Valuing the Dead: Death, Burial, and the Body in Second World War Britain

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Introduction

On 29 September 1942, the war 'came home' to Petworth, a small town in rural West Sussex, a reception area for evacuees far from the bombed cities of Britain and the devastation that war had wreaked across Europe. A lone bomber, flying over the town in the morning, dropped three bombs, one hitting Petworth Boys' School during the mid-morning break. Thirty-two people, including 28 schoolboys and their Headmaster, were killed. The impact of an event like this on a small, close knit community can only be imagined: according to the newspaper *The Daily Mirror*, 'from one road alone, out of a dozen or so boys who left for school in the morning, only four returned home.' (Daily Mirror 1942) The child victims were buried together side by side in a long trench grave in Horsham Road cemetery, and Canadian troops, who were stationed nearby and who had helped to dig out the bodies of the dead and injured, accompanied the funeral cortege, their trucks carrying the coffins to the church and on to the graveyard. Bishop Bell, the Bishop of nearby Chichester and a vocal critic of area bombing, conducted the funeral, and the cortege paused next to the town war memorial for local dignitaries and representatives of the military to pay their respects.

Even in a carefully choreographed funeral and burial such as this, where there was a strong sense of community between those immediately bereaved and other members of the community, and where a real effort was made, via the involvement of the Canadian soldiers, to link the deaths of these schoolchildren with the Allied war effort, the importance of family traditions and personal relationships with the dead remained strong. One Canadian soldier recalled seeing an old man place a coin on one of the coffins – he was the grandfather of the dead boy, and the coin was the pocket money that he gave him every week – the gift of the coin was a final act of familial intimacy. (Petworth Society Magazine 1985, n.p.)

The value of this coin was obviously unattached to its financial value. Instead, it had an emotional worth, as it symbolized the relationship between the man and his grandson and demonstrated that for the grandfather this relationship continued after the boy's death. Economies are not just financial but are also emotional, as societies and cultures attach historically specific worth to particular emotional transactions, objects, expressions, and acts. The political value attached by the state to the children's bodies in this case, with their widely reported funeral, attended by local grandees and representatives of the Empire's military alongside grieving families and members of the local community, should be clear. Tragic though these deaths were, they could also be made to work for the state in wartime, symbolizing both the brutality of an enemy that threatened the peace of rural England, killing schoolchildren at play and devastating the life of a peaceful small town, but also the determination to defeat this enemy, shared not just between the people of Britain, but across the Empire. The dead bodies of the Petworth schoolboys, buried communally, grieved for communally, and honoured communally at the town's war memorial in a manner that emphasized their commonality with the combatant 'glorious dead', were made to stand for unity in the face of an external evil. Their value, for the British state, lay in both their innocence and in the collective response to their deaths.

The dead are often absent from histories of wartime Britain. While the military dead of the First World War are central to British understandings of this conflict one hundred years on, dominating the cultural memory of a conflict widely comprehended in terms of loss, death and the legacies of grief, absence and hardship that the war left in its wake, the dead of the Second World War remain marginal to popular perceptions of the experience and impact of this conflict in Britain. This is reflected in much of the scholarship of the period: while studies of the British experience of the First World War often follow cultural representations in their consideration of both the nature of death, the treatment of bodies, and the

memorialisation and remembrance of the dead in the postwar period (Bourke 1996; Gregory 1994; Winter 1998), there has been relatively little attention paid to death, burial and remembrance in Second World War Britain. Although the study of death has become a vibrant interdisciplinary field in recent decades, originating in the work of the Annales scholars and providing us with a clear sense of changes in the practices of burial and bereavement over the past centuries, most analysis of the impact of war on these traditions in Britain has focused on the First World War, and that which has considered the management of death in the Second has examined military death, not civilian. (Longworth 1967; Spark 2010)

Two exceptions to this absence are the works of Pat Jalland and Julie Rugg. Jalland situates her examination of death in wartime Britain in a longer study of the social and cultural history of death in twentieth century Britain, arguing that the Second World War strengthened the pre-existing shift towards a culture of avoidance and reticence around death, first discussed in the anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer's study of changing British attitudes to death in 1965. Jalland traces both the ways in which local authorities, when burying the civilian victims of air raids in mass graves, attempted to use the rhetoric and symbolism associated with remembrance of the military dead to overcome the association of mass burials with pauper interments, and the grief of those whose loved ones serving in the Royal Air Force were declared 'missing' when their airplanes were lost over Europe, an anguish that echoed that of the families and loved ones of 'the missing' during the First World War. (2010) Julie Rugg, in a study of the management of civilian death from air raids in wartime Yorkshire, identifies the Second World War as one of the moments of crisis in which 'the struggle for control of the dead between the personal and familial and the public and communal' that, she argues, is a key aspect of the modern history of death and dying, comes into sharp focus. (2004, 153) This struggle can also be seen in the management of the bodies

of paupers, often interred by the local authority in common or unmarked graves, to the frequent distress of families who wished to claim the corpse as their own, and in the debates surrounding the state's decision not to return the bodies of those killed in the First World War to their families, but to bury them instead in cemeteries close to the battlefields. (Strange 2003; Ashworth 1967) In the Second World War, these tensions between the intimate and private, and the public and communal, became visible in the management of both the military and the civilian dead.

