Homecomings: the return of the dead

The army of the dead

Let us begin with one of the most powerful and haunting visions of the Great War. It is the final sequence of Abel Gance’s film *J’accuse*, made in 1918–19. The hero, Jean Diaz, a wounded soldier-poet, begins to lose his mind. He escapes from hospital, and reaches his village. There he summons the villagers and tells them of a dream. The dream as we see it starts in a battlefield graveyard with wooden crosses all askew. A huge black cloud rises behind it and, magically, ghostlike figures emerge from the ground. They are wrapped in tattered bandages, some limping, some blind walking with upraised arms, some stumbling like Frankenstein’s monster. They leave the battlefield and walk down the rural lanes of France to their villages. Their aim is to see if their sacrifices had been in vain. What they find is the pettiness of civilian life, the advantage being taken of soldiers’ businesses, the infidelity of their wives. The sight of the fallen so terrifies the townspeople that they immediately mend their ways, and the dead return to their graves, their mission fulfilled. After recounting this dream, the poet, now totally mad, accuses the sun above of standing idly by and watching the war go on. Then he dies.¹

This sequence of the dead rising from their graves is one of the great scenes of the early cinema. Its force is made even more poignant when we realize that most of the men we see on the screen were actual French soldiers lent to Gance by the French army to play in this film. Gance’s assistant in this film was the poet Blaise Cendrars, a Swiss-born veteran of the French Foreign Legion who lost his right arm fighting with the Legion’s ‘Moroccan Division’ in Champagne in September 1915.² He can be seen clearly, the bandages around his stump unravelling, leaning on the shoulder of Jean Diaz, played by Severin Mars. Cendrars survived, but many of the soldiers in earlier scenes of Gance’s film had returned to the front in the last months of the war and had been killed. Gance himself noted that some of those playing the dead in his film soon became the dead. Representation and reality had become one.³
Catastrophe and consolation

1. Before the Dead arise, in a scene from the film *J’accuse* (1919).

2. The Return of the Dead, in a scene from the film *J’accuse* (1919). Cendrars is in the centre, leaning on Severin Mars.
This terrifying and profoundly moving moment, when on film the dead came home to judge the living, is unlike any other in the history of wartime propaganda. At the very end of the 1914–18 conflict, Gance’s film brought to the cinema a vision of war in which the dead were the central figures. This is what turned it from a celebration of patriotic certainties into the exploration of eternal themes of love, death, and redemption.

Gance returned to the theme of the resurrection of the dead of the Great War in his second version of *J’accuse*, made in 1937. This time the hero, once more called Jean Diaz, is the sole survivor of his unit, the ‘Death Patrol’, sent out near Mort-Homme at Verdun on a pointless mission on the last day of the war in 1918. Only his moans save him from being buried with his comrades, who died for nothing. In effect, Diaz rises from the dead to be their spokesman, their emissary to those who don’t know what war is.

Diaz is a scientist who works in a glass factory. To prevent another war, he invents an impenetrable form of armour, ‘steel glass’ so powerful that it would make war impossible. He keeps it as his secret weapon against war, but alas, it is stolen by a venal ex-serviceman and pillar of the *anciens combattants*, and put into the military arsenals of the day. The only way the hero can stop the outbreak of war is to go back to Verdun and raise the dead of the Great War from their graves. In a scene of epic grandeur, he gathers up the storm clouds at the vast military cemetery at Douaumont, and recalls the dead of all armies from their eternal sleep: ‘My twelve million friends killed in the war, I call you.’ They rise and terrify the populations of Europe into forming a world government and putting an end to war for ever. But before this happens, evil and fear still fester. Diaz’s Christlike mission ends, as it must, in his death, burned at the stake – appropriately at the foot of a war memorial – by the ignorant masses who failed to see that war must never happen again. This last sacrifice, preceding the final triumph of peace, took place at Douaumont, near Verdun, where the hero had fought and had nearly died two decades before.

