Beneath the Crosses: The Remains of the First World War

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It is difficult for modern audiences to grasp the First World War's death toll in a tangible way. While the exact count remains elusive, scholars believe that between nine and ten million soldiers perished in combat between 1914 and 1918. [1] Today, it has become somewhat of a gruesome pastime among academics and the public alike to compare the casualty numbers of the First World War's more noteworthy battles, such as Verdun and the Somme. Often, these figures are so catastrophically large that they become an abstraction. It is far easier to conceptualize such immense loss through its human toll: empty church-pews, unopened Christmas gifts, the silence from the other side of the bed. For four years, death stalked country lanes and terrorized muddy trenches, it was the unwelcome guest of every household and hospital.

This was not the first time either Europeans or Americans had relegated themselves to die in significant numbers on foreign battlefields. But the First World War was altogether different— the scale of casualties, made possible by the industrial nature of the weapons used, presented a unique set of problems. What happened to the battered remains of those who were mowed down by heavy artillery at Loos, Arras or Vimy Ridge? It is common knowledge that many of the casualties now rest in vast military cemeteries that dot the countrysides of France and Belgium. But what is far less known is just *how* these men ended up at their final resting places, and the contention that raged in the post-War world over the process of re-interment. Today, it seems only natural that governments committing soldiers to combat are the ones responsible for providing adequate means of burial in the event of wartime mortality. A hundred years ago, this idea was neither self-apparent nor universally accepted.

This controversy lays bare one of the most interesting developments of the First World War: the co-opting of the death and memorialization process by the state. For centuries past, the

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[1] Antoine Prost, "The Dead," in *Cambridge History of the First World War: Civil Society*, ed. Jay Winter, vol. III (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 588, Ebook Edition.

military standard in the West dictated that soldiers, excluding officers, were simply disposed of in mass graves. During the Great War, the distance government had once maintained from the matter of soldierly burial disappeared. As this paper will discuss, this phenomenon primarily arose from a shift in class demographic within the armies who fought the campaigns of 1914-1918. Rather than traditional forces composed of professional soldiers, conscripted men from all areas of society did the majority of the dying during the First World War. And for political elites that increasingly found themselves subject to public opinion, it was not feasible to toss the destroyed youth of their nation into unmarked pits. But within this understanding, which was shared by many combatant nations, there was contention between state authorities and their respective publics over precisely where, and to what extent, the government should figure into the burial process. I will argue that this stratification in belief is a vital, and previously underappreciated, way to gauge the progression of democratic values during the First World War.

This paper is organized into three parts: the first, an examination of the contrasting history of military burial in Western Europe and America during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the second, a discussion on the treatment of dead soldiers during the war years, and the third, an in-depth exploration of the exhumation, re-interment, and repatriation processes. Also, I would like to note the boundaries of this work. The nations of primary focus will be the United Kingdom and its empire, America, and to a lesser extent, France. In summation, this paper seeks to provide insight behind the motivations of these particular governments who pursued such a radical course in the way of military burials, and relate the contentious debates over re-interment and repatriation to wider questions surrounding democratic values and expectations during the 1914-1918 period.

<u>Military Burials Before 1914</u>

Britain

"No, great king: I come to thee for charitable license, that we may wander o'er this bloody field to book our dead, and then to bury them; to sort our nobles from our common men. For many of our princes—woe the while— lie drown'd and soak'd in mercenary blood; so do our vulgar drench their peasant limbs, in blood of princes…" [2]

This quote is taken from Shakespeare's *Henry V*, in a scene directly after the young English king's victory at Agincourt. The speaker is a French herald, Montjoy, who asks Henry to allow for the burial of his countrymen. [3] Montjoy emphasizes that this endeavor must be undertaken in order to prevent the mixing of noble blood with that of the common soldier. After some back and forth, Henry acquiesces, asking the herald to "bring [him] notice of the numbers dead on both [their] parts." [4] Despite the fact Shakespeare was writing about an event that took place almost two hundred years earlier (*Henry V* was published in 1599, and the Battle of Agincourt took place in 1415,) Montjoy's request would have not been seen as archaic to seventeenth-century audiences. Indeed, in that era, and for approximately two and a half centuries to come, military burial was strictly determined by social status. While aristocratic officers could hope for some semblance of dignity in private plots (though this was not in any way guaranteed,) men of humbler rank could expect nothing more than being unceremoniously deposited into a mass grave. [5] A rather enlightening case study of the attitudes towards the common soldier can be gained from the historical example of the British Army's conduct during

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[2] William Shakespeare, *Henry V* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 79, Kindle Edition.
[3] Philip Longworth, *The Unending Vigil: A History of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Military, 2003), XIX
[4] Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 80.
[5] David Crane, *Empire of the Dead* (London, UK: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014), 3.

the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. Wellington himself referred to his low-born men publicly as "the scum of the earth," and the dead were either rolled into pits by local civilians, thirty to forty at a time, or cremated on pyres. [6] In the coming years, there was even less reverence shown to the men who had beaten Napoleon— their bones were often ground down to be used as fertilizer, or their teeth extracted for dentures. [7] After visiting the Waterloo battlefield decades later, Lord William Thackeray (the author of the classic 1848 novel *Vanity Fair*) neatly summarized the state of affairs: the ordinary soldier had been merely "shoveled into a hole… and so forgotten." [8]

There was more, however, to this caustic disregard for the majority portion of Britain's army than just the overt classism within its upper ranks. As David Crane insightfully points out in his 2013 study of the creation of the Imperial War Graves Commission, *Empires of the Dead,* for the majority of its early modern history the British public did not really hold any segment of their military, nor its various exploits, in particularly high esteem. [9] Britain's great continental wars of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century were viewed with suspicion by the masses, who decried them as being either "ministers' wars," "Hanover's wars'," "Tory wars"— or a combination thereof. [10] Moreover, victories like that of John Churchill's at Blenheim (1704) were so entirely removed from the lives of average Britons, fought on a different continent and by a professional army, they might as well have taken place on another planet. It was not until after Waterloo that the gulf between the British and its military began to narrow, as popular presses extolled the bravery of the men who managed to conquer the nation's arch nemesis of

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[6] Richard Van Emden, *Missing: The Need for Closure after the Great War* (Yorkshire, UK: Pen & Sword Military, 2019), 48.
[7] Emden, *Missing*, 48.
[8] Longworth, *The Unending Vigil,* XX.
[9] Crane, *Empire of the Dead,* 5.
[10] Ibid, 4.

more than a decade. [11] Relations were still slow to improve until the era of the Crimean War, when the Army underwent something of a bourgeois makeover. These "new men" of Britain's military, as colorfully described in *Empires of the Dead*, "were closer in their high-minded earnestness and Bible-carrying piety to the new middle classes of England from which they sprang than to their Godless predecessors of Badajoz and San Sebastian [two bloody sieges of the Napoleonic Wars]". [12] As the character and makeup of the British fighting forces shifted to reflect the values of Victorian society, civilians became more inclined to take a vested interest in both the fate of its soldiers abroad, and the status of their remains if they were killed in battle or by disease.

