“Rights, not charity”: René Cassin and war victims

“The war left deep and permanent scars on me, and on many of my comrades... I could not accept the idea that national solidarity towards disabled veterans would be restricted to a kind of charitable handout.”

René Cassin, Nobel Peace Prize Lecture, Oslo, December 10, 1968

At the end of World War I, an entire generation of veterans struggled to return to civilian life. Their ranks had been decimated by the considerable losses sustained during the conflict. In Europe, 10 million men lost their lives in combat; 20 million were wounded; 8 million suffered from various kinds of disabilities. The families who welcomed them home were often at a loss to cope with the severity of the soldiers’ injuries and trauma, with their own inability to care for them, and with the impossibility of returning to pre-war life. These psychological problems were compounded by economic difficulties when a demobilized soldier was disabled, or when a family’s principal provider had been killed in action. Widows, often young, numbered in the millions. There were nearly 6 million orphans when the Armistice was signed, and likely 3 million more in the years that followed, as veterans died from the consequences of their injuries.

For all of these “war victims,”¹ the recognition of their rights would be decisive: the right to a pension, to medical care, to a job. Indeed, these rights could take on paramount importance, since economic circumstances and living conditions were so difficult in the early 1920s. In the eyes of survivors of the Great War, the questions of justice and dignity were also at stake: in all countries, veterans called for “rights, not charity.” But how could these rights be defined in the wake of a conflict with so many victims? The social legislation inherited from the nineteenth century was no longer suitable for the situation, especially with new and equally important issues at stake in the post-war period:

the reconstruction of regions that had been destroyed, the political management of victory or defeat, the peace conference, the suppression of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary movements. In fact, the recognition of victims’ suffering was not the central issue, although the need for this recognition was certainly crucial. It was also necessary to provide legal grounds for their demands for compensation, which required political will—significant legislative work and the intervention of numerous legal scholars, including experts on labor law or occupational health.\(^2\)

In the immediate post-war period, the concept of “victim” had not yet been solidified and the idea of a “right to compensation” remained rather vague.\(^3\)

A definition of the rights of war victims in fact consisted of two parts. Legal scholars had first to evaluate \textit{a posteriori} the damage inflicted on people by the conflict, the severity of the damage, and the eventual chances of recovery. They thus defined society’s responsibility for this damage, by virtue of which victims could obtain compensation. In France, the concept of compensation can be understood in light of the work of Léon Bourgeois, the theorist of \textit{solidarisme}, a very influential philosophy at the end of the nineteenth century. In reaction to the rise of chronic poverty, Bourgeois wanted to encourage better social cohesion and redefine the social contract.\(^4\) Assistance to war victims fitted in with this line of thought.\(^5\) The Republic, both a warlike and maternal figure, as Maurice Agulhon’s work has amply demonstrated,\(^6\) was there to protect the weakest and to repair the damage wrought by the war. “The idea

\(^2\) In the case of France, for example: legal scholars such as Charles Valentino (who wrote an important dissertation on \textit{Accidents du travail et blessures de guerre [Workplace Accidents and War Wounds]}, Bordeaux: impr. Y. Cadoret, 1917), Marcel Lehmann (\textit{Le droit des mutilés [Disabled Veterans’ Rights]}, Paris: Librairie Bernard Grasset, 1918) and René Cassin.


\(^5\) The first mention of the idea of “compensation” for victims of the war appeared in a law passed on December 26, 1914. It concerned “those who were victims of property damage” when the Germans invaded, and it presented the state as the final means of recourse, when private insurance failed to compensate the individual who had suffered the damage.

of solidarity between Frenchmen was only a philosophy before the war, a philosophy that the war turned into a collection of harsh and clear experimental truths,” is how the representative Léon Bérard summed it up in a speech to the Chamber of Deputies in July 1917. Moreover, the concept of compensation also had a diplomatic dimension that should not be overlooked. In the case of France, if the state could be held responsible for the damage done to victims, the ultimate debtor was Germany, who would have to undertake “all pensions or compensations for the military victims of the war . . . and for those whom these victims provided for.”

_A posteriori_ compensation of damages, then, but also an anticipation of future risks. In effect, between the two wars, a new legal category was born, whose outlines were still rather vague: the vulnerability of war victims. By vulnerability, a legislator meant the losses or limitations resulting from war, the different kinds of handicaps that rendered victims fragile and exposed them, _a priori_ this time, to additional risks, whether of a physical nature (for example, deteriorating health) or of a social nature (such as job loss). The risks encountered by victims after the war imposed on society a duty to assist, to take care of, and to protect them. For the historian, the progressive introduction of this idea of vulnerability shows that legal scholars of the 1920s had already understood what current historiography continues to underline: one can never completely escape from the effects of a total war like World War I.

The definition of a right to compensation was thus inseparable not only from the establishment of medical categories, which were constantly evolving during the conflict, but also from the establishment of moral norms, which could valorize some kinds of injuries and neglect others, and, more globally, from the establishment of the social status of victims. To take one well-known example, the status of those with physical injuries was completely different from the status of those with psychological wounds, both during and after the war. For as much as the visibility of bodily injuries facilitated the realization of the damage inflicted on disabled soldiers, psychological wounds were tainted with the suspicion that they were faked, or they were considered dishonorable. In the same

way, in defeated countries, the disfigurement of severely wounded veterans was perceived as emblematic of defeat: they bore its signs on their bodies. In other words, the rights of war victims were at the intersection of several discourses, often competing ones: those of the legislator, the physician, and the victim himself, when he could express himself. However, in the wake of World War I, the initiative for a consideration of victims’ rights came from veterans and veterans’ associations rather than from the state. It is thus they who constitute the focal point of this chapter.¹¹

In the 1920s, many veterans felt they had been abandoned; the defense of their rights sounded like a cry of anger against this abandonment, anger that resulted from any number of causes: powerlessness to cope with the devastation of physical suffering, social isolation, blows to self-esteem, loss of virility, and feelings of shame. As it happens, this cry of anger that is so important for understanding the general tone of the war’s immediate aftermath has, over time, become difficult for us to hear. In “victorious” countries, national memory has altered the reality of the post-war transition period, wrongly presented as a moment of national unity. The difficulty of reintegration into post-war society has been progressively eclipsed by the official rhetoric of the 1920s, which glorified conquering soldiers as heroes. It is only recently, in fact, that we have rediscovered how chaotic the veterans’ return actually was, and understood that the recognition of their rights was only achieved after long and difficult battles.¹² In the defeated nations, images of veterans begging in the streets of German and Austrian cities, and then the Nazi mythology stigmatizing civilian ingratitude towards demobilized soldiers had as its consequence the complete distortion of the reality of the return home in 1918.¹³ In fact, not only were former soldiers well and truly


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celebrated upon their return to Germany, but the Weimar Republic rather quickly set up a significant aid system for disabled veterans, widows, and war orphans, which made it one of the most protective sets of legislation in post-war Europe.\footnote{Deborah Cohen, \textit{The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914–1939} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), Chapter 4.} Finally, historiography has often privileged an administrative approach to the question of veterans’ rights, without always fully taking into account its social and human implications. The familial, private dimension of the return home of disabled veterans has long been neglected in favor of a more global approach, that of the policies concerning veterans’ aid.\footnote{A notable exception is Marina Larsson’s pioneering work, \textit{Shattered Anzacs: Living with the Scars of War} (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2009).}

In comparison with the great social and political crises of the early 1920s, the question of veterans’ rights has often been considered a secondary problem. However, in more than one respect, it was a central element in the slow and chaotic transition period following the Great War. The question of veterans’ rights was first of all a factor in the stability of post-war societies: former soldiers were in essence men transformed by their experience of violence, men who were marginalized because they had been kept separate from the civilian world, and men who were demanding because they expected explicit signs of recognition from the societies welcoming them home.\footnote{On the psychological implications of recognition, see the work of the psychiatrist Claude Barrois, especially \textit{Psychanalyse du guerrier} (Paris: Hachette, 1999).} Ensuring them rights, especially the weakest among them such as the severely wounded and the disabled or their families, meant lessening potential arenas of conflict and social trouble, although the state’s direct intervention may not have sufficed to guarantee their loyalty.\footnote{Cohen, \textit{The War Come Home}, Chapter 2.} In a general way, compensation has always been perceived as insufficient with respect to the damage suffered—something well understood by the German psychiatrist Karl Abraham, as early as 1918.\footnote{Zur \textit{Psychanalyse der Kriegsneurosen} (Leipzig: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1919).}

Veterans’ rights were also closely connected to the economy of war and post-war reconstruction: during the conflict, the wounded had to be allowed to return to a working life as soon as possible, and their...
families had to be able to pursue their participation in the war effort. After the war, victims of the conflict had to be able to contribute, as best they could, to the work of rebuilding. This was the aim of setting aside jobs in industry for disabled veterans; this was also the goal of the technicians who invented new prostheses, which were not designed with either aesthetic goals in mind or with perfectly restoring bodily function. Instead, they were designed to be adapted to the disabled man’s professional needs. Rather than a mechanical hand, a disabled veteran could be fitted with an extremity in the form of a claw, pincers, or a hammer. Thus the concern was less with seeking to restore the disabled man to his pre-war identity than with allowing him, symbolically at least, to return to working life.19

Lastly, the question of veterans’ rights had a specifically political dimension. In a country like France, where soldiers had also been citizens since the establishment of universal male suffrage in 1848, such rights were connected to the status of citizen. It was as citizen-soldiers that numerous French soldiers proposed appealing to the Chamber of Deputies in order to put an end to the useless, deadly offensives of 1917, as Leonard V. Smith has shown in his study on the French mutinies in 1917.20 “We serve the army as a representation of the state, and we serve the state as a representation of the sovereign people,” the mutineers explained. “We are citizens, we are therefore free to express our feelings, the values that we defend,” as the cooper Louis Barthas summarized it in his war diaries, which provide good examples of this assumption of direct democracy.21 In this way, French soldiers differed from British or German soldiers, not all of whom enjoyed the right to vote. Once back at home, French veterans continued to invoke their status as citizens while asserting their rights. In their eyes, the aid given to them had no connection to welfare nor to a form of public generosity nor to a logic of recompense, but, instead, was intimately tied to their rights. This is the true significance of Georges Clemenceau’s famous statement in November 1917: “These Frenchmen whom we were constrained to throw into battle, ‘ils ont des droits sur nous’ [we owe them rights],” a

relatively vague formulation nonetheless, which does not define the precise nature of these rights or the way in which the nation will honor its debt.  

The case of France is therefore a particular one. In what follows, I want not only to describe how French veterans’ rights were structured after the Great War, but also to demonstrate that what was at stake for veterans transcended the context of the 1920s and the national context of France. Two radical claims lay at the heart of veterans’ associations’ fight for the decent treatment of disabled soldiers and families in mourning: the redefinition of war victims’ rights and peace between nations, both of which required that the absolute sovereignty of states be called into question. In other words, a state that sent millions of men to the battlefields could not be the only guarantor of the rights of these men upon their return. The state needed a goad and a watchdog—namely, veterans’ associations. By virtue of the sacrifices they agreed to make on the battlefields, the veterans of the Great War earned the moral authority to assert their rights. In the aftermath of the war, the profound significance of the effects of combat was at work, surpassing the somewhat technical character of the debates over veterans’ rights.

One man played an essential role in the definition and promotion of the rights of victims of the Great War: the French legal scholar René Cassin. Along with Eleanor Roosevelt, Charles Malik, P.C. Chang, and John Humphrey, he was one of the founders of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.  

Severely wounded in 1914, Cassin experienced the disorganization of the health services at the beginning of the war and the carelessness of public authorities in providing material assistance to soldiers who emerged from the war as disabled. He himself suffered little since he had the means to regain his place in society, but many around him found themselves victimized. His fight for the improvement of veterans’ rights was also the fight of all the veterans’ associations that were founded, even before the war was over.

When Cassin was a participant in the French delegation to the League of Nations in 1924, he initiated a dialogue with veterans from other countries, including former enemy powers such as Germany and Austria,
in order to defend these rights on an international scale and promote peace. René Cassin’s personal journey and his political role thus led him to raise questions about several forces specific to the post-war period: the link between veterans’ rights and the promotion of human dignity; the transition from the defense of veterans’ rights at a national level to a transnational level, and the relationship between the rights of the war’s victims and the defense of peace.

**French veterans’ associations and the victims of the Great War**

In the month of August 1914, Cassin was a young legal scholar, 26 years old, pursuing his studies in order to take the highly competitive national examination known as the *agrégation.* From a Jewish family near Bayonne in Southwestern France, close to the Spanish border, he attended law school in Aix-en-Provence, and then settled in Paris in 1908. He then divided his time between writing a thesis on civil law, which he defended in the spring of 1914, and a position as editor at the law journal *Recueil des Lois et Décrets,* better known as the *Recueil Sirey.* His friends were mostly students like him, who met in a group called the “Ihering Circle,” an intellectual club where members would present their work in progress. Among them was Paul Ramadier, who would become the first *Président du Conseil* of the Fourth Republic, and Marcel Plaisant, whom Cassin would meet up with again during the 1920s when the former was France’s representative at the League of Nations.

