

# Soldier Newspapers: A Useful Source in the Social and Cultural History of the First World War and Beyond

Robert L. Nelson

## Abstract

To memoirs and soldiers' letters, the new military historian must add soldier newspapers as a rich and useful source for understanding the fears and hopes of the troops of all ranks. By analysing the production and creation of these newspapers for the British, French, and German armies in the First World War, and indicating both the unique national traits of each nation's journals and the universal stories found across the three armies' newspapers, it is hoped that this article will point researchers toward the vast archive of soldier newspapers available for many of the wars of the last 250 years.

## Keywords

Censorship, First World War, Germany, journalism, newspapers, propaganda

As the social and cultural history of warfare continues to expand and become more sophisticated, historians are developing sources that tell us increasingly profound stories about the soldier participants at the heart of the new military history. To this day, one of the most significant shifts in source analysis remains the move from reading the memoirs of soldiers, usually officers, or at least better educated soldiers, to the analysis of soldiers' letters, a move from top to bottom.<sup>1</sup> It is now unthinkable for a historian of a modern western war to write a book in which he or she purports to tell us


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- 1 See J. Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York, 1976); P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, 1975). The pioneer of soldiers' letters use in Germany was P. Knoch, ed., *Kriegsalltag: Die Rekonstruktion des Kriegsalltags als Aufgabe der historischen Forschung und der Friedenserziehung* (Stuttgart, 1989). A classic study now available in English is B. Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914–1923*, trans. A. Skinner (New York,

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## Corresponding author:

Robert L. Nelson

Email: [rnelson@uwindsor.ca](mailto:rnelson@uwindsor.ca)

War in History  
17(2) 167–191  
© The Author(s), 2010  
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DOI: 10.1177/0968344509357127  
<http://wih.sagepub.com>  


what the soldiers believed, without making serious reference to what those soldiers scribbled down on dirty, crumpled paper, hunched over to thwart the rain, while sitting in a trench at Petersburg, Ypres, Stalingrad, or Khe Sahn. There is, however, another source that was available in all four places just mentioned, a set of texts that can help us fill out the mental landscape of soldier participants in the modern era: soldier newspapers. These journals were sometimes written solely by active soldiers, sometimes shaped by propaganda officers; either paid for through subscription or distributed freely; closely monitored by censorship officials or written and nailed to a nearby tree. In every case, a sophisticated approach to either what soldiers themselves wrote in these newspapers or, more complicatedly, what propagandists 'believed' their troops would find acceptable helps us fill out the life-world of the soldier, and depicts for us the many images, stories, and justifications that, whether he believed them or not, were a part of his mental universe. The new military historian dismisses such sources at his or her peril.

Of course, for historians, the depth and breadth of source material is crucial to any investigation, and some wars were undoubtedly more fruitful than others when it came to sheer production of written text. And as is the case with soldiers' letters, the First World War also represents the peak of soldier newspaper production. In the modern era, the period which has produced for us literate, lower-class soldiers, no other event saw so many of these young (and old) men sitting around for so long in the same place, writing so many millions of letters and writing, distributing, and reading so many soldier newspapers. On the Western Front soldiers from all armies commandeered buildings some 20 to 30 km behind the static front lines, and set up newspaper offices and sometimes even printing presses.

In what follows I will examine the story of soldier newspapers in that conflict, as it unfolded for the British, French, and German armies. Initially, I will briefly lay out the broad, generalized character of each national army's soldier newspapers, and the differences I have been able to highlight through reading all extant copies.<sup>2</sup> For the bulk of this methodological essay, however, I will examine the authors, production, distribution, and censorship of the newspapers, and then discuss the act of reading. I will then return to 'content', and provide some clues as to what such 'mass media' can tell us about universal aspects of soldier life in the First World War: namely, the image of the enemy and the ubiquity of women in the thoughts (and lives) of these men. I will end with a discussion of the under-studied soldier newspapers of other nationalities in 1914–18, and provide an overview of the possibilities for future research through reference to the soldier newspapers produced in many of the other wars throughout the modern era.

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2007 [orig. 1997]). A useful overview in English of the shift to a social history of French soldiers is D. Englander, 'The French Soldier, 1914–18', *French History* I (1987), pp. 49–67.

2 I saw and read all extant issues of the soldier newspapers of the German, French, British, and Dominion armies in Stuttgart, Leipzig, Paris, Cambridge, and London. See R.L. Nelson, *German Soldier Newspapers of the First World War* (Cambridge, in press), ch. 1.

## I. Soldier Newspapers and National Difference in the First World War

Jack and Bill  
Went up a hill  
To see a Frenchman's daughter;  
The Censor's here,  
And so I fear  
I can't say what they taught her.

*The Minden Magazine*, August 1916

All historians of Britain in the First World War should spend time at the British Library reading soldier newspapers.<sup>3</sup> Before going in they may have to steel themselves in order not to disturb their neighbours with their laughter. The hallmark of British (and especially Australian, though not so much Canadian) trench journals is the incredible, seemingly never-ending display of wit. Clearly, British authors and their soldier audience coped with ever-present death and the absurdity of war through humour. Beyond this, the newspapers were focused upon music hall and sport, all in an attempt to justify British presence and sacrifice in France and Flanders as a necessary defence of the British 'way of life'.<sup>4</sup> Both the avoidance of cruel reality with jokes, and the vague idea that the status quo was good and must be maintained at great sacrifice, render the British journals ultimately rather conservative in nature. Although the number of British soldier newspapers was significantly lower than the ubiquitous German productions appearing across no-man's-land, the richness of material has gone a great length to filling out our understanding of the daily life and thoughts of the average Tommy.

The difference in tone of the French soldier newspapers is most clearly shown with a January 1916 sketch in the journal *Bellica*. Here a nurse unglamorously kneels and washes the feet of a soldier amputee. Nothing of the sort ever appeared in either the British or German newspapers. It is this unflinching honesty about the war that is so noticeable in the French *journaux*.<sup>5</sup> French authors were indeed the only participants who spent no time justifying their presence at the front, nor working at framing the conflict as a war of defence. Unlike the British and the Germans, such things 'went without saying'.

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3 While the British Library holds perhaps the fullest set of British and Dominion soldier newspapers, excellent collections can also be found at the Imperial War Museum and Cambridge University Library.

4 This is the main argument of J.G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies, 1914–1918* (Oxford, 1990). I agree with his findings that the practice of entertainment and sport was used, by both officers and enlisted men, to remind themselves of what they believed they were protecting.

5 The most complete set of French soldier newspapers can be found at the Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine, Nanterre. A large number can also be found at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, as well as at the Service historique de l'armée de terre, Vincennes.

Yet, underneath this silence, what is remarkable is the utter commitment to the basic national ideal that there was a nation worth defending. The historian of the French soldier newspapers, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, refers to this vague understanding among the newspapers and their audience as ‘national sentiment’.<sup>6</sup> Beyond this stoicism other aspects of the French newspapers stand out, such as the very interesting racial imagery surrounding ‘tirailleurs sénégalais’, and the rather noticeable amount of nude women in sketches.

Finally, the German soldier newspapers of the First World War provide by far the largest source base, in both number of issues to appear and sheer distribution, and were unquestionably a part of the textual universe of almost every German soldier who spent more than a few weeks at or near the front.<sup>7</sup> Quite the opposite of the French, and to a certain extent the British, the authors of the German *Soldatenzeitungen* were obsessed with justification. Everywhere their readership daily fought to ‘defend’ the Fatherland, while standing on foreign soil and occupying foreign populations. Through a self-justificatory language of manly comradeship and the provision of a *mission civilisatrice* to the ‘backward’ locals, German soldiers could daily find the texts and images they needed to understand their sacrifice.<sup>8</sup> Crucially, through an analysis of the German soldier newspapers, we are able to move beyond the First World War trope of no-man’s-land in the west, and focus upon the theatre of operations that has been gaining an increasing amount of attention of late in our understanding of the war and its place in the grand story of the first half of the twentieth century, namely the Eastern Front.<sup>9</sup>

## II. Soldier Newspapers as a Source

### I Authors

Although the soldier newspapers are full of evidence that all ranks contributed, it is the editors, those in control, who can be somewhat more clearly identified. The ‘average’

6 S. Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War*, trans. H. McPhail (Providence, RI, 1992 [orig. 1986]).

7 The most complete set of German soldier newspapers can be found at the Deutsche Bücherei, Leipzig. Excellent collections can also be found at the Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte, Stuttgart, and the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau.

8 This is the central thesis of my forthcoming study: Nelson, *German Soldier Newspapers*. A recent study of German soldier newspapers that focuses on their use for the distribution of propaganda is A. Lipp, *Meinungslenkung im Krieg: Kriegserfahrungen deutscher Soldaten und ihre Deutung 1914–1918* (Göttingen, 2003). A notable early use of German soldier newspapers is D.E. Showalter, ‘The Homesick Revolutionaries: Soldiers’ Councils and Newspaper Propaganda in German-Occupied Eastern Europe, 1918–1919’, *Canadian Journal of History* XI (1976), pp. 69–88.

