



ARC  
DE TRIOMPHE

# THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER



LEARNING  
RESOURCE



RÉPUBLIQUE  
FRANÇAISE

*Liberté  
Égalité  
Fraternité*

CENTRE DES  
MONUMENTS NATIONAUX

## THE GRATEFUL HOMELAND

After the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria on June 28, 1914, by Serbian nationalists in Sarajevo, the First World War broke out. Despite attempts at appeasement, Austria-Hungary and Serbia declared war, dragging numerous allies into the conflict. In France, general mobilization led nearly 8 million men to take up arms. It was estimated that around 1.5 million of them died during the conflict, while 500 succumbed to their injuries.

Faced with this massacre, the management of bodies became a major issue in public debate. During the first months of the conflict, mass grave burials was the norm for the French army. A single grave could contain up to 100 bodies. It was customary to remove the sole identification tag that soldiers wore around their necks to provide information on their civil status and inform their families.

This had the consequence of rendering the majority of these remains anonymous. At the very beginning of the war, while the battles rage, front-line soldiers defied military authorities by burying their comrades themselves in individual graves located as close as possible to the battlefields. This practice forced the state to take legal measures. In December 1915, it was decided that every soldier fallen at the front had to be buried individually with a perpetual grave maintained by the Republic. In addition to this, the decision was made to attach a second identification tag to each of the fighters. In this way, each body would retained a name in case of exhumation.



01. Poster of the general mobilization order of August 2, 1914



02. Poster for mobilization on Rue Royale in Paris

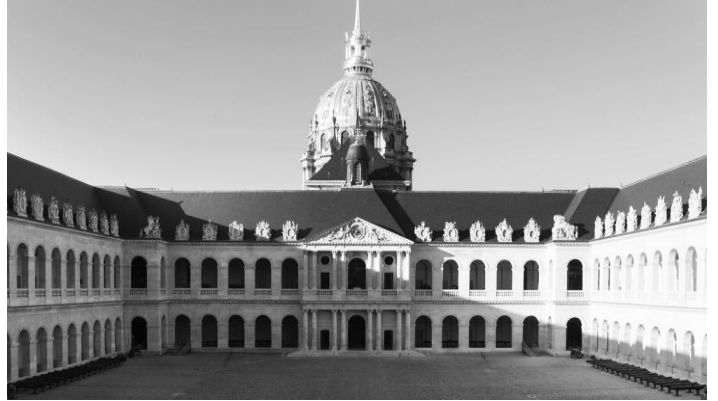
## JULY 14, 1915: TRIBUTE TO ROUGET-DE-LISLE

The Council of Ministers on July 10, 1915, initially considered transferring the composer's ashes to the Pantheon. The decision was ultimately made at the last moment to inter the ashes of the author of the *Marseillaise* at Les Invalides. As the war prolonged, it seemed important to rekindle the population's spirit through a strong patriotic impulse. So, the government hastily chose Rouget de Lisle. During this ceremony, there were very few able-bodied men present (as they were mostly at the front). The majority of the audience consisted of wounded and mutilated individuals, as well as many women, war widows, nurses, fundraisers for the *Journée de Paris*, children, and elderly veterans of the 1870 war.

The ceremony was highly ceremonial: it began in front of the Arc de Triomphe with the singing of the *Marseillaise* performed by Marie Delna, a lyrical artist who, like many performers, contributed to the war effort by singing in front of the troops. The poet's coffin was placed on a cannon carriage, covered with the tricolor flag, and pulled by nine horses. The casket was first symbolically honored in front of the sculpted group by Rude. Subsequently, the procession set off between the Arc de Triomphe and Les Invalides, passing notably through the Champs-Élysées avenue.

## THE HÔTEL DES INVALIDES

Built from 1670 at the initiative of Louis XIV, the Hôtel des Invalides was constructed in Paris on the plain of Grenelle to accommodate 4,000 war veterans. Its construction spanned five years according to the plans of the architect Libéral Bruant. In 1706, a dome was erected along with a church designed by Jules Hardouin Mansart. The body of Napoleon rests in this church.



