FIRST GLOBAL CONFLICT

CONTEMPORARY VIEWS OF THE GREAT WAR, 1914-1919

AN EXHIBITION: 29 AUGUST—19 DECEMBER 2014
THE RARE BOOK & MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY
A century has passed since the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the premiership of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His murder in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 set in motion the first great conflict of the twentieth century and the first conflagration to involve a world-wide system of empires, treaties, protectorates, and dependencies. Casualties from the war would number in the tens of millions and tens of millions more would be displaced or suffer political persecution. Europe’s borders, as well as those in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, would be drastically redrawn. The shadow of war would remain after an incomplete peace. A revolution in Russia and the fascist movements of the 1920s and 1930s would set the stage for further global conflicts.

One hundred years later, the participants in the original conflict are gone, but records of their experiences and views of the war endure on paper and film. Here are letters, photographs, posters, pamphlets, documents, and books that represent small, but intimate looks at the ways the “Great War” changed the lives of its witnesses. We hope these contemporary views convey both the scale of disruption the war brought, and the everyday bravery of those who faced it.

This exhibition is also part of a University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign campus initiative called “The Great War: Experiences, Representations, Effects” (http://www.thegreatwar.illinois.edu). Twenty-four additional photographs and books from the Rare Book & Manuscript Library will also be displayed at the University of Illinois Krannert Art Museum as part of the exhibition, “La Grande Guerre: French Posters and Photographs from World War I,” 28 August through 23 December 2014.

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Case 1: Early Views

Public and private reactions to the seemingly ineluctable approach of the war can be found in our collections. In a letter on the eve of the conflict, the writer Marcel Proust mentions to his banker Lionel Hauser that his brother, Dr. Robert Proust, had been stationed at Verdun, near France’s eastern border. He also alludes to H. G. Wells’s *War of the Worlds* and predicts the coming deaths of millions of men. In the first week of the war, Wells, the later unhappy creator of the phrase “war to end war,” wrote an opinion piece analyzing the origins of the conflict. Wells anticipated “the vastest war in history,” and, “a war not of nations, but of mankind.”

While some lamented the looming disaster of the war, others found opportunity. Wells’s piece appeared in the first issue of *The War Illustrated*, a magazine, launched in the war’s first weeks by William Berry, who parlayed the publication’s financial success into a newspaper publishing empire by purchasing, with his brother Gomer, the flagging *Sunday Times* in 1915. Authorities sought to control and shape the narrative and visual accounts that emanated from the war zones, through systematic photographic documentation and by inviting journalists, writers, and other public figures to tour the front lines and describe their experiences. H. G. Wells wrote an account of a 1916 tour in the book *War and the Future: Italy, France, and Britain at War* (1917). However, as the letter to his brother Fred in South Africa testifies, he fell victim to the erroneous assumption that Germany could not withstand the scale of the Allied attacks in 1916.

Case 2: Views at the Front

After the first few months, the fighting became static trench warfare in many locations, particularly in Belgium and France. The weapon of choice was artillery, (and evermore powerful artillery,) supplied on a never-before-seen industrial scale. The diary (author or authors unknown) of the 13th Field Artillery Brigade of the Austrian Army provides a close-up view of these operations, with terse daily reports of division composition, battery positioning, ammunition expenditure, and casualties suffered.
Case 4: Conflicting Poetics

The Rare Book & Manuscript Library holds the papers of two major literary figures active during the war, those of the American poet Carl Sandburg, as well as the archive of the British publisher Grant Richards.

Sandburg’s *Chicago Poems* (1916) launched his poetic career and though largely remembered for its gritty and populist evocations of urban life, the book contains an entire section of ‘war’ poems, including the poems “Buttons” and “Murmurings in a Field Hospital.” “Wars,” (see back cover) from the same volume, was reprinted in an issue of *The International Socialist Review*, which also contains an anti-war article by Sandburg writing as “Jack Phillips”—one of several pseudonyms he used in the journal.

Case 3: Humor

Humor formed an important part of life on the front lines: it served to relieve the stress of combat and to make fun of military life, its officers, and the war itself. Abian A. “Wally” Wallgren, who had worked for the *Philadelphia Ledger* and the *Washington Post* before the war, published cartoons in *The Stars and Stripes* that drew on his direct experience as a Private with the Fifth Marines of the First Division in France.

Humor was also a powerful and direct mode of political commentary. In response to an English anti-German parody, *Swollen-head William* (1914), the German painter Karl Ewald Olszewski created a book-length parody of the classic children’s book *Der Struwwelpeter*. His *Kriegs-Struwwelpeter* replaced the earlier work’s misbehaving children with political figures and allegories such as the Russian ‘Bombenpeter’, the British Navy officer ‘John Guck-in-die-Luft’, or the little French ‘Mariannchen.’ Henri Zislin, a French journalist and cartoonist, used biting caricatures to express his opposition to German rule in his native province of Alsace, which had been annexed after France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71).
By contrast, the nationalistic atmosphere of the early British response to the war assured an opening for a poetics of shared participation and sacrifice. The prolific poet and humorist Jessie Pope assembled her poems celebrating soldiering, many of which had appeared in newspapers such as the Daily Mail, into several popular works published by Grant Richards, beginning in January 1915 with her War Poems.

