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Fighting and dying for the fatherland: War violence in popular pictures and picture postcards in Germany, 1914–1918

The outbreak of the Great War in August 1914 did not take Europe by surprise. Yet its intensity and the scale of destruction and violence were unprecedented. It became not only the first instance of total war, but also the first ‘mediatised war’, since press coverage from all theatres of war was overwhelming and brought the conflict into the living rooms of the home front via newspapers, bulletins and other media.¹ State and military authorities in every European country started to control the press in order to influence the public image of their respective achievements. Propaganda offices were implemented to support the war effort and to convince the people at home and on the front lines to sacrifice their most precious belongings and even their lives for the fatherland. Vast amounts of propaganda material were produced in this context.

Of all the different forms of representation of the war, pictures played a significant role. The importance of images has been a staple of recent historiography since at least the ‘visual turn’ or ‘pictorial turn’.² Along these lines, a number of studies on the Great War have drawn on different kinds of visualisations.³ In this paper I am interested in the visualisations of violence in

¹ G. Paul, *Bilder des Krieges. Krieg der Bilder: Die Visualisierung des modernen Krieges*, Paderborn 2004, p. 105ff.

² W.J.T. Mitchell, *The Pictorial Turn*, “Artforum”, vol. XXX, 1992, pp. 89–94; G. Boehm, *Die Wiederkehr der Bilder*, [in:] *Was ist ein Bild?*, ed. by G. Boehm, Munich 1994, pp. 11–38.

³ To name only a few: on posters see M. Albrinck, *Humanitarians and He-men: Recruitment Posters and the Masculine Ideal*, [in:] *Picture This! World War I Posters and Visual Culture*, ed. by P. James, Lincoln (N.E.) 2009, pp. 312–339; J. Aulich, J. Hewitt, *Seduction or Instruction? First World War Posters in Britain and Europe*, Manchester 2007; F. Kämpfer, *Plakat, poster, affiche, manifesto...: Des Weltkriegs große bunte Bilder*, [in:] *Bildpropaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg*, ed. by R. Zühke, Hamburg 2000, pp. 125–143. On photography see A. Holzer, *Die andere Front: Fotografie und Propaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Darmstadt 2007. On press illustrations see T. Noll, *Sinnbild und Erzählung: Zur Ikonographie des Krieges in den Zeitschriftenillustrationen, 1914–1918*,

popular pictures of the Great War, focusing on the question of what kind of ‘war image’ they constructed and how military and state authorities tried to intervene in the process in order to establish a positive such image. The material I am looking at consists mainly of picture postcards from the period between 1914 and 1918, since they represent one of the most important types of popular images at the time in terms of numbers, circulation, and popularity. In my analysis, I will first outline the strategies applied by official censorship and propaganda authorities to influence the visual representation of the war, and war violence in particular, and explore the impact of these strategies on the market of public images and, consequently, on the public image of the war. Second, I will take a look at the motifs dominating the market of popular pictures between 1914 and 1918 and at how these changed over the course of time. Here the focus will be on the difference between photographs and graphic works and on what kind of war image they constructed.

CENSORSHIP OF POPULAR IMAGES

It is well known that the Great War was the starting point for strict and effective press control.⁴ This is certainly true for textual material, yet does not apply to the same degree to images. Until 1918 the censorship of images was mainly characterised by a lack of consistent general regulations, which created massive confusion among image producers about what was allowed and how one

[in:] *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit: Bilder des Ersten Weltkrieges*, ed. by R. R o t h e r, exhibition catalog German Historical Museum Berlin, Berlin 1994, pp. 259–272; T. E i s e r m a n n, *Pressephotographie und Informationskontrolle im Ersten Weltkrieg: Deutschland und Frankreich im Vergleich*, Hamburg 2000; G. P a u l, *Bilder des Krieges*. On caricature see E. D e m m, *Propaganda and Caricature in the First World War*, “Journal of Contemporary History”, vol. XXVIII, 1993, pp. 163–182; N. W e i s e, *Der Krieg in der Karikatur: Deutsche Witzblätter, 1914–1918*, “Historische Mitteilungen”, vol. XVII, 2004, pp. 178–194; E. S a c k m a n n, *Propaganda im 1. Weltkrieg: Lustige Blätter in ‘ernster Zeit’*, “Deutsche Comic-forschung”, vol. X, 2014, pp. 18–36. On postcards see C. B r o c k s, *Die bunte Welt des Krieges: Bildpostkarten aus dem Ersten Weltkrieg, 1914–1918*, Essen 2008.

⁴ See J. W i n t e r, *Propaganda and the mobilization of consent*, [in:] *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, ed. by H. S t r a c h a n, Oxford 2014, pp. 216–225; T. P a d d o c k, *World War I and Propaganda*, Leiden 2014; A. S c h m i d t, *Belehrung Propaganda Vertrauensarbeit: Zum Wandel amtlicher Kommunikationspolitik in Deutschland, 1914–1918*, Essen 2006; M. J e i s m a n n, *Propaganda*, [in:] *Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg*, ed. G. H i r s c h f e l d, G. K r u m e i c h, I. R e n z, Paderborn 2004; D. W e l c h, *Germany, Propaganda and Total War*, New Brunswick (N.J.) 2000; W. D e i s t, *Zensur und Propaganda in Deutschland während des Ersten Weltkrieges*, [in:] *Militär, Staat und Gesellschaft: Studien zur preußisch-deutschen Geschichte*, ed. by W. D e i s t, Munich 1991, pp. 153–163; K. K o s z y k, *Deutsche Pressepolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Düsseldorf 1968.

could get pictures released by the various state and military authorities responsible for the censorship of images.

During the first few weeks of the war, image censorship focused primarily on issues of military and strategic secrecy. Graphic works were therefore under less scrutiny than photographs, which were considered to be able to capture authentic details of warfare. With this in mind, German state and military authorities were eager to control and limit the scope of action of image producers on the front lines. The press photographers who were allowed to accompany the troops to the various theatres of war — the first embedded war correspondents of the twentieth century⁵ — were under the strict control of an officer and could not move about freely on the front lines. They had to follow the regulations issued by the Deputy General Staff in October 1914 in order to influence the process of producing photographs from the front lines right from the start. According to these regulations, photographers were obliged to depict ‘important topics from a patriotic perspective and nothing sensational or attention-seeking’. The images were supposed to prove that the ‘German army tries to avoid unnecessary hardship’. Important buildings in the occupied territories were to be photographed to show that they were ‘undamaged’, primarily in response to the Entente’s accusations of atrocities.⁶

A second level of censorship drew on the publication and distribution of images. From the outset of the war, image producers were required to hand in three copies of all images ‘which bear reference to the current war’ to the numerous different censorship offices implemented in the Reich from August 1914 onwards.⁷ Photographs from the theatres of war had to be sent to Department IIIb of the Deputy General Staff in Berlin⁸ and material depicting naval objects to the Naval Staff or the Information Department of the Reich Naval Office. All other war images had to be submitted to regional censorship offices in the respective Deputy General Commands, which numbered more than fifty throughout the Reich. A censorship office would keep two of the three copies in case of a positive decision and all

⁵ It was not easy to get admitted as an official war correspondent. Out of the approximately 500 photographers who applied at the beginning of the war, 15 were selected (*Bericht des Dr. Goerke, Berlin, vor der Freien Photographischen Vereinigung zu Berlin am 17.12.1915*, “Photographische Rundschau”, 1915, “Kl. Chronik”, no. 3, p. 9f.; “Liste der auf dem Kriegsschauplatz zugelassenen, zum Photographieren berechtigten Personen”, Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Munich Department IV [BHStA Munich — IV, MKr. 1710, fo. 46]).