Gance’s apocalyptic reveries are celebrated moments in the history of the cinema. His images of the return of the fallen were far from unique, though very few who worked in film so powerfully captured the almost unendurable sense of mass death in war which pervaded European society from 1914. That cloud of grief, and its expression in European culture, are the subject of this book.

I want to sketch some of the ways in which Europeans imagined the postwar world as composed of survivors perched on a mountain of corpses. How to relate to the fact of mass death, how to transcend its brutal separations and cruelties, were universal dilemmas. How artists, politicians, soldiers, and ordinary people understood them, imagined
them, dreamed about them, feared them, tells us much about the
cultural consequences of the Great War.

Death of a poet

To start with Gance’s *J’accuse* is to bring to the fore the theme of the
return of the dead, a return longed for, dreamed of, dreaded, and both
physically and symbolically realized in many parts of Europe after the
Great War. The context of the film and the powerful notions it evoked
are, therefore, much broader than may be apparent at first sight. As in
the work of many other artists, Gance’s power derived from his ability
to express sentiments about the tragedy of the war shared by millions of
his contemporaries.

The filmic art of Abel Gance touched on a theme, the return of the
dead, which transformed melodrama into myth. I am primarily
interested in the way that myth emerged during the Great War, and the
subsequent forms in which it was expressed. But the events surrounding
the making of *J’accuse* in 1918 also shed light on other key issues in the
cultural history of the war. Among them is the often cited impact of war
on the emergence of ‘modernism’, however defined.

It is my contention that the war gave a new lease of life to a number of
traditional languages expressed both conventionally and in unusual
and modern forms. One such form was cinema, the most modern
vehicle for the delivery to mass audiences of timeless messages.

The false antithesis of the ‘moderns’ and the ‘ancients’ was a theme
well known to contemporary experimental avant-garde artists. Among
them was the poet Guillaume Apollinaire. He is in *J’accuse*, amongst the
dead, though not by name. Born Wilhelm de Kostrowitsky, of mixed
Italian and Polish Catholic ancestry, Apollinaire (as he became known)
was one of the great avant-garde poets of the pre-war years. He
introduced Braque to Picasso in 1907, and spent years announcing the
virtues of cubism. He was a young rebel, but not the enemy of tradition.
A volunteer in 1914, and rewarded later with French citizenship, he was
wounded in the head in 1916. In the poem ‘La jolie rousse’ (‘the pretty
redhead’), written after Apollinaire was wounded, he asks his elders for
forgiveness for the sins of the young rebels. They are not the enemies of
tradition, but exuberant spirits who ‘want to bequeath to you vast and
strange domains’. He asks not for the downfall of the old, but for its
renewal, and above all for pity. He begs those of an older generation to take

Pity on us who are always fighting on the frontiers
Of limitlessness and the future
Pity our mistakes pity our sins‡

Pity is a word appropriate to the circumstances of Apollinaire’s
death. After surviving combat, a head wound, trepanning, and military
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medicine, Apollinaire was struck down in the last days of the war by the ‘Spanish flu’. Blaise Cendrars tells of the poet’s death. Cendrars was then in the midst of filming J’*accuse* with Gance in Nice. He went north to Paris to arrange for film clips and other items for the set. There he bumped into Apollinaire on Sunday 3 November 1918. They lunched at Montparnasse and spoke of ‘the subject of the day, the epidemic of Spanish flu which had more victims than did the war’. Five days later, Cendrars passed the concierge of Apollinaire’s building, who told him that his tenant had caught the flu. Cendrars bounded up the stairs, and was met by Apollinaire’s wife Jacqueline. She too was ill, but not as bad as her husband, who was ‘all black’ and still. Cendrars rushed to get a doctor, who said it was too late to help Apollinaire. The following evening, Saturday 9 November, he died.\(^5\)

According to Cendrars, the burial was held on Wednesday 13 November. He has left an unforgettable account of it, one which touches the themes of J’*accuse* in unanticipated ways. Cendrars told an interviewer in 1950 that he was still disturbed by memories of the burial of Apollinaire. For Cendrars, Apollinaire inhabited not the kingdom of the dead, but the kingdom of the shadows.\(^6\) Why? Because ‘I had such an experience at the burial that after 32 years I still have trouble believing that he is dead.’ What had happened?