Considering this development, it comes as little surprise that during the Crimean War (1853-1856), some of the first widespread attempts to establish official overseas British military burial sites were undertaken. In this period, 139 cemeteries were established by a newly formed government department, the Office of Works. Unfortunately, these graves were only marked with names if their family submitted a payment to the government— if the adequate funds were not received, the remains were rolled into a mass grave as they had been in for centuries past. [13] Once again, the benefits of wealth and privilege allowed for certain upper-class soldiers to maintain their individuality in death. But, as the nineteenth century progressed, there were clear signs that on the homefront at least, British towns and villages were increasingly committed to remembering common soldiers. A prominent example of this is the imposing Maiwand Lion in Reading, which commemorates by name all 329 men of the 66th (Berkshire) Regiment of Foot who died fighting in the Second Afghan War (1878-1880). [14] Reading's tribute to its fallen men

[11] Ibid, 6.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Emden, *Missing*, 48.
[14] Ibid, 49.

was not alone. In places like Bristol, Manchester, and Hull, memorial plinths dedicated to casualties of the Second Boer War (1899-1902) were built and engraved using funds gathered by local public subscription. [15] Families could almost never visit the far away places where their sons, brothers, or husbands fell, but these sites acted as accessible places where relatives and friends could mourn. [16]

There is too, perhaps, a darker element to these local memorials, one that would foreshadow the patterns of casualties in the First World War. As a part of the Cardwell Reforms of the 1870s (named for Edward Cardwell, Prime Minister William Gladstone's Secretary of State for War) the British Army implemented the so-called Localisation Act. The guiding idea behind of this piece of legislation was to reorganize recruitment and mobilization of soldiers according to geographical location, in hopes that it would increase camaraderie. [17] Before this, rank and file soldiers were placed into a single company within a larger battalion, all at random. [18] While the Localisation Act might have had positive effects on morale, its practical outcome was literally being written in stone on plinths and memorials across Britain as early as the 1880s and 90s. When a whole village is sent to battle, together, the odds that the said village eventually loses an entire generation of young men exponentially increases. This reality would materialize time and time again during the Great War, to devastating effect.

The Second Boer War saw the British Army once again take a more involved approach towards its fallen soldiers. [19] Although military command remained in an overall sense aloof from accepting formal responsibility for soldiers' remains, certain segments of the Army (such as

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Fred Cahir et al., *Australian War Graves Workers and World War One: Devoted Labour for the Lost, the Unknown but Not Forgotten Dead* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 3.

[18] Cahir, *Australian War Graves Workers*, 3.

[19] Emden, *Missing*, 49.

the Royal Engineers) were ordered to record names and individual burial places for those killed

in battle or by disease. Too, there was increasing non-governmental involvement in the matter of

military burials during the Boer conflict— one such group, called the Guild of Loyal Women,

actively compiled registers of fallen soldier's personal details, along with managing the

distribution of steel crosses for their graves. Affixed to each cross was an engraving that

typically read 'For Queen [or King] and Empire' along with the casualty's name and date of

death. [20] Despite the initiative shown by the British Army and associated organizations in the

matter of soldiers' burials in South Africa, the military graves of the Boer War still invariably

went the way of their predecessors. Left to the natural elements, they suffered for lack of care.

Nevertheless, the idea of individualized soldierly burials had entered the British psyche (in both

the public and military mind) and it is within this period we can see the roots of the immense

burial projects of the First World War.

The United States and France

"We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave
their lives that the nation might live. *It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this*.
But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground.
The brave men, living and dead, who have struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor
power to add or detract." [21]

-Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address"

It is difficult to overstate how radically the path of military burials diverged between the

United States and Britain during the nineteenth century. The best explanation for this schism lies

in one particular conflict: The American Civil War (1861-1865). Even before that point, though,

the United States Army had notably begun to create formalized resting places for its men who

had fallen abroad. One prominent example of this was the American government's subsidization

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[20] Emden, *Missing,* 50.
[21] Longworth, *The Unending Vigil,* XX.

of cemeteries in Mexico City, designed for American soldiers who had died during the Mexican-American War (1846-1848). [22] With the outbreak of the Civil War thirteen years later, and the subsequent volume of casualties, it soon became apparent that a more energetic and formalized approach to military burial was needed. Responding to this reality, in April 1862, the U.S. Army Adjutant General's Office issued General Order 33, which decreed that "in some suitable spot in every battlefield, so soon as it may be in their power, and to cause the remains of those killed to be interred, with headboards to the graves baring numbers, and, when practicable, the names of the persons buried in them." [23] Even if the inclusion of the phrase "when practicable" casts doubt on exactly how routinely deceased soldiers were able to be identified, the fact that the United States Government considered a gravestone with a name to be the standard for soldierly burial is striking. The impact of General Order 33 can also be measured in the sheer amount of national cemeteries created during the war years. By 1866, there were 41 cemeteries that held over 100,000 Union soldiers— a rather remarkable achievement for a government who had never before undertaken a military graves initiative on this scale. [24]

President Abraham Lincoln's moving address at Gettysburg Cemetery, quoted at the start of this section, pointedly emphasized the need for a nation to properly bury and commemorate their fallen soldiers. It was, as he saw it, simply the "proper and fitting" thing to do. It is essential to stress here the revolutionary nature of the ideas expressed in Lincoln's speech. It took another fifty years for Europeans to even remotely approach this understanding of what constitutes an appropriate military burial. Americans underwent this adjustment of attitude far earlier—mostly due to the demographic makeup of the men fighting the Civil War. Much like what Europe

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[22] Lisa M. Budreau, *Bodies of War: World War I and the Politics of Commemoration in America, 1919-1933* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2011), 25-26.
[23] Longworth, *The Unending Vigil,* XX.
[24] Ibid.

would experience during the 1914-1918 period, the Union Army drew from all areas of society: approximately 2.1 million soldiers were mobilized in the North, and over 360,000 of those men subsequently died. [25] [26] It was absolutely unimaginable to the numerous parents, siblings, and widows of these soldiers, that their loved ones would be subjected to the anonymity of a mass grave.

Moreover, the presiding political and intellectual culture of the United States must be appreciated when discussing the national movement towards individualized burials. With all due considerations made regarding America's long-standing racial and gender iniquities during this period, the country's foundational democratic ideals undeniably influenced the public desire to individually inter and commemorate their military dead. If the men of the Union Army gave their lives in major part to assure the principle that all men are created equal, why subvert this notion in death through granting a select few private burial, while consigning the majority to eternal anonymity? During the Civil War years, the United States was still a young nation, but its profoundly egalitarian ethos (or, at least as it applied to white males) had already firmly entrenched within the American life— the spirit of which can be very clearly seen in its military burial policies.

Unlike their counterparts in the United States, France's attitudes regarding soldierly interment remained somewhat static as the nineteenth century wore on. Tethered to traditional notions of social status deciding where, and in what manner, a soldier was buried, the French for most part resembled the British in their standard burial procedures. [27] Although, by the 1870s,

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[25] Mark R. Wilson, *Business of Civil War: Military Mobilization and the State, 1861--1865 (*Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 7.