Violent death in wartime is one of the clearest ways in which the intimate world of family, love, and personal relationships can come into contact with the structures, support, and demands of the state. This article builds on the work of Jalland and Rugg in its examination of some of the ways that the British wartime state attempted to manage the deaths of its civilian and military members so that, to paraphrase the historian Thomas Laqueur, the dead continued to work for the nation. (2015) Like Jalland, it considers the management of both civilian and military dead, beginning with a discussion of the treatment of the military corpse, which, with its roots in the First World War, shaped both planning for and policy governing, the state's attempted management of the civilian victims of air raids. While both military and civilian victims of modern warfare clearly had an emotional value for the bereaved, they also had a political value that could be put to work by the state for the wartime nation, acting as signifiers of a shared national cause, and as a unifying symbol of shared suffering, support, and resolution. However, in order for this work to be conducted successfully, the bereaved had to find both the state's treatment of the bodies of the dead, and of their grief, to be appropriate and fitting. Elaine Scarry (1985) has argued that, in times of war and conflict, this is particularly difficult, as the wartime corpse has 'a referential instability' that is distinct from issues concerning the management and interment of the dead in peacetime. Treated by the state in a manner found appropriate by the majority, and thus

able to convey the state's supposed honouring of and respect for the sacrifices of its people in wartime, the corpse can function as a potent symbol of a shared steadfastness and willing and worthwhile sacrifice. (Scarry 1985, 116-17) However, the perception that bodies are being treated without due reverence by the nation that sent them to their deaths can be destabilizing. In this case the dead, and those who mourn them, can threaten the sense that the state and its citizens share both common aims and a common valuing of sacrifice that is so central to wartime unity. In the ways that it managed the bodies of its military and its civilian dead during the Second World War, the British state attempted to ensure that they worked as symbols of shared sacrifice, of shared war aims, and of a national community that encompassed the living and the dead. As Layla Renshaw has argued, the 'demand to accord due process to the dead can also function as a demand to accord due care and attention to the survivors or mourners.' (2011, 12) The treatment of the dead was thus central to the war effort.

Burying the Military Dead

Writing during the First World War, Field Marshal Douglas Haig, Commander of the British Armies on the Western Front, had argued that the work of the Graves Registration Commission had 'extraordinary moral value'. (Laqueur 2015, 462) The Commission, led by Fabian Ware, had been formed in 1915 to ensure that, so far as possible, the bodies of the military dead of the First World War would be identified and their bodies interred. The Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC), founded by Royal Charter in 1917, again under Ware's leadership, took on the task of burying and commemorating the empire's dead. Many of the known and unknown dead were moved to the large 'concentrated' cemeteries that the IWGC was building, and in both large and small cemeteries they were buried with headstones that emphasized their military character rather than their civilian identity, while the 'missing',

those whose bodies had been lost in battle or simply blown apart by shells and machine guns, were named on memorials in these cemeteries, or on the large memorials at sites such as the Menin Gate at Ypres, or Thiepval at the Somme.

Buried by the state as soldiers rather than civilians, close to their place of death, the management of the dead of the First World War was controversial, particularly among those who had the means to repatriate the bodies of their loved ones. In May 1920 the House of Commons debated the work of the IWGC, and Sir James Remnant, opening the debate, made a strong case for the rights of families 'to treat their own loved ones in their distinctive way', whilst Viscount Wolmer cited letters from bereaved constituents describing the cemeteries as 'a most unwanted and cruel step'. For others, the uniformity of burial and commemoration seen in the cemeteries provided a measure of consolation. The former Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, whose son Raymond had died on the Somme, argued that those 'who fell, died with the same courage and the same devotion and for the same cause', a point supported in a letter from an army colonel who believed 'the fellowship of the war should be perpetuated in death by a true fellowship in memorial.' (House of Commons, 4 May 1920) Despite initial controversy, however, the state's burial of combatants, close to where they fell in cemeteries maintained by the IWGC, became widely accepted as the most appropriate form of interment for the nation's military dead, with the cemeteries and battlefields of Belgium and Northern France becoming popular sites of both tourism and pilgrimage in the interwar years. (Lloyd 1998; Connelly and Goebels 2018) In these cemeteries, the rows of individual headstones often disguised the trench graves, with bodies laid next to one another, that lay beneath.

As war approached again in the late 1930s, Britain began to consider how to once again bury its wartime dead. The Royal Navy, the oldest of the three services, planned to continue with its traditional means of disposal: burial at sea, with the corpse contained within

a weighted hammock, wrapped in the Union flag, and slipped over the side of the vessel after a full funeral service. Those who died at sea were commemorated on Naval memorials at Chatham, Plymouth, and Portsmouth, which also act as markers for ships travelling in and out of these ports.

Without such longstanding traditions, the Army and the Royal Air Force (RAF) attempted to meet the demands of another total war by building on the practices established by the Army in the First World War. Burial of the combatant dead from these Services was envisaged as taking place in three stages. Firstly, bodies (and body parts) would be collected from the battlefield, or place of death, and interred. Secondly, specially constituted units of the Army and the RAF would confirm the identity of the dead, and record the place of burial, exhuming the corpse where appropriate and moving it to a larger, 'concentrated' cemetery'. Finally, the IWGC would oversee the maintenance 'in perpetuity' of these cemeteries, as they had done since the First World War. (Spark 2010) As swiftly became clear, the burial, and accurate recording of place of burial, of combatants in fast moving battlefield conditions, was often difficult, while the identification of airmen lost in battle over enemy or occupied territory was to prove a problem that extended into the postwar years. For those lost at sea when troopships were sunk or airplanes shot down, of course, there was to be no burial.