The final absolution having been given, the casket of Apollinaire left the church of St Thomas Aquinas, draped in a flag, Guillaume’s lieutenant’s helmet on the tricolor, among the flowers and wreaths. A guard of honour, a squad of soldiers, arms at their sides, led the slow convoy, the family behind the carriage, his mother, his wife, in their mourning veils, poor Jacqueline, who had escaped the epidemic which had taken Guillaume, but who was still weak, the intimate friends of Apollinaire, Prince Jaztrebzoff, Serge, his sister, Baron d’Oettingen, Max Jacob, Picasso, all the other friends of Guillaume, including Pierre-Albert Birot and his wife who had given everything to stage *The Breasts of Tiresias* in the Maubel Theatre, all of literary Paris, Paris of the arts, the press. But as it reached the corner of Saint-Germain, the cortège was besieged by a crowd of noisy celebrants of the Armistice, men and women with arms waving, singing, dancing, kissing, shouting deliriously the famous refrain of the end of the war:

> No, you don’t have to go, Guillaume
> No you don’t have to go . . .

That was too much. And behind me, I heard the old glories of the end of symbolism, all the ‘immortal’ poets forgotten today, chattering, discussing the future of poetry, what young poets will do after the death of Apollinaire and rejoicing, as if they had come to celebrate victory in the battle of the Ancients and the Moderns. That was awful and I felt anger, indignation come over me.\(^7\)

Cendrars left the cortège with his lover and future wife Raymone and the soldier-artist Fernand Léger. They had a warm drink to protect themselves against the flu. Then they took a taxi to the cemetery of Père
Lachaise in northeast Paris, only to find that the funeral was over, and Apollinaire’s friends were leaving. They asked directions to the grave, and started searching among the headstones. They stumbled into two fresh graves, to the annoyance of the gravediggers. At times they seemed to be in Elsinore, not Paris. They asked the way, but though the gravediggers were decent men, they were of little help:

‘You understand, with the flu, with the war, they don’t tell us the names of the dead we put in the ground. There are too many.’ . . . But I said, he was a Lieutenant, Lieutenant Guillaume Apollinaire or Kostrowitsky. We have to fire a salvo over his tomb! – ‘My dear sir’, the head of the gravedigging team answered me, ‘there were two salvos. There were two lieutenants. We don’t know which one you are looking for. Look for yourselves.’

They saw a grave with a bit of frozen earth nearby exactly in the shape of Apollinaire’s head, with grass for hair around the scar where he had been trepanned. ‘The psychisme was so intense, that one did not believe one’s eyes.’

We were stunned . . . We left the cemetery, where already a thick glacial mist was enveloping the tombs and the cemetery, and said; ‘It was he. We saw him. Apollinaire isn’t dead. Soon he will appear. Don’t forget what I tell you.’

This surrealistic scene took place near the grave of Allan Kardec, the founder of French spiritualism. Cendrars and the other mourners passed the motto on Kardec’s grave. It says: ‘To be born, to die, to be born again and to progress without end. That is the law.’

‘It was fantastic’, Cendrars said. ‘Paris celebrating. Apollinaire lost. I was full of melancholy. It was absurd.’ He returned to the question which obsessed him: ‘Under what mask will Guillaume return to the great celebration in Paris?’

Eight days later, Cendrars returned to Nice to complete the work he had begun on Gance’s J’accuse. He recruited a number of wounded soldiers, known as les gueules cassées (the smashed faces) to play the dead in the fourth part of the film, the section on ‘The return of the dead’. Then Cendrars joined the dead himself. This is how Cendrars described his work in the final stages of the film:

in J’accuse, I did everything: troubleshooter, props, electrician, costume and stage designer, producer, cameraman, assistant director, chauffeur, accountant, cashier and in the scene ‘The dead return’, I became a Maccabee, covered in horses’ blood because I had to lose my arm a second time in the interests of the scene. You know the song:

When Jean Renaud went to war

Holding his guts in his hand . . .

