

War Letters: Communication between Front and Home Front

By [Martha Hanna](#)

Summary

In nations where literacy was well-established by 1914, letter-writing was critical to the emotional well-being of soldiers and their families. Men in uniform often circumvented the censors and sent home surprisingly frank descriptions of combat. Civilians sent letters and parcels to the front. Parcels provided a welcome supplement to soldiers' rations, but when food shortages became chronic in Germany and Austria, the scarcity of parcels and the lamenting letters that made their way to the front made soldiers aware of the depth of civilian suffering and contributed to a deterioration of morale in the German and Austrian armies.

Table of contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Learning to Write Letters](#)
- [3 Postcards, Parcels, and Family Correspondence](#)
- [4 Letters of Affection; Letters of Lament](#)
- [5 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Introduction

During the Great War, the efficient circulation of mail was essential to the well-being and morale of soldiers and [civilians](#) alike. Soldiers relied on it for reassurances that those at home remembered and loved them; that their welfare mattered to them; and that they continued to have a civilian identity to which they could return when the war was over. Letters, whether sent from or to the front, were eagerly awaited, often committed to memory, and assigned a totemic significance; but letters and postcards were not the only evidence that a soldier remained central to his family. Parcels, too, provided material and psychological comfort: home-made delicacies supplemented an often dreary and sometimes wholly inadequate diet; warm clothing offered protection from the elements; and mementoes from home, as mundane as a local newspaper, as essential as a family [photograph](#), and as moving as a lock of baby hair, became cherished objects. At the same time, civilians depended upon the

regular delivery of mail for reassurance that the man they loved remained, at least for the moment, unharmed. When lapses in correspondence inevitably occurred, even for the most innocuous of reasons, wives and parents waited at home with ever intensifying anxiety, eager for respite from the spiraling horror of uncertainty and dread.

Relative proximity to the battle fronts – as was the case in [Great Britain](#), [France](#) or [Germany](#) – made it possible for families to stay in regular contact with men in uniform. Letters mailed from London or Lyons, Berlin or Bordeaux sometimes arrived at the [Western front](#) within three days, and although [censorship](#) of front-line correspondence and the customary embargoes placed on outgoing mail in advance of major battles often delayed the return mail, families at home could usually expect to receive letters within a week. In all the fully industrialized, comprehensively educated nations of Europe, where railway networks were extensive and universal literacy well established, letter-writing became an almost manic enterprise. For the duration of the war, German soldiers and civilians exchanged close to 30 billion pieces of mail, of which 7 million letters and postcards were sent home every day.¹ French civilians sent at least 4 million letters per day to the front-lines and received as many in return.² By 1917, British soldiers were sending home between 1 and 2 million letters and postcards every day.³

The significant distances that separated Dominion and colonial troops from their families impeded but did not fully undermine regular correspondence. Canadians waited at least three weeks and often well over a month for mail from home; Australians and New Zealanders, twice as long. Bad weather, [submarine warfare](#), and human error could cause even greater delays. Rarely, however, was the mail system so thoroughly inefficient as to merit this caustic mention in *The Times*: a birthday card, mailed from England on 29 January 1917 to a soldier in [Egypt](#), finally arrived two years later.⁴

Notwithstanding its extraordinary volume, historians have often dismissed wartime correspondence as uninformative and overly sanitized. Censorship and self-censorship, it has been claimed, prevented soldiers from saying anything in their letters home that would allow civilians to comprehend, however imperfectly, the horror of war. There is some merit in this argument, but not enough to dismiss wartime correspondence as historically insignificant. Without doubt, some soldiers did refuse to say anything that would unsettle the sleep of their wives or parents; but the correspondence of front-line soldiers, from many different armies, when read in its entirety, is extraordinarily revealing not only for what it said about the war, but also for what it tells us about how combatants remained connected psychologically and emotionally to the families they had left at home. Soldiers confided their anxieties, their

hopes for the future, their love for their wives and affection for their [children](#) and parents.⁵ They sent home sentimental souvenirs and the detritus of battle; they implored their wives and mothers to provide them with clean socks, palatable food, and anything that could keep lice at bay. In turn, families – wives and mothers especially – wrote conscientiously, describing not only the minutiae of everyday life but also the increasing hardships of life on the home front. They assembled parcels, sometimes as frequently as once a week, to be shipped often at considerable cost to men in the front-lines and, even more urgently, to [prisoners-of-war](#). In the main, they did what they could to reassure the men they loved that home awaited them at the end of the war.

Learning to Write Letters

The generation of 1914 grew up in an age of widespread but not yet universal literacy. In Britain, France, Germany, and the German-speaking Habsburg lands almost all men and women born after 1880 were literate. In eastern and south-eastern Europe, where schooling was more erratic and literacy rates more modest, the ability to read and write varied dramatically, by region, by gender, by age, and by occupation. As a general rule, women were less likely to be literate than men and peasants less literate than city workers. Within the Habsburg Monarchy, for example, only 3 percent of men and 5 percent of women in Lower Austria were illiterate while 65 percent of men and 82 percent of women in Dalmatia were.⁶ In [Russia](#) literacy had made significant inroads in the ranks of the urban working classes – on the eve of the war at least 80 percent of men living in St. Petersburg and Moscow were literate – but this was the exception rather than the rule. Among rural women only 25 percent could read and write.⁷ Similar patterns were evident in [Italy](#), where the north was more literate than the south, and men more literate than women. By 1913, only 10 percent of Italian conscripts were illiterate, but when [writing home](#) they addressed themselves simultaneously to those who could read – wives and fathers, most notably – and those who could not.⁸ These striking variations in literacy meant that wartime correspondence was commonplace among the highly literate armies fighting on the Western Front and less widespread (but by no means non-existent) in other military sectors. Much of the research on wartime correspondence has, as a consequence, concentrated more on British, French, German, Austrian and, to a lesser extent, Italian letter-writing practices than on those of eastern and south-eastern Europe.

