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The Propoganda of Endurance: Identity, Survival, and British Trench Newspapers in the First World War

Neal Alexander Davidson
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Neal Alexander Davidson entitled "The Propoganda of Endurance: Identity, Survival, and British Trench Newspapers in the First World War." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in History.

John Bohstedt, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Vejas Liulevicius, David Tompkins

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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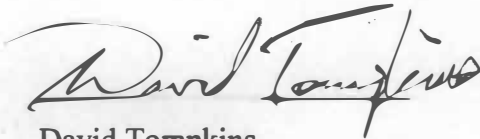


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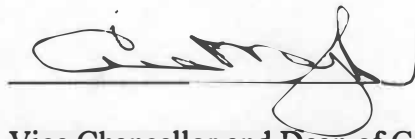


Vejas Liulevicius



David Tompkins

Accepted for the Council:



Vice Chancellor and Dean of Graduate Studies

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**The Propaganda of Endurance:
Identity, Survival, and British Trench Newspapers in the First World War**

A Thesis presented for the degree of Master of Arts
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Neal Alexander Davidson

May 2006

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I would like to thank Vejas Liulevicius for his detailed readings of my work and his always thoughtful suggestions. I am also indebted to David Tompkins, Palmira Brummett, Robert Nelson, and Denise Phillips for their assistance at various stages of my research. Above all, I need to thank John Bohstedt for his help with this study and his excellent advice for the last seven years.

I am hugely indebted to J. G. Fuller for both the system of citation employed here and much of the information included, which I have not always been able to determine on my own. I read the trench newspapers I have used in this study on microfilm at the University of Tennessee library. There are many others at both the Cambridge University Library and Imperial War Museum in England that due to both time and budgetary reasons I have not read. In three cases, I have used newspapers that it appears Fuller did not, so I have less information for them.

Abstract

This study explores the newspapers produced by British officers and men on the Western Front during the First World War. Although subject to censorship, significant scope was granted to the writers and editors of trench journals to express a seemingly strange combination of piety, humor, anger, and sadness concerning the course of the war. Trench newspapers therefore functioned as a cultural space in which the privations and competing desires of military life could be mediated. Through the juxtaposition of varying tones and views of the war, trench newspapers ultimately served to reinforce the hegemonic culture and values of the British Army by functioning as a propaganda of identity and endurance on the Western Front.

British trench newspapers both implicitly and explicitly compare the identities and experiences of soldiers and civilians, men and women, and officer and other ranks as British soldier-writers perceived them. In this way, British trench newspapers were able to examine the conflicts and privations of military life while ultimately reinforcing a common identity for British soldiers. Although civilians could be depicted as foolish or myopic concerning the course of the war, the trench journals could also express gratitude for gifts sent from Britain. Soldier-writers depict women much more favorably, though often simplistically as symbols of home or as objects of sexual desire. Within censorship, the trench newspapers express considerable skepticism, through humor, of the General Staff and the course of the war, but the necessity of fighting the war is never explicitly questioned. Finally, by addressing both violence and technology, trench newspapers obscure the agency of individual British soldiers in killing the enemy and dream of a swift conclusion to the war. Trench newspapers, therefore, are an invaluable resource for understanding the cultural history of the First World War.

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I. Introduction and Historiography

Remarkably, over ninety years since the outbreak of hostilities among the European powers in August 1914, historians are still producing studies assessing the progression, impact, and legacy of the First World War. Chronologically, these have ranged from the official histories produced in the immediate aftermath of the war detailing the actions taken by political leaders and Staff generals to the finely tuned monographs of recent decades. Historians and other scholars have applied seemingly every possible theoretical approach, evidentiary framework, and set of questions to the study of the war. In total, a dizzying number of studies detailing the political, diplomatic, social, and cultural minutia of the years between 1914 and 1918 has appeared concerning every major belligerent in the war. A reader may be forgiven for asking, then, what is left to be studied? Fortunately for scholars of the war, archival research by enterprising historians in recent decades has uncovered many sources that had hitherto been ignored within the historiography of the First World War. Among these are the numerous newspapers produced by the soldiers who served their respective nations on the front lines of the war, which can help answer questions that have occupied the most influential cultural and military historians of the first half of the twentieth century.

The purpose of this study is to examine newspapers produced by British troops who served in France during the First World War, arguing that the previous, limited analysis of these papers has often been somewhat simplistic. Although indebted to previous studies, the following essay argues that the trench newspapers of the Western Front contain a seemingly strange combination of humor, bitterness, and piety. While they

therefore reflect serious ambivalence within the minds of their mostly middle-class editors and contributors, the newspapers largely present a common identity among British soldiers serving on the Western Front through the juxtaposition of these seemingly divergent elements. In so doing, the trench newspapers in fact functioned as a propaganda of identity and endurance that drew upon, mediated, and reinforced hegemonic cultural values that the low-ranking officers, who largely produced these journals, inherited from prewar civilian life, including part-time service in Territorial forces. More particularly, as discussed below, British junior officers of the wartime army were inheritors of middle-class and aristocratic values that emphasized military duty, sporting culture, and paternalism toward lower ranks and classes. Though publication of the trench newspapers rarely exceeded more than a few hundred copies on the Western Front, their limited reception by British troops and their censorship at the battalion and divisional levels does not negate their importance as cultural productions of the period. On the contrary, the wide scope within censorship enjoyed by officers and men to express ambivalence and bitterness about their experience while positing a fundamental soldierly unity demonstrates the confidence the British General Staff ultimately had in the morale of the wartime army and the ability of their officers to lead. As demonstrated below, the trench newspapers ultimately present a mostly conservative vision of the war effort that validates the necessity of soldierly cohesion and endurance of common hardships. Largely, this is accomplished through the mediation and negotiation of common grievances and concerns through humor. Furthermore, the issues explored below closely concern some of the broadest historiographical debates among cultural and military historians of the Great War

in recent decades.

Historians' desire to study the soldier newspapers of the First World War is due in large part to a debate that began in the 1970's concerning the war's cultural impact, one largely shaped by the evidentiary scope and theoretical approaches of individual scholars. No single work looms larger in the cultural historiography of the First World War than Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*. First published in 1975, Fussell's study asserts that British soldiers on the Western Front lived in a world of "reinvigorated myth," in which they utilized earlier English romantic tradition to interpret and frame their experience. According to Fussell, the war fostered a new ironic, distinctly modern literary voice, which allowed subsequent writers on the subject of the Great War to find meaning and structure in what Fussell considers to be essentially senseless events.¹ Fussell's explicit focus is on the experience of British soldiers on the Western Front and this tendency is reflected by his source base, which consists of some of the most subsequently celebrated poetry of the war, by Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, as well as some of the most famous retrospective examinations of the front experience, namely memoirs by Sassoon, Robert Graves, and others. Despite this explicitly British focus, Fussell includes literary productions of the Second World War throughout his work, including some by U.S. authors.² Fussell's expansive source base demonstrates his concern for studying war as a phenomenon throughout the twentieth century, employing Edwardian Britain and its pre-

¹ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 115.

² See *ibid.*, 328-334.

war system of 'high diction' as the starting point to demonstrate subsequent disillusionment and alienation from prewar civilian life in British soldiers' use of irony to frame their war experience.³ Fussell's focus, therefore, centers largely on the war's impact on high literary culture in the twentieth century.

In a similar vein, Modris Eksteins's 1989 study, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* is an even more wide-ranging study of the First World War's cultural impact with an explicitly broader European focus in comparison to Fussell's, but one with a similar thematic structure and focus on equally renowned cultural productions. Whereas Fussell begins his study with a discussion of 'high diction' and the comfortable certainties of Edwardian life, Eksteins employs Igor Stravinsky's modernist ballet, *The Rite of Spring*, and its tumultuous first performance in Paris as his lens through which to view nascent modernism pre-1914.⁴ Eksteins then moves to a closer examination of the experience of soldiers on the Western Front, of both British soldiers who believed they were fighting for British civilization and world order, and of German soldiers who believed they were fighting for *Kultur* and spiritual renewal.⁵ In his comparative study of the experiences of British and German soldiers, Eksteins differs from Fussell, who is only explicitly concerned with the experiences of British soldiers. Most importantly, Eksteins like Fussell views the Great War as a fundamental cultural breaking point, a shift from the

³Ibid., 18-29.

⁴Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 10-54.

⁵Ibid., 116-119.

traditional to the modern, with its attendant disillusionment and despair. Eksteins pushes his analysis further than Fussell by explicitly linking the violence of the First World War to Nazism, concluding his narrative in 1945 in Hitler's Berlin bunker.⁶

Fussell and Eksteins's respective studies are remarkably similar in their emphasis on the Western Front and their evidentiary focus on more subsequently famous literary sources, written by everyone from Ernst Junger to Wilfred Owen. Important scholarship in the 1990's attempted to bridge a perceived gap in the historiography by examining more popularly produced and received cultural productions as well as the physical impact of the war on the bodies of combatants. In *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, published in 1995, Jay Winter argues against both Fussell and Eksteins by asserting that the period during and immediately following the Great War was not one of profound cultural discontinuity for Europeans. Rather, by examining commemorative culture and social processes of mourning, Winter argues that classical and romantic pre-war artistic modes were utilized anew to remember and represent the Great War. Thus, according to Winter, European culture was essentially backward-looking in the wake of the First World War; a culture in which the modern had infused the traditional with new meaning. Employing admittedly anecdotal evidence, Winter argues that individuals were able to connect with an 'imagined community' of mourning and bereavement through cultural productions such as war memorials, while spiritualism and reinvigorated romantic and classical forms allowed

⁶ Ibid., 315-331.

for a symbolic return of the dead in European imagination.⁷ By examining a more varied source base than Eksteins or Fussell, Winter detects the vibrancy of traditional cultural forms in the interwar period. Thus, Winter's source base and focus on the interwar period shape the overall conclusions of his work. The debates within these three iconic works concerning proper evidentiary scope and the nature of the war experience for both soldier and civilian loom large over the limited historiography on trench journalism in the First World War.

Influenced by the new approaches to cultural and military history pioneered by scholars such as these, in the 1980's Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and J. G. Fuller separately undertook major studies of French and British trench journalism respectively.⁸ More recently in 2002, Canadian historian Robert Nelson completed a major study of German trench newspapers.⁹ Largely unexamined systematically prior to the work of these scholars, trench journalism was a widespread phenomenon among German, French, and British troops throughout the course of the war. Nelson persuasively argues that German soldier newspapers were both far more numerous in number and distribution and far different in content than French or British journals. According to Nelson, the most

⁷ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5-11.

⁸ See Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War, 1914-1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France During the First World War*, trans. Helen McPhail (Providence: Berg, 1992). and J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies, 1914-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

⁹ Robert L. Nelson, "German Soldier Newspapers of the First World War" (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 2002).

striking difference between German and Allied newspapers was the “rhetoric of justification” employed by German newspapers to defend their occupation of Belgian and French soil.¹⁰ Furthermore, Nelson argues that German soldier newspapers demonstrated a fascination with their local surroundings on both the Western or Eastern Fronts that is largely absent from British trench newspapers despite the fact that British troops certainly found themselves on foreign soil.¹¹ Nelson argues that British journals were mainly the production of middle-class men who had attended public schools and were, “trained in the art of British irony and setting forth a mostly loyal and conservative vision of the war.”¹²

J. G. Fuller, in his landmark study of morale on the Western Front, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies, 1914-1918*, agrees with Nelson by arguing that the dominant tone of the British trench newspapers was humorous and that they were essentially intended by their authors to boost morale. Fuller provides the first exhaustive study of the British trench press, albeit subsumed within a larger source base. In total, British and Dominion troops produced 107 different newspapers during the course of the war. Of these, 89 were on the Western Front. The vast majority were the productions of low-ranking officers and some men of other ranks in infantry battalions. Trench newspapers first appeared on the Western Front in early 1915 and continued to appear throughout the course of the war. Their near ubiquity through geographic time and space clearly demonstrates their importance as cultural artifacts of the war. Beyond

¹⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹¹ Ibid., 5.

