

One of Many: A German Soldier at the Western Front, 1914-1918

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This paper considers the documentation of WW I from a collection of 172 *feldpostkarten* from a German Saxon soldier who served on the Western Front between 1914-1918. Drawn from a *Kriegsalbum* assembled by his family in Crimmitschau, a textile manufacturing center south of Leipzig, the cards sent by Gefrieter Emil Walter Jacob (*Ersatz-Bataillon J. R. 105*) provide a personal witness and micro-view of the war that complements the discussion of Great War's political origins, military tactics, industrial production, and the emergence of ever improving weapons systems. Unlike the accounts of the war offered by Ernst Jünger in *Stahlgewittern* (1922) and his *Kriegstagebuch* (published in their complete version in 2010), the collection of *feldpostkarten* offers a resource for the study of a different record of the war and survival.

After reviewing the unique formation of Saxon military units and their relationship to the Reich (soldiers swore allegiance both to the Kaiser Wilhelm and the Saxon King, Friedrich August), the paper provides an overview of the archive itself and maps the origin of cards relative to the evolving theatre of war. Viewed from the work of Friedrich Kittler (1990, 1999, 2013) and others, the cards invite consideration of the transport networks that allowed a continuous link between the western front and home front. Clearly, such links also served as a means of disseminating propaganda about the success of the war. Within the context of photography, lithography, and color printing – or what has simply been referred to as technologies of representation and/or misrepresentation -- the cards witness to ‘the theatre of war’ (*Kriegschauplatz*). While the cards – especially early in the war – are ‘tourist cards’ from multiple locations on the Belgian front, later cards include a large number printed by the War Ministry to celebrate generals, patriotic slogans, and religious holidays. The images of weapons systems encountered (field mortars, cannons, balloons and aircraft, reconnaissance towers, field hospitals, etc.) provide additional witness to the many other human and material actors in the theatre. Cards also include photographs taken in the field or in Belgian photograph studios of the soldiers sent the front. The shifting landscapes represented through the cards offer a mosaic of frames of the evolving war that may be compared to a quasi-documentary structure. The picture postcards, personalized through the messages they carry, literally situate the soldier in the ‘theatre

of war' albeit one that may be thought of as a micro-scene in an evolving drama. The transcription of written messages themselves provides a reminder that the Great War was the first European war where the majority of soldiers in the Belgian, British, French, and German forces were literate and can be viewed as agents for recording or inscription. Examples taken from the carefully written messages from Gefreiter Emil Jacob demonstrate the presence of idiolects or topoi that maybe considered as vehicles or coding or even covering information.

Gefreiter Jacob, born in Neukirchen on 27 September 1888, was inducted into the army on 22 August 1914. His military passport indicates that he participated in campaigns for Ypres, Verdun, the Argonne, Champagne, and Reims among others. He was released from service in Zwickau, 9 May 1919. He immigrated to the United States in 1924 and died in Wisconsin in 1963. He was my grandfather. My academic career has been devoted to the early modern history of science through the study of narrative, language, and other modes of representation. Although I have lived with the representations of WWI through family stories and material evidence such as these *feldpostkarten* for an extended time, this is the first time I have had the opportunity to explore an archive that involves intimate histories.

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