Almost fifteen years ago French historian Yves Aubry encouraged his colleagues to rescue widows from historiographical obscurity, arguing that the condition of these women in the past revealed a great deal about a society's willingness and ability to take care of its weakest members.1 The widows whom I will be discussing were more fortunate than many of their predecessors and contemporaries, for Frenchwomen who lost their husbands on the battlefields of the Great War benefited from an unprecedented generosity on the part of legislators. Various forms of assistance were made available to these women, and while the programs in question were extremely modest by modern standards, they were often of invaluable help. Such assistance for war widows, while designed to deal with the consequences of an unprecedented national calamity, showed many parallels with the welfare state that was slowly beginning to emerge in interwar France. As we will see, the government's efforts to help war widows mirrored the all-too-common contradiction of modern

welfare where a genuine desire to help is combined with an inflexible, centralized, and rigid bureaucracy that does not hesitate to invade privacy. However, we will also see that war widows were more than passive recipients of state aid: not only did they take full advantage of the opportunities offered by government programs, sometimes in ways unforeseen by legislators, but they also formed associations to lobby the government and gain more control over their own destiny.

The Great War led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Frenchmen, leaving behind an unprecedented number of new widows, most of them still young women. Determining the exact number of men killed and of the widows they left behind is no simple task, but historians who have studied the matter estimate that approximately 1.3 million French soldiers were killed during the war and that this bloodbath created roughly 680,000 war widows. This means that over the course of four short years, nearly seven hundred thousand married women suddenly found themselves without husbands, facing the prospect of having to support themselves and very often their children without the partnership of a man.

How did these women cope with this challenge? To begin with, a very large number of them did not. The 1921 census reveals that a large portion of those 680,000 new widows had simply disappeared, probably through remarriage. Looking at widows between the ages of fifteen

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and forty-nine who would still have accounted for the overwhelming majority of war widows in 1921, we see that their numbers have increased by only 266,000 since 1911: although this is striking, it is a far cry from the figure of 680,000 we would expect to find. Well over half of all French war widows had therefore remarried during or very soon after the war; their actions hint at the economic and social disadvantages of such a condition.³

The remarriage of war widows took place despite the fact that these women were not in the same position as most other French widows who simply had to make do as best they could, with neither the state nor their husbands' employers providing them with any sort of compensation for their loss. War widows were relatively fortunate in that the government awarded them pensions. Such a policy was nothing new in France or in Europe; it dated back at least to the eighteenth century, and when war broke out in 1914 the French system of pensions for widows was still regulated by a law of 1831.⁴ Completely new pension legislation was

³ There had of course been a sizeable number of widows in France prior to 1914. The 1911 census shows that there were more than 2.4 million widows for a population of just over thirty-nine million, meaning that widows accounted for 12% of the female population in the country. Statistique générale de France, Résultats statistiques du recensement général de la population effectué le 10 mars 1946, vol. 2, Population présente totale (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1953), 158, 177.

⁴ Manuel des pensions de retraite des officiers, sous-officiers, brigadiers, caporaux, soldats ou gendarmes et des pensions des veuves et secours aux orphelins, pensions, soldes et gratifications de réforme avec tarifs, annotations et explications, 10th ed. (Paris: H. Charles-Lavauzelle, 1910), 22, 24. It soon became obvious that this law, which had been designed for colonial and other forms of limited warfare, was completely unsuitable for the mass slaughter of the Great War. The relevant bureaucracy ground to a halt while French legislators slowly worked on a new pension law to provide for the huge number of
passed on 31 March 1919 and was predictably far less generous than the previous system had been, an unavoidable result of the staggering number of war victims to be provided for. The exact amount of a war widow's pension depended on the rank that her husband had held and on the exact cause of his death. However, both of these distinctions were largely irrelevant for the widows of common soldiers who had formed the bulk of the French army: these women were awarded a pension of 800 francs a year, with an extra 300 francs for each child under the age of eighteen.