[26] Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2009), 255.

[27] Avner Ben-Amos, *Funerals, Politics, and Memory in Modern France, 1789-1996* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), 255, Ebook.

the matter of military remains was clearly becoming more of a pressing issue in wider European geopolitical discourse. The Treaty of Frankfurt, which formally ended the Franco-Prussian War, stipulated that both governments (France and Germany) had an obligation to "respect and maintain the graves of soldiers buried in their respective territories." [28] One can scarcely imagine the powers of the victorious Seventh Coalition having a similar agreement with the defeated France of six decades earlier. It was also in the aftermath of their defeat against Germany in 1871 that France established a memorial organization that would be of great importance in the decades to come: *Le Souvenir français.* Founded in 1887 by a schoolmaster with Alsatian heritage, François-Xavier Niessen, *Le Souvenir français* was a private association that maintained and beautified French war cemeteries, as well as fundraised for the building of monuments to the fallen of 1871. [29] But, from the start, the association was continually plagued by both the highly conservative bent of its members, and a broadly unmotivated public, who were not particularly inclined to memorialize their departed countrymen— as that would also mean remembering their recent, humiliating defeat against Germany. Even so, it is important to mark the creation of *Le Souvenir français*, as it acted as a precursor in many ways to the governmental initiatives to bury and commemorate French soldiers during the First World War.

There is one final element of pre-1914 burial practice to be discussed, that being the American shift towards repatriation of soldiers' bodies at the turn of the twentieth century. As previously demonstrated, in comparison to France and Britain, the United States stood out in its unprecedented desire to individually identify, bury, and commemorate its fallen military members. The creation of numerous cemeteries in the years during and after the Civil War, such

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[28] Longworth, *The Unending Vigil,* XX.

[29] Antoine Prost, Helen McPhail, and Jay Winter, *Republican Identities in War and Peace: Representations of France in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2014), 12, Ebook.

as the ones at Gettysburg or Marietta, attest to the American government's commitment to the task of preserving soldiers' remains and even, in the cases where there exist headstones with names and ranks, soldiers' identities. But, in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War (1898), the United States again altered its approach to military burial. It was one thing to try to ensure proper resting places for soldiers who died on American soil, but it was quite another to uphold this commitment to individualism on far-flung, foreign battlefields. The solution, as decided upon by the McKinley administration, was to repatriate all casualties to the United States— sending the remains either to a national cemetery, or rather more remarkably, home to families for burial. [30] As historian Lisa Budreau explains in her influential 2009 study, *Bodies of War: World War I and the Politics of Commemoration in America, 1919-1933,* this was a profound shift in policy, one that "represented an undeniably more challenging experiment than anything previously attempted." [31] It is worthwhile here to explore some of the difficulties encountered by the men assigned by the U.S. government to retrieve bodies from not only Cuba, but Guam and the Philippines as well. Their struggles were a foretaste of what was to come during the First World War, and the official decision not to make their experiences public allowed for the growth of highly unrealistic expectations regarding repatriation of fallen soldiers in both the civilian and military spheres.

In late March 1899, the first American funeral transport ship, *Crook*, sailed into New York Harbor, containing approximately seven hundred bodies of servicemen killed in the recent Spanish-American conflict. [32] Reporting on the arrival, The New York Times rather grandly proclaimed that "the bringing home of the dead to the land of their birth or adoption is regarded

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[30] Budreau, *Bodies of War*, 24-25.
[31] Ibid., 26.
[32] Ibid., 28

as an innovation in the world's history of warfare." [33] A few days later, in an executive order of

April 4 regarding the burial of these remains, President McKinley elaborated further on the

reasoning behind repatriation:

> Those who died in another land left homes the undying memories that attend the dead of
> all ages. It is fitting that with the advent of peace, won by their sacrifice, their bodies
> should be gathered with tender care and restored to home and kindred. This has been
> done with the dead of Cuba and Puerto Rico. Those of the Philippines still rest where
> they fell, watched over by their surviving comrades, and crowned with the love of a
> grateful Nation. [34]

The bodies Mckinley references, those in the Philippines, would not lay in repose for

long. In fall 1900, the Quartermaster General sent David H. Rhodes, superintendent of the U.S.

Burial and Disinterment Corps, on a mission to Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippine Islands to find

American remains. [35] Rhodes' foray into the far Pacific was anything but straightforward. He and

his squad of fifteen assistants traveled for several months, dealing with miserable weather,

indifferent U.S. military officials, and a presiding inability to secure local labor from native

populations— most indigenous persons encountered were horrified at the American exhumation

of remains and were unsurprisingly unwilling to help in the effort, even with offers of pay.

Rhodes' official report back to the Quartermaster General describes wading through watery reefs

with coffins in areas where walkable roads were scarce, as well as their dangerous travels to

retrieve remains in areas "infested with armed Philippine insurgents." [36] By the end of this

expedition, 1,422 bodies were exhumed and repatriated to the United States. [37] Considering the

immense complications encountered on the way, this was quite the accomplishment for Rhodes

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[33] Ibid.

[34] "'President McKinley's Order' ," The New York Times (The New York Times), accessed February 21, 2022,
https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1899/04/04/issue.html.

[35] Budreau, *Bodies of War*, 30.

[36] Ibid, 30-31.

[37] Ibid, 30.

and his men. Reflecting back on his assignment, however, Rhodes was dubious about its long-term viability: "[the retrieval of remains became] an extremely hazardous operation for the safety of the dead, as well as the living." [38] Moreover, Rhodes also stressed that "relatives, friends, and others…can hardly realize what a tremendous task it is to reach many of the graves of our soldiers and return their remains safely to their homes." [39]

So, why was it not made clear to the American public how difficult, and in some cases how entirely impossible, repatriation was? Lisa Budreau points to the nature of David Rhodes' fifty-page report to the Quartermaster General about his time retrieving bodies in the Pacific. While the document makes for vivid reading, it also accuses various military entities of not only "[pilfering] supplies," but on the whole "censoring" the "hardships and dangers involved in the recovery and return of the dead." [40] It is because of Rhodes' wide-ranging criticisms, Budreau believes that the testimony did not reach beyond a select few in the U.S. Army. This resulted in body repatriation becoming somewhat of a gray area in both civilian and military life— it was understood by many as "what was done" when soldiers' died abroad, but the actual technicalities of it remained elusive.

Even during General John Pershing's expedition into Mexico to pursue Pancho Villa, in the last year before America joined the war in Europe, ambiguity reigned about bringing servicemen home. [41] Two months after the operation's conclusion in February 1917, the War Department was already sending concerned messages to military officials at Fort Sam Houston regarding the fates of those buried in Mexico, and how best to conduct them back to the United

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[38] Ibid, 33.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid, 37.