On August 1, 1914, France entered into war. Several hours after notices announcing the general mobilization were posted on the walls of Paris, Cassin took the train to Antibes to join his assigned regiment, the 311th Infantry. One month later, he was fighting in the Argonne and the Hauts-de-Meuse, at the time of the extremely violent clashes typical of the end of the “war of movement.” Many friends died around him, as he recalled in public in September 1940, in a moving speech delivered on the BBC, after he had joined the Free French:

> I can still see you even now, Captain Woignier, a Catholic from Lorraine with a fiery soul; when you closed your eyes in death, you gazed on your native land, and I can still see you, Vandendalle and Pellegrino, fearless and blameless, peaceful gardeners with bright red blood, like your beautiful flowers. I can see you, Garrus,

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24 The *agrégation* is a highly competitive national examination administered in a variety of subjects. Those who succeed on the *agrégation de droit* are guaranteed a position as a law professor in the French higher education system.
a humble day laborer from the hills of the Var, you, the freethinking poacher, who volunteered for dangerous patrols, and you, Samama, prosecuting judge who thought it important, because you were Jewish, not to seek a safer position.25

On October 12, the regiment received the order to lead a night raid on the Chauvoncourt barracks, near Saint Mihiel. When they arrived about a hundred meters from their goal, the front-line companies suddenly found themselves bathed in enemy searchlights. Under heavy fire from the barracks’ defenders, battle continued until two o’clock in the morning.26 Cassin fell, hit by several bullets. He was wounded in the abdomen and thought he was going to die. He asked a soldier in his company to let his father know, and he asked a priest to pray with him. The night turned to morning, and he survived. He was quickly evacuated, not to a neighboring hospital, but to the area where he had first reported for duty after being called up, in accordance with military regulations. What followed was an absurdly long journey of 600 kilometers back to Antibes. On October 17, he underwent an operation and remained a convalescent for 6 months. He was formally discharged in March 1916.27

Despite the severity of his injuries, Cassin was fortunate. He benefited from the support of his family and friends. He rapidly returned to civilian life, and with military honors: a commendation, the Croix de Guerre, and the Médaille militaire. By January 1916, he found a job as a lecturer in civil law at the law school in Aix-en-Provence. He therefore did not suffer from the solitude, the lack of recognition, and the financial hardship that afflicted many other disabled soldiers. The fate of many French soldiers wounded in the fall of 1914 was often much darker than Cassin’s. Until the reforms initiated in 1915 by Justin Godart, the Under-Secretary of State, the army’s medical system seemed to be completely overwhelmed by the influx of wounded men during the first months of the war.28 From a medical standpoint, most military doctors neglected to take into consideration the risk of infection caused by pieces of shell or shrapnel.29

26 Journal des Marches et Opérations (JMO), 311ème Régiment d’Infanterie, Service Historique de la Défense, 26N747/1.
28 The work of Justin Godart, named Under-Secretary of the State Health Service on July 1, 1915, was important: in particular, he undertook the setup of organizations specializing in examining the discharge dossiers of each military region and systematizing the way soldiers were discharged, as well as the creation of prosthetic fitting centers and physical therapy centers for disabled veterans. See Prost, Les anciens combattants et la société français, Vol. I, pp. 8 ff.
official report by the Hygiene Commission of the Chamber of Deputies in May 1915 describes the problem: “Without taking into account whether they were seriously wounded or not, men were assigned randomly to uncomfortable train cars with bad suspension, bad brakes, bad lighting, and that had not been disinfected; they often reached their destination only after a journey of several days.”

The wounded were crowded into rearguard hospitals, where they waited over many months before they could be discharged. The legislation on discharges and pensions was completely inadequate for a conscript army. At most, it made it possible to handle some hundred cases a month, not the tens of thousands of cases that had accumulated by the end of 1914. Yet this legislation remained in place until 1919.

Even more serious was the fact that the spirit of the 1831 law had become obsolete. Indeed, soldiers had to provide positive proof that their wounds were due to the war and not other causes. Suspicion often won out over compassion. In the absence of eyewitnesses or a correctly filled-out evacuation document, the military commissions of the Great War showed themselves to be overly picky. At most, they granted to wounded men a pension so small that it did not allow them to cope with the rising cost of living.

It was in this climate of growing discontent that the first veterans’ associations were born. In Paris, they were organized by 1915, whether on the basis of categories (the type of injury, or the injured man’s profession) or according to the hospital where they had been treated. In the provinces, disabled men were not as numerous, and tended to organize themselves in general associations: Saint-Etienne, February 1916; Nancy, April 1916; Orléans, February 1917. René Cassin joined the

31 French deputies had in mind a reform of the 1831 law as early as December 1914; a draft was proposed in November 1915, but the work of the bill’s sponsor, Pierre Massé, deputy from the Hérault, and then Georges Lugol, deputy from the Seine-et-Marne, was completed only at the war’s end: the pensions law was passed on March 31, 1919.
32 According to the Journal des mutilés (February 10, 1918), the price of basic necessities had multiplied by a factor of 2.5 during the length of the war in French cities with more than 100,000 residents. Between July 1914 and July 1917, the index of the price of goods grew by 183 percent (see Statistique générale de la France, Annuaire statistique, 55ème volume, 1939, partie rétrospective, 151).
33 One of the first major associations, l’Association Générale des Mutilés de la Guerre (General Association of Disabled War Veterans) was founded at the Maison-Blanche hospital in Paris. Places for medical care, but also places of boredom and of waiting, where discontent grew, hospitals and physical therapy centers provided especially favorable conditions in which discharged soldiers could give voice to their demands.
disabled veterans’ association of Aix-en-Provence in March 1916, more out of concern for his former comrades in arms than from personal need, since his teaching job provided him a comfortable salary:

In this city in mourning, Aix, I saw war widows; I saw our injured comrades who were starting to be invalided out, those from the battle of the Marne, and then the battle of Verdun; and my barber, who had lost his left hand, told me that the disabled in that area had begun to demonstrate, because with a provisional allowance of 1.50 francs per day, they were living in poverty, no longer able to exercise their professions. He, for his part, had been lucky enough to be rehired by his boss . . . I was the assistant secretary of the association, since I didn’t want to put myself forward. I wanted to help without drawing attention to myself. At the time I was a newlywed and had a crushing workload. We created the Aix association, and then others in the small surrounding villages . . . The widows, even those who had jobs, were not used to going out, and a woman dressed in mourning who went into a café was frowned upon. They really had to be courageous!

By joining together, the victims of the war sought to put pressure on public authorities to obtain a reevaluation of their pensions. Until the 1919 law, pensions were below the bare minimum wage. A soldier who was on 100 percent disability received 3.25 francs per day in 1915 and 4.80 francs per day in 1918. This was less than the minimum wage of the lowest paid factory workers during the war those—“specially assigned” whom soldiers saw as planqués or “shirkers.” These war pensions were far less than the salary of more highly skilled workers, who could earn 15–25 francs per day.

Some former soldiers were condemned to poverty. Many employers hesitated to hire a disabled veteran, who would produce less than an able-bodied man and who risked causing accidents. The Journal des mutilés [Disabled Veterans’ Newspaper], founded in 1916 by the Association des mutilés de guerre [Association of Disabled War Veterans], reported the following conversation between the boss of a car factory now making weapons, and a severely wounded former soldier who had come to ask him for work: “You are disabled, obviously, but that’s not our fault. You have to understand that we are obligated above all to consider the interests of our company and that we are trying to avoid being hampered by cripples.” Humiliated, disabled veterans tended to keep to themselves and to become discouraged. Men originally from the countryside,

34 Cassin, “Fragments autobiographiques,” La pensée et l’action, p. 197.
37 Journal des Mutilés, March 1, 1917, p. 3.
on the other hand, had more chances of finding farm work. They also reintegrated more quickly into their families, who protected them when they came home. Veterans’ associations did not lose any time, moreover, in promoting a return to the land, which was preferable to city life, that symbol of all ills. Agricultural camps created for disabled soldiers and war orphans thus had a therapeutic, pedagogical, and moralizing vocation. For the Association Nationale des orphelins de guerre [National Association of War Orphans], for example, “the salvation of the [French] race” would occur through “the resurrection of the soil and of agriculture, of the healthy and fertile life of the countryside.”

In addition to greater material support, former soldiers also wanted better moral recognition for the sacrifices they had made. On top of feeling useless after the severity of their injuries forced them to leave fellow soldiers at the front, they also felt the shame of being taken for cowards by civilians who knew nothing of war. Some called for symbolic rights, such as reserved seats on public transport—which still exist—or the creation of special insignia that would allow for them not to be confused with the embusqués or shirkers, who had stayed safely on the home front. The rights sought by severely wounded soldiers thus were not limited to confronting the material difficulties of wartime; such rights also had to allow for shaping the collective identity and maintaining the honor of those who would benefit from them.

From the outset, the founders of veterans’ associations firmly believed that they were leading a noble fight, legitimized by the blood spilled on the battlefields. Their actions as citizens and as veterans were meant to fight society’s indifference and the miserly mindset that prevailed, as they saw it, in the Chamber of Deputies and in government offices.

From the war’s outset, the ingratitude of the home front thus became a preferred theme in trench journalism, then in the newspapers of veterans’ associations. In October 1917, in the Journal des mutilés, an editorial

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38 Olivier Faron, Les enfants du deuil. Orphelins et pupilles de la nation de la première guerre mondiale (1914–1941) (Paris: La Découverte, 2001), pp. 64–65. This exaltation of the purificatory aspect of the campaign was a commonplace of war literature. On this topic, see in particular Bourke, Dismembering the Male.


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writer opined: “What we need now are offices where disabled veterans, widows, and orphans will be treated with respect, offices where employees, instead of rejecting a request due to a minor error on the form, will hasten to correct the error and right a wrong. And if Alexandre Ribot [former Président du Conseil from March to September 1917] does not find civil servants capable of simply doing their duty in wartime, let him send them to the front. There, they can defend their leather seats themselves.”

The newspapers of veterans’ associations played an essential role, beginning with the first years of the movement. In response to the diversity of individual situations, they reinforced the idea of a “community of experience” and utilized strategies that sensitized people to victims’ suffering. They published page-long stories of the mishaps affecting this or that injured veteran; here, an amputee forced to beg in the streets; there, a soldier who had been invalided out but who was now mistaken for a shirker. All while applauding the decision to reserve seats in the subway for blind and disabled veterans in December 1915, the Journal des mutilés denounced civilians’ attitude:

Thanks to you, Monsieur le Préfet, we will no longer see disabled veterans bullied, we will no longer see them struck by the vigorous fists of patriots by proxy in monstrous attacks; people will no longer have the right to read and re-read the same lines for half an hour without noticing the man suffering in front of them, leaning on his crutches or holding on to his cane, keeping his balance on a wooden leg with difficulty and pain.

Over time, this newspaper became an important one. It sought to put the expertise of specialists in administrative law at the public’s disposal so that veterans could navigate the maze of laws and regulations. In its first issue, published in May 1916, the paper addressed its readers in the following terms: “Do you have a claim to make? Write to us. Do you

43 Paul Birault, “Une loi de gratitude,” Journal des Mutilés, October 6, 1917.
44 On this idea, see especially the work of the political scientist Christophe Traini, “Les victimes entre émotions et stratégies,” in Sandrine Lefranc and Lilian Mathieu (eds.), Mobilisations de victimes (Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009).
45 Journal des Mutilés, December 1, 1917.
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need advice? Write to us. To obtain satisfaction . . . write to us. Do you need information? Write to us. For anything . . . write to us.”

In November 1917, a meeting of all the veterans’ associations was held at the Grand Palais in Paris, with the goal of forming a national union. But the small provincial associations, afraid of being overshadowed by the Parisian movements, organized a second meeting in Lyon in February 1918: the Union Fédérale (UF) was then born, and René Cassin would play an increasingly important role in it beginning in March 1919. During the meeting at the Grand Palais, the military physician Charles Valentino, who also held a doctorate in law, was instrumental in arguing that the principle of compensations should prevail over that of welfare.

What is at issue is whether the veteran wounded in combat, who saved his country, will constantly be at the mercy of the government’s generosity, or whether he will on the contrary be able to present himself before the nation as a true creditor! When a man comes home disabled and when he has shed his blood, ... this constitutes his right not to charity but to compensations for the damage he has suffered.

He drew lengthy applause. The principle of compensation, which the attendees passed by a unanimous vote, was defended by the associations during all the debates in the Chamber of Deputies; it ended up being written into the beginning of Article 1 of the Law of March 31, 1919.

This law represented considerable progress with respect to the legislation inherited from the July Monarchy (1830–48). First of all, it put an end to the disabled veteran’s obligation to prove the origin of his wounds, and instituted the principle of presumption of origin, which worked to his advantage. No more need to look for witnesses to attest that a wound had been received during the heat of battle. This new provision also applied to war widows, as long as their husband’s decease was officially registered—an often long and painful process given the large number of soldiers missing in action. The new law also made pension calculations more equitable, by replacing the old pension classes of 1831 with a new system of rating disability, in increments of 5 percent, going up to 100 percent disability. It was modeled on the French law of 1898 concerning workplace accidents. It is doubtless easy to stress the somewhat absurd character of these judgments: is the loss of a leg more serious than the loss

48 Charles Valentino, secretary-general of the UF from 1918, became director of the pensions bureau in 1920.
49 *Journal des Mutilés*, December 8, 1917.
50 Presumption of origin was already affirmed in the law of December 9, 1916 concerning special temporary allowances for discharged soldiers (réformés no. 2).
of an arm? How can the relative damage linked to the loss of a thumb, a hand, or the right instead of the left hand be evaluated? However, at the time, the scientific appearance of the disability evaluation system by and large convinced veterans. Increases were included based on the number of children and dependents. Finally, the rights of war widows and orphans were officially recognized.

At the very moment when the law on compensations was being discussed in the Chamber of Deputies, another problem arose: the progressive demobilization, by age groups, of 5 million French soldiers, following the Armistice. This brought other rights to light, which differed from disabled soldiers’ rights. This large-scale operation required faultless logistics on the part of the state: demobilization had to take place at a steady rhythm but without giving Germany the feeling that the French were disarming; it required sending men home, liquidating stocks of material, and organizing the occupation of the Rhineland. Since the demobilization of each echelon depended on the preceding one, it was impossible to give soldiers a precise timetable for their freedom. The men became impatient, worrying about the difficulties awaiting them upon their return: would their wife still be there? In what condition would they find their farm? Would their old boss take them back? Moreover, they came up against the cavils and quirks of a bureaucracy that they did not understand well.

Here is one example among many. In theory, the Law of November 22, 1918 affirmed the right of returning soldiers to take up their old jobs. The passage of this legislation, only 11 days after the signing of the Armistice, is one indication of its perceived importance by French legislators. However, this law, which appeared at first glance quite favorable to the rights of veterans, came with a condition: in order to be hired by a former employer, the veteran had to send him a registered letter in the 2 weeks following his discharge. After that, he lost all claim to this right. Now, how many returning soldiers forgot this formality during the joy of reuniting with their families? Two weeks was not long to readapt to civilian life. Moreover, quite often, the company where the demobilized soldier used to work had disappeared. It might have gone bankrupt during the war, or the boss might have been killed in battle. A cartoon published as early as 1917 in the Journal des mutilés expressed the soldiers’ fears: two men were shown talking in their trench, with one saying, “War, ok, well and good. But what about after the war?”

