

Soldier (Modern Era)

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VERSION 1.0 | PUBLISHED 11 JANUARY 2023

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1. Overview

The image of the soldier underwent profound change from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, linked to the industrialisation of warfare and the closer connection between the conflict and the community at home. This new type of mass warfare was increasingly difficult to reconcile with the traditional conception of the war hero.^[1] Notions of the heroic also changed in response to the political and economic conditions of the emerging modern era.^[2] The First World War ultimately represented a watershed in which the figure of the soldierly hero and its relation to modernity were renegotiated.^[3]

2. The industrialisation of warfare and its consequences for the image of the soldier

2.1. Warfare on the road to modernity

In the mid-19th century, warfare in Western countries began to change. Technical innovations such as the needle gun or the *mitrailleuse* were influencing both strategy and tactics. Whilst, during the Crimean War of 1853–1856, soldiers still advanced towards each other in long line formations, the advantage of modern weapons for defensively entrenched units was already noticeable during the siege of Sevastopol in 1854/1855. Developments in weapons technology led to the obsolescence of the military tactics that had still been being used successfully in the first half of the century. However, it was not only military technology that changed, but also the increasing importance of political leadership, which had to coordinate armed forces as well as mobilise civil society at home for the war effort. During the American Civil War of 1861–1865, these two developments became apparent for the first time in a Western theatre of war. Barbed wire, trenches, landmines, and artillery fire were not inventions of the First World War; they had already been tested in the middle of the century and changed the soldierly experience.^[4] However, despite the new technological developments, the individual soldier did not lose his place in the military doctrines of European countries. It was only towards the end of the 19th century that the ideal of an autonomous soldier was exchanged for that of a mass army, for example in the early 1880s in the Third French Republic.^[5] The major military campaigns of the second half of the century also saw the deployment of colonial troops, which led to the emergence of new **heroic figures**. The Zouaves in the French army, for example, were incorporated into heroic narratives that spread a mixture of exotic and mythical warrior ideals that contrasted with European soldiers. However, the depiction of colonial troops was tainted by racist stereotypes and notions of African or Oriental savagery.^[6]

2.2. Militarization of European societies

The introduction of compulsory military service during the last third of the 19th century had a major influence on the image of soldiers in Western European societies. While this was viewed with scepticism by most states after the Napoleonic Wars, as it was feared that democratic principles would be thereby extended, Prussian successes after the 1860s demonstrated the advantages of general conscription, which had already been introduced there in 1814. Other states such as France or Russia continued to rely on selective conscription with extensive exceptions. Only after the victory of Prussia and its German allies over France in 1870/71 did other states adopt universal conscription with a large force of reserves.^[7]

Towards the end of the century there was, therefore, a more comprehensive democratisation of the soldier, which at the same time became more closely linked to civil society. The male population was now almost invariably educated about military virtues, which included attributes such as strength, heroism, discipline, unity, obedience to authority and sacrifice for the nation. These same values consolidated the notion of conscription as a civic duty and also underscored the seeming inevitability of war. Accordingly, the military occupied an ever-greater place in Western European societies and thus led to a popularisation of the soldier imagined as heroic, who would sacrifice his life for the

fatherland in an emergency.[8] Even though the influence of such militarisation on the societies concerned is difficult to quantify, it can be assumed that towards the end of the 19th century a romantically transfigured idea of soldiers and of warfare was widespread and no longer corresponded to the realities of modern war.[9]

Fig. 1: Carl Röchling: "Death of Major von Hadeln on 18 August 1870"



Carl Röchling: "Episode from the Battle of Gravelotte (Death of Major von Hadeln on 18 August 1870)"

1897, oil on canvas, 115 cm × 181 cm, Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Inv. No. 1988/99.

Source: Bartmann, Dominik / Werner, Anton von (Eds.): Anton von Werner. Geschichte in Bildern. München 1993: Hirmer, 97, No. 293, Fig. 61.

