

University of Windsor
Scholarship at UWindsor

History Publications

Department of History

2014

Soldier Newspapers

Robert L. Nelson
University of Windsor

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/historypub>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nelson, Robert L.. (2014). Soldier Newspapers. *1914-1918-Online International Encyclopedia of the First World War*.

<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/historypub/237>

This Contribution to Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.

Soldier Newspapers

By [Robert L. Nelson](#)

Soldier newspapers are a massive, yet little used primary source of the First World War. They were read and written by the almost universally literate men at or near the front in the French, British, and German armies. Although they were shaped by both official censorship as well as powerful self-censorship, these newspapers were popular. Importantly, they were purchased by a soldier audience seeking both reassurance and justification. Each army found itself in a different context. Although each set of newspapers depicts elements of a universal experience for all soldiers, they also unsurprisingly indicate the distinct national experiences of each army.

Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Soldier Newspapers: History, Production, Authorship](#)
 - [2.1 The Pre-1914 History of Soldier Newspapers](#)
 - [2.2 Production](#)
 - [2.3 Authorship](#)
 - [2.4 Censorship](#)
- [3 Themes of the Soldier Newspapers: Daily Life, Humour, the Enemy, and Women](#)
 - [3.1 Daily Life](#)
 - [3.2 Humour](#)
 - [3.3 The Enemy](#)
 - [3.4 Women](#)
- [4 Soldier Newspapers and National Difference: France, Britain, Germany](#)
 - [4.1 French Soldier Newspapers](#)
 - [4.2 British Soldier Newspapers](#)
 - [4.3 German Soldier Newspapers](#)
- [5 Conclusion](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

Introduction

The newspapers created by and for soldiers, at or near the front, in the First World War (WWI), represent the single greatest shared print discourse of the war.^[1] The many millions of [soldiers' letters](#), while often using the language of this shared discourse, were nevertheless private and almost always intended for a non-military audience. Soldier newspapers, however, were written for – and shared among – a massive, yet distinct community of (almost solely) men seeking daily justification and motivation for – and an understanding of – their often extreme circumstances. These were "club newsletters," in a manner of speaking. Both the authors and the readers were members of the same club, away from home, every one of them familiar with

\$Soldier Newspapers - 1914-1918-Online

the threat of mortal danger. Like letters, newspapers were the victim of both official and self-censorship, and like letters they must always be read with a critical eye. But they were enormously popular and were read (or read aloud and listened to) by millions. Therefore, they cannot be dismissed as mere propaganda.^[2] They function as lenses through which one sees elements of the daily life of soldiers, catches glimpses of humour, and beholds visions of women (both loyally on the home front and not so "loyally" behind the lines). But interestingly, for the most part in these pages there are no depictions of the enemy, at least not the portrayals endorsed by home front propaganda. Finally, the similarities and differences between the newspapers of the German, French and British armies illustrate the many ways in which the soldiers of each nation participated in the same war, but with intriguing disparities accounted for by the very different circumstances each army confronted.^[3]

Soldier Newspapers: History, Production, Authorship

The Pre-1914 History of Soldier Newspapers

Just as the Americans managed to conduct their revolution shortly before the French, so did Nathanael Greene's (1742-1786) colonial troops' *South Carolina Gazette* of 1782 beat out Napoleon I, Emperor of the French's (1769-1821) *France vue de l'Armée d'Italie* and *Le Courier de l'Armée d'Italie*, both founded in 1796, as the first example of a soldier newspaper. Only somewhat later, while in fact fighting Napoleon's forces, did the Germans print their initial soldier newspapers, the first was in both German and Russian at Vitebsk and appeared in 1812. One year later, in October 1813, Prussian Headquarters produced the *Feldzeitung*, which ended its run seveny-nine issues later in Paris on 29 April 1814.^[4] Although the Americans again produced soldier newspapers – such as during the war and occupation in Mexico (1846-48) – in Europe, the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) seems to have moved too quickly and ended too abruptly to produce any such literature. While there was one fascinating product of the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901), the *Pekinger Deutsche Zeitung*, there are surely some as yet unearthed newspapers from the many imperial endeavours of the British and French in the 19th century.^[5] Soldier newspapers required time, a certain amount of stability, literate soldiers and some specialized equipment. While such circumstances were clearly a rarity from 1782 to 1914, the following four years would provide the best set of conditions for such production that the world had ever seen, and would perhaps ever see again.

Production

The first soldier newspaper of the Great War was actually an amalgam of both soldier interests and those of the civilian population, with whom the soldiers were in very close contact. The *Kriegszeitung der Feste Boyen und der Stadt Lötzen* was founded on 7 September 1914 in an East Prussia overrun with Russian troops. A mere week later on the Vosges front, a notoriously quiet sector throughout most of the war, Staff Sergeant Edmeier of the Bavarian Army handwrote four copies of a leaflet full of stories and poems, tacked it to a tree near the front line, and thus birthed the war's first "trench" newspaper. It was called the *Hohnacker Neuste Nachrichten* and would eventually develop into the *Bayerische Landwehrmann*, entertaining several local units and peaking at a circulation of 2,000.^[6] Similar developments occurred on the other side of no man's land in the British and French armies, as the front lines became ever more permanent. By early 1915, the German army's support for soldier newspapers began to far surpass that of the French and the British armies. It supported the foundation of "army"-level newspapers, which often matched the professionalism and polish of the home front dailies and enjoyed circulations over 50,000.