Literacy alone did not guarantee that all were equally adept – and equally comfortable – correspondents. Even in countries where literacy was well-established, familiarity with the forms and protocols of letter-writing was not always a given. In the middle classes, the ability to write a well-phrased letter, as explicated by the letter-writing manuals (or *secrétaires*, as

they were known in France) that proliferated in the 19th century, was by the beginning of the 20th century essential to bourgeois identity. Considered a necessary arrow in the quiver of middle-class German suitors, for example, the art of letter-writing distinguished the bourgeois gentleman from his rough-edged contemporaries.⁹ German children of the working classes, whose families could not afford letter-writing manuals, learned at least the rudiments of letter-writing in the classroom.¹⁰ So, too, in France, where [children](#) from the earliest grades practiced how to compose a New Year's letter or describe a day spent away from home. More than anything else, they learned how important letter-writing was to the cultivation and maintenance of family affection.¹¹ British children, however, were not introduced to the art of letter-writing until the last year of the elementary curriculum, and not all children stayed in school that long.¹² This does not mean that the English working classes had no experience with family correspondence. Like their counterparts in Germany and Italy, where immigration had made obvious the advantages of epistolary competence, some British working-class families would have exchanged letters with siblings and relatives who had emigrated to the colonies.¹³ Many more would have made use of the ubiquitous penny postcards which proliferated in the decades before the Great War.¹⁴ From the 1890s onwards, when discounted postage rates for cards were first introduced, the affordable, attractive, and all-purpose illustrated postcard became the preferred – and sometimes only – means for people of modest means to stay in touch. As Edith Hall, a young English girl of the working class, recalled, her family sent and received postcards almost daily: “My grandmother would send us a card *each evening* which we received by first delivery the next morning. She would then receive our reply card the *same evening*.”¹⁵ It is not for nothing that the postcard became known as the “poor man’s telephone.”¹⁶

Postcards, Parcels, and Family Correspondence

The cultural practice and presumptions of family correspondence, inculcated in the years prior to the war, accompanied men from across western and central Europe when they went to war. If circumstances permitted, they would write letters, the much preferred method of communication (especially between husbands and wives); but when circumstances or limited skill conspired against them, postcards had to suffice. Three different kinds of postcards were available: official “field postcards”; inexpensive, commercial picture postcards; and carefully embroidered cards intended as keepsakes. The military-issue postcards were free, convenient, and easily mass produced: in the Austrian-Hungarian Army alone the military authorities distributed 655 million service postcards in the Austrian ranks and 171.5 million to

men conscripted from Hungary.¹⁷ However, these service postcards were roundly despised as impersonal and almost completely uninformative. Offered a pre-printed menu of options – from “I am quite well” to “I am being sent down to the base” – British soldiers had to heed the emphatic warning that “If anything else is added to the post card it will be destroyed.” Soldiers in the multi-lingual army of the Habsburg Monarchy were given even fewer choices: the service postcard that was distributed during the last two years of the war contained only one sentence – “I am well” – written in nine official languages.

Much more popular were the illustrated postcards whose varied designs accommodated all tastes and most occasions. Some offered scenes of devastated villages within the battle zone, indicating thereby where the soldier found himself at the front. These cards often fell afoul of the military censors: in one sample, from 1917, French censors in Amiens reviewed almost 23,000 letters, but destroyed only 156, of which 149 were illustrated postcards.¹⁸ Other postcards amused, titillated, or offered patriotic assurances to soldiers and civilians alike. Children sent their fathers postcards to remind them that they were missed; fathers sent cards in honor of special occasions. Husbands and wives tried to find the card that expressed just the right sentiment of tenderness, love, and (sometimes) erotic longing. More elaborate still were the birch-bark cards sent from the Russian front to families in the Habsburg lands and the hand-embroidered cards, embossed with heartfelt greetings of love or patriotic enthusiasm popular among British, Canadian, and, in 1918, American troops. In late 1916, [Wilfrid Cove \(1882-1917\)](#) sent his wife such a card, embroidered with the optimistic message “Every joy this Xmas.” Struggling to stay warm in her semi-detached suburban house and ever more anxious about her husband’s well-being, Ethel Cove probably had a joyless Christmas, but she no doubt appreciated her husband’s inscribed message: “To My darling Wife, with fond love and best wishes for a Happy Christmas from her devoted Husband, Wilfrid. Xmas 1916.”¹⁹ The marginally literate Canadian soldier, [Martin Suter \(1891-1955\)](#), wooed his intended bride with a series of embroidered cards which revealed both his imperfect mastery of written English and his authentic affection for the distant Flo (d. 1967): “Well Dear flo I wish that I wos home with my Dearing girl we wod hav sum tim wot do you think but I geas that we won be hom for chris I do hop that I can cum to Galt with you Deary well I ges I will clos for this tim good by best love and kisses to my dear Girl flo rit sun as you can. [sic]”