9 See the already classic V.G. Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge, 2000). In my reading of the German soldier newspapers of both fronts, I found profound differences in the representations of the occupied populations. Slavic populations were represented as primitive, dirty, and in need of a German overlord. The tone was indeed ‘colonial’ in nature. See Nelson, *German Soldier Newspapers*, ch. 5.

soldier newspaper editor of the First World War was a middle-class, low-ranking officer, with a teaching or otherwise belletristic background. He was reasonably well educated and was older than the average soldier, and thus typically ascribed to pre-war conservative politics.<sup>10</sup> While we lack detailed information for the British newspapers, all the hallmarks of such a background are apparent throughout the articles. The historian of the British and Dominion trench journals, John Fuller, was able to identify the rank of the editor(s) for 66 of the 107 newspapers he analysed: 'According to these identifications, twenty-seven seem to have been edited by officers only, twenty-five by other-ranks only, and fourteen by a combination of the two.'<sup>11</sup> Audoin-Rouzeau was able to compile statistics for 500 of the French editors, and a similar breakdown occurs: roughly one-third come from the ranks, and the remaining two-thirds were mainly NCOs and junior officers. He was further able to determine the pre-war occupation of 60 editors, of whom the largest groups were: 16 artists or writers, 13 journalists, 5 lawyers, and 4 teachers.<sup>12</sup> Finally, in his 1937 dissertation, Karl Kurth was able to use documents (later destroyed by an air raid in 1945) to provide much information on the German soldier newspaper editors. Of the 180 newspaper staff he identified, 34 were lower ranks, and the remainder were NCOs and junior officers through to the rank of captain. Of the 100 pre-war occupations he identified, 32 hailed from the publishing industry, 18 were artists, and 10 were teachers.<sup>13</sup>

Although we lack the data, it is safe to say that these editors were older men. Soldier newspapers began to appear in large numbers by mid-1915, and there are some general statements that can be made about the armies on the Western Front from that point on that tell us about who the editors were. First of all, the armies of 1915 were already replacement armies. The pre-war armies of professional soldiers in their mid- to late twenties had suffered heavy losses, and now the ranks were being filled with two large groups: the young, just out of school, and the older reservists being called back to service. The resulting demographic bulges of men closer to the age of 20 and those 30 and over resulted in a separation of duties. Those younger, faster, and typically without their own families to take care of were more likely to be at the front, running, fighting, and dying. The older and slower, with wife and children on the home front, were more likely to be behind the lines, working in supply, and doing paperwork, such as, for instance, editing soldier newspapers.<sup>14</sup> These were not 'two' fronts at the front; all were part of the same semantic universe, had worries, were often bored, and could be (and many editors were) killed. Nevertheless, the editors were relatively older, and, especially because of their backgrounds,

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10 Although the development of literacy, and the association of a university education with conservative politics, varied across each country, in general it is safe to assume that the 'average' editors in all three countries were similar in education and general national-political leaning.

11 Fuller, *Troop Morale*, p. 11

12 Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War*, pp. 9–10.

13 K. Kurth, *Die deutschen Feld- und Schützengrabenzeitungen des Weltkrieges* (Leipzig, 1937), pp. 215–17.

14 I would like to thank Michael Geyer for alerting me to this generational difference and segregation taking place at the front during the war. For an excellent discussion of this point, see Ziemann, *War Experiences*, pp. 34–35.

most often moderately conservative nationalists. They were raised in, worked in, and often had taught or written about a world of middle-class bourgeois ideals, whether it was a belief in the positive contribution of the British Empire, the universal application of French-born thought, or the hard-working, sober traits of all Germans. Yet in most cases any individual ideology of this or that editor was always tempered by the fact that he<sup>15</sup> was writing for a large and diverse audience. That audience was almost always a paying audience, and it was an audience that contributed written pieces to be included in the newspaper. Thus, although the background of the editors is important, the content of the soldier newspapers reflected much more than the ideas and beliefs of these few men.

The editors were at great pains to gain the acceptance of the soldier audience. Beyond the provision of entertainment and escapism, which will be discussed under 'reading newspapers' below, one of the chief motivations for the newspapers' editors was to bring all the men together, in solidarity and comradeship. After declaring that obviously top-down efforts to create *esprit de corps* were doomed to rejection by a soldier audience, Fuller claims:

More sustaining was a simple concern with the battalion as a practical community, evolved in training and quickly bound by experience. *The Vic's Patrol*, for example, aimed 'to bring the different units within the Battalion into a more intimate relationship'; *The 20<sup>th</sup> Gazette* to bring 'officers, NCOs and men of the 20<sup>th</sup> battalion CEF into closer touch with one another'. Both enjoyed long runs.<sup>16</sup>

Some British journals went further by declaring that through the use of this medium for 'grousing' and venting, tensions that were intergenerational, green vs veteran, or officers vs other ranks, could be defused: 'our columns are open to every grouch in the Battalion, and a growl on any subject, whether the grievance be either real or fancied, will be joyfully received and have immediate insertion', promised the aptly named newspaper *The R.M.R. Growler*.<sup>17</sup> This theme of solidarity was far less prominent in the French newspapers, but did occasionally appear, as in this editorial from *Le Poilu du 6-9*: 'The only purpose of this paper is to inform our friends about regimental life and to strengthen, to draw tighter still if possible, the ties of friendship which unite them'.<sup>18</sup>

Creating and strengthening a sense of comradeship was, however, the hallmark of the German soldier newspapers. 'A trusted comrade is what we'd like to be', claimed the editors in the first issue of *Der Schützengraben*:

This newspaper would like to hold more firmly and tightly the ribbon that binds us together, the members of this Corps. It is the spirited comradeship in both the world of the trenches as well as the larger corps area which brings about an unforced exchange of our big and small

15 I have only found one caveat to the use of this pronoun: one of the three editors of the largest and most famous German soldier newspapers, the *Liller Kriegszeitung*, was the female author Friedel Merzenich.

16 Fuller, *Troop Morale*, p. 13.

17 This quote appeared in the January 1916 edition, cited in Fuller, *Troop Morale*, pp. 13–14.

18 1 August 1916. Cited in Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War*, p. 14.

experiences, in both curious and multifaceted ways. The humorous and childish, the reflective, serious, and profound, should all be found here.<sup>19</sup>

The welcoming article in the first issue of the *Zeitung der 10. Armee*, entitled 'What We Want!', referred to itself as a 'soldier's rag that would like to be a dear comrade to the grunts'. In addition to 'seriousness and joy', its contents would also include 'instruction and edification'. This newspaper was conceived as a vessel for the soldiers: 'Honest and German, written in the bosom of truth [*Knien der Wahrheit*], what you the comrades have to say!' Its location in the east as the main beacon of German culture in a vast alien landscape led the editors in their introductory issue to use language which rarely appeared out west: 'working together in *völkisch* Work for the German Spring . . . sharing the innermost, holiest and highest German character that is the salt of the earth and the light of the world'.<sup>20</sup> As we will see below, the Germans furthest from home, far off on the Eastern Front, produced many more soldier newspapers, indicating both the lack of other easily available home front newspapers and also a stronger need for self-identification. The same was true for Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand troops, who all produced relatively more soldier newspapers than their British confreres.

The editors of the soldier newspapers of all three armies shared the same powerful motivation: they believed they were documenting a great historical event and that their newspapers would be valuable to future historians. In the *Kriegszeitung der 4. Armee* Dr H. Dreyhaus wrote an article entitled 'Home Front and Soldier Newspapers in the Wars of Liberation'.<sup>21</sup> He described the research he was conducting on the soldier newspapers of the wars against Napoleon, how important they were, and how difficult it was to find any surviving samples. Here, as elsewhere in the soldier newspapers of the First World War, there was a strong sense that those creating these texts were involved in something greater than the mere provision of ephemeral news and humour for the troops. They believed that they were manufacturing documents that would provide 'the truth' of the war experience for future historians.<sup>22</sup> But these newspapers were also to be a historical document for the participants as well. The success of *L'Echo des marmites* was measured by:

the pleasure it gives their editors in relieving the monotony of trench life by taking up some of their rest hours spent in villages that are almost always evacuated, then the delight of being able to send their families a souvenir of the campaign, and finally, for those who return home, the joy of reading later, at rest, these pages full of memories.<sup>23</sup>

And the bridging of both 'history' and the personal lives of the soldier audience was perhaps best summed up in the pages of a very popular Dominion journal: 'the history

19 22 August 1915.

20 9 December 1915. This was to be accomplished 'without schoolmasterliness' [ohne Schulmeisteri].

21 15 February 1917.

22 See J. Winter, 'Philipp Witkop and the German "Soldiers' Tale"', in P. Witkop, ed., *German Students' War Letters* (Philadelphia, 2002), pp. v–xxiv.