Initially, small newspapers were produced in a bunker with a mimeograph. Eventually, as readership grew, a dedicated space was required. This was usually a building commandeered to handle the editorial duties and house the "found" printing presses. These publishing establishments were located up to thirty kilometres behind the lines, such as in Lille. In some Allied cases, the actual printing occurred back in Paris or London. The military postal system provided distribution to paying subscribers; copies were also sold through military bookstores and at train stations. Although some of the most successful German soldier newspapers, such as the *Liller Kriegszeitung*, were able to cover their costs through paid advertising, most were purchased by their readers.^[7] Subscription costs importantly distinguish soldier newspapers from mass-printed military propaganda broadsheets, which were produced without the input of frontline soldiers and distributed freely. Soldier newspapers were bought by troops, and thus meant something to the soldier audience.

The British and Dominion armies created 107 distinct titles, few of which had a circulation of more than 5,000. At least 200 distinct titles appeared in the French army, and in mid-1916, between 75,000 and 132,000 copies were appearing each month.

While both of these collections were very rich and will be discussed throughout this essay, it is probably safe to say that the majority of French soldiers, and very likely a high percentage of British and Dominion soldiers, never saw a soldier newspaper. The case in the German army, however, is exactly the opposite. On the [Western Front](#) in 1916-17, at least 1.1 million soldier newspapers were being printed and distributed to German troops. On the much more "foreign" [Eastern Front](#), where home front newspapers were far more difficult to come by,^[8] that monthly number surpassed 2 million. To understand what that means in terms of saturation: in 1916 there were 3 million German soldiers on the Western Front and 1.0 to 1.5 million in the East. There were at least 110 distinct titles and thus, while the French produced more distinct titles, they were smaller "trench" level newspapers that never reached anywhere near the number of readers as the German newspapers. It is therefore unlikely that any German soldier in the First World War spent more than a few weeks at or near the front without reading or listening to a soldier newspaper.

Authorship

There exists enough evidence about the editors of the soldier newspapers to make some generalizations about who they were. In general, they were educated, middle-class, low-ranking officers, often from a belletristic background (authors and journalists). They were likely to be older and of a more conservative leaning. That last assertion can be made due to the simple fact that already by early 1915, a separation was occurring. The faster, more idealistic (i.e. younger) men, with "only" their lives to lose, were at the front lines, while older, slower, family men, who tended to more openly complain and be somewhat more conservative in their politics and with their lives, could be found in the rear, working in logistics or editing newspapers.^[9] The background information of those older editors can be somewhat pieced together for each army.

Unfortunately, there are few available details on the British editors. The solid information is that they were evenly split between officers and other ranks. The more conjectural evidence, based on what appeared in the newspapers, points to an educated background and familiarity with writing and [journalism](#). In the French newspapers, one third of the editors were other ranks while two thirds were officers and Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs). The prewar occupation of sixty French editors is also known. From that group, sixteen were artists or authors, thirteen worked in journalism, five were lawyers and four were teachers. The ranks of 180 German newspaper staff who could be identified were: thirty-four lower ranks, with the rest ranging from NCOs to officers. Of the 100 identified prewar occupations of German editors, thirty-two were in the publishing business, eighteen were artists and ten were teachers.

The common vision voiced by the editors was that the journals be a place promoting unit cohesion, where comradeship could be nurtured. The editors of the first issue of *Der Schützengraben*, on 22 August 1915, wrote:

This newspaper would like to hold more firmly and tightly the ribbon that binds us together, the members of this Corps. It is the spirited comradeship in both the world of the trenches as well as the larger corps area, which brings about an unforced exchange of our big and small experiences, in both curious and multifaceted ways. The humorous and childish, the reflective, serious and profound, should all be found here.

Similar declarations appeared in *The Vic's Patrol* – "to bring the different units within the Battalion into a more intimate relationship"^[10] – as well as the 1 August 1916 edition of *Le Poilu du 6-9*: "The only purpose of this paper is to inform our friends about regimental life and to strengthen, to draw tighter still if possible, the ties of friendship which unite them."

Censorship

Much like the individual letter writer penning a missive to his mother, the editors of the soldier newspapers had to deal with the dual constraints of both official censorship and the more mercurial nature of self-censorship. The letter writer knew there were many things he "officially" was not allowed to include in what he wrote to his mother, but he also had to decide whether or not to tell her everything he was *allowed* to write. The audience, that is, the mother of a soldier, did not want to know just how dangerous and horrifying her son's world truly was. In the case of the soldier newspaper editor, on the one hand, official censorship disallowed many things from appearing in the newspapers, including negative or pessimistic stories that could hurt morale. On the other hand, self-censorship, that is, carefully meeting the needs of the audience, was just as powerful a moderator on what the editors could and could not write.