The emotional needs of the bereaved, as well as the morale of surviving troops, were central to military strategy for the burial and recording of the dead. In guidance published in 1943, the Air Ministry reminded its staff that policy concerning burials and funerals of RAF personnel 'has a marked effect on public morale.' (Imperial War Museum, Air Ministry 1943, 27) The swift identification of bodies, knowledge of the means of death, and reassurance both that death had been swift and painless, and that the body had been treated with respect, were all of importance to the bereaved. Letters sent to Squadron Leader Reverend G. H. Martin by the relatives of men 'lost' while serving with Bomber Command in 1944 and 1945

express time and again the overwhelming anxiety felt by those whose loved ones had been posted missing, and their desperate desire for information. The value that the emotional economy of wartime placed upon stoicism and restraint, and the stress that this could place upon individuals, was expressed by one woman who, when her husband was posted as missing, wrote to Martin saying, 'I am waiting anxiously for news and trying to be the brave wife that I know he would want me to be', while the mother of a missing airman described 'the strain of waiting' in her letter. (Imperial War Museum, Squadron Leader G.H. Martin Papers) A Mass Observation respondent described how a friend of hers 'wishes she could die' after her husband was reported missing in Malaya, but that she had to 'keep on, for the children's sake.' (Mass Observation 1942) Confirmation of death, and reassurance that the loved one had been buried with due reverence would, it was hoped, provide some comfort to these bereaved, and, crucially, help to ensure that wartime morale was upheld.

This, however, was not always possible. After the fighting in North and East Africa in 1942, the War Office released a press statement in response to a 'growing expectation among Britons that news be provided of their missing and dead relatives' explaining how difficult it was proving to quickly identify bodies. (Spark 2010, 67) When this information was not available, or when there was a fear that bodies were not being treated with due reverence, it was difficult to match the emotional value the dead held for the bereaved with a sense that they were equally valued by the state. Some, with good reason, clearly feared they were not valued in death and wanted the bodies of their loved ones returned to them: War Office files record the request of a Mr Kimelman, who wanted the body of his son, killed in Egypt in 1942, returned to him. (War Office, Graves Registration Middle East, 1943) Likewise, a Mrs Norton wrote to General Eisenhower to ask him to facilitate the return of her son's body, buried in a military cemetery in France. War Office files note that 'she has been informed on more than one occasion that permission to bring back to England the body of her

son would not be permitted in war.' Desperation presumably led her to ask for Eisenhower's help. (War Office, Funeral, Burials and Reports, 1944-45)

The burial of identified bodies in war graves within Germany often caused particular anguish, one woman writing to *The Times* in 1946 about a friend who was 'in great distress' after learning that her son's final grave was to be in Germany:

> She and her relatives have appealed for a reversal of this decision … parsimony on the part of Government is responsible. It is unbearable that those who mourn the loss of their heroic dead should have their hearts wrung by the thought that England allows them to lie in enemy territory. (*The Times* 5 December 1946)

Writing in a similar tone to *The Daily Telegraph*, Margery Swanwick explained that 'I myself lost a son and a nephew, both killed in Germany, and it is with the utmost distaste that I contemplate visiting their graves in a country, and among inhabitants, with whom we have so recently been at war.' (Spark 2010, 143) While the Canadian government had decided in 1945 to move the bodies of the Canadian dead from Germany to concentrated cemeteries in the Netherlands, the British decision to maintain IWGC cemeteries within German borders was unpopular, the bereaved perhaps fearing that the graves would not be treated with the respect believed to be shown to those in formerly occupied countries. For example, writing of allied graves in the Cher region of France in 1945, the Paris correspondent of *The Times* noted that 'it will be a solace to those at home to know that the graves are cared for with reverence, and the dead are held in abiding remembrance.' (1945) Similarly, the booklet *Five Graves at Nijmegen* by the war correspondent Eric Baume opened with a description of a Franciscan Friar and village residents praying at the graves of five British Guardsmen, while

'over the road mortars thudded and machine-guns coughed' as the war in North West Europe moved towards its painful and bloody end. (1945, 4) Such solace as descriptions like these offered was out of the reach of those who mourned soldiers and airmen buried in enemy territory.

The importance of burial practice for morale was also seen through the efforts that went into identifying the dead, and their place of burial. As Allied troops moved through North West Europe after June 1944, they came across the graves of combatants who had been killed earlier in the War, both in the chaotic retreat to Dunkirk of 1940, and on later bombing missions. The logistical problems were huge. A memo from the Adjutant General's Office in August 1944 to the Commander in Chief of the 21st Army Group in Europe noted that 'it is probable' that alongside the graves of men who died in 1940 would be found the corpses of other Allied personnel, including those who died whilst carrying out 'operations behind the lines' and who 'died as Prisoners of War'. 'In many cases', the memo continued, 'no reliable records of such graves are held', and so 'a careful watch should be kept' on all such graves in the hope that the corpse interred there could be correctly identified, and the details passed to the family. (War Office, Graves and Burials 1944-45) Many of course were never to be found or identified: the memorial that stands at the entrance to the CWGC cemetery at Dunkirk records the names of 4,500 casualties who died or were captured during the British Expeditionary Force campaign of 1940, and have no known grave. (CWGC Website) In Asia, climatic conditions added to the existing problems of identification: decomposition occurred quickly in the humidity and heat of the jungle, and one survivor of the retreat to Singapore recalled that 'bodies were left in the jungle where they fell'. Local wildlife, including large predators and voracious insects such as white ants, also caused 'other difficulties that were not usually met with in European theatres.' (War Office, Graves Registration 1943) The numbers and geographical spread of RAF crew, whose planes had been shot down over

Europe, presented perhaps the greatest difficulties. In July 1945, at the end of the war in Europe, the Casualty Branch of the Air Ministry estimated that approximately 31,000 air crew were still listed as 'missing'. Of these, it was believed that around 24,000 were dead, with at least 1,000 bodies lost to the sea. (Spark 2010, 143) By the time the RAF set up Missing, Research and Enquiry Service (MRES) Units to try to find and identify the bodies of these men, the processes of decomposition, combined with the violent manner of many of these deaths, made this an unusually difficult, and often unpleasant, task.

