K. S. Inglis

Entombing Unknown Soldiers: From London and Paris to Baghdad

On 11 November 1920 vast crowds in London and Paris watched a procession in which the unidentifiable remains of a soldier who had died in the Great War were carried through the city to be reburied in a sacred place at the center of the capital.

There had never been such a ceremony until that moment. Yet so fitting did the symbolic gesture appear to people in other belligerent nations that over the next decade it was copied in nearly every country, both the victorious and the defeated.

In 1921 the ceremony and the monument-making were enacted in four other nations of the victorious alliance: the USA, Italy, Belgium and Portugal. Two states created by the war, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, followed in 1922, and Romania in 1923. In that year for the first time the body of a man who had served in the army of a defeated country was buried, in Bulgaria. Austria and Hungary followed, and by 1930 the ritual had been performed also in Poland and Greece, Belgium had acquired a second (1927), and in the USA an unknown soldier of the American Revolution had been entombed. The British Empire had none outside the imperial metropolis. When one was suggested for the colony of Jamaica the proponents learned that there were no unidentified bodies of soldiers from the British West Indies. From the self-governing dominions there were plenty; but Australians and Canadians were content to have the body in Westminster Abbey defined as representing the whole empire. Among other imperial powers the Portuguese actually had not one but two tombs of unknown soldiers, one from Flanders and the other from the war in German East Africa; and in France somebody proposed in 1921 that the remains of an unknown black soldier be dug up and reburied in Senegal. Nothing appears to have come of the idea: certainly there were difficulties, physical and symbolic, in selecting a body that was both unknown and black.
It is ironic – to use a word overworked but always hard to avoid in writing about the Great War – that in neither of the two nations with most men to mourn, Russia and Germany, was the tomb of an unknown soldier created. The Bolsheviks who withdrew Russia from the war disowned it as a cause, and the only tomb admitted to the sacred center of the Soviet capital city was Lenin’s. In Germany, nothing came of a call in 1926 by the Chief Burgomaster of Cologne, Dr. Konrad Adenauer, for the entombing of an unknown German soldier by the bank of the Rhine; the Tannenberg Memorial (1927) contained the tombs of twenty unidentified soldiers, but was built to celebrate Hindenburg’s victory over the Russians, not to commemorate the fallen; and in Berlin the Neue Wache, transformed in 1931 into a memorial to the war dead, accommodated no unknown soldier until well after the next world war.¹

Origins

After the event England and France each produced contenders for the honor of having inspired it. Educated Europeans were familiar with Thucydides’ account of the ceremony in which Athenians honored men who had died in the wars against Sparta. An empty coffin represented “the missing, whose bones could not be recovered.”² Men whose bodies could be recovered were carried home for burial at a civic funeral, in which that empty coffin enabled relatives of the missing to participate. There was no burial of the remains of an unidentifiable warrior. What made the Athenian ceremony resemble and possibly help to inspire the making of tombs to unknown soldiers after 1918 was that it gave “the missing” a funeral.

No war before the Great War had yielded so many missing men. They were in two categories: either their bodies could not be recovered – blown to pieces, buried in mud, or otherwise eluding burial parties during and after the war; or they could be recovered and interred but not identified. In this second category some bodies had become wholly anonymous, while for others some evidence – a man’s uniform, or the place where he lay – established the corpse’s nationality. It was from among these graves identified by nation but not by name that the makers of
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tombs for unknown soldiers sought the bodies to be removed and honored.

Only recently had European nation-states come to regard dead soldiers in the Athenian manner, as citizens meriting civic honor. Traditionally, war monuments commemorated leaders: kings, emperors, generals, admirals. The victors exult, in effigy and inscription; the dead soldiers, whether they fought for winners or losers or both, are buried collectively and namelessly, mere compost for the causes they have willingly or unwillingly served. Then, as the age of popular democracy and mass movements dawns, the service and death of ordinary soldiers begins to be recognized, on monuments which mourn them as well as celebrating their cause. The Missing, the Unknown, are given honor first in the USA, the most democratic of nineteenth-century nation-states, after the Civil War, until that time the most costly of modern wars. The civil cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has a memorial urn erected in 1896 “to the unknown dead” and inscribed as “A tribute of gratitude to those Union soldiers and sailors of the Civil War of 1861–1865 whose last resting place is unknown”; other cemeteries have similar memorials. And in the new National Cemetery at Arlington, Virginia, just across the river from Washington D.C., the remains of 2,111 unidentified northern dead were honored by what was named the Tomb of the Unknown Dead of the War between the States.

These are not tombs of unknown soldiers: the cemetery monuments have no bodies under them, and the tomb at Arlington is collective. But each is the expression of the new, modern conviction that dead soldiers deserve individual honor, and that where this is physically impossible they should be commemorated as Missing Unknown. These are visual gestures created in the same spirit as the words Lincoln was inspired to speak over the Union dead in the cemetery at Gettysburg. There is talk in France of some similar monument to the unknown dead of the war against Prussia. Nothing comes of it; but the idea is in the air of those nation-states where the dead soldier is now perceived as having a civic personality.