The audience that daily experienced the realities and horrors of front line [warfare](#) did not want a newspaper that explicitly and

honestly walked through the realities and horror of front line warfare. These newspapers were purchased because they provided escape. This was not the complete escape that could be found in novels purchased at military bookstores. Instead, it was the escape depicted in stories about soldiers' lives, mainly behind the frontlines. The tales had to be truthful enough that the paying soldier audience found them acceptable, but not "real" enough that they simply told the story that war is hell. In fact, violence and no man's land appeared very rarely in any of the belligerent forces' soldier newspapers. But at the same time, there was no condemnation of that violence, no treasonously [pacifist](#) point of view put forward. Thus, editors could please the "higher ups" by eliminating anything "anti-war", but at the same time perhaps disappoint the upper echelons by tempering any "pro-war" messages that would have surely turned off their paying audience.

Lastly, while those "defending" on French soil could largely placate their audiences with escapism, the German editors and indeed audience needed something more: justification for [occupation](#). While not exactly a "pro-war" message, German editors did spend time catering to the needs of their audience in explaining how, in a "defensive" war, they all stood on foreign soil. Again, as opposed to pure "propaganda", such messages both pleased the censors but also appeased the desires of the audience.^[11]

Unsurprisingly perhaps, the British had the most lax system of official censorship, but again, not much is known about it. It was most succinctly laid out in *The Minden Magazine*:

We are not allowed to insert the names of the various places we go to; neither are we allowed to discuss too minutely the ins and outs of our prolonged misunderstanding and unpleasantness with the Germans. Neither are we permitted to criticise too freely our political enemies or friends.^[12]

The French formalized their censorship apparatus in March 1916, as laid out in the following circular of [Joseph Joffre \(1852-1931\)](#):

It has been brought to my notice that certain trench newspapers have been suppressed by order of staff officers in command of the corps publishing the papers. The aim of these papers is to divert and amuse the fighting men. At the same time they demonstrate to all that our men are full of confidence, cheerfulness and courage. The propaganda branch of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses the trench newspapers to demonstrate to the correspondents of foreign newspapers the excellent morale of our troops along the whole of the front. I consider that their publication should be viewed with goodwill as long as they do no harm to the army and on condition that their management is closely supervised, to avoid the publication of any article that does not fit in with the aim stated above. I would ask you to be so kind as to encourage the senior officers under your command to take heed of these considerations in relation to any trench newspapers which may be published by troops placed under your command.^[13]

[Philippe Pétain \(1856-1951\)](#) then further tightened this scrutiny after the 1917 mutinies, recommending that a copy of each issue be sent to general headquarters.

Again unsurprisingly, especially in light of the much greater seriousness with which Germans approached the whole business of soldier newspapers, control over German newspapers surpassed that seen in the Allied armies. In 1916, a *Feldpressestelle* (military press office) was instituted, and the man who oversaw newspaper censorship on the home front, Major [Walter Nicolai \(1873-1947\)](#), issued the following directive to soldier newspaper editors on 24 May 1916:

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

Some main points are emphasised:

A) Exclusion of everything that could be seen as having a religious, moral or political direction.

B) Especially protect the Civil Peace.^[14]

Similar to what the French would institute in 1917, it was ordered that two copies of each newspaper be sent to the *Feldpressestelle*. Lastly, in a move beyond anything seen on the Allied side, the *Feldpressestelle* sometimes wrote its own

articles and forwarded them to the major soldier newspapers in the hopes some would be printed. Again, clearly due to editors' fears that their paying audience would abandon them if they thought their beloved newspapers were becoming propaganda sheets, the *Feldpressestelle* complained bitterly that at most a third of the editors regularly included one of these articles. The pressure on the editors only increased in the latter half of 1917 with the introduction of [Erich Ludendorff's \(1865-1937\) "Patriotic Instruction"](#), leading to Nicolai's renewed hope that editors would partake in this intensified propaganda effort by including more of the *Feldpressestelle*-written articles.

Themes of the Soldier Newspapers: Daily Life, Humour, the Enemy, and Women

Daily Life

The irony evident in referring to anything in the First World War as quotidian, or "normal", was savagely mocked in the May 1915 edition of the British *Whizz-Bang*: a cartoon entitled "Scenes from our Daily Life" depicted an officer about to be decimated by an incoming shell. He asked "Oo called this Sanct-u-ary Wood?"^[15] More so than in the other armies, the British were rarely allowed to be truly "idle", and thus throughout their soldier newspapers there are many parodies of the word "rest". There was similarly little, if any, discussion of everyday life in French newspapers. Germans, on the other hand, were sometimes allowed to be "bored", and made fun of that fact: again, in the quiet Vosges sector, issue number three (n.d. 1915), of the small *Schützengrabenzeitung* was named the "Quiet Number", and featured a cartoon of a weary man standing behind a counter, with the caption, "A Day in the Life of the Baggage-Train, or, My God is this Boring".

Eastern Front German soldier newspapers did more often portray "daily" life, because this was one gigantic, relatively quiet sector. Indeed, one sketch "Position on the Shchara", depicts a vast no man's land with waist-high trenches on the German side and no discernable enemy line in the distance.^[16] Other Eastern Front newspapers discussed the boring, lice-infested, damp daily life. One whimsical cartoonist went so far as to metaphorically depict the hell of an endlessly drenched life with a sketch of a steel-helmed water monster emerging from a swampy trench.^[17] Life here was so quiet that one author, in the 31 February 1916 issue of the *Zeitung der 10. Armee*, complained that, as opposed to "war", soldiers in the East were taking part in something much more akin to "border patrol", and likened their position to the Roman "*Limes* against the Barbarians". And in yet another quiet sector, the Macedonian Front, an article in the 9 March 1917 *Kriegszeitung der 9. Armee* observed that there was only rarely evidence that a war was underway in the occasional long range [artillery](#) shell hurtling overhead.