The RAF established these MRES Units towards the end of 1945, and their task varied across national borders. In Denmark, their work was made easier by the 'elaborate monuments' that local residents had sometimes erected over graves, and by the 'records of RAF crashes and burials' that had been carefully preserved throughout the war. By contrast, the teams working in the Netherlands recorded that 'there was a special problem in this country owing to its flooded condition', and in Germany, the main European target of area bombing, 'the destruction … rendered search work very difficult' while local populations were observed to be 'generally unco-operative.' (Air Ministry Report 1944-1949) The search teams used a range of techniques to try and identify the numerous dead, including infra-red photography, tooth charts, and bone measurements. However, as many of the exhumation reports show, the violent deaths often experienced by these men meant that there was often little left to identify. For example, a report on a body exhumed in St Avold, North East France, which was 'in an advanced state of decomposition [and] wrapped in a mattress cover', noted that it had only been possible to identify part of the right humerus and femur, along with parts of an RAF uniform, parachute, and harness. (Air Ministry Report 1944-1949) Other cases show how imaginative detective work could at times enable the successful identification of a corpse where there were very few bodily remains present: one man being identified by his signet

ring, and another by his Ronson lighter, which had been a wedding present from his wife. (Air Ministry Report 1944-1949)

The accurate identification of the dead could provide some solace to the bereaved, and the effort that the state put into this difficult process was designed to ensure that the bereaved felt their loved ones were valued by the state, that the collective nature of the war effort was emphasised, and through this, to ensure that the military dead continued to 'work' for the war effort. During the fighting, the dead were ever present, providing a vivid reminder for their living comrades of their potential fate. The living often recorded a morbid interest in the corpses that were, all too often, their companions. Alex Bowlby, whose memoirs record his time fighting his way up the Italian Peninsula with the Rifle Brigade, wrote of the fascination that the dead held for him. Near Monte Cassino he came across 'a row of black crosses, topped with coal scuttle helmets' which 'snatched our pity'. The smell, however, 'cut it short':

> Instinctively I realized I was smelling my own kind, not animals. I understood what they must feel in a slaughter house. These dead were under the rubble. If we could have seen the bodies it would have helped. The unseen, unconsecrated dead assumed a most terrifying power. Their protest filled the truck. We avoided one another's eyes. (Bowlby 1969, 20)

Walter Robson, also fighting near Cassino, wrote to his wife describing another close encounter with a corpse:

> under the fallen rubble of the ruined staircase lies the body of a New Zealander. … A rough wooden cross rests against the wall above the grave …

> The cross says baldly 'Patterson 2NZEF' with RIP pencilled down the spine. We cook by the grave and leave tea leaves on it and empty tins. Curious flowers indeed. But none of it is very sanitary and as the days wear on so the smell grows worse. (Robson 1960, 102)

The dead body provoked a number of responses amongst combatants, with pity, revulsion, and fear amongst them, but perhaps the most potent, and of most concern to the military authorities, was the response to the body as a *momento mori*, a reminder to the combatants of their own potential fate.

The need to keep combatants fighting, and to maintain their morale amid difficult and arduous conditions, underpinned the military's treatment of the battlefield dead. The War Office was especially concerned about military morale, believing that its conscripts were of 'lesser quality' than combatants of earlier periods, or in other services. (Usshiskin 2017, 90) One Army Chaplain attached to the 46th Division in Southern Italy, recorded how 'the men are very critical of the temporary expedients which conditions force upon us at times', such as bodies laying unburied for days, and men buried in isolated sites, the exact position of which was sometimes lost. (Snape 2008, 302) Chaplains attached to fighting units were told to oversee identification and interment, to ensure that the corpses were buried with 'full reverence', and to communicate this to the families of those killed in battle. (War Office, Allied Expeditionary Force 1945) Instructions sent to Chaplains with Allied Forces in North West Europe in 1945 included the reminder that 'those you bury have made the supreme sacrifice.' (War Office, Allied Expeditionary Force 1945) The burial of the dead was crucial to both civilian and battlefield morale. The diaries of Leslie Skinner, who served as Chaplain to the Sherwood Rangers in Normandy after D Day, provide us with some sense of what this could entail for those tasked with caring for the dead. Again and again, Skinner describes the

'really unpleasant' (26), 'nasty' (44), and 'sick making' (49) job of preparing bodies for burial that had been dead for some time, or had to be removed from the remains of burnt out tanks. Nonetheless, he was adamant that the fighting men should not have to undertake these tasks:

> Squadron Leader offered to lend me some men to help. Refused. Less men who live and fight in tanks have to do with this side of things the better. They know it happens but to force it on their attention is not good. My job. (49)

For Skinner, the need to protect men from the potentially destabilizing and distressing sight of their comrades' bodies after death outweighed his own personal anguish.

As it tried to ensure that the military dead continued to work symbolically for the war effort, the British state was able to turn to the traditions of burial and commemoration that had developed during the First World War. The military dead, nameless in earlier centuries, were to be given names and identifiable resting places in Britain's total wars of the twentieth century. In its attempts to achieve a referential stability for the military dead, and to provide some consolation for the bereaved, the burial policy of the wartime state was both a product and an extension of the move to democratically name the dead that had emerged during the nineteenth century. (Laqueur 2015, 388-412) Whilst this process had a precedent in the treatment of the military dead during the First World War, the new technology of aerial warfare meant that it had to be extended to the civilian dead of warfare for the first time. This article now turns to look at the British state's approach to the burial of its civilian victims of war.