It is no surprise that the idea of entombing an unknown soldier came to more than one mind after 1914, during the war in which more men were killed than ever before, and with weapons and in

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conditions which left so many of them Missing. Whoever may have thought of it first, the initiative that led to action was certainly English. A clergyman who had been a chaplain during the war put the idea late in 1920 to the Dean of Westminster Abbey, ancient church and national pantheon, who wrote to King George V early in October suggesting that the ceremony of inaugurating the Cenotaph in Whitehall, scheduled for the second anniversary of the Armistice on 11 November, be accompanied by the reburial of an unidentified soldier in the Abbey. The King took some persuading, but gave way to the enthusiasm of his prime minister Lloyd George. This British initiative was followed in France just in time for the ceremonies to be simultaneous.

There is nevertheless a sense in which the plans had a French origin; for it is unlikely that Whitehall would have acquired its cenotaph had the arrangers of the victory march in Paris on 14 July 1919 not informed the British government of their plan to install under the Arc de Triomphe for the occasion a cenotaph, an empty tomb to represent the French war dead, which would be honored by everybody who marched past. That provoked the planners of London’s victory march five days later to commission their own temporary cenotaph, representing the dead of the British empire, to receive homage from the parade as it swung past all the offices of state, from Trafalgar Square toward the Houses of Parliament and the Abbey. Sir Edwin Lutyens’ plaster cenotaph was intended only for the parade. Its totally unforeseen popularity demanded first that the Cenotaph be left in place and then that it be reproduced permanently, in stone. The stepped pylon surmounted by empty tomb stood in public space, unadorned by a cross or any symbol or word other than Lloyd George’s inspired phrase “The Glorious Dead.” The architect was not an orthodox Christian, and his creation conveyed no Christian message except to observers who chose to see in the empty tomb a message of resurrection. The tomb of an unknown soldier in Westminster Abbey would be the Church of England’s answer to the Cenotaph. The Unknown would pause in Whitehall for the inauguration of the Cenotaph and then resume the journey to be buried in the floor of the Abbey. Thanks to the Dean, the ceremonies would connect the nation and its ever more precariously established church.
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Bodies

The French and British bodies were chosen by lot, in a manner designed to make quite sure that they were unknown, and people in every other country did the same. The British selection was made without publicity: six unidentified bodies were dug from sites of battle in France and Belgium, sealed in coffins and driven in six motor ambulances to an army hut near Ypres, where an officer was blindfolded and led until his hand touched one of the coffins. The French procedure was thoroughly public, making the selection itself the beginning of the ritual. The choice was entrusted not to an officer but to a newly conscripted corporal whose father was among the Missing; the eight coffins were borne to no mere hut but to an underground citadel at Verdun, where Corporal Auguste Tain placed on one of them a bouquet of flowers picked from the battlefield. The ceremony of choosing was itself an episode in the sacralization of Verdun as a holy place of the Third Republic.

Makers of tombs in 1921 and later emulated the French in improvising a ritual both democratic and sentimental. The Americans had been on the point of letting an officer choose when the arrangers learned what the French had done and cast instead a sergeant with roses to decide between their four. The Italians had a bereaved mother put white flowers on one of their eleven; in Belgium the selector was a blinded veteran, and in Romania a war orphan pointed to one of ten coffins and said: “This is my father.” In the Illustrated London News art supplied the drama life had denied the British Unknown, having him chosen by the angelic figure of Fame.

The British and French had also contrasting policies on the disposal of those bodies not chosen. Britain’s three were reburied without any sign of their posthumous expedition. France’s seven were reinterred without ceremony under a cross in the center of a war cemetery in Verdun, and with an inscription connecting them and their location with the Inconnu in Paris; they were buried at exactly the time he reached his destination. The Americans followed the British by quietly returning the unchosen corpses to their graves. The Italians, on the other hand, buried the residual ten with a ceremony outside the ancient cathedral at Aquileia where the lottery had been conducted, and as in France this was
done just when the body chosen was being interred in the capital. The left-over British and American corpses were lying, after all, in foreign ground; the Italian and French, however, were in the soil of their own homeland, and their compatriots judged it proper to let the nation know that each of them had almost become the Unknown Soldier.

Journeys

"Go, Soldier of France, to the glory that a grateful country reserves for its great men," said the deputy mayor of Verdun. "Go to receive for ever in glory the admiration of future generations. Verdun salutes thee with emotion."

Special trains carried the coffins toward their destinations, and carefully selected warships awaited the two that had to cross the sea. The destroyer HMS Verdun, picked for its name, transported the British body over the Channel, and the famous old cruiser Olympia, Dewey's flagship when he sailed into Manila Bay to sink the Spanish fleet in 1898, carried the American body across the Atlantic. The railway carriage bearing Italy's body to Rome was followed by thirty trucks filled with flowers and was met at the station by the king.