⁶ Deputy General Staff, department III B, “Anweisungen für Kriegs-Photographen und Kinematographen”, 8 October 1914, BHStA Munich — IV, MKr. 1710, fo. 44.

⁷ War Ministry to Deputy General Command XIV, 29 April 1915, BHStA Munich — IV, MKr. 13345/2.

⁸ Deputy General Staff, 17 September 1914, BHStA Munich — IV, MKr. 1710, fo. 36, Deputy General Staff, 30 October 1914, Generallandesarchiv (GLA) Karlsruhe, 236–22708; Deputy General Staff, 5 November 1914, Bundesarchiv–Militärarchiv (BA–MA) Freiburg, RM 3 — 10296, fo. 22.

three if it did not release the picture.⁹ The enormous number of letters written by publishing houses, photographic studios and small postcard manufacturers shows that many of them had huge difficulties in finding their way through the complicated censorship procedures. To make matters worse, the release of pictures by a regional censorship office applied only to its respective area. If picture producers wanted to publish their material in the whole country, they had to hand in the image to every single regional censorship office. In several cases, the same picture was admitted in one area and banned in another.¹⁰ This procedure changed only in March 1915. From then on, the approval of one censorship office was sufficient.¹¹ However, archival material demonstrates that even after this point, censorship decisions were anything but consistent¹² and that some pictures were confiscated by the police even after their approval by censorship authorities.¹³

Until September 1915 no specific regulations regarding the censorship of pictures existed apart from the overall directive that no military or strategic details should be revealed in texts or in pictures. But in many cases, even clearly ‘fictional’ pictures were banned by censors, causing many complaints.¹⁴ When the ‘Grundsätze die Handhabung der Bildzensur betreffend’ (‘Regulations regarding the censorship of images’)¹⁵ were issued in September 1915, the number of complaints actually increased,¹⁶ since from then on censors also had to assess ‘artistic depictions’ and ‘illustrative photographs’. According to the ‘Grundsätze’, censors were to ‘release them to the greatest possible extent’, even if they depicted ‘the very seriousness of the war (including scenes of fighting, dead, or severely injured soldiers)’. The amended edition of the ‘Grundsätze’ from November 1915, however, added quite

⁹ Imperial Navy Office to Central Office for Foreign Services, 2 January 1916: BA–MA Freiburg, RM 3 — 9875, fos 207–208.

¹⁰ Prussian War Ministry to Bavarian War Ministry, 17 November 1915, BHStA Munich — IV, MKr. 13344, fo. 217.

¹¹ War Ministry, 16 March 1915, BHStA Munich — IV, Stv. Gen. Kom. I. AK, 1756.

¹² War Ministry to all Deputy General Commands, 17 November 1916, BA–MA Freiburg, RM 3 — 10297, fo. 129. See “Papier–Zeitung”, 2 May 1915, vol. XXXV, p. 735.

¹³ Imperial Naval Office to Company Schuh & Co., 23 March 1915, BA–MA Freiburg, RM 3 — 10287, fo. 257; Imperial Naval Office to Meissner und Buch, 24 September 1914, BA–MA Freiburg, RM 3 — 10281, fo. 144.

¹⁴ Jungdeutschland Post to Imperial Naval Office, 17 September 1914, BA–MA Freiburg, RM 3 — 10281, fos 121f.; Der Stein der Weisen: Illustrierte Zeitschrift zur Verbreitung naturkundlichen und technischen Wissens to Imperial Naval Office, 23 September 1914, BA–MA Freiburg, 3 — 10281, fos 163f.

¹⁵ Deputy General Staff to all censorship offices, 23 September 1915, BA–MA Freiburg RM 5 — 3796, fos 222–223.

¹⁶ Prussian War Ministry to Oberkommando in den Marken, 12 August 1915, BHStA Munich — IV, stv. GK I. AK, 1702; Illustrations Gesellschaft mbH to Imperial Naval Office, 26 April 1916, BA–MA Freiburg, RM 5 — 3725, fo. 81; War Ministry to Imperial Naval Office, 18 August 1915, BA–MA Freiburg, RM 3 — 10296, fo. 93; HStA–MA Stuttgart M 77/1–715, fo. 161.

a few restrictions in this respect, including the highly interpretative sentence: ‘Exaggerated depictions of the horrors of war are to be avoided, as are those which might be interpreted in a negative way by our enemies’.¹⁷ Prisoners of war were only allowed to be shown when their names were given, in order to avoid having missing persons wrongly identified or recognised. Pictures of dead and injured German soldiers were only allowed when their faces were not recognisable; those of severely mutilated or blind soldiers could only be published when they conveyed ‘not the[ir] suffering but the[ir] care’.¹⁸ This version of the ‘Grundsätze’ was adopted without further amendments for the ‘Zensurbuch für die deutsche Presse — Leitsätze für die Bildzensur’ (‘Censorship book for the German press — regulations for the censorship of images’) by the Oberzensurstelle of the War Press Office in Berlin published in March 1917. The ‘Zensurbuch’ was the main reference book for censors throughout the Reich, but censors in regional offices, particularly in the Southwest of Germany, were eager to follow their own path.¹⁹

As early as three weeks after the beginning of the war, the Bavarian War Ministry issued a decree ‘regarding the control of picture postcards with war motifs. Unfortunately many of them disparage the reputation of the German culture and the German army and its military achievements’.²⁰ With this the Bavarian government went far beyond the general directive for the censorship of images, which is another example of the inconsistencies in this field. The decree referred to the flood of so-called *Hetzpostkarten*, supposedly humorous graphic works or cartoons on picture postcards depicting the enemies in a humiliating and disparaging fashion. These included illustrations of the well-known poem *Jeder Schuss ein Russ; jeder Stoß ein Franzos*, *jeder Tritt ein Brit* (‘Every shot a Russian, every push a Frenchman, every kick a Brit’). Or they showed ‘The European Menu’ with ‘Gallic chicken soup’ and ‘Russian bear ham’, or German and Austrian soldiers beating up their enemies, the German Michel sweeping them away with a broom, enemy politicians or state representatives hanging from the gallows or suffering from diarrhoea, and so on. ‘Humorous’ picture postcards and pictorial broadsheets with military motifs were already common before the First World War, but only from 1914 onwards did the images of the decadent Frenchman, the cowardly Brit and the lice-ridden, drunken Russian inundate the market of popular pictures. It is difficult to estimate how many of these postcards were produced and sold, but according to newspaper articles and references in the main newsletter for the postcard industry they must

¹⁷ Deputy General Staff, November 1915, BHStA Munich–IV, stv. GK I. AK, 1756.

¹⁸ Deputy General Staff to all censorship offices, 23 September 1915, BA–MA Freiburg, RM 5 — 3796, fos 222–223.

¹⁹ For differences between the War Press Office in Berlin and the Press Office of the Bavarian War Ministry see C. B r o c k s: ‘*Unser Schild muss rein bleiben*’: *Deutsche Bildzensur und –propaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg*, “*Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift*”, vol. LXVII, 2008, pp. 31ff.

