations—whether socialism, the Catholic Church, intellectuals and academics or international business and finance. One of the tasks of the post-war era was to reconstruct the European identities that

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[22] Jonathan Wright, *Gustav Stresemann, Weimar's Greatest Statesman* (Oxford, 2002), 368-72.
[23] *Simplicissimus*, cartoon of Briand and Stresemann, 1925, demobilizing images of 1914 ("To Paris," "To Berlin").

war had sundered and forced into national camps. It is less that such circles automatically favoured cultural demobilization than that they could not avoid the issue, which often proved a thorny one. Let me give two examples from among many.

The majority French trade union confederation, the reformist Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), participated in the International Federation of Trade Unions which initially, like the parallel political body, the Labour and Socialist International (to which the French Socialists belonged) had great difficulty in dealing with the German trade unions and the SPD, who were accused of complicity in the *Kaiserreich's* war and in the harsh treatment of labour in occupied France and Belgium.[24] The issue of reparations continued to be a subject of discord. Yet within two years, trade unionists and reformist socialists on opposing sides campaigned for a programme of international social and economic reform (vested in the International Labour Organization, which was part of the League of Nations) and also for a "War against War." Having played an important role in their respective national mobilizations during the war, they now fought for social progress and international peace. These were two sides of the same coin—for peace seemed impossible without social equity while a better society would be menaced if peace were not secured.

No less significant was the Church. Many of the French faithful maintained their allegiance to the national Catholicism that had been such an important component of cultural mobilization for the war. But a minority current represented by Marc Sangnier, the charismatic lay Catholic leader, embarked on a process of cultural demobilization by seeking out like-minded German co-religionists and bringing them to France in public acts of reconciliation. Sangnier was instrumental in organizing a series of international congresses to this end, the culminating one of which, in 1926, was held at his own country property of Bierville, in the Beauce, where an elaborate liturgy of peace was invented, replete with reconciliation between a French and German widow at the foot of a giant outdoor cross, who then advanced together towards a child clad in white symbolizing a future of peace. A "youth crusade" followed three years later in which young French and German Catholics made a pilgrimage to the symbolic sites of wartime violence (Verdun, Notre Dame de la Lorette) to proclaim their gospel of peace.[25] Sangnier and his Catholic "moral disarmament" (he used the phrase) were a palpable influence on burgeoning French christian democracy.

A third feature of cultural demobilization addressed the pivotal role of the soldier's wartime sacrifice, an issue made all the more crucial by the organizational strength of the veterans. Briand, for example, had to reinvest their sacrifice in the cause of peace without repudiating the heroic masculinity of wartime. As he put it in his 1926 speech:

> Our peoples, *messieurs* the German representatives, have no need to prove anything to each other regarding their vigour or heroism. Both have

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[24] John Horne*, Labour at War. France and Britain, 1914-1918* (Oxford, 1991), 302-49.

[25] Gearóid Barry, "Disarming Hatred: French Catholics and the Legacy of the Great War: Marc Sangnier, 1914-1933" (PhD thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 2005), 183-211.

shown heroism on the field of battle, both have reaped an ample harvest
of glory in combat. Henceforth, they can seek successes in other fields.[26]

Antoine Prost has shown that French veterans evolved in their majority
towards an attitude of "patriotic pacifism," meaning that belief in the rectitude and
unavoidable necessity of the Great War combined with a determination that it should
truly be the war to end war ("la der des ders"). There was of course a spectrum of
opinions, but the language of peace with its frank recognition of the horror of war and
de-heroisation of combat gave 1914-18 its meaning for many, perhaps most, *anciens
combattants*.[27]