Suitable overnight resting places were found or improvised. In Rome the coffin was placed before the high altar in the Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli, often the scene of services associating church and state, for a ceremony of solemn absolution. In Warsaw too the coffin's first lodging after leaving the train was in a church, the city's cathedral. In London the coffin stayed in its funeral coach, and in Paris it occupied a temporary chapel near a railway station. In Portugal and the USA secular buildings were preferred: Lisbon's parliament, Washington's Capitol, where on 10 November 1921 nearly 100,000 people filed past the casket resting on a catafalque which had borne the bodies of Lincoln and later the other murdered presidents Garfield and McKinley when their bodies had lain here in state. In the evening, as guards stood with arms reversed, President Harding laid on the casket the bronze seal of the USA, and the Vice President, the Speaker, the Chief Justice and General Pershing laid wreaths.

The final journey, on 11 November or whatever other date had been judged most appropriate – in Italy 4 November (anniversary
of victory over the Austrians), in Portugal 9 April (anniversary of a battle at Lys, Belgium, in 1918), in Poland 2 November (All Souls’ Day) – took the Unknown on a route and with a pomp which equated him with monarchs and other great personages. In London the procession recalled the coronations and funerals of monarchs, in Washington the funerals of presidents. In Paris the Inconnu was accorded one of the great state funerals of the Third Republic.8

Destinations

The site for London’s tomb was uncontested. As soon as the Dean of Westminster proposed it, everybody involved was impressed with the symmetry of Cenotaph and Tomb: the bodiless tomb out in Whitehall, the nameless body inside the Abbey. In France, however, the destiny of the body touched off an argument about the nature of the Republic and the meaning of the war which was settled only just in time for the ceremony to be held on the designated date.

Unlike the British Unknown, France’s could not be buried among kings: the royal bodies out at Saint-Denis occupied an unpopular ecclesiastical monument to the old regime. Nor did anybody propose putting the Inconnu in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame: the formal separation of church and state ruled that out. As late as 3 November 1920 the intended site was the Panthéon, which since the latest swing in the pendulum of French history between monarchy and republic had been reconsecrated as a civic temple in 1885 when it had received the body of Victor Hugo. After vehement debate in the National Assembly the Panthéon was rejected, and the Arc de Triomphe chosen, with only three days to go. The Panthéon, critics declared, was for great men. “The poilu whom we are going to glorify is not a great man. He is the symbol of the immense number of soldiers who sacrificed themselves for their country. He is the symbol of victory.”9 He should, therefore, lie under the arch which commemorated the nation’s triumphs. Moreover, they believed that the Panthéon had been as it were denationalized, identified with the Left, by the burial there of Zola in 1908. As for the Arc, though republicans were uncomfortable about its history as a project initiated by an empire and
accomplished by two monarchies, it had been made more congenial to them by receiving the body of Victor Hugo to lie in state on its way to the Panthéon. Moreover, the sacred character of the Arc had been enhanced by harboring that cenotaph which symbolized all France's war dead in the parade of 14 July 1919.

In the nick of time the parties created a remarkable compromise by which the body of the Inconnu, savior of the nation, would be accompanied on its way through Paris by the heart of Gambetta, savior of the Republic. The procession was a double state occasion, giving the Inconnu the funeral of which he and all the other Missing had been deprived and reenacting the funeral Gambetta had been given nearly forty years earlier. Coffin and casket were carried first into the Panthéon, where the President of the Republic eulogized both Gambetta and the Inconnu, and then escorted to the Arc, the Inconnu to be laid under it and Gambetta's heart to be returned to the Panthéon. On the Sunday after 11 November more than 25,000 people filed past Gambetta's catafalque and more visited the Arc, though they could not see the Inconnu, for such had been the rush that no tomb was yet prepared. The coffin had been moved after the ceremony to a chamber high up in the Arc, awaiting final entombment on 28 January 1921.10

Makers of tombs in other countries searched for fit sites and found them without evident controversy. Portugal's two Unknowns were buried in Batalha Abbey, which resembled in history and meaning both Westminster Abbey and the Panthéon. Belgium's lay at the center of Brussels, in front of the Palais de Nation, forum and symbol of national independence. For Poland's a Mausoleum was built under a central arcade. Italy's was buried inside an Altar to the Nation, within the vast monument to Victor Emmanuel II which stood, or sat, on the Capitoline Hill proclaiming the new Italy as legatee of ancient Rome. Here and elsewhere, the presence of the Unknown not merely conformed with, but enriched and even transformed, the meaning of its site.

**Inscriptions**

Custodians in different countries made different judgments about how much verbal help visitors needed to understand what they
were seeing. Though national stereotypes might make us expect otherwise, the French opted for economy of inscription and the British for loquacity. At first the French coffin was to be inscribed simply “Le soldat français.” Le would have made him generic, abstract, a type; and I imagine that is why the article became un, recognizing the Inconnu as an individual. The inscription finally chosen said simply: “Ici repose un soldat français mort pour la patrie. 1914–1918.” Not even “inconnu”: that goes without saying. The tomb under the Arc is allowed to speak for itself.

Britain’s Unknown was almost from the beginning a Warrior. In a nation where the navy was mythically the senior service and occupied a more honored place than the army in public memory, “soldier” jarred on more ears than in other countries when tombs of the unknown were being considered (even though any unidentified British body dug up in France or Belgium was almost certainly a soldier’s).