²⁰ BHStA Munich — IV, MKr. 13344, fo. 3a.

have been very popular:²¹ of the approximately five hundred postcard motifs that were banned during the first twelve weeks of the war in a Bavarian censorship office, only five or six did not belong to this group.²²

The Bavarian War Press Office gave two reasons these pictures had to be withdrawn from circulation. First, there was a political implication: these ‘dangerous’ products would diminish Germany’s reputation in the neutral countries and lead to false assumptions about Germany’s military strength, which would subsequently pose a security threat.²³ But most importantly, as the main newspaper for the book industry summarised, these picture postcards were considered inappropriate in view of the ‘dignity of the German nation fighting for its existence’ and the ‘seriousness of the situation’.²⁴ Other censorship offices in Württemberg and Saxony followed the Bavarian policy in November 1914,²⁵ meaning that the ban on objectionable popular pictures was affecting all major German cities involved in the publishing industry, such as Munich, Stuttgart and Leipzig, by as early as a few weeks after the beginning of the war. Only in Berlin were the censorship offices initially reluctant to suppress popular ‘healthy humour’,²⁶ until Major Deutelmoser of the Oberzensurstelle intervened. He highlighted that the impact of popular pictures on the ‘masses’, the ‘uneducated’ and ‘illiterate people’ would do more harm than good.²⁷ Finally, ‘inciting’ postcards were also banned in Prussia by the Prussian War Office beginning in March 1915.²⁸ As newspaper articles indicate, the ban on these postcards was quite effective and caused a profound decrease in these products in 1915.²⁹

²¹ “Papier-Zeitung”, 5 November 1914; “Das Plakat”, vol. VI, 1915, pp. 23–28; 29–31; vol. VIII, 1917, p. 4.

²² Lists of banned war picture postcards and illustrated broadsheets in BHStA Munich — IV, MKr. 13344 passim.

²³ Bavarian War Ministry to Deputy General Command I. AK, 11 May 1915, BHStA Munich — IV, Stellv. Gen. Kom. I. AK 1756.

²⁴ “Börsenblatt für den deutschen Buchhandel”, vol. CCXLIII, 19 October 1914, 81 (1914), 4, 1546. See also Krefß to the press, 5 November 1914, BHStA Munich — IV, MKr. 13345/2.

²⁵ “Börsenblatt”, vol. CCLXV, 14 November 1914, 81 (1914), 4, 1655f.; Verbot des Stellv. GenKom VII. AK, 31 May 1915: BA–MA Freiburg, RM 3 — 10296; “Börsenblatt”, vol. CCLVIII, 6 November 1914, 81 (1914), 4, p. 1624.

²⁶ “Börsenblatt”, no. CCLXVIII, 19 November 1914, 81 (1914), 4, p. 1672. See “Papier-Zeitung”, 15 November 1914.

²⁷ Oberzensurstelle to all censorship offices, 1 December 1914: BA–MA Freiburg, RM 5 — 3796, fo. 10.

²⁸ War Ministry, 16 March 1915: BHStA Munich — IV, Stellv. Gen. Kom. 1756.

²⁹ For instance: “Das Plakat”, vol. VI, 1915, p. 29. Thus it is all the more surprising that some researchers of the Great War still consider ‘inciting’ picture postcards to be examples of the ruthless propaganda efforts of the German authorities. To name just a few: P. F i s c h e r, *Die propagandistische Funktion von Bildpostkarten im Ersten Weltkrieg*, [in:] *Der Erste Weltkrieg als Kommunikationsereignis*, ed. by S. Q u a n d t, H. S c h i c h t e l, Giessen 1993, pp. 63–75; A. F i s c h e r, *‘Helfi*

About one year later, censorship offices again had to deal with what they called ‘inappropriate’ postcards. A new type of satirical cartoon had emerged, criticising the disastrous food situation in Germany: ‘Obituary. It is with great sadness and grief that we must announce to all our relatives, acquaintances, and friends that our beloved and unforgotten, our irreplaceable LAST LOAF OF BREAD has been eaten after 14 days of severe rationing. The half-starved and sad bereaved kindly ask for superfluous bread ration cards. The bereaved: husband and wife Joseph Hunger and Mina Hunger, née Famish, sons-in-law Max Meatless, Moritz Withoutfat, aunts Alice Turnipmuck and Katherine Flourlack’.³⁰

Obviously these caricature postcards were much more critical in tone than the *Hetzpostkarten* that disparaged the enemy, and were banned shortly after their appearance. However, it is striking that the reasons given for this ban by the authorities involved were far less categorical and fundamental than the line of reasoning against the *Hetzpostkarten* and referred mainly to practical reasons.³¹ It seems as if the violation of the alleged ‘greatness’ and ‘seriousness’ of the war was considered a more dangerous threat than the satirical criticism of living conditions in Germany.

VISUAL PROPAGANDA

In the early days of the war, state and military authorities had not yet drawn up detailed plans to implement a propaganda system, since they expected the war to be over in a few months. Just a few weeks before August 1914, there was only one person in the whole of the army responsible for liaising with the press and therefore in charge of propaganda tasks. Two years later, one thousand army members were involved in propaganda activities;³² and in 1918, a total of twenty-two press offices were implemented at several ministries and within the military administration.³³ In

uns siegen!’ Weltkriegspostkarten, [in:] *‘Als der Krieg über uns gekommen war...’: Die Saarregion und der Erste Weltkrieg*, ed. by L. K u g l e r, Saarbrücken 1993, pp. 125–135.

³⁰ Postcard 1917, Hauptstaatsarchiv Militärarchiv (HStA/MA) Stuttgart, M 77/1–715.

³¹ War Press Office/Oberzensurstelle to Bavarian War Ministry, 25 August 1916, BHStA Munich — IV, MKr. 13345/1, fo. 51. Ban on *Hungerpostkarten* (hunger postcards), see GLA Karlsruhe, 236 — 23099 passim; Oberkommando i. d. Marken, 9 June 1916, HStA/MA Stuttgart, M 77/1–437 and M 77/1–715.

³² W. V o g e l, *Die Organisation der amtlichen Presse- und Propagandapolitik des Deutschen Reiches von den Anfängen unter Bismarck bis zum Beginn des Jahres 1933*, “Zeitungswissenschaft”, vol. XVI, 1941, special edn 8/9, pp. 1–105, here pp. 80ff.

³³ J. V e r h e y, *Krieg und geistige Mobilmachung: Die Kriegspropaganda*, [in:] *The Great War: Der Erste Weltkrieg im internationalen Zusammenhang Stimmungen, Wahrnehmungsformen und Verarbeitungsweisen. Zur Erfahrungs- und Kulturgeschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs*, ed. by W. K r u s e, J. V e r h e y, Hagen 1995, p. 52.

the following, I will show that despite this overwhelming increase in propaganda institutions — which reflected the amount of money put into this area — images remained of secondary importance. The official propaganda policy focused on press control, primarily of printed texts, until the end of the war.