That was cinema!

The personal impressions Cendrars brought to J’accuse were inscribed in a new and revised scenario of the film. In 1922, Gance re-edited it, and
incorporated a powerful image, which went straight to the heart of Cendrars’ experience. Gance added a scene which had not happened before the Armistice. On 14 July 1919, a victory parade traversed the Champs Elysées in Paris. Foch, Joffre, Pétain, Clemenceau were there. But leading the way, and changing the entire tone of the occasion were the mutilés de guerre. What had started as a victory celebration turned into a sombre moment of mass mourning.12

Three years later, Gance took film footage of this event and added another element to it. While the living soldiers defiled through the Arc de Triomphe, the army of the dead marched above it, in every sense au dessus de la mêlée. Apollinaire had come back, together with a million other men. What Cendrars had seen in Père Lachaise cemetery, what countless men and women had imagined in these immediate postwar years, Gance captured in cinematic form. It is an image to which I shall return.

Homecomings

Gance’s film characterized a broad cultural response to the disaster of the Great War. The return of the dead was treated through allegory, metaphor, and allusion. I will sketch some of these figurative approaches in later chapters, but first I want to emphasize that there was a matter-of-fact dimension to this issue, of which everyone touched by the war was aware. The problem was where and how to bury the dead of the war.

The incident surrounding the burial of Guillaume Apollinaire captures the moment. The mix of despair and delirium in the celebration of victory suggests something of the manic, melancholic nature of the Armistice of 1918. Cendrars’ sense that a fresh grave somehow resembled Apollinaire’s profile, that he wasn’t really dead, indicates the power of denial, the retention of hope in a loved one’s survival, even if only in metaphoric form. So many others had no known grave that the possibility did indeed exist that they were still alive.13 But for most people, such hope faded rapidly, and all that was left was finding and honouring the grave of a loved one. Here too Cendrars’ difficulty in finding Apollinaire once in Père Lachaise cemetery paralleled the problems millions had in locating their dead and in making the pilgrimage to their graves.14

The cultural history of the Great War was not only a matter of representations; real bodies were there in every theatre of military operations. Real friends and families in their millions mourned their loss, and wanted to give them a final, dignified resting place. That task was fraught with difficulty. How it was achieved tells us much about patterns of mourning and remembrance in the aftermath of the war.
By 1918 there were thousands of *ad hoc* cemeteries in northern France and Flanders (and elsewhere), and the remains of millions of dead soldiers, both identified and unknown, were scattered over vast tracts of land. In 1915 the French government agreed to finance the creation of an archipelago of military cemeteries, and to enlarge existing cemeteries at state expense for the burial of soldiers. Initially the French government agreed to look after the burial of Allied soldiers too, but in 1916 the British decided to separate their commemorative work from the French. Initially as the Prince of Wales’ Committee for the Maintenance of Military Graves, later as the Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission, a separate organization was formed to deal with the creation of cemeteries to house British, Imperial, and Dominion war dead. With some exceptions, none was to return home.

The creation of cemeteries for French war dead was a more complicated matter. Civilian graves were used, and civilian authorities sought compensation for loss of space. The final disposition of the war dead was undecided. They were buried in separate cemeteries, in civilian cemeteries in the ‘Zone Rouge’ or former combat zone, or – if they had died in hospital behind the lines – in their native villages. Not surprisingly, no decision was taken about policy on war cemeteries before the end of the war; consequently all three types of site were used, with disturbing results.

