

ESF Exploratory Workshop on
**The Unthinkable:
The Military Dead of the Great War**

Péronne (France), 29 June – 2 July 2008

Convened by:

**John Horne ①, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau ②
and Gerd Krumeich ③**

① Department of History, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland

② Centre de Recherches Historiques, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, France

③ Historisches Seminar, Heinrich-Heine Universität Düsseldorf, Germany

SCIENTIFIC REPORT

The Military Dead of the Great War: ESF Exploratory Workshop, Historial de la Grande Guerre, Péronne, 30 June – 2 July 2008.

REPORT TO THE EUROPEAN SCIENCE FOUNDATION

1. Executive summary.

The aim of the workshop was to explore the possibility of a longer-term research project on the military dead, which constituted 95% of the mortality of the First World War (the Armenian genocide apart). The enormous human cost of the war is one of its principal features. Yet accurate figures at different levels (national, armies, battles, localities) are still problematic, despite the work done in the inter-war period. The military dead also constitute a central theme in the cultural history of the war, both at the time and in the 'memory' of the conflict. The workshop planned to explore both aspects of the subject and the ways in which they might be related.

Twenty-three delegates attended, along with Dr Slavomir Michalek representing the European Science Foundation. The delegates came from ten member states of the ESF as well as Australia, Russia and the United States of America. Unfortunately, the participant from Hungary had to pull out at the last moment owing to the ill health of a family member. But the workshop fulfilled the aim of a broad representation from the countries involved in the Great War and in particular from eastern Europe, where research on the subject is less developed than in western Europe.

Held at the Historial de la Grande Guerre at Péronne, France, the participants were able to use the resources of what is the most modern and extensive museum of the Great War on the former 'Western Front'. The workshop also incorporated a half-day visit of the 'open museum' of the Somme battlefield (where it is situated) on 1 July, enabling delegates to witness the 'memory' of the war dead as expressed in the annual commemorations of the first day of the battle.

The battlefield visit apart, the workshop was organized in four half-day sessions. The first was on the demographic and statistical aspects of military casualties and the second on the cultural dimension. The third session, which followed the battlefield visit, took the Battle of the Somme as a case study for the project as a whole. The

final session sought to make full use of the presence of delegates from Italy, Austria and eastern Europe and also to evaluate the form that a research project might take.

The format adopted was that of brief introductory presentations in each session, followed by a free-ranging discussion of a 'brain-storming' type by all participants. This worked very well in terms of assessing the 'state of the art' of the subject, exposing some of the major problems in relation to sources, concepts and methodology, and getting a lot of ideas on the table in a very short time. Discussion was extremely lively, and the atmosphere was one of intense, productive and collegial work. The half-day tour of the battlefield of the Somme proved very stimulating in terms of the problems addressed by the workshop, and also posed sharply the contrast with the absence of such commemoration at the Great War battle sites in eastern Europe, though not Italy.

One inherent difficulty was partly overcome. This was the full integration of scholars from eastern Europe into the debate. A special attempt was made in the final session to elicit comments and observations from all colleagues, and subsequent comment from several participants from eastern Europe suggested that they gained a great deal from the workshop. But there is an imbalance between the state of the existing work, and also the level of reflection, on the subject regarding the countries of the western front and Italy compared to countries involved in other fronts. The contacts established mean hopefully that a future research project on the subject would be able to incorporate scholars working on eastern Europe, and in particular those from the region itself.

Overall, however, the workshop demonstrated the richness of the subject and the value of relating its two dimensions – demographic and cultural.

2. Scientific content.

The first half-day session focused on the existing statistical sources, the problems involved in interpreting them, and the ways in which they were established both during and after the war. The complexity of the different categories of 'casualty' – the dead, wounded, missing and prisoners of war - quickly became apparent. This was not just as a statistical question (making it difficult to establish firm figures for

particular battles or armies) but also one of categorization – how the figures were actually established in the chaos of war, and to what end. Nonetheless, controlling the two categories of the ‘dead’ and the ‘missing’ seemed more manageable than embracing the wounded and prisoners. It also allowed all categories to be taken into consideration since a proportion of the missing, wounded and prisoners-of-war were later classified as dead.