The clergyman who had originated the idea suggested “comrade,” which would have had an altogether different sound, addressing other war veterans rather than the grieving nation, and possibly alarming custodians of order with its Bolshevik associations. Lloyd George told the Commons on 1 November 1920 that “Warrior” was to be the word so that the body chosen would represent the three services (the air force having become separate in 1918). Intentionally or not, “Warrior” had another resonance, as a prime example of what Paul Fussell indispensably calls high diction. To name a twentieth-century soldier a warrior was to enroll him retrospectively in the army of some heroic age.

At first, in 1920, the inscription on the coffin in the Abbey was “A British Warrior who Fell in the Great War 1914–1918.” That was not enough for the Dean, who had the Unknown covered on 11 November 1921, when the making of the tomb was complete, with a blanket of high diction which he had made himself – in order, he said, to instruct posterity: “Beneath this stone rests the body of a British warrior unknown by name or rank brought from France to lie among the most illustrious of the land,” the inscription now began, and ended many words later with a passage copied from the tomb of a bishop interred in the Abbey in 1395: “They buried him among the kings because he had done good towards God and towards his house.” Into what space remained
around the edges the Dean fitted five passages from the Bible, including “In Christ shall all be made alive.” Antoine Prost observes that the inscription in Paris is perfectly sober. London’s is intoxicated. The Dean had chosen a very English, Anglican response to the challenge of honoring the sacrifice of ordinary men in the army of a modern state: not, as in Paris and elsewhere, and as in the nearby Cenotaph, by ignoring the rank and class of the Unknown, but by promoting him, affirming him a fit courier and companion to the kings and bishops around him, a feudal Christian warrior.

London’s inscription was singular in both density and substance. Athens’ had many words, but they were those of Pericles’ funeral oration, invoked to link the modern Greek state with classical antiquity. Republican America, like republican France, had nothing like the London text, though the message to be read at Arlington was not quite so plain as the one in Paris. At first, on the traveling coffin: “An unknown soldier who gave his life in the Great War.” By the time it reached Arlington: “Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God.” Where the French let the honor and glory speak from the Arc for themselves, the Americans put them in writing (“capitalized nouns of the high tradition,” as Samuel Hynes observes of many words on Great War memorials); and “Unknown” has become “known but to God,” differing from the French statement both in its high diction and its theism, though stopping short, as Americans customarily did in formal public speech, of commitment to Christianity.

Though sparing with words, the Americans went far beyond the British or the French in visual representation. After a few years the tomb at Arlington was judged to be not grand or eloquent enough, though it stood up, a sarcophagus above ground, unlike London’s and Paris’s tombs, which were flat and flush with the floor. A competition in 1928 produced a sarcophagus sixteen feet long, twelve feet high and nine feet wide, bearing figures reminiscent of those found on ancient Greek tombstones: a male figure of victory, a female peace, and an American soldier. As in their war cemeteries and battlefield monuments, so at the Tomb of the Unknown, Americans built more expressively than anybody else, though their losses had been lighter.
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Guardians

As the Dean of Westminster felt that London’s Unknown needed verbal elucidation, so custodians in France and the USA sensed that something else was missing.

In Le soldat inconnu: Histoire et culte, Charles Vilain fancies that at night the Inconnu was lonely. From its third anniversary in 1923 the tomb was accompanied by a Flame of Remembrance, which was placed next year in a brazier made of bronze from a captured German gun and which was to burn day and night forever as a sign that the Inconnu would never be forgotten. An association of veterans, La Flamme sous l’Arc de Triomphe, was formed in 1924 to pay daily attention to the flame and was given official responsibility in 1930 for doing so and for maintaining the Inconnu in the people’s memory. The Flame was quickly imitated. Belgium, Portugal, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, each installed one. As a symbol of eternity the device could appeal to believers in all faiths and none.

The tomb at Arlington was patrolled around the clock by an elite of professional troops known as the Old Guard. Those severe soldiers stamping around the Tomb were Arlington’s equivalent of other Unknowns’ flames of remembrance, demonstrating the nation’s – or at least the state’s – enduring commitment to its war dead.

Honors

The Tomb of the Unknown became everywhere a receptacle for wreaths, private and public. For visiting heads of state and ambassadors official and unofficial, it was recognized as the right place to lay floral tributes, from one people to the war dead of another. When Charles Lindbergh flew across the Atlantic in 1927 his first calls in Europe were to put flowers on the tombs of unknown soldiers in Paris, London and Brussels. Such gestures in honor of the dead begged no question about what the Unknown had done in life. It was different when the tombs received, as they all did, not only wreaths but medals. Though everything about the Unknown was entirely conjectural beyond his nationality and place of death, politicians and generals...
deemed him to have been a hero. The highest awards for bravery in battle, created from the time of the French Revolution to honor men regardless of rank, were heaped on his tomb. The British at first stopped short of acting out this fiction, going no further on 11 November 1920 than to have the Unknown guarded inside the Abbey by 100 winners of the Victoria Cross; but they could not stay out of the ritual exchange of decorations which the Americans initiated in 1921. President Wilson’s last act in office was to approve the bestowal of the Congressional Medal of Honor on the Unknowns in Paris and London. The French reciprocated by admitting the American Unknown to the Légion d’honneur at the gangway of the Olympia, and the British, after taking impolitely long to let General Pershing place the Medal on their Tomb, conferred the Victoria Cross on the Unknown at Arlington. So it went on, among the victor nations. As late as 1929 the Belgians and the Portuguese were exchanging their highest honors. Of all elements in the cult of the Unknown Soldier, this one was the most provocative to people who did not like the posthumous conscription of the war dead for political purposes.