Home-sickness, a recurrent theme in postcards dispatched from the front-lines, was temporarily eased by the arrival of a parcel from home. Like the distribution of letters, the shipment of packages was an enormous enterprise that sometimes threatened the efficient functioning of every nation’s military postal system. As early as Christmas 1914, the French postal service was processing at least 200,000 packages (and monopolizing the use of 100

freight carriages) every day. Families were asked henceforth to keep their shipments to a minimum and were reminded that military regulations prohibited the shipment of liquids, food, and perishable items. Few regulations were more consistently ignored for the duration of the war. French families sent their men a cornucopia of local delicacies: fresh fruit, home-made preserves, sausage, paté, cheese, slabs of raw meat with cooking fat for sautéing, even raw eggs. During the weeks leading up to Christmas and New Year's the French postal authorities sorted upwards of 600,000 packages each day.²⁰ Although the British sent fewer parcels than the French they nonetheless shipped on average 60,000 parcels a day (and 4.5 million in December 1916), soon overwhelming the vast sorting facility built in Regent's Park in 1915.²¹ Some parcels were custom-made by gourmet grocers; others by philanthropic women's groups and school children. Indeed, teachers across western and central Europe worked tirelessly to coordinate the charitable impulses of their pupils, helping them to assemble and then ship parcels - dubbed "*Liebesgaben*" in Germany and [Austria](#) - to troops at the front.²² Although men certainly appreciated the socks, newspapers, tobacco, and other necessities of front-line life that were staples of these "love gifts", the parcels they opened with greatest pleasure were the ones sent by mothers, wives, and daughters. On 14 November 1916, Wilfrid Cove acknowledged receipt of a parcel that resembled a veritable pantry: "Your parcel was a treat. The sausage rolls are A. 1 also the cakes, and the ounce of the good old stuff in a nice new pouch was the very thing! But the eggs! Oh! The eggs!!! Before I'd taken off the canvas cover I detected "something." I put on a pipe and carefully extracted the noisome articles and promptly immersed them into the water in a shell hole before they exploded. It is a pity they went bad, for apart from the expense they are a great treat."²³

Parcels sent from England and France usually arrived at the Western Front within a week. Those shipped from distant British Dominions could take two months or more. This meant that every parcel had to be sturdily wrapped and filled only with items that would survive several weeks of unrefrigerated transit. Canadian families prepared boxes of fruitcake, fudge, and maple sugar, but spoilage was inevitable, as [Laurie Rogers \(1878-1917\)](#) ruefully admitted: "those raisin cakes keep fine and even if they are a little bit stale they are from home." A few weeks later another parcel arrived, this time in excellent condition: "Dear May...Since we arrived here the parcel of eats arrived and believe me we four enjoyed them. Everything was in fine condition nothing smashed or squashed. ...It is awfully good of you to go to so much trouble in baking and making candy when you are so busy but if you only knew how much we think of the things from home you would feel highly complimented."²⁴

Parcels offered much more than relief from the monotonous rations sent up the line. Tangible

reminders of familial affection, in the Entente armies they also helped maintain front-line camaraderie. Although every parcel contained something intended for the exclusive enjoyment of the recipient – cookies made by young children, esoteric essays to satisfy the intellectual appetites of a highly educated soldier, family photographs to wear close to one's heart – men in the French, British, and Dominion armies usually shared most of their temporary bounty. One Canadian soldier noted: "Most boys get parcels very often indeed, and naturally your own crowd all share up alike. Last night, one of us got a cake, chocolate, café au lait, etc., and sitting round the old brazier we were quite happy for a time."²⁵ French officers called upon the generosity of parents, wives, and friends to send packages the contents of which were meant for distribution among their men. Following the death in 1916 of [Maurice Masson \(1879-1916\)](#), his company sergeant wrote appreciatively of his generosity: "when he received [parcels] of warm clothing or linens he always distributed them [among us]. He also liked to give us tobacco, cigars and little gifts which give soldiers such pleasure."²⁶ Masson relied upon his wife and family friends to supply this largesse; unmarried officers often expected their mothers to do the same. [Etienne de Fontenay \(1893-1916\)](#) frequently asked his mother to provide aid to the men in his company and, when need arose, their [widows](#) and children. Like regimental wives in England who arranged for the distribution of packages to the men under their husbands' command, Mme de Fontenay routinely sent parcels filled with the very essentials of front-line life: "warm clothing, sweaters, socks, pencils and writing paper."²⁷

Working-class soldiers appreciated the parcels they received from home, but they also worried that their families spent money they could ill afford to provide them with packages. French soldiers were angry that their families had to pay for parcel post, when letters sent to men in uniform went free of charge. More than once, [Paul Pireaud \(1890-1970\)](#) groused about postage rates that he deemed extortionate, and [Fernand Maret \(1894-1974\)](#) wondered how his family could continue to pay for all the packages they sent him.²⁸ In Britain, where postage rates applied to all mail destined for the front, parcels were an onerous expense, especially for working-class families. [Herbert Oates \(1882-1917\)](#), a working man from Leeds, enjoyed the packages his wife and sister sent, but feared they were taxing an already overburdened family budget: "well I hear food stuff is very dear in England so do not send any more parcels as what with the price of stuff and then sending it over hear [sic] I do not think you can afford it."²⁹ This was also Laurie Rogers's fear. Only weeks before he was killed in action, he implored his wife: "now dear girl I don't want you to send me cake and candy for two reasons first it gives you a lot of extra work and secondly everything is so expensive I know you will go without yourselves just to be sure that I get something and I don't want that. Don't think dear girl that I don't appreciate the trouble that you go to for I do and also

enjoy the cake and fudge but I won't have you and the kiddies doing without for me."³⁰

Grateful recipients of their families' gifts, soldiers reciprocated as best they could. Christmas and birthdays, in particular, were not to be forgotten, however meager the array of goods on offer. Herbert Oates found his four year old daughter "Rosery Beads for her Christmas box" and promised that he would send his wife a "Ankerchief as soon as I see wone."³¹ Laurie Rogers thought that his eight-year old son might appreciate "a pocket knife I took from a wounded German it is not anything very beautiful but no other boy in his school would have one, do you think he would like to have it?...It may be late for Christmas but it will be just as good."³² Sometimes, however, the most prosaic parcel was the most appreciated. After [Caporetto](#), when the Central Powers made significant territorial gains into northern Italy, [Leopold Wolf \(1891-1952\)](#), a staff officer in the Habsburg army, took advantage of plundered stockpiles to send his new bride packages of food to supplement her own insufficient rations.³³