The second half-day session discussed the cultural representations of the military dead. The question of what contemporaries knew about the mortality levels at whatever level (the locality or military unit, the army, the nation as a whole), and also the question of whether they believed enemy ‘losses’ to be higher, were discussed. So, too, were the cultural and artistic representations of the war dead as an integral part of the conflict, as well as the fundamental shift that occurred after the war, when the dead became a focus of the ultimate cost of the conflict, and when the heterogeneous wartime category of the ‘missing’ turned into the dead who had left no body to be grieved. The latter were very numerous and became a particularly anguished component of the memory of the war.

The third half-day session consisted of the visit to the battlefield commemorations on the 1 July, which culminated with the ceremony at the Arch to the Missing of the Battle of the Somme, perhaps the most imposing on the entire western front. This was followed by the fourth session which took the Battle of the Somme as a case-study for the project as a whole. Interesting and important divergences of opinion emerged on the technical aspects and reliability of the British Empire and German figures. The cultural dimension, experienced that morning, was also touched on. This second day of the conference culminated in a key-note address by Jay Winter (Yale University) on the importance of considering the military dead in the context of the larger demographic impact of the war.

The final half-day session explicitly broadened the focus to Italy, Austria-Hungary, Russia and eastern Europe (though all of these had been included in the earlier discussions), discussing the comparative state of the sources and the relevance of the approaches so far adopted for armies and states whose contemporary statistics, archives and current historiographical concerns were not always the same. It was

agreed in conclusion that the workshop had outlined and explored an important and extremely rich subject, but that a period of further reflection was required by all participants and in particular by the Research Centre of the Historial de la Grande Guerre as to how this might best be established and pursued. An undertaking was given to maintain the informal network established at the workshop and to keep it appraised of thinking on the way forward with the project.

3. Assessment of the results

The workshop explored what may amount to a new inter-disciplinary field: cultural demography.

It demonstrated the extreme complexity of calculating military 'casualties', owing to the changing definition of what these were and to the various purposes for which the figures were produced. However, it became clear that focusing on deaths provided a better chance of getting more accurate figures, and that it was unnecessary to compute figures for the wounded and prisoners of war. The project would still be able to consider the significance of these categories since a proportion of each of them ended up in the statistics of the dead. An obvious starting-point was to revisit the attempts made after the war to establish the overall figures for the dead in the different countries concerned. It also became clear that various frameworks of analysis for the dead were both possible and desirable, such as military units, particular battles, and defined communities on the home front (village, town, etc.).

It was shown that the military dead, both during the war and afterwards, is a culturally rich theme. How individual and mass death were related to each other was a central issue in the experience and commemoration of the war. Potentially, the comparison of how military cemeteries and memorials were established on the different fronts provides an excellent framework for studying the 'memory' of mass death at a European level.

The 'missing' emerged as a key category since it changed in definition during and after the war. The 'missing' started as those whose fate in the chaos of combat was unknown. Eventually, when those who had been wounded or made prisoner were eliminated, they became a significant component of the dead. As such they posed a

particular problem in terms of commemoration, since they left no corpse for burial and mourning. The 'missing' is an ideal subject for relating the statistical and cultural aspects of the project.

The difficulty of integrating scholars from countries where the subject of military casualties, and more broadly the demographic and military history, of the First World War is relatively advanced with scholars from countries where this is not the case was only partly overcome. Nonetheless, in the final session there was a very good evaluation of the situation in countries such as Austria (including the multi-ethnic army of the Hapsburg Dual Monarchy), Slovenia and others states of the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Lithuania and Russia, and the possibilities of their collaboration in the project. It is clear that a younger generation of historians of the Great War is emerging in these countries, and that their collaboration in a future project is both possible and essential.

Two significant gaps in the subject were identified by the workshop. One is the paucity of work on Russian military casualty figures (partly owing to the Communist regime's relative lack of interest in the subject). The second is the lack of research on the military cemeteries and memorials on the eastern front, which effectively means in interwar Poland (contemporary Poland and Ukraine). Poland did not exist as a state during the Great War and Poles fought on both sides, in the Russian, Austro-Hungarian and German armies. But the new Polish state became the custodian of the major eastern front battlefields after the war. We have no basis for comparing the elaborate commemoration of the war on the former western front with that in the east. Both these gaps would require particular attention in a longer-term project.