**Politics**

*The Times* correspondent in New York saw a candidly political purpose in the exchange of Victoria Cross and Medal of Honor late in 1921, as delegates assembled to confer about disarmament: the ritual had been arranged “so as to impart a religious and patriotic character to the opening of the Washington Conference on Armistice Day.”

Every Unknown was immured in politics. The Portuguese government declared an amnesty for political prisoners on the day of the interment. To the struggling Polish government of Grabski, whose worries in 1925 included grave doubt about French support in dealings with Germany, Prime Minister Painlève sent an assurance that the French army would be as one with the Polish army at the moment when the monument to the Unknown Polish Soldier was inaugurated. Belgium’s second Unknown, a French soldier who had died on Belgian soil, was entombed at Brussels in 1927 in order to affirm joint French and Belgian determination to keep the Germans paying reparations.
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The Unknown could be invoked for political and other purposes without fear of contradiction from the Tomb. Pershing had no need to seek permission before dedicating his war memoirs in 1931 to the Unknown Soldier. Poets spoke on his behalf, one making the body in Arlington beg the Washington Conference "From war's earth-blind captivity/ Untomb me!" and another, a few weeks later, getting him to deplore the release from gaol of the pacifist Eugene Debs: having set free "my worst detractor," he asks from the tomb: "Why bring me here except it was in mockery?" Unknowns were especially prone to be recruited by movements on the Right. In 1923 London's Warrior could not decline the honor of solemn induction as Principal Knight and Supreme Head of the Order of Crusaders, an ancient-sounding but brand-new body of patriots whose rhetoric was not unlike Mussolini's.

The new Italian leader made Rome's Unknown a Fascist. By 4 November 1922, the first anniversary of the interment at the Altar of the Nation, Mussolini had just been appointed premier, and he and his ministers knelt in silent prayer before the Unknown while the church bells of Rome rang. Black Shirts and Red Shirts fought around the Tomb on 4 November 1924. Once securely in power, Mussolini made the Tomb the site for Fascist ceremony and for oratory celebrating and mythologizing Italy's participation in the Great War. As Patrizia Dogliani sees his regime's landscaping of Rome, the Altar of the Nation, visible from all corners of the city, became the point of junction between those quarters of the national capital remodeled at the end of the nineteenth century and the new capital of the Fascist empire. "This monument, with its sacrificed soldier, links the Piazza Venezia, theater of Mussolini's discourse, to the imperial forums excavated under Fascism." That may help to explain why Rome's Tomb gets no word in the post-Fascist Guide Michelin.

Meanwhile, Hitler was calling himself the Unknown Soldier.

Dissenters

The cult of the Unknown Soldier provoked anger and irony among pacifists and socialists and some less doctrinaire people disenchanted by the outcome of the war.
Let us honor if we can
The vertical man
Though we value none
But the horizontal one.

Thus W. H. Auden, dedicating his Poems in 1930 to Christopher Isherwood. The two most common grounds for disliking the cult were that it ignored the needs of the survivors and that it forced a patriotic and belligerent ideology on the helpless dead. Conservatives could well complain that the first judgment was unfair. In London The Times editorial of 12 November 1920, which described the burial of the Unknown as "the most beautiful, the most touching, and the most impressive that in all its long, eventful story this island has ever seen," said also: "A quarter of a million of the comrades of the Unknown Warrior are still seeking employment." But did Lloyd George or any of his successors in office ever honor the vertical man as they valued the horizontal one? What did they offer the survivors except what Robert Graves in a wartime poem had called "Big Words"? Writers and artists protested. Georg Grozs drew a medical board passing a skeleton for military service. Benjamin Peret marched around as the German Unknown Soldier, spouting meaningless verse. Bertold Brecht wrote two sardonic poems on the Inconnu. The American Edgar Lee Masters, writing in 1924 an epitaph for unknown soldiers, has them say:

... had we known what was back of their words
We should not be lying here!

Literary mockers speculated about the actual identity of the Unknown. Bernard Shaw enjoyed imagining that the corpse in the Abbey would turn out to have been a German. John Dos Passos wondered if Arlington had received a less than quite pure American, a black or an Italian or a Jew: "How can you tell a guy's a hundredpercent when all you've got's a gunnysack full of bones, bronze buttons stamped with the screaming eagle and a pair of roll puttees?" Dos Passos, who had seen the war from inside the medical corps, ended his Nineteen Nineteen (1932) with a sardonic passage on the honoring of the Unknown:
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Where his chest ought to have been they pinned the Congressional Medal, the D.S.C., the Médaille Militaire, the Belgian Croix de Guerre, the Italian gold medal, the Vitutea Militara sent by Queen Marie of Rumania, the Czechoslovak war cross, the Virtuti Militari of the Poles, a wreath sent by Hamilton Fish, Jr., of New York, and a little wampum presented by a deputation of Arizona redskins in warpaint and feathers. All the Washingtonians brought flowers. Woodrow Wilson brought a bouquet of poppies.