Hunger on the home front in [Germany](#) and the [Habsburg Monarchy](#) made it increasingly difficult for families to supply their sons and husbands with even the most modest food parcels. Hans Spieß, a Bavarian peasant, perhaps overestimated his parents' affluence in June 1916, when he somewhat churlishly thanked them for a recently delivered package: "you are quite well off, because you still have something to eat, unlike us. All things from the parcel are gone and now I don't know what to do." Nine months later, they were still able to send him parcels, for which he appeared more genuinely grateful: "I received the parcels No. 11 and 12 yesterday and 13 and the letter and card today, many heartfelt thanks." Josef Beigel, worried about food shortages at home, noted at the end of March, 1917, that "we are not supposed to get any [food] parcels anymore." By the end of the year, when Spieß received a parcel containing nothing more than "meat and two apples," the hardship of life on the German home-front was all too evident.³⁴ In the Habsburg Monarchy, where by 1917 the food crisis restricted most residents of the capital to a daily ration of only 830 calories³⁵ Viennese families were rarely in a position to ease their soldiers' plight with food parcels. Indeed, as mentioned above, the most fortunate among them - like the newly married [Christine Wolf \(1891-1975\)](#)- did not send packages to their men in uniform; they received them.

Whether abundant or almost non-existent, packages directly affected soldiers' morale. The practice of sharing the contents of packages with the men under one's command, which occurred often in the British and French armies but almost never in the armies of the Central Powers, or with one's front-line comrades reinforced a soldier's respect for his officers and

fondness for his mates. The arrival of a parcel, and the distribution of its contents, thus became an important occasion for building and reaffirming front-line morale. Beyond that, however, the contents of a package constituted demonstrable proof that life on the home front was not yet so difficult as to reduce the soldier's family to penury. And for these very reasons, the absence or paucity of parcels proved dangerously demoralizing in the German and Austrian-Hungarian ranks. From 1916 onwards, men grumbled ominously about the relative abundance their officers enjoyed – believing in some instances that officers were skimming off the lion's share of parcels sent from home – and despised those who refused to share their largesse.³⁶ As Benjamin Ziemann has demonstrated, unequal access to food parcels also threatened the solidarity of Germany's rank and file. For as long as rural soldiers could count on their families to provide them with some desperately needed additions to their daily rations, their comrades from the cities looked on with envy and rancor: "How painful it is to watch while others open up their packages full of good things and gobble them down, while I have no hope of receiving a package like that."³⁷

Parcels were especially important for prisoners-of-war (POWs), whose very survival often depended upon the generosity of their families and the efficiency of national relief agencies. Until October 1915, when by international agreement the Allied powers were authorized to supplement the bread ration distributed in [German prisoner-of-war](#) camps, British and French prisoners subsisted on German rations and the contents of parcels received from home.³⁸ Thereafter, family parcels offered welcome additions to the supplies disbursed by British, French and, in the last year of the war, American relief agencies. Even though parcels destined for prisoners-of-war were shipped free of charge, they still constituted a significant charge on the household budgets of ordinary families: after the war, the [French government](#) calculated that each family of a [French POW](#) spent on average 2.50 francs per day for every day the prisoner remained in captivity, for a national total in excess of 1 billion francs.³⁹ But for the prisoners who received them, parcels from home could mean the difference between life and near-death. [Georges Connes \(1890-1974\)](#), a French officer taken prisoner in 1916, received almost two hundred packages during the thirty months of his imprisonment.⁴⁰ The Russian officers held at the same camp were much less fortunate: almost entirely deprived of food parcels, they (like their Romanian and Italian counterparts) lived on subsistence rations and occasional hand-outs from their more affluent allies.⁴¹ Conditions for rank-and-file prisoners were even worse: those whose families could not provide supplemental rations often suffered near starvation.

In 1918, when the [German offensives](#) of the spring and the Allied counter-offensives of mid-summer resulted in the capture of thousands of new prisoners on both sides, conditions for

many POWs deteriorated dangerously. Rank and file soldiers taken prisoner in 1918 were usually assigned to labor companies that operated immediately behind the lines; and many of them had to live on starvation rations. As [Heather Jones](#) explains, parcels rarely made their way to these newly captured POWs either because the soldier was unable to inform his family that he had been taken prisoner, or because parcels were sent first to Germany where their contents were often plundered by civilians on the verge of starvation.⁴² German prisoners also suffered from the economic disaster that beset their homeland: by September 1918, they heard repeatedly from their families that “they were unable to send them anything...: ‘If you knew what we have become I think you would not even dare to ask us for a pin.’”⁴³

Parcels made a soldier’s life something other than pure misery. They were, however, no substitute for a letter. Indeed, almost every soldier insisted that nothing mattered more to his morale than the regular receipt of letters from home. Similarly only a letter in the soldier’s own hand offered his parents, siblings, wife and children the much needed reassurance that he was still alive. To be fully satisfying letters had to be honest, informative, affectionate, and confiding. Yet they also had to be sufficiently anodyne, vague, and politically inoffensive as to pass the censors. Censorship occurred in all armies, to guarantee that militarily sensitive information would not fall into the wrong hands, to identify instances of political (or military) subversion, and to assess the morale and well-being of front-line troops. But each army imposed censorship as it saw fit. In Germany until April 1916 and in Britain for the duration of the war, mail was censored at the company level: junior officers were responsible for reviewing all mail produced by the rank and file soldiers in their company.⁴⁴ The unit-level censorship of family correspondence found few admirers. A German soldier recalled how “every one of us had a strange and bitter feeling...we felt disgusted watching this sergeant reading our letters to our wives at home.”⁴⁵ In the British and Dominion forces junior officers found the task laborious; their men felt it insulting. As Desmond Morton has argued, “[p]art of a soldier’s humiliation was the knowledge that his officers read every word of his personal letters and, as mess waiters knew, sometimes joked about them with brother officers.”⁴⁶ By mid-1916, however, both the German and French armies had put in place a more randomized system of censorship similar to that in effect in the Austrian-Hungarian army. The task devolved to censors who read only a random sample of letters generated in any given regiment – perhaps only 2 percent of all letters dispatched from the French front-lines – and who operated sufficiently far behind the lines that the soldier and the censor were unknown to one another.⁴⁷