Case 5: Opposition

Organized opposition to the war was strongest in Great Britain. Many interest groups found common cause to resist the war’s encroachment on their principles. Labor activists, anti-war suffragettes, anti-conscription and conscientious objectors, anti-war anarchists and socialists, Irish nationalists, ecumenical groups, Quakers, and anti-militarist organizations all publicly objected to the war’s aims and prosecution. Their publications, demonstrations, conferences, and personal resistance often led to estrangement from friends and relatives, arrest, imprisonment, and forced labor. An umbrella organization, The Union of Democratic Control, had affiliations of 650,000 by 1917 and many of its leaders went on to serve in the first Labour Party government in 1924.

Die anarchistische Internationale u. der Weltkrieg.

Die internationalen Konsorten sind dadurch bekümmert, dass die nationalen Konsorten nicht in der Lage sind, die gegenseitigen Interessen der Mitglieder der internationalen Konsorten zu vertreten. Der Ausdruck „interkommunistische Konsorten“ soll daher nicht in die gleiche Weise zugelassen werden, wie es bisher der Fall war. Es ist wichtig, dass die internationale Konsorten nicht nur auf der Ebene der nationalen Konsorten, sondern auch auf der Ebene der internationaalen Konsorten die Interessen der Mitglieder der internationalen Konsorten vertreten.

Exhibit 26
Case 6: Personal Opposition

Siegfried Sassoon was a decorated officer in the Royal Welch Fusiliers and a poet who found his life and work changed by the war. Wounded at Fontaine-lès-Croisilles in April 1917, he was returned to England to convalesce. Once known as a poet of private volumes, his war experiences informed his trade-published (W. Heinemann) May 1917 book of poems, The Old Huntsman. Encouraged by reviews and by correspondence with fellow officers about the book, he nonetheless felt that a stronger form of protest against the war was necessary. By June he had decided to refuse to return to duty. Encouraged by the philosopher Bertrand Russell and others, Sassoon penned his “Statement” against the war for wider distribution and a reading in the House of Commons by Liberal Party MP and Union of Democratic Control member H. Lees-Smith. H. G. Wells had met with Sassoon in the Reform Club in May and was one of the first to receive a copy. One hundred printed copies at the offices of the No-Conscription Fellowship were seized and destroyed by the police. At the intercession of the poet Robert Graves and others (including possibly Winston Churchill), Sassoon did not face court-martial, but was sent to a hospital in Craiglockhart, Scotland to be treated for shell-shock, where he befriended another ‘war’ poet, Wilfred Owen.

Case 7: Late Views

By August 1918 it was becoming clear that the German military was faltering. There were retreats across many areas of the front with large casualty counts and declining morale across all ranks. At home, ongoing food shortages, failing industrial infrastructure, and general war weariness were eroding support for continuing the war. Germany’s Chief of the General Staff Paul von Hindenburg’s 2 September Kundgebung Hindenburgs an Heer und Volk (“Hindenburg’s Address to the Army and People”) attempted to restore some of the lost morale, arguing for increased resolve, and to get ‘true’ Germans to fight those trying to break the German spirit at home and at the front.
Soon, however, it was clear that the German spirit was not enough to counter depleted manpower and munitions. An Armistice was agreed upon. The date and time: 11 November at 11 AM. In a photograph taken that day in Stenay, Meuse (France) the soldiers of the 353rd Infantry, 89th Division of the American Expeditionary Force are pictured at 10:58 AM awaiting the silence: some alert, others relaxing, some perhaps nervous for what will follow.

Writing about that silence, American artilleryman Edmund Purves expresses his personal ambiguity on the victory, the reaction back in America, and the dread of returning home a different person to a place different from when he left it.

The Armistice and subsequent peace treaty left Germany a shattered country. Kurt Butow, the former German tutor to the Wells family and a veteran of four years of war, wrote Mrs. Wells of the depleted Germany he returned to: food shortages, increasingly expensive commodities, and of his future much changed from his pre-war dreams.

Upon reading the English translation in manuscript, Herbert Read, former editor of *The Times of India*, wrote to Wells with his enthusiasm for the novel, hoping that it would “make another war more than ever unthinkable.”

One of the best known and most successful of the postwar literary responses to the war was Erich Maria Remarque’s novel *Im Westen nichts Neues [All Quiet on the Western Front]*. The story of Paul Bäumer transcended the experiences of one soldier on one side, and gave voice to a generation decimated physically and psychologically by war.
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22. Die anarchistische Internationale u. der Weltkrieg. [London]: Printed for the No-Conscription Fellowship, [1917]. Shelfmark: IUB01200.

Case 6:

Case 7:

Case 8:
Army Medical Examiner: "At Last a Perfect Soldier!"

WARS
By Carl Sandburg

In the old wars drum of hoofs and the beat of shod feet.
In the new wars hum of motors and the tread of rubber tires.
In the wars to come silent wheels and whirr of rods not yet dreamed out in the heads of men.

In the old wars clutches of short swords and jabs into faces with spears.
In the new wars long range guns and smashed walls, guns running a spit of metal and men falling in tens and twenties.
In the wars to come new silent deaths, new silent hurlers not yet dreamed out in the heads of men.

In the old wars kings quarreling and thousands of men following.
In the new wars kings quarreling and millions of men following.
In the wars to come kings kicked under the dust and millions of men following great causes not yet dreamed out in the heads of men.

—From Chicago Poems.