As mentioned earlier, the soldier audience was little interested in the extreme violence and extreme boredom they already knew so well. There were virtually no depictions of the former and only a smattering of the latter. Soldier newspapers were purchased to provide escape and enjoyment, both of which were nevertheless to be grounded in the reality the audience understood.

Humour

The Latest War News

The Germans have taken Cascara Sagrada on the Dutch frontier.

The British admit the Germans have taken Cascara, but doubt their ability to hold it.

The enemy is evacuating all along the line, and the strain on their rear is tremendous.

The Germans are trying to suppress this, but it is leaking out in several places.

What price the scrap of paper now?

[The Press Bureau has no objection to our publishing this, but will take no responsibility as to its accuracy.]^[18]

Daily life in the trenches meant an endless cycle of stomach ailments and bowel issues. This provided a rich source of humour in the newspapers of all armies. Similar to the above-quoted British diarrhea-themed joke, a 1916 German newspaper contained this quip:

A man goes to the doctor and asks for medicine to counter his diarrhea. The doctor prescribes castor oil. Days go by. Doctor: 'Well? How are you, are you still coughing?' Soldier (with one hand on his stomach, the other holding onto the bottom end of his backbone): 'But doctor, dare I?'^[19]

And a French cartoon, in the November 1915 *La Bourguignotte*, depicted a new weapon: several soldiers had their rear ends bare and pointing toward the enemy while another fed them from a large pot labeled "beans".

While all soldier newspapers attempted humour, it is no exaggeration to claim that the British journals were completely saturated with it. The relentlessness with which everything was treated as a joke in these pages initially suggests that these were incredibly open and free editors. Yet, further reflection leads to a recognition that there was something deeply conservative, and indeed "self-censoring" in the nature of this humour. Much like the "culture of consolation" argument put forward about the counter-revolutionary effects of music hall,^[20] it is the eternally joking and "grousing" British soldier that ultimately never questions anything he is told. The French newspapers in general were much more serious in tone but they also indulged in scatological humour, as well as humour at the expense of women. One French cartoon entitled "Obsession", in the 15 January 1917 edition of *Tacatacteuftauf*, depicted a very large wife getting into bed with her horrified German husband, who yells, "No! No! ... Not the tanks! Not the tanks!" And in the same newspapers on 15 April 1917, there was a sketch of a woman cupping her naked breasts and declaiming, in reference both to her breasts and the troops at the front, "*Pourvu qu'ils tiennent!*" ("I hope they hold up!")

German soldier newspapers were similar to the French in their rare incidence of humour, but they nevertheless engaged in some scatology, as referenced above, as well as poking fun at things such as women's fashion. "Fashion in the Trenches" depicted women modeling belt-cinched trenchcoats, gas masks adorned with lovely necklaces, and [barbed wire](#) wrapped in the manner of a skirt.^[21] Additionally, there was one form of humour that surprisingly mocked the official Germanisation campaign against foreign words: in the 10 September 1915 *Liller Kriegszeitung*, the sketch "What a Man Heard and Saw while on Leave" showed someone taking down a "Coiffeur" sign above a shop. An onlooker then said, "Just right, Mr. Head Washer (Kopfwascher), away with the enemy's language!"

The Enemy

Soldier newspapers of the First World War furnish a very powerful argument against the so-called ["war culture"](#) thesis, the theory that the troops' deep hatred for the enemy fuelled their motivation and endurance.^[22] The fact of the matter is that there were virtually no negative depictions of the enemy in any of the armies' soldier newspapers. The absence of such images cannot be attributed to official censorship, for what could have pleased the high command of each army more than these newspapers whipping their men into a froth of hatred? And what could have put the editors into a better relationship with their superiors than the inclusion of hateful images of the enemy? The only explanation for their non-appearance must be that the paying soldier audience would not accept such images. [Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau's](#) conclusion in his study of the French soldier newspapers supports this view:

The soldiers assessed their comrades and their leaders by the yardstick of their courage under fire, and they judged the enemy by the same criterion: it was this which forbade the latter to be denigrated. Self-respect and respect for the enemy were inseparable.^[23]

The British almost always depicted the enemy with humour. Two examples from the *Minden Magazine* show the perceived similarity of the soldiers on both sides, while simultaneously making light of murderous violence: in the December 1915 issue, a German yelled from his trench that he had a wife in Birmingham, while the Tommy replied, "Get yer head down or there'll be a widow!" In the March 1916 issue another joke played out as follows: "T.A. (member of burying party): 'Sargint, 'eres a German wot aint quite dead.' Sergeant: 'Never mind; Shovel 'im in. You can't believe a word wot these bleeders sez.'" The French newspapers did not deal with the enemy humourously, and depicted them most rarely. In one of the few examples, *La Saucisse* of June 1916 told of two patrols, one French, one German, coming across each other in a misty no man's land. Just after silently passing each other, one of the Germans remarked "Sad war, gentleman, sad war!" The Germans, like the British, could poke

\$Soldier Newspapers - 1914-1918-Online

fun at the enemy: one cartoon entitled 'Peace Dream of a French Soldier' portrayed a dozing *poilu* fantasizing about a new suit.^[24] And in the 19 October 1915 *Liller Kriegszeitung*, there was a cartoon depicting the Eastern Front which, while in no way exhibiting "hatred", did manage to portray a cultural bias against Slavs: "Bravely 'forward'" depicted two illiterate Russian soldiers marching towards St. Petersburg because they could not read the sign.