23 20 April 1915. Cited in Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War*, p. 18.



of the Aussie Army is being given by the Official War Correspondents. "Aussie" wants to give its spirit.<sup>24</sup>

## 2 Production and Distribution

Although there were some examples of mobile presses, throughout the war for the most part the production of soldier newspapers began and continued in earnest behind fixed front lines, and, in the German case, especially in the static and quiet area of the Vosges, with Colmar becoming an early capital of soldier print. The earliest and crudest newspapers were handwritten, progressing to sheets pressed onto a gelatin tray one at a time. Although still handwritten originally, the next innovation involved using mimeograph printing, which could produce up to 1000 copies. Eventually, however, sets of type were found on both sides of the front in abandoned French buildings. Where the newspapers were ultimately printed varied greatly, with most German soldier newspapers printed in towns safely behind the lines (Lille, Colmar, Vilnius), while many French newspapers were printed in Paris. Although the smallest soldier newspapers were locally distributed, for the vast majority the military postal system was the method of delivery. Additionally, these newspapers were sold at train stations, in military bookstores, and in the street. Finally, as Kurth notes: 'As a consequence of the soldier newspapers' limited print run, relative to troop strength, they must have been passed from hand to hand. For the same reason, they were tacked to bulletin boards, and copies were made available in soldiers' homes [*Soldatenheime*] and canteens.'<sup>25</sup>

Although troops could sometimes come across soldier newspapers distributed at no cost, it is crucial to note that the vast majority were purchased. And the few that were free were able to survive on advertising income, such as the most famous German soldier newspaper of the war, the *Liller Kriegszeitung*. This is crucial when one considers the 'usefulness' of soldier newspapers as sources for the social and cultural history of war. These were not propaganda leaflets printed on the cheap by the army then 'thrown' en masse at uninterested soldiers who ignored such obvious tripe. The soldier newspapers were exceedingly popular, and were paid for in the millions.<sup>26</sup> Further, this was not simply a 'lack of choice' situation: there were millions of home front newspapers available at the front, and thousands of military bookstores. Ultimately, then, the military did not

24 *Aussie*, February 1918, cited in Fuller, *Troop Morale*, p. 15. The editor of the June 1916 edition of *The Incinerator* immodestly believed his journal would be important for 'that future Macaulay who writes the history of the great European War 1914-'. Cited in Fuller, *Troop Morale*, p. 4.

25 Kurth, *Schützengrabenzeitungen*, pp. 212-13. Kurth believes (as do I) that all German troops read soldier newspapers, or at least any who spent more than a few weeks at or near the front.

26 In his apologetic memoir of 1920, the German 'Director of News Services' of the First World War, Major Walter Nicolai, noted that the price tag of the soldier newspapers was an effort to ensure the content was not seen as propagandistic: 'Payment was preferred to free distribution, in order to lessen the impression of influence'. W. Nicolai, *Nachrichtendienst, Presse und Volksstimmung im Weltkrieg* (Berlin, 1920), p. 67.



finance the newspapers. Yet, by dint of circumstance, a military situation did help defray costs: the staff was already paid for, the buildings were commandeered, and distribution was free. Subscription paid for paper, oil, and colouring.

It is safe to say that the British and Dominion armies produced the smallest amount of trench journalism (both in sheer number and per capita). John Fuller identified 107 titles, and although a select few of these had print runs of 5000 or more, for the most part these newspapers were relatively small in number and reach (though unquestionably rich and very important as a source).<sup>27</sup> Next we have the French, the army with the most 'titles', that is, distinct publications, of any fighting force: Audoin-Rouzeau located roughly 200, and reasons that twice as many may have existed. He further estimates that, in the middle of 1916, 75 000 to 132 000 copies per month were printed. This leads him to presume that, although this is a significant number, it is most likely that the majority of French soldiers never saw a trench journal.<sup>28</sup>

While the combined number of titles may have been higher on the Allied side, the sheer volume of German soldier newspapers dwarfed their counterparts. This was due to the much larger printing runs and professionally administered distribution by the Germans. In 1916–17 at least 1.1 million soldier newspapers per month were distributed on the Western Front, and over 2 million on the Eastern Front. In 1916 the average number of soldiers at the front was 3 million in the west, 1–1.5 million in the east.<sup>29</sup> While it is probable that a majority of Allied soldiers may never have seen a troop journal, it is likely that from late 1915 only the rare German soldier spent more than a few weeks at the front without reading, or at least 'hearing', a soldier newspaper.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the practice of 'reading aloud' is not mentioned in the studies of the Allied newspapers and puts into question any simple calculation of printing runs equating readership. Unlike the relatively 'private' conditions of civilian life it could be surmised that under the conditions of static trench warfare, where men spent many long hours together, one member of a small (or large) group of friends may well have read aloud items of interest.<sup>31</sup> Finally, although historians of soldiers' letters rightfully claim to represent many more men in

27 Fuller, *Troop Morale*, p. 9–10.

28 Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War*, p. 25.

29 Figures based on Kurth, *Schützengrabenzeitungen*. Troop numbers in R. Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 5–7, and Liulevicius, *War Land*, p. 14. Notice the much higher ratio of soldier newspapers to troops on the Eastern Front, reflecting the relative lack of home front newspapers.

30 The first number of the *Champagne-Kamerad* (18 December 1915) contained the following stanza in the poem 'The New Newspaper': 'In the trenches, in the billet, / In the bunker, in the hero's hollows, / In the hospital and the casino / Nowhere shall this little paper fail to appear' ('Im Schützengraben, im Quartier, / Im Unterstand, in Heldenhöhlen, / Im Lazarett und im Kasino / Soll nirgendwo dies Blättchen fehlen').

31 On the rise of literacy and reading in Germany pre-1914, see P. Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin, 1900* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), pp. 51–58. See also his comment on the duality of using newspapers as sources: on the one hand, there are many commonalities among newspapers, creating in a certain sense one experience; on the other hand, German society was far from homogeneous, and one can simultaneously discover fissiparous experiences in newspapers (pp. 47–50).

uniform than the better-educated subjects of Paul Fussell's and others' work,<sup>32</sup> their source base is still limited to those who actually felt comfortable writing, who were motivated to actively write, and whose letters have survived. Soldier newspapers, however, touched the lives of a very great number of Allied troops, and indeed a substantial majority of German soldiers in the First World War. The degree to which this source reflected the thoughts and beliefs of the vast majority of those who participated in the war is, however, far more difficult to ascertain.

### 3 Censorship

The most fundamental constraint upon how we use soldier newspapers to represent the voices of the soldiers themselves is the existence of an apparatus of censorship that surrounded trench journalism to varying degrees throughout the war. Added to this, the soldiers' press operated under a form of self-censorship that must be recognized in order to appreciate the affinities between these newspapers on both sides of the line. Self-censorship is most often presented in histories of propaganda as editors swallowing dissenting words that might displease those higher up the chain of command. What is less often mentioned is the manner in which the taste and acceptance of the readership forms a powerful 'censor' itself, forcing editors into reactive forms of self-censorship. For evidence of the latter it may not be unreasonable to refer to the noticeable absence of slurs upon, or critique of, enemy soldiers, to be discussed below. Whatever officers may have thought about it, soldiers would not accept a language that denigrated the men on the other side of the line. Yet it is important to recognize that, from early 1916, both the French and even more so the German soldier newspapers were formally and systematically censored.

We know that the smaller in number British newspapers were censored at either the battalion or divisional level (as indeed all examples of that other great source of First World War social and cultural history, the soldier's letter, were censored at the company level). As the editor of *The Minden Magazine* wrote: 'we are not allowed to insert the names of the various places we go to; neither are we allowed to discuss too minutely the ins and outs of our prolonged misunderstanding and unpleasantness with the Germans. Neither are we permitted to criticise too freely our political enemies or friends.'<sup>33</sup> Fuller judges that in the end the British censors were remarkably liberal and ultimately rarely if ever censored the details of everyday soldier life, thus leaving us with information not always apparent in other sources.<sup>34</sup>

After a period of unofficial internal censorship of the French soldier newspapers, on 8 March 1916 General Joffre issued the following circular to his generals:

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32 Prior and Wilson claim that when Fussell describes the splendid, innocent Edwardian period that was forever destroyed in 1914, one is led to believe that the nation as a whole spent its time 'lolling about in deck chairs and awaiting the fall of a wicket'. R. Prior and T. Wilson, 'Paul Fussell at War', *War in History* 1 (1994), pp. 64 and 68.