In early 1919, the discourse on rights occupied a major place in veterans’ rhetoric and in Parliament. The veterans’ associations, which were
French veterans’ associations and victims of the War 33

quite influential in France during the interwar period, were split into two large groups, with some defending the specific interests of disabled veterans (the UF was the most powerful), while the others welcomed the demobilized soldiers upon their return home, such as the Union Nationale des Combattants (UNC), founded on November 11, 1918 with the support of the army, the Catholic Church, and the business world. The UNC already numbered nearly 100,000 members in February 1919. During this entire period, discontent reverberated among both recently demobilized soldiers and those still waiting to be demobilized. In the explosive context of the major strikes of spring 1919, the Clemenceau government wanted at all cost to avoid a situation where the social crisis and veterans’ resentment might combine and stimulate revolutionary conditions. In March 1919, the government instituted a demobilization bonus of 250 francs, supplemented by 20 francs for each month spent at the front. It also waived taxes due during the war for veterans and war widows, if their income was less than 5,000 francs; once home, many demobilized soldiers had found a letter from the tax bureau waiting for them, demanding back taxes. Finally, efforts were made to honor soldiers on their return and to help them avoid the bureaucratic headaches that the first waves of demobilized soldiers had fought with. The weight of symbolism in this definition of veterans’ rights has over time become for us largely unfamiliar. However, it remains essential. Otherwise, how can we understand that men worn out by the war years could take umbrage at the “Abrami suit,” the badly cut suit of clothes given to them upon discharge? Or that they could complain in their letters about being welcomed in demobilization centers by young soldiers who had not seen combat?

For disabled veterans’ associations, however, the question of pensions remained the top priority, since the amount set by the Law of March 31, 1919 was rapidly revealed to be insufficient in light of the rising cost of living. But how could the government be persuaded to agree to a

52 Antoine Prost justly reminds us that veterans’ associations had four to five times as many members as trade unions did in France at the beginning of the 1930s.


54 Should this growing inability to understand be set against the demilitarization of European society, as seen in James Sheehan’s masterful study, Where Have all the Soldiers Gone? The Transformation of Modern Europe (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008)? Generally speaking, the moral categories that prevailed at the outset of the Great War, particularly the idea of sacrifice, have been modified by the professionalization of the army over several decades and by a kind of banalization of the military as a profession. On this theme, see Eric Deroo (ed.), Le sacrifice du soldat (Paris: CNRS éditions, 2009).

55 The Chamber had initially adopted a standard of 2,400 francs per year for a soldier declared 100 per cent disabled, which was more or less equal to the cost of living for
reevaluation of the amount of the pension? If pensions worthy of the name were to be put in place, perhaps it would be best to begin with a distinction between those who had seen combat and those who had not, between those who had fought in the trenches and those who had worked desk jobs, because they were disabled before the war? Justice or equality: this was another element of the post-war debates. At the annual meeting of the UF in Nancy in May 1921, René Cassin forcefully challenged this proposition. Professor at the School of Law in Lille, he had become, in May 1920, the secretary-general of the UF, then its vice-president, under the president, Henri Pichot, a schoolteacher from the Loiret department in north-central France. They directed the largest veterans’ association in France. “We had to be vigilant because some wanted to use disabled veterans for political reasons, even violent ones,” he remembered. “We never accepted this and at that moment we took a uniquely republican position: we would obtain everything through the law, through democratic means!”

For Cassin, to establish a hierarchy among veterans of the Great War was inconceivable. All had served their country, whether by their work or with their blood: no one could contest the spirit of equality among veterans. It was up to the state to find the necessary resources to provide them what it owed.

What was at stake in these debates of the immediate post-war period was important. By ardently defending the principle of compensation, veterans’ associations asserted that the state was not, in their eyes, a supreme tribunal that could distribute rights to its soldiers according to its good pleasure. In reality, the rights enjoyed by veterans were already imposed on the state by reason of its contract linking it to its citizens, in a series of reciprocal obligations. Moreover, rights resulted from damages incurred during the conflict, whatever their nature: ruined health, job loss, delay in career advancement. Enshrining the principle of compensations in law thus implied a redefinition of what it meant to be a victim of war. As the *Journal des mutilés et réformés* [Disabled and Discharged Veterans’ Newspaper] put it: “Officer, junior officer, or


56 Cassin, “Fragments autobiographiques,” p. 201.


58 This theme appears again in discussions over measures for retired veterans, begun in 1930. In 1933, Cassin reaffirmed the legitimacy of these measures: “This is not generosity on the part of the State towards victims of the war and veterans, but the compensation for personal damages.” (Rapport au Congrès de l’UF à Limoges, June 3–7, 1933)
ordinary soldier; worker, farmhand, employee, or boss, the equal nature of their sacrifices was indisputable. And the equal sacrifice calls for equal compensations, according to the principles of true democratic justice.”

In June 1793, the Convention had led the way by promoting severely wounded regular soldiers to the rank of second lieutenant so that they could benefit from decent pensions and be admitted as residents to the national military hospital and retirement home, L’Hôtel national des Invalides. At the time, a “sacred debt” incurred by the nation with respect to its defenders was spoken of; the term was largely taken up again in political discussions after the Great War. The 1919 law went much farther than the 1793 law, since it guaranteed the same treatment to all veterans.

The rights of victims and the origins of the French welfare state

The debate over veterans’ rights following the Great War thus led to a renegotiation of the bond between the state and its citizens, but it was not restricted to this one point. Studies of other post-war periods, in particular the post-war transition period following the American Civil War, have sought to theorize the link between the development of veterans’ pensions and the development of the welfare state, stressing the role of veterans’ lobbying, the rivalry between political parties to capture the veterans’ vote, and the creation of a large bureaucracy in charge of pensions. In the case of France after the Great War, the establishment of rights for veterans also tended to increase the state’s role in such

59 Journal des Mutilés, June 1, 1917.


61 In addition to Clemenceau’s 1917 speech, where he affirmed that veterans “have rights over us,” Aristide Briand, in his inaugural speech of 1921, reminded his audience that disabled veterans and the families of soldiers killed in combat were “the nation’s first creditors.” Cassin took up this expression in an article published in La France mutilée, January 30, 1921.

62 Theda Skocpol, Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992). Calling into question the idea that the welfare state developed in the United States in the 1930s, Skocpol points out that the federal government devoted a quarter of its spending to pensions between 1880 and 1910. In 1910, more than 560,000 disabled veterans, and more than 300,000 widows, orphans, and dependents received federal aid, while thousands of veterans received care in specialized facilities. See also Megan J. McClinton, “Civil War pensions and the reconstruction of union families,” Journal of American History, 83 (September 1996), pp. 456–80. The classic work on post-Civil War pensions remains
different domains as veterans’ access to medical care, the right of disabled soldiers to work, and the training of veterans for reentry into the work force . . . This change, begun during the war, did not take place without some tension: historically, the source of social policy in France has been traced to the rise of mutual aid societies in the nineteenth century, at the local level, and not, as is generally believed, to the tradition of a centralized state. Thus, the expansion of the state’s social role in 1914–18 was viewed with suspicion. Many felt it risked creating a large bureaucratic and technocratic machine that would distance itself from veterans and be deaf to their expectations.

Veterans’ associations in particular were quite aware of this danger. René Cassin, who had directed the UF since 1922, took a close interest in the Office national des mutilés et réformés or ONM [National Bureau of Disabled and Discharged Veterans], founded in 1916 in order to coordinate the efforts of various aid organizations working with victims of the war.

Initially part of the Ministry of Labor, then the Ministry of Pensions in 1920, the ONM financed rehabilitation programs for disabled veterans, convalescent homes for the severely wounded, and welcome centers for war orphans, both in Paris and provinces, thanks to departmental committees created by prefects.

In order to understand the social weight of this organization, we must recall the extraordinary philanthropic movement born during the war, the thousands of private foundations or buildings bequeathed for the use of disabled veterans, war orphans, and war widows. In 1916, for example, there existed more than 3,000 charitable organizations in Paris, each with their own boards, benefactors, and volunteers: Œuvre nationale de protection en faveur des femmes et enfants victimes de la guerre [National Charity for the Protection of Women and Children War Victims]; Œuvre de secours aux enfants [Help the Children Charity]; Œuvre de l’hospitalité
Victims’ rights, and origins of the French welfare state

Some had been founded at the end of the nineteenth century and continued their work after the summer of 1914; many others were born out of the momentum of national unity of the Great War. This burst of generosity needed to be controlled and managed; this was the role of the ONM, which was recognized as a public institution by legislation on January 2, 1918.

The veterans’ priority was thus rapidly to take control of the ONM. In February 1918, only six representatives from charities in charge of disabled veterans and six from disabled veterans’ associations were part of an executive board comprising sixty members. A year later, ten additional representatives from disabled veterans’ organizations joined the executive board of the ONM. Among them were several important figures in the veterans’ movement: André Maginot, Henri Pichot, and of course René Cassin. Disabled veterans occupied an increasingly large place in government offices of France’s départements, but they were irritated by having to depend on the government to nominate them to their post. According to the veterans, the future of the ONM lay in the election of representatives, and in a management system shared between the state and veterans’ associations.

Here we see one of the arguments already advanced in the debate over pensions: veterans held a moral authority that came from their experience as citizen-soldiers. It should thus fall to them and to them alone to outline a policy on aid to war victims, and not to bureaucrats to decide on such a policy in their place. In October 1920, a new reform increased the number of representatives at the head of the ONM to eighty, half of whom would henceforth be disabled veterans or war widows. In addition to the equal number of members of veterans’ associations and representatives of the state, the process of the selecting of the former was especially interesting. Disabled veterans’ associations and war widows chose a slate of candidates for representatives to the ONM, who were then voted on by the associations’ membership. In other words, the very principle of social democracy, specific to France, saw the light of day in this organization and it would be taken up by works councils in 1945.

But aid policies were not restricted to disabled veterans; they also applied to their families and to the families of soldiers killed in action. Several days after mobilization, the Law of August 5, 1914 had anticipated the conflict’s impact on families. It awarded a sum of 1.25 francs to families of war victims.


per day to the wives of soldiers who had been deployed, supplemented by half a franc per day per child under the age of 16. In so doing, legislators were only following a model inherited from the end of the nineteenth century, which based social assistance on the family unit, with respect to the number of dependent children. In a country such as France, suffering from a low birth rate, the risk of a war that would turn into a “demographic blood-letting” was taken quite seriously. In founding the Secours National [National Aid Society] by the end of 1914, the mathematician Paul Appell wanted to come to the aid of the victims of war and “ensure the lives of those indispensable to the future of the French Race.”

The Law of August 5, 1914 nonetheless rapidly proved to be inadequate. It was not enough to support the families of soldiers financially while they were deployed. After the very heavy losses of the summer and fall of 1914, countless war orphans needed help: along with the children of severely wounded soldiers, they initially only benefited from a pension called secours annuel or “annual assistance,” going back to a law passed in April 1831. What was required was not only to dust off the nineteenth-century legislation but also to adapt it to the context of total war: such was the meaning of the law that Léon Bourgeois proposed to the Senate on April 1915, leading 2 years later to the Law of July 27, 1917, which established the Office national des pupilles de la nation [ONP, or National Bureau of Pupils of the Nation].

A distinction should be made between the terms orphelin de guerre or “war orphan,” and pupille de la nation or “pupil of the nation.” The former refers to all children whose fathers were killed in combat but also to those whose fathers died later from their injuries. A child could thus be born well after the war, in the 1920s or even the 1930s, and be considered a war orphan; this unusual situation shows the extent to which identities could fluctuate during this period, and how the distinction between wartime and peacetime is impossible to delineate. War orphans benefited indirectly from the pensions law of March 31, 1919. The pension of a war widow was simply augmented by virtue of how many children she had, up to the age of 21. The status of pupille de la nation was more

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68 The law of August 5, 1914 remained in effect until October 1919. It affected nearly 4 million French families during World War I.


70 Several decrees in the fall of 1914 gave special consideration to the widows and orphans of civil servants killed in combat; they received half of the fallen soldier’s salary, but this arrangement was set to end at the cessation of hostilities.
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complex. These were children whose main provider, whether their father, mother, or other adult, was no longer capable of seeing to their needs, due to death, or to an injury or illness resulting from war or aggravated by it. *Pupilles de la nation* were thus not necessarily orphans. The law of July 1917 renewed a legal category that had appeared for the first time in France under the Revolution and then under the Empire—that of adoption by the nation—even if it did not have the same sense as it did in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In order to obtain the status of *pupille de la nation*, the child’s legal representative had to initiate the request, which then had to be accepted by the civil court of the district where the applicant resided. This adoption by the state was symbolic in nature: with the citation “Died for France” on the father’s death certificate, the corresponding citation “adopted by the nation” was added to the child’s birth certificate. It could be accompanied by material assistance from the state, but this was not automatic.

What is especially interesting for our purposes here with respect to victims’ rights was the way in which those who drafted the Law of July 27, 1917 wrote it in such a way that *pupilles de la nation* could not be confused with *pupilles de l’Assistance publique*, or wards of the state. Under the Third Republic, the *Assistance publique* (Social Services) was developed with the goal of receiving mistreated and neglected children, and reintegrating them into society. Helping neglected children was part of a larger context of the increasing intervention of the republican state into family life, which occurred in particular via the establishment of compulsory education, the regulation of child labor, and the growing intolerance of domestic violence. Under the guise of regulating familial disorder, the boundary between public and private space thus tended to fade. Bureaucracy removed children from paternal authority. It placed them in foster families, often in the countryside, in hopes that they would be able to escape the bad instincts inherited at birth and become good citizens thanks to working and living in a healthy environment. The ultimate goal of the *Assistance publique* was to transform children “into honest people and to make them love their social milieu and their profession.” There was no concept of social compensations for orphan wards of the

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71 The first case of public adoption was that of Suzanne Lepeletier de Saint-Fargeau, 11 years old, whose father was assassinated in 1793 by a bodyguard who criticized him for having voted in favor of the execution of Louis XVI. In December 1805, Napoléon had adopted as *pupilles de la nation* the children of officers and ordinary soldiers who had died at Austerlitz. A long tradition was thus set in place, applied successively to victims of the July Days of 1830, June 1848, and the war of 1870–71.

state; the state protected them, certainly, but it also kept them in a sort of rural proletariat and stigmatized them throughout their life. Wards of the state remained second-class citizens.