The sheer chaos of the devastated areas led many bereaved people to call for governments to let them bring their dead home, back to their villages where they could be interred in local cemeteries. This argument was voiced early in the war, but with little success. On 17 October 1914, the Mayor of Mantauban in the Tarn et Garonne, near Bordeaux, forwarded the request of a father in his town who wanted to bring his son’s body home. The request was refused. A ship construction merchant from Dunkerque wrote to the Minister of the Interior on 14 February 1915 to ask for permission to exhume his dead son from a common grave in the civilian cemetery at Esternay, near where he had died. His body was clearly identified; thus the bereaved father asked to rebury him in a separate grave until the end of the war. At that time, he would bring his son home, all at his own expense. Permission was denied. At the same time, a bereaved father and mother asked to rebury their son, whose grave they had identified, so that they could conduct a funeral before the body had become ‘impossible to identify’. The plea to hear ‘la prière d’un père et d’une mère désolés’, was refused by the Ministry.

Such bureaucratic obstacles were circumvented by less scrupulous people. The Mayor of Florent on the Marne wrote to his prefect about the secret exhumation of the body of a soldier of the 47th Infantry Regiment. The Mayor of Bouchy-le-Repos reported another case of grave-robbing. The Mayor of Compalay told the Prefect of Seine et Marne of the arrival
in July 1919 of one widow Terrouet with the body of her son, who had 
died in September 1918. She had been helped by a ‘Parisian entrepreneur’ 
named Tanguy, who provided transport, exhumation, helped verify 
identification, placed the body in a coffin, and conducted the bereaved 
woman and the body of her son back to her village. All for a fee of 2.50 
francs per kilometre and a handling charge. Such ‘entrepreneurial flair’ 
was recognized as widespread and unscrupulous.\textsuperscript{20}

It was a futile hope that such private enterprise would come to an end 
at the Armistice. Still, an attempt to bring order to the situation was 
made soon after the cessation of hostilities. On 24 November 1918, a 
Commission on Military Cemeteries was created, under the Presidency 
of General Castelnau, a bereaved father himself. The Commission’s 
charge was to regroup isolated burials, and to create and maintain 
designated military cemeteries. While this process was under way, for a 
period of three years, no private exhumations and reburials were to be 
allowed.\textsuperscript{21}

This decision did not end the matter. It simply intensified a long and 
at times acrimonious debate about the appropriate resting place for the 
fallen of the Great War. The spokesman for the view that the fallen 
should remain on the Western Front was Castelnau, Joffre’s right-hand 
man at the outbreak of the war and later commander of the Armies of 
the East. An anti-Dreyfusard, he was one of the most prominent 
Catholic traditionalists in the army. He had lost three sons in the war. 
His view, and that of many other staff officers, was that the dead should 
rest where they had fallen.\textsuperscript{22} They had died for that land. It was 
sanctified by their sacrifice. Some hoped that the eventual return of 
greenery would create sacred forests, places of pilgrimage for the whole 
world.\textsuperscript{23} ‘Don’t separate those whom death has united’, wrote another 
advocate of the status quo in 1920.\textsuperscript{24}

These views were held by a minority. Over the next year, hundreds of 
people, prominent and obscure, from all over France joined in a 
campaign to bring the dead back home. One reason was to avoid a 
three-year wait while cemeteries were being built. To tarry, some 
argued, was to assure misidentification of the dead. On a more 
emotional level, others decried ‘the cruelty of the erection of a new 
barrier between families and the bodies which belong to them’. After all, 
‘their sacrifice was made only to reinforce the family ties that bind them 
to us’.\textsuperscript{25}

In May 1919, these contradictory views were exchanged at a meeting 
of the Conseil d’Etat. On the one side stood those in favour of letting the 
dead rest where they had fallen. In De Morey’s words:

I think my son must rest among those with whom he fought; he led his men in 
battle and I want him to remain among his comrades; that the battle will
continue for him, that he be on the frontier and there inspire future generations, in case of a new attack to defend his Country. . . . I am convinced that, facing this army of sleeping heroes on the field of battle, the Country will be very profoundly moved.

In cemeteries already built, like Saint-Menehould, one sees the army that saved France; there, under the earth, and each year we will come to render homage where homage is due. Won’t this be better, infinitely more beautiful than to scatter the bodies of our heroes in communal cemeteries, where, after one generation, military tombs will not be maintained?

