



Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars

By George L. Mosse

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At the outbreak of the First World War, an entire generation of young men charged into battle for what they believed was a glorious cause. Over the next four years, that cause claimed the lives of some 13 million soldiers--more than twice the number killed in all the major wars from 1790 to 1914. But despite this devastating toll, the memory of the war was not, predominantly, of the grim reality of its trench warfare and battlefield carnage. What was most remembered by the war's participants was its sacredness and the martyrdom of those who had died for the greater glory of the fatherland.

War, and the sanctification of it, is the subject of this pioneering work by well-known European historian George L. Mosse. *Fallen Soldiers* offers a profound analysis of what he calls the Myth of the War Experience--a vision of war that masks its horror, consecrates its memory, and ultimately justifies its purpose. Beginning with the Napoleonic wars, Mosse traces the origins of this myth and its symbols, and examines the role of war volunteers in creating and perpetuating it. But it was not until World War I, when Europeans confronted mass death on an unprecedented scale, that the myth gained its widest currency. Indeed, as Mosse makes clear, the need to find a higher meaning in the war became a national obsession. Focusing on Germany, with examples from England, France, and Italy, Mosse demonstrates how these nations--through memorials, monuments, and military cemeteries honoring the dead as martyrs--glorified the war and fostered a popular acceptance of it. He shows how the war was further promoted through a process of trivialization in which war toys and souvenirs, as well as postcards like those picturing the Easter Bunny on the Western Front, softened the war's image in the public mind.

The Great War ended in 1918, but the Myth of the War Experience continued, achieving its most ruthless political effect in Germany in the interwar years. There the glorified notion of war played into the militant politics of the Nazi party, fueling the belligerent nationalism that led to World War II. But that cataclysm would ultimately shatter the myth, and in exploring the postwar years, Mosse reveals the extent to which the view of death in war, and war in general, was finally changed. In so doing, he completes what is likely to become one of the classic studies of modern war and the complex, often disturbing nature of human perception and memory.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

This review of the cultural and political impact of World War I complements Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (LJ 7/75) by tracing primarily the German experience. Mosse draws less upon literature than Fussell did but explores such sources as war monument and cemetery design and popular cultural items to build his thesis. He holds that the "Myth of the War Experience," largely created by intelligent volunteers, coupled with the "cult of the Fallen Soldier" added to the rise in nationalist feelings after the war, leading to the re-ignition of conflict as World War II. The book will most interest scholars and informed readers, but the chapter on trivialization of war will appeal to postcard and toy soldier collectors. A fascinating book. Recommended.

-George H. Siehl, *Library of Congress*

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Review

"Mosse analyses well."--W-W-1 Aero

"Thought-provoking, insightful . . . a wonderfully different perspective."--Dr. Byron J. Nordstrom, Gustavus Adolphus College

"Absorbing, beautifully written"--Publishers Weekly

"George Mosse's book is an investigation of...the Myth of the War Experience. It is a very serious and reflective study, combining thoughts on propaganda, on tribalism, on the cult of youth, and on the other things that are necessary for a war atmosphere....Keep this book near you, to be consulted when next you hear some wrinkled politician going on tearfully about `our boys' not having died in vain"--Christopher Hitchens, *Newsday*

"Well-argued and absorbing....A lively, scholarly examination of the heroic myths of war"--Booklist

"A well-researched original examination of "reshaping the memory of the world wars"....This is a thorough, honest and important book. It should be widely read, especially in the week before each Remembrance Day.-Day By Day

"This review of the cultural and political impact of World War I complements Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* by tracing primarily the German experience....A fascinating book"--Library Journal

"Mosse has skilfully tied together many threads in his far-ranging book. He shows the centrality of the myth to European history over a 200-year period....This is a stong attempt to assess an important international issue. He has convincingly shown the power of myth to shape the destiny of nations."--The Canadian Historical Review

"The strength of Mosse's work is the way it uses the iconography of war memorials to explore messages about gender in European political culture....Rich scholarship....We are indebted to Mosse for drawing our attention to the profile of masculinity in war memorials."--Journal of Modern History

About the Author

George L. Mosse is Bascom-Weinstein Professor of History, Emeritus, at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and Koebner Professor of History, Emeritus, at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. His previous books include *The Crisis of German Ideology*, *Nazi Culture*, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, *Nationality and Sexuality*, and *Toward the Final Solution*.

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