03. The Hôtel des Invalides



04. Transfer of the ashes of Rouget-de-Lisle, 1915

Before the Great War, which marked a decisive moment in the struggle for women's emancipation in France, some of them were already wage earners, working at home (on the farm or in sewing) and especially as laborers, office workers, or domestics. From a legal standpoint, however, women still remained perpetual minors under the guardianship of male authority (the father, the husband, the employer).

On August 6, 1914, a call was issued to "French women" by René Viviani (1863-1925). The aim was to mobilize women from rural areas to replace those "on the battlefield immediately at work", to maintain agricultural work, grape harvests, and harvests at the end of summer. Society as a whole had to mobilize, and women were encouraged to participate in the war effort in various sectors such as factories, hospitals, administrations, etc. These new responsibilities imposed by the state were to be coupled with the burdens of daily life. Women heeded this call and mobilized massively in various sectors, both public and private.

### MORAL SUPPORT FOR SOLDIERS

As the conflict dragged on, letter exchanges between the fighters and their families became crucial for the morale of the troops. From 1915, many works of war godmothers were created to maintain a connection with the soldiers: through regular correspondence, these godmothers provided moral and emotional support to isolated fighters.

During the conflict, war widows emerged. As a consequence of the numerous soldiers who had died on the front, the black-clad figure of the widow symbolized the trauma affecting the entire nation. Many widows, without employment, found themselves in utter destitution, and charitable organizations mobilized to assist them. Some received aid from the state: if the soldier was killed on the front, his wife was officially recognized as a war widow.

Publicly known women were also involved in the conflict, especially in charitable works established at the beginning of the war to assist soldiers on the front. Women from the bourgeoisie engaged in numerous charitable activities and fundraising appeals to collect funds. The money collected was used to send parcels to soldiers, to provide assistance in hospitals, or to support the most deprived individuals affected by misfortune. Wealthy individuals were also involved, and many public figures used their money and fame to develop philanthropic actions for the benefit of the most vulnerable. This was notably the case with Anne Morgan, who founded the CARD (*Comité Américain pour les Régions Dévastées*, literally "American Committee for Devastated Regions") in 1917.

Educated young women from affluent backgrounds, on the other hand, turned to voluntary aid. After receiving accelerated training, they became nurses and swelled the ranks of the Red Cross certified personnel. With the health emergency, field hospitals multiplied along the front. In these institutions, the "White Angels" cared for the wounded, assisted surgeons during operations, and provided moral support to soldiers by offering the comforting presence that men lack. However, with the lengthening of the war, the emotional and intimate frustrations of the soldiers became a cumbersome reality: female prostitution developed around the front lines and behind the lines during leave. The military hierarchy, which prohibited wives from joining their husbands, tolerated this situation.

The image of the fighting woman was widely used in propaganda: with calls for monetary donations for the war effort, allegories of the protective mother or the resistant young girl were employed in support of various causes. From Marianne to Joan of Arc, historical icons symbolized bravery, mourning, pain, or the heroism of the people in the face of the enemy.





The Armistice of November 11, 1918, only suspended the conflict. It was necessary to wait until June 28, 1919, and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles for peace to be declared. The main provisions of the treaty were drafted during the International Conference of Paris organized by the victors. In this ceremony, every detail was symbolic: the choice of the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles as the signing location was not incidental. Indeed, France sought to erase the humiliation it had endured during the signing of the previous Peace Treaty after its defeat in 1871. June 28 also referred to the anniversary of the Sarajevo assassination. The staging and conditions of the signature contributed to the humiliation of the vanquished, who had proclaimed their empire in the same place in 1871.

Immediately after the Armistice, the debate over burial sites resurfaced: Where should the soldiers be interred? At the place where they fell alongside their comrades or on their home soil near their families?