States. [42] Even if the expectation of repatriation had already been established from the events of a decade and a half earlier, procedurally, the U.S. Army had no clear and unanimous policy on how best to complete these missions. Indecision on returning bodies continued, and families besieged the War Department for any information on how to obtain their loved ones. At the time of its entrance into the First World War in April 1917, the U.S. Army was still torn between its desire to commit perhaps the ultimate act of identity-recovery for its fallen soldiers, repatriation, and the harsh reality that they had no way to systematically accomplish this task. The woes created by this divide would exponentially increase in the face of tens of thousands of wartime casualties on the Western front.

This section has described the pre-First World War soldierly burial practices of Britain, America, and France. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a time of real change for the interment of military casualties in these countries, especially for the former two listed. But, as demonstrated, by the outbreak of the First World War there still was a very wide gulf separating the European and United States' schools of thought on the issue. While the British and the French were just beginning to move away from mass burials, and figuring out the logistics of maintaining foreign military cemeteries, the Americans were attempting to bring back every fallen soldier to the continental United States. It is necessary to consider why these paths differed so dramatically, and to do that, one must think in a more abstract sense about the meaning of a war grave. Fundamentally, they are the physical representation of the contract between the state, and those who gave their lives on its behalf. By studying the evolution of military burials in this era, the conscious enlargement of this agreement can clearly be seen— or, more simply, there is a marked increase in what these governments understood to be their obligations in the area of

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[42] Ibid, 38.

memorializing fallen soldiers. This change was not a spontaneous one, rather, it was a reaction to a shift in social values on both sides of the Atlantic. By 1914 it was broadly understood that depositing men into a nondescript pit was not how a modern society should treat its war dead. The extent to which the American, British, and French militaries responded to this development varied due to each nation's democratic traditions (particularly in the case of the United States,) as well as the social composition of their armies. The next section will illustrate how military and public authorities dealt with the immense amount of casualties during the First World War, and how the hopes for individualized soldierly burials as articulated before 1914 interacted with the brutal day-to-day realities of the Western Front.

Military Burials 1914-1918

Britain

"We set to work to bury people. We pushed them into the sides of the trench but bits of them kept getting uncovered and sticking out, like people in a badly made bed. Hands were the worst; they would escape from the sand, pointing, begging— even waving! There was one which we all shook when we passed, saying, 'Good morning,' in a posh voice. Everybody did it. The bottom of the trench was springy like a mattress because of all the bodies underneath." [43]

- Diary Entry of Leonard Thompson, British Soldier on the Western Front

As with all other combatants of the First World War, the British Army was in no way prepared for the onslaught of death that began in August 1914. Today, it is the number of casualties that is usually remarked upon when discussing the monstrous impact of the fighting. What is less appreciated, perhaps, is the variety of gruesome ways in which soldiers were killed. This is an oversight in public knowledge that is as widespread now as it was during the war. For example, frontline soldiers would often bemoan the fact that in popular art, deceased servicemen

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[43] Cahir, *Australian War Graves Workers*, 5.

were often depicted in serene poses, usually with a neat bullet hole in their forehead or heart. [44]

The reality was far more macabre. In her book, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War,* Joanna Bourke descriptively articulates the situation:

> Death was obscene [...] Scottish highland kilts were blown up and putrefying buttocks exposed. Men were roasted alive. Death descended from the skies and disappeared without being sighted by those who survived. It was like black magic: bodies continued walking after decapitation shells burst and bodies simply vanished. Men's bodies 'shattered': their jaws dropped and out poured 'so much blood'. Aeroplane propellers sliced men into pieces.[45]

For fifty-two months, the slaughter continued unabated. Numbers vary, but scholars estimate that at least 722,000 men in the British armed forces were killed during the war. [46] And from the conflict's very beginnings, the never-ending stream of casualties presented acute issues in terms of burial. Simply, there was hardly any space or opportunity to properly take care of the dead. Soldiers were either buried where they fell, or in plots near the front line. [47] Earlier on, some men were interred in municipal graveyards along Western Front, alongside civilians who had also been killed amid the fighting. [48] Approximately nine months into the conflict, though, it became clear that these areas were becoming filled to capacity and were incapable of future use. [49] The physical process of burial was most often undertaken by fellow unit soldiers, who understandably struggled with both the psychological and practical elements of their task. William Clarke, a British soldier at Loos, described the Sisyphean nature of interring his comrades in a diary entry: "it had proven impossible to bury them all," … "[and that] when the rains came, it washed most of the earth away, you'd go along the trenches and see a boot and

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[44] Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 1999), 212.

[45] Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, 213-214.
[46] Ibid, 214.
[47] Cahir, *Australian War Graves Workers*, 3.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.

puttee sticking out, or an arm or hand, sometimes faces. Not only would you see them, but you'd be walking on them, slipping and sliding." [50]

In this hellish environment, correct identification of bodies proved extremely difficult. Moreover, even if remains were properly marked, very often records were not kept of the exact geographical location of a burial. [51] Constant bombardment led to bodies being continually displaced, or entirely destroyed. [52] Back on the British homefront, concern was growing over the perceived neglect towards military graves. In a January 1915, a letter to *The Times* described an anonymous woman's heartbreak after traveling to France in order to find the grave of her brother: "Comrades in his regiment had given her the particulars of the exact locality and even described the wooden cross and its inscription erected over the grave"... "[but upon her arrival] every trace of the identifying crosses or other marks had disappeared." [53] Questions were being asked about graves even at the highest levels of military command. Two months after the distressed letter in *The Times*, the then Commander of the British First Army, Douglas Haig, wrote to the War Office, warning them that: "it should be bourne in mind that on the termination of hostilities the nation will demand an account from the Government as to the steps which have been taken to mark and classify the burial places of the dead, steps which can only be effectively taken at, or soon after, burial." [54] Haig had correctly grasped the public mood regarding war graves, and presciently understood as early as 1915 that this was an issue that was not going to go away. There could be no Waterloo-esque disregarding of British soldiers' identities, even if they were regularly being deposited in mass graves like their Napoleonic counterparts. [55] Having

[50] Bourke, *Dismembering the Male, 215.*
[51] Cahir, *Australian War Graves Workers*, 4.
[52] Ibid, 5.
[53] Emden, *Missing,* 51.
[54] Emden, *Missing,* 47.
[55] Bourke, *Dismembering the Male,* 215.

expended the nations' sons, the military was now beholden to the nations' mothers— and they

were not going to stand to have their children be, to once again use Lord Thackeray's powerful

words, "shoveled in a hole… and so forgotten". [56]

Once incident in spring 1915 perfectly illustrates just how far families were willing to go

to reclaim their fallen boys. On April 13, William Glynne Charles Gladstone, a Lord Lieutenant

and grandson to Prime Minister William Gladstone, was killed in action at Laventie. [57] His bereft

mother demanded that his body should be brought home to the family estate at Hawarden, and

his uncle, Henry Gladstone, arranged the repatriation with the consent of the Prime Minister

Asquith and the King. [58] His body was disinterred under fire and was returned to England with

great fanfare. [59] A couple of weeks after this event, though, the British authorities outright

banned the repatriation of British war dead in France. [60] This move was primarily the decision of

one man: Fabian Ware. By 1915, Ware had established himself as the de-facto man "in charge"

of British soldiers' graves— a role that evolved from his ambulance work on the Western Front

in the early months of the war. [61] While transporting wounded soldiers back and forth from

medical units, Ware had become alerted to the ongoing chaotic and inconsistent burial practices

of the British Army. In attempts to remedy the situation, he and his men had begun gathering and

recording identification details of any individual graves they came upon. While the work was

extremely difficult (especially without any official support of the military,) Ware later reflected:

> The experience gained in the search for the British wounded, [had] helped the Unit in
> taking up another most useful piece of work viz the identification of places in which
> British killed had been hastily buried, and the placing of crosses on the spots thus
> identified, with inscriptions designed [details painted on the reverse of the cross] to

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[56] Longworth, *The Unending Vigil,* XX.