Eight hundred francs a year: what did this mean in practical terms? Such questions are never simple to answer, and in this case special complications arise as a result of the


Very few pensions had been allocated under the old system before the end of the war. Many widows whose husbands had been simple soldiers continued to receive the separation allocation of 1.25 francs a day that the government had been providing to the "needy" wives of mobilized men since August 1914. It was also possible for war widows to apply to the Ministry of War for supplementary assistance if they had not yet been allocated pensions, and legislation passed in 1914 and 1916 significantly streamlined the process by foregoing any means tests. Jean-Jacques Becker, *The Great War and the French People*, trans. Arnold Pomerans (Dover, NH: Berg, 1985), 17-18, 20-21; Fougerol and Saillard, 12, 43, 48.

franc's notorious postwar instability. However, we can put a widow's pension into perspective, albeit in a very crude fashion, by comparing it to the earnings of a day laborer who was estimated to make an average of 7,000 francs a year in Paris or 4,700 francs in the provinces in 1921. To understand the purchasing power of a widow's pension we need to know that in 1920, a kilogram of bread cost roughly one franc, a liter of milk cost a little less, and a kilogram of butter or beefsteak cost around fifteen francs. A war widow's daily budget was just over two francs, which means that if she bought a kilogram of bread, she would have had a little more than a franc left for purchasing other food or clothing, or paying for heating, miscellaneous expenses, and rent. Pensions for war widows were therefore insufficient to allow a woman to support herself and her family, a problem that was only aggravated by the rampant inflation of the 1920s. A lengthy legislative process and normal bureaucratic red tape meant that readjustments lagged several months behind the franc's sharp falls in purchasing power, making life even more difficult for war widows.

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7 Pierre Goulène, Évolution des pouvoirs d'achat en France (1830-1972) (Paris: Bordas, 1974), 86. It is worth repeating that such calculations are very imprecise. Sauvy's estimates are more modest than those of Goulène: he claims that a day-laborer in the Paris-based metal-working industry would only have earned 4,900 francs during the fourth trimester of 1920. Sauvy, 508.


9 See for example Bulletin Périodique de l'Association Départementale des Veuves de Guerre de la Charente-Inférieure no. 1 (June 1925) where the general secretary asked the government for a readjustment of pensions to compensate for recent "dramatic" price increases.
Faced with such challenges, these women were not content simply to sit back quietly and meekly accept whatever the state decided to give them. Many of them banded together in associations to offer each other material and emotional support and to lobby the government. A large number of small organizations devoted to war widows existed at the communal and departmental levels throughout France by the Armistice, and many of these soon became members of a loose-knit federation of organizations representing war victims throughout the country. These organizations began by incessantly lobbying the government for higher pensions for war widows and their children, but by the early 1920s much of their energy was devoted to simply demanding readjustments as the franc's value fell and pensions became worth less and less. One great goal of the widows' associations throughout the 1920s was to have a widow's pension recognized as the legal equivalent of one awarded to a wounded veteran who was deemed to be 50% disabled. Association leaders argued that such an arrangement had several advantages including speedier adjustments of pension rates since disabled veterans normally received increases to their pensions before war widows. This objective was achieved in 1929 after a decade of struggle and was perhaps the greatest triumph of the war widows' movement.

Most of these organizations also found themselves advocating female suffrage, partly due to general feminist convictions, but also thanks to more pressing concerns:

10 Such initiatives were part of a wider movement that saw war victims and veterans create organizations to defend their rights. See Antoine Prost, Les anciens combattants et la société française, 3 vols. (Paris: Presses de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1977).


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association leaders constantly argued that war widows suddenly found themselves saddled with the responsibilities of heads of families but were deprived of many of the associated rights, placing them at a grave disadvantage.\footnote{See for example Bulletin de l'Association Départementale Corrèziennne des Veuves, Orphelins & Ascendants de la Guerre, (2nd trimester 1926): 14-15. Even the reactionary Catholic Union of War Widows was in favor of suffrage for war widows (although not for women in general). Bulletin de l'Union Catholique des Veuves de la Guerre (Jan.-Feb. 1928): 2-3.} This was especially true when it came to war victims' pensions, with many widows' associations coming to believe that wounded veterans were receiving favorable treatment because they, unlike their female counterparts, could use the ballot as leverage. Obviously, the organizations' efforts in this sphere did not bring about any immediate results.\footnote{Indeed, their overall effectiveness as lobbyists was open to question, which may be partly explained by a lack of numbers since it was common for organization leaders to complain that membership figures were far too low. For a particularly bitter condemnation of war widows who chose not join any associations, see Bulletin Périodique de l'Association Départementale des Veuves de Guerre de la Charente-Inférieure no. 7 (n.d.), 1-2.}