Nothing of the sort applied to *pupilles de la nation*. First, legislators took care that the status of these *pupilles* did not authorize state intervention in the private sphere. The recognition of the rights of children, as victims of the war, would not harm the rights of the family. As early as the law of July 5, 1915, paternal authority was transmitted to the mother, whose role tended to expand during and after the war, as recent studies of war widows have shown. Moreover, the consideration accorded by society to *pupilles de la nation* differed completely from that accorded to wards of the state. The legislator Léon Bérard was quite clear on this point: “For reasons of moral appropriateness that are obvious to everyone, it was simply not possible that sons of soldiers who fought in the war be in the same legal category as ‘foundlings’ or ‘neglected children.’” The legal scholar René Querenet specified, “One of the preoccupations of the law’s authors was that [*pupilles de la nation*] not be subsumed into the same group as wards of the state [*pupilles de l’Assistance publique*]. It was not charitable assistance that the law provided along with the title of pupil of the nation, it was a right . . . ”

And since it was a right, all *pupilles de la nation* had to be on equal footing. “It is a law of Brotherhood and not charity,” the legislator said. “It applies to rich and poor. The state has incurred a sacred debt towards the *pupilles de la nation*. The law ensures the same title of honor to all these children, however unequal their fortunes. It brings them closer together with a patent of nobility conferred on them that calls to mind the sacrifices of their fathers, who died to ensure our safety.” It was thus quite appropriate that on July 14, 1918 a great ceremony took place all over France to mark the inauguration of the law concerning *pupilles de la nation*. The parallel between France at war and Revolutionary France was carefully stressed through the use of a common vocabulary: the defense of Liberty, the indivisibility of the Nation, the veneration of heroes who died in combat, and the emergence of a new elite destined to renew the country: “The law brings them closer together by conferring on them patent of nobility that calls to mind the sacrifices of their fathers, who


74 René Querenet, Conférence faite au Comité d’entente des œuvres venant en aide aux veuves et aux orphelins de la guerre (Paris, 1918).
died to ensure our safety.”75 In other words, the right to compensation stems from a “fictive kinship”76 that elevates them above their status as simply victims, in order to make them children of the entire nation—hence the debates about whether or not their status as *pupilles de la nation* should end upon reaching the age of majority: since the state adopted these children as its pupils, should it not act as a father who would continue to care for them their entire life? For war orphans, on the other hand, obtaining a pension was explained more simply, in terms of a blood relationship to a soldier killed in action or who died as a result of his wounds.

As in the case of veterans, the state’s intervention on behalf of war orphans grew out of an intense private-sector mobilization that dated back to the start of the war. Certain charities were secular and republican in nature, such as the *Œuvre des Pupilles de l’École publique*, which was initially founded to aid children in the public school system whose fathers had been killed in action or severely wounded. Others, of a Christian nature, such as the *Œuvre des Bons Enfants* [Charity for Good Children], sought to link war orphans to the image of Christ as a child. In a country like France, where the question of secularism still inspired heated debate, secular and religious charities were often at odds with each other, especially when it came to sharing public funds. In the Catholic newspaper *La Croix*, for example, the journalist Jean Guiraud stigmatized the *Œuvre des Pupilles de l’École publique* as being “run by a Jew, M. Xavier Léon,” and the army orphanage as “run by a Jewess, Mlle Weil,” who would pressure war widows to enroll their children in secular schools in exchange for the promise of financial help.77 Inversely, the secular camp denounced the hidden influence of Catholic associations on families in mourning.

At the same time, solidarity in favor of young victims of the war extended well beyond national boundaries. The Great War gave emigrants of French origin the opportunity to restore their ties to France, ties that had been neglected for several decades. In July of 1917, the orphans of the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence département received 5,000 francs from the French expatriate colony in Puebla, Mexico, which had been established there during Napoleon III’s failed 1861–67 military expedition. The conflict also gave rise to a significant demonstration of solidarity from American philanthropists, who acted in a variety of ways in order to

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76 This “fictive kinship” plays an important role in dealing with collective grief in the 1920s and 1930s, as Jay Winter has shown in “Forms of kinship and remembrance in the aftermath of the Great War” in Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (eds.), *War and Remembrance in the 20th Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 25–40.

supply food to people under German occupation (under the leadership of Herbert Hoover, as I will discuss in Chapter 4), to help refugees and then to participate in the rebuilding of destroyed French villages (Anne Morgan and her association, the American Friends of France), and to come to the aid of war orphans (the Fatherless Children of France association). In 1917, a group of American patrons acquired the château of the marquis de Lafayette, situated in the little village of Chavaniac in the Haute-Loire département. Several years later, Edith Carow Roosevelt, the widow of President Theodore Roosevelt, gave funds earmarked for “all the Pupilles de la Nation from Saint-Quentin and its region.”78 Her son Quentin, a pursuit pilot, had been killed in aerial combat on July 14, 1918 in the skies above the département of Aisne.

In the end, the return to peace nonetheless raised the risk that this burst of philanthropic goodwill would dry up, dependent as it was on the generosity of various benefactors. In addition, the Office national des pupilles de la nation [National Bureau of Wards of the Nation], created in 1917, suffered from significant regional differences in the way children were helped, with those in some areas getting better assistance than those in other areas. By increasing pensions, the Law of March 31, 1919 provided an initial answer to all these questions.79 In all the debates concerning the definition of the rights of victims of the Great War, René Cassin played a leading role. He was sometimes nicknamed the “father of pupilles de la nation [wards of the Nation].” As a legal scholar, he took part in the negotiations over legislative and statutory documents, as did his colleagues Lehmann, Pichot, and Valentino. His efforts sometimes ran up against the inertia of certain legislators, as he recalled in an autobiographical text: “[For them], war was like a vast parenthesis that the last cannon’s blow in 1918 had closed, and when I met with an elderly senator—an intelligent man—to discuss the matter of the pupilles de la nation, telling him that severely wounded soldiers needed their children to be cared for (for there were the dead and also the very severely wounded), he replied, ‘I thought the situation of these brave men would improve with time.’ I pointed out to him, ‘Monsieur le Sénateur, legs do not grow again!’”80

79 Pensions varied according to the rank of the deceased. For ordinary soldiers, it was a mere 300 francs per year and per orphan, which is very little. The base rate went up to 500 francs per year in 1922 (see A. Scherrer, La condition juridique de l’orphelin de la guerre de 1914–1919 [Nancy: Berger-Levrault, 1933]).
80 Cassin, La pensée et l’action, p. 203.
Cassin did not forget that he wielded a kind of moral authority conferred on him by veterans of the war, especially the members of the UF, of which he was president from 1922. One of his priorities was to obtain equal control of governmental offices between representatives of veterans’ associations and public officials. This was done in October 1920 for the ONM, which gave veterans’ associations a historic responsibility: the ONM’s mission was now to distribute funds among hundreds of veterans’ associations and physical therapy centers, and to give loans to disabled soldiers to buy a piece of land or housing. Cassin followed all this work closely, in his capacity as vice-president of the ONM. On the other hand, veterans’ associations remained a minority on the executive board of the Office national des pupilles de la nation (ONP) Over time, the defense of the rights of victims of the war ended up being concentrated within a single organization: the Office national des anciens combattants [National Veterans’ Bureau] was incorporated into the ONM in 1933, in order to found the Office national des mutilés, anciens combattants et victimes de la guerre [National Bureau of Disabled Veterans, Veterans, and War Victims], which in turn absorbed the ONP in January 1935.

Reintegrating disabled veterans into society: a common goal for all veterans

Beginning in the early 1920s, the question of the rights of war victims expanded beyond the strictly national framework and acquired an international dimension. This was the time of the first major veterans’ meetings devoted to war victims’ rights. These rights took on new meaning: by creating dialogue among veterans from different countries, on subjects as fundamental as physical therapy, financial compensations, and access to a job, veterans no longer situated themselves on the grounds of categorical claims—that is to say, rights specific to a social group. Rather, they focused more attention on the relationship between veterans’ rights and human dignity. In becoming more international, veterans’ discourse on their rights became more universalizing, and, in a way, more radical. According to them, it was no longer a particular country, in the name of a pact linking citizens and public power in time of war, that was indebted to its own veterans for their sacrifices on the battlefields—as indicated, for example, by the May 1920 demonstrations of disabled veterans in all the major German cities.¹¹ All the former warring countries owed

¹¹ These demonstrations brought thousands of people together in the streets of major cities, and they were especially impressive. Soldiers with several facial disfigurements were at the head of a parade in Berlin in May 1920, followed by amputees leaning on
inalienable rights to their veterans, in the name of universal principles such as justice and dignity.

One point deserves special emphasis because it is fundamental. The dialogue among veterans did not originate from any initiative coming out of Geneva. It arose out of the veterans’ associations themselves, which were increasingly convinced that the well-being of their members depended on a common defense of their rights, across national borders. By sharing information on social policy in each country, these associations could better put pressure on their governments. Moreover, a growing number of Allied veterans had understood that, if a lasting peace was to be obtained, the democratic institutions of the Weimar Republic had to be supported and everything had to be done to avoid German veterans’ movements being mired in a desire for revenge and in nationalist hatred. In the countries formed out of the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the deterioration of the food situation and financial instability threatened demobilized soldiers and their families.

With time, all of Central Europe would descend into chaos.

In January 1921, the leaders of Britain’s National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers petitioned the ILO, founded in 1919 with Article XIII of the Treaty of Versailles, in order to promote social justice throughout the world. They requested that the ILO organize a conference on the rights of disabled veterans. Several months later, the UF, then under the leadership of Henri Pichot, took up the British project during its meeting in Nancy (May 15–17, 1921). In the summer of 1921, the ILO conferred with different veterans’ associations across Europe in order to organize a conference in Geneva.

A man by the name of Adrien Tixier would play a crucial role in this enterprise. Like Cassin, he was a disabled veteran. On August 28, 1914, while the Battle of the Marne raged, Tixier was gravely wounded. He was only 21. His left arm was amputated up to the shoulder. His body remained riddled with shards of shrapnel. For more than 30 years, his life was “a proud dialogue with pain,” as Léon Blum would later say in a speech delivered at Tixier’s funeral in February of 1946. After his discharge in 1914, Tixier chose to become a schoolteacher, working in the
Albi region. He then devoted all his energy to the defense of disabled war veterans and became one of the leaders of the veterans’ movement. Tixier was a republican and a socialist, like many inhabitants of the Limousin where he grew up, in Haute-Vienne, and the département he later lived in, the Tarn, where Jean Jaurès had been elected as a representative to the Chamber of Deputies in 1885. In 1919, Albert Thomas, the Socialist Party candidate for Jaurès’ seat, met Tixier. Several months later, when Thomas was named director of the International Labor Office, he called on Tixier to come to Geneva and put him in charge of issues concerning disabled war veterans.85

In June 1921, Tixier received a letter from Paul Vaillant, secretary-general of the Fédération socialiste des Côtes du Nord, who sent him the resolutions adopted at the UF meeting in Nancy. The idea of an international effort on behalf of disabled veterans was not new: as early as the end of the war, the Permanent Inter-Allied Committee had created a prosthetics research laboratory in Brussels. But, generally speaking, French veterans were disappointed by the inertia of this organization.86 Moreover, and this was doubtless the most extraordinary part, the UF wanted to meet with representatives from the Central Powers: “For the first time, officially, so to speak [. . .] enemy combatants of yesterday will meet face to face, somewhere other than on the battlefield, to collaborate on a task of mutual recovery and justice.”87

For the members of the ILO’s executive board, partnership with disabled veterans had many advantages. The veterans were obviously the ones most affected by developments in prosthetics and by new laws formulating social policy—laws aimed at them, covering insurance, pensions, and jobs. The veterans provided the ILO with additional legitimacy. Albert Thomas, its director, called them “experts from the practical point of view.”88 Nor could the sheer number of disabled war veterans be overlooked (there were more than 8 million of them, out of the 20 million men in Europe wounded by the war), along with the weight of their role in veterans’ associations and their impact on public opinion. Their organizations were powerful: the veterans’ movement was structured around the disabled veterans’ groups, beginning with the severely

86 The leaders of the ILO also criticized the work of the Inter-Allied Committee. In a report dated September 1922, Tixier gave the following account of a conference that the Committee held in Lubljana and in Belgrade: “More or less meaningless results. Some vague wishes were expressed, after ineffectual discussions, held in trains and hallways . . . On the other hand, the three Yugoslav capitals were all visited, there were dozens of receptions, lunches, dinners, speeches, and toasts” (ABIT/MU/2/2/0).
87 ABIT, MU/7/2/2, Letter from Vaillant to Tixier, June 30, 1921.
88 ABIT, MU/7/1, Thomas’ speech in March 1922 to the first meeting of the experts.
wounded who had been demobilized during the war. In the end, in all of post-war Europe, injured and disabled veterans had become particularly visible in the public sphere. “Living monuments to the war dead,” in the words of the novelist Joseph Roth, they movingly embodied the presence of war in post-war societies. Support for disabled veterans could have a favorable effect at a time when international organizations were still in a fragile state due to the refusal of the United States to participate, the strength of nationalism, and the criticisms of militant Communists.89

In reality, veterans’ groups as a whole did not turn to the ILO to ask for international cooperation. Close to the French Communist Party was the Association républicaine des anciens combattants, or ARAC [Republican Association of Veterans]. The ARAC refused, and would continue to refuse, to work with the bourgeois institutions that had grown out of the Treaty of Versailles. The writer Henri Barbusse, who financially supported the association with the royalties from his best-seller Le Feu (Under Fire, 1916), was its secretary-general. In a letter to Tixier, he wrote: “We do not believe as you do that the poverty and injustice endured by soldiers of the proletariat can actually be fought via annual conferences held under the auspices of and with the official participation of the representatives of governments responsible for the people’s poverty and for war.”90

At the other end of the political spectrum, some French veterans’ associations rejected the very idea of working with German veterans. This was the case of the Union nationale des combattants, or UNC [National Veterans’ Union], which, after the UF, comprised the second largest veterans’ association. This association developed a nationalist discourse that left no room for cooperation with former enemies.

The same attitude could be found among the Association générale des mutilés de la guerre [General Association of Disabled War Veterans], the oldest of the veterans’ associations, founded in the summer of 1915. In a letter to Tixier, its director, General Malleterre, former director of the Invalides military hospital and retirement home in Paris, expressed his unease:

89 “It seems to me that the millions of men who went to war, through their moral authority as much as through their strength, make up an element whose help it is of great interest to obtain,” wrote Tixier in a letter to the Secretary-General of the League of Nations on October 7, 1922 (ABIT, MU/7/5/1).