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2.3. War reporting and mass media

However, these developments alone were not enough to change the idea of soldierly heroism in Western European societies. Without the new type of war reporting that kept civil societies informed of events on the front, such a change could not have taken place. Thus, the Crimean War was the first major conflict in which professional war correspondents wrote not only about the developments of the fighting, but also about the deeds and sufferings of ordinary soldiers. Thanks to improved means of transport, and telegraphy, these reports could reach European societies relatively quickly.[10] Thus, the war reports published in newspapers brought many tales of heroic deeds of ordinary soldiers closer to the British readership and thus created a broader public awareness of a soldierly type of hero for the first time. Simultaneously, public interest in honouring these ordinary men in uniform increased.[11] War as a media event[12] consequently had a major influence on the change in the image of soldiers in Western European societies.

3. Phenomena and forms of representation of soldierly heroism

3.1. Soldierly heroism in modern warfare

The Crimean War, above all, changed the British public's attitude towards its soldiers. It was the basis for a modern national myth in which soldiers allegedly fought for national honour, for justice and freedom. Chivalry and heroism had previously been represented by aristocratic military leaders; military paintings, for example, usually showed noble officers in heroic battles. The common soldier was usually ignored. The erection of the *Guards Crimean War Memorial* symbolised a turning point in Victorian attitudes to soldierly heroism. (See fig. 2.) It represented an attack on the aristocratic claim to leadership within the military, which had proved disastrous during the Crimean War. If the British hero had previously been imagined as a 'groomed' gentleman, he was now a trooper, a 'Private Smith' or a 'Tommy'[13] of folklore who fought bravely and brought victory to the motherland despite the mistakes of the British generals. This narrative persisted into the First World War.

Fig. 2: The Guards Crimean War Memorial, 1861



The Guards Crimean War Memorial, 1861, London

after a design by John Henry Foley and Arthur George Walker.

Source: [User:Qmin / Wikimedia Commons](#)

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The introduction of the Victoria Cross to honour the achievements of ordinary soldiers finally gave official recognition to this development. In other countries, however, similar forms of recognition had already existed for some time, for example in France since 1802 with the *Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur* or in Prussia since 1813 with the *Iron Cross*.^[14] The creation of the Victoria Cross demonstrates a change in the idea of heroism, and not only in its official symbolism. Soldiers who received this award became important reference points for commemorative events and a popular remembrance culture. A large number of post-war books also glorified the courage of ordinary soldiers from the 1850s onwards.^[15] In addition, a new religious subtext within soldiery emerged during the Crimean War. The suffering clearly described in the newspapers changed the image of soldiers among the British upper and middle classes. Whereas the ordinary soldier had previously been a drinking, undisciplined brawler, he now became a faithful Christian who accomplished the will of God through his martyrdom.^[16] For the rest of Western Europe, however, the Crimean War did not have the same impact. For France, the German states, the Habsburg monarchy and Italy, the wars of the 1860s were to prove more significant points of reference. In these wars, too, however, the novel connection between the military front and civil society led to a similar change in the notion of the

soldier and to closer links between the battles and civic society.[17]

3.2. The First World War as a rupture of the heroic

The First World War reconfigured assumptions about military heroism. If developments since the Atlantic Revolutions and the Napoleonic Wars had led to a democratisation of military heroism, this process culminated on the battlefields of the First World War.[18] The anonymised war of mass destruction marginalised the significance of the individual subject and thus effectively excluded the possibility of heroism on the battlefield – at least in tactical war. In regions that were not marked by the stalemate on the fronts, individuals were able to stand out and in some cases were built up as heroic figures in the media in their home society – for example, T. E. Lawrence, who as a mixture of soldier and adventurer still elicits great fascination.[19]

