The commemoration by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission of men who died in wars involving Britain

The news of 22nd April 2021 contains a report of acknowledged racism against some men who died in war.

The numbers involved are somewhere between 45,000 and 350,000 and relate to the First World War (WW1). This is a significant number of men who did not get the rights they were due. Something like 1,300,000 men died in WW1 from the British Empire and Dominions, 800,000 of them from the British Isles.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) looks after the graves and commemorations of those men who have died in wars, starting from the First World War. It was initially the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC). From its inception, it was determined to treat all people equally. This is why lists of dead are made alphabetically, not by rank, and I have seen graves of Christians alongside graves of Muslims and Jews, kept equally - and beautifully - well.

Central to the stated principles of the CWGC is the commemoration of each war casualty by name on either a headstone or memorial to the missing maintained in perpetuity.

I worked for the CWGC at its headquarters in Maidenhead, Berkshire, thirty years ago and at that time was unaware of any racism. Indeed, I was impressed by how the dead men of ex-empire countries were still treated with equal care to those from the UK. Part of what I worked on was the unidentified dead, on a continuing project to identify them.

I have looked briefly into what is behind the news and thought you might be interested in my findings.

The Twitter post that started the news:

"In 2019 we created a special committee to investigate gaps in our war dead records. They found that after the First World War, outside Europe, names were missed, and we did not always treat people equally. We accept their recommendations on how to address the issues found."

There is a quick graphical overview of the report's findings on specific anomalies compared with the treatment of soldiers in Europe.

The committee that produced the report was convened partly as a result of a Channel 4 documentary *The Unremembered* which suggested instances of unequal treatment in the dead in East Africa from the First World War. The report, published this on the 21st April 2021, is available in PDF.

The report recognises that "a number of historical discrepancies in commemoration have been identified by the [CWGC]" and that these historic discrepancies have never been explored proactively.

The report states: "The Committee accepts that the subjects explored in this report are potentially contentious, contested and divisive, particularly those connected to ethnicity, culture, language, caste and religion, and the way in which they were used by some to build hierarchies of race." The report is open that it is these subjects which are central to their conclusion.

Most of the discrepancies in treatment were in Africa and the findings are that this is partly the result of the way deaths were recorded at the time, and also a reflection of "unique issues, experiences and decisions made on that continent", such as trying to cover the recording of graves after the end of WW1 in an area of over 650,000 square miles in seven different countries, where sometimes a burial might the only one for a hundred miles. (Compare this with Gallipoli, an area of around 200 square miles with around 46,000 casualties.)

The report says that evidence suggested that "between 45,000 and 54,000 named casualties are or were in some way deliberately treated differently to those killed in Europe" more than half of whom where Indian. We should be careful here, however: dealing with a corpse in a hot climate is more urgent than dealing with one in a cold, or even frozen, environment. The need to quickly bury a body gives less time for identification, where there is not identification on the body (e.g. pay book or "dog tag").

While the report concentrates on non-European casualties, it is the discrepancy between dying in Europe and dying elsewhere that seems to be a large part of the problem. For example, the report notes that nearly 40,000 "Indian casualties" only have their name in a register (not on a memorial, where the CWGC should have them maintained until or unless they have a named grave). These include the "combined British and Indian memorials at Nairobi and Dar es Salaam". (Around a third of most Indian Divisions were made up of white British citizens.) Even horses get better treatment than these men!

However, the European front saw some especially difficult circumstances, particularly in the first years of WW1. There was a lack of organisation for burials and men would often be buried where they fell. Such places would often later become a battlefield, with explosive shells disturbing the graves and eradicating the makeshift grave markers.

Part of the problem is that many Africans served both sides. While soldiers from some countries were more easily identified, there were as many "carriers" as troops in some theatres. As the war progressed, countries changed hands and a carrier could easily find themselves working for the side that no longer was in possession of their homeland. Recording their deaths became difficult simply because it wasn't clear who to report to.