[57] Paul Cornish and Nicholas J. Saunders, eds., *Bodies in Conflict: Corporeality, Materiality, and Transformation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 66.

[58] Cornish and Saunders, *Bodies in Conflict, 66.*

[59] Emden, *Missing*, 54.

[60] Cornish and Saunders, *Bodies in Conflict*, 66.

[61] Emden, *Missing,* 50.

preserve the rough [pencilled] records which many in cases were already in danger of being obliterated. [62]

Throughout 1914, Ware kept gathering volunteers to his cause. [63] By Christmas that year, his Mobile Unit had around thirty vehicles and fifty to sixty personnel, which allowed them to expand operations in terms of grave registration. Once ascertained from either comrades or unit Chaplain's records, the details of the deceased where "at first stenciled then later stamped onto aluminum tags and fixed to each soldier's wooden cross," … "in addition, an attached brass plate bore the information that the crosses had been erected by the Mobile Unit of the British Red Cross Society." [64] Recognizing the efforts of Ware's men, and also the need to have someone in charge of military burials, in March 1915 the adjutant general of the BEF, General Macready, gave the unit the title of The Graves Registration Commission (GRC). [65] Formally, the GRC was given the task of both negotiating the "purchase of foreign lands, in perpetuity, for the British war dead," and "formalising the process of recording, registering, and planning Imperial war graves." [66]

One of the first moves the GRC made was to implement the mandatory wearing of dual-identity discs for soldiers, in order to make the post-mortem identification process more straightforward if a soldier was killed in action. [67] Despite the fact that there was no concrete guarantee that soldiers would wear these discs, it was considerably better than having no protocol at all in this area. [68] The GRC soon had units cropping up all over the Western Front:

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[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid, 51.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid, 52.

[66] Cahir, *Australian War Graves Workers*, 4-5.

[67] Ibid, 5.

[68] Ibid.

first in the town of Béthune, then around the Aisne and Marne battlefields, as well the Somme.[69]

In a sign of the times, the GRC even expanded to include a Photographic Branch, which

permitted bereaved families to apply for an image of a grave. [70] Eventually, Ware's commission

was renamed the Directorate of Graves Registration and Enquiries (DGR&E), its responsibilities

now evolving to include not only "[ensuring] military-wide compliance with established

identification and burial practices across 'all theaters of war,'" but managing the ever increasing

stream of family inquiries and requests. [71] Too, the DGR&E actively collaborated with the new,

military-appointed Corps and Divisional Burial officers, whose job it was to oversee army

burials and to report the details of these events back to Ware's organization. [72] Thanks to the

efforts and cooperation of both parties, by 1916, somewhat of a procedure had been established

for the BEF regarding soldierly interment. One British officer, Lieutenant Knee, described the

rough parameters of what a standard burial looked like:

> Orders had been given that we were to take from their pockets pay books and personal
> effects, such as money, watches, rings, photos, letters and so one, one identification disk
> had also to be removed, the other left on the body. Boots were supposed to be removed, if
> possible, as salvage was the order of the day. A small white bag was provided for each
> man's effects, the neck of which was to be securely tied and his identity disk attached
> thereto. [73]

In spite of the strides made towards burial standardization by the DGR&E, it was

becoming clear that a more permanent approach towards British war graves was necessary. Ware

thought often of peacetime, and what the creation of post-war cemeteries would look like. Back

in 1915, he had begun talks with the French government "over the long term status of British

graves in France." [74] Hoping that the graves could be given a permanent place, Ware's dreams

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[69] Emden, *Missing,* 52.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Cahir, *Australian War Graves Workers*, 6.
[72] Emden, *Missing*, 53.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid, 54.

were realized when at the end of that year, the French parliament decided that land would be "given in perpetuity to the Allied dead," at France's own expense. [75] It was an act of immense generosity, but one that highlighted the fact that the British were going to need long term plans in order to manage such an immense burial project. This understanding only grew more pressing as the war dragged on, and bodies continued to mount. Finally, in May of 1917, the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC) was established in order to formulate a vision for what British war cemeteries would look like in their final form. Fabian Ware was brought on as its executive head, the Prince of Wales was made President, and Rudyard Kipling was appointed to be a kind of creative advisor. [76] The stated mission of the IWGC at its inception was to ensure uniformity of graves along the following three principles:

1. The memorials should be permanent,
2. The headstones should be uniform, and
3. There should be no distinction made on account of military or civil rank. [77]

The spirit of egalitarianism defined Ware's idea of how Britain was going to pursue its massive burial scheme. But, the very fact that IWGC had complete ownership over wartime bodies, and mastery over their fates, was a fact that was to cause significant controversy in the years post-1918. As this paper will later discuss, many Britons were outraged at the fact that their sons had been taken once again from them in death.

America and France

"Dead horses lay at short intervals along the way, many having died from exhaustion. The weather was hot and the bodies of both men and animals had become black, swollen, disorganized masses of organic matter, alive with maggots. Flies bred in millions and soon became an intolerable nuisance as well as more or less a serious menace to health. Other

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[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid, 56.

[77] Cahir, *Australian War Graves Workers*, 7.

insanitary conditions existed, and there was much reason to apprehend an outbreak of intestinal diseases." [78]

> -American Major General M.W. Ireland's Report in "Field Operations,"
> *The Medical Department of the United States Army in the World War,* 1925

Having joined the conflict in April of 1917, The United States' losses in the First World War were far less substantial than those endured by their European counterparts. The American Graves Registration Service (GRS) calculated after the war that 34,063 soldiers were killed in action, while another 14, 215 had died of their wounds. [79] Indeed, the major cause of death for the AEF besides combat wounds was disease—especially the Spanish Flu Pandemic, which tore through the U.S. Army during its engagement in Europe. [80] Comparing these casualty numbers, though, with those of the French Army, who suffered around 1,325,000 dead in the four years of fighting, one can get a sense of the real disparity between the Americans and their allies in terms of soldiers killed. This is not to say, however, that the U.S Army's experience of the terror on Western Front is any less valid or real. Just as with anyone who entered that landscape, the horror of the situation was all encompassing. The Americans, at least, had the marked benefit of having the example of their allies' burial practices. Inspired by the British and their Graves Registration Committee (GRC), in 1917 the U.S. Army military command established their own Graves Registration Service. [81] Indeed, the tasks undertaken by the GRS were almost identical to their equivalents in the BEF: they were to find, mark, and record American remains. And just like all other combatant armies of the First World War, the gruesome task set for the GRS was hindered by the prevailing conditions on the Western Front— constant bombardments, identity confusion, and the never-ending stream of dead soldiers.