Yet this suggested a reconciliation with the enemy that was internally
contested and never clearly reciprocated by German veterans, whom defeat had
placed in a very different position. The more liberal of the two main French veterans'
organizations, the Union Fédérale, had since its inception aimed at linking with
veterans of all nations. But progress was slow and interrupted by the Ruhr crisis of
1923. Meanwhile, in a move echoed in many other international forums, a purely
Allied veterans' body was set up, supported by the more conservative French
association, the Union Nationale, which insisted on the full payment of German
reparations. It was only in 1925, the year of Locarno, that a truly international
meeting at Geneva laid the foundation for the parallel *Conférence Internationale des
Associations de Mutilés de Guerre et d'Anciens Combattants* (CIAMAC).[28] The
opening congress in 1926 conveyed the project:

> The representatives of the associations of handicapped and able-bodied
> veterans [...] consider that the men who waged the war and whose flesh
> still bears the mark of their suffering have the right and duty to
> collaborate actively in the pacification of minds and the rational
> organization of relations between peoples. They express their horror of
> war and recognize that their supreme goal must be the establishment of
> lasting peace. They affirm that international relations should be founded
> on the respect of treaties and the acceptance of obligatory arbitration for
> the solution of all conflict between states.[29]

In effect, the CIAMAC became the League of Nations body for world war
veterans. Briand, when hosting a reception for the Paris meeting in 1928, declared it
to be a powerful ally in the "the pacification of minds and moral disarmament."[30] But
the point is that not only did the more conservative *Union Nationale* (despite its
eventual endorsement of Briand's foreign policy) not affiliate to the CIAMAC but the
body was boycotted by the nationalist veterans' organizations in Germany. A
common opposition to war between former enemy soldiers was at best a partial
success.

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[26] Elisha (ed.), *Aristide Briand*, 178.

[27] Antoine Prost, *Les Anciens Combattants et la société française* (Paris, 1977), 3
vols, vol. 3, *Mentalités et idéologies*, 77-151.

[28] Léon Viala, *Les Relations internationales entre les associations de mutilés de
guerre et d'anciens combattants* (Paris, n.d., but 1930).

[29] Viala, *Relations internationales*, 38-39.

[30] Viala, *Relations internationales*, 69.

One final aspect of cultural demobilization requires brief mention, though it deserves much more. By reversing wartime understandings of the conflict, the process made the war itself strangely incomprehensible. New narratives were needed and new myths, in the sense of condensed, symbolic stories. Among these, all the great powers (not Germany alone) were held responsible for the war, along with the arms manufacturers and the diplomatic system. A campaign to blacken Poincaré's role as the architect of French foreign policy before the war ("Poincaré-la-Guerre") was waged by Communists and radical pacifists. The polemical and patriotic investment in the war by the press and official cultural organs was dismissed as "propaganda" and indeed the term "propaganda" first took on its negative, pejorative meaning in this context. Nowhere was this clearer than with the "German atrocities" of 1914, which were now seen by some as pure Allied misinformation and whose memory was marginalized as an obstacle to peacetime relations with Germany.[31] Memory of the invasion dwindled to a local phenomenon. Most significantly of all, many veterans emphasized the horrors of the war and the mutual victimhood of the soldiers, rather than their part in its violence.[32]

4. The causes and limits of cultural demobilization.

How can we explain this sea change in French opinion towards the war in the second half of the 1920s? It was partly a reaction against the perceived failure of Poincaré's hard-line policy in the Ruhr. The centre-left which came to power in 1924 (the Cartel des Gauches) was by political temperament more open to reconciliation and international arbitration (the Radical premier, Edouard Herriot, was one of the progenitors of Locarno). Yet the diplomatic parameters mapped out by Briand, with their mix of pragmatic realism on national defence and utopian aspirations for a demilitarized world, continued to define his approach under centre-right premiers who embodied the war effort and peace treaty—such as Poincaré and André Tardieu (the latter had been Clemenceau's right-hand man in 1919).[33] This suggests that cultural demobilization was a political response to the imperfect post-war world in which France had to live.