Until the Bild- und Filmamt (Picture and Film Office; BuFa) was established in January 1917, only a few state and military offices effectively produced propaganda images by themselves, and this was mainly graphic or caricature material.³⁴ Yet they in fact had a huge number of different types of pictures at their disposal, from two different sources. First, there were photographs and graphic works collected by censorship offices throughout the Reich in accordance with the requirement that image producers hand in spare copies of the pictures they wanted to be released. Second, the Press Office of the General Staff of the Field Army issued an appeal in October 1914 requesting documentary material ‘such as for instance announcements [...], placards, intercepted enemy orders and messages, interesting notes by soldiers, photographs’.³⁵ By November 1915, forty-five thousand photographs had been handed in to the General Staff.³⁶ The authorities never used these images or the copies of pictures released by the censorship offices for propaganda purposes; the material was merely put at the disposal of newspapers and publishing houses.³⁷ Thus, the visual mediatisation of the war was more or less left to the press and to manufacturers of postcards and of other popular pictures, at least until 1917. The secondary actors in this field included a wide range of museums, libraries and parastatal institutions, which collected and showed war images in various war exhibitions. By 1917, 217 war collections had come into being. Their first objective was to collect as much material as possible about the war for the generations to come. Their second and more present goal was the ‘patriotic education of the people’ by means of strictly documentary exhibitions.³⁸

³⁴ Such offices included the Militärische Stelle des Auswärtigen Amtes, which was mainly responsible for *Auslandsaufklärung* (propaganda for foreign countries) and was also in charge of domestic propaganda as of July 1916. The office produced posters and flyers. It was only beginning in 1917 that the War Press Office and the Zentralstelle für Auslandsaufklärung employed graphic designers and caricaturists. Even then, their output was quite marginal. See E. D e m m, *Propaganda and Caricature in the First World War*, “Journal of Contemporary History”, vol. XXVIII, 1993, pp. 63–182, here p. 166.

³⁵ Bavarian War Ministry to Deputy General Command I. AK, 8 October 1914, BHStA Munich/IV, stv. GK I.AK, p. 1702.

³⁶ “Der Photograph”, vol. XXVI, 1916, p. 122.

³⁷ Bavarian War Ministry to Deputy General Command I. AK, 8 October 1914, BHStA Munich/IV, stv. GK I.AK, p. 1702.

³⁸ S. B r a n d t, *Kriegssammlungen im Ersten Weltkrieg: Denkmäler oder Laboratoires d’histoire?*, [in:] *Keiner fühlt sich hier mehr als Mensch...’: Erlebnis und Wirkung des Ersten Weltkrieges*, ed. by G. H i r s c h f e l d, G. K r u m e i c h, Essen 1993, pp. 241–258, 241, 243.

It was not until January 1917, when the BuFa was established,³⁹ that state and military authorities started to produce, publish and distribute war images on a large scale themselves. Six mobile camera crews of cinematographers and photographers worked for the BuFa at different theatres of war and delivered masses of films and photographs, more than twenty–five thousand pictures until March 1915 alone.⁴⁰ Three departments published and distributed them: the *Inlandsdienst* to the home front in Germany, the *Auslandsdienst* to the neutral states and the *Frontdienst* to the troops on the front lines.⁴¹ As a new and exciting medium, cinematography was the main focus of the BuFa and all of its departments, but a huge amount of photographs were also taken. It is striking that a large number of these photographs were designed and subsequently used as *Lichtbilder* in slide shows on both the front lines and the home front. As the main reference booklet from 1918 summarising all valid decrees and regulations regarding propaganda for the troops in Bavaria stated, ‘The most effective means of propaganda of all is the spoken word’.⁴² The main regulations regarding the propaganda on the home front in Hanover used almost the same wording: ‘With the right choice of speakers and the right topic, the spoken word is presently the best means of propaganda, if possible in connection with authentic illustrations’.⁴³ Slide shows were a very modern and popular medium at the time, cheap to produce and easy to realise. Images were considered an important propaganda tool, but more as a supplement to talks and texts than as a means of their own. In the area of the 13th Deputy General Command (Württemberg), by July 1918 the propaganda officer had organised 821 slideshows for civilians, 213 for reserve troops, and 102 in military hospitals.⁴⁴ These mainly addressed economic subjects targeted to the different groups, such as farmers, workers, and women,⁴⁵ and were supposed to be informative and documentary in tone. For instance, the presentations ‘informed’ the people at home that the food situation in Germany

³⁹ H. B a r k h a u s e n, *Filmpropaganda für Deutschland im Ersten und Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Hildesheim 1982.

⁴⁰ BA–MA Freiburg, W — 10/50 298, fo. 14. Dr. Wagner on BuFa, 13.3. (n.y., probably 1917), BHStA Munich — II, MA 97624.

⁴¹ H. B a r k h a u s e n, *Filmpropaganda für Deutschland*, p. 77.

⁴² *Die Truppenaufklärung: Zusammenfassung sämtlicher für die Aufklärung im byerischen Besatzungsheere zurzeit geltenden Erlasse, Bestimmungen, Anweisungen usw. gedruckt im Kriegsministerium*, 19.2.1918: BHStA Munich — IV, stv. GK I AK, 2369, p. 2.

⁴³ *Richtlinien für die Aufklärungs- und Propagandatätigkeit im Bereich des stv. GK X. AK*, 10 May 1917, quoted in: *Militär und Innenpolitik im Weltkrieg 1914–1918*, ed. by W. D e i s t, Düsseldorf 1970, p. 819.

⁴⁴ G. M a i, ‘Aufklärung der Bevölkerung’ und ‘Vaterländischer Unterricht’ in *Württemberg 1914–1918: Struktur, Durchführung und Inhalte der deutschen Inlandspropaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg*, “Zeitschrift für Württembergische Landesgeschichte”, vol. XXXVI, 1977, pp. 199–235, p. 217.

⁴⁵ HStA/MA Stuttgart, M 1/3 — 498 and 499. See also HStA/MA Stuttgart, M 77/1 — 450 passim and BHStA Munich — IV, Stellv. Gen. Kom. I. AK 1709.

was admittedly difficult, but still better than in the Entente countries; they tried to smooth over conflicts between rural and urban people and prevent strikes among armaments workers.⁴⁶

One reason for the remarkable reluctance to use pictures effectively within the propaganda efforts or to use them in a suggestive fashion was rooted in the overall reservations against the notion of propaganda, which was equated with advertising and connotations such as gain and profit⁴⁷ and hence with an American lifestyle.⁴⁸ This is why the word ‘propaganda’ was banned from the official rhetoric and substituted with the term ‘education’ (*Aufklärung*). The propaganda campaign for war loans was the only exception to this, which is why it should be mentioned here briefly. During the first eighteen months of the war, the Ministry of Finance was in charge of this campaign, meaning that it remained isolated from other propaganda activities.⁴⁹ Not until autumn 1915, when the War Press Office took over, did the *Siegfrieden* (peace through military victory) approach start to dominate the propaganda campaign.⁵⁰ Posters had no images at all before the sixth war loan, because the Reichsbank believed that this would be ‘harmful to the patriotic cause’.⁵¹ The design for the seventh war loan in 1917 was tendered out for competitive bidding, and Fritz Erler was awarded the contract for his famous *Mann im Stahlhelm* (the man in the steel helmet), an image which was strongly debated and highly praised precisely for its suggestive effect: ‘Never before in Germany has a poster — let alone a picture poster — been as widely disseminated as ‘Mann im Stahlhelm’, by Erler; never before has a poster made such a deep and suggestive, albeit highly controversial impression on the German people’.⁵²

Designs similarly suggestive in character, by Ferdy Hormmeyer, Walter Georgis, and other artists, followed with the eighth and ninth war loan. Although some officials and press critics pointed out the advantages of images as propaganda for the masses, and for workers and women in particular, the War Press Office hesitated to use images on a large scale, and the Prussian Minister of War congratulated

⁴⁶ See C. B r o c k s, *Unser Schild*, p. 41.

⁴⁷ J. V e r h e y, *Krieg und geistige Mobilmachung*, p. 45.

