

France still suffers from horrors of war

Two weeks ago on a bright Sunday morning I stood in the yard of an exquisite 12th-century Norman church. Twenty or so inhabitants of the tiny Normandy village of St-Marcouf formed up to enter the church, led by two old men bearing tattered French battle flags.

It was a mass to remember the village's dead in World War I, 67 distant years past. With somber dignity they filed into the church, flags flying. In a brief, deeply moving moment, I suddenly felt some of the glory and tragedy of France.

At the middle of the grey stone churchyard rose a memorial stone. On it were the words: "St-Marcouf, followed, 18 men from a village of no more than a hundred souls had been devoured in the hell of the Western Front. This idyllic village, set amid some of Normandy's most exquisite landscape, managed to survive 1,000 years of war and strife, yet it nearly died in 1918.

Traveling across the verdant French countryside, the same tragic words are repeated in every village square, until they become a relentless and melancholy dirge. No matter how small the hamlets, no matter whether in the Dordogne, in Provence, in Brittany, there always seem to be those 18 or 20 names. And sometimes the battles where the villagers died: Verdun, the Somme, the Marne.

I could not escape the terrible geometry of death in these beautiful French villages: How could so many dead have come from such small hamlets? Who was left to till the fields or milk the cows?

In a striking contrast, appended to the bottom of each memorial were one or two names — France's



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dead in World War II. After the vast butchery of the Great War, World War II seemed, for France, like a passing illusion. The statistics tell why: In World War I France mobilized 8.4 million troops; she suffered 6.1 million dead and wounded — 73% of all her soldiers.

During World War II, France mobilized 5 million men but suffered only 210,000 dead, less than 15% of her deaths in the Great War. Nor should we forget the 4.2 million Frenchmen wounded in World War I, most of whom were permanently invalidated in days when antibiotics were unknown. Until recently, there were still reserved seats on the Metro and buses for "mutilés de la guerre."

This butcher's bill explains in good part why, in 1939, France did not fight to the death against the Nazis. The carnage of World War I fatally sapped France's will to resist: Another such war simply could not be contemplated. Why this did not also happen to Germany, a nation that suffered 7.1 million casualties during the Great War, is a fascinating question to be addressed another time.

Europe's peace movement today is, in a certain sense, a product of the bloody trenches of World

War I. The people of Europe fear not only the unknown terrors of nuclear war but the very well understood documented horrors of conventional war. World War I destroyed the morale of France and ended its role as a great power; World War II did the same for Germany and Britain.

Earlier this year, France's President Francois Mitterrand and Germany's Chancellor Helmut Kohl met at Verdun, the sight of World War I's most hideous battle. There, during 1916, some 700,000 Frenchmen and Germans died in a futile effort to gain control of a few ridgelines and forts. Millions of shells and gas produced a lunar landscape and the world's largest cemetery.

An entire generation of young Germans and Frenchmen was steadily fed into the maelstrom of Verdun. Tens of thousands died in order to gain a few yards of blasted land, sacrificed by generals on both sides who were using 19th-century tactics against 20th-century technology. Up the Sacred Way, the road leading into the fortress of Verdun, were sent men from all the villages of France — from St-Marcouf and a thousand others. There, France's youth were pounded into bloody pulp by German heavy guns.

It was thus deeply moving, perhaps as moving as that morning at St-Marcouf, when I saw the reserved, formal leaders of France and Germany together before the cemetery near Verdun's Fort-Douaumont. They stood, side by side, heads bowed before the ghosts of a lost generation of Europeans, 15 million dead soldiers, men who might have been poets, farmers, scientists, workers. Then these two men, one French, the other German, blood enemies for a thousand years, silently reached out and took the other's hand.