Widows' associations were only partly successful in their struggle to preserve the pensions of remarried widows. All Frenchwomen whose husbands had been killed during the Great War were legally entitled to pensions, even those who had subsequently remarried, and the right of these women to compensation was the subject of bitter controversy within the government and society at large during the 1920s. At a time of great financial difficulties for the French state at the beginning of the decade, the idea of paying 800 francs a year to over 600,000 war widows was mortifying for many politicians and civil servants. As
the war and its trauma began to fade into the past, public opinion was also turning against the perceived "abuses" of certain war pensioners, remarried widows in particular. Serious thought was given simply to removing these women from the pension rolls altogether, but, thanks in part to strong pressure from the associational movement, this was never done. However, remarried war widows' pensions were frozen starting in 1925, so that they became worth less and less over the coming years as the franc's value fell.\textsuperscript{14} Whether they ended in success, failure, or compromise, the battles fought by the widows' associations show that many of these women were much more than passive recipients of state aid.

Given the inadequacy of government pensions provided to widows and their children, such women had to find other sources of assistance, the most popular choice being the state subventions given to the so-called Wards of the Nation. A law of 24 July 1917 decreed that the French nation "adopted" the child of every French soldier who had fallen on the battlefield; the orphans were given the title of \textit{Pupille de la Nation} or "Ward of the Nation," and a National Office was created to assist these children in various ways. There was a great deal of rhetoric about "fallen heroes" and "sacred debts" whenever the Wards of the Nation were mentioned, and this language was very

\textsuperscript{14} This represented a serious setback for remarried widows, since the law of 13 July 1925 nearly doubled war widows' pensions. Sauvy, 184. The issue of remarried war widows was of much concern to the associational movement, which tended to emphasize the solidarity of all war victims. The associations therefore usually saw the government's plans to eliminate remarried widows' pensions as the proverbial "thin end of the wedge." See for example \textit{Bulletin de l'Association Départementale Corrèzienne des Veuves, Orphelins & Ascendants de la Guerre}, (3rd and 4th semesters 1932), 16-17, 19-21.
much in evidence at a ceremony that was held at the Sorbonne in 1919 featuring a number of prominent speakers such as Maurice Barrès, René Viviani and Léon Bourgeois. These dignitaries gave extremely sentimental patriotic speeches about the importance of honoring and rewarding the sacrifices of France's fallen soldiers. Bourgeois' speech was particularly emotional and concluded with the following words: "We must make sure that not a single one of these children will one day be able to say: 'My mother, France, abandoned me when I needed her most!'"\(^{15}\)

On a more concrete and less lofty level, the "adoption" of the child was purely rhetorical since the legal tutor, who was almost always the widowed mother, continued to have full rights over the child.\(^{16}\) As long as the mother remained the legal guardian of her children, the Office never interfered directly in the family's life, and its role was limited to providing disinterested advice and, in certain cases, financial aid. According to the law of 1917 the nation had the solemn obligation to "assume the cost, partial or total, for the upkeep and the education necessary for the normal development of the ward." Assistance depended on the wealth and needs of the family and therefore differed from pensions, which were provided as a matter of right to rich and poor alike.

However, as the flowery rhetoric suggests, legislators had intended the title "Ward of the Nation" to be a mark of honor, one for which all widows would apply on behalf of their children as a way of commemorating departed heroes.


\(^{16}\) Faron, 109-10.
In fact, the government's goal seems to have been to appeal deliberately to widows from the privileged classes who would only need a little assistance in order to send their children—more specifically, their sons—to upper-crust schools to prepare them for entrance to university or the grandes écoles. During the aforementioned ceremony at the Sorbonne (the very location was an indication of the National Office's intent), Maurice Barrès had told the Wards of the Nation who were present that the most important service they could accomplish was to help reconstitute the nation's elite as quickly as possible.

In reality, however, the Office became a de facto means of providing supplementary assistance to those war widows and orphans who needed it the most. Departmental offices of the Wards of the Nation tacitly acknowledged that in general only those widows who had an immediate need for money or financial assistance bothered to ask for adoption. As far as sheer numbers were concerned, the National Office had no cause to complain: by the end of 1919, 300,000 war "orphans" had been declared Wards of the Nation, and had received over a hundred million francs, mainly in the form of subventions for upkeep. Only a year

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17 ONPN, Bulletin 15 (n.d.), 39. Part of the problem was that the entire apparatus for the Wards of the Nation had come on the scene just as the government was cutting allocations for mothers at the end of the war and many fatherless families found themselves almost bereft of resources until the 1919 pension law was passed. The credits that the government allocated to the National Office were therefore often used to provide needy war widows and their children with more or less regular allocations to replace those they had lost. Needy widows came to see membership as a supplemental form of income rather than a badge of honor. ONPN, Conseil Supérieur, Procès-verbaux, première session (July 1930), 29.