Burying the Civilian Dead

In comparison with the widespread belief that the state's treatment of the military corpse ensured, so far as possible, an appropriate level of respect and reverence, the burial of civilian victims of warfare proved to be one of the more contentious aspects of wartime life. State and civic involvement in civilian interment was, of course, not new, and throughout the war the state struggled to throw off the shadow of the 'pauper's grave' that clung tenaciously to the mass burials of air raid victims that took place in multiple cities around Britain.

Much of the planning for war that took place in the 1930s focused on the impact of aerial bombardment, and management of the high numbers of casualties that were expected as a consequence of this. From the publication of Giulio Douhet's *The Command of the Air* in 1921 onwards, air power theory – the belief that future wars would be won and lost by the ability of civilian populations to endure aerial bombardment – had come to dominate military thinking. (Holman 2014) In 1924, the Air Raid Precautions' (ARP) Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence was formed to consider how best to defend Great Britain in the coming age of aerial warfare, but it was not until 1936 (the year of the Spanish Civil War and the remilitarization of the Rhineland) that the Home Office began seriously to consider how to cope with civilian corpses in any future war. Basing their calculations on the numbers killed by bombing raids in the First World War, government statisticians estimated that an average of 17 people would be killed per tonne of bombs dropped, with an enemy air force being capable, in the opening weeks of a conflict, of dropping 150 tonnes of bombs daily. This gave a figure of 2,550 fatalities per day. However, a handwritten note attached to these figures, and probably informed by the bombing of Spanish towns and cities, suggested these figures could be doubled or even trebled, and that London alone could see 'a daily aggregate … of 7000 corpses.' (Home Office, War 1936-1939) In a series of meetings between 1936 and 1937, a Home Office committee, known as the Burials (Civilians) Committee, held regular and highly confidential meetings to plan for this eventuality. The Committee paid

particular attention to three key issues: how and where to dispose of the dead, how to proceed when no family members came forward to claim bodies for burial, and what to do about unidentified corpses. The London Metropolitan Boroughs' Joint Standing Committee commissioned a survey of the burial space available in the city and concluded that the best solution to the expected high numbers of fatalities would be trench burial, which, they estimated, would allow for approximately 'three and a half million bodies to be accommodated.' (Home Office, Blitz 1940) Similar preparations were on-going in Scotland, where the Department of Health for Scotland wrote to local authorities to suggest that they prepare trenches 'deep enough to take five tiers of bodies.' (Glasgow Corporation Civil Defence Department, 1940) Thus the mass burial in trench graves of large numbers of civilian casualties was seen as preferable to either repeated, individual burials or burying corpses in single graves one on top of the other, as was often the case in pauper burials 'on the parish.' (Strange 2003, 148) The heavy air raids that were widely expected to open the war did not materialise, and when the blitz of 1940-1941 began, it soon became obvious that casualty figures would not reach the apocalyptic predictions of the late 1930s, meaning that in many instances, victims were claimed and buried by their remaining families. The government was nevertheless concerned about the impact of frequent private funerals on morale, commenting that 'a multiplicity of funerals might in some cases be obviously undesirable.' (Ministry of Health, Civilian War Dead Bible 1939–1943) In several cases, where the number of fatalities was high, burial of the victims in a trench grave by the Local Authority was undertaken. This was in part an attempt to avoid the stigma associated with pauper burials, and also an attempt to avoid the detrimental impact on morale of repeated private funerals after a heavy raid. (Laqueur 1983, 186) Both of these aims were only partially successful.

Following the heavy bombing raid on the small industrial city of Coventry in November 1940, the civic leaders, facing a lack of infrastructure and fearing a breakdown in morale, decided to bury the majority of the dead swiftly in two mass graves. In this instance the collective burial of the dead does seem to have achieved the referential stability that Scarry discusses. The majority of Coventry's bereaved agreed to the interment of their loved ones in a civic ceremony. Of the 568 people killed in the air raid, 422 were buried in two mass graves: 172 on 20 November, and another 250 five days later. They were buried in layers three deep in two long trench graves. *The Tragedy of Coventry*, a British Pathé newsreel of the first funeral, emphasized both the civilian identities of the victims, named as 'martyrs' in the film, the solidarity of the bereaved community, and the need for young men to join the RAF in order to 'avenge this awful catastrophe.' (British Pathé 1940) In his oration over the grave, the Bishop of Coventry urged his audience to remember that:

> the eyes of millions of people are upon you. We must try not to dwell too much on what we have lost but to turn our thoughts and our hands to the tasks we can do to help for the sake of our city and our nation … The Germans can kill our loved ones, but it rests with us whether they shall break our spirit. (*Manchester Guardian* 1940)

Although the War Office had specifically warned against the use of the term 'common grave' in connection with mass burials of air raid victims, because of its connotations of pauper burials, it was nonetheless widely used to describe the burials at Coventry. Tom Harrisson, reporting on the funerals for Mass Observation and the BBC European News, stated that 'they buried the dead of Coventry yesterday, in a common grave', while national and regional newspapers, including *The Times*, the *Daily Record*, and *The Scotsman* used the same term.

(Mass Observation 1940; *The Times* 1940; *Daily Record* 1940; *The Scotsman* 1940) The funerals were attended by representatives of the Armed Services, alongside civil defence workers, civilians, and local dignitaries, and the religious service included Free Church prayers and a Catholic ceremony alongside the Anglican burial rites. By taking a multidenominational approach, and by bringing together civilians, the military, the bereaved, and city officials in a microcosm of the nation at war, the funerals appear to have successfully avoided the stigma of the pauper's funeral, instead managing to convey through the collective, civic, interment of the dead a sense of local identity, national solidarity and resolve.