¹² Ibid., 216.

this, Fuller regards them as important sources, in that they are “uncoloured by subsequent experience or by selective memory.” By examining them as part of a much broader study, however, Fuller implicitly suggests that they must be examined within the context of other available sources.¹³ As Fuller himself perceptively argues, the use of trench newspapers as sources is not without its pitfalls. Virtually no specific biographical data exists on the men who produced the journals and only limited publication data is available. Even then, it is self-reported by the journals themselves, and therefore must be treated with some skepticism. In his analysis of the papers, Fuller himself does not ignore their occasional ambivalence and even bitterness, but fails to explicitly account for this contrast with what he considers to be their primarily humorous tone.¹⁴

Originally published in French in 1991, Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau’s *Men at War, 1914-1918* is the only comprehensive study of French trench newspapers. Drawing a distinction from many German Army newspapers, which he argues were often produced *for* the men, Audoin-Rouzeau argues that French trench newspapers were produced *by* the men, thus making them fundamentally different in his view. Audoin-Rouzeau broadly argues that French officers and non-commissioned officers largely produced the roughly 170 surviving French journals mainly for the purpose of providing recreation and escape for soldiers in order to boost morale. Moreover, Audoin-Rouzeau, drawing upon admittedly incomplete evidence, argues that the officers who wrote and edited the French newspapers largely came from the urban middle-class and tended to have backgrounds in

¹³ J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture*, 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 150-152.

journalism or the law.¹⁵ Audoin-Rouzeau argues that French trench newspapers, Due to their relatively lax censorship, proved to be a enormously complex phenomenon on the Western Front:

As an indicator of the need for speech of a community deprived of opportunities for self-expression, the trench press finally established itself as the focal point of many and varied aspirations-the concern for senior officers to sustain morale, discipline, *esprit de corps* and respect for rank conflicting with the fighting troops' desire to rise above the daily misery of the war, to bear witness, and to regain some dignity through writing. The result was often an inextricable muddle of propaganda and personal testimony.¹⁶

Audoin-Rouzeau therefore argues that the trench press served to maintain the morale of the French Army by providing a lens through which French soldiers could interpret and frame their everyday experiences. The analysis that follows attempts to examine the juxtaposition of different thematic elements within British trench newspapers to discern how they negotiated and presented soldierly identity while drawing upon dominant cultural modes of the time period. In this way, the newspapers functioned as a propaganda of identity and endurance on the Western Front. Such a conceptualization of propaganda is indebted to the work of French sociologist Jacques Ellul.

In his classic 1962 work, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, Jacques Ellul examines the myriad ways in which propaganda functions in modern, technological societies. According to Ellul, propaganda is far more than the "political" propaganda

¹⁵ Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War*, 8-10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

produced by governments, such as the British propaganda produced by Wellington House during the First World War intended to boost support for the war effort among the civilian population in Britain. Ellul examines what he describes as “sociological propaganda,” which he defines as “the penetration of an ideology by means of its sociological context,” that emerges within societies beyond anyone’s conscious intention.¹⁷ Ellul argues that an entire modern society’s way of life is conveyed to an individual through sociological propaganda. Ellul therefore considers educational systems, newspapers, television, and films to be sociological propaganda. Within this admittedly diffuse phenomenon, Ellul argues that far more overt, targeted political propaganda can and often does exist. For Ellul, propaganda can only function successfully when it draws upon broad, widely-accepted cultural myths and values.¹⁸ In similar fashion, the soldier writers and editors who produced British trench newspapers did not think of their work as akin to the propaganda produced by the British government that, for example, emphasized alleged German atrocities in Belgium.¹⁹ Rather, the trench newspapers functioned as propaganda in an Ellulian sense in that they drew upon, mediated, and ultimately served to reinforce hegemonic cultural values.

I use the term “hegemonic” here, despite the fact that Ellul himself does not, to

¹⁷ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 62-70.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁹ See Nicoletta Gullace, “Sexual Violence and Family Honor: British Propaganda and International Law during the First World War,” *The American Historical Review* 102, No. 3 (June 1997), 714-747.

underline the argument that power in the British Army, and society more broadly, was characterized by both coercion and consent. The early twentieth century Italian revolutionary and theorist Antonio Gramsci himself distinguished between “leadership,” a combination of moral and physical force often used with allies, and “domination,” the outright subjugation or destruction of an opposing group. Furthermore, Gramsci argues that such relationships are often mediated by the institutions of civil society such as the press and schools.²⁰ The employment of potentially problematic terms such as ‘propaganda’ and ‘hegemony’ here is not intended to steer this essay into thickets of theoretical convolution, but to aid in stating the elegant and complicated truth of the trench newspapers. Trench newspapers were not merely propaganda organs through which officers delivered the values and ideology of the British Army to the men. Rather, they functioned as cultural spaces in which the power relationships and values of the British Army were mediated and negotiated with remarkably broad scope, despite official censorship, and ultimately served to reinforce the hegemonic culture and values of the British Army. The culture and values of the British Army, which had traditionally been dominated by men of aristocratic background, often trained at Sandhurst, came under strain during the First World War due to the enormous number of volunteers and ultimately conscripts that entered military service.²¹ The trench newspapers therefore,

²⁰ Walter Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution: A Study of Antonio Gramsci's Political and Cultural Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 215-221.

²¹ See G. D. Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches: Officer-Man Relations, Morale and Discipline in the British Army in the Era of the First World War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 13-22.

often edited and compiled by men from middle-class or aristocratic backgrounds, acknowledged grievances, such as frustrations with the General Staff, while reaffirming morale and discipline. Cultural hegemony in the British Army during the First World War, therefore, does not simply correlate to a broader hegemony of a particular class in British society. It pertains more directly to the ability of officers to maintain morale and discipline.

Before turning to more specific analysis of particular themes within the trench newspapers, it is worthwhile to briefly examine the structure and composition of Britain's army immediately before and during the war. The largest military unit that intimately figured in the lives of infantryman was the battalion, which would have consisted of roughly 35 officers and 1000 men. The battalion in turn consisted of 4 companies, 16 platoons, and 64 sections. Commissioned officers commanded companies and platoons, while non-commissioned officers commanded sections.²² Above battalion lay brigade, consisting of four battalions, and above that, a division. In the First World War, a British division consisted of about 20,000 men, commanded by a major-general and his staff. A division was capable of defending between 4000-6000 yards of the front.²³ Furthermore, roughly speaking, British divisions were either Regular, New Army, or Territorial. Territorial forces were those that consisted of auxiliary infantry battalions which were combined with the Yeomanry in 1908 to form Territorial battalions. These units only

²² Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare, 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980), 7-8.

²³ *Ibid.*, 8.

trained part-time in contrast to Regular battalions, which constituted Britain's professional army prior to the war. New Army units were those created after the outbreak of war in 1914. The matter is further confused by the fact that New Army battalions often contained elements of Territorial forces, such as the Pals battalions, in which many men from one locality served together, or were formed out of the skeletons of regular battalions. Of course, Britain began conscription in 1916, but the trench newspapers are overwhelmingly the production of New Army and Territorial battalions, comprised almost entirely of men who had been civilians prior to the war.²⁴

In physical form, an individual edition of a trench newspaper was typically between ten and fifteen pages long. As discussed in greater detail below, some contained advertisements, both real and fictive. Most which endured beyond one issue had regular features, such as "Thing We Want to Know" and editorials. In terms of physical size, many were relatively small, perhaps only 9 inches by 11 inches. Some were larger, but few reached the size of the average U.S. newspaper today. Information in this regard is admittedly poor because their size is not discussed in any of the secondary literature and can not be determined from microfilm.²⁵ Although produced by different types of battalions, there are no major differences in tone consistently between Territorial and New Army units, nor between infantry and other services.

²⁴ G. D. Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches*, 13-22.

²⁵ Robert Nelson, "RE: Trench Newspapers." E-Mail to Neal Davidson (January 23, 2006).

II. Humor, Piety, and Escapism

Previous analysis of British trench newspapers has tended to focus on their humor. Humor was often juxtaposed, however, with far more somber depictions of the war, but ones that ultimately insisted on the necessity of endurance within a broader identity for British soldiers. Excepting Nelson and Fuller, the conventional impression that trench newspapers were mainly humorous is evidently founded on the most well-known trench newspaper, *The Wipers Times*, an officer-edited production of a New Army infantry battalion. Wipers was British Army slang for the Ypres Salient, a particularly active sector of the Western front.²⁶ The 21 surviving editions of *The Wipers Times*, variously renamed *B. E. F. Times*, *Kemmel Times*, *New Church Times*, *Somme Times*, and *Better Times*, were printed from February 1916 until the end of the war. Their fame probably rests on their being reprinted in a facsimile book in 1918, with an introduction from “The Editor” of the paper. Perhaps due to their availability in book form, both Fussell and Eksteins have quoted *The Wipers Times*. The editor’s introduction to the 1918 reprinting paints a vivid portrait of how the soldiers produced the paper immediately behind the front lines.²⁷

Let us pause to examine the editor’s description as it is one of the only available accounts of how soldiers produced a trench newspaper. Soldiers chose to launch the paper after the “discovery of an old printing-house just off the square at Wipers.”

²⁶ Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, 21.

²⁷ *The Wipers Times: A Facsimile Reprint of the Trench Magazines: The Wipers Times, The New Church Times, The Kemmel Times, The Somme Times, The B. E. F. Times* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1918.), v-vii. See Figure 1.

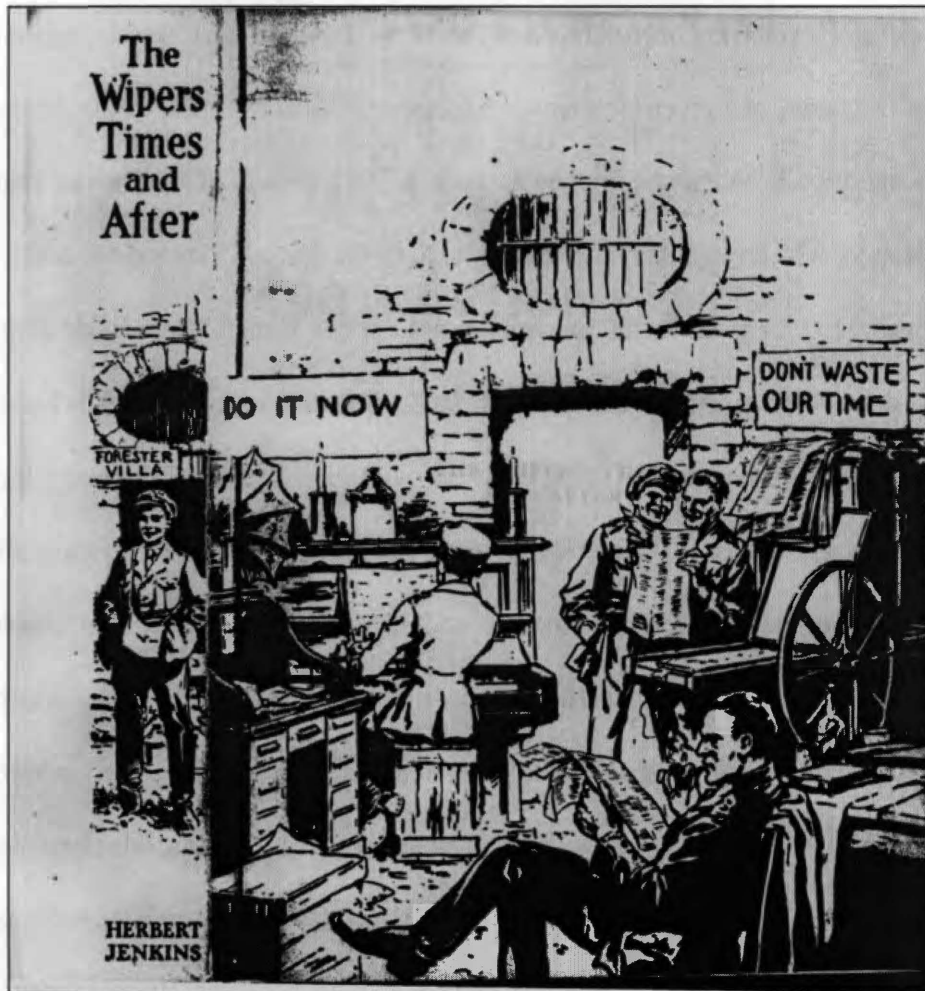


Figure 1. Title page from *The Wipers Times: A Facsimile Reprint of the Trench Magazines: The Wipers Times, The New Church Times, The Kemmel Times, The Somme Times, The B. E. F. Times* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1918), v.

Evidently, the printing house was close enough to the front to have been largely destroyed by the German artillery, “the most perfect picture of the effects of Kultur as interpreted by 5.9's ever seen.”²⁸ Despite the difficult and squalid conditions, the editor writes fondly of the experience, referring only humorously to “Fritz’s love-tokens” which “arrived with greater frequency and precision than we altogether relished.”²⁹ Due to the difficulties of producing directly behind the line, no more than 250 copies of any particular edition were ever printed, which were then immediately sold to the editor’s “immediate circle,” presumably to men in his battalion, which is not directly named. Censorship is mentioned only in connection to the more vague title, *B. E. F. Times*, which eventually had to be adopted because the name had changed as the editorial staff’s division changed location.³⁰ Here, in miniature, one can see many themes and attributes common to almost all trench newspapers: dramatic and even humorous understatement of the danger presented by the proximity of German forces, lack of open hostility to Germans, a persevering attitude about the entire enterprise, and limited distribution and subsequent reception by other British soldiers. Above all, the humor is evident throughout this introductory piece, which is perhaps why many historians have perceived them as almost unambiguously humorous.

