

MEMORIALIZATION

Military Cemeteries: A European Invention after the First World War

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ABSTRACT

After the First World War, a new kind of graveyard was created: military cemeteries, where millions of soldiers' bodies are buried in a similar manner that reveals the evolution of the cult of the dead and above all, their individualization. Apprehended in the long term, these funerary places, in addition to making the conflicts' deadly violence visible, also reveal both the negotiations that governed the tributes paid to the dead and the gradual pacification of relations between formerly warring nations. A global phenomenon, military cemeteries still reflect singular national projections and representations that demonstrate – above and beyond their similarities – the persistence into the 21st century of national self-representations. Those self-representations prevented the construction of transnational necropolises and hindered the development of a Europeanized memory of war.



First and Second World War Military Cemetery of Montauville (Meurthe et Moselle, France). Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#).

The Origins of Military Cemeteries: A Recent Invention, Fruit of a Long Evolution

Military cemeteries are now an integral part of Europe's landscape. Yet their implantation on European soil is fairly

recent. Their creation originally arose from the desire to individualize those who died in the context of conflicts that had become more and more deadly and involved a growing number of combatants, which changed modes of mourning and remembering. So it also derived from the mobilization of entire populations that was tied to the emergence of nationalism. In addition, the invention of military cemeteries reveals a change in attitudes towards death, which had been remodeled by Romanticism, which showcased the affects related to mourning, as well as funerary traditions: in Paris, Père Lachaise cemetery became the reference for landscaped cemeteries.

The Crimean War (1853-1856) set several precedents. Prior to it, soldiers' bodies were buried in unmarked mass graves. For one thing, when the conflict came to an end, the French military cemetery in Sebastopol was created. That cemetery has often been described as the first of its kind, although soldiers' bodies, grouped by units, were still buried in mass graves rather than individual tombs. In addition, the Treaty of Paris, which put an end to that conflict, introduced the preservation of French cemeteries in Crimea into international law. That mechanism was reiterated in 1871, in the Treaty of Frankfurt, between France and Germany, which stipulated that the country where a military cemetery was located would be responsible for its maintenance. But the first military cemeteries with meticulously aligned individual tombs emerged from the American Civil War (1861-1865). That was also when the first attempts were made to engrave in stone the name of every soldier who died in combat, either on each tomb, or on a monument.

In the Immediate Aftermath of World War I: A Codification Undertaking

At the confluence of the modern cult of the dead, the emergence of new military bureaucracies and the wishes expressed by the families of fallen soldiers, First World War military cemeteries are surprisingly similar from one country to the next, while also having meaningful differences. The Treaty of Versailles stipulates their preservation on the soil of the former enemy. The grounds acquired a sacred aspect – the graves became eternal, which was not an option for civilian graves – but they were dedicated to the cult of the nation. Except in a few countries, like Rumania, religious expressions were marginalized. Cemeteries of this new kind were guided by several principles: the first was the identification of military casualties, an operation that was often made difficult – despite the generalization of “dog tags,” or identification tags in the late 19th century – by the destructive ravages the bodies had been subjected to. Gigantic body-and-human-remains sorting operations would be carried out at the end of each of the world wars. The bodies were sorted by nationality and those of combatants who were considered “unworthy” (mutineers, those executed for desertion, collaborators, soldiers having switched sides and donned the enemy's uniform) were not buried in a military cemetery. Specific spots were reserved for them, like the French section in Frohnau Cemetery in Berlin after 1945. Next, the bodies were identified, using forensic-medicine techniques whose limitations led to the establishment of tombs for unknown soldiers. The cemeteries were open to the families of fallen soldiers, but expressions of mourning were severely restricted. Inspired by the United States National Cemetery System, created at the end of the Civil War, new public or semi-public organizations were founded to handle these huge tasks: the Society for the Tombs of Fallen War Heroes in Rumania (1918), the Military Graves Office and the National Military Graves Commission in France in 1918, the German War Graves Commission in 1919, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, created as early as 1917;

Following World War I: Military Cemeteries, National Symbols

What would become of fallen soldiers bodies was defined by law. In France, the law of 29 December 1915 called for individual tombs for French and allied soldiers who died on the battlefield or in a military hospital. The law of 20 July 1920 allowed families to request that their loved one's body be returned at the government's expense. Aside from France and the United States, no other countries made arrangements to have the bodies returned. That led to the creation of military cemeteries on foreign soil, and, therefore, to complex diplomatic negotiations. Even now, those grounds benefit from extraterritoriality. The bodies of 44,304 German soldiers lie, for example, in the German cemetery of Langemark, in the Belgian province of West Flanders. That extraterritoriality is considered to be permanent, as a symbol of the eternity of the nation.

Those circumstances led to the creation of specific national funerary landscapes. In 1918, for the German Commission, the architect Tischler defined a type of landscaped cemetery that was vaguely inspired by a dreamt-up aesthetic meant to seem "Teutonic": the "heroes' woods." Each grave was supposed to be graced with an oak tree. Although that never actually took place, those cemeteries still feature the presence of a large number of trees. In 1920, France chose rows of white crosses, with walkways covered in gravel and a plain flagpole to fly the French flag. That arrangement has been reproduced identically, even on foreign soil, in France's 265 national necropolises and in the 2,000 military sections in municipal cemeteries, for a current total of 74,000 bodies, and for 2,000 national military cemeteries in 78 countries. The bodies of soldiers who fell in colonial wars benefitted from the same treatment. At the family's request, the cross can be replaced by a Jewish star, Muslim crescent or even just a rounded stone for agnostics. As a counterpoint to military cemeteries, ossuaries were created for unidentified remains. The largest one is in Douaumont, in the Meuse. It contains the skeletal remains of 130,000 unidentified French and German soldiers who fell in Verdun, all together. That mixing of enemies' bodies is exceptional. Thanks to windows, soldiers' skeletal remains can be seen from outside the building.

The largest military cemetery in the world is in Redipuglia, in Italy's Friuli region. Inaugurated in September 1938, the example of Fascist architecture houses the bodies of at least 100,000 fallen soldiers from World War I. After World War II, some existing military cemeteries, like the National Necropolis of the Pétant in Montauville, Meurthe and Moselle (Lorraine, France), were enlarged in order to take in new bodies. As the persecutors of all of Europe, the bodies of German soldiers had an uncertain status. It was not until the fall of Communism that the bodies – of Soviet and German soldiers alike – were exhumed. After 1989, the German Commission located and exhumed over a million corpses in Central and Eastern Europe and built hundreds of new cemeteries, like the one in Chisinau, Moldavia, which was inaugurated in 2006, after five years of preparation.

Reconsidering military cemeteries from a long-term perspective – from the late 19th century to the 21st – makes it possible to analyze soldiers' bodies' role in the national narrative, at the intersection of families' private mourning and national cults of fallen soldiers. It is the story of the construction and maintenance – as well as the evolution – of national narratives in Europe. This page of history also demonstrates the impossibility of getting free from those narratives, even if the graveyards sometimes also act as places of dialogue and reconciliation.

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