The Cult of the Dead

Hidden away in the cemetery of Colmar, a victim of the Franco-Prussian War seemed to refuse to rest in peace. Disturbing the heavy concrete slabs placed above his grave, with one arm, the National Guardsman appeared to reach out for his sword. His epitaph declared that he was killed in combat, but for him, the fight was far from over. In the years after the war, all from monarchist Catholics to anti-clerical republicans put forward a notion that soldiers had exchanged their ephemeral lives for eternal glory, forever to be remembered and revered as martyrs. Such were the views that inspired Bartholdi’s monument to the fallen National Guardsmen of Colmar, which depicted one man’s struggle to carry on the fight from beyond the grave. Influenced by the rituals and language of Christianity, these beliefs emerged from a network of religious and secular visions of patriotic self-sacrifice that converged into a cult of the war dead. For amidst all the failures and the faults, only the dead emerged untainted by the conflict. Death did not leave a spectre haunting France, nor did it bequeath universal revulsion for the horrors of war; instead it brought hope and faith in the nation’s future.

Urbanization, declining mortality rates, falling church attendance, and political attacks against the Catholic Church all affected changing attitudes and cultural concepts of death in the late nineteenth century.¹ By the early nineteenth century, a cult of the dead had become a widespread phenomenon cutting across every social class and region, reflecting a growing tendency to deny death and an unwillingness to accept separation from loved ones.² Such trends were revealed in cemeteries where fewer individual graves and increasing numbers of family tombs were constructed.³ From the wealthiest upper classes down to the poorest peasantry, all began to invest in the best burials their means would allow. By the 1830s, rich families were spending fortunes on lavish
monuments and funeral ceremonies, rendering cemeteries places of curiosity and tourism as well as mourning. With scientific advances and the spread of more rational thinking diminishing superstitious fears of ghosts, visits to cemeteries on All Souls’ Day became a popular social and educational activity. During the Belle Époque, the dead dominated culture and society either through the glorification of heroic death or through fears of apocalypse. Influenced by European representations of death in the work of the Pre-Raphaelite and Germanic painters and the music of Liszt, Bruckner, and Mahler, French fin-de-siècle culture consolidated the cult.

This chapter explores how the catastrophes of l’année terrible produced a cult of the war dead. Having been so shattered in conflict, it seemed that the nation needed to create something else in which to believe. Writing in the late 1970s, George Mosse observed that despite growing scholarly interest in death, changing attitudes towards fallen soldiers had been largely overlooked, even though they had played an integral part in the development of nationalism. This is, of course, now far from the case, with considerable scholarly consideration having been focused on remembrance of the victims of war. Yet much of this work focuses on twentieth-century conflicts, and while Philippe Ariès, Michel Vovelle, and Thomas Kselman have shed considerable light on political, social, and cultural attitudes towards death in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the dead of the Franco-Prussian War have tended to be neglected.

The Revolutionary Wars changed the experience of combat, making soldiers out of citizens and transforming the relationship between armies and nations. With soldiers carrying a political stake in the nation, they had greater motivation to fight; at the same time, however, their increased value as individuals made them less dispensable. Thus the Revolution of 1789 at once gave men a reason to fight and a reason not to die. The nation therefore needed to be redefined in terms that would inspire loyalty, while patriotism needed to be configured such that it would demand sacrifice. In consequence, new concepts of nationalism came to represent death on the battlefield as the fulfilment of life, giving it meaning as the ultimate act of patriotic devotion. The fear of losing loved ones and declining faith in the reassurance of an afterlife also made a reconfiguration of patriotic self-sacrifice imperative. As Philippe Contamine argues, before 1789, soldiers willingly gave their lives for a vision of the fatherland sanctified by its association with the Church and monarchy; the Revolution therefore had to seize the mantle of patriotism, transforming faith in the nation into a new religious