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[78] Budreau, *Bodies of War*, 52.
[79] Ibid, 19.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid, 22.

Unfortunately for the U.S. Army, these day-to-day issues were compounded by a larger lack of long-term vision regarding soldierly burial. The Americans simply did not have anyone of the same caliber as Fabian Ware to advocate for the dead. This was in many ways a result of that ongoing schism, touched on earlier in this paper, within the highest ranks of the Army over repatriation. Just before the United States' April 1917 entry into the war, AEF Commander John J. Pershing and Major General Henry G. Sharpe, the U.S. Army's Quartermaster General, decided that it was "impracticable" to waste shipping space on coffins and burial equipment. [82] Having then made the decision to inter all fallen soldiers in Europe, at least for the time being, one can imagine the chagrin at the high levels of the Army when the Secretary of War, Newton D. Baker, announced that "the government would ensure a home burial to all who died in its foreign service," in September 1918. [83] The frontline burial situation suffered for this prevailing lack of clarity. During the last months of the war, as well as the first months of 1919, the GRS did their best to continue identifying and reburying the dead. In the meantime, the U.S. Army worked frantically to crystallize a concrete plan of repatriation— all while the American public grew ever more impatient for the promised return of its sons.

The French Army experienced much the same trials and travails as their American and British counterparts in the way of military burials. Although, it is still important to note that even among allies facing similarly impossible combat conditions, there were slight differences in protocol for interring soldiers. A rather startling example of this can be seen in the fact that French operational protocols dictated that mass graves were still the specified means of burial for privates until July 1915. [84] When the French High Command finally decided to repeal this edict,

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[82] Ibid, 20.
[83] Ibid, 21.
[84] Prost, "The Dead," 570, Ebook Edition.

they replaced it with instructions that "[not only were] no more mass graves to be created, [but] that corpses should be buried either individually or in trenches of ten bodies side by side, not piled up on top of each other." [85] The county's parliament codified this decided shift towards egalitarianism in a law of December 29, 1915: "Any soldier who had died for France has the right to a grave in perpetuity at the expense of the State." Again, while it must be reiterated that while the reality of fighting on the Western Front frequently necessitated the usage of mass graves and generally nondescript burials, the fact that France's government had established this as a standard is a telling of the real change of feeling in both the military and public spheres about precisely what was owed to soldiers who had made the ultimate sacrifice, regardless of their social background.

This section has explained the wartime burial practices of Britain, America, and France on the Western Front. Despite the variation of casualties among the three nations, they all attempted to identify and properly bury remains in the face of the continual barrage of killing. The final portion of this essay will detail what each of these countries ultimately chose to do with their war dead, and the widespread controversies that arose over state ownership of these remains.

Bringing up the Bodies, 1918-1922

Britain

"A really melancholy work and a rather sad task, but it was a necessary one, as apart from its sentimental value it was necessary from a sanitary point of view. However, we didn't go about it with long faces but tried to keep as cheerful and jolly as we could." [86]

-   Private George William Mitchell, member of the Australian Graves Detachment (AGD), remarking on his time exhuming remains on the Western Front

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[85] Ibid.

[86] Cahir, *Australian War Graves Workers*, 87.

Before the issues surrounding the permanent burials of British soldiers are discussed in full, it is important to clarify one area in First World War death studies that historians have traditionally overemphasized: the supposed novelty of state-owned remains. Yes, absolutely, while the 1914-1918 period was the first moment where nations took such a high degree of control over private bodies, this was no means a completely unfamiliar role for European or Americans governments— particularly in Britain. Returning to Joanna Bourke, she warns that when considering this subsection of First World War history, the "contrast between the anonymous, mutilated corpse on the battlefield and the personalized, integrated corpse at home should not be exaggerated." [87] There is this enduring idea that, pre-1914, all people died at home, in the comfort of their own beds, surrounded by family who ultimately oversaw their loved ones' burials in the graveyard of a quaint local parish. To give a better idea of this trope, the following is an excerpt from historian Antoine Prost's essay, "The Dead," published in the third volume of the *Cambridge History of the First World War*: "Death at the front could not be the well-prepared and well-ordered death of the past— the death of a sick man whose last breath passes in a bed, surrounded by family affection, perhaps after a sacred rite. No— from 1914 men faced brutal and bloody death. In war men die alone…" [88]

While what Prost is saying in regards to the misery of wartime death is unquestionably true, it must be remembered that to have the "good death" that he described earlier in the passage, one needed to have a fair bit of means, and a concerned network of friends and relatives. [89] Pre-War death in Britain was not necessarily a serene thing, especially with the

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[87] Bourke, *Dismembering the Male,* 216.
[88] Prost, "The Dead," 561, Ebook Edition.
[89] Bourke, *Dismembering the Male,* 216.

nineteenth century onset of industrialization and the dangers associated with it— underscoring

this point, it is estimated that around 16,000 people died in workhouses a year. [90] Moreover,

despite the shock felt by the middle and upper classes during the First World War when they

discovered their sons would not be returned to them, to the poorer populations of Britain, not

having ownership of their own bodies, as well as those of their kin, was nothing new. As

established by the 1832 Anatomy Act, the responsibility for disposing of dead bodies was the

prerogative of "an executor or [any] 'other Party… having lawful possession of the body of any

deceased person'".[91] For paupers, those living in British Poor Law institutions, the fate of any

unclaimed remains were at the discretion of "elected representatives on the Board of Guardians,"

who frequently bequeathed them to the medical profession for dissection. [92] The need for bodies

increased exponentially during the Great War, and presiding British medical officials knew that

unclaimed pauper bodies under the auspices of the Poor Law Guardians would work perfectly for

their ever-growing needs. [93] In this vein, it is worth mentioning that during and after the First

World War, less than four percent of corpses in dissecting schools, like the one at the University

of Cambridge, had been bequeathed. [94] Knowing the protocol surrounding pauper's remains

during this era, it is not difficult then to surmise how the majority of the other ninety-six percent

of cadavers were obtained.