90 ABIT, MU/3/7/22, Barbusse to Tixier, letter dated August 3, 1920. On May 1, 1920, Barbusse had participated in founding a Veterans’ Internationale, whose founding document was quite clearly hostile to the spirit of Geneva: “Veterans agree to not collaborate with anything in favor of the League of Nations, which is incapable of reaching its goals, and they agree to condemn it as well as any similar bourgeois institution willingly established in order to guarantee the safety of imperial conquests, in opposition to all the proletariat.”
We reject wholeheartedly the mere idea of making contact with German veterans as long as Germany continues to avoid paying reparations for the damage it inflicted on France and the Allies; as long as it publicly questions the responsibilities it solemnly affirmed at the Versailles Peace Treaty, and as long as the voices coming from beyond the Rhine continue to proffer their lies in a detestable spirit of vengeance. It is possible that some far-sighted Germans may be disposed to understand and to cooperate with inter-allied nations in the interest of a general peace. But they are few in number, and we must wait until they are legion and until they have given indisputable proof of the transformation of the German mentality...  

What was true for the French was of course also true of other veterans’ associations. The German Reichsbund and its 750,000 members, the association of disabled Austrian veterans, that of the Italian disabled veterans, the union of Polish disabled veterans and the British Legion—about 4 million disabled veterans altogether in Europe—said they were ready to meet with foreign veterans. But other associations voluntarily kept their distance. In Germany, the International Union, affiliated with the Fédération Internationale presided over by Barbusse, changed its mind and decided not to participate. The Union of Romanian Veterans accepted the idea of a meeting but set as a preliminary condition that “the associations of [their] former enemies declare they would respect and commit to honor existing treaties and pay reparations via the governments of their countries.” The National Federation of Disabled Belgian Veterans, for its part, judged that “the time of devastation is still too close and that of reparations still too far away to make it possible for the association to consider a cooperation of this kind.”

The first international veterans’ meeting thus willingly took a practical approach, as if to keep away from controversial topics such as the Germans’ responsibility for starting the war and for paying compensations. Along with the disabled veterans who represented their associations, there were officials from the ILO and scientific experts such as Ripert, a physician at the French Army’s prosthetics fitting center in Paris, or Meier, head of the prosthetics and orthopedics department at the Ministry of Labor in Berlin. In discussions among veterans, physicians, and officials from various offices serving disabled veterans, the principal topics were the most promising prosthetic devices in post-war Europe, the most suitable materials, the best fitting techniques, and the most effective physical

91 ABIT, MU/7/9/5/4, Malleterre to Tixier, letter dated November 2, 1922.
92 ABIT, MU/7/5/1, Romanian Veterans’ Union to Tixier, letter dated October 10, 1922.
93 ABIT, MU/7/5/1, Belgian National Disabled War Veterans’ Federation to Tixier, letter dated December 6, 1922.
therapy. But the underlying objective was more ambitious: by working to reintegrate disabled veterans into active life, the delegates hoped to “establish a truly humane system of work in the world”—words that effectively called to mind the ILO’s mandate and that indicated a global way of thinking about the meaning of human dignity after the war.

The bureaucratic character of the minutes of these meetings, available in the ILO’s archives, should not lead us to forget their human aspect or their symbolic importance. Men profoundly affected by the war found themselves face to face: those who had lost an arm, such as Adrien Tixier and the Polish delegate Kikiewicz; men wounded in the abdomen like Cassin; severely disabled men such as Major Cohen from the British Legion. For all of them, confronting former enemies was a new trial: “I know from experience that it is not pleasant to meet people who not long ago were firing bullets and grenades at you while you were firing at them, but it is precisely in the interest of world peace that I judge such meetings necessary,” Tixier wrote.

On June 28, 1919, in the Hall of Mirrors, the German signatories of the Treaty of Versailles were obliged to come face to face with a delegation of French veterans described in French as *gueules cassées* (“men with broken faces”)—a living reminder to the enemy of his responsibility for leading such a brutal war. Only 2 years later, the Geneva meeting was to be the occasion to reflect together on the rights common to all veterans of the Great War. “It was not without some anguish that I left the warm environment of the meeting in Annecy in order to fulfill a particularly serious mandate,” René Cassin remembered. “Germany and Austria had participated in the ILO since its founding in 1919; the most powerful Disabled Soldiers’ Federations of those countries . . . had sent a delegate or two, sharing the stage for the first time with Allied delegates. The initial encounter was polite although marked by an understandable reserve.”

What would henceforth be the implications of a shared investigation into the rights of disabled veterans? The first, doubtless the strongest in symbolic terms, was the recognition of equal suffering among French and German disabled veterans. During the entire World War I, the body of the enemy was the locus on which nationalistic hatred focused, as a
Reintegrating disabled veterans into society

number of recent studies on the historical anthropology of the Great War have suggested. 99 French physicians published articles explaining that the enemy was a different being, not only in his mind but also in his physiology: his physical appearance, his ways of speaking or eating, and even his smell—all supposedly differed from those of Allied soldiers. 100 Recognizing that disabled veterans from all countries had equal rights made physical suffering a common feature among all veterans, whatever their country of origin. Disfigured bodies were no longer seen solely in light of national combats, disturbing vestiges of the violence of war in Allied countries, incarnations of defeat in Germany and Austria-Hungary. 101 Assessed by doctors and legal scholars, but used above all by the veterans themselves to establish their common claims, these disfigured bodies formed a foundation from which each veteran’s rights could be worked out.

Moreover, the first international disabled veterans’ conference met with the goal of comparing the prosthetics and physical therapy techniques available in different countries. 102 To read the reports of the experts who met in Geneva makes it possible to see more clearly the state of general improvisation that prevailed at the time. No one could evaluate the results obtained with a particular prosthesis since there was scarcely any follow-up on veterans fitted with prostheses, except in Canada. But the very idea of international cooperation was revolutionary. Several years earlier, applied sciences, especially in the area of prosthetics, was considered to be one of the areas of expression for national genius. The context of the Great War had given rise to one of the great idols of early twentieth-century medicine, the surgeon. 103 The small group of specialists in reconstructive surgery was seen as particularly distinguished, and, among them, the most revered were those who operated on soldiers with severe facial trauma. 104 In all the nations who had gone to war, the ability to reconstruct bodies, send severely wounded men back to the front, and reintegrate disabled veterans into the war economy was praised as a sign

102 This comparison led to the 1921 publication of a work of international documentation on prosthetics, created by Dr. Florent Martin, director of l’Institut de prothèse et d’appareillage [Institute for Prosthetics] in Brussels (ABIT, MU/5/7/1).
103 Sophie Delaporte, Les médecins dans la Grande Guerre.
of that country’s modern medical techniques and of its surgeons’ skill. For example, following a visit to the Roehampton hospital in England, a reporter for the popular magazine *The Illustrated London News* vaunted the “many types of wonderful mechanical arms and legs now on the market” for disabled soldiers, while the catalog of the Inter-Allied Exposition of May 1918 explained: it was “the best artificial substitutes known to science” that would allow the disabled veteran to find “a definite future in civilian life.” Through vivid accounts by the journalist Margaret Chute, Roehampton House became “the house of redemption... where the maimed and broken are made whole again, the legless are taught to walk, and the armless are taught to work.”

The notion among the Allied physicians of one day working with doctors from enemy countries had seemed unthinkable: had German science not been demonized, accused of denying humane values and using scientific knowledge for destructive purposes? The international conferences on disabled soldiers held in 1921 and 1922 thus represented an important turning point in rebuilding relationships among scientists from the former belligerent nations, at a time when Germany and Austria were still excluded from international scientific meetings. Relations among specialists in prosthetics, moreover, evolved more rapidly than the relations among more abstract scientists. During the International Research Council in Brussels in 1925, the French mathematician Émile Picard, who had lost three sons during the Great War, campaigned against admitting Germany to the organization: the 6 years that had passed since the end of the war represented “a very short time in which to draw a veil over so many odious and criminal acts, especially when no regrets were expressed,” he explained.

It was in this moral and intellectual context that a preparatory meeting was held in Geneva in September 1921, and then the first meeting of experts on disabled veterans, in March 1922. The first subject under

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105 Bourke, *Dismembering the Male.*


108 ABIT, MU/7/2/2 and ABIT, MU/7/4/1.
discussion was the international circulation of information on prosthetics. At a time when there were so many disabled veterans living in post-war Europe, it was important that they benefit from competition between the manufacturers of different devices, and that these devices be subject to international standards. The situation of disabled veterans differed significantly from one country to another. In France, since the beginning of the Great War, veterans had had their choice of device and of fitter, but they were often preyed upon by unscrupulous orthopedists who offered discounts on what turned out to be defective devices. In Austria, the government had a monopoly on the manufacture of prosthetic devices, and the lack of competition impeded innovation and progress. As for Russia and newly (again) independent Poland, whose progress in this area was impeded by a gap in technological progress, they simply could not cope with the large number of disabled veterans.  

Experts therefore suggested organizing an international documentation center and an exposition on prosthetics and orthopedics, which would be held in Geneva and also travel across Europe: the goal was to respond to the veterans’ requests as best they could and eventually to have the disabled men themselves demonstrate how to fit the devices, as had been done in Great Britain. From an ideological standpoint, this was a notable change when compared with the wartime period. During the conflict, exhibits of prosthetic devices were organized in a national framework (in France, as early as 1915) or in an international one (Allied exhibitions in Paris, London, Rome, and Brussels); such exhibits aimed instead to show the public the reassuring image of rebuilt bodies, ready to reintegrate into society and contribute to the war effort. Nationalist discourse always underlay these displays, such as when Justin Godart opened the Val-de-Grâce Museum in 1916, in order to show the public the successes of French military surgery. “By creating painstakingly accurate displays of the surgical repairs that were carried out on soldiers’ bodies at hospitals like Val-de-Grâce, the museum framed France’s reconstruction in bodily terms,” argues the art historian Amy Lyford.  

In this type of exhibit, disabled soldiers thus found themselves largely instrumentalized. The staging of reconstructive surgery was not aimed at them, but at civilians or at Allies. The meeting in Geneva, on the other hand, had as its goal to put the disabled veteran back in the center of the picture. In particular, one outcome of the meeting was to recommend

109 ABIT, MU/7/4/1, initial meeting of experts to study questions concerning disabled war veterans, March 2–4, 1922.

comparing social policy in different countries in order to promote those polices most favorable to veterans.

Indeed, there were many differences between Germany and Austria, where veterans benefited from a developed system of health insurance, and France, where it was necessary, in the absence of general insurance against illness, to create an entire special bureaucracy for medical assistance to disabled veterans. The question of disabled veterans living abroad also emerged. In a world where political instability and the search for work led many survivors of the conflict to leave their country of origin, and where national identities often fluctuated, due to changing post-war borders, this was naturally a central question. How could reciprocal protection of disabled veterans be guaranteed between countries that had been enemies during the war—for example, in the case of German or Austrian veterans who came to France looking for work? And in a general fashion, how to proceed so that disabled veterans who had gone abroad were not penalized when the laws of their host country were less favorable than those of their country of origin? This subject, as technical as it may seem, raised important theoretical questions for international law, particularly the following one, on which René Cassin spent a great deal of time during the 1930s: is a right linked to one’s nationality or to one’s domicile—in other words, one’s country of residence?111

During the meeting in Geneva, on the advice of Cassin, experts recommended giving disabled veterans the benefits of their country of origin, but no country would be obligated to give foreign disabled veterans advantages not provided to its own veterans: in the end, it was the law of the host country that prevailed. Moreover, each state would be responsible for periodically reimbursing the expenses of other states on behalf of its disabled veterans: the recognition of international rights for disabled war veterans thus concluded with bilateral accords, founded on mutual recognition of the pensions granted by the country of origin, and, over the long term, an international agreement prepared by the ILO. Along with this question of the rights of disabled veterans living abroad, the reorganization of post-war international law was outlined, even including countries that had formerly been enemies.

The steps proposed by the Geneva meeting were in essence those of comparative law. Experts were there to instruct each other on the laws in force in each country. The ILO was in charge of collecting this information in the form of syntheses and answering the requests for information

coming from veterans’ associations. On the question of pensions, taken up during the March 1922 meeting, the laws of former belligerents could be divided into three separate kinds of systems. In Germany and Austria, compensation for war injuries followed the model used for workplace accidents. In Great Britain, obtaining a pension depended on the judgment rendered by an administrative commission. France had the most original system, with its classifications of disabilities, unconnected with workplace law, and the establishment of appeal procedures, which did not exist in Great Britain. René Cassin believed that, if the practical interest of these comparisons was not immediately felt in countries already endowed with modern laws, each of these major systems benefited, with time and experience, by borrowing from the others.\textsuperscript{112} From the comparison of systems of protective social policies, reciprocal influence was born: such a result was also the hope of the first meeting of experts in March 1922.

It should be noted in passing that the experts no longer thought of disabled war veterans’ rights as separate from other types of laws pertaining to social policy. In his opening speech to the 1922 meeting, Albert Thomas, director of the ILO, explained that “the efforts in favor of disabled war veterans . . . should be used for the benefit of those disabled in a workplace accident, and of all disabled people in general.”\textsuperscript{113} We should not see this as a sign of downgrading the question of veterans’ rights, but instead as a sign of how difficult it was to separate the direct consequences of the war from the other problems that existed in post-war societies. Certainly, veterans formed a distinct social group and for that reason they enjoyed a certain number of rights. But the experience of being handicapped and the stakes it involved (restoring bodily functions, financial coverage while an invalid, lasting reintegration into the workforce) as well as its impact on people (social isolation and loss of self-confidence) applied not only to disabled veterans but also to those injured in workplace accidents, for whom the ILO had been responsible since its founding.

In the summer of 1923, a second meeting of experts convened in Geneva to discuss the question of job placement for disabled veterans. In the economic context of the time, work had become the main concern of veterans. These placement efforts, difficult in and of themselves, were made even more difficult by mass unemployment in the immediate


\textsuperscript{113} ABIT, MU/7/4/1, Speech by Albert Thomas to the first meeting of experts on disabled veterans, March 2, 1922.
Rights, not charity": René Cassin and war victims

post-war period. Veterans’ associations awaited information on other countries’ policies concerning the employment of disabled veterans. However, the deterioration of the international situation was hardly favorable to such a meeting. Since the beginning of 1923, in response to delays in the payment of German reparations, French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr Valley. In March, violent clashes broke out between workers at the Krupp factory in Essen and French soldiers who had come to requisition vehicles. Arrests and expulsions of civilians were carried out in response to various forms of passive resistance used by the inhabitants of the Ruhr, and in response to acts of sabotage by Freikorps troops. French veterans’ associations were caught between wanting to develop further contact with German veterans’ organizations and supporting a policy of firmness. The exchange of letters between the Reichsbund and the UF in June 1923 testifies to the intransigence of French veterans:

Our attitude responds faithfully to the peaceful will of the French people. They have been and they are still too exhausted by a war that they in no way wanted, wished for, or provoked—a war started by imperialist powers and conducted for four years on French soil—to wish to start another war. In their efforts to rebuild Europe, French veterans would strongly and sincerely like to find support from the German people and from a true democracy that would have real power in Germany... Alas, much more is needed in order for the efforts that have been made so far to have the expected results, and for the reparations payment policy for which your Federation has always declared its support to be carried out with sincerity in your country.114

Tixier was initially pessimistic about the possibility of bringing French and German veterans together again, at least as long as the Ruhr crisis remained unresolved.115 By the end of August 1923, the representatives of disabled soldiers’ associations and the heads of national bureaus in charge of veterans’ job placement nevertheless met in Geneva. The circle had grown: Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand all sent representatives. As in 1922, the meeting essentially consisted of exchanging information on the laws in force in different countries. With the use of films, including one about blind veterans in the Siemens-Schuckert factory in Germany, the participants sought to show that severely wounded war veterans could perfectly well regain an active role in the economy. The real question at the heart of the debates was the validity of the principle of reserving jobs for war victims.