Where poets complained of Big Words, the Irish-born artist Sir William Orpen protested at the Big Picture. The painter Frank Salisbury had been commissioned to depict the ceremony in the Abbey, incorporating portraits of royalty, for the House of Commons. Orpen, himself engaged to do an official painting of delegates at Versailles, came up instead with a coffin flanked by two mad-looking half-naked soldiers, entitled “To the Unknown British Soldier in France.”

Irreverence could take a more temperate form. In an American story of the early 1920s, when somebody mentions the Unknown Soldier, a society matron asks: “What! Haven’t they found out who he was, yet?”

World War II

We might have expected no more Unknowns this time. One Tomb was surely enough. Whole populations, not just their soldiers, were engaged. Public taste in many countries had turned against monuments of all kinds for war commemoration, in favor of utilitarian forms. Yet a number of new Tombs and other memorials to Unknowns were created after 1945, and the process continues. In most cities, including London and Paris, the Unknown continued to occupy his site alone, though in France the ecclesiastical custodians of the ossuary, cemetery and chapel of Notre-Dame de Lorette, near Arras, acquired an Inconnu from the second war – ashes from a concentration camp – and others later from Indo-China and North Africa. In Paris a Memorial of Martyrs of the Deportation, a crypt-like structure created behind Notre-Dame in 1962, incorporated a Tomb of the Unknown Deported;
and on the edge of the city’s Jewish quarter the Tomb of an Unknown Jewish Martyr was inaugurated in 1956.

In the USA Arlington received, after significant delays, Unknowns from World War II, Korea and Vietnam. Tokyo became the site for one in 1959 after controversy about where it should and should not be put. In Moscow an elaborate tomb was installed just outside the Kremlin in 1967. Two years later, in socialist emulation, the government of the German Democratic Republic had an unidentified German body exhumed from the eastern front and entombed in the Neue Wache. Lest that gesture startle or repel, the soldier who had fought in a cause disowned by the regime was accompanied by an unknown resistance fighter. Outside Saigon, the Tomb of an Unknown Soldier commemorates the liberation of the city in 1975.

Some other new Unknowns were created as essays in criticism, parody or subversion of the orthodox version. The English sculptor Reg Butler made an Unknown Political Prisoner: not a tomb, not even, as the makers of the worldwide competition it won in 1953 may have hoped, a statue, but an abstract form to be exhibited within sight of East Berlin. A monument to The World’s Unknown Soldier killed in World War II was erected in Kyoto in 1958; a memorial to the Unknown Deserter of that war was put up in Bremen in 1987 by pacifist army reservists; and an Unknown Insurgent was buried in Budapest in 1989, when at last public honor could be given to heroes of 1956.

Baghdad’s tomb of 1982, raised by Saddam Hussein over a soldier killed in the war against Iran, was the first ever erected while the conflict in which the man had died was still on. Australia’s, inaugurated in the Hall of Memory of the national war memorial on 11 November 1993, will surely hold another record, as the last to be built over the remains of a man who died in the Great War.

Meanings

*Westminster Abbey.* In one precise sense the British people needed war memorials more than anybody else, for nearly all their million dead men lay in foreign graves. Early in the war the government
had forbidden the return of dead bodies. (As a public enterprise the project would have cost too much, and as a private enterprise it was intolerable to let the rich do what the poor could not afford.) Death in war touched most families, hardly any of whom could have the healing experiences of participating in a funeral and tending a grave. More than a million of them visited the Cenotaph, and more than a million the grave of the Unknown Warrior, in several days after 11 November 1920. I know of no crowds so vast at the inauguration of any other country's memorials.

Whatever comfort individual mourners may have got from private visits to the Tomb, it was the Cenotaph that became at once the center of Armistice Day commemoration. People were actually told not to put wreaths on the Tomb. The Cenotaph was deep in them; and the national ceremony enclosing the two minutes of silence at eleven o'clock, the moment the firing had stopped, was enacted there each year in the presence of a large crowd. The doors of the Abbey were closed until 11.30, then opened for people to be marshaled two abreast past the Tomb. Out in Whitehall, at the Cenotaph, rather than inside the Abbey, was created what Ben-Amos, adapting Bakhtin, has called a chronotope: a bringing together of national and personal memory, of past and present, at a particular ceremonial moment.26

So the Tomb in the Abbey took second place to the empty tomb in the street as a monument sacred to the memory of the war dead. All the year round, as on Armistice Day, the special character of the Cenotaph was recognized by a gesture no authority could prescribe: men took off their hats as they passed. After 1927 the Tomb took third place, as the British Legion Festival of Remembrance held in the Albert Hall became popular. The Festival was held in the evening, Armistice Day never being a public holiday in the United Kingdom, and always ended with a shower of poppies from the dome, each poppy representing one of the absent war dead, known or unknown.