He told his colleagues of a letter from Lady Cecil, who wrote to him that her British son, killed in 1915, ‘should remain with his men, asleep in the soil of France, which will become dearer to me because my child is buried there’.  

On the other side of the argument also stood bereaved and distinguished men. Louis Barthou, President of the Conseil d’Etat and soon to be Minister of War under Briand in 1920, said: ‘I have been told I could have retrieved the body of my son; others have done so’ for a fee. But he had refused. He objected to waiting for three years after the end of the war; his son had died in 1914. Why wait seven years before he could properly be laid to rest? 

Castelnau and his colleagues won the day. In June 1919, the Ministry of War forbade all exhumations in the Zone of Military Operations. In September 1919, the Ministry of the Interior wrote to all prefects ordering the stamping out of the clandestine traffic in bodies.

As one might have predicted, such edicts carried little weight with families whose sadness led them to seek comfort even in illegal ways. A change in the government’s line was urged from many angles. The journal L’art funéraire et commémoratif and its editor Lucien Marie took a leading part in this effort. It may be said ungenerously that memorial artists had a vested interest in bringing the dead home, and indeed alongside appeals to the government to let the dead return were advertisements for the latest tasteful designs for funereal statuary and sculpture. But the views aired in this journal were echoed throughout the country. ‘Our sons, no, no, we don’t want to leave them there’, wrote one obscure father in July 1919,

Though they are dead, we want to remove them from those accursed places in the battlefields. They did their duty. Now we must do ours for them: to let them rest in peace in the cemetery of their ancestors. To abandon them there, is to condemn them to eternal torment.

The war today is over. The living are going home. Let’s let the dead return to their villages, to those villages which were in their last thoughts at the tragic moment of their deaths.
Others called for ‘the demobilization of the dead’\textsuperscript{32} for religious reasons. French war cemeteries were civic memorials, sanctified by a state which only a decade earlier had formally severed its ties with the Catholic church. For many Catholics, to bring the dead home was to return them to the parish church. In the pages of \textit{L'art funéraire et commémoratif}, Lucien Marie even went so far as to suggest that the reluctance of the Ministry of War to accede to their demands was because some of the responsible officials were Jews. As we all know, he intoned, the Jews were ‘the most materialist people on earth, and also the people with the least developed cult of the dead’.\textsuperscript{33}

It would be a mistake, though, to locate this agitation solely on the extreme right. Very respectable centrist groups and individuals subscribed to it as well. ‘Return to families the remains of our heroes’, wrote the editor of \textit{Souvenir et fraternité}, the journal of the National Union of the Families of the Dead of the Great War.\textsuperscript{34} He had the support of the Union of Fathers and Mothers of those who Died for their Country, an association of eminent Parisian politicians, scholars, and other public figures, whose meetings were held regularly at the Panthéon from 1915.\textsuperscript{35}

Bereaved people had the right to a free annual visit to the war cemeteries of the north of France. But those who lived in the south and southwest could not easily undertake such pilgrimages. It made sense, they felt, to bring the remains of the fallen back to the bereaved, so that they, the ordinary people of France, could put the dead to rest, and provide them with a funeral ceremony which many had been denied by the butchery at the front.

What may finally have swayed the authorities was that the return of the dead continued to take place illegally. Parents with means were still making private arrangements with gravediggers, who for a fee were willing to bring their sons home again. This form of private enterprise infuriated the army, which had to deal with both bribery and churned-up cemeteries, as well as the anger of poor parents, at the crassness and privilege of wealth.\textsuperscript{36}

On 28 September 1920, the French government finally gave in. It promulgated a decree establishing the right of families to claim the bodies of their loved ones, and to transmit them home, at state expense.\textsuperscript{37} It took over a year to organize the bureaucracy, the procedure, and necessary transport,\textsuperscript{38} but, starting in the summer of 1922, about 300,000 of the dead of the Great War actually went home. Since roughly 700,000 of over 1 million fallen French soldiers had been identified, this figure represented about 40 per cent of those whose families had the right to request their return.\textsuperscript{39}