33 Cited in Fuller, *Troop Morale*, p. 19.

34 Fuller, *Troop Morale*, p. 19.

It has been brought to my notice that certain trench newspapers have been suppressed by order of staff officers in command of the corps publishing the papers. The aim of these papers is to divert and amuse the fighting men. At the same time they demonstrate to all that our men are full of confidence, cheerfulness and courage. The propaganda branch of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses the trench newspapers to demonstrate to the correspondents of foreign newspapers the excellent morale of our troops along the whole of the front. I consider that their publication should be viewed with goodwill as long as they do no harm to the army and on condition that their management is closely supervised, to avoid the publication of any article that does not fit in with the aim stated above. I would ask you to be so kind as to encourage the senior officers under your command to take heed of these considerations in relation to any trench newspapers which may be published by troops placed under your command.<sup>35</sup>

The mutinies of 1917 and the arrival of Pétain were required, however, before the French censorship apparatus began to approach the thoroughness of the German example seen below. With his order of 21 October 1917, Pétain recommended that a copy of every issue be sent to general headquarters, as he was worried about 'the dangers that might be presented by a lack of supervision in the editing of trench newspapers'.<sup>36</sup>

The German army's control over soldier newspapers significantly surpassed what was occurring on the Allied side, and, because of their much greater presence in the lives of German soldiers, it is necessary to provide more attention to the details of German censorship. On 11 March 1916 the military press office (*Feldpressestelle*) was formed with a mandate to maximize the effectiveness of the soldier newspapers in the west as a tool to maintain the morale of the troops. Major Walter Nicolai, the overseer of all newspaper censorship in Germany, met the editors of the largest army newspapers in Charleville on 24 May 1916 in order to coordinate their efforts. At this meeting, Nicolai said the following:

Army newspapers do not fall under the jurisdiction of the censorship that controls home front newspapers. The fundamental rules that operate for the home front press must be authoritative for the army newspapers.

Some main points are emphasized:

- A) Exclusion of everything that could be seen as having a religious, moral or political direction:
- B) Especially protect the Civil Peace [*Burgfrieden*].<sup>37</sup>

A similar meeting occurred on 1 February 1917, on the Eastern Front in Vilnius, where Captain Friedrich Bertkau was in charge of all newspapers.<sup>38</sup> At Charleville, it was also ordered that two copies of every issue of every soldier newspaper was to be sent to the

35 Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War*, p. 20.

36 Op. cit., p. 22.

37 Cited in Kurth, *Schützengrabenzeitungen*, pp. 234–35.

38 Kurth, *Schützengrabenzeitungen*, p. 227.

*Feldpressestelle*, three more to the War Press Office (*Kriegspresseamt*), and one to the Prussian war ministry.<sup>39</sup>

A further attempt to bring Western Front newspapers into conformity was *Korrespondenz IIIb*. This collection of articles was written by the staff of the *Feldpressestelle*, and then made available to the soldier newspapers, two to three times per week. The editors could then choose which of the articles, if any, to print. There was no order to incorporate the articles, but Nicolai made it clear that he desired that the editors would do so more often than not. In fact, according to Kurth, only a third of the soldier newspapers did so.<sup>40</sup> In an October 1916 *Feldpressestelle* briefing, the lack of compliance with this request was further evidenced when it was admitted that those in attendance knew of the existence of only 32 soldier newspapers and that, of those, on average only 7 or 8 regularly accepted the *Korrespondenz*.<sup>41</sup> In the east the *Presseabteilung Ober-Ost* similarly made available the *Korrespondenz B* (for Bertkau). Further, in the summer of 1917, the programme of 'patriotic instruction' (*Vaterländischer Unterricht*) was implemented to varying degrees throughout the German army. Ludendorff had argued that the longer the war dragged on, the greater the need directly to educate the soldiers on the 'goal and meaning of the war'.<sup>42</sup>

In a memorandum of 29 July 1917 this new 'offensive' was spelled out: officers were to make 'conviction, sense of duty and clear determination' the 'basis for the fighting power of the army'. Because it was understood that the soldiers were weary and wanted only an end to the conflict, the necessity of such a programme was deemed paramount: 'Desire for peace is understandable, but a sense of duty and will for victory must be

39 Lipp, *Meinungslenkung*, p. 49. At a meeting of the *Feldpressestelle* on 22 January 1917, a set of directives (*Richtlinien*) was drawn up for the editors of the army newspapers. Number two reads: 'It is the nature of the situation that the soldier newspapers are the voice of a certain intellectual upper class in the army. They must nevertheless strive to echo *all* comrades. Only thus will they awaken and strengthen a feeling of togetherness and become the spiritual focus of the troops.' Point seven emphasized the need for the newspapers to nurture the connection to the home front. Thirteen and fourteen highlighted the desire for reports on the occupied lands and peoples. And directive seventeen, while asking the newspapers to foster humour, requested nevertheless that a serious tone be maintained, and that not too many jokes appear. In both the description of who wrote the newspapers (authors, journalists), the desired audience of those editors (all comrades), as well as the content (home front, occupied lands, and lacklustre humour), it can be said that all of these 'directives' were well in place, having emanated from the editors themselves, long before this set of guidelines appeared. 'Richtlinien fuer die Schriftleitungen der Armeezeitungen', *Feldpressestelle* beim Generalstab d. Feldheeres Gr. H. Qu. West., B Nr. 1576, 22 January 1917, Sächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv-Kriegsarchiv, Dresden, KA (P) 21152.

40 Kurth, *Schützengrabenzeitungen*, p. 229.

41 See 'Dritte Besprechung mit den Schriftleitern der westlichen Armeezeitungen im Grossen Hauptquartier', *Feldpressestelle* beim Generalstab d. Feldheeres Gr. H. Qu. West., B Nr. 1576, 17 October 1916, Sächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv-Kriegsarchiv, Dresden, KA (P) 21152.

42 Document 328, 17 July 1917, 'Befehl des Generalstabes des Feldheeres an die Oberkommandos der Heeresgruppen und Armeen betr. die Einrichtung einer Aufklärungsorganisation beim Feldheer', in W. Deist, *Militär und Innenpolitik im Weltkrieg 1914–1918* (Düsseldorf, 1970), II, pp. 835–37.

stronger'.<sup>43</sup> In a fascinating exchange at a November meeting on patriotic instruction, Nicolai stated that he had often heard the judgement that the soldier newspapers were rejected by the troops. He then asked if anyone present concurred. After a pause, Nicolai continued: 'Because none of you put up your hand, I take it that we all believe that the soldiers value the soldier newspapers. I hope, though, that this unanimity is not influenced by the fact that some of the leaders of patriotic instruction sitting here are also simultaneously heading soldier newspapers.'<sup>44</sup> Thus, by the latter half of 1917, there was significant new pressure on the editors of the soldier newspapers to increase the amount of top-down propaganda emanating from the high command, while simultaneously maintaining credibility in the eyes of the readership.<sup>45</sup>

It is not surprising that a historian with a Nazi agenda such as Kurth would press the charge at the end of his analysis of the First World War soldier newspapers that the 'employment of propaganda was insufficient and methodologically wrong'. Writing in 1937, Kurth sought to make sure that, 'should the German people again be forced to defend their right to life through arms', the front press would be properly used by the propaganda organs of National Socialism.<sup>46</sup> While the Nazi claim that the propaganda of the First World War was almost non-existent surely goes too far, it is also incorrect to claim that 'propaganda' uniformly made up the contents of the German soldier newspapers. As one historian points out, there was more than a little resentment among the 'independent-minded' army newspaper editors during and subsequent to the meeting in Charleville with Nicolai.<sup>47</sup> As is already clear from the proud words of editors cited earlier, these men believed they were creating work of lasting historical (and belletristic) integrity. One of their main complaints against incorporating more and more 'official' articles was that this would directly reduce the 'authenticity' they maintained among their readership.

The relationship and negotiation between author and audience in any mass literary phenomenon is far more subtle and complex than a simple true/false, propaganda/not propaganda dichotomy. Both the producers and the consumers of the First World War soldier newspapers looked to the product for: (a) material that would maintain and/or

43 Document 335, 7 September 1917, 'Verfügung des stellv. Generalkommandos des XIII. AK an die unterstellten Militärbehörden: Zur Behandlung politischer Fragen im Rahmen der Aufklärung', in Deist, *Militär und Innenpolitik*, II, p. 858.

44 'Aufzeichnungen über die Besprechung über den Vaterländischen Unterricht. Am 4. 11.17 in Charleville und 5. 11. 17 im Grossen Hauptquartier', Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg, RM 5/3820.

45 Deist argues that 'Patriotic Instruction' was completely ineffective, in 'Der militärische Zusammenbruch des Kaiserreichs: Zur Realität der "Dolchstoßlegende"', in U. Büttner, ed., *Das Unrechtsregime: Internationale Forschung über dem Nationalsozialismus*, vol. 1, *Ideologie – Herrschaftssystem – Wirkung in Europa* (Hamburg, 1986), p. 108.

46 Kurth, *Schützengrabenzeitungen*, p. 247. For an introduction to the as yet unanalysed soldier newspapers of the Second World War, see H.-W. Eckhardt, *Die Frontzeitungen des deutschen Heeres 1939–1945* (Vienna and Stuttgart, 1975). Without the experience of a largely immobile *Stellungskrieg*, these newspapers seem to have almost immediately become something akin to 'occupation newspapers' (*Besatzungszeitungen*).

