

*Dying for France: Experiencing and Representing the Soldier's Death, 1500-2000.*  
By IAN GERMANI. Montreal and Kingston, London, Chicago: McGill-Queen's  
University Press, 2023. xiv + 506 pp.

Much changed both on and off the battlefield during the half millennia covered by Germani. The Frenchmen who died in Francis I's Italian Wars lived in a world of pervasive violence and death; the Frenchmen born between 1891 and 1895 could anticipate living to a ripe old age, if a quarter of them had not been killed in the First World War. Before the twentieth century many more soldiers died of disease than in combat, but while Germani acknowledges the benefits of medical advances, his story is also about expanding lethality of gunpowder weaponry. As armies became larger, and the enemy more distant, the meaning of the soldier's death shifted from glory, to sacrifice, to victimhood. In the sixteenth century, the death of common soldiers went unremarked in the sources left to us, only those of nobles warranted comment; but even before the French Revolution there are signs of democratisation, and by the twentieth century all the fallen needed to be named, mourned and commemorated. In the twenty-first century it seems that the soldier's death has become an 'unacceptable tragedy' (p. 6), leading to prosecution in the courts.

Yet there are also striking continuities, as soldiers from one generation interpreted their experiences in light of their ancestors'. The lives and deaths of Captain d'Assas (killed at Clostercamp, 1760), of General Marceau (killed at Altenkirchen, 1796), and the Corps Expéditionnaire Français in Italy in 1943-44, which largely consisted of Moroccan and Algerian troops, were all compared with that of Bayard, 'the knight without fear and beyond reproach' (killed in 1524). The Fall of France in 1940 recalled the Battle of Pavia in 1525, when 'All was lost, save honour' (p. 340). Military concerns with duty, comradeship and even chivalry recur in these pages, even if in ironic mode, as the omnipresence of death bred indifference and callousness. This is a brutal book, full of physical and mental anguish, massacres and crimes. Still, soldiers themselves invoked ideals taught in schools and exemplary texts. Probably not all of France's colonial troops cherished 'la mère patrie' as much as Captain Charles N'Tchoréré of the Tirailleurs Sénégalais, summarily executed by a German officer in June 1940, but the effect of missionary tales of patriotism and sacrifice are evident in his correspondence. These military virtues did sometimes place limits on violence, at least to judge by those occasions when they vanished. Most of the conflicts covered, from the Wars of Religion via the Vendée and the Commune to the Second World War, were also civil conflicts, marked by even greater depravity. A particularly grim finding is that these same virtues, especially when contrasted with civilian apathy, could become a cult in which 'the soldier's death was meaningful in and of itself, regardless of the outcome of the battle and of the cause for which he fought' (p. 414). The Paras' war of torture and murder in Algeria, while reverencing their own, quite rare fatalities, illustrates that this is a book about killing as much as dying.

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