Women

The same Eastern Front bias appeared with regard to the representation of women in the German soldier newspapers. While Lithuanian, Polish and sometimes Russian women were sketched or mentioned, they were almost never depicted as love interests. The inverse was the case in [occupied France](#). French women were relentlessly put forward as objects of German desire and clearly as the girlfriends of the soldiers in stories, poems and drawings. The only hint of cultural chauvinism on the Western Front were sketches that indicated that French women were ugly in the morning and that only after applying makeup and fancy clothes were they attractive, while German women were truly (and thus always) beautiful. Here one sees the argument that French civilization was but a thin patina, like mascara, whereas German *Kultur* was much deeper.

The British newspapers, while chaste in their drawings of women, could be bawdy with jokes that winked at the real meaning behind "*promener ce soir*", and over the top in nursery rhymes such as

Jack and Bill

Went up a hill

To see a Frenchman's daughter;

The Censor's here,

And so I fear

I can't say what they taught her.^[25]

And again, holding to national [stereotype](#), the French soldier newspapers were the most focused on the pursuit of women, especially the journal of the elite *Alpins*, *L'esprit du cor*, whose first six issues seem to be one long bragging session about the men's conquests: one cartoon, in the 30 June 1917 edition, depicted a naked woman lying in bed. She asked the soldier now dressing, "Well, well! My little soldier, what do you say to that counter-attack?" Unlike the other national newspapers it is difficult to tell when the French were discussing the women at home, or merely behind the lines. The depiction of French women on the home front was a complicated mixture of both praise as well as fear that these women were being unfaithful, expressed most luridly with cartoons featuring white French women cavorting with black African soldiers.^[26] Similar praise and worry were featured in the British newspapers, but relative to the French and German journals, they had little to say about the women at home.

German soldier newspapers, however, had much to say about those "faithful" women at home, and in doing so display an interesting gendered discourse on "loyalty." As already indicated, German soldiers were very open in their newspapers – though not in letters home – about their many relations with local women. Yet, German soldiers were constantly referred to as "faithful" men. This was because faithfulness for men referred to a sense of loyalty to the nation, and not simply the wife. This was a public, not private, faithfulness. In sharp contrast, German women described in the newspaper were always true to their men. They waited quietly and personally loyal on the home front. This juxtaposition between how soldiers and soldiers' wives were to behave was most powerfully depicted in the ironically titled "The Faithless Wife," in the 15 April 1917 *Sommewacht*. In this story, a soldier on leave attempts, unsuccessfully, to seduce his comrade's wife.

There was of course another category of women that defied easy labeling, yet were omnipresent behind the lines and often appeared in the soldier newspapers: [nurses](#). Interestingly, although depicted as white angels in the journals of each army, and

\$Soldier Newspapers - 1914-1918-Online

while clearly being publicly "faithful" to the nation much like a German soldier, nurses were nevertheless described in the newspapers as objects of relentless sexual desire. There were German stories of soldiers obsessing about the "touch" from the hands of the sisters, and British paeans to past nurses, but in a telling example of the seriousness of the French newspapers, the January 1916 edition of *Bellica* depicted a nurse on her knees washing the feet of a soldier who had lost both arms. Similarly uncomfortable sketches never appeared in British or German newspapers.

Soldier Newspapers and National Difference: France, Britain, Germany

French Soldier Newspapers

Whether with the sketch of an amputee or with such "jokes" as this one – "The rank stupidity of the army and vastness of the sea are the only two things which can give an idea of infinity"^[27] – the French soldier newspapers set themselves apart from the British and German with a certain seriousness and frankness that could be quite striking. Unlike the British making jokes of everything or the Germans' overwhelming focus on justifying their presence on foreign soil, the French editors clearly had no reason to explain, justify or make light of things. The situation was dire, and the war – the defense of France – required no explanation. Soldier newspapers reveal the constant justification and legitimation soldiers required for the horrible things they were constantly asked to do, except in the circumstances of obvious defense on home soil. Every French soldier, whether he liked it or not, whether or not he wanted to fight or flee, knew why he was in the trenches. Such a recognition of the situation by the audience freed the editors from any explanations, and in fact allowed them to actually criticize their superiors sometimes. Although there were moments in the British and German newspapers where a mildly pejorative tone towards parliamentarians appeared, there was nothing like the following passage from the 1 September 1917 issue of *Le Gafouilleur*:

Truly wiped out by the hard sessions of the House – whose unhealthy fetid odors are well known – our deputies decided to take a vacation. They will rest their minds, tortured by the anguishing questions resolved this year. [...] So deputies, have a [censored] happy vacation, enjoy the sun and countryside. Don't you do anything: [censored]. And if for a few months we don't have your sessions, we will still have the shells we mentioned, for there are Germans in France.