Several months before, in January 1923, French legislators had voted on a law granting preference to disabled veterans, widows, and orphans

114 ABIT, MU/3/2/22, The Union Féderale to the Reichsbund, June 1923.
115 ABIT, MU/7/5/1, Tixier to Cassin, letter dated March 16, 1923.
when hiring for government jobs. Unlike the previous law of April 1916 on the placement of disabled war veterans, it was no longer ordinary soldiers who benefited from the law, but all war victims, without regard for age or profession. With the law of 1923, therefore, we see a way of redefining the contract linking the state and individuals, and, in consequence, a redefinition of the social status of victims of the war. At the same time that commemorations of the Great War put the focus on veterans, to the detriment of the civilian victims of occupied regions, as Annette Becker has amply illustrated, the state’s aid had a larger scope and reach, in the form of government-sponsored jobs. It was understood as aid to families, whether they had been weakened by the return of a severely wounded soldier or by the death of the head of the family. This extension of the welfare state’s benefits to victims as a whole, and not simply to veterans, was moreover one of the recurring themes of the associations’ demands: during the first meeting of experts in Geneva in 1922, for example, the delegates recommended that the prosthetics benefit not be limited to those with a disabled veteran’s pension, and that the right to prostheses be extended to civilian victims of the war.

It was still necessary for victims of the war to prove that they could benefit from jobs reserved for them. The procedure was long; applicants often perceived it as humiliating, and it was closely monitored by military authorities: all the medical examinations, certificates of professional aptitude, and job interviews were held in barracks. The admissions tests were no different from those for candidates in good health. It was simply that each year a certain number of government jobs were reserved for victims of the war, classified according to the severity of their wounds in the case of disabled veterans, and according to the number of dependent children in the case of war widows. Proof of the difficulty of getting one of the reserved jobs can be seen in the fact that only about half of the applicants, on average, got a job. In fact, the proposed jobs often required professional qualifications of a higher level than those typically held by veterans, since they had gone off to war too young to have gone beyond the most elementary schooling, and higher than those typically held by widows, who also did not have a sufficient educational level. Most beneficiaries of the law thus held low-skills jobs, where the pay was

116 To the law of January 30, 1923, concerning government jobs, was added that of April 26, 1924 on jobs in the private sector.
117 Annette Becker, Oubliés de la Grande Guerre.
118 ABIT, MU/7/4/1, meeting of experts on disabled veterans, Geneva, March 2–4, 1922.
not enough to live on. Reserved jobs generally came as a supplement to pensions, which were themselves rather inadequate. In 1928, a French war widow who had not remarried, and whose husband had been an ordinary soldier, received an annual pension of 1,696 francs, or 4.64 francs per day, which was a little more than the price of 2 kilograms (4.4 pounds) of bread. Reserved jobs thus brought both an essential financial supplement and job security, since they were government jobs.

As it happens, although it was quite important from the perspective of the question of jobs, in view of the number of people affected (1 million disabled soldiers, 600,000 widows, 550,000 orphans), this French law of 1923 also raised significant theoretical questions concerning the rights of war victims. The legislative debates preceding the vote on the law helped to illustrate the dual aspect of the concept of the right to work. As with pensions, reserved jobs exemplify the symbolic debt contracted by the nation towards those who sacrificed themselves for it: disabled soldiers had the right to reserved jobs in compensation for the handicaps inflicted on them during the conflict, but disabled soldiers also had the right to participate in rebuilding the country. This was the second meaning of the right to work. “In sum, what do our disabled comrades and those who have suffered from the war want? They simply want to regain their place in society, they want to continue the efforts begun on the front lines, they want to restore our France, which has been sorely tried, to the place she should occupy among the nations, that is to say, first place, which she held before the war,” explained Marcel Ferraris, a deputy from the Jura. “They still want to work for the prosperity of the country, which emerged victorious from this terrible war.”

In asking that veterans be able to participate in post-war reconstruction, that they all have the right to work for their country, the final declaration of the Geneva meeting in August 1923 held each state responsible for the bien-être social or “social welfare” of disabled veterans, a term that at the time was often used as a synonym for droits sociaux or “social rights.” But each of the participants was persuaded at the time that this improvement in veterans’ rights, in various forms (the right to medical care and to prostheses, the right to a pension, the right to work . . . ) depended on consolidating democracy in post-war Europe and peaceful

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122 ABIT, MU/7/4/2, Final declaration of the Geneva meeting of August 31, 1923. However, this right to work was progressively extended beyond the area of the public sector, as the French law of April 16, 1924 shows, which required all industrial and agricultural enterprises to employ pensioned war veterans as 10 percent of their workforce.
relations among the nations comprising it. Without this kind of political stability, both national and international, the rights of veterans would be fragile and doomed to disappear.

**From victims’ rights to peace through justice**

In the minds of many of those who participated in the Geneva meetings of 1922 and 1923, these meetings were only a first step in restoring peaceful relations among the veterans of the Great War. “You will certainly understand that the discussions will not be limited to technical considerations,” explained Paul Vaillant, secretary-general of the Fédération socialiste des Côtes du Nord, in proposing a first meeting with the Germans. “For my part, I very much hope that it will be possible for us to form a solid foundation for an international veterans’ federation, destined to be the strongest element of peace, standing against the hawkishness of the chauvinists, the imperialists, and those hungry for revenge, in every country.”

Some delegates, however, thought that technical questions were the only kind that could be mutually addressed with former enemies. Until that point, the questions of peace treaties, reparations, and even responsibility for starting the war, had all been carefully avoided. Why risk discord that could threaten the fragile edifice constructed during the first meetings in Geneva?

The answer to this question lies in one of the major transitions brought about by veterans in the 1920s: from an ideology of *la Guerre du droit* [the War for Justice], to a growing faith in peace brought about through justice. During the Great War, the large majority of soldiers, whatever their nationality, had adhered to the idea of a defensive war, conducted by their countries according to the rule of engagement. For the French and their allies, the profound feeling that the Central Powers unilaterally bore responsibility for the beginning of hostilities reinforced this conviction. In their eyes, the war was doubly just, both because it had been provoked by outside aggression and because, on the battlefield, the Germans used methods of war contrary to international law and to which it was therefore legitimate to respond.

Academia played a part in setting up the argument for the “War for Justice.” The legal scholar Louis Renault, who had been a member in the French delegation to the Hague Convention in 1907, gave a famous lecture at the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques entitled “War and human rights in the twentieth century,” in the fall of 1914. During

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123 ABIT, MU/7/2/2, Vaillant to Tixier, June 30, 1921.
124 This question of a just war is addressed in a special issue of *Mil Neuf Cent*, 1, 2005.
the same period, the accounts of atrocities committed by the German army against Belgian and French civilians formed an entire body of accusations, carefully examined by jurists on a variety of investigative committees, and countered by German intellectuals in the form of the famous Manifesto of the 93 (October 4, 1914), which also belonged to the domain of law. The jurist André Weiss, a well-known specialist of international law, took on the role of legal expert for the committee. In 1915, he published a small treatise on the German violation of Belgian neutrality. In other publications, he dismantled the arguments put forth by German legal scholars. The other target of the Committee was of course French public opinion, whose support of the Union sacrée had to be safeguarded. Even the major peace movements, such as the association La Paix par le droit (Peace through Justice), run by the philosopher Théodore Ruyssen, a specialist of Kant, did not distance themselves from this patriotic credo.

It is important here to return briefly to the source of this juridical pacifism in order to illustrate the place that international law occupied in pacifist milieus before the war. Founded in 1887 by a group of students preparing for their baccalauréat at Nîmes, the Association des jeunes amis de la paix [Association of Young Friends of Peace] had become in 1895 the association La Paix par le droit. From the outset, it distanced itself from the radical, anti-militarist pacifism exemplified by Gustave Hervé and it adopted a more juridical and pragmatic approach, sometimes described as “moderate pacifism.” The wars of the future would not be avoided by opposing the draft or by refusing the principle of national self-defense, according to the supporters of juridical pacifism, but through the advancement of international law, dialogue among nations, and the development of the practice of arbitration. From this standpoint, two national traditions could almost be opposed: a German pacifism marked

125 Horne and Kramer, German Atrocities, 1914.
by an ethical conception of peace that exalted a natural, preexisting harmony among men, and a French tradition that spoke less in terms of morality and more in terms of international law or arbitration. The association La Paix par le droit set as its goal to “popularize legal solutions to international conflicts by studying them.” In so doing, it was part of a larger trend of thought on the rise at the end of the 1890s, with important figures such as Frédéric Passy, who founded the Société française pour l’arbitrage entre les nations [French Society for Arbitration between Nations] in 1867, and Léon Bourgeois, the theorist of solidarisme and the head of the French delegation to the Hague Conventions in 1899 and 1906. It was these same men who founded the European office of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in 1912; Jules Prudhommeaux, secretary-general of La Paix par le droit, also became one of its leaders.

When war broke out, the pacifist forces that had worked in France for a rational agreement with Germany, in the name of law, all supported the Union sacrée as one. They first had to mourn the loss of their pre-war pacifist hopes; that is, to accept “the inevitable ruin of all that had been the object of [their] faith, of [their] love, of [their] action,” in Ruyssen’s words. But by August 10, 1914, the association’s journal, also called La Paix par le droit, had redefined its goals and recovered its sense of mission. If war had broken out, it was not because the doctrine of juridical pacifism had been false or naive, but because European powers, beginning with Germany, had not applied this doctrine. “Since they wanted war, let the war—this war of legitimate self-defense—be violent, obstinate, fierce,” the famous physiologist Charles Richet wrote. “Let it only end with liberation. In this colossal struggle, we represent the independence of peoples, freedom, the definitive future pacifism of the world. Let us remain soldiers of the law.”

In a letter dated August 6, 1914, written with the determination characteristic of those who had decided to go to war, Jules Prudhommeaux confided:

I who made no exceptions in my pacifism and who wanted Franco-German reconciliation with all my strength—I am now surprised by my ardent desire for the destruction of governmental and feudal Prussia, for the fall of the Hohenzollern, for a ferocious Commune [like the Paris Commune of 1871] that would make socialism in Germany leap a century ahead and regenerate that country;

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something, in the end, something in Europe so decisive and so profound that on the remnants of pan-German savagery, the time might come for the United States of Europe.”¹³¹ For its part, the Ligue des Droits de l’Homme [Human Rights League], whose defense of republican rights dated back to the Dreyfus Affair, vigorously denounced the “atrocious war” led by an imperialist Germany.¹³² “The law! Never has an idea seemed more clear, more just, more familiar,” Victor Basch wrote in May 1915. “What was formerly denounced as empty ideology has again become, in the hour of danger, the clearest, the most urgent of watchwords [. . .] Germany has done an immense service to our cause.”¹³³

At the same time, many German pacifists supported the need for a defensive war: “Ever since the question of peace and war has no longer had anything to do with what we want, and since our nation, threatened on the east, the north, and the west, has been engaged in this historic struggle, any German who is a friend of peace must do his duty towards his Fatherland, like any other German,” according to a pacifist pamphlet from fall 1914.¹³⁴

In France, the reinvestment in juridical pacifism in a struggle for a just peace would come about in several phases: first in the winter of 1915 and the fall of 1916, when Briand began to sketch out the conditions for a lasting peace “that would protect the freedom of nations from any assault, through international conventions,” then with the growth of Wilsonian ideology in early 1918. In the last months of the war, juridical pacifism became an important school of thought, after having been somewhat marginalized. It took up the project of a League of Nations, which had been invented by Léon Bourgeois before the war, and renewed its relevance, in the form of a French Association for the League of Nations, founded in 1918. For all these moderate pacifists, there was no doubt that peace should be based on an Allied victory and on writing the German defeat into legal history. In November 1916, the Conference of the Ligue des Droits de l’Homme, held in Paris, had already set out the legal basis for a lasting peace in these terms: “Justice requires that the future peace treaty plan for sanctions against the instigators responsible for the war;

penalties against those who carried it out without respect for people’s rights; reparations owed by the aggressor states.”

But what did veterans think and how did they situate themselves with respect to the debates over peace through justice? During the conflict itself, soldiers as a group were convinced that they were participating in a just war, and were acting within their rights in fighting against the enemy. The letters of French soldiers as seen in the archives of the Contrôle postal aux armées or military postal control, despite the subtle cuts of the censors and the soldiers’ self-censorship, sometimes reveal feelings of revolt in the face of the difficulties of war or in the face of the absurdities of military life. They never question, or they rarely question, the validity of the national defense argument. The Allied soldiers always held on to the feeling of engaging in a just war, a defensive war to protect their country, their way of life, and their families. As it happens, German soldiers who penetrated enemy territory had the same feeling; they saw their actions as legitimate in view of the surrounding double threat of Russian forces on the eastern front and Franco-British forces on the western front. They gladly saw themselves as their country’s advance guard, leading a defense against foreign invasion.

At the moment of the Armistice, the letters of French soldiers express the same sure faith in a just war, confirmed by victory over Germany. In this army grieving so much loss of life, the certainty of having led a war for the triumph of justice subsisted. “The job is done, we are satisfied,” a soldier of the Fifth Army wrote. “The crushing of the Boche [Hun] is the symbol of the best of victories, that of good over evil, truth over lies,” as another soldier summed it up, while many of his comrades awaited Germany’s demobilization and punishment with equal impatience. In the eyes of most French soldiers in 1918, Germany now had to be made to pay for what it had done. Germany—that is, its leaders, as President Wilson said—but also its people, including civilians, as numerous soldiers’ letters suggest. In a period as unstable as that of the Armistice, it is however impossible to find a coherent and collective idea of justice in soldiers’ letters, as this was something necessarily still too abstract for those who had endured the ordeal of war in the flesh.

