Revival After the Great War

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Fig. 1. Governments honored widows by presenting to them their husbands’ posthumous medals. Yet widows continued to struggle with material deprivation and emotional trauma in the post-war world. Source: Imperial War Museum, Q56741.
Reclaiming the Ordinary
Civilians Face the Post-war World

Tammy M. Proctor

In her diary an elderly female author in Ghent, Belgium, carefully records the destruction of her grandparents’ house and with it a lifetime of memories; she describes her birthplace as having been mauled or battered. An Englishwoman married to a German aristocrat laments: “The few people I have already spoken to were depressed and horrified at the terms of the armistice, especially that the blockade is not to be raised, which means for so many people a gradual death from exhaustion”. Finally, in a letter to the British War Office intelligence bureau, a Belgian official pleads for a certificate of service for wartime agents, noting that “we are flooded with demands” from men and women for concrete evidence proving that they were soldiers in the British service. Each of these accounts was penned in the days after the official armistice on the Western Front on November 11, 1918, and each touches on fundamental themes that faced civilians in the aftermath of the First World War.

With the end of war, combatants and civilians alike confronted a need to reclaim the ordinary or, in other words, to return to normalcy. Yet there was a clear problem: what constituted normal in a world transformed by violence and disruption? This essay looks at the tension between remembering and forgetting in civilian lives in the post-war world, paying close attention to the gendered representation of their war experiences in personal accounts and examining how ordinary people defined normalcy after 1918 in the face of significant obstacles. In particular, this essay explores two main pressures that emerged within a gendered framework. First, despite many ways in which normal life resumed in the streets and households of Belgium, for some people continuing deprivation and widespread devastation delayed the resumption of “normal” life. This was especially true for civilians who had been traumatized or whose breadwinners had died or who now cared for severely disabled returned soldiers. Second, returning to a pre-war ideal of an ordinary or normal life suggested forgetting or minimizing the impact of the war. However, most civilians felt compelled to remember their dead and wounded while also seeking recognition of their own
patriotic service and sacrifices. As Drew Gilpin Faust argued in her influential study of the US Civil War, modern war led to a crisis of language, knowledge, and understanding, and survivors often felt “sentenced to life”. This rupture between pre-war understandings of life and death also marked the First World War and its aftermath.

Many historians have examined the strains of the immediate post-war period, often with an eye to the long-term impact of the war, especially in terms of the precedents set for later conflicts. Some scholars have dissected the question of violence, particularly as it pertains to civil society as well as on the battlefield, in order to understand the watershed that was the First World War. Others look to questions of trauma in individual lives by examining widowhood, grief, injury, and disfigurement, often through the lens of gender. A related field of study places this trauma into the framework of claims for compensation in the form of pensions, long-term medical care, and reparations. With the surge in scholarship surrounding the centenary of the war, there has been a trend towards investigating the violence unleashed by the war that continued into the 1920s. In particular, historians have examined the phenomena of civil war (Ireland, Soviet Union), population exchange and violence (Turkey, Greece, Poland), and paramilitary action (Germany, Italy, Hungary). Finally, a robust area of historical work explores the culture of memory that emerged after 1918.

In spite of all the historical work published on the post-war period, the question of how individuals and families negotiated the challenges of post-conflict life remains an elusive and thorny problem. In their article on mourning in France that was published in the 14-18 encyclopedia online, Rémi Dalisson and Elise Julien provide compelling statistics and analysis of the scope of the trauma. For French communities, roughly two-thirds of the population experienced the loss of either a family member, a colleague, or a friend; officially there were 600,000 widows and a million war orphans. As they note, expressions of grief and mourning were omnipresent, from the clothing of mourners to the special services and monuments devoted to the dead (Fig. 1). Again, this ever-present memory of the war daily challenged the idea of normalcy. In Belgium, war losses (60,000) included both soldiers and civilians, many of whom had been killed during the 1914 invasion. Public political wrangling over the question of the repatriation of bodies and community mourning marked the immediate post-war period, while families privately grieved. As John Horne has argued: “The dead thus defined the living...”, and he makes it clear that negotiating the future was a challenge for those who survived, caught between anxious remembrance of the war and cautious hope for the years to come.