18 The preponderance of subventions for upkeep was due to the fact that the orphans were still young, and their mothers could only
later, these numbers had nearly doubled.\textsuperscript{19} While this was all well and good, the Office was probably less pleased about the background of these increasingly numerous Wards. This discontent appears in the remaining records of the departmental office of the Wards of the Nation in Versailles, which had once been responsible for the large and populous department of Seine-et-Oise to the west of Paris. These records suggest that the majority of widows who had their children "adopted" were from the working class and usually had three or more children. It seems certain that the government had not fully anticipated that working-class widows would use the National Office to their advantage in this fashion. At any rate, the reality was that subventions for upkeep, which effectively became means-tested supplements to the war pension, were far and away the Office's single greatest expenditure during the first decade of its existence.\textsuperscript{20}

If we look at Besançon, the capital of a rural department along the Swiss border, we can see how a typical departmental office of the Wards of the Nation functioned. By 1922, the local administrators were of the opinion that every child in the department who could receive this form of assistance until their children reached thirteen years of age. ONPN, \textit{Bulletin} 1 (1919), 48-49.

\textsuperscript{19} By the end of 1920, the National Office had 550,000 Wards on the books, of whom over 300,000 were receiving some form of material aid. Ibid., 5 (Dec. 1920), 57; 7:16.

\textsuperscript{20} Seventy-eight million francs were budgeted for this purpose in 1922, and by the end of the year most departmental offices were providing such subventions to about 50\% of the widows who had registered their children. ONPN, \textit{Bulletin} 10 (n.d.), 7.
of 3,679 Wards, the majority of them very young. When it came to subventions for upkeep, the local office claimed that it carefully followed the guidelines sent from Paris and that each case was judged on its individual merits. As per instructions, every case had recently been reviewed to cut down on unnecessary expenditures, but the departmental office was by no means cold-hearted. Administrators often continued to provide subventions even after widows had remarried, arguing that in such a rural area the new husbands were often poor farmers who could barely support themselves and their new wives, let alone any children from a first marriage. On average, each war widow in the department received 281 francs a year per child, and such assistance was no doubt invaluable to these women, but it came at a price as the local office tried to keep a close eye on them to make certain that they were being "good mothers." The Besançon office was less than thrilled with certain widows in this regard, although its attempts to modify their behavior were usually foiled by a lack of cooperation from local bureaucrats who were reluctant to report any wrong-doings in the first place. In this small department, we see how the institution of the Wards of the Nation manifested itself as state intervention and social welfare at their best and at their worst, eager to help the worst-off, but also to supervise and control them.

This was also true at the national level, where the Office constantly strove to impose its leadership and

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21 Département du Doubs, Office National des Pupilles de la Nation, Rapport annuel 1921 (Besançon, 1922), 2. This suggests that most war widows in the department were poor.
22 Nevertheless, nearly five hundred subventions for upkeep had recently been cut, which brought the total down to 2,250 (well over half of all registered Wards), for a total cost of 632,000 francs. Ibid., 4-5.
23 Ibid., 3.
policies upon recalcitrant regional offices but also showed a genuine concern with helping war widows. The first few years of the Office's existence saw civil servants in the capital frustrated by the regional offices' frequently incorrect understanding and application of guidelines, which led to wide variations throughout the country. The National Office tried to crack down on such inconsistencies during the 1920s despite the fact that certain departmental offices complained that they were merely responding to regional economic variation. For example, the local office in Savoy argued that it was forced to provide as many subventions as it did because there was a great deal of unemployment in the department, making it very difficult for war widows to find jobs to support their families. The administrators were willing to show a certain degree of leniency in such cases, but they clearly preferred to have all departmental offices providing subventions to roughly the same number of orphans, and for these subventions to average a certain fixed amount.\textsuperscript{24} The National Office was in this sense a typical centralized bureaucracy, wanting conditions in every part of the country to match a preconceived theoretical standard, regardless of the local realities that could render this problematic.