Thus, in a way peculiar to the French newspapers, underneath the naked women, the occasional jokes, and often viscous honesty, there is the stubborn but quiet acceptance of what needs to be done for the nation, a mood Audoin-Rouzeau called *sentiment national*. But it must again be noted that, similar to British and German newspapers, this national sentiment did not involve hatred of the enemy, for the enemy was rarely depicted or discussed. Although German atrocities were a major feature of home front French newspapers, the *poilu* dismissed "baby-killing" and other atrocities as eye-wash. French soldier newspapers provide no evidence of a "war culture," the theory that hatred of the enemy was a prime motivator for combatants in World War One.

British Soldier Newspapers

The tone of the British soldier newspapers, while similar to their French allies in lacking any distinct hatred for "Fritz," was otherwise quite different from either their French or German counterparts. As evidenced already, almost everything in these journals was presented as comic relief. The author of a 1940 article entitled "They laughed at war", correctly claimed that "the keynote of the British journals was humour."^[28] Psychologically, the British occupied a murky ground somewhere between the French, confident in their moral position, and the occupying Germans, constantly reminding themselves that they were the gentlemanly defenders of *Kultur*. While the British could easily see themselves as "defending," as they stood shoulder to shoulder with their French allies on French soil, it was much more difficult to tell themselves that they were defending "Britain." It surely goes without saying that the British soldier newspapers did not even begin to discuss the fact that for the last half-millennium the British had constantly been at war with the French, and for the last two centuries often allied with the Germans. John Fuller argued that the manner with which the British successfully dealt with this abstract notion of "defense" while on French soil, was that the British thought of themselves as defending a certain "way of life," that if the Germans reigned supreme on the Continent, life simply could not, and would not continue as before in Albion.

While humour was part and parcel of that British "way of life," so was the unifying, cross-class popular culture of British music hall. The songs and skits of this form of entertainment were much more prominent in the British journals than either the French or German. Because both officers and enlisted men had attended the same theatres in Britain and could sing the same songs, a

bond existed between officers and men in the British soldier newspapers that was not found in the other nations' journals. But again, this cross-class singing and humour, while always possessing an element of "grumbling," was also a conservative acceptance of the circumstances, another way to grin and bear it. As noted above, Gareth Stedman Jones' idea of a "culture of consolation" seems to hold very true for the British soldier newspapers of the First World War.

German Soldier Newspapers

The most striking manner with which German readers of soldier newspapers consoled themselves seemed to be by depicting themselves as good, gentlemanly comrades.^[29] Everywhere German readers and the editors of German soldier newspapers found themselves on occupied, foreign soil, yet soldiers tend not to want to see themselves as aggressive conquerors, but rather as "defenders," and indeed, it was in full knowledge of this that the German government had always framed this as a "war of defense." Thus, perhaps as a balm against feelings of insecurity in at least appearing to be the aggressor, the newspapers were full of stories of the faith and loyalty of German soldiers as well as German women on the home front. The journals were constantly detailing acts and stories of great comradeship between soldiers. In the rare depictions of the violent front lines, there were occasional stories of rescue in no man's land, of comrades saving comrades, but never about actually killing the enemy.

On both fronts, but especially the Eastern Front, the German audience found itself in foreign territory, among foreign civilians and foreign languages. The newspapers were full of local culture and history, told with a perspective that clearly suggested that the German presence in [France](#) or Lithuania was good for the occupied. To a certain extent France, but to a much greater extent Eastern Europe was depicted as backward and in need of German know-how and order. Thus, in addition to being good comrades to each other, upstanding German soldiers were portrayed as gentlemen occupiers lifting the poor local civilians up to a higher standard of living in a version of the "*mission civilisatrice*" normally found overseas.

These elements of a gentlemanly, indeed a "manly," defensive justification of Germany's role in the war was most clearly seen in the sketches of armoured knights. From 1916, but much more frequently during the last ever more desperate months from the summer of 1918, German soldiers as medieval knights holding back the onslaught of the Allied powers became a popular theme in the newspapers. It is this last theme, a fairy tale-like escapism to both understand and justify "holding out," that most clearly demarcates the German soldier newspapers from those of the Allies. The German newspapers were at the far end of the sliding scale of justification, one that begins with the serious and honest tone of unapologetic French editors defending *la patrie*, through the more fanciful and elaborate obscurantism of humour and songs with "normally" French-hating British editors defending France, to the haughty escapism of German authors justifying aggressive occupation on French soil. Each audience had different needs and each set of soldier newspapers responded to those needs differently.

Conclusion

Soldier newspapers can provide a lot of information on what soldiers wanted to read about, and what they in fact read. They craved articles about the women just behind the lines; they did not want details about the horrors of no man's land. The British read the newspapers in order to laugh, to "muddle through," while the Germans sought information about the occupied populations behind the lines in order to feel better about their role on foreign soil. Although soldier newspapers should be read with a critical eye, the soldier-to-soldier discourse found in these newspapers is a crucial addition to our understanding of what soldiers read and believed from 1914 to 1918.