Whether enforced at the unit level or implemented by random selection behind the lines, censorship of personal correspondence proved a major irritant for all soldiers; for some, it

effectively denied them the freedom to write at any length or with much detail about the war. This was especially evident in the British ranks, where censorship by one's commanding officer often stifled frank communication. Herbert Oates was a most reluctant soldier and during the few months he spent in the front-lines before his death in the spring of 1917, he conveyed very little in his letters home of what he experienced. Perhaps he chose to censor himself, out of respect for the feelings of his wife and children; perhaps he would have said more had his mastery of written English been more assured. But the reason he gave his wife was simple enough: his letters had to be read "before they leave here so we cant [sic] put mutch [sic] in." And thus he wrote in banalities. The weather was awful; the food, not too bad; the trenches, filthy: "I had a poor Christmas as we was in the trenches all the time so you can guess what it was like but we have just come out for a day or two rest I have just been to the baths and we have got a clean change of shirt socks pants and we washed them I can tell you afor [sic] if we had put them down they would have walked away by themselves so you can gess [sic] what it was like."⁴⁸ Everything else was left to Beatie Oates's imagination.

Many soldiers, however, were more willing than Herbert Oates to court the ire of military censors. Recognizing that their families were anxious to know exactly where they were at the front, most soldiers tried to send this information home, one way or another. Some soldiers were able to do this openly and with impunity: Paul Pireaud, serving with the heavy [artillery](#) at [Verdun in 1916](#), sent his wife a hand-drawn map, indicating the precise position of his battery. Others ran the risk of court martial. One hapless soldier in the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry faced a court-martial for having written the word 'Vimy' in one of his letters.⁴⁹ To avoid such severe punishment, soldiers in all armies invented codes, some of which were so impenetrable as to be all but useless to writer and reader alike. Other codes were simple but effective: one favored by many soldiers allowed them to reveal their location at the front by placing a dot under a succession of letters. Fernand Maret used this simple subterfuge to tell his parents where he was during the height of the 1917 mutinies, when censorship in the French ranks was most punctilious.⁵⁰

Soldiers also attempted, with uneven results, to circumvent the military censors entirely, either by using the civilian mails or by sending private correspondence home with men going on leave. French troops had a clear advantage in this regard: they had direct access to their own civilian postal system, which was subject to censorship but closely scrutinized only during the mutinies, and unlike the British and Germans, they were not searched when going on leave. Dominion troops could use the civilian mail while on leave, and some did so to write freely about their war experiences. In March 1916, for example, while [William Coleman \(1879\)](#) was on leave in London, he confided to his wife that "the Canadians are now taking

over a piece in the Ypres Salient. At present our Brigade is on the left and has left flank on Hooge. ...The British have taken over new line from the French and this is part of the general scheme of allotment. Please do not show this to anyone."⁵¹ A few months later, Laurie Rogers, whose wife repeatedly urged him to tell her as much as he could about the war, waited until he was on leave in London to describe his harrowing experiences at [Ypres](#): "the Bombardment we have just come through was the worst since the war began so you will imagine [sic] what it must have been like. The ground just shook like a jelly and the explosions were so heavy at times that I was lifted right off the ground. I sincerely hope I never have to go into another like it. I went into the front line with 75 men and two officers and there was only one officer and twelve of us left to march out."⁵² Although May Rogers no doubt wept as she read this stark description of combat, her husband confided in her because she (like many other wartime wives) insisted upon it. As Marie Pireaud observed to Paul, however many tears she shed upon reading - and re-reading his letters - she "preferred to know the truth and all the truth."⁵³

In the long interim from one leave to the next, troops in the British and Dominion forces could enjoy a temporary respite from the over-bearing censorship of the front-lines by using much coveted, albeit irregularly distributed green envelopes. First issued in the spring of 1915, they were imprinted with the assurance that "correspondence in this envelope need not be censored Regimentally," and with the warning that "the Contents are liable to examination at the Base." Captain [Frederick Corfield \(1884-1939\)](#), a career officer in the [British Expeditionary Force](#), thought that the new envelopes would be appreciated by men in the ranks: "he can say things wh: [sic] he doesn't want the officer who censors here to know."⁵⁴ Green envelopes were, however, more a privilege than a right and any misuse of the system carried with it the threat that the privilege would be revoked. [George Ormsby \(1879-1967\)](#) regretted that "[s]o many of the boys took advantage of them and wrote home about their petty squabbles how such an officer treats his men, etc. and making complaints all around that the privilege was partly withdrawn and may be withdrawn altogether so then every letter we write home will have to be censored by our officer."⁵⁵