Another historic problem is that of the area commander. Perhaps surprisingly, this wasn't always British, or even under direct British control. If a local authority buries local people without an identifiable grave, and just notifies the authority of a number of dead, it is hard to imagine what the fledgling Imperial War Graves Commission could have done at the time. This is not the era of internet connectivity, or even widespread international telephony. The accusation, which the CWGC accepts, is that it should have done more to follow up on such matters, especially given that white (usually British) soldiers were usually buried with individual, named, graves. The CWGC points out that it often wasn't told of deaths, or even entire grave sites, at all.

It is perhaps natural that the proximity of the European theatre led to better recording there. There is no indication that the British Army treated casualties differently according to ethnicity, though the report conjectures that the Indian Army failed to notify casualties properly, potentially for "tens of thousands". There is no conjecture in the report of the ethnic breakdown of these.

As late as 1934 - sixteen years after the war had ended - the CWGC were finding new major grave sites and having to update the estimated cost in dead men of WW1.

It was not unusual for those in charge of burials at the time to be illiterate. We should not expect that any governing organisation can look after the rights of men very easily in the midst of global war, dealing with people who can't fill out forms and can't read instructions sent to them. As much as we might wish all men had been given their due at the time, this is simply expecting too much. What is wrong, and was wrong at the time, is that a man's ethnicity might matter as to how his corpse is treated and how his death was recorded (or even if it was recorded at all). Where literacy existed, men filling out unfamiliar names might well misspell them, sometimes grossly so.

The issue of equality of treatment was raised as early as 1918 and was regrettably dealt with unsatisfactorily - at least by modern standards. It was claimed that many African tribes had little sentiment over the dead and this was why many African graves went unnamed, the choice being made to erect collective memorials instead. As the report says, "Sweeping judgements such as these, which chose to ignore the intricacies of faith, culture and customs in Africa outside Christian and Islamic traditions, played a significant role in shaping the IWGC policies that led to unequal treatment."

The report highlights times when the IWGC had records of the dead but did not act upon them. It did not record them properly and they were not initially included in the digitisation project of the 1990s. (An identified burial does not always mean it can be found, particularly in Africa. I have seen reports like "buried 6 miles NE of Woblighamboodya" and nobody has any idea where Woblighamboodya is to start with, let alone find a grave - which might no longer be marked - somewhere approximately 6 miles in a roughly north to easterly direction from it.)

In many part of Africa, as with other parts of the world, there was a "concentrating" effort after the war, largely done to concentrate the war dead in larger cemeteries that it was felt would be easier and cheaper to maintain. Unfortunately, while the dead of some religions, notably the Abrahamic ones, were exhumed, the dead of lesser known (to British) were not. Further, it was generally assumed that European people could be exhumed and moved, whereas unknown religions of other nations should be left to revert to nature. Many of these graves might never now be able to be discovered and recorded.

There are different religious and cultural requirements for how to deal with a cadaver. Some of the initial burials needed to be exhumed so that the body could be cremated, for example. In these instances, the name should appear on a memorial but the IWGC was not always informed, and sometimes did not correctly act on information received.

There were times when colonial authorities appear to have wilfully abandoned graves in favour of collective memorials, which has never been the policy of the British government or of the IWGC. There was even confusion over how Indians should be treated, with those who died in Europe being treated equally while those in Egypt were deliberately only recorded on memorials - apparently on the advice of the Indian Army. Worse still, there are cases where the name of the known dead never appeared on a memorial but only in a register kept either a nearby burial site, or at CWGC's HQ in Maidenhead.

The report details some of the effort of people made throughout the 1920s to get proper recognition for the dead men, both for troops and for non-combatives who were hired in war work. The efforts made were by people around the world, both British (IWGC and forces) and Empire.

One of the report's key findings is that the IWGC's commitment to uniformity in the handling of commemoration – and therefore equality in death – had geographical limits. "The Committee has produced an excellent report, which pulls no punches. Our response today is simple: the events of a Century ago were wrong then and are wrong now. We are sorry for what happened and will act to right the wrongs of the past. We welcome the Committee's findings and embrace fully its detailed recommendations".

We should remember that these findings are mostly historical, though the historic injustice to the men who died has not been addressed until now. There is no indication that men in the past 80 years have not been given their rights. All men deserve equal human rights, and over the coming years we can expect to see the CWGC do what it can to implement those rights for all the dead of WW1.

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