Rather than being completely humorous in tone, however, British trench newspapers are ultimately far more ambivalent, juxtaposing humor with more somber representations of the front experience. Such ambiguity can clearly be seen in the title

²⁸ *Ibid.*, v.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, vi.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, vi-vii.

itself of *The 5th Gloucester Gazette: A Chronicle, Serious and Humorous, of the Battalion While Serving with the British Expeditionary Force*. *The Gazette*, an officer-edited newspaper of a Territorial battalion, true to its name, provides both serious and humorous commentary on the soldiers' experiences at the front. Looking at the first page of the October 1916 edition, one is greeted by the faces and names of those in the battalion recently killed in action, thus holding out to soldier readers the possibility that they will receive some individual recognition from their own battalion if killed.³¹ The same edition, however, includes numerous summaries of recent battalion sporting events, such as rugby and bowling, clearly indicating, as Fuller argues, the importance of English sporting culture behind the lines. Other editions of the *Gazette* are similarly full of the comic (often cartoons), the tragic (lists of casualties), and the patriotic (lists of battle honors awarded). A cartoon from the April 1917 *Gazette* neatly displays the ability of the trench newspapers to find the comic within the serious. The cartoon consists of three images, each depicting a British soldier in a particular pose. In the topmost image, the soldier stands in a trench as shells fly overhead and explode in the distance. The caption reads, "Our Barrage! Nuff said, duck your head." In the middle image, the soldier crosses No Man's Land and approaches what is presumably the German barbed wire. The accompanying caption informs the reader that "it's simply grand to cross no-mans-land . . .," while in the bottommost image the same soldier is once again crouching in the trench as German shells fall all around him, though not injuring him. The caption does admit that "to be far from

³¹ *5th Gloucester Gazette*, 15 (October 1916), 1. (Most trench newspapers do not number their pages, all number given here are based on numbers I assigned). See Figure 2.

N° 15 OCTOBER 1916

5th GLOUCESTER GAZETTE

A Chronicle, serious and humorous, of the Battalion while serving with the
BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

"Happy is he who dies for his earthly city, for it is the body of the city of God."
Charles Paine, killed in action 1916.

*" All homo vivo
Tu mors ubi, ubi vivas, ubi bell
That we might live "*

<p>1. 3411 L/Cpl. E. E. BARTLEY. Killed, 14/9/16.</p> <p>2. 8823 Pte W. JARVIS, Missing, bel. Killed, 23/7/16.</p> <p>3. 2nd Lt. E. MADDER. Killed, 20/7/16.</p> <p>4. 2nd Lt. D. G. DORRANT. Killed, 16/8/16.</p> <p>5. 1998 Pte. S. F. FEAR. Killed, 21/7/16.</p> <p>6. 445 Sgt. H. YOUNG. Killed, 23/7/16.</p>	<p>7. [Det. W. FREAM. Killed, 21/7/16.</p> <p>8. 2563 Pte. A. E. ROBERTS. Killed, 6/7/16.</p> <p>9. 2nd Lt. C. V. M. PUCKRIDGE, Miss., bel. 5th., 21/7/16.</p> <p>10. 2174 Pte. A. E. JELFS. Missing, 23/7/16.</p> <p>11. 421 Sgt. P. T. COOKLEY. Killed, 21/7/16.</p> <p>12. 2nd Lt. J. FARRIMOND, Miss. bel. Killed, 21/7/16.</p>
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Figure 2. *The 5th Gloucester Gazette*, 15 (October 1916), 1.

hence, you'll gladly give a guinea."³² The comic rhyme and somewhat silly depictions of the British soldier clearly suggest humor and levity, but for the modern reader this is all the more strange, because soldiers on the Western Front surely experienced first hand the horror of being shelled and the acute danger of attacking across No Man's Land.

How then, can the modern reader make sense of such a cartoon? How can it have been drawn by someone who had experienced trench warfare? In reality, it is in function, though not necessarily in intention, a masterful piece of propaganda that encourages endurance by making light of the difficulties of war, while also acknowledging the desire for escape, "to be far from hence." It also implicitly encourages a common soldierly identity by referring to all soldiers together rather than merely the one depicted in the cartoon, "a midnight raid is part of *our* trade." In addition, the war is made diminutive, "On a nice *little* private war."³³ By so doing, the cartoon mediates competing desires among soldiers by both acknowledging soldiers' instinct to avoid combat but also implicitly encouraging endurance by fostering a collective soldierly identity, based on shared suffering and common experience.

Beyond cartoons, the intertwined themes of humor and escapism are prevalent throughout the trench newspapers. The February 16, 1916, *Wipers Times*, for example, lists in its "Agony Column" pleas for assistance from anonymous, and highly dubious, authors. One soldier begs, "will any patriotic person please lend a yacht and L10,000 to a

³² 5th *Gloucester Gazette*, 18 (April 1917), 5. See Figure 3.

³³ *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.



Figure 3. The 5th Gloucester Gazette, 18 (April 1917), 5.

lover of peace. . . Size of yacht immaterial.”³⁴ An “Agony Column” from *The B. E. F. Times* of March 5, 1917, which is merely *The Wipers Times* renamed, includes the following notice:

For SALE or EXCHANGE.-Large country ESTATE, pleasantly situated on the banks of the Somme. Owner travelling East for the benefit of his health. No reasonable offer refused. Would exchange for a couple of white rabbits, or something edible.³⁵

The humor in both these cases clearly rests on a desire for escape from military life and a return to some form of normalcy, thus the conceit that a soldier can contrive a private exit from the war. Although these certainly express a desire to leave the war, desertion is never explicitly condoned or mentioned. Thus, one can see again the scope within censorship for troops to express private frustrations, but none openly question the necessity of fighting the war.

The very next issue of *The Wipers Times* on February 26, 1916 contains a fanciful piece by “Belary Helloc,” in which he explains how the war will soon brought to a successful conclusion, which contains both considerable humor and skepticism. Helloc begins by setting the “total fighting population of Germany” at 12 million and then employs a series of increasingly absurd logical leaps to reduce that figure by conditions such as being “temporarily unsuitable for fighting due to obesity and other ailments” and being part of “Generals and Staff.”³⁶ Ultimately, Helloc concludes that only 16 German

³⁴ *The Wipers Times*, 1, No. 1 (February 12, 1916), 7.

³⁵ *The B. E. F. Times*, 1, No. 4 (March 5, 1917), 15.

³⁶ *The Wipers Times*, 1, No. 2 (February 26, 1916), 7.

soldiers are defending the Western Front. The humor here clearly includes a great deal of wishful thinking on the part of a soldier who wishes the war to end. Interestingly, however, the piece ends with the less cheerful conclusion that “this number I maintain is not enough to give them even a fair chance of resisting four more big pushes.”³⁷ By way of conclusion, Helloc expresses considerable skepticism about the effectiveness of British offensives, even before the enormously costly Somme offensive that began in July of the same year. Helloc’s piece clearly demonstrates how humor, escapism, and skepticism were often combined within the trench newspapers. One should also note that “Generals and Staff” are not considered to be part of the fighting, a theme in trench newspapers discussed in greater detail below.

The most well-known examples within the historiography of a combination of whimsical humor and skepticism about the conduct of the war can be found in the satirical advertisements found throughout many trench newspapers. The most famous example, cited by Modris Eksteins in *Rites of Spring*, comes from *The Wipers Times* of July 31, 1916, interestingly enough a month into the Somme campaign. By this time, *The Wipers Times* had become *The Somme Times*. Beyond the joke that the paper was only published *sometimes*, it also suggests that the men who produced the newspapers may have been involved in the offensive. The advertisement asks the reader:

Are you a victim to Optimism?

You don’t know?

Then ask yourself the following questions.

³⁷ Ibid., 7.

1. Do you suffer from cheerfulness
2. Do you wake up in the morning feeling that all is going well for the allies?
3. Do you sometimes think that the war will end within the next twelve months?
4. Do you believe good news in preference to bad?
5. Do you consider our leaders are competent to conduct the war to a successful issue?

If your answer is “yes” to any one of these questions then you are in the clutches of that dread disease.

We can cure you.

Two days spent at our establishment will effectually eradicate all traces of it from your system.

Do not hesitate-apply for terms at once to:-

Mssrs. Walthorpe, Foxley, Nelmes and Co.

Telephone 72: “Grumblestones”

Telegrams: “Grouse”³⁸

Here, the humor is clearly far more forced. It is incredible that such open skepticism of “our leaders” was not censored from the journal. Beyond demonstrating the considerable scope the editors of the trench newspapers enjoyed to express open skepticism concerning the course of the war, the piece does not in any way question the *necessity* of fighting the war. Throughout the trench newspapers, this represents a pattern: soldier-writers can express considerable skepticism about the effectiveness of the war effort or the General Staff, but the importance of defeating the Germans is never explicitly questioned. *The Somme Times* does not merely express skepticism concerning the course of the war,

³⁸ *The Somme Times*, 1, No. 1 (July 31, 1916), 12. See also Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 221-222. See Figure 4.

ARE YOU A VICTIM TO
OPTIMISM?
—o—o—o—o—
YOU DON'T KNOW?
—o—o—o—o—
THEN ASK YOURSELF THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS.
—o—o—o—o—

- 1.—DO YOU SUFFER FROM CHEERFULNESS?
- 2.—DO YOU WAKE UP IN A MORNING FEELING THAT ALL IS GOING WELL FOR THE ALLIES?
- 3.—DO YOU SOMETIMES THINK THAT THE WAR WILL END WITHIN THE NEXT TWELVE MONTHS?
- 4.—DO YOU BELIEVE GOOD NEWS IN PREFERENCE TO BAD?
- 5.—DO YOU CONSIDER OUR LEADERS ARE COMPETENT TO CONDUCT THE WAR TO A SUCCESSFUL ISSUE?

IF YOUR ANSWER IS "YES" TO ANYONE OF THESE QUESTIONS THEN YOU ARE IN THE CLUTCHES OF THAT DREAD DISEASE.

WE CAN CURE YOU.

TWO DAYS SPENT AT OUR ESTABLISHMENT WILL EFFECTUALLY ERADICATE ALL TRACES OF IT FROM YOUR SYSTEM.
DO NOT HESITATE—APPLY FOR TERMS AT ONCE TO:—

Messrs. Walthorpe, Foxley, Nelmes and Co.
TELEPHONE 72, "GRUMBLESTONES." TELEGRAMS: "GROUSE."

STOP! & THINK!!!
—o—o—o—
Messrs. NUNTHORPE, COX & CO.
Are now opening their book on the
Summer Meeting.
—o—o—o—
THE OLD LIBERAL PRICES ARE ON OFFER.
5 1 the field for the BAPAUMESTAKES
All in, Run or not.
We Always Pay!!!
—o—o—o—
Midsummer Handicap.
1-3 ATKINS and ANZAC.
100 1 THE FLYING HUN.
—o—o—o—
Do not trust financial crocks,
Put it on with Nunthorpe, Cox.
—o—o—o—
Telegrams: 'REDTABS.'
Telephone: Six Lines, "102 Back'um."

Mr. HOWFIELD
Begg to notify his many kind Patrons that he and Mr. CAULETT have DISSOLVED PARTNERSHIP owing to a little difference of opinion and he is carrying on business in NEW and COMMODIOUS PREMISES with
Mr. NORLETT.
—o—o—o—
COME & INSPECT OUR
New styles in fine Tiles
Great cops in gorgeous props
AND REMEMBER THAT
If you're going o'er the bags,
Come and see our new glad rags.
—o—o—o—
**THE SAME FINANCIAL LATITUDE
ALLOWED OUR CUSTOMERS
AS HITHERTO.**

Figure 4. *The Somme Times*, 1, No. 1 (July 31, 1916), 12.

however, for in the same issue it declares “the war seems to be drawing nearer its only conclusion,” indicating that some men are considering how to spend their time once the war was won.³⁹

The 5th Gloucester Gazette and other trench journals, however, often provided more serious commentary on the front experience than merely listing the names of casualties or expressing skepticism concerning the war’s course. The September 1916 *Gazette* begins with a poem in memory of Lt. R. E. Knight entitled “In Memoriam:”

Dear, rash, warm-hearted friend/ So careless of the end/ So worldly-foolish so divinely-wise/
Who, caring not one jot/ For place, gave all you’d got/ To help your lesser fellow-men to rise/
Swift footed, fleeter yet of heart. Swift to forget/ The petty spite that life or men could show you/
Your last long race is won/ But beyond the sound of gun/ You laugh and help men onward-if I
know you/ O still you laugh, and walk/ And sing and frankly talk/ (To angels) of the matters that
amused you/ In this bitter-sweet of life/ And we who keep it’s (sic) strife/ Take comfort in the
thought how God has used you.-F. W. H.⁴⁰

Poetry like this was common in the trench newspapers, as it was in the civilian press in Britain.⁴¹ Clearly the tone here is not at all humorous, but rather intensely personal and religious. The same issue of the *Gazette*, however, contains bits of humor as well, but often with a bitter edge. In a section that employs quotes to describe important aspects of the war and world affairs, America is declared “invincible in peace, invisible in war.”