⁴⁸ ‘Ohnehin steht unser Volk aller amerikanischen reklamehaften Form der Propaganda durchaus mißtrauisch gegenüber. Dem gegenüber muß zunächst unter schlichter trockener Darlegung der tatsächlichen Verhältnisse die auf die Zähne beißende Entschlossenheit gegen den Vernichtungswillen unserer Feinde geweckt werden.’ 16.9.1918, “Unterrichtsoff. des stellv. Gen.Kom. XIII. AK über die Stimmung im Lande”, quoted in W. D e i s t, *Militar und Innenpolitik*, no. 365, p. 967.

⁴⁹ See J. Verhey, *Krieg und geistige Mobilmachung*, p. 50.

⁵⁰ B. Z i e m a n n, *Front und Heimat: Ländliche Kriegserfahrungen im südlichen Bayern, 1914–1923*, Essen 1997, pp. 125–128, p. 135f.

⁵¹ R. M a l h o t r a, *Politische Plakate 1914–1945, Bilderhefte des Museums für Kunst und Gewerbe* 22, Hamburg 1988, p. 10.

⁵² H. R e c k e n d o r f, *Kunst und Künstler im Dienste der Kriegsanleihe*, “Das Plakat”, vol. VIII, 1917, no. 4, p. 215.

the German authorities for their failure to ‘follow the enemies’ fashion regarding propaganda’, implying their ‘American’ style of advertising.⁵³

REPRESENTATIONS OF WAR VIOLENCE IN POPULAR PICTURES

In both the present and the past, picture postcards in particular (but also other genres of popular pictures) have usually depicted the bright side of life. Beginning with their implementation in the 1870s, the picture postcards in Germany featured motifs to signify special joyful occasions such as birthdays, weddings, christenings, Christmas, Easter and other annual festivals; they showed the beauty of towns, landscapes and landmarks, sometimes in a humorous way, gave evidence that the sender had been to faraway places, and illustrated all kinds of poems and songs. They offered visual statements that could express the sender’s feelings supposedly better than his or her own words could do. Did all of that change under the circumstances of total war, state and military censorship and propaganda, and if so, in what way? What topics were common on popular images, what did they omit or shy away from? How were war violence and destruction represented in these pictures? All in all, what kind of images dominated the popular picture market, what was fashionable and sought after and what motifs did publishing houses and postcard manufacturers introduce onto the market?

The postcard and popular-image industry was facing huge losses and many problems at the beginning of the war. Before August 1914, 50 per cent of its production had been exported into countries with which Germany was now at war.⁵⁴ Consequently, producers had to focus on the domestic market. Paper shortages and censorship measures aggravated their difficulties, forcing several companies into administration.⁵⁵ Gradually the economic situation improved. The range of manufacturers of postcards and other popular pictures had been highly diverse even before the war, but now it widened; several large companies with broad portfolios competed with small and mid-sized manufacturers. Photographers at the home front staged scenes from patriotic war poems or took portraits of soldiers, both of which were duplicated on a surprisingly large scale. In addition, more and more soldiers at different theatres of war started producing their own media by using photographs of the front lines and converting them into postcards.⁵⁶ New channels

⁵³ Meeting of the Prussian Minister of War von Stein with the editor in chief of the Berlin *Morgenpost*, 24 August 1918, quoted in H. Thimme, *Weltkrieg ohne Waffen*, Stuttgart 1932, p. 208.

⁵⁴ H. M i d d e l a n i s, *Die deutsche Papier erzeugende und verarbeitende Industrie. Eine Studie zur Frage Autarkie oder Weltwirtschaft*, Düsseldorf 1934, p. 183.

⁵⁵ H. M e y e r h o l z, *Die Kunst- und Luxuspapierwarenindustrie Deutschland*, Marburg 1920, p. 77; J. H a a c k, *Bildpostkarten mit Glückwünschen: Zu Typologie und Funktion von Geburtstagskarten zwischen Jahrhundertwende und Erstem Weltkrieg*, PhD thesis, Hamburg 1988, p. 52.

⁵⁶ “Photographische Industrie”, 12 July 1916, pp. 425–426.

of distribution ensured a wide supply of popular pictures nearly everywhere. On the home front, postcards, broadsheets and calendars were on offer in stationery shops, pubs, general stores, post offices, newsagents, souvenir kiosks, hairdressers and cigar shops. Soldiers on the front lines could buy them from sutlers. Some German merchants even travelled to France, Belgium and Russian Poland to sell their goods to the troops deployed in the occupied territories.⁵⁷ It seems that by 1915 the focus on the domestic market, which led to a new range of war-related images, was finally paying off for manufacturers.⁵⁸

It is no easy task to reconstruct this new range of motifs in detail, but there is extensive evidence of some important general currents. First, the critics at ambitious art and design newspapers and magazines were keen and vigilant observers of the popular picture market. ‘Das Plakat’ and ‘Der Kunstwart’ were two such renowned outlets, committed to good and sophisticated design and graphic art. All of them were unanimous in their disappointment when the most recent releases entered the shops in August 1914. They poured scorn and derision on all of the new popular images of the war; they criticised the supposedly humorous *Hetzpostkarten* mentioned above, which were subsequently banned from September 1914 onwards, and condemned the *Dienstmädchenlyrik* (literally: lyric poetry for maids) for depicting ‘spruce soldiers with a soft complexion’ ‘thinking of their darlings far away’, who were ‘hovering in a cloud in the upper left corner’ of the postcard ‘looking gushing and infatuated’, or ‘barefoot little girls with dumb doll faces and corkscrew curls’ accompanying their father, ‘who carries a black–white–and–red flag instead of a rifle’, on his way to war.⁵⁹ ‘How cute this war is!’ concluded one observer as late as 1917.⁶⁰ Another target of their ridicule were all of the flags, emblems, insignia, and personifications of supposedly German virtues. ‘There’s not a moth or stain of rust that can live in peace in our most ancient pan–German cupboard of emblems and allegories! Wherever there is an eagle, it must loom; wherever there is a lady whose name ends in ‘ia’, she must pose’.⁶¹ These commentators blamed the German people for these products in bad taste, especially their desire ‘to bring the Great Era into their best rooms’ by buying and collecting popular war pictures in order to be ‘surrounded by the war in their very homes’. According to the critics, picture publishers and manufacturers also had to take their share of the responsibility, however, since their ‘ruthless greed for profit’ had fostered the bad taste of the masses.⁶²

⁵⁷ *Schundwaren in der Etappe*, “Der Kunstwart”, vol. XXVIII, 1915, pp. 182–183; “Papier–Zeitung”, vol. XL, 1915, no. 56, p. 1119.

⁵⁸ Dir. Kraemer, who produced postcards in the “Papier–Zeitung”, vol. XLII, 1917, no. 25, p. 523.

⁵⁹ W. B l o c h, *Kriegsgraphik*, “Das Plakat”, vol. V, 1914, no. 6, 15. Nov. 1914, p. 247.

⁶⁰ H. S a c h s, *Vom Hurrakitsch. Von Nagelungsstandbildern, Nagelungsplakaten und anderen Schönheiten*, “Das Plakat”, vol. VIII, 1917, no. 1, p. 4.

⁶¹ F. A v e n a r i u s, *Musterbuch–Kitsch*, “Der Kunstwart”, vol. XXVIII, 1915, p. 176.