47 Lipp, *Meinungslenkung*, pp. 47–54.

boost the morale and mood of all members of the army; (b) explanations and justifications for the context, both political and moral, in which these men found themselves, both as warriors and, in the German case, as occupiers; and (c) ways of relieving boredom, always an accompaniment of military service. Ultimately the degree to which the soldier newspapers satisfied the readership cannot be known, but as the most popular form of 'propaganda', their contents are important both for the manner in which they detail how the bourgeois editors and contributors formulated their ideas, as well as for how those same editors thought those ideas could most effectively be presented to the lower ranks.

### III. Reading Newspapers

Despite the limits on what could appear in soldier newspapers and our knowledge of the relatively educated, bourgeois background of virtually all soldier newspaper editors, we know that these journals were popular and read by millions. But what exactly was this 'act of reading'?<sup>48</sup> What was this 'escape'? On a sunny day, free of shelling and well protected from sniping, it may very well have taken place while sitting on the fire-step of a trench. At night, the escape might have occurred by lamplight in a subterranean bunker. Simply as a result of the amount of time spent 'behind the lines' as opposed to in the trenches, it was more often the case that reading occurred in the immediate rear, or up to 20 km away, where the soldiers could safely relax well away from the fight.

What exactly was read? The newspapers ranged in size and quality from 10×10 cm handwritten 'trench' newspapers, to the very best of the German 30×30 cm 'army' newspapers, which closely resembled the look and feel of home front newspapers of the era.<sup>49</sup> Some issues simply had the title and a drawing on the front page, while others began with many headlines and short articles, again much like a civilian newspaper. The smaller papers had as few as 4 pages, the larger up to 16, with an insert special section. In the later stages of the war, especially for the blockaded Germans, the paper became worse in quality, as did the ink. A typical life of one of these newspapers consisted of: the printing, the transport to the subscriber, being read most likely in snippets, sometimes aloud, then being either passed along or left in a communal area, such as an *estaminet* or *Soldatenheim*. Eventually, after a life measured in days or perhaps weeks, the once-, twice-, or dozen-times-read piece of First World War history would end its life, as a fire-lighter, or as insulation in the walls of dugouts during long winters, or, most likely and ignominiously, as toilet paper.

This material, these spaces, and some measure of time all came together as the environment for this escape, the formal act of reading. In her seminal study *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway analyses the role and function of escapist literature among American female housewives. She argues convincingly that the expectations

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48 W. Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, 1978).

49 'Trench' newspapers denote small, roughly company-level journals, whereas 'army' newspapers were the larger, more professionally made journals, edited and written at the army level.



in compensatory literature are very strict: oppressed communities are always eager to escape their drudgery, find 'vicarious emotional identification' and be 'recognized' for 'the value they doubted they possessed'.<sup>50</sup> Time and again historians have discovered the same among working-class audiences of the past. Richard Hoggart argues that the lower classes in Britain saw virtually all art as escape,<sup>51</sup> and Stanley Pierson shows how, in 1890s Germany, there was a powerful reaction to the kitchen-sink realism of 'naturalism', with Social Democrats claiming that workers had enough misery and required escape, even though the vast majority of such pleasurable works were run through with 'bourgeois mentality'.<sup>52</sup> Thus, to an important degree, Radway's modelling of the act of reading romance novels can be applied to the fulfilment of desire so sought after by lower-rank soldiers throughout the war.<sup>53</sup>

As in romance novels the fulfilment found in reading soldier newspapers was twofold: on the one hand, there was the simple pleasure of escape through the act of reading; on the other hand, and more powerful ideologically, was the compensation achieved through justification of one's position and actions. Soldiers function in a dangerous environment, and are involved in breaking the ultimate taboo in society: killing. It is easy to understand why many soldiers, in being asked both to risk the sacrifice of their own lives and to take the lives of others seek out moral certainty in what they are doing. This desire extends into a tendency for many soldiers to rely upon 'firm', often 'conservative', beliefs and values when they find themselves in terrifying environments.<sup>54</sup> For the British, this was most obvious through the largely uncritical framing of virtually everything through humour, as well as the rather vague, yet deeply conservative, justification of the war as the defence of a 'way of life'. Although there were many German soldiers who were quite comfortable critically assessing their nation's role in this war and questioning the concept of a 'war of defence' while stationed almost exclusively on foreign soil, it is surely the case that there were as many, if not more, soldiers who were incapable of critically assessing their identity, for such a line of thought was uncomfortable in the extreme, if not untenable. It is for this latter group, a truly vast number of men, that

50 J.A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1991 [orig. 1984]), p. 113.

51 R. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life with Special References to Publications and Entertainments* (London, 1957).

52 S. Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working-Class Mentality in Germany, 1887-1912* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), ch. 5. On the shift to nationalism within the SPD see Pierson's ch. 10 as well as V.L. Lidtke, *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany* (Oxford, 1985).

53 Of course, the crucial difference here is that, unlike Radway, I am unable to interview my readers and thus must hypothesize about the role of fantasy in the soldier audience. I thank Roger Chartier for his thoughtful comments to me on this and other aspects of the reading of soldier newspapers.

54 This is known as 'terror management theory', and was initially sparked by the influence of E. Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York, 1973). See J. Greenberg, S. Solomon and T. Pyszczynski, 'Terror Management Theory of Self-Esteem and Cultural Worldviews: Empirical Assessments and Conceptual Refinements', *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* XXIX (1997), pp. 61-139.



the soldier newspapers provided a soothing balm, the very escape and justification that so many desired.<sup>55</sup>

In his study of the French soldier newspapers Audoin-Rouzeau argues that although such a primary source is 'a reflection of the combatants' attitudes and way of thinking', it 'cannot constitute the sole source of information about the men of 1914–18; every source has its limitations, its gaps and its pitfalls';<sup>56</sup> there existed not only formalized censorship but, even more importantly, the self-censorship of the journalists who refrained from writing about subjects they and others deemed off-limits. Such a source, like any other, cannot represent an unclouded window upon the 'reality' of the front in 1914–18. Nevertheless, the soldier newspapers can be used, carefully and with healthy suspicion, to embellish further and elaborate upon the social and cultural world in and behind the lines created by soldiers themselves.

#### IV. Soldier Newspapers as Comparative History: Elements of the Universal Experience

While brief reference was earlier made to significant national differences among the soldier newspapers of the British, French, and German armies, analysis of these sources can also highlight some of the more universal experiences of soldiers in the First World War.<sup>57</sup> Thus the overall nature of daily life on the Western Front can be gleaned through a comparative approach to the soldier newspapers, and is demonstrated through a discussion of two subjects: the image of the enemy and the depiction and portrayal of women.

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55 'If the events of the heroine's story provoke too intense feelings such as anger at men, fear of rape and violence, worry about female sexuality, or worry about the need to live with an unexciting man, that romance will be discarded as a failure or judged to be very poor. If, on the other hand, those events call forth feelings of excitement, satisfaction, contentment, self-confidence, pride, and power, it matters less what events are used or how they are marshaled. In the end, what counts most is the readers' sense that for a short time she has become other and been elsewhere. She must close that book reassured that men and marriage really do mean good things for women. She must also turn back to her daily round of duties, emotionally reconstituted and replenished, feeling confident of her worth and convinced of her ability and power to deal with the problems she knows she must confront. When a writer can supply a story that will permit the reader several hours of vicarious experience living as a woman who flourishes because she receives the attention, devotion, and approval of an extraordinary man, that writer will have written an ideal romance . . . The Smithsonian group's reliance on this evaluation system enables the women to insure that a media institution, which in fact operates to benefit others financially, also benefits them emotionally. As a result, they at least partially reclaim the patriarchal form of the romance for their own use. By selecting only those stories that will reinforce their feelings of self-worth and supply the replenishment they need, they counter the force of a system that functions generally by making enormous demands upon women for which it refuses to pay.' Radway, *Reading the Romance*, p. 184.

56 Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War*, pp. 2 and 35.

57 Of course, I speak here of the war in Europe. A truly universal experience would incorporate the experiences of participants in the other global theatres of the war.

## I The Image of the Enemy

One of the most striking absences in the soldier newspapers of all combatant forces is the lack of an image of the 'hated' enemy.<sup>58</sup> To be sure, there were attacks upon the abstract enemy nations and their leaders, but the soldiers opposite, hunkered down in the cold and wet trenches, suffering the same daily pains and discomforts as the newspaper authors and editors, were virtually never depicted as anything but worthy adversaries. While home front 'eyewash' might occasionally label enemy soldiers 'evil', at the front there was rarely anything but stubborn respect for the men sharing the same fate of the world of no-man's-land.