Nevertheless, on the European Western Front especially, the suffering, the anonymity of the battlefields and the enormous fatalities led to death losing its heroic potential, and to the fallen being assigned a victim role. While it was still possible to commemorate the heroically fallen in the American Civil War or the Franco-Prussian War in the second half of the 19th century, the dead of the First World War were reinterpreted as victims of this conflict.[20] In the soldier's self-perception in particular, there was a corresponding disillusionment, itself a product of the Enlightenment and Romanticism.[21] The expectations of many soldiers were disappointed above all by the absence of an offensive war imagined as heroic, buried instead in the positions and trenches by artillery fire.[22] The inflationary distribution of military awards also discredited this potential source of military heroism.[23] However, it cannot be said that soldierly heroes were no longer seen in the societies of the homeland. Werner Sombart and Georg Simmel, for example, transferred their ideal conceptions of the German people to the fighting soldiers, who became the prototype of a "neuer Mensch" ("new man") through their heroically imagined struggle in the trenches. From this point of view, the type of soldier-hero did not need a specific individual to enable adoration. Rather, the imagined collective concept of the soldier formed a surface for the projection of longings and expectations that were to be fulfilled through the soldier's heroic struggle.[24]

Another development that reached a temporary peak during the First World War was the close connection between the frontlines and home. This required that new heroic narratives had to be found on the so-called home front of the belligerent states, which counteracted the impression of the industrially conducted mass war. New possibilities of controlling the mass media were used, among other things, to convey heroic figures that were supposed to contribute to a comprehensive mobilisation of society (see also [propaganda](#)).[25] Accordingly, attempts were made to stylise individual figures as heroes in the media, which, however, only led to a long-term adoration of soldiers in exceptional cases.[26]

Fig. 3: “Les héros obscurs”



3.3. Soldierly attributes

During the First World War, military heroism was transferred to the entire **collective** of soldiers for the first time. After the battles at Verdun and on the Somme, the heroic-soldierly attributes of suffering, **perseverance** and standing firm, of willingness to make sacrifices and of manliness fulfilled a role model function at the front and at home. Thus, every soldier could theoretically be a hero without having a definable community of admirers.[27]

The culmination of this process after the war was the cult of the allegorical figure of the Unknown Soldier, who was regarded as the epitome of the heroic soldierly sacrifice.[28] This development also had an impact on individual military heroes, who themselves could not do without soldierly attributes or who were placed in the vicinity of the soldierly hero collective, such as the generals Paul von Hindenburg, Philippe Pétain or Ferdinand Foch, who were celebrated as heroes.[29] The soldierly collective became an important basis for legitimising the individual war hero.

The soldierly hero during the First World War was, however, not only endowed with new attributes derived from modern warfare. As Stefan Goebel shows, the image of the modern soldier, especially in British society, was shaped by notions of medieval chivalry. Even if chivalry in battle was no longer possible, the ideal of chivalrous behaviour remained an important component of idealised notions of

the soldier in British society. Soldierly heroism thus saw a shift from action – such as in a victorious battle or duel – to character. The First World War also led to soldierly heroism transcending class boundaries. Using the example of ‘chivalry’, one can see that on a rhetorical level, national virtues were glorified which applied equally to all those who had fallen.[30]

3.4. Mechanised chivalry

While it was only possible in very few cases to portray individual front-line soldiers as heroes, in other theatres of battle people were found who seemed more suitable for [heroization](#) in the media. Above all, aviation offered the possibility of giving military heroism a face again, thus counteracting the anonymisation and disillusionment of an industrialised war. “Heroes of the air” such as Gabriele D’Annunzio, Manfred von Richthofen or Georges Guynemer once again succeeded in reviving earlier notions of military heroism through an appropriate media staging.[31] At the same time, they represented an extraordinary modernity, for the mastery of aircraft stood for not only mobility and overcoming the limits of space and time, but also for the triumph of man over nature. In many ways, the competition in the skies offered a counter-image to the nameless dead on the battlefields and made war meaningful again.[32] Submarine captains occupied a similar position in media representation, but never achieved the popularity of fighter pilots.[33]