British officers had more opportunity than their men to circumvent the censors. Although all outbound correspondence was subject to random checks at the base, officers could often avoid the embarrassment of front-line censorship by signing their own envelopes or having a trusted fellow officer do so. Upon his arrival in France in October 1914, Corfield warned his wife: "It's awfully hard to write anything when every word is read and censored before it's licked up!" But it soon became evident that he could rely upon a fellow officer to censor his letters, with little attention to their contents. Indeed, he lamented the death of his friend and

fellow officer for many reasons, not least of which was that “Nairne always censored my letters so I don’t know how I shall get this one off.”⁵⁶ Other officers, usually of higher rank, censored their own letters.⁵⁷ In his letters to his wife, Colonel [Rowland Fielding \(1871-1945\)](#) created a record of his front-line service that hid little of its horrors.⁵⁸ Although some officers believed it was “not playing the game to insert information which the men are not allowed to give,”⁵⁹ others had few such scruples. When Corfield’s brother-in-law wrote more than he should have, Corfield was appalled: “Darling do write and tell Dennis not to write the things he does, it really is most awfully wrong of him and if he does for heavens sake make the Vernons shut their mouths...Really if the censor opened those sort of letters he’d quite rightly be court martialed.”⁶⁰

Censorship thus had varied effects, across ranks and from one army to another. French and German soldiers despised the censors as voyeurs and busybodies, but they still wrote more about the war (and their demoralization) than their commanders would have liked. They described the blasted landscape of the Western Front, the misery of everyday life, and their own near misses with death. [Lucien Kern \(1889-1920\)](#), one of three brothers who had immigrated to [Canada](#) shortly before the war, returned to Europe in 1914 to serve in the French army. As early as February 1915, he confessed in a letter to his mother, sister, and brother-in-law: “Two of my comrades were killed right at my feet. I was up to my knees in blood. Each time that I lowered my head I saw their crushed heads, hit by a bullet from a rifle only 13 meters away. ...My heart broke to see such good comrades spread out at our feet like that.”⁶¹ More than a year later and under the new censorship regime, Fernand Maret took stock after a week in the front-lines at Verdun: “I’ve come back from the dead because I’ve never seen such butchery; our regiment had many losses, 60 percent; in one company, only 30 men came back. I suffered martyrdom for a week, that’s to say I was crazy for eight days straight, almost everyone was and some still are... It is a true war of savages, curses on those who are responsible, I damn them.”⁶² Conditions in the German lines were, of course, no better. When writing to his parents, Hans Spieß was as appalled as Maret, as disgusted as Kern, and as honest as both of them: “[w]e are in a very dangerous position here. ...The Frenchmen bring mines over more than three cwt. If one of those hits a dugout, it crunches ten men without leaving a single limb in one piece. It is so sad to watch and see all that. ...The worst and most moving of all is when one’s best comrade is getting torn apart, and one is supposed to leave him next to you until it is dark. Then he can be buried...This is not a war any more, it is just murder, who is to blame for that.”⁶³

Not all soldiers were as forthcoming when writing to their parents as Maret, Kern, and Spieß.

Some chose to confide more frequently in their siblings; married men often wrote most expansively to their wives. As Martyn Lyons has shown, Italian troops did not usually unburden themselves to their parents but “often wrote more freely to another correspondent, perhaps a brother, the local priest or a lover.”⁶⁴ In the British forces, sisters and fathers were often confidants; mothers, much less so.⁶⁵ But even mothers learned, directly or indirectly, much about the war that must have kept them awake at night. [Ella Bickersteth \(1859-1954\)](#) had three sons in uniform – [Burgon Bickersteth \(1888-1979\)](#), [Julian Bickersteth \(1885-1962\)](#) and [Morris Bickersteth \(1891-1916\)](#) – and only occasionally did they feel constrained by the censors’ regulations. Although Burgon could not, in good conscience, tell his mother where his company was heading in late 1915, he could (in a subsequent letter) describe its malodorous nature: “There is the awful smell of the trenches after an engagement, the smell of gunpowder, and dead bodies and blood. It is a stench I shall never forget.” Julian, a military chaplain, wrote not only of the spiritual consolation he twice had to offer men condemned to death for desertion, but also of the wounded men huddled helplessly at a casualty clearing station: “My eyes are glutted with the sight of bleeding bodies and shattered limbs, my heart wrung with the agony of wounded and dying men. ...It is pitiful to see the men suffering from gas. They lie, their eyes streaming, their bodies burnt and blistered, and vomiting out their very souls – and but little can be done to relieve them.”⁶⁶

Letters of Affection; Letters of Lament

To concentrate exclusively on what front-line soldiers did, or did not, say in their letters home about the horrors of the war is both to misconstrue the multifaceted, conversational character of wartime correspondence and to minimize the importance of correspondence generated on the home front. When men in uniform inquired about the family farm, the scholastic progress of their children, or the health of aging or infirm family members they simultaneously affirmed their civilian identity, as fathers, husbands, and sons, and engaged their parents, wives, and children in domestic conversations that helped efface the distance that separated them. Husbands offered opinions from afar about their wives’ disputes with over-bearing in-laws or irresponsible tenants; fathers corrected the spelling errors of their children, while taking pride in their scholastic achievements; and almost everyone affirmed their affection by sending home sprigs of flowers, incongruous snippets of beauty plucked from the mire of the front-lines.⁶⁷ Just as importantly, mothers, wives, and children reminded men in uniform that they were loved; sought their advice on matters momentous and merely irksome; and in open defiance of official recommendations confessed their emotional anxieties and material misery.