The widespread and international recognition of the suffering of Coventry, together with the decision – announced immediately – to erect a memorial over the graves, may also have helped these burials to achieve the referential stability that was sought, and which eluded many other mass interments. The report of the funerals in the *New York Times* emphasized both the unity and stoicism of the mourners, the perceived similarity of the victims with the military dead, and the unusual nature of the burial:

> Only one woman in that long line broke down and wept and had to be supported by friends. Others bore their grief silently and inwardly in the traditional British fashion. That was the end. There was no singing, no music, nothing to alleviate the stark ugliness of what was more like a soldiers' burial in the field of battle than anything else. (*New York Times* 1940)

The victims thus functioned as symbols not only of the city, ensuring that 'the name and fame of Coventry shall not die', but of a more widely shared commitment to war aims, and a willingness to bear the brutal demands of war in order to achieve victory. (*The Birmingham*

Post 1940) Although those buried individually by their families, and those buried in the second mass funeral, received less outside attention than the victims buried together on 20 November, the widespread recognition of Coventry's suffering, visualized through the wide coverage of this funeral, helped to stabilize the meaning of these corpses. The dead of Coventry, dying as civilians but treated like combatants in their death, burial, and commemoration, thus continued to work for the war effort long after their interment.

In Belfast and in Clydebank, a small town just west of Glasgow, similar mass burials following heavy air raids were less successful at conveying a sense of collectivity and resolution, and a referential stability was harder to achieve. In both of these instances, the political value that the state attempted to attribute to the dead through the collective management of their burial and funeral rites failed to resonate with their emotional value for many of the bereaved. Like Coventry, both Belfast and Clydebank were fairly small industrial and working class communities, albeit divided by sectarian and, in Belfast, political affiliations. Both suffered heavy bombardment, Clydebank in March 1941 and Belfast the following month, when what became known as the 'Easter Tuesday raid' devastated parts of the city. Unlike Coventry, however, their experiences received little wider recognition, nor did they gain the accompanying national and international sympathy. The targets of heavy air raids were often not directly identified lest the subsequent publicity should enable further raids by Germany, although this had not been applied after the bombing of Coventry because of its propagandist value. This policy led to a widely reported belief amongst the populations and local authorities of heavily bombed regional towns and cities that knowledge of their experiences was being deliberately withheld by the London-based government. The resentment that this caused, and the belief that only the suffering and fortitude of London was being recognized, contributed towards bitterness and sometimes anger in these towns and cities, rumours of much larger casualty figures than had been inflicted, and demands such as

that made by the Liverpool Information Committee in December 1940, after heavy bombing of the city and the nearby town of Birkenhead, that the government should tell 'Liverpool and the nation the simple truth … we can take the truth, and would prefer to know it.' (Home Office, Air Raids 1940–1942)

Both Clydebank and Belfast had inadequate shelters in place for their populations: the local government in both Northern Ireland and the west of Scotland had assumed early in the war that their regions were too far from Germany to be targeted by heavy raids, their position on the west of the British Isles supposedly offering some protection despite the important industrial and military function of both areas. The geology of Belfast, built on clay with a high water table, made the provision of deep civilian shelters difficult, and by the time of the 1941 air raid, private shelters were only available for about 15% of the city's population, whilst in Clydeside many people sought shelter in the close of their tenement buildings: the entrance hallway sometimes strengthened by wooden struts and sand bags. (Blake 1956, 218) Both cities also struggled to restore civic authority and organization in the immediate aftermath of the air raids, and in the chaos and confusion that followed, many individuals whose homes had been damaged, who were cold and hungry, and who feared that further raids would follow, left to seek shelter in nearby towns and villages. The subsequent absence of people who could identify the dead, the scale of the destruction, and the high numbers of dead and injured, overwhelmed casualty and mortuary services, meaning many bodies were left unidentified, awaiting burial in anonymous mass graves. In these circumstances, the desire that local authorities bury civilians in such a way that their deaths 'should be counted as an equal sacrifice' with those of the 'men and women of the services' was to prove deeply challenging. (War Office, Memorials and Graves 1941–1945)

Following the large air raid that took place on the night of 15-16 April 1941, the ability of the Belfast authorities to manage the large numbers of casualties was quickly

overwhelmed. The city's mortuaries, which could hold up to 200 bodies, swiftly filled, and corpses were sent to other public buildings, such as the Falls Road Baths. Joseph McCann, a Warden for the local area, later recalled the chaos and carnage:

> Disembodied arms, legs and head were bought in on planks. Soldiers arrived with a stretcher, piled high, its grim contents covered by a sheet, a mound of human remains, pieces of bodies that had been gathered up. (Barton 1989, 147)

These scenes were echoed across the city, with the *Belfast Telegraph* reporting that 'bodies were being recovered from heaps of rubble all over the place' (1941), and by 22 April the Town Clerk was asking those who knew of people missing to contact City Hall:

> in order to establish the identity of any person whose death has occurred … and whose body has been destroyed or cannot be found or is in a place from which it cannot be recovered or cannot be identified, or has been buried as a person unknown, or as some other person. (*The Northern Whig* 1941b)

Three days after the raid, approximately 250 people, about one third of those killed, remained unidentified. Their bodies were taken to St George's Market in the city centre and prepared for viewing by those still searching for missing friends, neighbours, and relatives. Of the 250 taken to St George's Market, 151 were identified, and 92 of these were taken for private burial by their families. (Public Record Office of Northern Ireland 1941)