Robert L. Nelson, University of Windsor

Section Editors: [Dominik Geppert](#); [David Welch](#)

Notes

1. ↑ The British soldier newspapers can be found in the British Library, London, and the Imperial War Museum, London; the French in the Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine, Nanterre, and the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris; the German in the Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte, Stuttgart, the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau, and (most comprehensively) in the Deutsche Bücherei, Leipzig.

2. ↑ Throughout this article, information about the Allied newspapers is gleaned from: Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane: *Men at War, 1914-1918. National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War*, translated by Helen McPhail, Providence 1992 (orig. 1986); Fuller, J.G.: *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies. 1914-1918*, Oxford 1990; as well as Nelson, Robert L.: *German Soldier Newspapers of the First World War*, Cambridge 2011, which analyzes the British and French soldier newspapers alongside the German. The authors of the major studies on the British and French soldier newspapers agree that they cannot be dismissed as propaganda, although one of the historians of the German soldier newspapers believes that for the most part the German newspapers provide little more than propaganda. See Lipp, Anne: *Meinunglenkung im Krieg. Kriegserfahrungen deutscher Soldaten und ihre Deutung 1914-1918*, Göttingen 2003.
3. ↑ While these three armies represent by far the most substantial sources of soldier newspapers, there are other intriguing examples: the unique position of Belgian soldiers, fighting and living almost completely cut off from their homeland, pervaded the articles of their soldier newspapers. See Bertrand, F.: *La presse francophone de tranchée au front belge. 1914-1918*, Brussels 1971. The late, yet massive entry of American forces produced *The Stars and Stripes*, "[u]n doubtedly ... the best-known army newspaper of all time." See Cornebise, Alfred E.: *The Stars and Stripes. Doughboy Journalism in World War I*, Westport 1984, p. 3. For a study of Italian soldier newspapers, see Isnenghi, Mario: *Giornali di trincea 1915-1918*, Torino 1977.
4. ↑ A key study for American soldier newspapers is Cornebise, Alfred E.: *Ranks and Columns. Armed Forces Newspapers in American Wars*, Westport 1993. The references to the first German soldier newspapers come from the earlier, important dissertation: Kurth, Karl: *Die deutschen Feld- und Schützengrabenzeitungen des Weltkrieges*, Leipzig 1937, pp. 8-11, as well as from the useful article: Buck, Gerhard: *Feld- und Schützengrabenzeitungen des 1. und 2. Weltkrieges im Archiv der Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte*, in: *Jahresbibliographie. Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte* 39 (1967), p. 487. Kurth made reference to earlier forms of material printed by military formations in the 16th and 17th centuries, but claimed that the 'modern' form only appeared with Napoleon (p. 8). Buck would seem to agree (p. 487). The newspaper of the Pennsylvania Fifth Regiment, in 1861, had a four column section in German, for its German recruits. Cornebise, *Ranks and Columns* 1993, p. 27.
5. ↑ Kurth, *Schützengrabenzeitungen* 1937, pp. 10f. Kurth cited Charpentier, André: *Le livre d'or des journaux du front 1914-1918, feuilles bleu-horizon*, Paris 1935, as claiming that Rudyard Kipling was on the staff of 'The Friend' in the Transvaal in the spring of 1900.
6. ↑ Edmeier, M.: *Entstehung und Weiterentwicklung der Ersten deutschen Schützengrabenzeitung und des Ersten deutschen Schützengraben Verlag*, Lille 1916.
7. ↑ However, production was not terribly expensive: the army paid the soldiers' wages and did not charge for the post, and the buildings were commandeered. Money was only required for paper, oil and colouring.
8. ↑ Due to similar reasons, among them being "cut off" from home by great distance, Canadian and ANZAC troops produced relatively more soldier newspapers. The tone of the Canadian newspapers was very similar to the British, though with less humour, while the Australian troop journals were notably racier, anti-authoritarian, and distinct from the British. These "national" differences, or lack thereof, may very well lie in the fact that the Canadian forces were substantially more "British born" than the Australian forces. The Canadian and ANZAC soldier newspapers are thoroughly analyzed alongside the British in Fuller, *Troop Morale* 1990.
9. ↑ Ziemann, Benjamin: *War Experiences in Rural Germany. 1914-1923*, translated by Alex Skinner, New York 2007 (orig. 1997), pp. 34f.
10. ↑ Fuller, *Troop Morale* 1990, p. 13
11. ↑ Again, as noted above, Lipp disagrees, and believes that, from mid-1916 at the latest, the German soldier newspapers became the mouthpiece of a high command intent on moulding a "**stab-in-the-back**" understanding of the war among the soldiers, using anti-home front propaganda to create a split between civilians and soldiers.
12. ↑ Fuller, *Troop Morale* 1990, p. 19
13. ↑ Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War* 1992, p. 20.
14. ↑ Cited in Kurth, *Schützengrabenzeitungen* 1937, pp.234f.
15. ↑ The fact that one of the only instances of portraying violence in the British newspapers also obliquely affirmed that horrific violence was a part of "daily life", is of course fascinating.
16. ↑ *Kriegszeitung von Baranowitschi*, 7 July 1917.
17. ↑ *Zeitung der 10. Armee*, 29 April 1916.
18. ↑ *The Leadswinger*, 16 October 1915.
19. ↑ *Zeitung der 10. Armee*, 21 August 1916.
20. ↑ Jones, Gareth Stedman: *Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870–1900. Notes on the Remaking of a Working Class*, in: Jones, Gareth Stedman (ed.): *Languages of Class. Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982*, Cambridge 1983, pp. 179-238. Along these same lines, humour clearly also served as a safety valve, a way in which soldiers could comment on their seeming lack of agency in a giant and horrifying system. See both Le Naour, Jean-Yves: *Laughter and Tears in the Great War. The Need for Laughter/the Guilt of Humour*, in: *Journal of European Studies* 31 (2001), pp. 265-75, and Madigan, Edward: "Sticking to a Hateful Task". *Resilience, Humour, and British Understandings of Combatant Courage, 1914-1918*, in: *War in History* 20 (2013), pp. 76-98.
21. ↑ *Zeitung der 10. Armee*, Fastnacht 1916
22. ↑ For a good overview, see Purseigle, Pierre: *A very French debate. The 1914-1918 'war culture'*, in: *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 1 (2008), pp.9-14.