While drawing on many of these important historical works, this essay takes a slightly different angle. Rather than examining the long-term impact of the war, instead I focus on the first 18 months following the armistice on the Western front in November 1918. In particular, this chapter examines the challenges of reconstructing life within the framework of a gendered narrative strongly articulated in the aftermath.
of violence. My argument relies on evidence from only three locales: an occupied zone (Belgium), a nation living with defeat (Germany), and a victorious nation (Britain), although these themes certainly resonated in other post-war settings. While each of these states experienced war and its aftermath in profoundly different ways, all sought to reconstruct the family in order to reconstruct society.

According to many memoirs and diaries, the armistice of November 1918 was both surprisingly abrupt and long awaited. Promises of peace had abounded for more than a year in the media, so when rumours became reality many civilians had trouble processing this change. In Brussels, diarist Mary Thorp described the cautious anticipation of early November: “[w]e are living on our nerves at high pressure, expecting every moment to hear the armistice is signed…” In Germany as well, civilians waited to hear news. As one young woman wrote in her diary on November 2, “The war is as good as over, but fighting goes on”.

Newspapers also awaited the armistice. The Times of London published a short piece on November 8, entitled simply “Suspense”, that described the eager anticipation and breathless attention to rumor as Britain expected to hear of a peace. In much post-war memory of the war, the November 11, 1918 armistice has a totemic quality: the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, but for those living through the war it was simultaneously anticipated and anti-climactic.

Although many expressed joy and looked forward to the future, the end of war also brought anxiety and fear for soldiers and civilians alike, but often for different reasons. Male combatants feared that normal home life might be beyond their grasp or that their families would no longer recognize or want them. They also faced enormous economic insecurity. Women, on the other hand, worried about how their male loved ones might have been transformed by war, both physically and emotionally, and thousands waited for prisoners of war to come home or hoped that their loved ones who were presumed missing might still be alive. On top of these concerns, many women faced loss of employment and severe hardship. The instability that citizens perceived was often real.

Violence and its threat accompanied soldiers home; in Epsom, England, for example, soldiers waiting to leave the army attacked a police station and killed a man in June 1919. Women still working in wartime jobs experienced verbal or physical abuse from veterans. Even those seen as keeping the peace and controlling other women and children, such as policewomen, faced threats and ridicule in the streets. In formerly occupied Brussels in the days following the armistice officials worried about socialist revolution during the period before the resumption of civil government. In Germany, the disorder was much more severe in 1918 and 1919, as many soldiers left for home without formal demobilization. Labor instability, revolutionary activity, and civil unrest, as well as the return of six million men during a period of political collapse, was difficult to control (Fig. 2). Media accounts of the moral rot
brought about by the war made many people fear for their futures – venereal disease, young people running wild, petty crime, drunkenness, marauding soldiers – all these featured prominently in the discourse about soldiers returning in 1918. For Germans in particular, the shocking loss from the war and the humiliating terms of peace exacerbated tensions as families were reunited in the midst of unemployment and shortages. Men wanted to return to ordinary family life, but many had very little to which they could return, or they simply did not know how to regain normalcy.

Historian Jason Crouthamel documented some of the challenges soldiers now faced as they struggled both to remember and to forget their experiences. One particularly poignant set of letters between a soldier and his wife expresses both the longing for a return to pre-war family life and a dread that it could not be recaptured. This soldier worried that upon returning to Germany he would feel “like a tourist” in his own country. Veterans described fears that the world had changed and the normal could not be recaptured. Men, unlike women, often articulated this idea of dislocation through an angry focus on the betrayal of the home front; they feared that men who had not served or women who had taken on male jobs had gotten
ahead. For German and Irish soldiers, for instance, the civil disorder and revolution they encountered at home in 1919 only reignited their sense of alienation. Again, Crouthamel aptly described this disruptive return, noting that soldiers had idealized home while serving at the front, but in 1918 that fantasy “collided with the reality of a desperate, fractured home front”.21

It was not just German soldiers who felt that they were returning to a foreign country. Phyllis Bentley, an educated British woman who had got a well-paying clerical job during the war, explained bluntly that her reality had changed with the armistice:

Suddenly it became the duty of all women to clear out – I use the vulgar expression advisedly because it represented the opinion of the man in the street at the time – and leave the jobs open for the returning men […] So we all cleared out and returned home.22

Women who lost their livelihoods with the armistice often had difficulty receiving governmental help because of the emphasis most states placed on a male breadwinner. In Britain, for instance, married women could receive benefits through their husbands as dependents, but unmarried women lost their right to government assistance if they rejected jobs such as laundry work or domestic service.23 This put women in a difficult situation in multiple ways. Unmarried women who had previously earned an income now faced returning to their parents’ home (as Bentley did) or finding work that might be unsuitable or poorly paid. Bentley, an unmarried, middle-class, educated woman, had little to fear because her family could support her.

While middle-class women felt a sense of grievance, poor women faced particular anxieties, and many lived a different reality in the weeks and month after the war than their wealthier counterparts. Many women faced loss of employment and severe hardship. Married women, especially if they had minor children, often could receive public assistance only as wives and mothers. Their dependence on male breadwinners meant that many women were unwilling or unable to leave bad domestic situations, this at a time when some men returned with psychological trauma. Sometimes, too, relief payments for widows and pensions did not cover basic needs. Government officials worried, too, about rising divorce rates, which they perceived as an attack on the nuclear family and “normal” households. In Britain and in Germany divorce rates spiked in the years following the war, and they never returned to their pre-war levels.24 For many, such an increase in family dissolution required a redrawing of gender lines to build an ideal family model, often remembering something that had never really existed.

In Germany, where the economic blockade continued into the immediate post-war period and where the return of prisoners of war was often slow, the hardships of the war lasted beyond the armistice. One remarkable set of accounts helps expose such
difficulties and anxieties in the period between the armistice and 1920. A Quaker team visited German homes of POWs who had worked for the Friends in French war relief schemes in devastated areas. This German mission brought financial payment for the prisoners’ work and a message from the POWs to families whom they could locate. Prior to this journey, the three representatives (two Quakers and a Mennonite volunteer) took more than 200 photos of POWs and also recorded personal messages for their families. While this was designed to create reconciliation and spread the message of peace, this mission also provided testimonials and photos to use in fundraising literature in the United States for post-war relief efforts in Germany.25 The three relief workers recounted moving stories of their visits with families, some of which were in remote and hard-to-reach areas. One example of such a visit comes from Solomon Yoder who visited the Grassler family in Losnitz, a coal mining district. The father was bed-ridden and the family of four was surviving on the wages of two teenaged children in the household. When Yoder showed her the photo of her son the mother seemed transfixed. Then Yoder gave her Otto’s pay and she just sobbed. Despite Yoder’s assurances that Otto wanted her to spend the money on the family, she assured him that she would put it in Otto’s savings account for his return home.26

The Friends’ representatives also encountered stories of the unbearable waiting for news of the missing. Yoder, a Mennonite relief worker, wrote home to his mother about the heart-rending situation of a Russian Mennonite woman living in the Berlin suburbs. Her husband, a German, had served in the food department of the army and had disappeared more than a year earlier in southern Russia. As Yoder noted, “Frau Sperling hopes and worries each day. She says if she only knew whether he was dead or alive, it would be better than this uncertainty”.27 Frau Sperling was also supporting twins aged 13, and Yoder commented on the meager food they had in the household more than a year after the war ended.

States recognized that such hardships contributed to political and social problems, and officials developed plans to address shortages, unemployment, and infant and maternal mortality rates. In Germany, the Law for Maternity Benefits and Maternity Welfare (1919-1920) provided basic stipends as well as food and healthcare for mothers, but this only began to deal with the scope of the problem.28 Foreign aid organizations such as the American Relief Administration also set up feeding centers for children and delivered more than a million meals weekly, but again, this was a short-term, limited solution.29 Government officials also worried considerably about the fall in birthrates at the end of the war and about the poor health of children. In Britain, the birth rate dropped from 24.1 births per 1,000 in 1913 to 17.7 in 1918.30 While British women did have more children in 1920, the new average birth rate of the 1920s never returned to the levels prior to World War I. In Germany, the birth rate dropped even more precipitously during the war. The 1911 rate was 29.5 per 1,000, but it had dropped to 14.7 in 1918. By 1924, the rate had risen to only 21.1.31
Another lingering worry in the immediate post-war period was what a “normal” household now looked like after the cataclysm of war. For Belgians, especially those living in war zones or those who returned from a time as refugees, home was no longer a physical reality. The physical devastation from the war meant a long rebuilding period for homes and livelihoods. As in Germany, many Belgian soldiers merely left for home when news of the collapse of the front came; they wanted their ordinary lives to resume as quickly as possible. However, militarization had deeply affected Belgian towns, cities, and landscapes, thereby slowing down the process of normalization. Many transport lines were destroyed or inoperable, and factories had been looted by departing troops. It was also a time of revenge for angry civilians who had lived through enemy occupation. Mary Thorp described the scene in Brussels in mid-December 1918:

The shop-keepers who traded kindly with the Germans, have had their shop & windows smashed & goods plundered – the La Faire comestible shop, Rue de Namur, the 2 grand & “expensive” pork-butchers & the pastry-cook at Porte de Namur, & others of course in other neighbourhoods.

Those who may have profited by the war or who had actively or passively collaborated felt the sting of post-war retribution. This was particularly true of women accused of “sexual treason” or friendly relations with enemy men, and as societies drafted a script of war remembrance women often found themselves as either good victims or bad perpetrators.

As individuals and families sought to manage the effects of four years of war on their physical and psychological wellbeing, communities and states set to work remembering and making meaning of the war, often through memorials and public commemoration. With the armistice, states emphasized combatant dead, placing them at the center of post-war commemoration and defining non-combatants as “objects” of war. Most memorials and celebrations of service focused on male fighters, leaving others who had served and who had experienced losses without closure and sometimes without a sense of whether their war service mattered. Almost from the beginning, the language of these memorials articulated a heroic male combatant and a sacrificial female civilian, each playing a role in the ongoing gendered narrative of war. Individual monuments showed uniformed men, male graves, and female caretakers, while state-sponsored cemeteries and monuments to the dead inscribed the names of the men who had died. Implicit and explicit in the iconography was a gendered vision of sacrifice. This left many male civilians without a way to tell their stories that did not paint them as cowardly or complicit in the deaths of so many. Male conscientious objectors, workers in industries of national importance, and men with medical conditions faced post-war guilt and shame. Women, on the other
hand, had difficulty demonstrating their own heroism as providers, defenders, and
workers. Female medical personnel, for instance, who had endured air raids and
dangerous conditions near the front, were often redefined in the public narrative as
nurturing angels. The post-war stories of remembrance served multiple purposes: as
a focal point for societal grief, as a guide to rebuilding families through a gendered
understanding of war service, and as a necessary interpretation of the losses suffered.  

In Belgium, which had suffered under enemy occupation, the post-war com-
memoration included civilians as heroes and heroines, but most of the time their
heroic acts focused around resisting victimization rather than on patriotic service. In
the context of German occupation, Belgian civilians had trouble contesting the
idea of “poor little Belgium” that had dominated wartime accounts of the nation
(Fig. 3). The publication of wartime atrocity accounts, the massive wave of refugees
who fled the country, and the deportation of male workers and officials during the
war all pointed to a tale of victims triumphing over repression. Resistance activities,
patriotic manifestations, intelligence gathering, and other active war service became
relegated to a few individual stories of outstanding individuals. Often, too, the search
for collaborators and war profiteers tainted the post-war narrative of civilian heroism.
In their book investigating post-war disciplining of those considered to be unpatriotic,
Xavier Rousseaux and Laurence van Ypersele listed multiple ways in which Belgians
policed each other’s war actions. In some communities popular vigilantism in the
immediate aftermath of war punished “bad” Belgians with physical attacks and
property destruction. Also, several official judicial proceedings also raised the issue
of economic and moral collaboration in the months following the war. In such an
atmosphere, proving one’s active war service was important in order to show loyalty.