Nevertheless, the central administration was sometimes appalled by the parsimony of some of the regional offices, which often believed that their superiors in Paris wanted them to spend as little money as possible. For example, in 1926 the National Office was especially irked by the case of a widow living in the Maine and Loire department who had nothing to live on but her pension—her health was poor, and she could not work on a regular basis. She and her son therefore had to make do with 1,100 francs a year; the

\textsuperscript{24} ONPN, \textit{Bulletin} 7 (n.d.), 15-23.
mother applied for subventions from the local office of the Wards of the Nation but was turned down. One day, her son fell ill and required an operation that ended up costing 1,000 francs. She again asked the local office for help but was only awarded a one-time payment of 400 francs. The National Office wondered how the woman would possibly manage to pay back the remainder of the debt and angrily informed the departmental office that it should have paid for all the medical fees and awarded the widow a permanent and fairly hefty subvention. The Parisian bureaucrats were opposed to "waste" and wanted uniformity but were quick to remind the regional offices that the money entrusted to them was a "sacred debt" that was owed to those war widows and orphans who truly needed it.

The aid that was made available to war widows and their children after 1918 is closely connected to the development of the French welfare state. Historians have been increasingly willing to admit that the Third Republic, once decried as the epitome of bourgeois stagnation, had already started patiently laying the foundations for such a state by passing important social legislation before 1914. Likewise, a reevaluation of the interwar period has been underway recently, and historians are beginning to agree that governments during this period were more forward-looking in matters of social welfare policy than had once been thought. Paul Dutton, for example, argues in his recent book that the current model of France’s system of social security owes a great deal to the evolution of family

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25 Ibid., 42.
welfare and social insurance between 1914 and 1945.\(^{27}\) Tim Smith goes further by arguing that World War I helped bring about several important social reforms that were later downplayed by politicians in the 1940s and 1950s who wanted to make their own achievements appear more groundbreaking than they really were.\(^{28}\)

Widows' pensions and the subventions provided to Wards of the Nation, which involved very important transfers of wealth,\(^{29}\) must be seen in the context of these developments. The devastation of the Great War temporarily pushed efforts for social welfare in one specific direction, forcing the state to mobilize as never before to come to the aid of victims of the conflict who numbered in the hundreds of thousands. The fact that many of these victims were women and children certainly made this expenditure more acceptable since these two categories had long been seen as particularly worthy recipients of charity and had been favored targets of early welfare measures.\(^{30}\)

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\(^{28}\) Timothy B. Smith, *Creating the Welfare State in France, 1880-1940* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 3. In particular, Smith points to the law of 5 April 1928 on sickness, disability, maternity, and old age insurance, calling it the "most important piece of social legislation in French history to date," despite the fact that other historians have tended to downplay the impact of this law (3, 4).

\(^{29}\) In 1926, war pensions (including those for disabled veterans, widows, orphans, and ascendants) cost the state four billion francs, the most important item in the budget after debt repayment and defense. Sauvy, 189.

\(^{30}\) Dutton, 6; Smith, 17. In 1900, two-thirds of French citizens receiving welfare payments were women (most of them widows): Allan Mitchell, *The Divided Path: The German Influence on Social Reform in*
Although many legislators responsible for the pension law of 1919 and the creation of the Wards of the Nation in 1917 would have denied it, these men constructed what was essentially a well developed—albeit temporary—welfare system designed to help a select few French citizens deal with the vicissitudes of life.

Most of these politicians argued that war widows and orphans were an exceptional case, but the large-scale assistance programs that they devised inevitably had some influence on the growing public acceptance of welfare in interwar France. Once the state showed its willingness to give pensions to well over half a million war widows, it was only a matter of time before people began to wonder why women who had lost their husbands to illness or industrial accidents were any less worthy of assistance. Despite the copious rhetoric about sacred debts and heroic sacrifices that surrounded war widows and their children, the assistance that they received was indicative of a society that was beginning to accept the idea that the state had an obligation to help its most disadvantaged citizens. The reactions of war widows to the aid that was made available to them also demonstrate the emergence of a new attitude towards state assistance, which was starting to be seen as a right.\footnote{Smith, 5.} As is usually the case with social welfare in modern states, the people concerned had their own ideas about it and did not hesitate to use the system for their own ends and to advocate change. They had come to expect that France, their mother, should indeed not simply abandon them.