⁶² “Der Kunstwart”, vol. XXIX, 1915, p. 32; see W. B l o c h, *Kriegsgraphik*, “Das Plakat”, vol. V,

Clearly these commentators followed their own agenda and had quite strong opinions about 'good' graphic art. Nonetheless, they monitored the market very closely and were experts on the field of popular art, so their observations are valuable for our purposes. A second source might give an even more detailed picture: the trade journal "Die Papier-Zeitung" and its supplement for the postcard industry reported each week on newly released and bestselling motifs.⁶³ An analysis of this material confirms the contemporary observations mentioned above: during the first six months of the war, the "Probenschau" lists an enormous variety of images, including prints of traditional battle paintings, graphic works of battle scenes, artistic postcards with epigrams, *Ultpostkarten* (humorous postcards), women and children in uniform, bromide postcard prints based on photographs from the front lines, religious motifs, and portraits of the emperor and military commanders, as well as the eagles, flags and oak leaves that decorated poems and songs.

Yet the most common postcard motif by far was a range of kitsch photographs of couples in love, sometimes coloured, sometimes illustrating a song or poem, usually taken in a photographer's studio at the home front with professional or semi-professional models and duplicated by one of the bigger publishing companies or by the photographer. These pictures resembled the sentimental, romantic postcards produced in the pre-war period; the only difference was the clothing of the male model: in the postcards from 1914 onwards, he was in uniform. According to a post office clerk of the time, 90 out of a 100 picture postcards featured *Dienstmädchenlyrik*.⁶⁴ Though this estimate might be exaggerated, it nevertheless shows a significant current in the popular picture market that is supported by the statements of art critics and other observers. There was one modification under the new circumstances of war which is worth mentioning: apart from the huge amount of postcards depicting couples together, a great many show them separated. In these pictures, the woman is always at home waiting, mostly inert; sometimes she is holding, reading or writing a letter; sometimes she is only looking up at the sky; and in some less common cases she is busy with housework. These pictures imply that her main task is to wait faithfully for the man, who is sometimes depicted reading her letter or thinking of her while being on guard, but more often he is quite busy with military activities. Still, she remains on his mind all the time, which is usually indicated by her picture in a cloud in the upper left or right corner of the card. Words such as 'faith', 'pain' and 'hope' (for peace or for seeing the beloved again) predominate in the captions, regardless of

1914, no. 6, 15 November 1914, p. 247; *Geschäftemacher im 'Patriotischen'*, "Der Kunstwart", vol. XXVIII, 1915, p. 103; A. Halbert, *Plakat und Patriotismus*, "Das Plakat", vol. VI, 1915, no. 1, p. 20f.; "Der Kunstwart", vol. XXVIII, 1915, p. 182f.

⁶³ "Die Papier-Zeitung: Fachblatt für Papiererzeugung und Großhandel, für Papier-Verarbeitung, Kartonagen, Buchbinderei, Druckgewerbe, für Schreibwaren und Bürobedarf".

⁶⁴ "Photographie für Alle", vol. V, 1916, no. 1, p. 2.

whether the picture shows him or her in the foreground. By taking a closer look at the connection of text and image, we can see that the postcards often equate the military defence of the fatherland with the individual protection of the family at home. War and warlike actions, including representations of war violence, are not depicted in their military or political context but in their reference to the family and the home. Thus, in conclusion, the analysis of ‘romantic’ postcards shows that instead of a militarisation of society, the postcard motifs suggest a marginalisation of the military.⁶⁵

A somewhat similar group of motifs, which were equally popular on calendars and other media, depicted staged scenes from war songs and poems. Most of them were photographs taken in the same studios as the romantic postcards — and probably with the same models. ‘Stolzenfels am Rhein’, ‘Deutsche Artillerie’, ‘Des Königs Grenadiere’, and in particular ‘Die Wacht am Rhein’ were the most common ones, mainly printed in a set of six cards with different scenes each illustrating a verse or the chorus. The pictures seem to be interchangeable between the different songs and poems: young, handsome men in uniform with rifles and flags, feisty or sad, usually with one of them dying on the sixth postcard, the last scene. A closer analysis of the images in connection with the text reveals that the postcards mainly revolve around two aspects: first, the supposed ‘fact’ that Germany was fighting a defensive war (primarily by protecting the ‘German’ Rhine); and second, the implied equating of the single family of each individual soldier with the whole nation. Similar to the romantic postcards, the underlying message of these pictures justified the war as a natural human instinct to protect one’s offspring and closest relatives. It is striking how closely the images emulate the then highly fashionable cinematography and tap into the modern viewing habits of this period by stringing scenes together in a film-like manner. In so doing, they emphasise the fictional and emotional character of these illustrated narratives.

The photographic postcards from the studios on the home front, whether romantic images of loving couples or staged scenes of traditional war poems and songs, are generally emotional images. Instead of focusing on ‘real’ events and their ‘authentic’ depiction — which was undoubtedly the main advantage of photography according to the overall opinion of the time — these photos on postcards concentrated on the fictional, on a sentimental narrative of separated lovers and dying heroes who were sometimes seen as two elements of the same story: ‘To ensure that nothing is missed, a bit of the fray is added, depicted in a naïve fashion. Sentries in countries far away and beyond the oceans, injuries, and heroic death are brought face-to-face with idyllic pictures of love’s bliss as it used to be and as it should be again, decorated with hearts and Iron Crosses, and surrounded by some good old and bad new rhymes. And all of this is staged

⁶⁵ For a more elaborate interpretation see C. B r o c k s, *Die bunte Welt*, pp. 74ff.

in the studio of a photographer with paid models, in a theatrical manner with cold sentimentality'.⁶⁶

Another very popular group of postcard motifs, according to the "Probenschau" of the "Papier-Zeitung", were pictures from the different 'theatres of war'. This title, which was often used on the back of the cards, was somewhat misleading, since in many cases it did not mean that the pictures were drawn, painted or photographed by someone who had actually been at the front. Particularly during the first few months of the war, photos from the front lines were rare and the demand for allegedly 'authentic' pictures high. Thus, postcard producers focused on motifs that were easier and cheaper to produce: they commissioned graphic designers, painters and illustrators at home to concoct images of storming and attacking German troops. It is no surprise that these pictures were pure figments of the imagination, even though their accompanying texts on the reverse side often implied that they referred to real events and actual places. Sometimes they were signed by the artist, who very often was a book illustrator or a graphic designer, sometimes even with a certain degree of prominence, but more often the artist remained unknown. Such pictures constructed a certain image of the war and of war violence, especially during the first half of the war, that fulfilled the expectations and assumptions of the people at home.

These pictures were typically crowded with soldiers and bursts of action and energy, with one or more individuals with quite distinguishable features standing in the foreground [fig. 1]. Everyone seems to be moving forward, to have been



1. 'Sturmangriff', postcard, b/w, after a drawing, postmarked 5 November 1915, J.C. König und Ebhardt

⁶⁶ "Photographie für Alle", vol. V, 1916, no. 1, p. 2.

captured at a moment of intense action. A second characteristic element of these pictures is their depiction of space. In figure 1, the artist has tried to include a vast area of space without compromising on detail. We can see the trench in the foreground, with hundreds of German soldiers, that faintly and vaguely seems to stretch on for miles in the background. Barbed wire — looking more like a fence around a peaceful meadow than a tool of war — indicates the nearby enemy lines. In the very far background we can spot some lovely hills. (The dominant colour of this black-and-white drawing would be green, if it were coloured). A grenade is exploding quite close by, but not close enough for us to distinguish the details of its impact: one man is clearly hit and falling backwards, but no injuries can be seen. Some craters indicate that there have been other explosions earlier, and the clouds in the background signify more grenades exploding right then. Another soldier in the lower right-hand corner is dead, but again we cannot see any injuries. He is lying on the ground quite peacefully. The others are focused on going ahead, undeterred by the violent acts around them. Their leader has already left the trench. Raising his rifle in his right arm, he is storming towards the enemy while his head is turned back to his men, probably to order them to follow him.