Women and children knew what was expected of them: they were to reinforce the morale of

their men-folk by reassuring them that they were loved and remembered. Because fathers at the front feared that they would soon be forgotten, they urged their children to take up the task of regular correspondence. Children old enough to be acquainted with the rules of grammar and composition often took this responsibility very seriously, composing letters filled with family news, classroom triumphs, and minor mishaps.⁶⁸ George Ormsby preserved and clearly cherished the ink-smudged letter he received from his daughter, Margaret. Younger children were, not surprisingly, less loquacious: the very youngest might illustrate a family letter with a kiss or a winsome drawing. And some simply balked at having to sit still long enough to write a letter. Although Laurie Rogers heard often from his daughter, his seven-year old son preferred to play, to skate, and to avoid the tedium of letter-writing period. Mothers were, in the main, more reliable correspondents than young children, although the semi-schooled women of [rural Europe](#) often struggled to put pen to paper. Rosa Pireaud, less literate than her son, daughter-in-law, or husband, battled fatigue and her own sense of inadequacy when she wrote to her son. She begged Paul's forgiveness for not writing on the lines: "in the evenings I can't see properly and during the day I don't have time." However halting her penmanship, she nonetheless assured him that she remained his "mother forever" ("ta mère pour la vie").⁶⁹ The more educated mothers of the middle-classes became their sons' regular correspondents. In the words of Michael Roper, "letter-writing was a way of mothering at a distance" and mothers took the task seriously.⁷⁰

For married men, nothing mattered more than the regular – often daily – receipt of letters from their wives. Just as a husband's letter offered his wife temporary assurance that he still lived, a wife's affirmed that he was still loved. Wives wrote about many things: the price of coal, the precarious state of the harvest, and the precious antics of infants. They complained about their neighbors, provided updates on the condition of sick children, and offered commentary on international politics. Nothing was more important, however, than their avowals of affection. Often phrased in ways that displeased civil and military authorities, who feared that women's laments of loneliness would only demoralize frontline soldiers, war wives nonetheless frequently expressed their love by confessing their loneliness.⁷¹ By October 1917, May Rogers's husband had been overseas for more than two years and she hoped desperately that he would be eligible for one of the few extended leaves granted to long-serving Canadian soldiers: "if only I could see you, I think it would make a different woman of me loneliness is eating my heart out and yours too probably."⁷² Marjorie Fair, an English newlywed in 1917, was more fortunate than May Rogers – she at least had seen her husband recently – but just as lonely: "I am making a vast effort to remember (with no success) that I have the best man in the world for my sweetheart. I forget that (a) he is away; (b) no prospect of leave; (c) I am darned tired of the lonely life."⁷³

Women knew that they were not supposed to say anything to cause anxiety or contribute to demoralization in the front-lines; but they also knew, because their husbands and sons insisted upon it, that they were expected to tell the truth about developments at home. If a child was sick, family living arrangements stressful, or food shortages critical, then the men in the front lines wanted to be told. Thus letters from home spoke not only of love, loneliness and the persistent anxiety known only to families separated by war, but also of the material difficulties that became ever more pervasive in the last years of the war. When compared with the plight of families in central and Eastern Europe, civilians in Britain and France were well off. The intensely cold winter of 1916-17, the resumption of submarine warfare that threatened temporarily Britain's food supply, aerial bombardment which targeted London and coastal towns with deadly effect, and the introduction of [rationing](#) late in the war gave them ample cause for complaint nonetheless. In 1917 Ethel Cove and her two little girls were, she avowed, comfortable enough, but her elderly mother was suffering from the effects of coal shortages: "Mum can't keep warm (her hands are bad) and Poppy buys coal by the 1d or 2d worth ...I've sent Mum 2/6 as it's dreadful to think of one of your own going hungry and cold in this weather."⁷⁴

Even more dreadful were the fear and terror that accompanied bombing raids. In November 1916, rumors of a serious raid over [London](#) alarmed British soldiers in France who feared for the safety of their families at home. Wilfrid Cove waited anxiously for word that Harrow had not been hit, and Stuart Tompkins, whose Canadian-born wife had accompanied him to Britain, was equally unsettled: "Do you know there have been rumours of a great air raid on London. I do not believe it but it can't help but make me anxious. I shall look for letters to reassure me."⁷⁵ Letters from home were not, however, always reassuring, as Susan Grayzel's study of civilian responses to aerial bombardment makes evident. In July 1917, when London suffered a raid that killed thirty-seven and injured 141, one young war-wife confessed: "Oh darling this life is getting too terrible for words & one's nerves cannot stand much more.

When I shut my eyes can see those huge things like great blackbirds right over us..."⁷⁶ In comparison, Mary Corfield's plight was much less alarming: hard-pressed to live on her allowance of £360 per year, she thought she should find herself a job. Her husband demurred: "About the work Darling I don't know what to say 32/- a week isn't too bad if the hours are reasonable and provided you can give it up the moment I come home on leave." And, he insisted, she was not even to think about using her wages to settle her mother's debts.⁷⁷ Disagreements about money punctuated the Corfield correspondence and when combined with the disruptive effects of absence and new (albeit temporary) economic opportunities for women infused their marriage with intermittent tension.

In the Central Powers, where food shortages endangered the health of civilians, women were

entirely indifferent to the injunction that they were to suffer in silence. In Vienna, “by 1917 state censors had become alarmed at the despairing tone of private letters sent from the home front to soldiers in the field...Comments such as ‘When you all return home, you won’t find us alive’ were not uncommon.” A teenage girl in Bohemia warned her father that “our mother doesn’t want to and cannot support us...Everyday she goes without breakfast...and at night she comes home totally exhausted and cries from hunger, and we cry with her.”⁷⁸ Women in Germany and Russia wrote of political unrest, mistreatment at the hands of the police, and the relentless, increasing misery of everyday life.⁷⁹ These so-called “lamenting letters” were more than mere confessions of material misery. Insofar as they challenged the legitimacy of the state, exposed its inability to provide civilians with the necessities of life, and ignored injunctions to suffer in silence, they were acts of political and cultural defiance.