_The Inconnu._ Two circumstances give the _Inconnu_ a meaning different from the tomb in London. First, the war had been conducted for the most part on French soil, the soil whose preservation against a polluting enemy the French hymned in their
national anthem. Second, France had been defeated within living memory by the enemy over whom she now triumphed. The ceremony of 1920 commemorated both the second anniversary of a victory and the fiftieth of a defeat – a defeat transcended in the formation of the Third Republic, as symbolized by making Gambetta’s heart the companion of the *Inconnu*, and now avenged. Burying the *Inconnu* under the Arc erased defeat by connecting the outcome of the Great War with the victories celebrated overhead. “By a kind of semantic slide,” suggests Prost, “the Napoleonic ‘triumph’ has become that of the Republic, and the glory of 1918 is substituted for that of the Empire.” The meaning of the Arc is in turn transformed by the coming of the *Inconnu*, giving it at last the character of a thoroughly national monument, ready (as Ben-Amos observes) for the hugely popular lying in state of Foch in 1929. Maurice Agulhon sees the *Inconnu* as the most animated of all monuments in Paris.²⁷

The Dean of Westminster was not alone in celebrating the Unknown Warrior for having ended among kings and bishops: one writer observed that each new monarch on the way to the throne had to step over the grave of the man who had died to save his kingdom.²⁸ The French, republican way was rather to exalt the *Inconnu’s* solitude. Vilain’s hagiographical account dwells on it: the *Inconnu* does not share his space with Victor Hugo or Rouget de Lisle or Gambetta; or, later, with Joffre or Foch; not even with Napoleon.²⁹

Three elements collaborated powerfully to charge the tomb with meaning: the ceremony on 11 November, which became the national holiday, more so than 14 July; the ex-poilus’ daily tending of flame and site; and the flow of private pilgrims who could imagine a missing husband or father buried there. Prost compares the veterans’ vigil to a daily mass.³⁰ From early years people made the sign of the cross before the *Inconnu*, as people in London removed their hats to pass the Cenotaph. Nowadays, a plaque nearby testifies to the power of the tomb’s meaning for some young people in the face of another defeat:

LE 11 Novembre 1940
devant la tombe de l’Inconnu
LES ÉTUDIANTS DE FRANCE
manifestant en masse
LES PREMIERS
resistèrent à l'occupant.

Arlington. If W. Lloyd Warner is to be believed, Americans had no doubt who the Unknown Soldier was: "one of our greatest and most hallowed symbols of democracy and the only very powerful one to come out of World War I.... The American Unknown Soldier is Everyman of the mystery plays. He is the perfect symbol of equalitarianism." I wonder. In Warner's analysis of his country's culture, everything works as intended. I doubt whether the Tomb at Arlington quite did, or does.

When the U.S. Army's Chief of Staff responded to an early suggestion for an American Unknown, he saw two difficulties: that by the time the Army Graves Registration Service had done its work, there might be no unknown American soldiers (as there turned out to be no British West Indian ones); and that the USA had no burial place for a fallen hero similar to Westminster Abbey or the Arc de Triomphe. The reply is instructive. First, it reminds us how few Americans died in the Great War, compared both with men from other belligerent powers and with their own countrymen in the Civil War. The 115,000 deaths from battle and disease amounted to less than a quarter of Civil War deaths, in a much enlarged population. Moreover, relatives had been promised that every dead Doughboy would be brought home from Europe unless his family agreed to let him stay there. Grieving for dead soldiers was an uncommon experience for people in postwar America, mourning men whose bodies lay in foreign fields was rarer still, and the unidentified, from whom an Unknown could come, were as few as 2,000. The Chief of Staff's second problem must be seen in this demographic context. To say that there was no suitable place for an Unknown American comparable to the sites in London and Paris was to imply that the project did not warrant, as it were, prime sacred space in the capital, within sight of the Washington Monument or the Memorials under construction to Lincoln and Grant. Sixty and seventy years on, promoters of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and the Holocaust Memorial Museum were given spectacularly central sites in the capital's landscape.
Arlington had two disadvantages as a sacred site for the American nation: it was out of the way, and it signaled the hegemony of the Union over the Confederacy. That it was deemed suitable for a Tomb was a covert acknowledgement that the experience of what Europeans called the Great War meant less to Americans than to them.

The discussion of a date for the burial is also significant. 11 November was chosen and declared a national holiday; but had the body been delivered in time the ceremony would have been conducted on Memorial Day, which in 1921 fell on 28 May, the holy day that had been named at first Decoration Day because that was when grieving women had laid flowers on the graves of northern war dead. The planners would actually have preferred a date whose associations were with the Civil War, not the war just finished.

Moreover, visitors to the Tomb did not give it due reverence. The men of the Old Guard were brought in after several years to make people recognize that the tomb was sacred. They not only marched around it like robots; when necessary they spoke like robots, emitting the following message: "It is requested that everyone maintain a mature and reverent attitude in the vicinity of the tomb. Thank you."

Insofar as that admonition is necessary to Americans, the monument evidently lacks the symbolic power attributed to it. Who now, wanting to meditate on the individual deaths and national wounds inflicted by the war in Vietnam, thinks of doing so beside the Unknown Soldier from that and earlier wars out at Arlington, rather than beside the wall of 60,000 names at the sacred center?