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁰ *5th Gloucester Gazette*, 14 (September 1916), 2.

⁴¹ See Ted Bogacz, “A Tyranny of Words: Language, Poetry, and Antimodernism in England in the First World War,” *The Journal of Modern History* 58, No. 3 (Sept. 1986), 643-668.

Conscientious objectors are also criticized: “And thou, the scorn of every patriot’s name/
Thy country’s ruin and thy council’s shame/ Poor servile thing! Derision of the brave.”⁴²

Here, once again, the mixture of tone is quite ambivalent, ranging from the deeply pious to bitter.

Numerous other examples from British trench newspapers demonstrate the seemingly incongruous combination of the comic and the serious, particularly in cartoons. In an image from the July 24, 1916, edition of *The Gasper*, two soldiers lie in No Man’s Land; one is caught in the barbed wire while another looks on. Under the legend “Queer Questions,” one soldier asks the other “caught in the wire, Bill?” Bill sardonically responds, “No, I’m playing leap-frog you -- fool.”⁴³ Here, the intent is clearly again to be humorous, but the levity once again rests on a very dangerous reality that many soldiers would have had to face at the front. In addition, the humor here is sanitized and censored by the omission, whether voluntary or forced, of a curse word. Paul Fussell has argued, for example, that obscenity was an integral part of soldiers’ expression during the First and Second World Wars, which distinguished the language of soldiers from the more sanitized and cliché-ridden elevated language of civilian and military leaders.⁴⁴ Therefore, the omission of a single curse word could alter the meaning of a passage for an audience of soldiers, by making the situation appear absurd and unrealistic. It is further based on an

⁴² *5th Gloucester Gazette*, 14 (September 1916), 5.

⁴³ *The Gasper*, 20 (July 24, 1916), 2. See Figure 5.

⁴⁴ Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 251-267.



THE CASPER

Queer Questions.
 "First Wifey in Second Dime, who has taken over wifey": "Caught in the Wifey, Bill?"
 "Second Wifey": "No; I'm playing keep-frog you — food."

Strange Stories

IV.—The Impression.

I do not ask you to believe in the supernatural. It is not my purpose, in writing these accounts, to take up the pen either for or against any particular point of view. My object is to present you with the facts as they are, and to let you judge for yourselves. I do not wish to say anything to excite you, or to make you feel that you are being deceived. I only wish to tell you what I have seen and heard, and to let you judge for yourselves. I do not wish to say anything to excite you, or to make you feel that you are being deceived. I only wish to tell you what I have seen and heard, and to let you judge for yourselves.

It was the morning of our last attack. The military had not been very active during

the night, when you take this consideration the fact that it has minutes since the whole would be known and we would go. As a matter of fact, the peculiar advantage we possessed by means of the nature of the time, was not a great one. The German and the British, we have quite well, were expecting an attack there. That was part of our game, but so we think it would come, they thought. It had been a beautiful night. The British and the German had advanced on an extensive scale, and we were very much surprised to see them. The German and the British, we have quite well, were expecting an attack there. That was part of our game, but so we think it would come, they thought. It had been a beautiful night. The British and the German had advanced on an extensive scale, and we were very much surprised to see them.

There was, of course, no opportunity for selecting ours, as we just being ourselves from behind the dead body of one of our men, who had, presumably, been killed in an earlier and less successful attempt. The British and the German, we have quite well, were expecting an attack there. That was part of our game, but so we think it would come, they thought. It had been a beautiful night. The British and the German had advanced on an extensive scale, and we were very much surprised to see them.

Figure 5. *The Gasper*, 20 (July 24, 1916), 2.

ironic and humorous detachment from the violence inherent in the situation. For the contemporary reader, it is difficult to imagine that Bill, in acute danger of being killed, would take the time to make a joke, but the presentation of such an attitude in a soldier newspaper serves to depict the war as bearable. By inspiring humor in a dangerous situation that many soldiers doubtlessly had to face, the cartoon is clearly encouraging not only laughter but endurance as well.

The serious and the comic were also juxtaposed in other forms as well. Poetry or doggerel was a common form of expression in the trench newspapers and the poems themselves could often be both comic as well as serious, both often appearing in the same newspaper. Comic poetry itself was often juxtaposed with more serious and somber pieces of news. The December 22, 1915, edition of *The Gasper* contains a poem entitled "To My New Pack," which opens with the lines, "I love thee not thou stranger new/ Though thou art hidden from my view, I've had about enough of you!"⁴⁵ The intent here is clearly to make light of the drudgery of a soldier's life, and by so doing, making it seem more bearable for the soldiers who read the newspaper. In the same edition, however, the editors of the newspaper do note that "since we have left England several of our comrades have fallen . . . we offer our sincerest sympathy to the relatives."⁴⁶ The choice of words here is highly significant. According to Fussell, this is an excellent example of 'high diction,' the system of language that "two generations of readers had been accustomed to associate with the quiet action of personal control and Christian self-abnegation

⁴⁵ *The Gasper*, 10 (December 22, 1915), 2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

(‘sacrifice’).” Within this system of ‘high diction,’ a “friend is a *comrade*,” and “the dead on the battlefield are the *fallen*.” For Fussell, high diction served to allow readers to distance themselves from the horrors of modern warfare. He argues that ‘high diction’ was itself one of the most notable casualties of the Great War, although it persisted until 1918.⁴⁷ Here, therefore, the cumulative effect of the juxtaposition of the comic and the serious, using ‘high diction,’ is to implicitly encourage the reader, whether soldier or civilian, to endure the hardships of war.

The editors and contributors to British trench newspapers, therefore, were able to employ a variety of literary modes, the merely humorous, the bitterly satirical, and the pious to express their thoughts and feelings concerning the war. Granted considerable scope by censors at the brigade and divisional level, editors were able to include a surprisingly wide variety of views in their journals. Although the papers often express skepticism concerning the course of the war, duty and sacrifice are honored and upheld while the necessity of fighting the war remains unquestioned. Are duty and sacrifice worth it, if the war is going poorly? The trench newspapers broadly answer “yes.” As discussed more fully below, the trench newspapers affirm the necessity of endurance and the importance of soldiers’ identification with one another. For soldiers, identifying with one another can often entail a comparison to civilian life.

⁴⁷ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 21-22.

III. Soldiers and Civilians

A lively historiographical debate has emerged in recent decades concerning the degree to which the war separated and even alienated British soldiers from civilian life. Paul Fussell, while noting the remarkable geographic proximity of the Western Front to Britain, largely argues that the front experience was fundamentally at odds with men's prewar civilian life and attitudes, and thus the resulting irony transformed modern culture.⁴⁸ Here, naturally, Fussell's sources have shaped his conclusions. Fussell's study is also mainly concerned with a change in attitudes after the war, when Edmund Blunden, Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves all reimagined their war experience, often obsessively. The experience of British veterans in the interwar period, however, is largely beyond the scope of this study, which focuses on the experience of soldiers *vis a vis* civilian life during the war itself, both when returning home on leave and while at the front. Fussell is correct in asserting the geographic proximity of the front to Britain that even allowed soldiers to receive parcels and newspapers from home. In fact, the trench newspapers demonstrate a close concern on the part of soldiers for civilian life, most likely because many of the men serving in the war, whether part of Kitchener's Armies or later conscripts, were civilians only a short time before. Borne out by the trench newspapers, the emerging consensus in recent historiography is that no fundamental alienation from the civilian world existed among the majority of soldiers, though anxiety, frustration, and anger certainly did. British trench newspapers and recent historiography therefore do not bear out Eric Leed's thesis that the war transformed British soldiers into "liminal" figures

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 72-74.

fundamentally separated from the civilian world. Rather, the men who served on the Western Front remained intimately connected to civilian life.⁴⁹

The most fundamental and obvious way trench journals demonstrate a connection to, concern with, and even desire for civilian life is in the simple fact that the editors of trench newspapers, as discussed briefly in the preceding section, deliberately imitate many of the features of a civilian publication, including letters to the editor, advertisements, and lifestyle columns that both ape and satirize civilian life, thus demonstrating the importance of civilian culture in the perspective of British soldiers, many of whom were civilians only a few years or months before. Nor are all the advertisements necessarily satirical, *The Whizz-Bang* for July and August 1916 contains seemingly genuine advertisements for “military uniforms and equipment at Binns, Sutherland” and “Duty-Free Tobacco and Cigarettes.”⁵⁰ Other editions of the paper include similar examples. The most likely cause for *The Whizz-Bang*’s genuine advertisements is its publication in England. Though written and edited behind the front in France, *The Whizz-Bang* was evidently sent to Darlington, England, and published by the North of England Newspaper Co. Produced by a first-line Territorial division, it is perhaps more likely that its editors had close connections to a particular region. Again, it should be noted, little is known about how particular trench newspapers were produced.

Other newspapers, such as the *Queen’s Own Gazette*, include similarly genuine

⁴⁹ Eric J. Leed, *No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 12-33.

⁵⁰ *The Whizz-Bang*, 1, No. 7 (July-August 1916), 15-16.

advertisements, while some, such as the 5th *Gloucester Gazette* and *The Gasper*, include none, neither genuine or satirical. As previously mentioned, *The Wipers Times* and its subsequent incarnations included numerous satirical postings in every issue. These satirical postings parodied the popular culture of the time in light of the war, providing soldier readers with a humorous interpretation of their experience, such as this advertisement from the Christmas 1916 issue of *The B. E. F. Times*:

The Callanseeum Theatre of Varieties

To-day at 2-15; Every Evening at 8-30.

Mr. Thomas Atkins Presents His Stupendous Xmas Revue

The Big Bangs are Here by Mew Nishen-Wurkurs

Music by R. Tillery

Lyrics by Redats

Introducing:

Tino: The world-famed sleight of hand artist.

Wilhelm: Who will sing "Peace, Peace, Glorious Peace."

Hind and Berg: Sword swallows and nail eaters

Also the Wothehellsitmatograph Featuring:

The Westminster Troupe in All Change Here

Doors Always Open

Prices as Usual⁵¹

By imitating contemporary popular advertising from civilian life, this particular trench newspaper and others make the war seem familiar and humorous to their soldierly audience. Reimagining Kaiser Wilhelm as a music hall singer and Hindenburg as a sword swallower obviously serves to make the enemy seem less threatening. The dangers of the

⁵¹ *The B. E. F. Times*, 1, No. 2 (December 25, 1916), 16.

front are made diminutive when in the same edition assures its reader that the “anti-zeppelin curtain” is “lowered twice nightly” on a performance near the front.⁵² Trench newspapers mimic the format and style of civilian publications in many other ways.

Many trench newspapers featured sections that printed letters to the editor, either real or fictive, that served to create a sense of civilian normalcy in the trench newspapers, so as to characterize the war as entirely tolerable and unthreatening. The editors of *The Wipers Times*, in particular, were found of presenting fictive letters, often with the effect of lampooning civilians, such as a letter from “Eliza Stiggins” who wishes to start a charity to provide “flannel pajamas for our troops in the front line” because she has heard that British soldiers are “very short of pajamas.” Stiggins is certain that the campaign will meet with success given the efficacy of her “umbrellas for our gallant sailors” charity.⁵³ Of course, this is absurd, the paper’s soldier readers would know that men at the front lived in conditions that made changing into pajamas before going to sleep impossible, even if they did have any. Letters to the editor, whether real or fictive, could turn bitter in regard to civilians, such as the following from *The New Church Times*:

Sir,

On looking at some of the pictures published by the daily pictorial papers in England I am affected by a peculiar feeling of nausea. This is especially noticeable when the subject happens to be peace meetings in Trafalgar Square, etc. Surely, if at home they must have peace meetings, and must tolerate conscientious objectors, then these

⁵² *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 15.

might be hidden from the public eye. The only way to heal open sores is to bind them up and the ventilation of full page photos is not likely to be beneficial to our best interests, besides making a rather disgusting exhibition,

I am, Sir,

Yours faithfully,

A LOVER OF DECENCY⁵⁴

Whether this letter was actually submitted to the editor of this particular paper is unknown, but it seems likely given the tendency to print clearly contrived letters that this is one of the editors expressing his opinion of “peace meetings” in Britain. Beyond implicitly endorsing the war effort, the letter not only expresses bitterness regarding perceived civilian disloyalty but also demonstrates a deep concern with life in Britain based on the assumption that it affects life for soldiers in France. In both examples, whether lampooning or criticizing civilian life, the writers express deep interest in civilian life and construe a common identity for soldiers by way of comparison.

Trench newspapers also frequently show evidence that soldiers had access to and read London newspapers. The same edition of *The Kemmel Times* discussed above asks under the heading, “Things We Want to Know,” the question, “Whether the London papers are aware there are a few British troops on the Western Front?”⁵⁵ Whether the author of this question feels that London’s newspapers are spending more time discussing French or Dominion troops, or too little time covering the war at all, is unknown. *The Daily Mail*, for example, was readily available to troops on the Western Front, often

⁵⁴ *The New Church Times*, 1, No. 1 (April 17, 1916), 8.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

brought up to reserve trenches by French paperboys.⁵⁶ London papers were often singled out for derision in the trench newspapers. Such skepticism does demonstrate a mistrust among some soldiers for news from home, which perhaps increased the appeal of trench newspapers. Moreover, trench newspapers never systematically published 'straight' news concerning the broad course of the war, preferring instead news of battalion sporting events or lists of men recently killed in action.