This card is a typical example of graphic postcards depicting soldiers on the offensive. In some other portrayals, horses and cavalry troops are added to increase the amount of action and energy. But the main feature of all of these images is a multiplicity of space, action, and time; to put it another way, they represent the big picture of the war, with everything included. Most of the elements depicted do not correspond with real events at the front lines, and violence and death are glossed over by a neat landscape and isolated hints of destruction. Elements known from traditional wars or from previous eras are usually used instead of modern weaponry. However, one aspect is striking: what is usually missing in these pictures showing fictional attacks is the enemy.

The “Probenschau” suggests that photographic images became more common in 1915. Many of them were taken by officially embedded war photographers who accompanied the troops in the East and the West, others by photographers who travelled to the different theatres of war at their own risk and without an official permit because war photos were a profitable business. A huge number of photos were also taken by soldier-photographers, whom the “Probenschau” does not mention. The attacking soldiers and other actions of war violence so popular on graphic postcards were not dominant subjects on photographic postcards, however, mainly because it was still very difficult to capture these moments with the camera, as the German scholar Bernd H ü p p a u f described in 1992 as a pivotal problem of the representation of the war.⁶⁷ Even after the first pocket cameras were introduced and roll films superseded glass plates, long exposure times made it difficult to take

⁶⁷ B. H ü p p a u f, *Modern Warfare and its Representation in Photography and Film*, “Krieg und Literatur/War and Literature”, vol. IV, 1992, no. 8, pp. 63–84.

photos of moving objects. A second problem was choosing the ‘right’ focus of the picture. The no man’s land between the trenches was usually spread out over many kilometres; this space was vast and empty, and its immensity was impossible to fit into one photo. The Australian photographer Frank Hurley wrote about his experiences in trying to capture a scene at the front lines: ‘I have tried and tried to include events on a single negative, but the results were hopeless. Everything was on such a vast scale. Figures were scattered — the atmosphere was dense with haze and smoke — shells would not burst where required — yet all elements of a picture were there could they but be brought together and condensed [...] on developing my plate, there was disappointment! All I found was a record of a few figures advancing from the trenches — and a background of haze. Nothing could have been more unlike a battle’.⁶⁸

Hurley solved the problem he experienced by using several negatives to construct one photo showing different events that did not in fact happen at the same time or in the same place. His famous picture ‘Over the Top’, from Zonnebeke, Flanders in October 1917, consisted of twelve different negatives [fig. 2]. This photo was considered the ideal documentary picture of the Great War, even its



2. Zonnebeke, Photo from 12 negatives, Frank Hurley, 1917

⁶⁸ F. Hurley, *Hurley at War: The Photography and Diaries of Frank Hurley in Two World Wars*, Sidney 1986, p. 6, quoted [in:] B. Hüppauf, *Modern Warfare*, p. 67.

‘archetypical image’,⁶⁹ and it still structures and informs our views of the Great War. Yet it had as little actual authenticity as the drawing in Figure 1: it is a collage that resembles in many details the fictional attack depicted in the drawing. It offers a view over a vast space, with a lot of movement and action, exploding grenades, airplanes, and storming soldiers. Hurley’s picture, taken (or rather created) in 1917, demonstrates that war photography still focused on and reproduced an image of the war that was very much influenced and modelled along the lines of graphic works and popular pictures of the time. However, not every photographer was as inventive and successful as Hurley. Many professionals and soldier–amateurs used a much easier and very common method to create photographs depicting action and movement: they staged them. Again, these pictures were hardly documentary or authentic, a usual claim of war photography.

Another way of dealing with the ‘crisis of representation’⁷⁰ was to break down and fragment different parts of the overall view of the front lines that could not be represented in a photograph. There are pictures showing merely the space of war action — the trenches — as a snippet, either with or without soldiers and in a rather static fashion that implies a supposed stability [fig. 3]. The weapons of the enemy provide another similar visual snippet on photographic postcards: unexploded bombs (with comments in chalk giving their size and calibre), captured tanks, and visual war trophies. Photos of German weapons usually show them



3. ‘Ostpreußischer Landsturm im Schützengraben’, photographic postcard b/w, postmarked 28 October 1914

⁶⁹ B. H ü p p a u f, *Modern Warfare*, p. 67.

⁷⁰ Idem, *Experiences of Modern Warfare and the Crisis of Representation*, “New German Critique”, special issue on Ernst Jünger, vol. LIX, 1993, pp. 41–76.

being operated by soldiers (again most often staged). Separated from the context of their destructive power, the armaments are reduced to their technical features and thus have lost their threatening potential — unlike the exploding grenades and firing machine guns in drawings and paintings.

In addition to these motifs, war photographic postcards also represented war violence by showing three different aspects of the impact from weapons. The first aspect was metropolitan destruction: a huge number of cards depicted destroyed cities photographed by either professional or amateur photographers, demonstrating that this form of unprecedented destruction from the Great War was noticed right from its outset and considered to be one of its most remarkable consequences, worth photographing again and again — with two significant differences: The captions on many postcards featuring pictures taken by official photographers blame the enemy for the destruction of the respective city or village and use the photo to ‘prove’ the ruthless warfare of the French or the British. This can be seen as an answer to the atrocity accusations of the Entente. The postcards with destroyed cities photographed by amateurs are somewhat different: they tend not to blame any side for the destruction, implying that it is the natural result of war. Sometimes a German soldier is included in the picture, but hardly ever as a victor. Both photographer and depicted soldier usually appear as mere observers of something they have hardly anything to do with; both express either disbelief at the incredible destruction or relief that it is not their own hometown in ashes. Yet photographic postcards and photographs with motifs like these were common only at the beginning of the war, as Bodo v o n D e w i t z describes,⁷¹ arguably because they were a novelty during the first months of mobile warfare and afterwards lost their sensational edge.

The destroyed and completely devastated landscape, the second aspect of war destruction, was a common motif until the end of the war — and beyond it. Craters, burnt tree stumps, mud and puddles of dirty water symbolised the destructive potential of the Great War and made nature the innocent victim of the war, representing all war victims in general [fig. 4]. The ambiguity of this symbol allowed many different interpretations, which included the impact of modern weapons or the godlike yet negative power of humankind to destroy what the Lord had once created, the totality of modern war and industrialised warfare and blaming fate instead of nations or groups of people, to name just a few.

The third and final aspect of war violence depicted was death on the battlefield. While not the most popular topic on photographic postcards, dying or dead soldiers do feature in some. Whereas drawings and other graphic works usually showed the last breath of a dying soldier amidst his comrades (or his horse), situated in a scene of blossoming flowers, green meadows, and lovely forests — sometimes as an

⁷¹ B. v o n D e w i t z, *‘So wird bei uns der Krieg geführt’: Amateurfotografie im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Munich 1989, p. 230.