But the explanation is also psychological. By the later 1920s, the bulk of the memorials had been built and a national ritual of mourning and commemoration established. In a country that was officially victorious and had rebuilt much of the devastated north-east, achieving the highest economic growth-rates in Europe, the provocations and resentment that might prolong the war culture in a defeated country were attenuated. The invader had gone. The French sacrifice had been given new meaning since the Treaty of Locarno suggested that the Germans now accepted Versailles. The ideological and cultural terms on which the war had been fought lost much of their urgency—hence the retrospective distance from the mood of wartime. The other dimension of the war—the horror of industrialized destruction and the mass mourning to which it gave rise—could thus be expressed in public and political

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[31] John Horne, "« Propagande » et vérité dans la Grande Guerre", in Christophe Prochasson and Anne Rasmussen, eds., *Vrai et faux dans la Grande Guerre* (Paris, 2004), 76-95.

[32] Leonard V. Smith, *The Embattled Self: Experience, Narrative and the Narrator in French Soldiers' Testimonies of the Great War* (Ithaca, 2007).

[33] Rudolph Binion, *Defeated Leaders. The Political Fate of Caillaux, Jouvenel and Tardieu* (New York, 1960), 267-309.

discourse. It was this that lay behind the cult of Briand and the stance of the veterans. The full redemption of wartime sacrifice lay now in the defeat not of the enemy but of war itself.

Of course, the process was neither complete nor consensual. Abiding hostility and mistrust toward Germany in France (and not only on the centre-right) should not be underestimated. Many continued to make the memory of the war and Allied solidarity a sheet anchor in what they felt to be fundamentally troubled international waters. But the real limitation to the process was external, in the highly qualified nature of the German response even during the years of Weimar prosperity and Stresemann's ascendancy. The reasons for this are clear. Precisely the factors that made it possible to dismantle wartime mentalities in France were contested or inoperable in Germany. Unlike after 1945, Allied occupation was geographically restricted and not designed to reconstruct German political institutions and culture. Hence, despite the historical precedents (including the Prussian occupation of north-eastern France in 1871-73), the effect of foreign occupation remained negative—a constant reminder of the infringement of German sovereignty and a goad to the nationalist right. Worse, when France and Belgium occupied the Ruhr to force the resumption of stalled reparations payments, this was experienced as an invasion, paralleling that of France and Belgium in 1914 and prompting a surrogate cultural remobilization.[34] *(Ill. 5)*[35]

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[34] Gerd Krumeich, "Der 'Ruhrkampf' als Krieg: Überlegungen zu einem verdrängten deutsch-französisch Konflikt," in Gerd Krumeich and Joachim Schröder eds., *Der Schatten des Weltkriegs. Die Ruhrbesetzung 1923* (Essen, 2004), 9-24.

[35] German anti-French cartoon, showing a crazed Marianne seizing the Ruhr, with the legend: "Hands off the Ruhr" (1923).

Illustration 5

  Although Stresemann sought constantly to highlight the benefits of Locarno-style diplomacy for resolving Germany's problems with the peace treaty, this in itself raised a misunderstanding since for the former Allied governments Locarno confirmed Versailles, leaving room for negotiation and arbitration only on its modalities, such as reparations, occupation and disarmament, not on its substance. Anyhow, much of German political opinion remained unpersuaded. Perhaps most fundamental of all, it was nigh on impossible to reinvest the sacrifice of the German soldier in the peace process on offer, or at least to achieve any national consensus on