Beyond satirizing the mode and style of civilian publications, explicit comparisons between civilians and soldiers also exist throughout British trench newspapers. The July 24, 1916, edition of *The Gasper* contains one of the best and complex examples of comparison, with one piece of implied opposition between British soldiers and civilians juxtaposed with humorous elements and genuine patriotic enthusiasm. The cartoon that covers the top half of the front page depicts a British soldier on a street presumably in England, evidenced perhaps by the car driving down the left hand side of the street, although the exact setting is not certain. He is definitely not close to the front, as the well-ordered buildings and shops behind him demonstrate. Startled by the blowout of a tire, the soldier has dived to the ground while a civilian couple look on, pointing and smirking. The accompanying legend reads, "Thus Habit Doth Make Cowards of Us All."⁵⁷ The line is a clear allusion to "thus conscience doth make cowards of us all" from Hamlet's famous

⁵⁶ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 65.

⁵⁷ *The Gasper*, 20 (July 24, 1916), 1. See Figure 6.

The Gasper.

THE UNOFFICIAL ORGAN OF THE B.M.F.

No. 20

JULY 24, 1914.

Price [England, One Penny; France, 10c;—Over Seas,



"THUS HABIT DOTM MAKE COWARDS OF US ALL."

Hullo England!

How you had promised safety on the way to France. Why you had a sense of the danger. You give and shake hands with the man who was to take you to the front. You give him the money you had to give him, and then he goes back to his work.

There is no such thing as a free lunch, and you find out of the morning whether you are a fool or a wise man. You find out of the morning whether you are a fool or a wise man. You find out of the morning whether you are a fool or a wise man. You find out of the morning whether you are a fool or a wise man.

You find out of the morning whether you are a fool or a wise man. You find out of the morning whether you are a fool or a wise man. You find out of the morning whether you are a fool or a wise man. You find out of the morning whether you are a fool or a wise man.

NOTICE—Order to the great differential between France and England is to impossible to justify "The Gasper" as any other daily, readers will therefore be found on the editorial services from France.

All contributions to be sent to: Editor G. H. Green, 10 Avenue d'Orléans, London. Copies of the railway rates may be obtained for 1914, free from any address, in the United Kingdom. No to the B.M.F. from the Publishers. Being Business Publishers, we are not bound by the rules of the Post Office. If a larger sum is sent, orders will be sent weekly till the balance is paid. See the back cover of the paper for the full details of the rules of the Post Office. All rights of reproduction of contents reserved by the Proprietors. Applications should be addressed to the Publishers.

Figure 6. The Gasper, 20 (July 24, 1916), 1.

contemplation of suicide.⁵⁸ The humor here is bitter and clearly targeted at the civilians who, ignorant of the harsh realities of trench warfare, do not realize why the loud bang sent the soldier instinctively diving for cover. The bitterness and sadness of the humor is compounded by the reference to cowardice, suggesting to any soldier readers that civilians in Britain or elsewhere either do not understand or appreciate the bravery of soldiers fighting on the Western Front. It would be easy to interpret this cartoon as a clear example of de-mystification and disillusionment among soldiers on the Western Front as the war turned bloodier during the Somme offensive of July 1916. Easy analysis, however, is typically confounded by a written piece directly below the cartoon entitled “Hullo England,” which describes the experiences of an anonymous British soldier home on leave. Here, however, bitterness at civilian myopia and ignorance are lacking. Instead, the writer ecstatically describes the beauty of England in the summertime, concluding by noting that:

. . . when we go back we shall fight with a finer frenzy and a fresher fire against those who have laid desolate dear, doughty little Belgium, and who would do the same to our beloved island, the dearest jewel in our golden ring of empire.⁵⁹

Here, rather than finding skepticism about civilian life in England, one finds a ringing endorsement of the war effort and the empire as a whole. At first glance, these two pieces seem in diametric opposition to one another. Both, however, function in effect as a propaganda of identity and endurance by encouraging soldiers to identify with one another

⁵⁸ See William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992): Act III, Scene 1, lines 64-98, 128-129.

⁵⁹ *The Gasper*, 20 (July 24, 1916), 1.

in opposition to civilians. Clearly present in the cartoon, it is even present in the account of leave in England, as the writer clearly refers to himself in common with other soldiers, “when *we* go back . . . to *our* beloved island.” The writer also suggests a heightened soldierly sensitivity to England’s beauty, noting that “never before have *we* really appreciated what a fine place England is to live in.”⁶⁰ Even within a clear endorsement of the war effort, it is the soldiers alone who are depicted as understanding what is truly at stake, fully understanding the preciousness of British life. Thus, these two seemingly contradictory pieces can actually function together to form an ultimately coherent message for British soldiers, one both of identity, construed in comparison whether bitter or benign to civilians, and endurance, based on shared understanding and experience.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that civilians are uniformly depicted as foolish or stupid in trench newspapers. *The Queen’s Own Gazette* of the Royal West Kent Regiment, for example, frequently listed the names of people in England who had made gifts to the regiment, though what gifts they offered is not specified. In this case, these lists are juxtaposed with lists of regimental casualties and battle honors.⁶¹ *The Queen’s Own Gazette* is a reminder of how difficult it is to make generalizations about the newspapers produced by British soldiers during the First World War. Although many were primarily humorous in tone, *The Queen’s Own Gazette* is devoid of almost any humor whatsoever. Rather, it almost entirely consists of descriptions of regimental activities and the men who have been killed in action or otherwise served with distinction.

⁶⁰ Ibid.,. Emphasis mine.

⁶¹ See *The Queen’s Own Gazette* (May, 1916).

Here, the intent was clearly to help soldiers endure the difficulties of the war and to identify not only with one another but with the world of civilians at home in England as well. As such, it nicely demonstrates that soldierly identity was not always construed in opposition to civilians in Britain.

Beyond descriptions of their experiences on leave, trench newspapers also demonstrate British soldiers' continuing concern with and connection to British public culture, often responding to Britain's civilian newspapers and occasionally to political leaders as well, particularly when the news concerned the war. In a rare comment on actual news of the war, *The Kemmel Times*, the once again renamed *Wipers Times*, reacted with what was at least rhetorical shock and sadness to the death of Lord Kitchener in their July 3, 1916, edition. The opening editorial states that "true he was known to us by name only, yet it was a name that meant a lot to us." What follows is some of the most direct anger at Germans in any of the British trench newspapers:

However, the pitiful spectacle of William, Tirpitz and Co. shedding tears of blood in their anxiety to prove to a pack of poor, deluded sausage eaters, that they have blown the British Navy off the map, ceases to be amusing and becomes a disgusting spectacle of monomaniacal absurdity.⁶²

Remarkably, the crude stereotypes of Germans and anger over Lord Kitchener's death evaporate in the next sentence when the editor happily declares, "here everything has been merry and bright."⁶³ Beyond demonstrating the awareness of troops at the front

⁶² *The Kemmel Times*, No. 1, Vol. 1 (July 3, 1916), 3.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 3.

concerning major news from Britain, the close juxtaposition of anger, sadness, and joy in tone raises a number of important questions concerning the editorial voice of trench newspapers. Did the editor in this case mention Lord Kitchener's death as a matter of course, because he was ordered to by a superior, or out of sincere concern and grief over his death? Such questions are impossible to answer with certainty, but the piece does neatly typify how the trench newspapers served as a space that mediated the desire for levity ("everything has been merry"), wartime piety ("a name that meant a lot to us"), and vitriol for the enemy ("deluded sausage eaters").⁶⁴

Both implied and explicit comparisons between soldier and civilian, therefore, exist throughout British trench newspapers. Whether bitter, comic, or appreciative, the trench journals construe soldiers as deeply concerned with life in Britain, however much the war has changed their personal perspective. In all of the above examples, the trench newspapers clearly construe a common identity for soldiers, but it is a complicated one. Most of the soldiers serving in France had been civilians only months or years earlier, and the fact that in format and style the trench journals imitate civilian publications demonstrates that soldiers did not desire to simply leave civilian life behind. The publication of trench newspapers by soldiers, in and of itself, was an act born out of a desire for a sense of normalcy at the front. Even when separated by their war experience, many British soldiers desired civilian life. Comparisons between soldiers and civilians and the mediation and negotiation of soldierly identity in trench magazines, however, was never as simple a dichotomy as soldier and civilian.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 3.

IV. Men and Women

As Nicoletta Gullace has perceptively argued, women were central figures in Britain's official propaganda effort during the war. Wellington House, the center of Britain's propaganda effort, focused particular attention on Germany's "rape" of neutral Belgium and employed gendered language to emphasize German atrocities against civilians, construing the war as a defense not only of international order, but also of British women and children. As much as gendered images of German atrocities dominated British public discourse, according to Gullace, they are conspicuously absent from British trench journals.⁶⁵ Trench newspapers of many different armies often depicted women quite differently than Home Front propaganda. For example, women were also prevalent as symbols in German soldier newspapers. Nelson argues that the German journals largely construed women as loyal comrades in the *Burgfrieden*, the "united front of all Germans against the enemy," emphasizing their faithfulness and loyalty.⁶⁶ Interestingly, as Nelson himself notes, Fuller's study, written in the mid to late-1980's, largely ignores the question of women in the British journals, which perhaps reflects subsequent shifts in the historical discipline. Fuller's avoidance of women remains nonetheless remarkable, however, because women feature throughout many of the British journals. Soldiers' perceptions of home were shaped by their relationship to and desire for women.

British soldiers at the front inhabited an exclusively male world. Separated from their wives or any other women while in the trenches, soldiers were particularly conscious

⁶⁵ Nicoletta F. Gullace, "Sexual Violence and Family Honor," 714-719.

⁶⁶ Robert Nelson, "German Soldier Newspapers," 137.

of this sacrifice of military life, which is evident throughout British trench newspapers.

Often women are depicted as symbols of the comforts of home, as well as objects of desire that, by their absence, demonstrate the difficulties and privations of life at the front.

Sometimes women are the direct subject of comment, while sometimes they merely exist on the periphery. One newspaper included sketches of women almost without comment seemingly at random. Interestingly, unlike in some propaganda of the British government, trench newspapers almost never employ women as gendered symbols of what British soldiers are presumably protecting, home and hearth. By openly discussing the desire for women, either sexually or more broadly as part of the comforts of home life, British trench newspapers implicitly construct a collective male identity for British soldiers and furthermore, by acknowledging privation and desire, encourage British soldiers to endure their collective hardship.

A cartoon from the December 1916 5th *Gloucester Gazette* provides an excellent example of the depiction of women as symbols of the comforts of civilian life. Entitled “Seaside Camps of 1917,” it is separated into four panels. Three of the panels depict a soldier performing various chores: carrying rations, scrubbing floors, and digging ditches, all within sight of the ocean. The fourth shows a woman dressed in a bathing suit, standing by the ocean and asking the reader to join her for a swim. The woman is drawn under the caption, “what we should like!”⁶⁷ The obvious inference here is that a seaside holiday in England with a woman is self-evidently preferable to the drudgeries of military life. Beyond this, by making light of the collective privations of all soldiers, the cartoon

⁶⁷ 5th *Gloucester Gazette*, 16 (December 1916), 5. See Figure 7.



Figure 7. *The 5th Gloucester Gazette*, 16 (December 1916), 5.

implicitly suggests a collective identity for soldiers in opposition to civilian life, represented here by a woman. Here, in contrast to many depictions of civilians more generally, the cartoon implies no hostility towards women. Instead, this cartoon and others like it employ women as symbols of sexual desire and the life left behind by soldiers at home.

Beyond cartoons, women are often the subject of poetry, either as objects of romantic desire or as symbols of the comforts of home. The April 17, 1916, edition of *The New Church Times* includes the following lines:

In dug-out cool I sit and sneeze/ Safe from whizz-bang's mauling/ Dreams come my
appetite to tease/ Fond visions which my fancy please/ Of maids divine, entralling/
And glorious times when our Job's done/ My thoughts you'll echo-"Damn the Hun!"⁶⁸

The above poem simply expresses romantic and perhaps sexual desire for woman, while also expressing anger at the Germans. Here, however, the poet simply depicts "the Hun" as the obstacle that will prevent him from returning home or gaining access to women. The soldier-poet's anger at the Germans as a mere obstacle is part of a broader pattern in the trench newspapers discussed in greater detail below.

Furthermore, trench newspapers often portrayed women as synonymous with 'Blighty,' British Army slang not just for England, but for permanent rest at home. In the British slang of the First World War, a 'blighty wound' is one that would get a soldier sent home, but would not permanently incapacitate him.⁶⁹ A cartoon from the August 1917

⁶⁸ *The New Church Times*, 2, No. 1 (April 17, 1916), 7.