135 Quoted by Lorrain, Des pacifistes français et allemands, p. 127.
138 Cabanes, La victoire endeuillée, Chapter 1.
The disappointment of French soldiers awaiting demobilization, when they heard about the peace conditions imposed on Germany in the spring of 1919, was quite significant in this regard. If we turn once again to the analyses provided by the archives of the military censors, we learn that most French soldiers thought that the negotiators at the Paris Peace Conference had not gone far enough, that they had not succeeded in translating the need for justice expressed by the victorious troops into the language of international law. “We were too timid, too humble,” a French soldier wrote regretfully in a letter to his wife on July 1, 1919. The men in black, the diplomats, “have ruined the work of the men in blue,” the soldiers of 1918. And he added, “Our politicians made a shambles of everything. We should have had Foch as a dictator and peacemaker.”

It is precisely the confusion between law and justice that is problematic here. In the eyes of the French soldiers, peace treaties should do justice to the dead and to the suffering they endured during the war—but how can treaties do this?

Pacifism as an ideology, if one means by this not the refusal of war in and of itself, but veterans’ common quest for a lasting peace, thus took several years to take hold. In this sense, the progress of a kind of cultural demobilization, put in place by associations such as La Paix par le droit, which returned rather quickly to their pre-war convictions, should not be confused with the veterans’ associations’ movement towards peace, slower and not as well organized. In France, at the beginning of the 1920s, the veterans’ associations formed a complex milieu, where attitudes towards former enemies differed significantly from one association to another. Certainly, a deeply felt need for pacifism, spurred by the trauma of 4 years of war, henceforth transcended political and social boundaries. For the first time in European history, millions of veterans empathized with one another in a common hope that the horrors of war would never return: “Never again,” “Nie wieder Kreig,” “Plus jamais ça.” But pacifist ideology itself was divided, since not everyone could agree on exactly what peace would mean, or on how to bring it about in a lasting manner, or on the role that the League of Nations could or should play in reconciling former enemies.

A minority group, comprised of intransigent pacifists such as Henri Barbusse and Victor Margueritte, held the Allies and the Central Powers equally responsible for the carnage of the Great War. These veterans did not want in any way to connect their fate or that of the international

veterans’ group to which they aspired, to the fate of the League of Nations, a bourgeois institution inherited from the unjust post-war treaties. Most French veterans, for their part, hewed to a tradition that the historian Norman Ingram has called “old-style pacifism.” At the beginning of the 1920s, this tradition constituted the main support of the League of Nations, whose values it espoused: arbitration, and disarmament in a military and moral sense. Founded in 1918, the French Association for the League of Nations was more or less run by disabled veterans, which in itself is significant—even if it does not mean, of course, that all veterans were favorably disposed towards the League. In 1923, six large federations of disabled veterans (from the Pas-de-Calais, Meurthe et Moselle, Cantal, Tarn, Puy-de-Dôme and Loiret départements) joined the Association, and many members of the UF soon followed. All advocated for La Paix par le droit and for international arbitration. René Cassin naturally belonged to this school of thought. The League of Nations for him constituted the “necessary framework for a better humanity, for which [veterans] fought.” It would enable “replacing anarchy with an organization suited to making justice reign among nations.”

Beginning in 1924, René Cassin became a member of the French delegation to the League, nominated by Édouard Herriot to represent veterans. He thus traveled regularly to Geneva, especially in the fall, when the general assembly was held. It was there that he became friends with several important figures in international relations, such as Paul Mantoux, who had been Clemenceau’s translator during the peace conference and who was now a member of the Secretariat of the League, and members of other delegations, such as Wellington Koo from the Chinese delegation and Christian Lous Lange of the Norwegian delegation. The latter was a leading advocate of disarmament, and he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1921, along with the Prime Minister of Sweden, Hjalmar Branting. Because of the close ties he maintained with veterans’ associations in France, especially the UF, which at that time numbered seventy

141 That being said, the work of Jean-Michel Guieu (*Le rameau et le glaive*, pp. 95–106) has shown that organizations supporting the League of Nations brought together distinguished statesmen and intellectuals, but, in the end, they were unable to establish themselves in the provinces and they were few in number. Total individual memberships for all such organizations did not number more than 20,000 in France at the end of the 1920s. This was much fewer than the British League of Nations Union, which went from 4,000 members in 1919 to 650,000 in 1928 (see Christian Birebent, *Les mouvements de soutien à la Société des Nations en France et au Royaume-Uni [1918–1925]*, PhD dissertation in history, Université Paris X-Nanterre, 2002, p. 200).
142 Published in *La France mutilée*, November 1922, quoted in Agi, *René Cassin*, p. 50.
federations and nearly 320,000 members, Cassin served as an intermediary between French veterans of the Great War and the League of Nations, which took great care not to cut itself off from public opinion. All of the UF’s influence and all the weight of Cassin’s moral authority were needed in order to arrange a meeting of veterans’ associations from nine countries, under the League’s auspices, in September 1925. They met not to talk about technical questions such as aid to disabled veterans, but rather the future of peace. This was doubtless one of the most surprising human enterprises of the 1920s, but also one of the least well known.

Nothing was less self-evident from the outset than Franco-German reconciliation: it had to confront persistent enmity between the two countries, internal divisions within pacifist movements, and the fundamental difference between French and German pacifism. The divide was a considerable one. In France, pacifism was progressively diffused in public opinion, to the point of becoming a “shared idea,” whereas in Germany, pacifism was held responsible for the defeat. Shaken by the requirements of the treaty of Versailles, which weakened the dogma of “peace through justice,” German pacifism was then marginalized by the rise of various strains of nationalism.

The signing of the peace treaty was first followed by a long period of silence, where relations between pacifists in Germany and France were practically broken: the former felt they had been cheated out of the just peace promised by President Wilson, and the latter did not know if they could trust pacifists who had compromised their beliefs by working with the government of the Reich during the war. At international peace conferences, the French systematically refused to participate when German delegates were present. Relations between activists in the two countries were restored very slowly, first at an unofficial level, through organizations such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, then through official visits, such as when the Ligue des Droits de l’Homme in Paris welcomed German delegates, and when French peace activists were welcomed to Germany in 1922.

The following year, in 1923, the occupation of the Ruhr was felt to be a real calamity for Franco-German reconciliation, but it had paradoxical results. Many French pacifists did in fact denounce, in the name of international law, France’s brutal policy in the Ruhr, and they did come to the aid of German pacifists, who were increasingly regarded as

144 For a history of this reconciliation, see Lorrain’s fine overview in Des pacifistes français et allemands, Chapter II.
traitors in their own country. “In the Ruhr, we behaved like Germans—no, not like Germans, but like Boches,” declared Victor Basch, who would become president of the *Ligue des Droits de l’Homme* in 1926.\(^{145}\) True, no one questioned the legitimacy of reparations, which German peace activists also supported. But neither did anyone want fresh humiliation for Germany, which might create serious risks to peace in Europe. The victory of the Coalition of the Left in 1924 marked a complete change of policy, with a reduction in compensations and the beginning of the evacuation of the Ruhr. At the same time, the policy of reconciliation undertaken by the German Minister for Foreign Affairs, Gustav Stresemann, and his French counterpart Aristide Briand, led to a kind of cultural demobilization, as evidenced by what has been called the “spirit of Locarno.”\(^{146}\)

Several important international conferences brought French and Germans together, whether it was the Conference of Associations for the League of Nations, held in Lyon in July, or the twenty-third Peace Conference, held in Berlin in October. After the renewal of tension during the occupation of the Ruhr, meetings between French and German activists were seen as the best way to counter the rise of different strains of nationalism. Other initiatives were undertaken, such as public talks held by the *Ligue des Droits de l’Homme* in France and in Germany, where foreign speakers took the floor. But this very clear change in the climate of Franco-German relations should not cause us to overlook either cultural differences between French and German pacifists, or, above all, the skepticism of some sectors of public opinion. In France, the meetings organized by the *Ligue des Droits de l’Homme* in cities in the provinces were often tempestuous; they were held in front of an audience that had not seen or heard a German for 10 years.\(^{147}\)

The first meeting of the CIAMAC took place in just such a moral context. It is worth stressing from the start the power of such an initiative, though its actual influence should not be exaggerated. The prevailing climate in 1924 was indeed that of reconciliation between former enemies, but this development was neither linear nor irreversible, and it had to overcome a kind of incredulity on the part of many survivors of the first large-scale modern conflict. “The spirit of goodwill, the spirit of a common quest, this is what the spirit of Locarno is at the present moment, much more than a spirit of enthusiasm and lightness of heart,


\(^{147}\) Lorrain, *Des pacifistes français et allemands*, p. 209.
after all the many trials that various peoples suffered for years,” as the
director of the ILO, Albert Thomas, summed it up. In organizing this
historic meeting of the first CIAMAC, the ILO willingly stayed in the
background. The questions under discussion did not directly have to do
with its mission, and it did not want to become implicated in a discus-
sion whose course and outcome could not be determined ahead of time.
Tixier limited himself to renting two rooms at the University of Geneva
for hosting the conference. The UF was, in fact, the organizing group.

We can only imagine the feelings of Paul Brousmiche, the president of
the UF, when he greeted foreign veterans:

We are here among those who, having known the horrors of war, should have
the strength to tell to each other, face to face, truths that are elsewhere not easy
to say or express, for reasons of national interest . . . Peace? Do we not have a
common interest in defending it together, not only in the moral interest of a
better humanity, but even in the material interests of veterans, disabled or not?
For only with economic security, restored through a lasting peace, can measures
likely to safeguard and improve our existence be planned and carried out.

Alongside the French of the UF, there were the German delegations
from the Reichsbund and the Federation of Disabled German Veterans,
the Federation of Austrian Disabled Veterans, the National Association of
Disabled Italian Veterans, the Polish, Romanian, and Czech delegations,
and that of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes.

Six hours of heated debate were needed to bring about a final resolu-
tion, adopted by all these veterans. The associations committed to collab-
orate on furthering the spirit of peace, and voted unanimously to ratify the
fundamental principles of the League of Nations. Obligatory arbitration
and general disarmament were presented as indispensable conditions for
a lasting peace. On the part of the Germans, this unequivocal support for
an international institution born out of the Treaty of Versailles, called the
“Diktat” of Versailles in Germany, represented considerable progress. It
was the work in particular of influential members of the delegation such
as Erich Rossmann, a socialist deputy to the Reichstag, who was won
over by Henri Pichot of the UF. At the end of the conference, Eric
Drummond, secretary-general of the League of Nations, welcomed a
delegation of veterans, including German veterans, to the League. Other
officials of the League participated, such as Joseph Paul-Boncour, which
naturally gave much more stature to what had been a relatively informal
meeting.

148 ABIT, CAT/2/26/2, Speech by Thomas on the Locarno accords and the economic
future of Europe, University of Belgrade, February 9, 1926.
149 ABIT, MU/7/9/5, First CIAMAC, Geneva, September 18–19, 1925.
But it was one thing to ratify a common declaration in a meeting room at the University of Geneva, and quite another to defend the League of Nations in the face of public opinion. “Frenchmen and Germans, after returning to their countries, will be very strongly attacked by Communist groups because of their support for the League of Nations, and by right-wing groups with nationalist tendencies,” worried Tixier. “On the other hand, we have agreed to put aside for the time the questions that would have made everything break down: a people’s right to self-determination; the respect for treaties and the Treaty of Versailles in particular. But we will nonetheless have to talk about them one day.”\(^{150}\) If we set aside the exceptional character of this meeting, its concrete results seem rather feeble. No one took responsibility for setting up a permanent structure, such as an international disabled veterans’ organization. A simple administrative bureau was established, under the direction of Tixier and two colleagues from the ILO.

A year later, a new conference of the CIAMAC took place in Geneva. In the wings this time, however, several nationalist French veterans’ associations tried to make the initiative fail. Some French delegates to the CIAMAC believed they should impose as a condition of their participation that disabled German veterans had to reaffirm Germany’s collective responsibility in starting the war. Tixier had to forestall them on the eve of the conference.\(^{151}\) During the meetings, a new incident occurred when provocateurs took the floor to publicly discuss article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles, which held Germany responsible for the war. However, after an entire night of discussions, the delegates agreed on a document expressing “their right and their duty to collaborate actively on furthering the spirit of peace” and recalling their commitment “to the respect of peace treaties.”

This question of Germany’s responsibility for starting the war was, indeed, a central question that divided pacifists. Take the case of one of the most influential French pacifist groups, *La Paix par le droit*. Its leaders, who were at the head of Franco-German reconciliation efforts, also remained convinced that Germany alone bore responsibility for the conflagration of 1914, due to its deliberate violation of Belgian neutrality. True, Ruyssen thought that Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles was pointlessly humiliating to former enemies, but, in the end, he found nothing to criticize in this judgment of Germany. In 1919, he refused to participate at an international meeting of peace activists that included

\(^{150}\) ABIT, MU/7/9/5, Memorandum from Tixier to Albert Thomas, September 1925.

\(^{151}\) ABIT, MU/7/9/5/2, International conference of disabled veterans and veterans, Geneva, September 30–October 2, 1926.
Germans: “My first act in a meeting where I might be likely to encounter German or Austrian pacifists would be to ask them if they completely repudiated all of their actions.”\textsuperscript{152} For their part, the members of the German League for Human Rights strongly condemned Article 231, all while recognizing the important role of the League of Nations. It was not until 1921 that a more radical pacifist organization, the Bund Neues Vaterland (BNV), accepted Article 231. A common manifesto was even signed, in conjunction with the French Ligue des Droits de l’Homme, at the initiative of Helmut von Gerlach, one of the leaders of the BNV.

Little by little, international conferences of veterans and disabled veterans, which would have been thought unlikely several years earlier, created their own rituals of peace. Meetings almost always traditionally began with a reminder of the horrors of the Great War. These men who normally hesitated to speak openly about their suffering, who wrote in their organizations’ newsletters and newspapers with an ironic distance,\textsuperscript{153} now justified reconciliation by acknowledging the wounds the war had inflicted upon them. A solemn silence followed their stories; an emotional silence ensued when their former enemies took the floor. In October 1926, in Geneva, the veterans displayed a kind of symbolic brotherhood by designating a German delegate and a French delegate as joint chairs of the last session. After 3 days of debate, everyone participated together in a minute of silence in memory of the war dead. In September 1927, in Vienna, a memorial wreath decorated with the flags of ten veterans’ delegations was placed on the Austrian Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. In August 1928, in Berlin, all of the delegates were welcomed by the German chancellor, Hermann Müller.

