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Ian Germani, *Dying for France: Experiencing and Representing the Soldier's Death, 1500-2000*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023. xiv + 506 pp. Illustrations, footnotes, bibliography, and index. \$95.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780228016359; \$76.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780228016366.

Review by Michael J. Hughes, Iona University.

Ian Germani has produced an important work on the history of military deaths in modern France. Establishing a pattern that he follows in most of his book, he opens his study by describing the deaths of French soldiers who were killed during an ambush in Afghanistan in 2008 and analyzes their significance. He proposes that the reaction to these deaths in France reveals a shift in perceptions about French troops who have perished as a result of their military service and in the meaning attached to losses from war. In earlier eras, and especially prior to World War II, France treated the combatant's death as important and valuable, as an act that fulfilled a higher purpose. Germani uses the anecdote about the troops who died in Afghanistan to show that military casualties suffered in the twenty-first century are now considered private tragedies that should be confined to the families who suffered them. They no longer register as sacrifices that deserve to be commemorated by a grateful nation. Throughout the remainder of his hefty, detailed book, he explains how and why this change occurred.

Germani starts with the Italian wars of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and continues through to the recent occupation of Afghanistan. He focuses on three phenomena in this endeavor. He examines the nature of warfare in different conflicts and the responses of French soldiers to the dangers and deaths to which they were exposed. In addition, he investigates the relationship of mortality within the military to death rates among the French population as a whole, and the ideals surrounding the soldier's death in French culture and the significance ascribed to it. This tripartite approach is derived from a model proposed by the prominent French military historian André Corvisier. Germani's narrative also draws inspiration from John Keegan's exploration of the ways in which individual soldiers experienced war and incorporates insights from Hervé Drévillon's efforts to assess the impact of war by comparing military losses in different conflicts with mortality due to other causes. He likewise engages with Yuval Noah Harari's thesis asserting that a new vision of war as a fundamentally unique and transformative activity coalesced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[1]

Acknowledging his debts to these and other scholars, Germani separates the evolution of military deaths into three eras: the Renaissance to the wars of revolutionary France, the Napoleonic wars to World War I, and the interwar period to the present. He devotes three

chapters to each period. The nobles who led the armies of the French monarchy and forged their culture during the Middle Ages aspired to a “fine death” in which they perished heroically in combat, displaying the virtues of chivalry (p. 24). A demise of this sort secured honor and glory for themselves and their families. According to Germani, aristocratic military captains like Pierre Terrail de Bayard and their subordinates clung to this tradition during the Renaissance. The gunpowder weapons that proliferated after 1500 and the wounds that they inflicted, however, often killed the would-be knights of Renaissance France in undignified ways at inopportune moments. The religious and political upheavals of the Wars of Religion also drove them to commit monstrous acts that tarnished the reputation of France’s warrior class. The French monarchy and its supporters adapted to these trends, Germani argues, by promoting a new kind of honor that encouraged its soldiers to enhance their reputations by performing deeds that benefited the king and the common good.

He explains that the absolutist state of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and military commentators modified honor still further. They sought to persuade nobles in the royal army to acquire prestige through their professional diligence and patriotism, as well as their courage and fighting skills. This change, along with others such as improvements in the French army’s discipline, made both officers and soldiers more appealing figures who were increasingly celebrated for their willingness to give their lives for king and country. In this environment, soldiers were not supposed to risk death to appear heroic but to emulate individuals such as the Chevalier d’Assas, who was killed while trying to protect his regiment from concealed enemies at the battle of Clostercamp. Like d’Assas, they needed to offer their lives for causes more important than their personal glory. Germani shows that the emphasis on sacrifice became more pronounced during the French Revolution. Between 1789 and 1794, France’s leaders reacted to the monumental challenges that they faced and the losses that their country suffered by portraying the French soldier’s death as a patriotic obligation that was appreciated by a grateful populace. Additionally, they proclaimed that military sacrifice was essential for protecting the Revolution’s accomplishments. Although radicals denounced honor as an aristocratic quality and tried to purge it from French military culture, Germani claims that it and traditional martial values reemerged to blend with patriotism during the rule of the Directory, which tended to commemorate fallen generals rather than martyrs from the rank-and-file.

In the second period that he studies, Germani contends that although Napoleon honored prominent military commanders like Marshal Jean Lannes, who died as a result of leading his troops, representations of military deaths were eclipsed by celebrations of French victories. Describing the terrible hardships and casualties experienced by the soldiers of the First Empire, he maintains that Napoleon usually refused to acknowledge the losses that they sustained. At the same time, the emperor consoled his men by portraying himself as a considerate leader who was devoted to them. The accomplishments of the emperor’s beloved *grogards* and legends surrounding their honor, lust for glory, patriotism, and dedication to Napoleon eventually turned them into icons. Their example taught French soldiers throughout the nineteenth century that they must be prepared to surrender their lives for France and its glory.