this. Germans remained profoundly divided by the war. Unlike in the former Allied countries there was no national monument and no national ritual.[36] While none of this by itself brought the Nazis to power, it nourished the nationalist right. Hitler had campaigned since 1920 against what he called *"moralisch Entwaffnung"* or the moral disarmament of Germany. When he came to power, French veterans anxiously scrutinized their German equivalents to reassure themselves that reconciliation was still possible, but the diagnosis was pessimistic.[37] Already at the end of 1930, the popular pictorial weekly *Vu* suggested the frailty of peace in the new decade. *(Ill. 6)*[38]
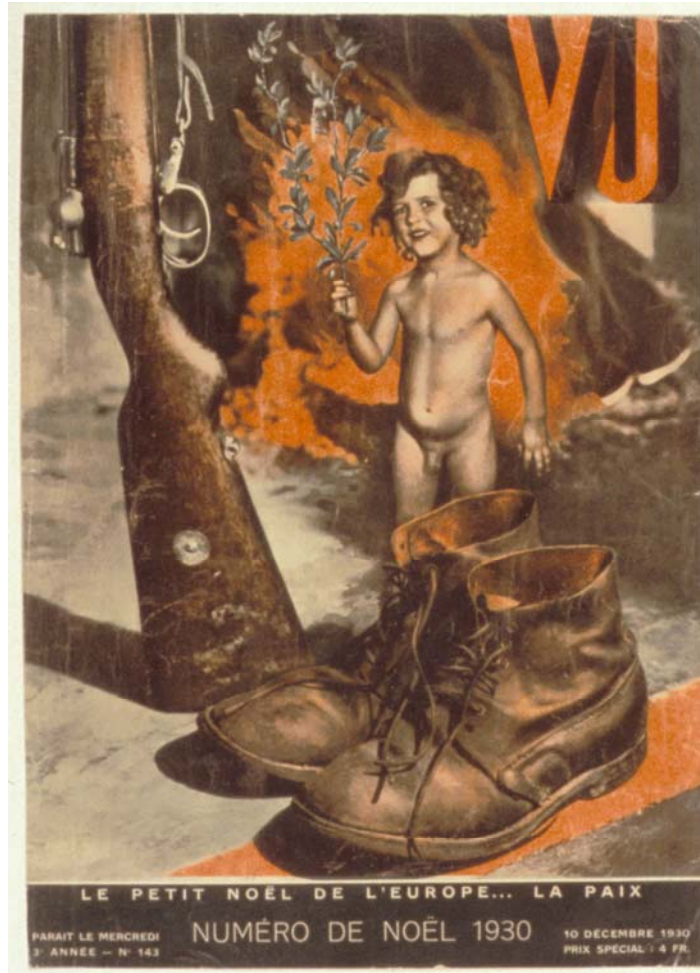

Illustration 6

As Nazi Germany pursued cultural and political remobilization for war, the choice for France (and Britain) polarized into one between appeasement (culminating in the Munich crisis) and reluctantly following suit with remobilization for an unwanted war.

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[36] George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers. Reshaping Memory of the World Wars* (New York, 1990), 97-8. The *Neue Wache*, official repository of the German unknown soldier, was only inaugurated in 1931 and made little impact.

[37] André Gervais, *La Tranché d'en face. Enquête d'un combattant chez les combattants allemands* (Paris, 1933), esp. 137-46.

[38] *Vu*, December 1930, "The New Year of Peace in Europe." *Vu* was one of the largest circulation illustrated periodicals in France.

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The demobilizing of minds in the 1920s was integral to the ways in which the French came to terms with the greatest bloodletting in their history. It would be wrong to suggest that this led directly to the defeat of 1940 or to Vichy collaboration with the German occupiers during the Second World War. The internal polarizations of French politics and the ideological remobilizations in the 1930s, notably by the anti-fascist left and the *fascisant* right, let alone the well-known history of French rearmament from 1936, meant that the French did re-engage with war. But the First World War bequeathed a legacy of attempted reconciliation as well as of national resistance—and it was the relationship between the two that would durably influence French history for the remainder of the century.

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Ill. 1. French picture of Rheims cathedral in ruins as a "Parthenon" (1920)
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Ill. 3. Vote for the League of Nations. French anti-war poster, 1932 (Association of the League of Nations)
Ill. 4. Cartoon, *Simplicissimus* (1925). Briand and Stresemann reversing the language of war
Ill. 5. German cartoon, 1923: Hands off the Ruhr!
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