4. 'Priesterwald', photographic postcard b/w, postmarked 13 September 1915, photographic studio Hermann Schwarz, Metz

illustration of a traditional war or love song — photographs were expected to give a more authentic account of this last consequence of war violence. However, just as 'real' fighting on the battlefield was nearly impossible to capture, the 'true' face of war death was also rather difficult to represent directly, not only for practical and ethical reasons but also because of censorship regulations.⁷² Yet there are a few photographic postcards with dead soldiers (the fallen are usually not German soldiers, but victims from the enemy side), such as a card postmarked in February 1918 titled 'Feindlicher Graben nach dem Sturm' (Enemy trench after the attack) [fig. 5]. The photo shows a blurred, bleak landscape covered with indistinguishable bodies. Interestingly, this postcard was produced by a well-known publishing house specialising in popular images (Kunst- und Verlags-Anstalt Schaar und Dathe, Trier), whereas other photographs with this motif seem to have been taken primarily by soldier-amateurs.

Much more common were pictures with graves and graveyards, usually taken in a peaceful and quiet setting. These photographs were obviously much easier to take than those of dying or dead soldiers, but this was probably not the only reason for their popularity. It is striking how similar many images of war graves, war funerals and war graveyards are to those from the pre-war era, and how much they try to emulate drawings and graphic works that picture the last respects in a rather sugary, cheesy fashion [fig. 6]. In so doing, these photographic postcards tapped

⁷² See fn. 18.



5. 'Feindlicher Graben nach dem Sturm', photographic postcard, 13 February 1918, Kunst- und Verlagsanstalt Schaar und Dathe, Trier



6. 'Grabandacht im Priesterwald', photographic postcard, 1915, Willy Koehler, Metz

into existing viewing habits based on the fact that graves, funerals and graveyards were familiar tools to deal with death under civilian circumstances. They gave death meaning and sense, usually with a Christian background. But even without the religious connotation, they offered consolation and turned war death into something peaceful, equating it with the natural death at home and, in some cases, romanticising it by using similar visual rhetoric to heroic graphic works.

Photographic postcards depicting everyday routines of military life — another group of popular motifs on postcards — had a very similar consoling effect, even though their visual subject was diametrically opposite that just discussed. They showed soldiers collectively marching, digging, resting, reading, sleeping, singing, washing, smoking, eating, and drinking. As random as they might seem, these pictures tried to transfer habits and everyday scenes from civilian life at home to the front lines. By omitting danger, violence, and anxiety, they constructed an image of a nearly peaceful life at the front lines that did not seem so out of the ordinary, apart from the lack of any of the luxuries and conveniences of a life at home. In this sense, these pictures were also meant to comfort and calm family members and friends on the home front.

In 1918 the “Probenschau” of the “Papier-Zeitung” shows that more and more ‘neutral’ images were entering the popular picture market: portraits of pretty ladies, children (not in uniform), flower bouquets, and landscapes — now without eagles, flags, or oak leaves.

CONCLUSION

A massive censorship and propaganda machine was established during the course of the Great War, and the German authorities had at their disposal a vast trove of war images, both graphic and photographic, which were produced from 1914 onwards and particularly in the war’s second half. Given these facts, it is remarkable that the authorities did not make more use of this material. Pictures were utilised effectively only in some cases (war loan posters) and often merely as an additional tool (slide shows with a focus on the ‘spoken word’). The underlying agenda of visual propaganda strategies to maintain conformity among the people at home and the soldiers on the battlefield was to show the ‘greatness’ and ‘seriousness’ of the time by avoiding ‘Americanised’ advertising. This is reflected by the ban on ‘humorous’ and satirical caricatures. Most other motifs were allowed, resulting in an abundance of different popular war images.

This broad range of popular visualisations constructed a multifaceted image of the war that was dominated by two different visual approaches. The first strategy was to gloss over the newly experienced violence of industrial warfare and mass slaughter at the front lines by not omitting war violence per se, but turning it into a colourful adventure without victims, a romantic love story or a test

of brave comradeship. These pictures were successful because they tapped into existing viewing habits shaped and informed by traditional warfare and because they emulated familiar visual patterns of civilian and pre-war life. The pictures depicting the war this way were primarily produced either in photographic studios on the home front or on the drawing tables of illustrators and cartoonists. Photographs from the front lines, on the other hand, which were considered capable of conveying an authentic image of the war, rarely showed violence at all. They fragmented the big picture on the battlefield into single stages of what purported to represent military life, depicting everyday scenes, staged attacks removed from the setting of the battlefield or the consequences of war destruction such as destroyed villages, landscapes and graves. These fragmented scenes and snippets of the battlefield, which in many cases only hinted at violence without actually showing it, were open to a variety of interpretations regarding the cause or the meaning of this violence and the war in general, always insisting on its truth by referring to its alleged authenticity.

After the end of the war, it was the very polysemy of these war photographs that contributed to constructing an image of the Great War which was meant to undermine the new republic in the late 1920s, when nationalistic circles initiated the publication of previously unpublished photographic material on a large scale for political purposes.⁷³ Wanting to stir up the public against the new republican German state in the context of the heated debates on the commemoration of the war,⁷⁴ they used photographs that shaped a new and modern trend in war representation, along the lines of Ernst Jünger's and other nationalistic authors' writings [fig. 7]. These images depicted the war as an endurance test for the German soldier, showing the tremendous efforts of the troops, their suffering, and even their death, as well as the large scale of destruction, implying that this conflict was a kind of natural catastrophe. These pictures became 'floating signifiers' (Claude Lévi-Strauss), since they could connote a chain of different political ideas

⁷³ H. R e x, *Der Weltkrieg in seiner rauhen Wirklichkeit: Kriegsbilder-Werk mit 600 Bildern aus allen Fronten mit authentischen, wahrheitsgetreuen photographischen Originalaufnahmen durch Hermann Rex, unter Erg. durch offizielle Aufnahmen des Kriegs-Bild- und Filmamtes des Reichs-archivs und Aufnahmen treuer Kameraden*, Oberammergau 1926; G. S o l d a n, *Der Weltkrieg im Bild. Originalaufnahmen des Kriegs-Bild- und Filmamtes aus der modernen Materialschlacht*, Berlin 1927; F. S c h a u w e c k e r, *So war der Krieg*, Berlin 1927; W. B e u m e l b u r g, *Der Weltkrieg im Bild: Frontaufnahmen aus den Archiven der Entente*, Munich 1929; O. V i t t e n s e, *Weltkriegsbilder, nach Berichten von Mitkämpfern und Augenzeugen zusammengestellt*, Stuttgart n.y.; *Das Antlitz des Krieges: Bilder-Atlas des Weltkrieges*, ed. by N e u f e l d, H e n i u s, Berlin n.y.; W. R e e t z, *Eine ganze Welt gegen uns: Geschichte des Weltkrieges in Bildern*, Berlin 1934; *Die unsterbliche Landschaft: Die Fronten des Weltkrieges. Ein Bilderwerk*, ed. by O. V o l k m a n n, Leipzig 1934.

⁷⁴ B. Z i e m a n n, *Contested commemoration: Republican war veterans and Weimar political culture*, Cambridge 2012.



7. 'Der Wald von Longueval 1916 nach der Schlacht an der Somme.

Photo by John Warwick Brooke, Imperial War Museum Q 4267

depending on the context of their publication and the accompanying text.⁷⁵ Mainly published in the late 1920s and early 1930s, these photos shaped the image of the First World War, not only in the immediate post-war period and throughout the Weimar Republic, but to this day as well.

⁷⁵ In her article on photographs from the Second World War in this issue, Petra Bopp shows how additional texts on photographs can cause a shift in meaning and even change the connotation of a picture completely.