Both Belgian men and women sought recognition for their patriotic activities. For
instance, civilians submitted detailed depositions along with supporting documents
from eyewitnesses in order to prove their work in resistance and intelligence net-
works run by allied governments. Some submitted their testimony as part of official
inquiries into wartime service, while others proactively offered evidence in the hope
of post-war recognition and possibly payment. One good example is the dossier of
Marie Pierson, a 40-year-old Belgian housewife who filed a claim for recognition
for her service in the Sedan region of the front where she was “actively occupied in
espionage.” She went on to explain that she secretly gathered information on the
movements of German troops for British intelligence. To support her claim, she
included a statement from a local curate who had encountered her during her 1918
spying activities. Pierson’s dossier demonstrates the painstaking documentation of
war service by civilians hoping to show their patriotic commitment and the danger
that they had undertaken during their nation’s crisis.
In Britain, too, women demanded recompense and recognition for their war work. Six thousand female munitions employees marched on November 19, 1918 to Parliament “to convey to the prime minister and the Ministry of Munitions their demand for ‘immediate guarantee for the future’.”\(^3\) Other smaller groups staged later demonstrations, marches, and petitions in the immediate aftermath of the armistice, trying to preserve their jobs and to demand recognition in the form of pension or out-of-work insurance. These demonstrations did little to stop the mass unemployment of former female war workers. Angela Woollacott estimated that in Birmingham and Newcastle tens of thousands of women faced unemployment by mid-December.\(^3\)

**Conclusion**

In her well-known memoir, *Testament of Youth*, Vera Brittain spends a full chapter on the difficulties of reclaiming a normal life after the war. Yet even as she decried the celebratory mood and dwelled on all she had lost, Brittain also recognized that the year 1919 represented a rebirth with which all had to reckon:
[1919] appeared to an exhausted world as divine normality, the spring of life after the winter of death, the stepping-stone to a new era, the gateway to an infinite future – a future not without its dreads and discomforts, but one in whose promise we had to believe, since it was all that some of us had left to believe in.⁴⁰

For Brittain’s generation, the First World War functioned as a break between the ordinary existence they remembered before the war and the unfulfilled promise of the post-war, in which violence, trauma, and anxiety continued to plague them. Brittain’s experience was not entirely representative, however, and other people just got on with life. They went to the cinema, they worked, they attended church, they raised families even if they continued to mourn losses from the war.

In reflecting on 1918 and its consequences, it is hard not to conclude that the war did not really end for many families and societies. Belgium’s post-war reckoning and rebuilding helped shape its response to a second occupation in 1940 in profound ways. In Germany the rise of National Socialism, whose core early supporters were war veterans, placed the scars of war on full display. British veterans, too, sought an outlet for their feelings of displacement, as is evident in the fledgling Boy Scout movement, which experienced major growth especially among adult members in the 1920s.⁴¹ For women across Europe, the gendered work of rebuilding society that became their responsibility remains elusive in the historical records, and the striving for normalcy became an ongoing struggle, also largely hidden from view. Likewise, the building of monuments and the commemorative impulses of the 1920s could never quite provide the meaning or the closure that combatants and civilians sought. Even the gendered reclaiming of war service for the heroic male soldier ultimately failed to restore a sense of order to the home, the workplace, or the community.
Notes

3. Archives Générale du Royaume (AGR) P-207, Correspondence, Folder #1; Services Observation Anglais to the War Office, 25 November 1918.


Pedersen, *Family, Dependence*, 126.

Britain allowed for divorce on equal terms with the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1923, at which time divorce rates grew. In Germany, divorce rates tripled after the war. Bessel, *Germany after the First World War*, 231.


Michelle Mouton, *From Nurturing the Nation to Purifying the Volk: Weimar and Nazi Family Policy, 1918-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 155-156. The infant mortality rate in Germany in 1918 was 38.9 per 1,000 births, Mouton, 154 n.3.


Bessel, *Germany after the First World War*, 229.


In her recent book, Alison Fell examines the narratives that a few women in France, Belgium, and Britain constructed in the post-war period in order to make their case as veterans of the conflict. Alison Fell, *Women as Veterans in Britain and France after the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Archives Générale du Royaume (AGR) P-2224, Services Patriotic; Deposition of Marie Augustine Pierson to the Commission des Annales des Services Patriotiques, May 1919.


Ibid., 107.


Fig. 1. Karl Gläser, *Monument to German Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg*, executed in snow, 1915, Stuttgart, Ice skating rink. Picture postcard, F. Hinderer Verlag. (private collection)