It didn’t all go smoothly. There was a dispute as to who had the right to claim the body: parents or widows. The parents’ association argued
that the filial tie was the only one that could not be broken, and hence they had precedence. The widows’ organization thought otherwise. The parents won. There were substantial difficulties in providing irrefutable proof of the identities of the fallen, a theme recently recreated in the film of Bertrand Tavernier, *La vie et rien d'autre*, where two women separately seek to find alive or claim the remains of the man they both loved. There were the real logistical problems of reaching the devastated areas, finding the appropriate grave, filling out the right forms, finding and paying for the right trains, and so on. The anguish of disinterring the dead in the chaos of the battlefields, of distinguishing the remains of one man from another, of fighting off the ‘jackals’ ready to offer their help at exorbitant prices, accompanied this *rite de passage*.

But the operation was concluded, more or less successfully, by the beginning of 1923, to the great relief of the French military. As the man responsible for overseeing the military cemeteries of the north of France, General Ferre, put it:

1922 was a baneful year for our cities of the dead due to numerous exhumations which, practically without precautions, upset the soil of military burial places, broke some funerary emblems, destroyed trees and shrubs and surroundings. Thanks to the devotion and perseverance of our committees, we have just about escaped from the chaos and the damage has been repaired. Exhumations at state expense are over; there are no more transports of bodies (with a few exceptions); the situation has stabilized, and it is time to give these cemeteries their final crosses and stelae.

War cemeteries are scattered over a vast area, in Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East. But since most of the casualties suffered by the major combatants were incurred on the Western Front, it is in France and Flanders that the problem of creating war cemeteries was most acute. For different reasons, the decision to let the dead rest where they had fallen was taken by all participants. Having lost the war, the Germans were in no position to return to the areas they had occupied and exhume the remains of their fallen soldiers. The Americans were committed to the return of their dead soldiers, but the British ruled it out on grounds of expense and equality. So many men had no known grave that granting the privilege of bringing back only identified bodies would discriminate against about half the population.

Instead, symbolic gestures of the return of the fallen were made in many countries. In 1920, unknown soldiers were interred in Westminster Abbey in London, and under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. In the following year, the same ceremony took place in the United States, Italy, Belgium, and Portugal. Most other countries followed suit, or, as in the cases of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, accepted the tomb in the Motherland to represent their own unknown soldiers. On 11 November
1993, the Australians broke ranks, and brought home one of their unknown soldiers who had been buried in a Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery. After a full military funeral, he was laid to rest in the ‘Hall of Memory’ of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.48

The German approach to this question was bound to entail greater difficulty and ambiguity. A number of projects were formulated, but they lacked the power to focus attention on one sacred site. The absence of any consensus on the meaning of the war, the origins of the defeat, and the place of the military within German political culture ensured that the idea of burying an unknown soldier in Berlin or Tannenberg or Munich had a divisive as much as a unifying effect. Monumental art in Germany remains contested material to this day.49 As the distinguished German scholar Reinhard Kosseleck put it in an article in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, who is to say that the unknown soldier of the Great War hadn’t shot the unknown war resister?50 Among the ‘winners’, these problems also existed, but they could be absorbed in a consensus as to the value of commemorating the fallen who gave their lives for victory.

Commemoration was a universal preoccupation after the 1914–18 war. The need to bring the dead home, to put the dead to rest, symbolically or physically, was pervasive. All I aim to do here is to suggest the significance of an issue which was both allegorical and real. Those who tried to reunite the living and the dead, to retrieve their bodies and to give them a secure and identifiable resting place, faced staggering problems. There was the scale and chaos of the battlefields at the end of the war; there was as well terrible uncertainty as to the survival of thousands of men who simply had vanished in combat. Before commemoration came discovery, a theme to which I turn now.