3.5. Soldier-heroes after the ‘Great War’

The soldierly hero was a deeply ambivalent and literally fractured figure after the First World War. On one hand, all post-war societies drew a large part of their legitimacy from the fallen soldiers, who without exception were declared heroes who had sacrificed themselves for their fatherland. On the other hand, all post-war societies had to deal with the constant presence of the surviving soldiers. Many of them were physically scarred by the war, missing limbs or with facial injuries, and were a pervasive reminder of the horrors of war. Their presence was difficult to reconcile with the fallen who were imagined as heroic.[34]

Even if the survivors were not forgotten, a notion of soldierly heroism that remained attached to the ‘Great War’ dominated. The sacrifice of millions of soldiers did not, in a sense, allow the trench hero to lose his hegemonic position in the collective memory of nations. Although attempts were made, especially by the left-wing political spectrum, to popularise a pacifist type of soldier, the image of the front-line soldier fighting for the fatherland dominated the interwar period.[35] For example, at the victory celebrations and the tributes to the three marshals of France, Joseph Joffre, Ferdinand Foch and Philippe Pétain, in Paris, it was stipulated that under no circumstances should the impression be given that these three were greater than the fallen soldiers.[36] But the heroic sacrifice of the fallen was not the only central motif in the heroization of soldiers. At the other end of the spectrum of memories of the soldiers of the First World War was an exaggeration of the experience on the front that sometimes seemed religious. Such an emphasis on the heroic struggle and the community at the front was intended to release these soldiers from their victim role and spread the exemplary ideal of a front-line fighter that could be transferred to civilian society. Pacifist appeals in the name of the Unknown Soldier and nationalist-militarist ones in the name of the front-line fighters stood for the two extreme poles of remembrance of the soldiers of the First World War.[37]

The public and the official discourses of remembrance also offered post-war societies the possibility of self-assurance through the evocation of chivalric attributes, irrespective of the interpretation over the soldiers' sovereignty. Chivalric symbolic language suggested that the soldiers had not been touched by the brutality of war, that it had not turned them into cold-blooded murderers. Chivalric attributes helped to contain this potential post-war moral dilemma.[38]

Fig. 4: Frank Hurley: "The morning after the first battle of Passchendaele", 1917



Frank Hurley: "The morning after the first battle of Passchendaele showing Australian Infantry wounded around a blockhouse near the site of Zonnebeke Railway Station, October 12, 1917."

Source: [National Library of Australia, nla.obj-147387446](https://nla.obj-147387446)

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3.6. Soldierly heroism in the remembrance culture of the post-war period

In almost all nations, monuments to this new heroic figure were erected at the beginning of the 1920s. (See fig. 5.) The forms of commemoration for the fallen of the First World War were largely similar. For example, the common soldier who had been given his own grave was often commemorated; names were rarely listed by rank, resulting in a symbolic equality of the dead. Moreover, similarities in symbolism and imagery prevailed, so that one can perceive a uniform, European commemoration of the fallen that expressed similar ideas of soldierly heroism.[39]

The figure of the Unknown Soldier not only served as a focus for national mourning and to retrospectively legitimise the war victims, it also contributed to perpetuating a certain type of soldier-hero. The image of the front-line soldier who sacrificed his life for his fatherland in the trenches shaped the interwar period. In this regard, Bernd Hüppauf notes that, at least in the German case, two mutually exclusive war myths persisted: On the one hand, the "myth of heroism and sacrifice" of the Langemarck myth, which mainly inspired conservatives and nationalists. On the other, an "aggressive myth with futuristic and nihilistic features", as epitomised in the material battles of Verdun in 1916. The Langemarck myth had kept alive and glorified the soldierly heroes with the ideals of chivalry and heroic sacrifice, whereas the Verdun myth had presented man as raw material, shaped in the highly

organised, amoral and compassionless war. While the Langemarck myth essentially served the retrospective heroization of the fallen, the Verdun myth prospectively formed the ideological foundation of a “new man” in the age of mass war, which was later to be taken up by the Nazis.[40]

Fig. 5: Monument to the war dead of Hendaye, 1921



**Monument aux morts de la guerre
1914–1918, Hendaye, 1921**

designed and executed by Henry Martinet and Louis Adamski. Bronze statue by Paul Ducuing. Inscription: “Aux héros hendayais de la Grande Guerre.”