Having now established the fact that the Great War was not the first moment the British

government had interjected itself into the post-mortem affairs of its citizens, it is now time to

analyze the reaction of the broader swathe of the nation's public when it realized that they would

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[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid, 217.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.

not be deciding where, and in what manner, their family members laid in repose. From 1915 onwards, Fabian Ware was insistent on a policy of non-repatriation. And on November 19 1918, the IWGC formally adopted this principle, stressing its fundamental importance to the organization's mission and ethos. Also at this meeting, it was decided that only cemeteries with over forty burials were going to be maintained by the IWGC, which meant that the remains in more isolated graves were going to have to be exhumed, and sent to cemeteries with greater numbers of existing burials. [95] Public reaction to the IWGC's outlawing of repatriation was split. Some, like Henry Cook from Guildford, were grateful:

> I hope you will pardon my writing to express my thanks to you on your decision in bringing into the cemeteries the bodies buried in isolated graves. I am a father of two dear boys buried in isolated graves, much as myself and many dear parents would like to have them buried in their own parish cemetery, yet where the brave lads who fought and fell together is a very fitting place for them to rest in peace. [96]

Others were deeply unsettled by the IWGC's usurpation, as they saw it, of their natural rights to determine their family members' burial. In 1919, upwards of 90 letters a week flowed into the War Graves Commission's office, all calling for repatriation. Some individuals requested that bodies be returned on the basis that the body in question hailed from "a highly esteemed family," and others argued that their right to repatriate came straight from Section 2, Article 225 of the Versailles Treaty: "*They* agree to follow every facility for giving effect to request that the bodies of their soldiers and sailors may be transferred to their own country." [97] Responding to such letters, the IWGC stressed that the "they" in question referred to Germany, and that the whole clause did not grant repatriation rights to the persons living in Allied nations. Fundamentally, Ware understood that if bodies were allowed to be sent back to their families, a

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[95] Cornish and Saunders, *Bodies in Conflict,* 67.
[96] Ibid, 69.
[97] Ibid*,* 72.

deep inequality would emerge between those who had the money to pay for such an operation, and those who did not. [98] The whole idea behind the IWGC was that all of Britain's war dead should rest together, where they had fallen. [99] Too, Ware, a passionate supporter of the British imperial project, envisaged these military cemeteries as becoming "manifestations of the Empire," with all nationalities receiving equal burial treatment. [100] If repatriation was pursued, the IWGC's bedrock principle of egalitarianism, both in the way of military rank and nationality, would be forever lost.

In the end, Ware won out against his opposition. After a particularly contentious debate in the House of Commons in May 1920, the matter was settled in favor of not returning war remains. [101] It is instructive here to consider the regulations established by the IWGC in regards to exhumation and reinterment:

> A registration officer proceeds to the spot, assures himself that the remains are British and with his field assistants, or, if not available, with civil labour, lifts the remains, watching carefully for any possible means of identification. The remains are placed in canvas, the men handling them wearing rubber gloves. The human shape of the remains is maintained as nearly as possible. Wrapped round with the canvas which is stitched or tied with a string, and a label attached, the remains are transported to the vehicle (an ambulance, box-car or lorry). The cross, if one is found, is attached to the remains. They are then covered with a Union Jack and reverently carried to the cemetery of concentration where the new grave is dug and ready to receive them. This grave is 4'6" deep and the space, in width, allotted to each body or remains of a body is 2'. The A form or burial return is made out by the registration officer in the cemetery. The grave is then filled in a cross erected bearing all possible particulars of name, regiment and date. The registration officer will cause any detached human remains he will hear of or see lying on the surface which are unidentifiable,to be collected and buried in a cemetery— but not registered.[102]

The bureaucratic language of these instructions obscure the ghastly reality that grave workers had to endure on a daily basis. Predictably, the experiences for the various burial

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[98] Prost, "The Dead," 574, Ebook Edition.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid, 575.
[102] Cornish and Saunders, *Bodies in Conflict,* 72-73.

detachments proved to be highly traumatic. Some soldiers, like Private Mitchell quoted at the start of this section, coped with the pressures of taking care of their decomposing comrades by reminding themselves of the necessity of their task. Others, once finishing the assigned work for the day, flooded to the brothels and bars of Paris and Amiens to forget what they had just seen. [103] Much like the effects of active combat, the experiences of grave-digging marked all men who participated—even if the effects took years to materialize. Private William Framton McBeath, a member of the Australian Graves Detachment on the Western Front, was remembered by his daughter as a "fun loving man, often singing and whistling." [104] The only two times she ever remembered him being angry was "when their dog, Jack, caught a rat and shook its blood and guts all over the freshly washed and polished Austin," and "when [he dug up] rotten eggs from a failed preserving effort that his wife had buried in the vegetable garden." [105] Considering McBeath's time as a grave-digger, one can easily understand the reasons why these rather innocuous events were so upsetting to him. [106]

On a final note, something must be said for the exceptions made to the IWGC's standing burial procedures. In the cases of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, Grave Registration Officers were instructed to leave bodies alone altogether. For religious reasons, it was deemed that these soldiers were not to be exhumed, not even to be identified. [107] If these bodies had to be disturbed, it was policy that they were cremated and dispersed into a nearby body of water. Unfortunately, owing to pre-existing laws in France, the disposal of these ashes into rivers or seas were illegal, so it was decided that these remains were laid to rest in the nearest IWGC cemetery, in "a

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[103] Cahir, *Australian War Graves Workers*, 90.
[104] Ibid, 125.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Cornish and Saunders, *Bodies in Conflict,* 73.

separate plot for each religion." [108] Fare's insistence on equality towards the treatment of war remains was absolute, but, as evidenced, he was willing to make compromises to ensure the equitable treatment of the Empire's soldiers.

America and France

"I heard so many conflicting stories about overseas that I thought America was the best place for his body so as myself and my family could take care of his grave and no doubt there are lots of other parents to next a kin [sic] felt the same way." [109]

- Anonymous Brooklyn Mother

The American repatriation project after the First World War was extraordinarily complex. Once U.S. Army authorities eventually decided that they were going to make good on Secretary of War Baker's promise, they were faced with the enormity of transporting thousands of bodies back to America. Not all families, however, requested the bodies of their lost relatives— preferring that they remained among their comrades in France. 30,900 American soldiers were buried in Europe, and their graves were maintained by the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC), an organization designed to in many ways resemble the IWGC. [110] In comparison, the Grave Registration Service (GRS) shipped 45,588 bodies back to the continental United States, with another 764 to European places of origin. [111] To clarify, when referring to "places of origin," it means that the GRS sent immigrant soldiers' back to their country of birth. So, rather amazingly, in countries like Italy and Ireland, there are multiple reports of American military caskets literally being carried through the countryside to be returned to family in areas where roads or railroads were scarce. [112]

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[108] Ibid.
[109] Budreau, *Bodies of War*, 76.
[110] Prost, "The Dead," 573, Ebook Edition.
[111] Budreau, *Bodies of War*, 81.
[112] Ibid, 64.