The remainder of the dead were buried in two mass funerals on 21 April: the remains of 163 people were buried in 153 coffins, the majority in a mass grave at the City Cemetery

and those who had been identified as Catholic at Milltown Cemetery. Funeral rites had been conducted inside the market by representatives of the Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland, and a Rabbi. The city did all it could to echo the sense of solidarity and empathy that had been so successfully conveyed by the funerals in Coventry some six months earlier: nurses, members of the forces, and civil defence workers accompanied representatives of City Hall and of Stormont, the Northern Ireland parliament, as they marched behind the lorries that carried the coffins to the graveyards. *The Northern Whig* described how, as the cortege passed the 'heaps of rubble' that were 'all that remained of the victims' home', workers clearing the debris 'with shovel or pick in hand stood to attention.' (1941a) Morale, a hazy subject that government agencies spent large amounts of time attempting to assess, was low in Belfast following the raids. Many of the city's inhabitants left Belfast after the Blitz, some travelling to stay in nearby towns, where the Women's Voluntary Service often struggled to cope with the influx of refugees, whilst others trekked in and out of the city, sleeping in the surrounding countryside, towns, and villages, and returning to the city by day for work. A correspondent to *The Northern Whig* compared morale in post-raid Belfast disparagingly with that in other badly hit British towns such as 'London, Liverpool, Glasgow, Birmingham, Manchester, Bristol and Coventry', claiming that those leaving the city included Air Raid Wardens, leaving one post with eight wardens from an original total of twenty. (1941c) In the already divided city of Belfast, struggling with the physical and emotional aftermath of aerial bombardment, the dead, buried in collective graves in separate cemeteries, struggled to symbolize collectivity and resolution.

Clydebank, a small industrial town just west of Glasgow, was bombed over two nights from 13-14 March 1941. Like Belfast, the town's infrastructure struggled to recover during the immediate aftermath of the raids, and many residents left Clydebank on buses organized by the local council to take shelter in towns and villages across Scotland in the days following

the air raid. They were fleeing not only anticipated further attacks, but also a lack of shelter, food, and clean water. A report from a Senior Officer of the Royal Engineers, seconded to the town, noted critically that 'civil authority … still appeared to have no co-ordinated plan of work' 58 hours after the last raid. (Clydebank Archive Centre 1941) The IWGC's official record of civilian casualties of the war lists the number of fatalities in Clydebank as 455, though rumours long circulated that the numbers were about 1200. John McGovern, MP for Glasgow Shuttleton, claimed in the House of Commons that there was 'great resentment in the Clydeside area' owing to the belief that the region's suffering was unknown outside of Western Scotland. (IWGC 1954, 2355-2369; House of Commons 1941)

As in Belfast, the emergency mortuary provision in Clydebank proved inadequate to the task of storing and identifying the dead. The emergency mortuary at the Greyhound Stadium was destroyed in the bombing, and bodies were sent to improvised mortuaries around the town, including a Church Hall and a primary school. One young man, home on leave from the army, described the scene in the temporary mortuary at St James Church Hall, where he had been sent to look for his family: 'There were rows and rows of dead bodies burnt, maimed and disfigured, lying there waiting to be identified. I left the hall unable to recognize anyone.' (Clydebank Life Story Group 1999, 29) Some bodies were stored outside, awaiting collection and delivery to the temporary mortuaries. Helen McNeill, a child at the time, recalled her mother hurrying her past an alleyway the morning after the first air raid:

> I looked in and told my mum that a lot of people in there were sleeping as I saw rows of legs sticking out from the tarpaulins. I was to know at a later date that they were some of the many people who had lost their lives during that terrible night. (Clydebank Life Stories Group 1999, 55)

The town's stock of Civilian War Dead forms, designed to aid in the identification of the dead, had been destroyed. In addition, there was a shortage of grave-diggers, coffins, and Union flags to use as palls. A Mr McRobbie, sent from the Department of Health in Edinburgh to help the Mortuary Services, swiftly came to the conclusion that 'mass burial of the unclaimed bodies was the only practicable method' (Scottish Record Office 1941).

By 16 March there were some 66 unclaimed bodies still at the temporary St James Hall mortuary: 48 unidentified and 18 identified but not removed for private burial. McRobbie arranged for these bodies to be buried in a mass grave at the town's Dalnottar Road cemetery and, watched by a small group of dignitaries, including the Secretary of State for Scotland, the dead were buried in shrouds in a trench grave, the funeral service conducted by Protestant and Catholic clergymen. The following day a smaller number of bodies from other mortuaries were added to the grave. (Scottish Record Office 1941) Perhaps unsurprisingly, disquiet about both the piecemeal nature of the burials and the problems with identifying the dead arose almost immediately. Some of this disquiet was anticipated, the Scottish Office recording the funerals as both 'not to be kept secret' but also 'not to be publicised.' (Scottish Record Office 1941) The *Daily Record* reported the burial of 'the nameless dead', describing how 'unknown victims of the Nazi onslaught on a Clydeside town were buried yesterday in a common grave.' (1941) The District Commissioner for Civil Defence, Sir Stephen Bisland, complained about delays in taking the bodies from the mortuary for burial, the lack of coffins, and the presence of only two gravediggers to receive the bodies. (Scottish Record Office 1941) Given the chaos and uncertainty that followed the devastating raids on Clydebank, and the widespread sense that the local authorities were failing to cope with the aftermath, it is not surprising that the majority of those who were able to identify their relatives chose to bury them privately.