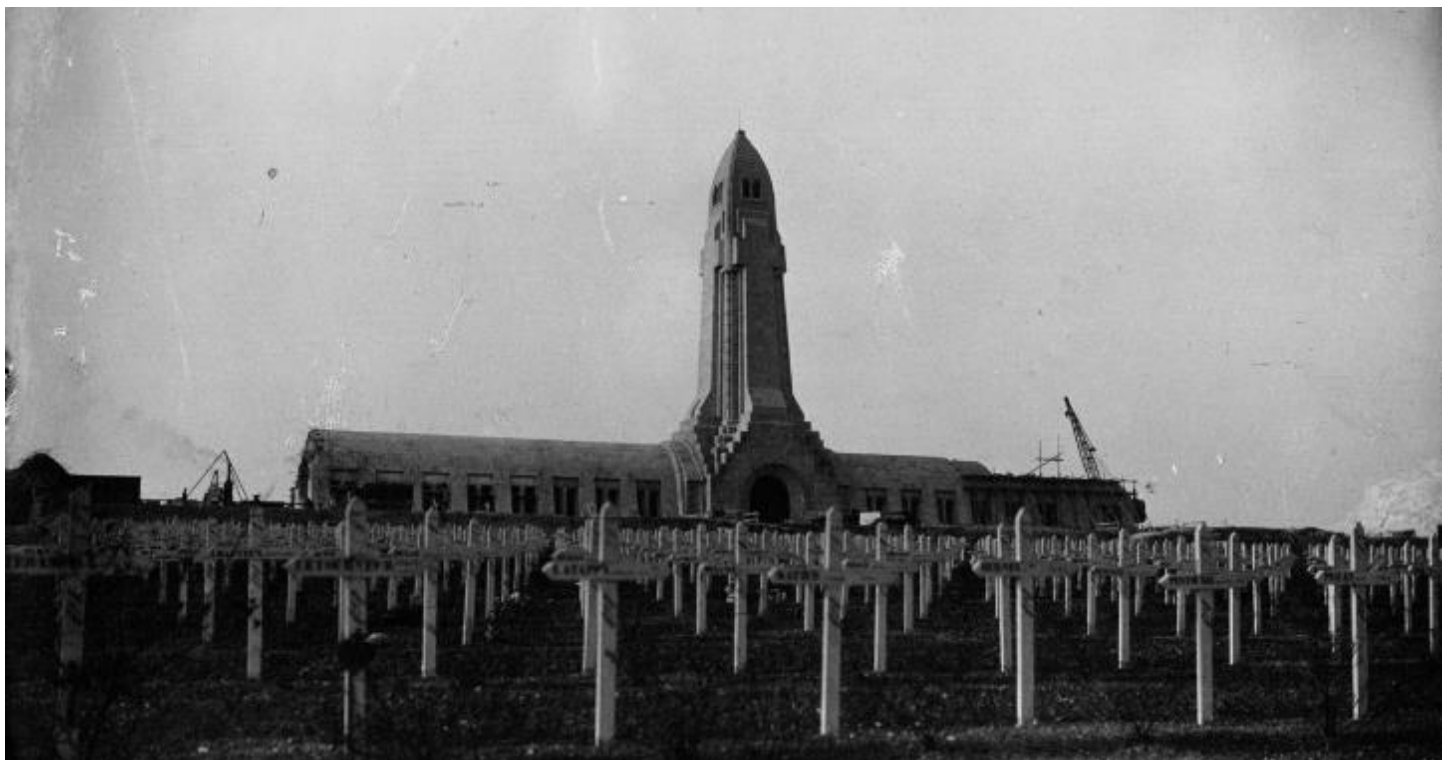
After grouping and identifying the remains of the soldiers, the government gave families the choice to repatriate the bodies of their deceased to the home front or to bury them in large cemeteries. These military sanctuaries were often located as close as possible to the combat zones, as it is the case for soldiers who fell at Verdun and were buried at Douaumont. Between 1920 and 1923, 240,000 bodies were sent back to their families, and 730,000 remains – whether identified or not – were interred in hastily opened ossuaries and necropolises.