Source: [User:Jahsensie / Wikimedia Commons](#)
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3.7. Freedom fighters as soldiers

But there were also forms of soldierly heroism that were not based only on the experiences of the First World War. In large parts of Europe, the fighting did not end in November 1918, but was continued by irregular units. In Germany, for example, Freikorps fighters who were still under arms in the disputed border areas between Germany and Poland until 1919 could be placed in a tradition with the soldiers of the Great War. During the phase of disputed nation-state foundations and unclear territorial allocations, individual freedom fighters were also assigned soldierly attributes throughout Europe. For example, Albert Leo Schlageter, who was sentenced to death during the occupation of the Ruhr, the irredentist Cesare Battisti, who came from South Tyrol, or the medical student Kevin Barry, who was executed in the Irish Civil War in 1920, could be portrayed and glorified as symbols of soldierly sacrifice for the fatherland.[41] In the post-war period, the boundaries between soldier-heroes and freedom fighters blurred accordingly.

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6. List of images

- 0 Teaserbild: "Les héros obscurs" (detail), back cover of the *Supplément illustré du Petit Journal*, 26 March 1916.
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- 1 Carl Röchling: "Episode from the Battle of Gravelotte (Death of Major von Hadeln on 18 August 1870)", 1897, oil on canvas, 115 cm × 181 cm, Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Inv. No. 1988/99.
Source: Bartmann, Dominik / Werner, Anton von (Eds.): *Anton von Werner. Geschichte in Bildern*. München 1993: Hirmer, 97, No. 293, Fig. 61.
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- 2 The Guards Crimean War Memorial, 1861, London, after a design by John Henry Foley and Arthur George Walker.
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- 3 “Les héros obscurs”, back cover of the Supplément illustré du Petit Journal, 26 March 1916
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- 4 Frank Hurley: “The morning after the first battle of Passchendaele showing Australian Infantry wounded around a blockhouse near the site of Zonnebeke Railway Station, October 12, 1917.”
Source: [National Library of Australia, nla.obj-147387446](#)
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- 5 Monument aux morts de la guerre 1914–1918, Hendaye, 1921, designed and executed by Henry Martinet and Louis Adamski. Bronze statue by Paul Ducuing. Inscription: “Aux héros hendayais de la Grande Guerre.”
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Citation

Stefan Schubert: Soldier (Modern Era). In: Compendium heroicum, ed. by Ronald G. Asch, Achim Aurnhammer, Georg Feitscher, Anna Schreurs-Morét, and Ralf von den Hoff, published by Sonderforschungsbereich 948, University of Freiburg, Freiburg 2023-01-11. DOI: 10.6094/heroicum/smee1.0.20230111

Meta data

DOI	10.6094/heroicum/smee1.0.20230111
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Category	Hero Types
Subject Headings (LOC)	Medals, badges, decorations, etc. , History, Military , Heroes , Heroes in mass media , Mass media , Soldiers , World War, 1914-1918
Index	<p>Authors: Stefan Schubert</p> <p>Persons and Figures: Georg Simmel, T. E. Lawrence, Werner Sombart, Paul von Hindenburg, Philippe Pétain, Ferdinand Foch, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Manfred von Richthofen, Georges Guynemer, Joseph Joffre, Albert Leo Schlageter, Cesare Battisti, Kevin Barry, Unknown Soldier</p> <p>Spaces and Locations: Russia, Italy, France, Germany, Prussia, Paris, Verdun, Somme</p> <p>Time and Events: 19th century, 20th century, Crimean War (1853-1856), World War I / First World War, French Third Republic (1870-1940), Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), Modern Age</p>

Compendium heroicum

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Gefördert von der Deutschen
Forschungsgemeinschaft

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