There was very little expression of direct hatred toward the enemy in the British and Dominion journals, and instead humour was the main method used to deal with this subject. In a sketch in the Canadian *Listening Post*, scared, half-naked Germans run around in no-man's-land, with the caption 'Silesian Unterwehr'.<sup>59</sup> *The Minden Magazine* presented a joke where a German yelled from the trenches that he had a wife in Birmingham. A Tommy hollers back, 'Get yer head down or there'll be a widow!'<sup>60</sup> There were several articles lending credence to the idea that there existed a 'live and let live' system between combatants, with unofficial truces occurring frequently. One piece reported that the orders to fire the mortar had been 'lost' and that therefore no murderous German retaliation could be expected that day.<sup>61</sup> An article in *The Outpost* commented on how well German trenches were built,<sup>62</sup> and a satirical piece in *The Whizz-Bang* of January 1916 poked fun at outrageous home front propaganda with a faked newswire story: 'Germans have taken more babies' lives today'. German prisoners of war were sketched in positive ways,<sup>63</sup> as exemplified by a 'small world' cartoon in the Canadian ambulance journal *The Splint Record*: a German prisoner asks his Canadian guard, 'Do you know my brother Hans who vos working in Winnipeg?'<sup>64</sup> Exceptions to these friendly portrayals were an uncaptioned sketch in the *Listening Post* of April 1918, depicting a guard hitting a German prisoner, and the humorous yet horrific joke in the March 1916 *Minden Magazine*, 'T.A. (member of burying party): "Sargint, 'eres a German wot aint quite dead." Sergeant: "Never mind; Shovel 'im in. You can't believe a word wot these bleeders sez."'

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58 Another striking absence in the soldier newspapers is combat. Beyond the occasional 'rescue story', what happened in no-man's-land was not discussed. The escapist function of the journals, as discussed above, would not work if the soldiers were reminded of their worst moments. Comradship, however, was a major theme of the German soldier newspapers, and elsewhere I argue that this was one of the crucial ways in which unit cohesiveness was found in the German army. See Nelson, *German Soldier Newspapers*, ch. 3.

59 10 August 1917.

60 December 1915.

61 *The Minden Magazine*, December 1915. See T. Ashworth, *Trench Warfare, 1914–1918: The Live and Let Live System* (New York, 1980). More references to this kind of behaviour are cited in Fuller, *Troop Morale*, p. 64.

62 *Outpost*, September 1916, cited in Fuller, *Troop Morale*, p. 62.

63 *Whizz-Bang*, March 1916.

64 27 December 1917.

Unlike the British and Dominion trench journals, there were a few mentions of direct fraternizations between French and German soldiers in the French trench newspapers. The June 1916 edition of *La Saucisse* described two patrols meeting in the mist of no-man's-land. The Germans continue on their way, one of them saying 'Sad war, gentlemen, sad war!', before disappearing again.<sup>65</sup> Audoin-Rouzeau claims that 'the soldiers assessed their comrades and their leaders by the yardstick of their courage under fire, and they judged the enemy by the same criterion: it was this which forbade the latter to be denigrated. Self-respect and respect for the enemy were inseparable.'<sup>66</sup> Further, the unmistakable superiority of German trenches could not be avoided in the commentary of the French newspapers. The author of 'A German Trench' described at length what he encountered after a successful advance, 'Despite ourselves, a cry of stupefaction escaped from us when we saw the door. Could this be a war shelter? A dug-out? Did we have before our eyes the capricious work of a bourgeois visionary?' He then framed the deft engineering by stating that, with his prudent materialism, the German needed such comfort. The Frenchman, buoyed by idealism and his 'flamme intérieure' is 'more capable to support himself in simpler conditions'.<sup>67</sup> The few references to German prisoners demonstrated differing attitudes. In a story from October 1917 French soldiers expressed sympathy for two Germans holding a dying comrade,<sup>68</sup> while an undated cartoon in *Le Poilu du 37* (no. 13) depicted arrogant French guards laughing at gloomy German prisoners.

Respect was shown to the French soldiers in the German soldier newspapers as well. 'The French Grave', of 1915, told the story of a French soldier who died in battle,

65 See also *Marmite*, 10 January 1915. Both articles are cited in Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War*, p. 164.

66 Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War*, pp. 165–71, quote p. 169. *Le P'tit père*, 9 December 1917, argued that the Kaiser forced Germans to fight: cited in Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War*, p. 163. *L'Argonnaute*, July 1917, featured a sympathetic sketch of German prisoners. See, however, J.P. Daughton, 'Sketches of the *Poilu*'s World: Trench Cartoons from the Great War', in D. MacKaman and M. Mays, eds, *World War I and the Cultures of Modernity* (Jackson, MS, 2000), pp. 35–67. Here, at least with regard to French cartoons, Daughton depicts a French audience seemingly more willing to accept 'propagandistic' stereotypes of enemy soldiers than were either the British or Germans. Audoin-Rouzeau has since significantly changed his tone, and, along with Leonard Smith and Annette Becker, he now argues that hatred of the Germans (a certain 'war culture' mentality) was a powerful motivating force for the average French soldier, specifically because of the German occupation of French land and mistreatment of French civilians therein. This line of argument has proven very controversial, and indeed does not hold when one compares the image of the enemy in the French, British, and German soldier newspapers. All newspapers share an equal uninterest in the image of the enemy as a hated barbarian. On the 'war culture' argument, see S. Audoin-Rouzeau and A. Becker, *14–18: Understanding the First World War*, trans. C. Temerson (New York, 2002 [orig. 2000]); L.V. Smith, S. Audoin-Rouzeau and A. Becker, *France and the Great War, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, 2003).

67 *Le Crapouillot*, March 1918, cited in J.-P. Turbergue, ed., *1914–1918: Les Journaux de Tranchées* (Paris, 1999), p. 39.

68 *Poils et Plumes*, October 1917, cited in Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War*, p. 165.

'a young hero', a 'brother'. The Germans gave him a full military burial and were therefore all the more incensed at being referred to by the enemy as 'barbarians'. A cartoon of 1916 slightly 'feminized' the enemy, but was not vitriolic or belligerent; 'Peace Dream of a French Soldier' showed that the typical *poilu* dream for peace was not reunion with family or return to work, but rather a fantasy about being able to wear a new suit.<sup>69</sup> The German soldier newspapers' sympathy for the French even went so far as to justify their resistance. 'The Deserter' described the story of a certain French soldier who had a wife and child in occupied France. He was killed trying to sneak through the German lines. The story was sympathetic, and the German soldiers were described as full of 'melancholy' for the fallen man and his family.<sup>70</sup> 'The French Soldier' argued that the French simply wanted to free their land of the enemy. The same article, which appeared in September 1918, went on to claim that the French treated their prisoners very poorly.<sup>71</sup>

Such information, which had been appearing in the occasional article since late 1917, was probably placed by the editors in the newspapers to discourage what had slowly but surely become a haemorrhage of German soldiers defecting to the enemy. It is thus interesting that it appeared within a story 'justifying' the fighting spirit of the French. Here again, there seems to be 'negotiation' between author and audience. A further fascinating example of that negotiation appeared in the article 'A Third Winter Offensive' in October 1916. Written as a *Korrespondenz* article, it was adopted by many soldier newspapers. The author admitted that the Germans had destroyed many buildings in France, but the French would inflict a thousand times as much damage on Germany. And with regard to the French, 'admittedly, their forefathers from the time of Melac have provided them with bravery', but they lacked chivalry, argued the author, as demonstrated by the way they threw the 'Blacks' and 'Yellows' at the Germans. The author further provoked the audience, asking them to imagine what would happen to German wives and daughters if these coloured fellows broke through.<sup>72</sup> Soldier newspapers could provide their audience with reasons to fight, yet fell well short of maligning the courage of their opponents.<sup>73</sup>

69 *Der Schützengraben*, 21 November 1915. The sketch is in the *Liller Kriegszeitung*, 19 February 1916.

70 *Liller*, 1 February 1917.

71 *Liller*, 9 September 1918.

72 Lipp, *Meinungslenkung*, p. 231. The depiction of blacks in the French soldier newspapers was rather ambiguous. While they very much appreciated the help they were receiving from their West African soldiers, they nevertheless invoked typical racial stereotypes, including their fear that these black men wanted to sleep with white Frenchwomen. See Nelson, *German Soldier Newspapers*, ch. 3.