## THE VICTORY PARADE

A few weeks after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles (on June 28, 1919), the celebrations of July 14th had a particular resonance: the choice of the location for the commemorations was symbolic. The axis of the avenues of the Grande Armée and the Champs-Élysées placed the Arc de Triomphe at the center of the event.

The route was lined with decorations referencing the victory. Military trophies were visible, a statue of a French soldier (*Poilu*) located at the Marigny intersection, cannons captured from the Germans piled in a pyramid and topped with a golden rooster, a symbol of France, at the Champs-Élysées roundabout.

The elaborate protocol put in place to organize the Victory Parade stipulated that aviators would not march aboard their aircraft but on foot. Anger risen among some of them, and it was believed to be a provocation. It was from the bar of the Escadrille (at the Fouquet's) that they organize the countermove. A few days later, on August 7, 1919, at 7:20 AM, Charles Godefroy took off in his Nieuport 11 biplane from the Villacoublay airfield. He circled the Arc de Triomphe twice, then flew through the arch. At the same time, a tramway crossed the square, and it was said that the passengers threw themselves to the ground in panic.



07. Douaumont: Inauguration of the ossuary lighthouse, Meurisse Agency, 1930





At the end of the conflict, a question arose: how could it be possible to allow the families of the 240,000 unidentified soldiers and the 253,000 missing to mourn without a body or a place of remembrance? On November 26, 1916, while the fighting was ongoing, Francis Simon delivered a speech at the East Cemetery of Rennes. He himself was the father of a soldier who had died in battle and the local President of the *Souvenir français* association.



Why wouldn't France open the doors of the Pantheon to one of these overlooked fighters who died bravely for the Fatherland? The burial of a simple soldier under this dome where so many glories and geniuses rest would be like a symbol, and furthermore, a tribute to the entire French army!

Francis Simon

His speech found an echo among the population as well as among the military. The idea resurfaced regularly in public discourse. It was necessary to wait until November 19, 1918, a week after the signing of the Armistice, for Maurice Maunoury, a deputy and war disabled veteran, to pick up this idea and submit a bill in that direction. In December of the same year, the Chamber of Deputies deliberated and selected the Pantheon as the location for the national tribute, preferring, however, a golden book containing the names of all the dead from 1914-1918, rather than opening a vault dedicated to an unknown soldier.

#### THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER AT THE ARC DE TRIOMPHE?

The politician and journalist Henry de Jouvenel launched the idea of a burial under the Arc de Triomphe in the popular newspaper *Le Matin* dated November 4, 1920:



Let us immediately demand the true place for the mortal remains of the **Poilu**. It is not the Pantheon, it is the Arc de Triomphe. [...] This son of all the mothers who have not found their sons is much more than a great man: he represents the generation of sacrifice; he is the entire people. Do not confine him in the cold solitude of that monument before which the visitor hesitates; carry him to the top of the triumphant avenue, amidst those four arches open to the sky [...] and let the history of France seem to rise toward him, on festive evenings, with the crowd. Consider it. It is he, the unknown, the anonymous, the simple soldier, who gives full meaning to the Arc de Triomphe. [...] Leave the Pantheon to writers, scholars, and statesmen.

Henry de Jouvenel

It is not excluded that the decision of the British to bury an unknown soldier in Westminster Abbey on November 11, 1920, accelerated the debates in France. However, the Arc de Triomphe had not yet been chosen by the Chamber of Deputies. The debate intensified among different political groups. The burial place became a political issue. Some of the left, including Catholics for some, demanded the entry of an unknown soldier into the Pantheon, while personalities from the center-left, right, and far-right, as well as veterans, took sides for the Arc de Triomphe.