⁶⁹ *The Lead-Swinger*, 1 (September-December 1915), iv.

Gehenna Gazette, for example, depicts a British soldier being wounded by a booby-trapped German helmet and then resting comfortably in bandages while being attended by a female nurse.⁷⁰ A similar cartoon from *The Sling* entitled “The Latest Recruit” features a woman in uniform called “A Stretcher-Bearer’s Dream.”⁷¹ Even when not depicted so prominently, drawings and sketches of women often appeared throughout trench newspapers, occasionally with little or no comment, evidence of the extent of their power as symbols of home and desire for soldiers at the front. *The Lead-Swinger*, for example, featured a series of drawings of several editions, entitled “The Girls Left Behind,” accompanied by only the name of the woman.⁷² The September 1916 *Direct Hit* also features sketches of women throughout in the margins of the text.⁷³ Here, women were clearly employed, consciously or not, as potent symbols of the comforts of home. Trench newspapers construed separation from home as an inherent part of military life and therefore as something that British soldiers must endure. By acknowledging collective soldierly separation from women, British trench newspapers therefore encouraged soldiers to identify with one another.

Another humorous depiction of soldierly interaction with women appears in the September 30, 1916, edition of *The Gasper*, in a cartoon that depicts a cigarette-smoking

⁷⁰ *The Gehenna Gazette* (August 1917), 15. See Figure 8.

⁷¹ *The Sling*, October 1917, Cited in Robert Nelson, “German Soldier Newspapers,” 140.

⁷² *The Lead-Swinger*, 1 (September-December 1915), 4.

⁷³ *The Direct Hit*, 1 (September 1916).



Figure 8. *The Gehenna Gazette* (August 1917), 15.

British officer in a punt, accompanied by a younger woman, being sternly observed by an older woman. The legend below reads, “The Horrors of War: Daylight Saving, Why *won't* it get dark?”⁷⁴ Although the exact setting of this scene is unclear, it is strongly implied that the officer is waiting until dark to make romantic or sexual advances toward the woman, but is hindered by daylight savings time and the stern matronly figure. Here, one can see civilians depicted as prone to misunderstanding the implied needs of soldiers while a younger woman is once again depicted as an object of desire. Again, the implication for a soldier reader of such a cartoon is that soldiers have collective concerns and desires that civilians either do not share or are unconcerned with. Whereas the cartoonist employs the older woman as a symbol of civilian stupidity and even hostility, the younger woman is depicted far more sympathetically. Therefore, just as in the case of civilians more broadly, British trench newspapers do not depict women in a completely uniform way, but examples of implied hostility, such as the older woman, are few.

Occasionally, the trench newspapers even employed distinctly gendered language to provide humorous commentary on the writer’s war experience, as in a poem entitled “To Minnie” from *The Somme Times*. “Minnie,” in this case was British Army slang for a German shell:

In days gone by some aeons ago/
That name my youthful pulses stirred/
I thrilled whene’er
she whispered low/
Ran to her when her voice I heard/
Ah Minnie! How our feelings
change/
For now I hear your voice with dread/
And hasten to get out of range/
Ere you

⁷⁴ *The Gasper*, 21 (September 30, 1916), 7.

me on the landscape spread.⁷⁵

Here, the poet's language implicitly compares the terrifying sensation of being shelled to a relationship with a woman that has gone sour. Through the feminization of German shells, the poet certainly makes German artillery seem perhaps less overtly threatening, but he also demonstrates a certain suspicion of women on the part of soldiers, which only appears occasionally within the trench newspapers, along with a concern about the situation at home in England, evidenced by a cartoon from the September 4, 1915 *Lead-Swinger*. Above the caption, "What the girls are reduced to in war time," a younger woman is eyed with obvious interest by an elderly man, which the cartoon deems "the only man left."⁷⁶ Although the primary intent is humorous, beyond expressing some light dismay at the conditions for women at home, the cartoon also implicitly acknowledges, as early as 1915, the toll the war is taking on British men, if the "only man left" is an old one.

Sentiments such as those expressed directly above were rare, however. In the main, British soldier cartoonists and writers depicted women very favorably, though largely simplistically, as symbols of the life that was unavailable to them at the front. Beyond merely expressing what Robert Nelson calls the "'universal' themes of love, lust, and desire," the trench newspapers largely reinforce dominant conceptions of gender roles inherited from civilian life. Furthermore, by largely denying them a role in civilian stupidity, the British trench press perhaps denies them agency in the conduct and course of

⁷⁵ *The Somme Times*, 1, No. 1 (July 31, 1916), 5.

⁷⁶ *The Lead-Swinger*, 1, (September 15, 1915), 3.

the war as well.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Robert Nelson, "German Soldier Newspapers," 140.

V. Nation, Regiment, and Class

Without question, the most complicated set of relationships and identities mediated and examined by the trench newspapers were those between British soldiers themselves. In particular, the trench newspapers acknowledge the difference between other ranks, front-line officers, such as platoon and company commanders, and Staff officers, who spent far less time in the trenches. In his 2000 study, *Leadership in the Trenches*, G. D. Sheffield examines the question of officer-man relations in the British Army of the First World War. Sheffield argues that the relationship was largely a good one, based on reciprocity between officers and men. Men of other ranks gave the officers deference, while the officers adopted a paternalistic relationship toward the men.⁷⁸ Employing trench memoirs, regimental histories, and other evidence, Sheffield brilliantly argues that these values reflected broader values in British society. The paternalistic attitude toward the working class that many middle-class and aristocratic officers had inherited from the public school, university tradition in Britain was so ingrained in Army training, particularly at Sandhurst, that Sheffield argues that even lower- middle or working class men who became officers during the course of the war unconsciously adopted it.⁷⁹ Men of other ranks gave deference to officers who did not overstep their authority and officers often thought it their duty to provide the men with what they needed, but the Army did not provide. Siegfried Sassoon, for example, on leave just before the Somme offensive,

⁷⁸ G. D. Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches*, 178. See also Helen B. McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers: The Liverpool Territorials in the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 180.

purchased rubber-handled wire cutters in London, which he then distributed to his company upon returning.⁸⁰

Although relations between platoon and company commanders and their men were evidently relatively good throughout the war, tension certainly existed between Staff officers and the men fighting in the trenches. This often tense relationship is borne out by some of the most subsequently famous British poetry of the war. Siegfried Sassoon's own famous "Declaration" against the war certainly demonstrates suspicion and disdain for both the Staff officers and civilian leaders in Britain. Nevertheless, no widespread mutinies occurred in the British Army during the course of the war, unlike in the French, demonstrating the effectiveness of the various mechanisms on and behind the front for maintaining troop morale. Among these are the trench newspapers themselves, which demonstrate both the tension between Staff and front-line troops, but also the willingness of the General Staff, within the context of censorship, to allow humor at their expense. Thus, although reception of the trench journals was limited, they clearly demonstrate officers' confidence in the values they inherited from civilian life and their ability to maintain the morale and discipline of the troops, which they largely did.

Of course, more basic than the relationship between Staff and front-line troops was the relationship between men of a particular unit. British trench newspapers therefore contain numerous references to competing roles and identities within the ranks of a particular regiment or battalion, between officers and men of other ranks as well as between privates and sergeants. In a cartoon from the November 1917 *London Scottish*

⁸⁰ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 65.

Regimental Gazette, a sergeant-major asks a private, "I've said twice you did not shave this morning, why don't you answer?" The offending private, drawn by the cartoonist as having clearly not shaven, responds "there's nae answer, sir, you've stated a fact."⁸¹ Here, the cartoonist clearly employs a Scottish accent in the case of the private, while suggesting that the sergeant-major speaks 'proper' English, thus demonstrating a perceived difference between a relatively recent recruit and a professional soldier. Cartoonists in British trench newspapers often employ this difference in accent between privates and those of higher ranks to emphasize the separations created by rank and background. The officer or sergeant is typically depicted as politely confused or incredulous at a private's blunder, while the private innocently explains his mistake, usually using an accent that would have been recognized by British readers as distinctively working-class. Here again, one can see that the issue of class in the trench newspapers is a complex one. The sarcastic and even satirical treatment of working-class accents in British trench newspapers belies their primarily middle-class authors.⁸²

One excellent example comes from the September 30, 1916 *Gasper*, which features a cartoon, credited to a Charles R. Stanton, depicting a Quartermaster sergeant confronting a private about the loss of his kit. The private innocently explains, "I was just a'lookin over the top, innercent like, when I sees a bloomin' German. 'E bobs 'is 'ead,

⁸¹ *The Scottish Regimental Gazette*, 263 (November, 1917), 164. Spelling theirs.

⁸² For the life of the English working class leading up to 1914, see Standish Meacham, *A Life Apart: The English Working Class, 1890-1914* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977).

and I was so took aback I threw me bloomin' at at 'im."⁸³ The cartoon does not make clear whether or not the Quartermaster understood this explanation, but it does humorously convey the perceived gap in educational and social backgrounds between privates and the British Army's professional soldiers. Such a gap was construed in different ways, however. In a cartoon from the September 1916 *Direct Hit*, an orderly sergeant informs an "indisposed" private that "it's only officers what gits indisposed."⁸⁴ In this case, the humor is directed at officers, whom the cartoon suggests are able to relax in their duty while men of other ranks are not. Examples of these humorous encounters across lines of class and rank are innumerable in British trench newspapers. Furthermore, a British reader in the early twentieth century would undoubtedly detect further variations in the dialects, both by class and region, depicted in the newspapers than are clear to a U. S. historian writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, the most important characteristic of this kind of humor is that it is rarely the bitter humor often employed by writers and cartoonists when depicting soldiers' encounters with civilians. Therefore, although British soldiers' newspapers do recognize the social differences and frustrations between men of different ranks, these are typically treated as purely comic. The private can not help being blissfully foolish, just as the sergeant cannot help being politely perplexed. Comic treatments of officer-man relationships therefore also gloss

⁸³ *The Gasper*, 21 (September 30, 1916), 1. Spelling theirs, meaning he threw his hat at him.

⁸⁴ *The Direct Hit*, 1 (September, 1916), 19. Spelling theirs.

over the very real existence of formal discipline in the British Army.⁸⁵

The mostly middle-class officers who wrote and edited the trench newspapers also demonstrated a capacity to humorously depict themselves. A cartoon from the May 22, 1916 *New Church Times* depicts an officer under the heading, “Questions a platoon commander should ask himself.” According to the cartoonists, British platoon commanders need to consider, “am I as offensive as I might be?”⁸⁶ The question was actually a running joke in the various incarnations of *The Wipers Times*, in which the question, “Are we offensive as we might be” often appears unaccompanied within the text.⁸⁷ Obviously playing on the double meaning of ‘offensive,’ it is left to the reader to decide whether or not officers are as offensive toward the Germans as they might be, or whether they are personally offensive to other men. By treating these interactions differently than relationships between soldiers and civilians, British trench newspapers largely succeed in subsuming inter-regimental and inter-rank rivalries implicitly and explicitly within a broader identity for at least all British soldiers serving on the front, demonstrating the essentially conservative nature of much of the humor in these sources.

The trench newspapers save much of their more caustic humor for examining the relationship between Staff officers and other soldiers. Much of this humor plays off the relative ignorance of men at the front concerning what is to happen to them. A feature

⁸⁵ For a discussion of discipline in the British Army, see G. D. Sheffield, *Leadership in the Trenches*, 1-28.

⁸⁶ *The New Church Times*, 1, No. 3 (May 22, 1916), 6.

⁸⁷ E.g. *The Wipers Times*, 1, No. 3 (March 6, 1916), 7.

that appears in many different trench journals is, “Things we want to know,” in which the writers ponder over information unknown to them at the front, but presumably known by others, such as Staff officers. The following are selections from several trench newspapers of things soldiers wanted to know:

The name of the M. G. O. Who has come to the conclusion that the only reason the Hun planes visit Pop. is to bomb his camp. (The personelle of which, we believe, is three N. C. O.'s and one private.)⁸⁸

Who is the Colonel of the Field Ambulance who has lace-edging to his pillow?⁸⁹

Is this a sample of telegram usually sent by a Staff officer on taking over the command of a battalion-“Please send two bottles of whiskey by car to Lille Gate-Urgent”

The name of the officer who originated the idea.⁹⁰

Whether a distinguished general was not lately shot at dawn for referring to a private soldier's Field Service dress jacket as a Tommy's tunic.

When am I going to get MY LEAVE?⁹¹

The above are only a small selection from an enormously wide-spread feature in the trench newspapers. Clearly, these and other similar examples often express consternation at the perceived ignorance of Staff officers, often portraying their existence as much easier than the average soldier. Incredibly, one example strongly implies violence, asking whether a general was “shot at dawn” for saying something stupid to a private. Naturally, asking a

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸⁹ *5th Gloucester Gazette*, 13 (July 1916), 4.