23. ↑ Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War* 1992, pp. 165-71. Audoin-Rouzeau is now one of the lead proponents of the 'war culture' thesis. See Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane / Becker, Annette: 14-18. Understanding the First World War, translated by Catherine Temerson, New York 2002 (orig. 2000).
24. ↑ Liller Kriegszeitung, 19 February 1916
25. ↑ Minden Magazine, August 1916.
26. ↑ See "The Fascination of the Home Front" in: Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War* 1992, ch. 5.
27. ↑ Audoin-Rouzeau, *Men at War* 1992, p.60.
28. ↑ Smith, L. P. Yates: They Laughed at War, in: *Defence* (1940), pp. 13f.
29. ↑ This section is based on the findings in: Nelson, *German Soldier Newspapers* 2011.

Selected Bibliography

Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane: **Men at war, 1914-1918. National sentiment and trench journalism in France during the First World War**, Providence 1992: Berg.

Bertrand, Francois: **La presse francophone de tranchée au front belge, 1914-1918**, Brussels 1971: Musée royal de l'Armée et d'histoire militaire.

Buck, Gerhard: Feld- und Schützengrabenzeitungen des 1. und 2. Weltkrieges im Archiv der Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte, in: Jahresbibliographie. Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte, Weltkriegsbücherei Stuttgart, volume 39, Frankfurt a. M. 1967: Bernard und Graefe Verlag für Wehrwesen, pp. 485-505

Charpentier, André (ed.): **Le livre d'or des journaux du front. Feuilles bleu horizon, 1914-1918**, Paris 1935: Imprimerie de Vaugirard.

Cornebise, Alfred E.: **The stars and stripes. Doughboy journalism in World War I** Westport 1984: Greenwood Press.

Daughton, James P.: **Sketches of the Poilu's world. Trench cartoons from the Great War**, in: Mackaman, Douglas Peter / Mays, Michael (eds.): *World War I and the cultures of modernity*, Jackson 2000: University Press of Mississippi, pp. 20-34.

Fuller, J. G.: **Troop morale and popular culture in the British and Dominion armies, 1914-1918** Oxford; New York 1990: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press.

Isnenghi, Mario: **Giornali di trincea, 1915-1918**, Turin 1977: G. Einaudi.

Koszyk, Kurt: **Deutsche Pressepolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg**, Düsseldorf 1968: Droste.

Kröker, Erich: **Die Feld- und Soldatenzeitungen beim Militärarchiv**, in: *Das Militärarchiv* 2, 1962, pp. 22-25.

Kurth, Karl: **Die deutschen Feld- und Schützengrabenzeitungen des Weltkrieges**, Leipzig 1937: Robert Noske.

Lipp, Anne: **Heimatwahrnehmung und soldatisches 'Kriegserlebnis'**, in: Hirschfeld, Gerhard / Krumeich, Gerd; Langewiesche, Dieter et al. (eds.): *Kriegserfahrungen. Studien zur Sozial- und Mentalitätsgeschichte des Ersten Weltkrieges*, Essen 1997: Klartext Verlag, pp. 225-242.

Lipp, Anne: **Meinungslenkung im Krieg. Kriegserfahrungen deutscher Soldaten und ihre Deutung 1914-1918** Göttingen 2003: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Lipp, Anne: **Friedenssehnsucht und Durchhaltebereitschaft. Wahrnehmungen und Erfahrungen deutscher Soldaten im Ersten Weltkrieg**, in: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 36, 1996, pp. 279-292.

Nelson, Robert L.: **Soldier newspapers. A useful source in the social and cultural history of the First World War and beyond**, in: *War in History* 17/2, 2010, pp. 167-191.

Nelson, Robert L.: **German soldier newspapers of the First World War**, Cambridge 2011: Cambridge University Press.

Seal, Graham Patrick: **The soldiers' press. Trench journals in the First World War** Basingstoke 2013: Palgrave Macmillan.

Turbergue, Jean-Pierre / Rouaud, Jean (eds.): **1914-1918. Les journaux de tranchées**, Paris 1999: Éditions Italiques.

Citation

Nelson, Robert L.: Soldier Newspapers , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10170.

License

This text is licensed under: CC by-NC-ND 3.0 Germany - Attribution, Non-commercial, No Derivative Works.