Some deputies rejected the Pantheon due to its ecclesiastical origin. The Unknown Soldier had to represent all the fallen fighters, so a secular and open temple is preferred. It was also considered that the Unknown Soldier was not a "Great Man", as the formula dedicated to those resting in the Pantheon described. He was anonymous. The Unknown Soldier was neither a great writer, nor a scientist, nor even a politician. He was much greater and should be able to rest in an exceptional place reserved for him because the sacrifice he represented was incomparable. Through him, the memory of millions of men was commemorated on this national altar. However, dissenting voices were heard. Some reject the Arc de Triomphe because, according to them, it was an honor reserved for the military. The Unknown Soldier would then be perceived as a "martyr of militarism". But the popular enthusiasm generated by the monument ended up convincing all the deputies.

On November 8, 1920, the deputies devoted the entire day to discuss the burial place. The Blue Horizon majority, under the leadership of Georges Clemenceau, finally convinced the Chamber. The Arc de Triomphe was unanimously chosen.





On November 10, a train from Verdun transported the body of the Unknown Soldier to Paris. The remains were placed at Denfert-Rochereau Square in a chapel near the heart of Gambetta. Throughout the night, the remains were displayed in the square, guarded by soldiers. Parisians could also come to pay their final respects during a wake. It is worth noting that Denfert-Rochereau Square was named after the Colonel who had defended the city of Belfort during the 1870 war. This choice reflected the idea of seeking revenge against Germany. Throughout the ceremony, this parallel between the 1870 war and the victory of 1918 was evident.

## THE CEREMONY

The next day, at 9 AM, the national ceremony began. Comprising numerous troops, 23 flags returned by the Germans, and a portion of the government, the procession gathered along Boulevard de Port-Royal. Facing the *Lion of Belfort* statue, the two funeral carriages were arranged: on the left, the carriage holding Gambetta's heart urn, and on the right, the coffin of the Unknown Soldier placed on the carriage of a 155mm cannon drawn by six horses and covered with a tricolor flag.

The procession then set off towards the Pantheon for the first part of the ceremony. Among the attendees, there were also the Legion of Alsace and Lorraine, soldiers dressed in the blue and madder red uniforms of 1914, and veterans from 1870. Passing through Avenue de l'Observatoire and Boulevard Saint-Michel, the procession converged on Rue Soufflot, which had been adorned along its entire length with twelve monumental torches. There, under the peristyle of the former church, President Alexandre Millerand and the rest of the government awaited the coffin of the Unknown Soldier, following the urn of Gambetta. This was followed by a speech by Alexandre Millerand in which he compared the two defenders of the homeland, Léon Gambetta and "the obscure and glorious remains of one of its soldiers".

The ceremony continued, the two funeral carriages, followed by the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister, and the marshals Joffre, Pétain, and Foch, were led towards the Place de l'Étoile. The funeral carriage of the Unknown Soldier was followed by a fictional family carrying violets (flowers of remembrance that grown on the battlefields and whose color recalled that of the uniforms of the *poilus*). The procession traveled along the Champs-Élysées from the Place de la Concorde and reached the Arc de Triomphe, where the two funeral carriages were positioned under the arch.

After the departure of the official authorities, the crowd gathered to pay tribute to the remains until the end of the day. Around 6 PM., the body of the Unknown Soldier was taken up to one of the rooms in the Arc de Triomphe, which was transformed into a chapel of rest for the occasion. At 7 PM, Gambetta's heart was escorted by a regiment of cuirassiers to the Pantheon; a temporary cenotaph was placed under the arch at the location of the future tomb. At the same time, festivities were organized by the City of Paris for the fiftieth anniversary of the Third Republic: 150 projectors illuminated the faces of the Arc de Triomphe during the evening. Throughout the day, festivities took place in various squares of the capital: at the City Hall, Concorde, and Nation, all illuminated for the ceremonies.

This ceremony was entirely part of the legacy of national tributes paid at the Arc de Triomphe since *the Retour des cendres* (literally "return of the ashes") of Napoleon I in December 1840. With its decidedly popular character, the tribute to the Unknown Soldier also recalled the funeral of Victor Hugo on May 31, 1885.