⁹⁰ *The Wipers Times*, 2, No. 4 (March 20, 1916), 6.

⁹¹ *The Whizz-Bang*, 1, No. 1 (January 1916), 5.

question is significantly less threatening than making a declaration, which may partly explain how pieces such as these passed censorship. The existence of these grievances in trench newspapers largely edited by low-ranking officers demonstrates their own frustrations but also illuminates, once again, the intentional or unintentional leniency of regimental and divisional censorship, which allowed considerable criticism of officers into the trench magazines. Such leniency functioned in the trench newspapers to alleviate considerable inter-rank tensions through humor.

Contrary to the general pattern, however, expression of more outright anger toward officers also existed in the trench newspapers, despite censorship. One of *The Wipers Times* famous advertisements poses the following question:

To Harassed Subalterns.

Is your life miserable? Are you unhappy?

Do you hate your Company Commander?

Yes! Then buy him one of Our New Patent Tip Duck Boards

You get him on the end-The duck board does the rest.

Made in three sizes, and every time a "Blighty."

"If once he steps on the end, 'Twill take a month his face to mend"

Write at once and ensure happiness

The Novelty Syndicate, R. E. House Tel.: "Dump"⁹²

Albeit within a comic mode, this satirical advertisement expresses the possibility of causing a relatively low-ranking officer direct bodily harm, successfully sending him home to "blighty," and injuring him severely enough that it will "take a month his face to mend."

⁹² *The New Church Times*, 1, No. 2 (May 8, 1916), 3.

Such sentiments are remarkable not only in that they passed censorship but also inasmuch as they demonstrate that the reciprocal relationship between officers and men based on deference and paternalism came under significant strain during the war. Remarkably, due in part to trench newspapers and other forms of entertainment available to troops, that relationship never broke down completely.

British soldierly identity itself, however, was often further complicated by competing national and regimental loyalties. The December 1917 *London Scottish Regimental Gazette*, for example, featured a cartoon that depicts two sets of soldiers walking past each other in opposite directions in the midst of a bombed-out French village. The captions inform the reader that it in fact depicts a group of English soldiers speaking to a group of Scottish soldiers. 'Tommy,' a generic name that could signify any English soldier, asks 'Scottie,' "Hullo, Scottie! How's your mother?" The Scottish soldier responds in any evidently strong Scottish accent, "Fine, man; but neist time ye write hame tell *your* mither that ye hae seen the sodgers."⁹³ Here, as the English and Scottish soldiers glare rather malevolently at each other, the intent is clearly to draw a distinction between soldiers from English regiments, and "the sodgers" of the London Scottish Regiment. In this case, the phonetic depiction of the Scottish accent and the assertion that the English soldiers are not really soldiers at all clearly sets the members of the Scottish regiment apart and construes a unique regimental and national identity for them. Competing identities could also form between different types of regiments. The trench journals of infantry regiments, such as the *5th Gloucester Gazette*, often lamented that "the status of the

⁹³ *The Scottish Regimental Gazette*, 264 (December, 1917), 1. Emphasis theirs.

infantryman is a sad blot on our Nation's history," referring to the comparatively high pay of rear area troops.⁹⁴ Differences in pay between British and Dominion troops was also a cause of resentment according to Fuller, although references to Dominion troops are few in British trench newspapers.⁹⁵

It is impossible to assert, therefore, that the trench newspapers presented an uncomplicated common identity for all British soldiers serving on the Western Front. Significant tensions existed and are evident in the trench newspapers, particularly between the General Staff and the rest of the Army. Even between low-ranking officers, such as company commanders, and their subordinates, significant anger and tension existed. And yet, even within a system of official censorship, grievances were allowed expression. The trench newspapers therefore demonstrate that identity and power relationships within the British Army were constantly negotiated and trench newspapers provided one cultural space in which mediation took place. Similarly, sporting activities behind the lines allowed officers and men to compete against each other, subsuming conflict within a broader battalion or regiment identity.⁹⁶ The trench newspapers therefore do recognize and present a common identity for British troops, but one that acknowledges grievances and reciprocal obligations in order to maintain morale.

⁹⁴ *5th Gloucester Gazette*, 19 (June 1917), 21. Also quoted in J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale*, 76.

⁹⁵ J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale*, 76.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 85-94.

VI. The Enemy, Violence, and Technology

Two often interrelated questions in the study of the First World War are how the war was rhetorically justified by the various combatants, and how soldiers and civilians alike perceived and characterized the enemy. In Britain, Wellington House propaganda rhetorically justified the war as a defense of Belgian neutrality and perceived German encroachments against the British Empire. Fears in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries regarding Germany's naval expansion rested on an understanding that Britain's naval supremacy was necessary to defend the Empire. Moreover, British political propaganda emphasized the underlying necessity of defending Britain and Belgian neutrality against the barbarity of German soldiers and their atrocities in Belgium. Beyond occasional passing references to Belgian neutrality, no British trench newspaper makes a concerted effort to justify the war effort, nor are unambiguously negative depictions of German troops common. The editor of the *Wipers Times*'s reaction to the death of Lord Kitchener is the exception rather than the rule. Robert Nelson argues that German soldier newspapers rarely contained simplistically negative depictions of Allied soldiers. French, British, and Dominion troops were typically portrayed as fellow comrades in arms, to be respected. A common motif, according to Nelson, was to portray Allied soldiers as pitiable because they did not know why they were fighting the German Army.⁹⁷ British trench newspapers on the whole are silent on the formal justification for the war, and largely only attack German soldiers through humor. The most scathing humor is typically reserved for the Kaiser himself.

⁹⁷ Robert Nelson, "German Soldier Newspapers," 74-77.

Beginning with its December 22, 1915, edition, *The Gasper* addressed the issue of Belgian neutrality sardonically in the form of a play, "A Scrap of Paper," described as a "burlesque in three acts," in which the Kaiser searches in vain for a missing piece of paper, an obvious reference to Bethmann Hollweg's famous dismissal of the treaty guaranteeing Belgian neutrality as a "scrap of paper." In the play, the Kaiser is a bumbling fool who is constantly making pronouncements such as "might is right" while pinning iron crosses on the two detectives he has hired to find the missing paper.⁹⁸ Here, the play does not discuss the issue of Belgian neutrality as a legitimate *casus belli*, but as a farce. The examples of outright anger at Germans or satirical characterizations of the Kaiser were altogether quite rare in British trench newspapers, however, and direct discussions of the individual killing of Germans are nonexistent. Due to the lack of overt discussions of the enemy, it is perhaps unsurprising that discussions of violence and technology were mainly humorous in the trench press.

It is easy to forget when reading trench newspapers the ever-present realities of trench warfare for the average British soldier on the Western Front. Concerning the industrialized warfare of the First World War, George Mosse has correctly and eloquently argued that:

Death was always present, confronted not only in battle but also in no man's land and in the trenches themselves. Soldiers used unburied corpses as support for their guns and as markers to find their way in the trenches; they sometimes took off those boots of fallen soldiers that were in better condition than their

⁹⁸ *The Gasper*, 12 (January 29, 1916), 3.

own.⁹⁹

The ever present reality of violent death in the trenches is only obliquely addressed in British newspapers through the use of humor, such as in the cartoons and poetry examined above, or through the listings of casualties. Even in the case of the latter, it is still a distinctly sanitized depiction of death in the trenches. Never is the cause of death discussed in any detail. More problematic still, is that violence and death are only obliquely referred to as phenomena that happen to British soldiers. The killing of the enemy is never explicitly discussed in British trench newspapers, certainly not on the individual level. Cartoons may depict British shells flying overhead, but such cartoons never describe where they are going, nor what they will do if they hit German soldiers. Staphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker have notably argued that in the cultural memory of the Great War, “death is always inflicted, always anonymous, never dispensed: one is always a victim of it.”¹⁰⁰ In British trench newspapers, therefore, a realistic depiction of human agency as a cause of violence, for either the victim or the perpetrator, is lacking. The reasons for this are many. As many of the above examples demonstrate, oblique or humorous discussion of death and violence as it happened to British soldiers did occur, but more direct discussions are absent. For example, none of the trench newspapers discuss dismemberment or permanent disability even though soldiers would certainly have been aware of this risk. Such discussions would certainly not have served

⁹⁹ George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 5.

¹⁰⁰ Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War*. Translated by Catherine Temerson (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 2.

to boost morale. In terms of inflicting violence on Germans, the lack of realistic depictions is most likely due to the anonymity of trench warfare for most trench soldiers and the fact that, despite Joanna Bourke's protests to the contrary, evidence suggests that the bulk of men did not relish the prospect of killing.¹⁰¹ Either way, more nuanced discussions of violence would not boost morale.

It is important to note, as well, that much of the death and violence suffered by soldiers of the First World War occurred on an unprecedented scale largely due to new technology that respective nations employed for the first time during the war, including tanks, artillery, poison gas, flame throwers, and although it had been used before, the machine gun. The trench newspapers responded to these new technologies mainly through humor, reflecting the overall attitude of most of the newspapers to industrialized death and violence in general. The German Army used the flamethrower, or *Flammenwerfer*, for the first time in February 1916 against French forces at Verdun, but the very next month *The Wipers Times* reacted to its use in a familiar mode:

Has your boy a mechanical turn of mind? Yes!

Then buy him a FLAMMENWERFER

Instructive-Amusing

Both young and old enjoy, this nasty little toy.

Guaranteed absolutely harmless

Thousands Have Been Sold.

Drop a postcard to Messrs. Army, Research and Co., when a handsome illustrated

¹⁰¹ See Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (London: Granta Books, 1999), 1-22.

catalogue will be sent to you.¹⁰²

Here, *The Wipers Times* simultaneously expresses a measure of disgust at the use of flamethrowers (a “nasty little toy”), some reassurance concerning its effectiveness (“absolutely harmless”), and expresses some desire to acquire one (“drop a postcard to . . . Army, Research, and Co”). The above perfectly illustrates the ambivalent attitude of the trench newspapers toward new military technology, expressing both disdain and desire through humor.

The British were the first to use tanks, with some limited success, in August 1916 on the Somme. Tanks, evidenced by the terror they initially inflicted on German soldiers when first used, were at the time a seemingly bizarre new technology of war that has subsequently become synonymous with modern warfare.¹⁰³ The trench newspapers expressed a great deal of ambivalence about the use of tanks. A cartoon from the December 1916 *5th Gloucester Gazette* provides unique commentary on the new technology. Under the heading, “Tanks again,” the cartoon depicts a horse in the middle of an enormous spiked, metal wheel with machine guns mounted to the side. It is unclear whether or not a soldier is riding the horse. This new mechanized horse crushes German soldiers in its path while shells glance harmlessly off of it. The caption beneath reads, “Why not make use of our mobile veterinary section?”¹⁰⁴ The cartoon is an elegant

¹⁰² *The Wiper Times*, 2, No. 4 (March 20, 1916), 1. See Figure 9.

¹⁰³ John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Random House, 2000), 297-298.

¹⁰⁴ *5th Gloucester Gazette*, 16 (December 1916), 1. See Figure 10.



**THE
WIPERS TIMES.
OR
SALIENT NEWS.**

No. 4. Vol. 2. Monday, 20th March, 1916. Price 50 CENTS.

**HAS YOUR BOY A MECHANICAL TURN
OF MIND? YES!**

—••••—
THEN BUY HIM A

FLAMMENWERFER
INSTRUCTIVE—AMUSING.

—••••—
Both young and old enjoy.
This natty little toy.

—••••—
GUARANTEED ABSOLUTELY HARMLESS

—••••—
Thousands Have Been Sold.

—••••—
Drop a postcard to Messrs. ARMY, RESEARCH and CO., when a handsome illustrated
catalogue will be sent you.

Figure 9. *The Wipers Times*, 2, No. 4 (March 20, 1916), 1.