Following his analysis of the Napoleonic era, Germani discusses the ways in which glory itself was redefined during the Franco-Prussian war. Ignominious defeat and revolt in defense of the Paris Commune associated glory with resistance and death in support of hopeless struggles.

The purpose of such sacrifices was to inspire the next generation of combatants to regain what had been lost. France did, of course, win the next war, but the unprecedented costs of World War I and the horrific experience of its battles started to change the manner in which military deaths were regarded. As one might expect, Germani spends more time on this war than any other. He asserts that ideas about the importance of dying for the *patrie* that were inherited from past eras persisted throughout World War I, but that soldiers who participated in it started to highlight its futility and depict the *poilus* as hapless victims.

Germani begins his investigation of his third period by examining these “disillusioned representations of the soldier’s death,” which became more pervasive after the Great War (p. 286). He explains that photographs that were printed in newspapers such as *Le Miroir*, novels like *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, and films such as *Les croix de bois* echoed the critical attitudes of French soldiers and communicated a nightmarish vision of the war as a meaningless disaster. Germani views this current in French culture as the starting point for the rejection of war that predominates in contemporary France. Yet, while France adopted a more ambivalent approach to war, he insists that “a culture of commemoration” arose in the interwar period that continued to cultivate a belief in the value of the soldier’s sacrifice (p. 286). This culture consisted of different measures employed to honor and mourn the country’s war dead, including the tomb of the Unknown Soldier, local war memorials, and the rituals connected to them.

After analyzing French reactions to the First World War, Germani focuses on the sacrifice of colonial soldiers during the Second. Determined to ensure that their story receives the attention that it deserves, he highlights their contributions to the allied war effort. He also debunks myths about them and reveals the injustices to which they were subjected. Contrary to nationalist tropes about their enthusiasm for French civilization, troops from France’s colonies often enlisted against their will or did so only for the benefits that they might obtain. Moreover, they frequently received inadequate and dangerous training, lacked proper supplies, and fought in dangerous circumstances where they were likely to be murdered if they were captured. Germani claims that the French government added both insult and injury during and after the war. It killed African troops who participated in demonstrations at Thiaroye in 1944, generally neglected deceased colonial soldiers in postwar tributes, and refused to provide them with pensions equal to those granted to metropolitan veterans until 2006. The last conflict that Germani studies in depth is the Algerian war, which, if not the final nail in the coffin of French beliefs about the merits of dying for *la patrie*, firmly closed the lid upon it. He proposes that professional soldiers within the French military adhered to a “myth of the paratrooper” that arose out of France’s colonial conflicts that portrayed death in battle as their life’s purpose (p. 415). Draftees and civilians, on the other hand, regarded the casualties that French forces received as well as inflicted with revulsion and became convinced that nothing positive was to be gained from either carrying on the struggle or dying in it.

Germani’s narrative is both compelling and relatively comprehensive. He combines military history, cultural history, and art history with the study of demography to account for various factors that affected French military deaths and the ways in which they were understood. In the process, he also reveals a number of important developments concerning the nature and significance of soldiers’ deaths in French history. For example, he demonstrates that for most of modern history, the losses that occurred in France’s wars were unexceptional when compared to the death toll generated by other causes. Moreover, disease and other forces killed far more French soldiers than the enemy until World War I. Most readers will probably not be

surprised by these revelations. Yet, Germani employs them to prove that French troops frequently risked their lives in battle before the twentieth century because a quick death and opportunities to distinguish themselves were more appealing than the alternative of dying slowly from illness in a final act that was anything but memorable. Furthermore, he helps his audience more fully comprehend just how traumatic the First World War was by placing it in its demographic context. Life expectancy rates increased in the early twentieth century to the point where the majority of the hundreds of thousands of young Frenchmen who perished in the war would have survived well into adulthood for the first time in their country's history.

The one phenomenon that Germani does neglect is gender. On a few occasions, he mentions masculinity as a factor that influenced the behavior of French soldiers and as a theme in representations of them, but soldiers in numerous eras did fear the emasculation that accompanied cowardice more than death in battle, and Germani largely refrains from exploring this subject and others concerning the relationship of war and gender. This oversight does not, however, diminish his study's value. His book covers an enormous amount of material as it is, and it would be unfair to fault him for the few topics that he does not address. Germani's study contains so much useful information and touches upon so many areas of modern French history, that it should inspire a wave of new scholarship that investigates, challenges, and expands upon his conclusions or treats them as a point of departure.

NOTE

[1] André Corvisier, "La mort du soldat depuis la fin du Moyen Age," in André Corvisier, *Les hommes, la guerre et la mort* (Paris: Economica, 1985), p. 367-94; John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Viking Press, 1976); Hervé Drévillon, *L'individu et la guerre: Du Chevalier Bayard au soldat inconnu* (Paris: Éditions Belin, 2013); Yuval Noah Harari, *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

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