The Research Centre of the Historial de la Grande Guerre has designated this project as a research project in the medium term (down to 2012). It is immensely grateful to the ESF for making possible this workshop, which demonstrated the importance and viability of the topic and which also showed that it is capable of arousing enthusiasm and commitment on the part of historians in a number of countries. Already, collaboration has begun between historians in Britain and Australia as a result of the workshop with a view to refining the statistics of the military dead for the British Empire.

The organizational and other issues associated with the project require reflection and further analysis. In particular, the questions of how research can be set up as outlined above in Poland and Russia need special attention.

The Research Centre will decide in the coming months exactly how it wishes to proceed with the project. It will of course consider closely the possibility of applying to the ESF (and to other bodies) for funding, but it needs first to establish exactly what the dimensions of the project, and the best methodology, would be.

4. Final programme.

Sunday 29 June 2008: arrival and dinner

Monday, 30 June 2008:

8:45-9:10 Inaugural address: Gerd Krumeich

9:10-9:30 Presentation of the European Science Foundation: Slavko Michalek
(Standing Committee for the Humanities)

9:30-10:45 Session 1: Counting the dead

President & organiser: Gerd Krumeich

11:00-12:30 Session 1: Counting the dead (continued)

12:30-14:00. Lunch

14:00-15:45 Session 2: Representing the dead

President & organiser: Annette Becker

16:00-17:30 Session 2: Representing the dead (continued)

19:00 Dinner

20:30-22:00. Keynote address: Jay Winter

Who are the dead of the Great War?

Tuesday, 1 July 2008.

06:30-13:00. Tour of the battlefield of the Somme and the commemorative ceremonies.

Guide & organiser: Nicolas Beaupré.

13:00-14:30 Lunch

14:30-16:00 Session 3: Counting and representing the dead of the Battle of the Somme.

President & organiser: Jay Winter

16:15-18:00 Session 3: Counting and representing the dead of the Battle of the Somme (continued)

19:30 Dinner

Wednesday, 2 July 2008.

9:00-10:30 Session 4: Planning the research project: The Unthinkable: the Military Dead of the Great War.

President & organiser: John Horne

10:45-12:15 Session 4: Planning the research project (continued)

12:15-12:30. Closing address: Jean-Jacques Becker

13:00. Lunch and departure.

5. Final list of participants.

Holger Afflerbach, University of Leeds, United Kingdom.

Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, France.

Nicolas Beaupré, Université de Clermont-Ferrand, France.

Annette Becker, Université de Paris X-Nanterre, France.

Jean-Jacques Becker, Président, Centre de Recherche, Historial de la Grande Guerre, France.

Annie Deperchin, Université de Lille-II, France.

Frédéric Guelton, Service Historique de la Défense, Ministère de la Défense, France.

Christa Hämmerle, University of Vienna, Austria.

John Horne, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland.

Heather Jones, European University Institute, Florence, Italy.

Gerd Krumeich, University of Düsseldorf, Germany.

Nicola Labanca, University of Siena, Italy.

Christoph Mick, University of Warwick, United Kingdom.

Robin Prior, University of Adelaide, Australia.

Antoine Prost, Université de Paris I-Sorbonne (emeritus), France.

Anne Rasmussen, Université de Strasbourg, France.

Gary Sheffield, University of Birmingham, United Kingdom.

Petra Svoljsak, Historical Institute, Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Alexandre Sumpf, Centre Franco-Russe de Recherche en Sciences Humaines et Sociales, Moscow, Russia.

Darius Staliunas, Lithuanian Institute of History, Vilnius, Lithuania.

Laurence Van Ypersele, Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium.

Nikolai Vukov, Institute of Folklore Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, Bulgaria.

Jay Winter, Yale University, USA.

6. Statistical breakdown of participants.

6.1 By country of employment.

- Austria 1
- Australia 1
- Belgium 1
- Bulgaria 1
- France 8
- Germany 1
- Ireland 1
- Italy 2
- Lithuania 1
- Russia 1
- Slovenia 1
- UK 3
- USA 1
- Total: 23

6.2 By approximate age.

- under 35 6
- 35-50 5
- 51-65 10
- over 65 2
- Total: 23

6.3 Gender.

- Male 16
- Female 7
- Total: 23

John Horne (Principal Investigator)
Professor of Modern European History,
Department of History,
Trinity College, Dublin 2, Ireland
Tel: 00.353.1.896.1011: e-mail: jhorne@tcd.ie

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