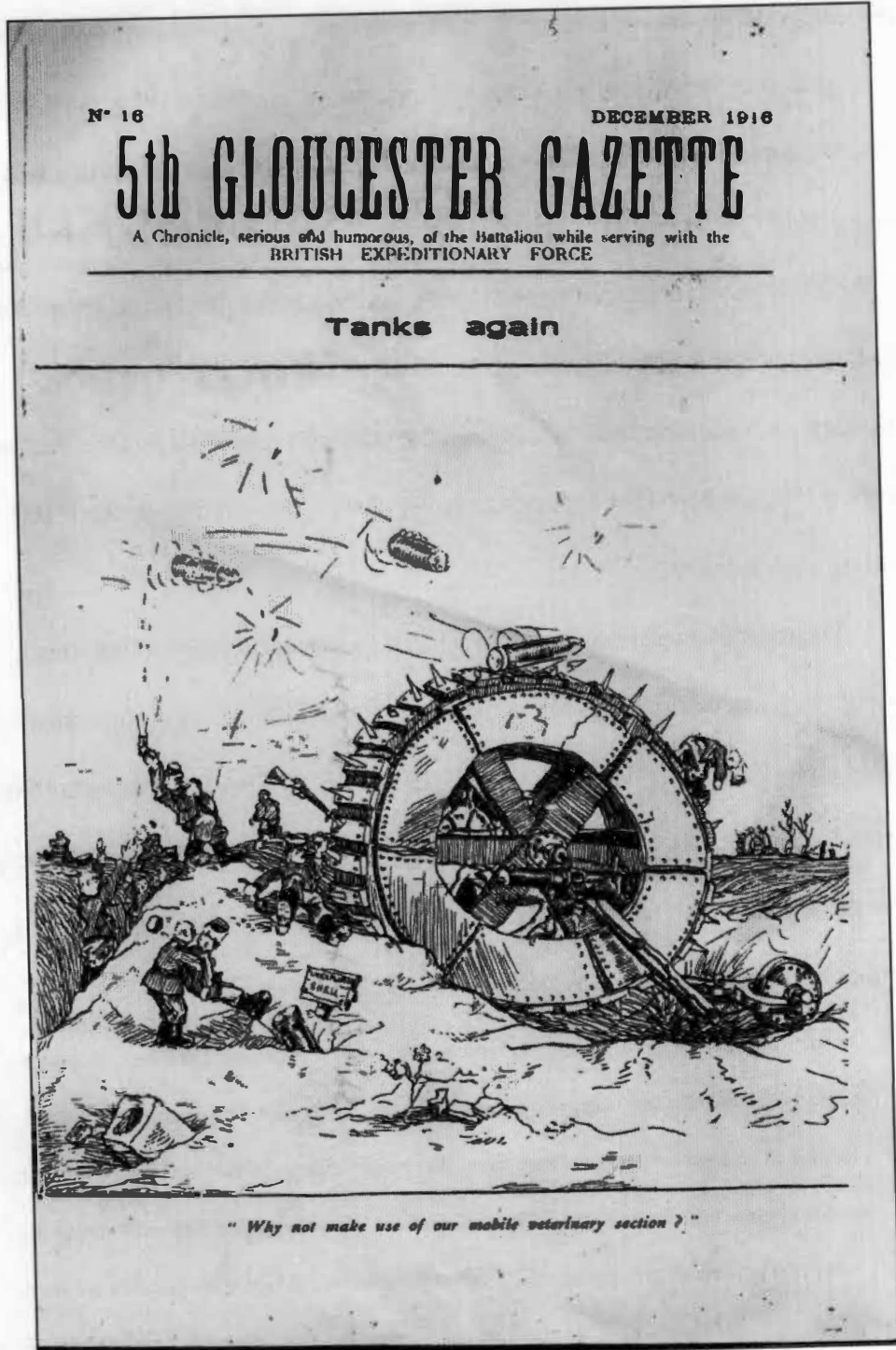


Figure 10. *The 5th Gloucester Gazette*, 16 (December 1916), 1.

commentary on the drastic changes in both tactics and technology that occurred during the First World War. By the time the cartoon appeared at the end of 1916, no hope remained on the Western Front for an effectual cavalry charge against German barbed wire and machine guns. Here, however, the old technology is married to the new with spectacular results. The cartoon is particularly intriguing in that it is the production of an officer-edited magazine of a Territorial battalion, which emerged partly out of the rural Yeomanry. It is possible that, to a degree, the cartoon expresses a fantasy on the part of an officer that still hopes for a glorious cavalry charge, but it is equally likely that it is satirizing such a desire.

The most common expression in regards to new technology in the trench newspapers, particularly in regards to the tanks, is one of hope. It is hope, however, mingled with skepticism. The December 1, 1916 *B. E. F. Times* expresses both hope for the success of the tanks while simultaneously mocking civilian journalism. In the article, "How the Tanks Went Over," Teech Bomas, a running joke in *The Wipers Times*, describes his experience in a tank battle:

In the grey and purple light of a September morn they went over. Like great prehistoric monsters they leapt and skipped with joy when the signal came. It was my great good fortune to be a passenger on one of them. How can I clearly relate what happened? All is one chaotic mingling of joy and noise. No fear! How could one fear anything in the belly of a perambulating peripatetic progolodymythorus. Wonderful, epic, on we went, whilst twice a minute the 17 in. Gun on the roof barked our defiance. At last we were fairly amongst the Huns. They were round us in millions and in millions they died. Every wag of our creatures tail threw a bomb with deadly precision, and the mad, muddled,

murderers melted. . .¹⁰⁵

Here, *The B. E. F. Times* satirically describes a tank as some sort of primordial beast that cuts down Germans by the millions. Clearly, the piece expresses significant skepticism, through humor, of the tanks' ability to decisively win the war, but it is equally clear that the article does express some whimsical hope that the tanks could defeat the Germans. Equally interesting is that the tank is depicted as a creature seemingly beyond anyone's control, that destroys the enemy by wagging its tail. Most likely unintentionally, the author expresses the thought that the technology of war had grown beyond the agency of an individual soldier to control. Similar to the cartoon discussed above, the piece seems to express a desire to make technology familiar, rather than alienating: a horse in new clothing rather than a mere machine, an enormous, friendly animal, rather than arbitrary guns. Here, the cartoon restores technology to the control of the individual soldier. Although both pieces depict or describe the deaths of German soldiers, they are rather sanitized and anonymous deaths. The soldiers in the cartoon are comically squashed by the horse-machine, and the German who die "in millions" in the second piece are faceless and nameless.

Such a lack of realistic depictions of violence in British trench journals is of enormous historiographical significance because the legacy of industrialized warfare is of critical importance within the historiography of the twentieth century as a whole. What was the legacy of the First World War's industrialized violence for the remainder of the twentieth century? Omer Bartov argues that the mass, mechanized killing first witnessed

¹⁰⁵ *The B. E. F. Times*, 1, No. 1 (December 1, 1916), 10.

from 1914-1918 laid the groundwork for the industrialized slaughter of the rest of the century, including the Holocaust itself.¹⁰⁶ Few, however, have written about the legacy of the Great War as lucidly and convincingly as George Mosse who, in his *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, argues that the “Myth of the War Experience,” though it existed prior to World War I, was compounded by it, which partly led to what Mosse considers to be a trivialization of violence and the taking of human life in the twentieth century.¹⁰⁷ Questions concerning cultural change and the effect of violence on combatants, therefore, permeate much of the work of the war’s most prominent cultural historians, and raise important questions about how historians should view British trench newspapers. Historiographically, the broader question of how World War I veterans of all nations remembered their own role in carrying out violence is a question of enormous importance in studying European societies of the interwar period.

¹⁰⁶ Omer Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 34.

¹⁰⁷ George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 7-11.

VII. Conclusion

Some of the last words of this study should be given to the trench newspapers themselves. A poem from the May 8, 1916 *The New Church Times* expresses perfectly the overarching sentiment expressed in the trench journals in a poem called “Minor Worries:”

If the Hun lets off some gas-Never mind/ If the Hun attacks in mass-Never mind/ If your dug-out's blown to bits/ Or the C.O.'s throwing fits/ Or a crump your rum jar hits-Never mind/ If your trench is mud knee-high-Never mind/ You can't find a spot that's dry-Never mind/ If a sniper has you set/ Through dents in your parapet/ And your troubles fiercer get-Never mind/ If you're whizzbanged day and night-Never mind/ Bully all you get to bite-Never mind/ If you're on a working party/ Let your grin be wide and hearty/ Though the sappers may be tarty-Never mind/ If machine guns join the muddle-Never mind/ Though you're lying in a puddle-Never mind/ If a duckboard barks your shin/ And the barbed wire rips your skin/ 'Tis reward for all your sin-So never mind/ But this warning I'd attest-Have a care/ When your Div. Is back at rest-Then beware/ When that long three months is over/ And you've lost your canteen cover/ Shoot yourself or find another-Have it there/ Have you all your drill forgotten-Luckless wight/ Through those months so rain besotten-Day and night/ On the left you'll form platoon/ Willy nilly, six till noon/ Front line trench will seem a boon-Drill's a rite/ Oh! You poor unhappy thing-Be not sad/ Just remember when all's wrong-And you're mad/ Though your worries may be great/ They're but part, at any rate/ Of old Fritz's awful fate-Buck up, lad!¹⁰⁸

The poem presents of veritable laundry list of privations and difficulties of not only life at the front but life in the British Army more generally, many inflicted by officers, including drill. The poet concludes, however, by explicitly calling for troops to endure their

¹⁰⁸ *The New Church Times*, 1, No. 2 (May 8, 1916), 5.

hardships and remember that it is for the worthy cause of defeating the German Army. The poem contains an implicit call for soldiers to identify with each other through their collective suffering and persevere.

Both Robert Nelson and J. G. Fuller have been correct in arguing for the essentially conservative nature of British trench newspapers in that they do, as in the poem directly above, encourage front-line British soldiers to identify with one another and endure their collective hardships. As this study has tried to demonstrate, the trench newspapers are very complex and varied cultural productions that contain a strange combination of the pious, the angry, the satirical, and the whimsical. Their reception by soldier readers was limited, but that does not diminish their importance as telling sources for studying the cultural history of the Great War. They were compiled and edited by officers and some non-commissioned officers who enjoyed wide scope within the confines of censorship to express soldierly grievances. The trench newspapers therefore functioned as cultural spaces that mediated and negotiated identity and power within British Army. The British soldiers who served in the trenches were not fundamentally alienated from civilian life, nor did they inhabit an utterly separated world. Similarly, one will not find evidence of a 'trench mind' or a mystical *Frontgemeinschaft*. The soldiers who wrote the trench newspapers inhabited two worlds, the civilian world they had known before the war as well as life on the front. Due to the close geographic proximity of the front, soldiers could stay informed concerning life in Britain, and the trench newspapers demonstrate soldiers' deep engagement in the civilian world. They therefore functioned as a propaganda of identity and endurance that mediated and negotiated the hegemonic

cultural values of the British Army.

By mediating the often conflicting relationships and identities within the British Army, the trench newspapers provide insight into how the British officers and men of other ranks viewed their roles in the Army and in British society more broadly. The issue of class and the trench newspapers is perhaps the most difficult facing the historian. Although some trench newspapers were exclusively officer-edited and others compiled by men of other ranks, this difference did not result in differing tones or styles. In fact, the officer-edited *Wipers Times* contains some of the most pointed criticism of officers, both front-line and General Staff. It is equally difficult to quantify the class backgrounds of the officers and men involved in writing the trench newspapers. Moreover, the use of 'middle-class' as an adjective in this essay is not an exact term, due to both the fact that it could refer to men of many different professions and the fact that we have no concrete biographical information on any trench newspaper writers or editors. Based on the work of J. G. Fuller and G. D. Sheffield, it is clear that Britain's wartime army was largely a mixture of the remnants of the Regular battalions, Territorial divisions, and New Army volunteers. Essentially, Britain's prewar army formed the skeleton for the enormous wave of volunteers in 1914 and 1915. All evidence suggests that it was largely these men, rather than later conscripts, who wrote and edited trench newspapers. On the whole, questions and conflicts of rank and status *within* the army are more important in the trench newspapers than broader issues of class in British society.

Moreover, because they are uncolored by "subsequent experience or selective memory," British trench newspapers remain distinctly unique cultural productions of the

Great War.¹⁰⁹ If the Great War did represent a shift from the ‘traditional’ to the ‘modern,’ trench newspapers existed in that transition, just as they lay at the crossroads of civilian and military life. From this unique perspective, they allowed their writers and editors to explore the tensions and complaints of military life through the lens of both their own military training and their previous lives as civilians. Thus, competing, but equally valid to the minds of soldiers, values collided in the trench newspapers. What loyalty do soldiers owe their generals? Their civilian superiors? The society they are ostensibly protecting? These are not inconsequential questions. In 1917, some French soldiers chose to mutiny in response to the unique difficulties they faced. After the war, ideologues and politicians in many countries, including National Socialists in Germany, idealized the trench experience for their own political ends. It is well worth demonstrating, therefore, the connections between civilian and military life even in wartime. Historically, the trench newspapers merit study not simply because they provide a unique perspective on trench warfare, but also because they are invaluable in determining how officers attempted to maintain their men’s morale in many different theaters of the war. They can also grant historians valuable insight into how many of the men who went to war in 1914 and 1915 understood their relationship to one another, to women, and to society more broadly. By allowing their authors to discuss and mediate the tensions and grievances of army life on the Western Front, British trench newspapers encouraged soldiers to identify with one another and thus acted as a propaganda of identity and endurance. The writings of soldiers who fought in the Great War are often all that remain of their lives. Trench

¹⁰⁹ J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale*, 20.

newspapers should, therefore, form an integral part of any cultural memory of the Great War and richly warrant further study by historians, although, as demonstrated, they confound simple analysis.

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Vita

Neal Davidson was born in Frankfort, Kentucky in 1981. He grew up in East Tennessee, where he attended Bearden High School. He ultimately earned his B.A. from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in 2003. Having completed his M.A. in May 2006, he plans to pursue his Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.