The CIAMAC’s meetings would thus take place successively, year after year, henceforth welcomed by the former Central Powers, Austria in 1927 and Germany in 1928. The number of participants grew as well, with seventeen national federations representing a total of nearly 4 million veterans. In the mid 1920s, only three major federations remained outside the movement: the American Legion and the British Legion (which moreover was clearly in decline, dropping from 1 million to 250,000 members in the space of 6 years) were both much more conservative than the associations that made up the CIAMAC; the Italian Federation of Veterans was also absent, but this was not surprising since it was one


of the pillars of the newly formed fascist regime of Benito Mussolini. The Vienna and Berlin conferences brought nothing new to the question of peace. On both occasions, veterans reaffirmed the importance of arbitration, moral disarmament, and educating the younger generations about peace: all themes that were present in veterans’ organizations’ newspapers since the end of the war.¹⁵⁴

On the question of material rights, the same complaints were still there. The resolution passed by the 1927 conference was particularly harsh on the indifference experienced by non-disabled veterans:

The conference notes that in the majority of states, [they] have not received any true compensation for the damage resulting from the lengthy combat duty, that has made them old before their time; it denounces the immorality of the principle by which those who serve the nation with money or labor are remunerated, whereas those who serve with their blood receive only an insufficient compensation; it proclaims the need for veterans’ associations to study ways to institute recognition of the particular debt owed to veterans.¹⁵⁵

It is difficult to judge whether a speech such as this one, given nearly 10 years after the war, conveys the sluggish passage of legislation in support of veterans, or the fact that no compensation could possibly have met their expectations.

Veterans and their families were the first victims of the economic crisis of the end of the 1920s, particularly in areas severely damaged by inflation and depreciation, such as Germany. It was a time when housewives went grocery shopping with baby carriages weighed down with money, where the price of meals changed hourly in restaurants: as soon as they got their pension, veterans raced to spend it, for fear that it would lose too much value over the next few days. Veterans’ meetings were held regularly in the 1930s.¹⁵⁶ Veterans still represented a significant part of the male population: a little more than four adult men out of every ten living in France in 1930. But the severity of the economic crisis dissipated little by little the hope of building, via international collaboration, a society that would be more welcoming to veterans, and a peaceful world. The decline of the League of Nations, weakened after the invasion of Manchuria in 1931, precipitated the fall of the CIAMAC. The competing Fédération


¹⁵⁵ In France, a retirement pension for veterans was finally instituted in 1930. Veterans’ associations had been consistently advocating for such a pension since the early 1920s.

¹⁵⁶ Wars in 1929, Paris in 1930, Prague in 1931, Vienna in 1932, Geneva in 1933 and 1934, Bucharest in 1935, Copenhagen in 1936, Paris in 1937. The minutes of these meetings are preserved in the archives of the ILO (ABIT, MU/7/9/6–15).
Internationale des Anciens Combattants [International Veterans’ Federation] or FIDAC, of which the British Legion was a member, became stronger. In addition, with Mussolini’s and Hitler’s rise to power, Italian and German associations could no longer take part in the CIAMAC’s activities; the Nazi regime imprisoned some of the German delegates who had attended previous international conferences.\(^\text{157}\)

Each of the reports written by the ILO delegate to the CIAMAC’s annual meetings shows, if not the loss of an ideal, then at least a kind of growing disenchantment: “The CIAMAC has only very limited means to act, and it is not in a state to use its own means to influence opinion.”\(^\text{158}\) True, the resolutions passed by the veterans during their meetings were valuable examples; they came from people who enjoyed a form of experience-based authority,\(^\text{159}\) and who played the role of “moral witnesses” in post-war societies, to use the concept proposed by Avishai Margalit.\(^\text{160}\) However, and this is doubtless the most essential point, the CIAMAC had no concrete way of imposing its views on governments, and, most of the time, public opinion was barely kept informed of them.

The overall results of the CIAMAC’s meetings are thus mixed. It is clear that they favored the development of a spirit of peace, by allowing delegates to get to know each other better and by putting them under the moral obligation to try and reconcile their views. If we compare the meetings held at the end of the 1920s with the hatred for the enemy that was still strong in the immediate post-war period, this development is truly remarkable. On some specific points, such as the reevaluation of pensions in Bulgaria and Austria, the CIAMAC’s meetings even had a concrete impact. But the initial project of a major pacifist association comprising all the veterans of the Great War never saw the light of day. “In these conditions, it seems necessary to limit ourselves to sympathizing with a movement that, while lacking the size and influence it could have had, is nonetheless worthy of interest,” concluded the ILO’s representative to the CIAMAC in 1929. This report has the ring of powerlessness: “Since the ILO is no more able than the League of Nations to have any effect on governments such that they modify their policies toward victims of the war, the defense of these victims can only be assured effectively through national associations or institutions, which alone have the means to act

\(^\text{157}\) ABIT, MU/7/9/5/12, letter from Tixier to the ILO’s correspondent in Romania, March 7, 1935.
\(^\text{158}\) ABIT, MU/7/9/5/6, 5th meeting of the CIAMAC, August 4–6, 1929.
\(^\text{159}\) For a critical reading of this idea, see Joan W. Scott’s famous article, “The evidence of experience,” Critical Inquiry, 17, summer 1991, pp. 773–797.
\(^\text{160}\) Avishai Margalit, The Ethics of Memory (Harvard University Press, 2002).
at their disposal.”

In other words, the defense of veterans’ rights was sent back to the national or local level. In the 1930s, the whole vision of the CIAMAC as a transnational organization—the forerunner of today’s NGOs—was laid to rest, and, perhaps with it, the utopia of an “international public opinion” on which a part of the League of Nations project depended.

Conclusion

With hindsight, the recognition of the rights of war victims can seem like an unfinished battle. At an economic level, first of all, the interwar crisis undermined the social gains of the immediate post-war period. Inflation cut down veterans’ pensions little by little; charities suffered from a decline in donations; public subventions diminished to the point of endangering the physical therapy centers supported by the state. For the beneficiaries, these restrictions were all the more painful inasmuch as they often coincided with a new stage of life, such as the entry into adulthood for war orphans, who were in their twenties at the end of the 1930s, and retirement for some veterans. At the moment when aid was needed to face the hazards of life, it was insufficient. The noble ideal that gave rise to the status of pupilles de la nation also gave way to a kind of disenchantment. “Our fathers were heroes, this gave us a kind of moral superiority. In talking with other children, one often said, ‘My father, he was killed,’” a war orphan recalled. But others only remembered from this period of time the feeling of receiving minimal assistance rather than truly being helped, and the humiliation of feeling different from other children.

Moreover, the dream of international brotherhood among veterans, incarnated by the CIAMAC, was unable to resist the rise of fascism, which swept across Europe. The hopes invested in the League of Nations by an entire generation of veterans, hopes for general disarmament, for the spirit of peace, for stronger international cooperation—all these hopes turned out to be illusory. “The more that direct memories of the [Great War] fade, the more difficult it will be to lay the initial foundation for new international laws on armaments,” René Cassin had warned, as early as 1929.

Two years later, the international conference on disarmament held in Geneva in February 1932 resulted in a complete

161 ABIT, MU/7/0/5/6, Report to the ILO at the end of the 5th meeting of the CIAMAC.

162 Faron, Les enfants du deuil, Chapter 9.

163 Archives Nationales, 382AP14: René Cassin, speech to the 3rd Commission on Disarmament, 1929, quoted by Prost and Winter, René Cassin, p. 110.
“Rights, not charity”: René Cassin and war victims

failure; Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, and the lack of any appropriate response from the League of Nations, would prove Cassin right. The League of Nations turned out to be incapable of preserving a system of collective security, no doubt because it would not challenge the principle of the absolute sovereignty of its member states.¹⁶⁴

Such are the interpretations traditionally proposed by the history of international relations. I would like to propose a different one, which seeks, on the contrary, to underline the originality of the defense of war victims’ rights following the Great War, and its fruitfulness over the long term. Even if the CIAMAC’s aims in the 1920s and 1930s ended in failure, the work of the generation of veterans of the Great War nevertheless had the merit of creating a new approach to victims’ rights, one which would eventually bear fruit after World War II.

The originality of the defense of war victims following the first large-scale modern conflict lies in its origins. For the first time in the history of Europe, a vast veterans’ movement was organized, with a multitude of local organizations as its base. Their goal: to defend the rights of victims of the war—beginning with the most vulnerable among them, such as severely wounded veterans, widows, orphans. With the exception of the UNC, created by the army to support the claims of demobilized soldiers, the other movements, which were more informal, grew out of the deep uncertainty felt by veterans upon their return from the war, and out of the feeling that laws inherited from the nineteenth century were no longer appropriate for a conscript army and a total war. In France, the codification of new rights for war victims in the 1920s resulted from negotiations between a republican state and millions of men returned home from the front. They asserted their rights as citizens in order to have their rights as veterans recognized. The history of war victims’ rights is thus first that of political history and national history: it is part and parcel of a long republican tradition, with its rituals, codes, and language. Because of its “total war” aspect, World War I nonetheless created a break in that tradition, since not only officers’ rights were defended, but those of all veterans, of all ranks, and, on a larger scale, those of civilians, who also benefited from “war compensations.” In fact, in France, the Great War renewed a sense of mysticism regarding equality and brotherhood that had its roots in the Revolutionary ideal.

With the founding of the CIAMAC, the defense of war victims’ rights took on an international dimension. Veterans from around the world met in Geneva, with representatives from both Allied and Central Powers countries. The fact that men who had fought each other for 4 years could meet together in this way was in and of itself quite extraordinary. Compared with the enormous ideological clash that was World War I, a discussion between veterans of both camps, severely wounded and disabled veterans, as it happened, was a strong symbol of a kind of universalization of rights. In spite of their different national origins and their diverse roles during the conflict, all these men had one thing in common, which legitimized the message they proclaimed together concerning rights and human dignity: they had all suffered in body, mind, and spirit. They had directly experienced the war and had survived it. They spoke thus not only in their own name, but also in the name of all whom the conflict had injured, physically and mentally, and, on a larger scale, they spoke in the name of those who had died. “Out of all veterans, the disabled are the closest to our dead,” the president of a French disabled veterans’ association declared in 1924. “Because the physical aspect, their infirmities—in a word, their daily suffering—remind them all the more of those who gave their lives on the battlefield.”165 The war dead were the ultimate creditors of the debt each nation had incurred towards its defenders.

Moreover, in the aftermath of the war, when ideological tensions still ran high, it is not insignificant that the dialogue between veterans addressed technical matters, such as the development of better prosthetics or setting aside jobs for veterans. This technical language, borrowed from the language of reconstructive surgery, from the language of labor law and economic language, went hand in hand with the CIAMAC’s moral admonitions to different governments: do not forget the victims of the war; take care of the veterans. In this, the CIAMAC adopted a manner of functioning and a style that would later characterize the organizations known today as NGOs—volunteer citizens’ associations, pursuing goals of common interest on an international scale, putting pressure on governments to defend their citizens’ interests.166 This is another


166 Such organizations were numerous on the eve of the Great War and during the conflict itself. See Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). However, the term “non-governmental organization” does not appear until the aftermath of World War II. Article 71 of Chapter X of the United Nations Charter gives them a consulting role.
original aspect of the movement for the defense of victims’ rights in the 1920s.

For all these veterans, the state could no longer be considered the sole guarantor of individual liberties. In the eyes of the most radical among them, the state was responsible for what they called the “butchery” of 1914–18; for the majority of veterans, “politicians,” considered devious and unscrupulous, could not be taken at their word. But on top of that, the idea of absolute sovereignty was regarded with great suspicion in pacifist milieux. According to them, it inevitably led to “an arms race, a politics of prestige, then to war.” René Cassin worked at length on all these questions, especially in a series of lectures given at the Hague Academy of International Law at the beginning of the 1930s. The best critic of absolute sovereignty nonetheless remains the jurist Nicolas Politis, a naturalized French citizen before the war who became a Greek citizen again, before being named Greece’s Minister of Foreign Affairs (1916–20) and one of its representatives to the League of Nations. In a lecture given at the Hague in 1925, Politis announced the end of international law based on the absolute sovereignty of states. The Treaty of Versailles had instituted “mixed, arbitrary tribunals” in order to protect minority populations, he reminded his listeners. They gave ordinary individuals full rights. The solidarity of human relations also seemed to win out over artificially drawn borders. But “that which will assure the final triumph of this new conception of international law is the irremediable ruin sure to come to the other fundamental principle of classic doctrine: sovereignty.”

Whatever the strength of this great dream may have been, forged in the wake of the war, the primacy of nation-states would win out in the end, driven by the rise of nationalism. Cassin’s criticisms thus became sharper. At the beginning of 1930, he categorically refused the preeminence of nationality over country of residence, for he saw in this an example of the state’s supremacy over the individual. “The link of nationality is not

167 Iriye, Global Community.
168 In particular, Cassin, “La nouvelle conception du domicile.”
170 The most famous example is the petition presented in May 1933 by Franz Bernheim, a citizen of Upper Silesia, fired because he was Jewish. He asked the League of Nations to enforce a 1922 treaty protecting minority groups in that territory, annexed by Germany. The League ruled in his favor. However, Goebbels traveled to Geneva in order to defend Germany’s sovereignty over its citizens. Nazi Germany ended up withdrawing from the League several weeks later. See Lauren, The Evolution of International Human Rights, pp. 127–130; Burgers, “The Road to San Francisco,” pp. 455–459.
the sole link between members of a Nation,” he wrote. “There are other, more fundamental ones: the home, the borough, the city.” In April 1940, his position became even more radical, for the danger no longer lay just in the absolute sovereignty of states but also in what Cassin called “the Leviathan State”: a state whose absolute power, in totalitarian regimes, was an instrument of political violence and of chaos.\footnote{Cassin, “L’État Léviathan,” \textit{La pensée et l’action}, pp. 63–71.} This was when Cassin prophesied that the Allies’ war against Nazism would have to be led in the name of a new “universal Declaration of the rights of the human being, shored up in every country by specific guarantees.” The fight he would lead in London, several weeks later, was an outgrowth of the defense of victims’ rights that had begun in the 1920s. The jurist of Free France, the man behind the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, remained a veteran of the Great War, with a disabled body and an indissoluble bond with the living and the dead: in sum, one with those who had suffered during and because of the Great War.