73 Criticizing and sometimes poking fun at the perceived weaknesses of the Russian army occurred almost exclusively in the newspapers of German soldiers not fighting the Russians, namely, those on the Western Front. In the article 'Our Enemies: "The Russian Soldier"', *Kriegszeitung der 4. Armee*, 18 February 1916, the Russians were berated for their 'blind obedience', and accused of having no concept of saving manpower in an assault. This, however, might be interpreted as a powerful form of 'duty and loyalty', such as the accompanying cartoon depicting a soldier being completely covered in snow if told to stay put and stand guard. The image was comic, yet implicitly showed admiration. Comments and jokes were made both about the perceived lack of Russian intelligence and the technical inferiority of

## 2 Girls, Girls, Girls

Although soldiers' letters can illuminate many aspects of the social and cultural life of soldiers, including some soldiers' beliefs and opinions that are not addressed in soldier newspapers, there is one significant lacuna at the centre of letters written by soldiers for mothers, family members, girlfriends, and wives: the women of the war zone and soldiers' relationships with them. Indeed, one of the most immediate ways in which soldier newspapers establish their importance as a neglected historical source is the degree to which they make clear the ubiquity of women in soldiers' lives just behind the lines.<sup>74</sup>

German soldier newspapers perpetuated the long established ideal of beautiful *françaises*. The famous bust 'The Beautiful Girl from Lille' seems to have already been quite well known in Germany, for the *Liller Kriegszeitung* made reference to this lovely sculpture constantly, simultaneously using it as a metaphor for the local women.<sup>75</sup> There were many sketches of pretty, stylish women with the caption 'Lillerin',<sup>76</sup> and a silhouette entitled 'The Wonder' depicted two *Landser* turning to gawk as a very attractive Frenchwoman walked by.<sup>77</sup> There were also sketches of young, pretty girls, often identified as the daughters of the local billet.<sup>78</sup> The ultra-chic nature of some local women occasionally translated into humour in the newspapers, as in 'O-o la lah!', with a *Landser* voyeuristically watching a woman keeping her little poodle in tow.<sup>79</sup> The witty poem 'Little Girl from Lille' described a pretty girl, yet lamented her inability to communicate in German and the fact that she wore far too much perfume. Indeed, the cartoon 'French Perfume' had one *Landser* complaining to another that he could not kiss the Frenchwoman standing nearby without a gas mask.<sup>80</sup>

The newspapers also reveal attempts to debunk the 'myth' of the extremely beautiful Frenchwoman. In one cartoon's first frame she is depicted early in the morning, looking monstrous, hair askew. In the second frame, she is transformed in the afternoon, her

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the Russian army. The article 'German and Russian Trenchwork', *Kriegszeitung für das XV. Armeekorps*, 7 April 1915, explained that German trenches were clean and exact, while those of the Russians were dirty and structurally inferior. This orientalist vision of the backwards east, however, was limited to Western Front soldier newspapers, thousands of kilometres away. See Nelson, *German Soldier Newspapers*, chs 3 and 5.

74 One of the main ways in which the German soldier newspapers discussed the relationship between home and front was through the many references to the women at home. These women were cast as *Kameradinnen*, a home front working together with the soldiers, not against them. Thus, whereas Lipp reads the soldier newspapers as being key in the construction and distribution of the myth of the stab in the back, long before the collapse of 1918, I found little evidence of this, and in fact, more often quite the opposite. See Lipp, *Meinungslenkung*, and Nelson, *German Soldier Newspapers*, ch. 3.

75 *Liller*, 13 October 1916, and throughout the *Liller Kriegszeitung*.

76 Example in *Sommewacht*, 25 February 1917.

77 *Liller*, 24 July 1918.

78 *Liller*, 10 May 1916; *Sommewacht*, 21 January 1917; *Sommewacht*, 29 April 1917.

79 *Sommewacht*, 13 July 1917.

80 *Liller*, 10 May 1916; *Sommewacht*, 6 July 1917.

face made up, her hair neatly set.<sup>81</sup> ‘How Hirnhofer-Jakl Got to Know the Beautiful Girl from Lille’ described a Casanova arriving on duty in France hoping to enjoy the highly touted local ladies. He discovers that they are particularly unattractive before they put on their make-up, and, even more frustrating, he cannot understand a word they say.<sup>82</sup> Occasionally unflattering sketches of rural women appeared, including a pipe-smoking old farming woman, a raggedy daughter of the local billet, and even a bearded grandmother.<sup>83</sup> These negative portrayals implied that German women were naturally beautiful, and the fact that Frenchwomen were only ‘superficially’ attractive fitted nicely into larger discourses surrounding French ‘civilization’ versus German ‘culture’ in general. But these negative images were exceptional. The German soldier newspapers make it clear that Frenchwomen were sought after and that German soldiers were having active, indiscreet relationships with them.<sup>84</sup>

In his brief and anecdotal history of Lille under German occupation in the First World War, Richard Cobb describes how French girlfriends of German soldiers, *les filles à boches*, were greatly envied by the local women, for they had, firstly, a man, secondly, material advantages, and, thirdly, freedom of movement in and around the controlled city.<sup>85</sup> Indeed the German soldier newspapers did little to conceal the fact that Germans were seriously involved with local women, as the large sketch of a German officer with his French girlfriend on the front page of the 8 July 1917 *Sommewacht* made clear. ‘Little Marguerite!’ was the story of a German and his French *petite amie* in Paris shortly before the war began, and the cartoon ‘Soldier Rudow in his Billet’ depicted a happy soldier being warmly welcomed by his hostess. He declares that if he were single he would marry her, but, alas, instead produces a photo of his fat wife. Another cartoon, this time portraying a large-breasted Frenchwoman walking past two *Landser*, explained that there were all kinds of possibilities for new French ‘relationships’.<sup>86</sup> The jealousy that existed among soldiers for those lucky enough to have a relationship with a local woman was depicted in a cartoon: a *Landser* urinates into the boots left at the foot of a ladder that leads up to what is presumably a local woman’s window.<sup>87</sup>

81 *Liller*, 30 July 1916.

82 *Liller*, 10 February 1916.

83 *Schützengraben*, 1 January 1917; *Liller*, 14 March 1916; *Liller*, 4 August 1917.

84 It is thus the complete absence of any reference to Slavic girlfriends in the Eastern Front newspapers that so clearly displays the growing radicalization in how Germans viewed the peoples of the east. See R.L. Nelson, ‘German Comrades – Slavic Whores: Gender Images in the German Soldier Newspapers of the First World War’, in K. Hagemann and S. Schüler-Springorum, eds, *Home/Front: The Military, War and Gender in 20th Century Germany* (New York, 2002), pp. 69–85.

85 R. Cobb, *French and Germans, Germans and French: A Personal Account of France under Two Occupations, 1914–1918/1940–1944*, 2nd edn (Hanover, 1984), pp. 13–14. See also H. McPhail, *The Long Silence: Civilian Life under the German Occupation of Northern France, 1914–1918* (New York, 1999).

86 *Sommewacht*, 2 December 1917; *Champagne-Kamerad*, 31 March 1918. The cartoon about relationships is in *Liller*, 16 October 1916.

87 *Schützengrabenzeitung*, Christmas 1915.



I found only one reference to local prostitution, in the small trench newspaper *Im Schützengraben in den Vogesen*.<sup>88</sup> The paper printed an 'official' report that the nearby, and very popular, 'House of Desire' was being forced to move south of its current position in the Vosges mountains. The author joked that although this would put it inside the Swiss border, luckily that country's government had no problems with such an establishment, as it was not used for 'purely military purposes'. 'Sexual Life and War', in the *Kriegszeitung der XV. Armeekorps*, provided the history of 'prostitutes', concluding that these women were important and had 'always' been a part of war.<sup>89</sup> Nothing was mentioned about the current situation, however, nor the specifics of what exactly these women did. In his own reading of the *Liller Kriegszeitung*, Richard Cobb surmises that the many advertisements in the newspaper for local French 'fortune tellers' may have been for prostitution.<sup>90</sup>

The Allied soldier newspapers were much the same in depicting soldiers as interested in local women for the straightforward pursuit of sex. 'An Interlude in Boulogne' depicted British soldiers checking out attractive French mothers walking in the park, while the cartoon 'A General Offensive' displayed an older officer leering at a young Frenchwoman.<sup>91</sup> The similarities between the German and British newspapers also extended to the mildly critical assessment of peasant women. The 'Ballad of Imperfections', about a hard-working girl of Picardy, asked, 'Why are your boots so flat and vast?', and, in 'French Dictionary. – No. 111', 'Say la gaire' was translated as 'She ain't wot I'd look at at 'ome'.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, when an advertisement by a 'lonely subaltern' wishing to marry a 'wealthy heiress' claimed 'nationality no bar', this nicely summed up the British soldiers' attitude toward available women.<sup>93</sup> The October 1918 *Aussie* featured a Digger walking with an Englishwoman in one frame, and a Frenchwoman in the second. Finally, the many references to the phrase 'promener ce soir', and what was meant therewith if a Frenchwoman asked it of a soldier, or vice versa, makes it clear that prostitution was well known, and accepted, by the British army in France.<sup>94</sup>

88 No. 3 [n.d.].

89 15 March 1915.

90 Cobb, *French and Germans*, p. 22.

91 *Outpost*, May 1917; *Dump*, 1917.

92 *Aussie*, 4 April 1918; *Minden*, March 1916.

93 *Minden*, January 1916. The immediate postwar edition of *Aussie* (Christmas 1918) had a Digger asking a gentleman how to say 'Voulez-vous . . .' in German.