12. At the Lion of Belfort [Paris, 11-11-20, the coffin of the unknown soldier, Place Denfert-Rochereau], 1920

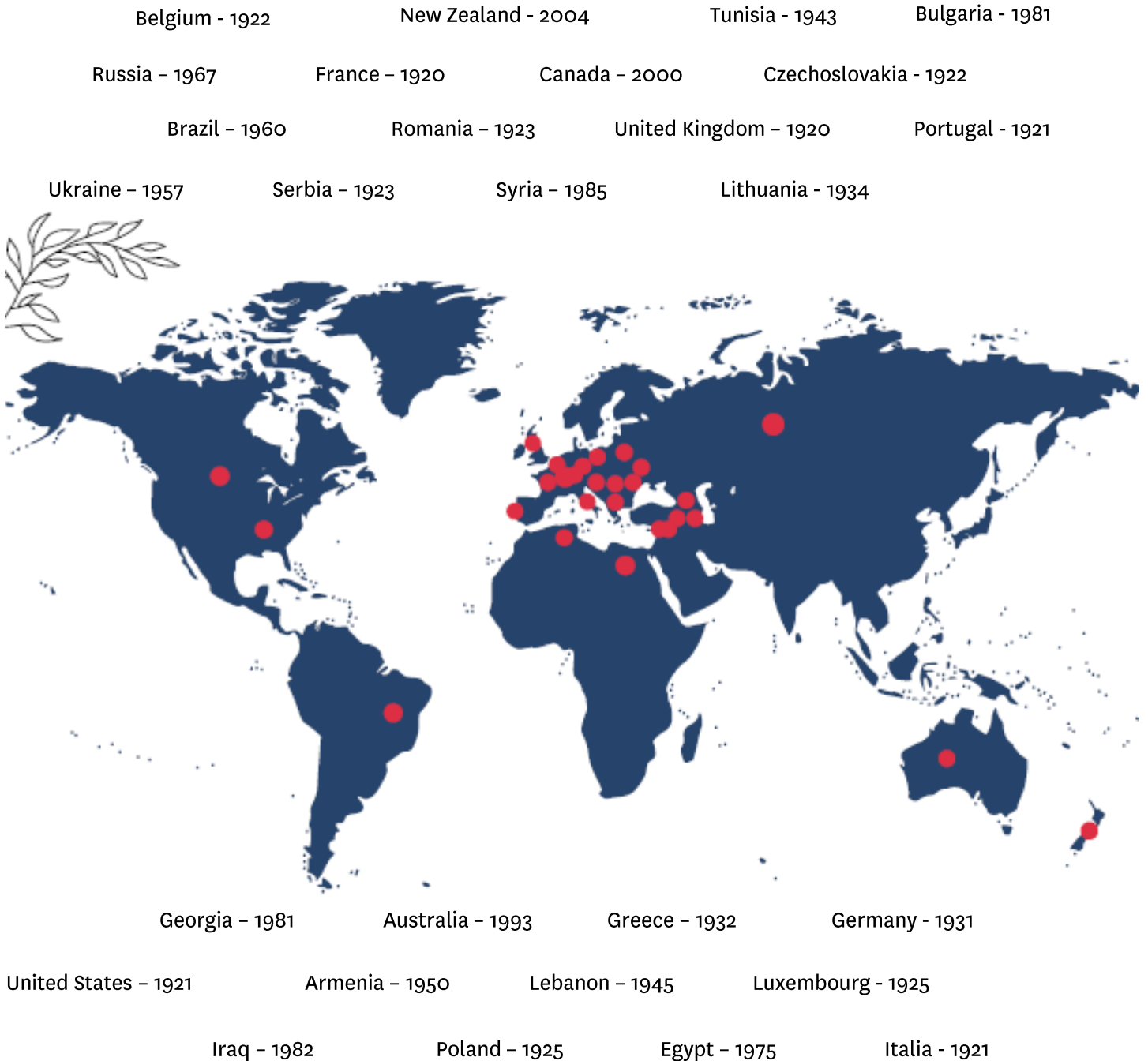






## SOME UNKNOWN SOLDIERS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Many countries followed this path by also burying an unknown soldier in highly symbolic places of remembrance.