Back in America, there was a similar roundabout quality when it came to actually receiving bodies. Not only did many of the country's inhabitants grow quickly impatient at the delays in bringing soldiers' home, there was also much annoyance at the frequent mishaps in the delivery of said remains. One notable example took place in the summer of 1921, when a New Jersey father came home and was shocked to find his son's coffin laying in front of his house. [113] Apparently, when a neighbor was asked about it, they replied simply: "four soldiers just backed the truck to the curb and carried the coffin to the porch." [114] At least in this case, whoever this soldier was, they had a home to be delivered to. As the U.S. Army frequently struggled in providing "sufficient notice to relatives informing them of a body's arrival," sometimes coffins were just stacked near where they were offloaded from transport boats. [115] [116] Even if families received a body, there were often reports of incorrectly identified soldiers, as well as caskets stuffed with rocks to give the impression of a full set of remains. [117] In America's defense, while it is easy to scoff at some of the GRS' mishaps, it must be remembered that repatriation had never been tried on this scale. Not only did authorities have to deal with the logistical dilemmas of identifying bodies, but they had to transport them across France, then get the caskets across the ocean, before finally depositing them in one American town or another. Nothing about trans-Atlantic repatriation was straightforward, nor was it inexpensive. After most bodies had been returned, the GRS calculated that the operation had cost 30 million dollars, totaling out to about 658 dollars per body— an enormous amount for America in the early 1920s. [118]

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[113] Ibid, 78.
[114] Ibid, 78-79.
[115] Ibid, 78.
[116] Ibid, 78.
[117] Ibid, 77.
[118] Ibid, 80.

There is one final element of the post-First World War exhumation and repatriation project to be gone over. Unlike the United Kingdom, who relied primarily on volunteers to gather their dead (which meant that the manpower strength in this area continually decreased as demobilization continued,) the U.S. Army specifically detailed about six thousand African American soldiers to complete this task. [119] This is a fact that has been recently brought to light, as the GRS official history took every pain to not to highlight the work of these black military personnel. Indeed, the final edition of the GRS history mentions them only in passing, and when doing so condescendingly stressed that, "the handling of bodies was entirely new work to the colored men, but, after witnessing the manner in which the white personnel performed the various operations, they proved to be efficient in the disagreeable task." [120] The only other references to the African American workers of the GRS are to be found in newspapers from the era. In May 1919, a journalist from the *New York Evening Post* detailed his visit to the American Argonne cemetery at Romagne, describing how the "sturdy negro troops," lived in tents and "[droned] out those weird tunes that are known in the South as 'the blues'." [121] Another article from the *Cleveland Advocate,* titled "Colored Yanks Bury Dead as they Sing Old Song," talked about how "these black men who thus sang songs of their Zion in a strange land must indeed have understood the meaning and full significance of the fact that Death is swallowed up in victory." [122] Other than these stories ran in the popular press, there exists scant evidence of the men who facilitated both American burials and repatriations. The iniquity of the situation is perhaps best summed up using the words of Lisa Budreau: "Although popular American opinion

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[119] Ibid, 53.
[120] Ibid, 55.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid, 57.

placed such great importance on the disposition of its dead, burial being a sanctified duty, no one but the black man was asked to do the job…" [123]

Like their American counterparts, France's government also used the labor of minority groups to aid them in exhuming bodies. Primarily, these immigrant workers were of Chinese or Indo-Chinese backgrounds, drawn from French colonies overseas. [124] When these remains were removed from their initial resting place, they were either re-interred, or sent back to their families. Initially, the French had gone the way of Fabian Ware and had not allowed repatriation of remains, citing that it was going to be too logistically difficult to transport bodies across the country. [125] The public outcry against this move was so great, however, that on July 31 1920, the French government announced the establishment of permanent military cemeteries, along with recognizing the family's right to reclaim their loved one's body— at state cost. [126] Starting March 1 1921, soldiers began to be shipped back to their families, each enclosed in a oak coffin. [127] Special trains were commandeered for the effort, each given detailed routes for distribution. At each stop, dozens of coffins were offloaded, to where local dignitaries paid respects before families stepped forwards to take the remains. [128] The whole exhumation and repatriation project lasted about three years, and approximately 240,000 French soldiers were ultimately returned home. [129]

This section has detailed the exhumation, re-burial, and repatriation processes (or lack thereof) of Britain, America, and France. At the First World War's end, all three nations all were

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[123] Ibid, 58.
[124] Prost, "The Dead," 577.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Cornish and Saunders, *Bodies in Conflict,* 71.
[128] Prost, "The Dead" 576, Ebook Edition.
[129] Ibid.

faced with the daunting prospect of having to find a final resting place for thousands of military casualties. Believing that body repatriation would underscore inequality on the homefront, as well impose a post-mortem division among fallen comrades, the IWGC was adamant on restricting repatriation. Conversely, America and France ceded ownership of war remains back to the public, yielding to their citizens' desire to reclaim their lost relatives. In the reasoning behind these two different burial approaches, two interesting strands of democratically driven thinking emerge. For Britain, repatriation was a violation of the sacred equality all soldiers had earned in death. But for America and France, to deny families their right to reclaim bodies was an even more egregious breach of democratic principle.

Conclusion

In terms of burial, what does a government owe those who give their life on its behalf? The rise of individual interments was a novelty in the nineteenth century, as before that point the majority of soldiers killed in action were destined to lay together in unmarked pits. Having established the principle that social class should not deprive a person of a separate identity in the case of wartime mortality, how did that idea withstand the horrors of the Western Front? Even if individual burials were often not undertaken due to time constraints and the hostile conditions of battle, in the post-War era, the British, American, and French militaries all tried their utmost to identify and separately inter soldiers' bodies. The choice to pursue this path came from a deep understanding of the implicit bargain of conscription— after using the bloom of their nation's youth as cannon fodder for the past four years, there was no way that the elected leadership of the three aforementioned countries were going to get away with using communal graves. Trying to assure individual burials is just another area where, as with so many other topics relating to the First World War, the pulls and pressures of mass politics were very clearly put on display.

It was not only in the area of maintaining soldiers' identities that democratic values of the First World War-era were tested. From the arguments surrounding repatriation, two very clear ideas emerge regarding the return of bodies that are inherently wrapped up in ideas of equality and personal freedom. For the British, by the virtue of their sacrifice, soldiers of all creeds, nationalities, and social classes had garnered the right to lay together undisturbed. The Americans and French, though, viewed repatriation as a family's natural prerogative— thus making their government's role in the burial process to be a facilitating, rather than a deciding one. It is not the purpose of this paper to determine which stance is more appropriate for honoring fallen soldiers, or the more "democratically sound" way to approach military burials. What is important, however, is realizing the nuance behind these differences and evaluating *why* they exist. While Britain, America, and France were all democracies at the time of the First World War (even with some notable exceptions in terms of voting rights,) they were nations with considerably different historical traditions and political cultures. To a country like America, whose own democratic culture is so fixed towards individual rights— the idea that the government would decide an item of such fundamental importance like burial was a major overstepping of bounds. But in Britain, whose own political culture has traditionally not been as obsessively preoccupied with personal freedoms, the government's dictation of terms regarding interrment post-1918 was not as upsetting. Herein lies a lesson for democracies everywhere: equality in treatment, whether it be in soldierly burial or anything else, means different things to different people, and the notion of fairness is invariably affected by long-standing historical influences. This is a truth that shines through from examining the burial projects of the First World War, and makes it a historical moment that is well worth revisiting.

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