Moscow. When the form came at last to the Soviet capital in 1967, it was to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the battle for that city and the jubilee of the Communist regime, for which the site was renamed 50th Anniversary of the October Revolution Square. The Tomb is an early expression of Brezhnev’s will to remake the myth of the Great Patriotic War, and more generally to affirm continuities with the nation’s past which he believed had been perilously neglected during the Khrushchev years. Local party officials built their own versions of the monument’s eternal flame into thousands of new memorials to the war of 1941–1945.
Entombing Unknown Soldiers

From the beginning the Tomb enjoyed an unplanned popularity, as wedding parties drove to it after their brief and cheerless ceremony in the registry office. The bride laid her bouquet before the Tomb. The new family's photograph album would begin with husband and wife paying homage to the Unknown Soldier who had saved their city. James E. Young observes that "when the Party eliminated the Holy Icon, it left a great vacuum in the people's lives." His remark so illuminates Muscovites' improvised use of the Unknown Soldier for a rite of passage that it is puzzling to find no mention of the Tomb, or of any other war memorial, in his account of the literal and metaphorical deconstruction of Soviet-age monuments in the post-communist era. Nobody is deconstructing the war memorials. Yeltsin is as attentive to the Unknown Soldier as Brezhnev was, and the bridal parties still pay their respects. In officially atheist East Germany the Neue Wache with its two Unknowns also attracted wedding parties. I wonder whether that will still happen now that the building has been reconstructed as the German national monument to victims of war and violent dictatorship.

Benedict Anderson, aspiring to a new understanding of modern nationalism, begins his book *Imagined Communities* with Unknown Soldiers and challenges us to try to imagine a Tomb of the Unknown Marxist or a cenotaph for fallen Liberals. "Is a sense of absurdity avoidable? The reason is that neither Marxism nor Liberalism are much concerned with death and immortality." By symbolizing life sacrificed for the nation, Moscow's Unknown Soldier contradicts or transcends the communist notion that the worker has no country. Buried under marble, the body expresses a less modern view of death than Lenin's, embalmed as if still alive in representation of the Enlightenment hope that science will liberate us from mortality. The entombed soldier appears likely to stay longer than the founder of Marxism-Leninism in the public space of central Moscow.

Baghdad. The Unknown Soldier Monument in the capital of Iraq, part of a complex memorializing the country's eight-year war against Iran, has been described as a "tilted Behemoth, which looks like a flying saucer made from reinforced concrete and frozen in midflight"; it "represents a traditional shield ... dropping
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from the dying grasp of the archetypal Iraqi warrior." It represents also what Alon Confino observes to be an under-studied phenomenon: the spread of nationalism — "an invention" (Benedict Anderson again) "on which it was impossible to secure a patent" — far beyond its European homelands. The Unknown Soldier has come a long way from Westminster Abbey and the Arc de Triomphe to the landscape of Saddam Hussein's Baghdad, from cultures vestigially Christian to one fusing Islam and modernity, from stone-slabbed grave to gigantic sculpture, all performing their own significant variations on the theme, still under-explored, of death in the wars of twentieth-century nation-states.
Entombing Unknown Soldiers

Notes

1 On the Tannenberg Memorial, see George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford, 1990), 97; and on the cult of the unknown soldier, 93–98. Several historians wrongly report that the Neue Wache contained from 1931 the tomb of an unknown soldier. On this and other points I am grateful to Dr. Hans-Martin Hinz of the Deutsches Historisches Museum.


5 Except where otherwise indicated, information on procedures, ceremonies and uses is derived from reports in *The Times* (London).


7 *The Times*, 11 Nov. 1920.


9 Charles Dumont, quoted in *The Times*, 8 Nov. 1920. See also Vilain, *Le soldat inconnu*, 60–64.

10 For the journey and ceremonies, see Vilain, *Le soldat inconnu*, chaps. 7 and 8.


16 On Lindbergh’s homage and for the proposal that “The unknown soldier ... is Stravinsky’s victim,” see Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (London, 1989), xv, 261–62.
This is a daring suggestion about a work performed in 1913, and still more so given that in *The Rite of Spring* the victim is a woman.

17 These examples are taken from Dixon Wecter, *The Hero in America: A Chronicle of Hero-Worship* (New York, 1941), 413.


19 Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 156.

20 Grosz and Peret are cited in an unpublished paper by Jay M. Winter. For Brecht and other German and French examples, see Volker Ackermann, "La vision allemande du soldat inconnu" (paper for conference at Historial de la Grande Guerre, Péronne, July 1992).

21 Quoted in Wecter, *The Hero in America*, 413.


23 Ibid., 473.

24 My description follows Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 295; see also plates 25 and 26 in ibid.

25 Quoted in Wecter, *The Hero in America*, 413.


33 Ibid.


35 For a sketch of a registry office marriage and adjournment to the Tomb, see Martin Walker, *Martin Walker's Russia* (London, 1989), 96-97.


39 Alon Confino, "The Nation as a Work of Art: The Image of German
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Heimat, 1871–1918” (paper for the conference on “The Transformation of the Sacred in Modern Nationalism”).