In both Clydebank and Belfast, unlike Petworth and Coventry, private burial remained the preference for those who were able to identify their dead. This was also true of other cities, such as heavily bombed Liverpool, where of the 554 civilians buried in a communal grave at Anfield, 373 were unidentified. (*Liverpool Daily Post* 1941) For most, the collective burial of civilian victims of air raids was to be avoided, redolent perhaps of the anonymous pauper's grave, but also because the graveside became a reminder of the violent means of death. Overseen by civic authorities, mass burials circumscribed both opportunities for the marking of individual lives, and for much of the custom and ritual that was meaningful to many of the bereaved. While collective burial of air raid victims was chosen as appropriate by some, most rejected it, the lack of autonomy in burial rites, and burial in mass graves echoing the anonymity of the pauper's grave rather than the reverence attached to the military dead of IWGC cemeteries. Despite the principle, attributed by the War Office to Fabian Ware, that 'the deaths of civilians or men and women of the service should be counted as an equal sacrifice', collective funerals and mass burials in common graves continued to be shunned by the majority of those bereaved by air raids. (War Office, Memorials and Graves 1941–1945)

Conclusion

The Second World War introduced the world to a new form of total warfare, one that had the targeting of civilians at its heart. Driven by the emergence and popularity of 'air power theory' in the interwar years, combatant nations largely embraced the idea that putting non-combatants at the heart of warfare, usually by aerial bombardment, but also through blockades, sieges, and other forms of attempted subjugation, would ensure that the long, drawn out war of attrition, seen in the trenches and battlefields of the First World War, could be avoided. The horror of targeting civilians, it was argued, would lead to a swift resolution of international conflict. This was a belief that combatant nations were to cling to through six

long years of war, and the deaths of tens of millions, the majority of whom were civilians (Bessel 2015, 252).

This new centrality of civilians to warfare meant that nation states now had to consider the best means of both disposing of the civilian corpse and of honouring the civilian victim. In Britain, as this article has shown, the state attempted to deploy the practice that had emerged in burial of combatants of the First World War, that of emphasizing the wartime identity of the dead over and above their civilian or familial identities, to both the military and civilian dead of the Second World War. In the case of the military dead, the state worked to try and identify bodies, and to provide what were seen as appropriate burial rites and memorialization, emphasizing, wherever possible, the reverence with which graves were treated by local populations when overseas, and investing considerable amounts of both manpower and capital into often lengthy and difficult attempts to identify corpses, thus hopefully providing some form of finality and closure for grieving relatives.

Military bodies were buried close to where they fell, eventually in cemeteries managed by the IWGC, or if the body could not be identified, named on memorials that listed the 'missing' military dead. At other times, they were buried by local populations in civilian cemeteries, their graves marked and maintained firstly by the local inhabitants, and latterly by the agencies of the British state. These efforts to identify and bury the bodies of combatants, and to maintain their graves, were designed to provide a referential stability to the combatant corpse, and some degree of resolution for the bereaved. The key exception to this was the controversy that surrounded the decision to maintain war graves in Germany, relatives often feeling that their maintenance by the IWGC did not outweigh their concerns about their loved ones' remains being buried within the territory of a former enemy.

The referential stability that the British state largely managed to attach to the combatant corpse was far more fragile in the case of the civilian dead. This, in part was

because those burying the civilian dead maintained the right to manage the funeral and interment themselves; a process that was usually unavailable to those whose loved ones had died as combatants. Again and again, communities, families, and individuals rejected the offer of a state-run funeral, with burial in a collective grave and commemoration by the local authority, for the victims of air raids. With a few exceptions, where local communities were convinced that the dead, if buried collectively by the local authority, would be treated with due reverence, buried in separate coffins, named on memorials, and remembered as members of a united community, people preferred to bury their dead as loved individuals, and as members of families and local communities.

The desire of so many to bury their own dead speaks to us both of the shadow of the pauper's grave, but also of the powerful affective bonds that continue to exist between the dead and the bereaved (Walter 1999). Whilst theorists disagree about the nature of grief, and whether these bonds are temporary or enduring, they agree that bereavement traditions and rituals provide both an important means of marking death and grief, and an opportunity for the community to show support for the bereaved. When individuals felt that they were losing control of these rituals, grief was perhaps harder to bear. The state's efforts to take control of bereavement rituals in wartime were, in part, problematic, because they removed this control from the bereaved.

During the Second World War, the British state attempted to attach political meanings to the bodies of its military and its civilian dead. This had been largely, if not entirely, successful in the aftermath of the First World War, where the ranks of identical headstones in cemeteries and names on memorials close to battlefields did useful political and emotional work, functioning as symbols of a national will and collectivity and as sites where the bereaved could find both 'their' dead, and some kind of consolation. The burial and memorialization of the bodies of the military dead during and after the Second World War

was largely able to draw on these existing traditions to attach a referential stability to the military corpse. The dead combatant was buried and remembered not just as an individual, but as a soldier who had fallen in the 'people's war', fighting for and defending British freedom, values, and traditions. The traditions that had emerged around the combatant corpse in the First World War could not be transferred in any straightforward way to civilians killed in air raids. The new form of warfare that emerged in the middle of the twentieth century may have targeted the civilian body, but these bodies, in death, often refused to work as symbols of a national will. Reflecting on a request that remains be removed from the collective grave of bombing victims for private burial in Bristol, a perceptive civil servant noted that:

> The majority of bereaved persons seemed actually to dislike their relatives' deaths being associated with the war, stating they wished to try and forget the circumstances … It would seem that the efforts of the IWGC and the Ministry to classify these deaths as heroic and to celebrate them by memorials and battlefield conditions like those of Etaples and Vimy does not evoke much enthusiasm in the minds of humble civilian sufferers. (Home Office, Burials, 1941)

The bereaved of the Second World War, it appears, wanted their dead to remain just that: civilians, and individuals, not members of a national, mobilized collective. Whilst the bodies of combatants could, with care, be put to work, acting as bearers of a shared national sacrifice, the bodies of civilian victims of war largely remained resistant to mobilization by the state.

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