Uncomfortable, outdated and too noticeable, it was replaced a few month later



Baïonnette  
Bayonet

Uniforme de Poilu en août 1914.  
Inconfortable, dépassé et trop voyant,  
l'uniforme sera remplacé dans les mois  
qui suivent.

Fusil Lebel  
Lebel rifle



Képi  
Kepi

Havresac  
Haversack

Capotte  
Greatcoat

Ceinturon avec cartouchière  
Cartridge belt  
Musette  
Canvas bag

Pantalon rouge garance  
Madder red trousers

Brodequin  
Brodequin



Soldat français  
(à partir de l'hiver 1914)  
French soldier  
(from the winter of 1914)



Soldat "tirailleur"  
Infantryman



Infirmière ambulancière canadienne  
Canadian ambulance nurse



Soldat allemand  
German soldier



## § Georges Clémenceau (1841-1929)

Radical socialist politician. He distinguished himself in numerous battles against colonial policy and supported Émile Zola in the Dreyfus affair. He was nicknamed “the tiger” for the swipe he dealt to his opponents. While Raymond Poincaré faced many difficulties during World War I, he was called to the position of Prime Minister. Making frequent visits to the front, he was considered the “Father of Victory” after the Armistice and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles.

## § Léon Gambetta (1838-1882)

Leon Gambetta was a lawyer in Paris and became the leader of the Republicans under the Second Empire. Elected as a deputy the following year, his colleagues feared his oratory skills. Opposing the war against Prussia, Gambetta, after the defeat at Sedan, proclaimed the Third Republic on September 4, 1870. Fleeing besieged Paris in a hot air balloon, he organized resistance in Tours. Despite refusing to run for the Presidency of the Republic, Gambetta nevertheless accepted the Presidency of the Chamber of Deputies in 1879. He was appointed Prime Minister in 1881. Under pressure from the Radicals, Pacifists, and some Republicans, Gambetta resigned in January 1882 after 72 days in office. He died prematurely on December 31, 1882, from an infection resulting from a wound after handling a revolver. His body rested in the cemetery of Nice, while his heart, by decision of the Government, was buried in the Pantheon in November 1920.

## § André Maginot (1877-1932)

Originally from Eastern France, he pursued studies in law and political science. He became the director of the interior in the government of Algeria. When the war breaks out, he was undersecretary of war and enlisted as a simple soldier despite his status. During the conflict, he faced the enemy on several occasions and was wounded in November 1914. His injuries prevented him from returning to the front.

He was then appointed Minister of Colonies in 1917 and later Minister of Pensions in 1920. In the same year, he was tasked with organizing the ceremony for the selection of the Unknown Soldier’s remains at the Verdun Citadel. As Minister of War from 1922, he implemented major construction projects for the defense line that would bear his name along the German borders.

## § Raymond Poincaré (1860-1934)

Man of letters and a political figure belonging to the liberal movement, he was appointed minister on several occasions before being elected Prime Minister and later President of the French Republic between 1913 and 1920. Faced with political divisions prevailing in 1917, he called upon Georges Clemenceau, his rival, whom he appointed as Prime Minister.

## § Auguste Thin (1899-1982)

Grocery clerk, Auguste Thin enlisted in the infantry at the age of 19 in January 1918. In 1982, shortly before his death, he was awarded the Legion of Honor by President François Mitterrand. The ceremony took place at the Arc de Triomphe.

## & OUVRAGES

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Learning resource – The Arc de Triomphe

**Administrator**  
Arnaud Vuille

**Head of Cultural and Educational Department, in charge of Public Engagement and Programs**  
Viviana Gobbato  
[service.educatifarc@monuments-nationaux.fr](mailto:service.educatifarc@monuments-nationaux.fr)

**Writing** Anthony Chenu,  
Morgane Le Coadou, Thomas Mélandre,  
Jean-Bernard Nutten, Gabriel Rivas  
**Illustrations** Thomas Mélandre  
**Editing** Viviana Gobbato  
**Graphic Design** studio lebleu