

Luc Capdevila, Danièle Voldman, eds. *War Dead: Western Societies and the Casualties of War*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006. xix + 200 pp. \$130.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7486-2297-9; \$40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7486-2298-6.

Reviewed by Mark R. Hatlie (History and Government Program, University of Maryland University College, Europe Division)  
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## War and Memorial Culture

This study of the casualties of war offers a broad overview of the cultural meaning and impact of mass wartime death in the West over the past 150 years or more. “Did the brutality, the suddenness, the sheer numbers of those killed change the relationship with death in the West?” (p. xi). The period covered by the book is the same as that of other recent studies of modern war and memorial culture, extending from the French Revolution through the wars of the twentieth century, but emphasizing primarily the late nineteenth and early to mid twentieth centuries. These years were a period during which a tension arose between a greater political and social concern for the individual on the one hand and developments in military technology and practice which killed unprecedented numbers and, often, did so in such a way that the dead were also not only distant, but often physically obliterated, depriving the bereaved of bodies to mourn.

*War Dead* defines “Western societies” in a refreshingly broad manner, including not only western Europe and North America, but also South America, primarily the southern cone countries of Argentina, Chile, and Paraguay. Indeed, these last cases promise to open up recent studies on wartime death and dying to a new cultural context. However, most of the examples and analysis are taken from France during and following the world wars, especially World War I. The authors include scattered examples from the Franco-Prussian War and the colonial wars of the 1950s and 1960s, as well as from other coun-

tries such as Germany, Spain, and Britain and even one or two anecdotes from Soviet experience. South America gets, in the end, relatively little attention, however. Thus, this study remains rooted in western Europe and does not radically break with works such as those by George Mosse, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, Annette Becker, or Reinhart Koselleck and Michael Jeismann. The other examples, however, serve to show that some patterns and conclusions are indeed more broadly applicable.

Chapters cover the struggle by individuals, families, armies, and states to cope with—that is, count, identify, and properly mourn—the unprecedented numbers of dead soldiers and, eventually, civilians as well. Expectations and cultural norms could hardly be reconciled with the extraordinary situation and the opening chapters systematically discuss the various tensions. After a chapter on enemy bodies, there are two final chapters on memory, rituals, and commemorations. Much of this material, especially the last two chapters, will be familiar to many scholars. As a general overview of the research in the field it covers not only the structural and institutional aspects of mass death in war, but trends such as the role played by war in the evolving sensibilities with regard to death, changes in the use of images of the dead, and changing cultural practices both on and off the battlefield.

The examples of public memorial culture from the Vichy and occupation period of 1941-44 represent one

of the strengths of the book. They appear throughout, but especially in the final section, on ritualized mourning. Because of the particular circumstances, these examples show quite effectively the political dimension of public mourning in wartime.

A primary weakness of the work stems from some lack of familiarity with the American Civil War of 1861-65. If their work had been informed by the more recent work of Drew Gilpin Faust (*This Republic of Suffering*, 2008), for example, the authors would have begun their discussion of national cemeteries for war dead at Antietam and Gettysburg instead of starting later, in Europe. More trivially, Andersonville is a “great battle” instead of an infamous prisoner of war camp (p. 157). Also, the role of images of death, primarily photographs, gets a nod in *War Dead*. Students of the Civil War, citing the work of Mathew Brady and others, would presumably put more emphasis on the American experience in the history of wartime images of death. One can also make the case that the shock of mass death in the American Civil War—a proportion of the population equivalent to several million deaths in today’s United States—marks a contrast to past experience just as stark as World War I did for Europe, the focus of this book and other recent literature.

Indeed, Faust’s study of death and dying in the American Civil War makes a good contrast with *War Dead* for highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of both. By focusing on one place and time, Faust can delve much more deeply into the culture, tracing such developments as American notions of domesticity and the “good death,” the tension between religious and secular interpretations of death, dying and the conflict in general, and the roles of race and gender. She can also more closely test the relationship between democracy and the paternal treatment of fallen citizens in wartime. There is even a chapter on killing (although not as in depth and psychological as David Grossman’s *On Killing*, 1995). Faust can offer vivid examples of such themes as the efforts of families to recover bodies and record in detail the practices and circumstances of their recovery efforts.

Capdevila and Voldman are more ambitious, covering much more ground in far fewer pages. The result is that larger patterns and contexts emerge, but the examples jump rapidly from place to place and time to time, of-

ten leaving the reader curious about the potential depth of the claim. Some themes are explored in more depth over a paragraph or several pages: the commemorative efforts of French Jews following World War I, for example, or the tombs of the Unknown Soldier in Europe and the Americas.

Both studies have chapters on the treatment of enemy bodies. Faust goes into great detail and explores the concrete circumstances and policies involved on both sides—for example, federal efforts to count, name and bury Union soldiers while intentionally leaving the rebels to rot in the open air. Capdevila and Voldman start by putting the subject into the context of developing international norms and laws, offering useful and highly relevant background material. They then proceed by themes centered on the practices and motives of the living with regard to dead bodies, showing practices ranging from respectful to horrific treatment. Some examples, however, are not drawn from wartime, but from the dictatorships of Chile and Argentina in the 1970s. Their practice of “disappearing” political enemies makes a good example for their case of how bodies can be used as a political weapon, but it is not a very convincing comparison to the mass disappearance of bodies in the artillery barrages of 1914-18 or swallowed up in improvised battlefield mass graves from Cold Harbor to Stalingrad. Both the scale and the circumstance differ appreciably and, hence, comparing the motives and practices becomes questionable. The coverage of the Chilean and Argentinean cases is all the more out of place because the reviewer was anticipating the Latin American cases to include more examples from, say, the Chaco War of the 1930s. But, it is mentioned only briefly in earlier contexts. The inclusion of the Holocaust in the section on enemy bodies is more convincing, although also is not about “combat” deaths.

Each chapter has end notes, and the book has a thematic bibliography. Most of the literature cited is in French, so the book gives the non-French reader an introduction to the state of the field in that country. The translation is easy to read quickly, despite a handful of awkward passages that may also be in the original. The book would make a good general survey for undergraduate use in classes on war and society, or Western cultural history.

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