



Temporary cemeteries

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The Great War left behind it a changed landscape on the front line. In the aftermath of the conflict, most of the burials were temporary. In the 1920s and 1930s, they were gathered in larger cemeteries, which today bear witness to the sacrifices made.

1919 : prefiguration of the permanent funerary sites of of the Great War

If the Great War left behind a landscape that was turned upside down on the front line, it includes today a great number of military cemeteries built in the 1920s and 1930s. In the aftermath of the conflict, most of these graves are temporary before being gathered in larger cemeteries.

Initially, many individual French, British, German and American graves were dug on roads, along embankments, or scattered on the battlefields. The bodies were gradually transported to temporary cemeteries located in the immediate vicinity of the front line, near communication routes or rear hospitals. Sometimes a stele or a commemorative monument remains on the spot, often erected by the bereaved families, as can be seen today at the Chemin des Dames. However, some of them, dating from the first weeks of the conflict, remain in their original location; the bodies are not moved or returned to the families. This is the case for the large tomb at Villeroy, which became the National Necropolis at Chauconin-Neufmontiers (Seine-et-Marne). It contains all 133 French soldiers who fell on the first day of the Battle of the Marne on September 5, 1914, in particular the writer Charles Péguy. In the days following the battle, it took the form of an ossuary and kept the appearance of the "military graves" of the 1870-1871 war. Soldiers lay side by side without distinction of origin, rank or religion. In 1919, its appearance was simple, only materialized by a mound topped by wooden crosses. The local population decorated it with wreaths, flowers and pennants, giving it a rich and colorful appearance, reflecting the homage paid to the soldiers and embodied by numerous patriotic

ceremonies. Like this burial site, the immediate environment does not seem to have changed. The ossuary, finally built in 1934, echoes an immense plain planted with wheat that abuts the hills where the German machine guns were posted.

Faced with mass death, in a context of social change and democratization, the recognition of the soldier as an individual overturned the rite of burial of the dead: individual graves were imposed on all armies on the entire front as well as in the rear. For France, the right to an individual and permanent burial for all soldiers was adopted on December 29, 1915. The preservation of the name of the combatant as a recognition of the collective sacrifice of the nation structured this law. In these cemeteries of earth and wood, the reproduction of identical graves foreshadows the desire for equal treatment between men, regardless of their ethnic and social origins, their religion or their rank. The families who requested it obtained the restitution of the body of their deceased. More than 250,000 of them were reburied in family vaults.

As early as September 1914, many cemeteries were multinational, such as the Franco-German cemetery in Saint-Quentin (Aisne), or the one on the road to Solesmes near Cambrai (Nord) created in 1917. This arrangement was to last, except for the American cemeteries. Once the war was over, the first sites were chosen and a vast policy of regrouping the graves was organized. But France, ruined and worn out by the years of war, kept its provisional cemeteries with homemade wooden crosses for a long time before making them a subject of reflection. These places of remembrance were then imbued with a republican, secular, social and political discourse.

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