94 See the obvious conversation, including the word 'combien', in *The Dump*, 1917, as well as the discussion, in 'franglais', about prostitution, in *The Minden Magazine*, June/July 1916. Although Fuller was correct when he stated that there was no mention of brothels in the British and Dominion soldier newspapers, he failed to notice that these journals contained many references to prostitution. Judging by the evidence in the trench journals, he must surely be wrong when he dismisses the pursuit of prostitution with his claim that soldiers had 'girlfriends', but were short of time and money for anything more. See Fuller, *Troop Morale*, p. 75. See K.C. Gibson, 'Sex and Soldiering in France and Flanders: The British Expeditionary Force along the Western Front, 1914–1919', *International History Review* XXIII (2001), pp. 535–79. The pitfalls of relying on soldiers' letters and memoirs with regard to sex behind the lines is apparent when David Simpson refers to Desmond Morton's work on the Canadian



The French newspapers were full of references to women,<sup>95</sup> but it is difficult to tell when they are referring to Frenchwomen ‘on the home front’ or to those just behind the lines. One newspaper in particular is surprising for its very large number of images of women, often semi-nude, and its many indicators that the soldier audience was especially sexually active. *L’Esprit du cor* was the newspaper of the Alpains, and, judging from the image put forward in these sources, these soldiers saw themselves as an élite that entertained women regularly. The first six issues leave the reader with the sense that these men did little other than discuss their sexual conquests (or fantasies thereof). One cartoon depicted a woman, lying in bed, asking a dressing soldier, ‘Well, well! My little soldier, what do you say to that counter-attack?’ Another sketch portrayed a doctor grabbing the naked breasts of his female patient.<sup>96</sup> The macho, élite nature of this newspaper achieved its zenith when it was claimed that the *Alpains* slept with local women, and that civilian French men should fear these soldiers.<sup>97</sup> These depictions of women extended to openly portraying prostitution, as in the cartoon that featured a Frenchwoman in lingerie complaining to a *poilu* that if he wanted to pay less, the nights would be shorter.<sup>98</sup>

## V. Soldier Newspapers in the First World War and Beyond: Further Research

Hopefully this overview of the authorship and production of German, British, and French soldier newspapers in the First World War, as well as brief examples of what this source contributes to the social and cultural history of that war, from the reliance of the British on humour, to the honesty of the French, to the need for justification among the Germans, will spur military historians to seek out and read the equivalent sources for other nationalities and other wars. What follows is some advice on possible trajectories.

Alfred E. Cornebise, the expert on American army newspapers, has provided us with an excellent history of what he rightly calls ‘Undoubtedly . . . the best-known army newspaper of all time’, *The Stars and Stripes*, from its foundation in February 1918 through to the end of its first run, in June 1919.<sup>99</sup> This monster, which at its height had a print run of 526 000, is recognizably of the same ‘category’ as the newspapers discussed above, with its mix of humour and morale-boosting stories. Like its brethren, it had to cover its own costs through subscription and advertising. Indeed, in words that Major Nicolai would

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soldier in the First World War (‘throughout Canadian soldiers’ memoirs and letters home, they insisted that the few women found in areas near the front were sexually unappealing’) in his ‘Morale and Sexual Morality among British Troops in the First World War’, in D. MacKaman and M. Mays, eds, *World War I and the Cultures of Modernity* (Jackson, MS, 2001), pp. 20–34, quote on p. 31.

95 The journals most concerned with female imagery were *Face aux Boches*, *Le Petit écho*, and *Notre rire*.

96 Both cartoons are in the 30 June 1917 edition.

97 30 June 1917.

98 16 June 1917.

99 A.E. Cornebise, *The Stars and Stripes: Doughboy Journalism in World War I* (Westport, CT, 1984).

have approved, the 7 February 1919 edition stated: 'Then the fact that the doughboy paid his ten cents for every issue made it possible for us to remind all and sundry from time to time that the paper was his and that every one else in the world could keep hands off'.<sup>100</sup> From the uncomfortable relationship between the draftees of a democratic nation and their officers, to the rather 'French' situation of exhibiting pride for fellow black soldiers while simultaneously reproducing old racial stereotypes, Cornebise more than demonstrates the usefulness of this newspaper for the social and cultural history of US soldiers in the First World War, and alludes to the 'dozens' of other US soldier newspapers available for analysis, as well as the plethora of 'camp newspapers' that were born stateside.<sup>101</sup>

In addition to a much-needed return to older studies of the soldier newspapers of the Italian and Belgian armies of 1914–18,<sup>102</sup> there remains the need to analyse the journals of the Habsburg monarchy. While the German language newspapers are numerous and easily accessible, it is unclear which if any of the many other linguistic groups in the Austro-Hungarian army had their own publications. The problem of illiteracy among the lower ranks arises when we shift our focus to Russia. While Hubertus Jahn mentions a centralized broadsheet produced for the Russian army,<sup>103</sup> I am unaware of other Russian soldier newspapers. Finally, a whole subset of related and unanalysed sources exist for the German experience in the First World War, that of the occupation newspapers. Prevalent in the east, these were journals produced for both occupying soldiers and the locally occupied populations, and appeared in many languages, such as the Grodno and Bialystok newspapers with their German, Polish, and Yiddish columns.<sup>104</sup>

For more than a century before 1914, however, soldier newspapers were created and distributed in various theatres of war. In his overview, *Ranks and Columns: Armed Forces Newspapers in American Wars*,<sup>105</sup> Cornebise provides a plethora of rich details and points to many areas of possible research, extending back to what may be the first modern soldier newspaper: the *South Carolina Gazette*, published by Nathanael Greene's colonial troops in 1782. The 25 soldier newspapers that appeared during the war and occupation of Mexico (1846–48) are especially intriguing, filled with stories of heroism, as well as descriptions of a 'squalid' but pretty Mexican landscape. Cornebise has located 300 titles for the American Civil War, with print runs of up to 4000. The editors were full of advice, from how to avoid sunburn to what to eat before battle. Although the pre-1914 German soldier newspaper history is limited to a few titles during the Napoleonic Wars, there are some unanalysed gems, such as the *Pekinger Deutsche Zeitung*, produced

100 Op. cit., p. 25.

101 For the soldier newspaper of the post-1919 US occupation forces, see A.E. Cornebise, *The Amaroc News: The Daily Newspaper of the American Forces in Germany, 1919–1923* (Carbondale, 1981).

102 M. Isnenghi, *Giornali di trincea 1915–1918* (Torino, 1977); F. Bertrand, *La Presse francophone de tranchée au front belge, 1914–1918* (Brussels, 1971).

103 There is a reference to Russian scholarship on newspapers for soldiers in H. Jahn, *Patriotic Culture in Russia in World War One* (Ithaca, 1995), p. 186, fn. 36.

104 See F. Bertkau, *Das amtliche Zeitungswesen im Verwaltungsgebiet Ober-Ost: Beitrag zur Geschichte der Presse im Weltkrieg* (Leipzig, 1928).

105 A.E. Cornebise, *Ranks and Columns: Armed Forces Newspapers in American Wars* (Westport, CT, 1993).

during the Boxer Rebellion. It stands to reason that the British and French adventures of the long nineteenth century possibly produced a wealth of soldier newspapers during conventional wars, as well as colonial newspapers along the lines of the German occupation newspapers mentioned above. The scope for new research is truly vast.

Finally, there are the untapped sources of soldier newspapers beyond 1918. Although the German soldier newspapers of the Second World War have been categorized and superficially analysed,<sup>106</sup> a great opportunity exists for a historian able to get past the unhelpful argument that Nazi soldier newspapers should be dismissed as pure 'propaganda'. Instead this resource should be mined for additional details of the daily lives of soldiers in perhaps the most significant conflict of all. While there are some tantalizingly brief examinations of the exploits of the British soldier newspaper editors in the Second World War,<sup>107</sup> their comprehensive history has yet to be written. American scholarship has moved beyond the recent history of an ever more 'institutional' *Stars and Stripes* to include fascinating analyses such as that of the 'underground' newspapers of the Vietnam era.<sup>108</sup> It is easy to imagine the potential of this approach up to and including analyses of present-day conflicts. As we move beyond the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, with an ever more literate class of lower-rank soldiers, historians have access to an increasingly fascinating bounty of 'soldier newspapers', from the base publications of the long-standing Cold War forces in Europe to the blogs being written and commented upon every minute today in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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106 Eckhardt, *Die Frontzeitungen*.

107 S.P. MacKenzie, 'Vox Populi: British Army Newspapers in the Second World War', *Journal of Contemporary History* XXIV (1989), pp. 665–81. See also J.A. Crang, *The British Army and the People's War, 1939–1945* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 97–99.

108 J. Lewes, *Protest and Survive: Underground GI Newspapers during the Vietnam War* (Westport, CT, 2003).

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