Conclusion

Correspondence and the parcels that periodically alleviated the misery of front-line service were critical components of wartime life for soldiers and their families. Literacy made the regular exchange of letters possible; longing for home and safe reunion made it necessary. Many, but not all, soldiers described in unnerving detail the tedium and terror of combat thus tacitly and sometimes openly defying the censors’ right to control their speech. Women at home – mothers, wives, and sisters – were thus less insulated from unsettling knowledge of conditions at the front than we have long believed. They did not know, as soldiers knew, what it was to endure the hell of the trenches; but they were not entirely ignorant, either. Regular correspondence did more, however, than present civilians with an imperfect knowledge of a soldier’s life. Its conversational character allowed wives, mothers, and children, as well as husbands, sons, and fathers, to affirm their affection while also giving voice to their anxieties. The regular exchange of letters, parcels and postcards thus offered soldiers and their families emotional sustenance and psychological consolation. As [Roy Gullen \(1881-1917\)](#) confessed to his wife, Mary, in September 1916: “it does my [sic] good to know I am writing to you dear heart.”⁸⁰ But letters of lament, marked by unapologetic accounts of psychological and material misery, challenged the social convention that civilians were to endure with stoic resignation the tribulations of war. When read in its entirety, the family correspondence of the Great War demonstrates that neither soldiers nor civilians accepted uncritically the right of the state to censor their thoughts and render mute their grievances.

Martha Hanna, University of Colorado

Notes

1. Ulrich, Bernd: *Feldpostbriefe im Ersten Weltkrieg – Bedeutung und Zensur*, as cited in Chickering, Roger: *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914 – 1918*, Cambridge and New York 1998, p. 101. ↑
2. Ministère de la Guerre, Etat-Major de l'Armée – Service Historique, *Les Armées Françaises dans la Grande Guerre*, tome XI: *La Direction de l'Arrière*, Paris, 1937, p. 395. The Ministry of War calculated that the “central military office [Bureau central militaire, or BCM] sorted, in normal times, between 3,500,000 and 4,000,000 letters. At certain times, particularly at the end of the year, the traffic intensified and grew to approximately 5,000,000. This counts only letters sent to the front as correspondence from the front did not pass through the BCM. This correspondence was more or less the same as that going in the other direction.” ↑
3. Marie-Monique Huss estimates that by 1917 the British army on the Western Front was sending 2 million cards or letters each day: Huss, Marie-Monique: *Histoires de famille: Cartes postales et culture de guerre*, Paris 2000, p. 89; Michael Roper suggests the more modest, but still impressive, statistic of 8 million letters per week: Roper, Michael: *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War*, Manchester 2009, p. 50. ↑
4. *The Times*, 18 January 1919. ↑
5. On the affectionate character of wartime correspondence between husbands and wives, see Hanna, Martha: *Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War*, Cambridge, MA 2006; between sons and mothers, Roper, *The Secret Battle* 2009; and between fathers and their children, Pignot, Manon: *Allons Enfants de la patrie: Génération Grande Guerre*, Paris 2012, ch. 4. ↑
6. Graff, Harvey J.: *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture*, Bloomington 1991, p. 295. ↑
7. Guroff, Gregory and Starr, Frederick S.: *A Note on Urban Literacy in Russia, 1890 – 1914*, *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, December 1971, pp. 520-531. ↑
8. Reeder, Linda: *Women in the Classroom: Mass Migration, Literacy and the Nationalization of Sicilian Women at the Turn of the Century*, *Journal of Social History*, Fall 1998, pp. 101 – 124; Graff, *The Legacies of Literacy* 1991, p. 298; Lyons, Martyn: *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe, c. 1860 – 1920*, Cambridge 2013, ch. 7. ↑
9. Wyss, Eva L.: *From the Bridal letter to online flirting: Changes in text type from the nineteenth century to the Internet era*, *Journal of Historical Pragmatics*, 9/2 (2008), pp. 228-229. ↑
10. Elspaß, Stephan: *Between linguistic creativity and formulaic restriction: Cross-linguistic perspectives on nineteenth-century lower class writers' private letters*, in: Dossena,

- Marina and Del Lungo Camiciotti, Gabriella (eds.): Letter Writing in Late Modern Europe, Amsterdam and Philadelphia 2012, p. 55. ↑
11. Hanna, Martha: A Republic of Letters: The Epistolary Tradition in France during World War I, *American Historical Review*, 108/5 (December 2003), pp. 1338-1361. ↑
 12. Vincent, David: *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750 – 1914*, Cambridge 1989, p. 89. ↑
 13. On the significance of correspondence in immigrant societies, see Reeder, *Women in the Classroom* 1998; Gerber, David A.: *Authors of their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century*, New York 2006; Dossena, Marina: “As this leaves me at present”: Formulaic usage, Politeness, and Social Proximity in nineteenth-century Scottish Emigrants’ letters, in Stephan Elspaß et. al, eds: *Germanic Language Histories “from Below” (1700 – 2000)*, Berlin and New York 2007, pp. 13-29; Lyons, *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe* 2013; and Elspaß, *Between linguistic creativity and formulaic restriction* 2012, pp. 45-64. ↑
 14. Huss, *Histoires de famille: Cartes postales et culture de guerre* 2000, p. 29. ↑
 15. As quoted in Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture* 1989, p. 51. ↑
 16. Gendreau, Bianca: *Putting Pen to Paper, Special Delivery: Canada’s Postal Heritage*, ed. Francine Brousseau, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Fredericton 2000, pp. 27-29. ↑
 17. Hämmerle, Christa: “You let a weeping woman call you home?” Private Correspondences during the First World War in Austria and Germany, in Earle, Rebecca (ed.): *Epistolary Selves: Letters and letter-writers, 1600 – 1945*, Aldershot 1999, p. 154. ↑
 18. Section Historique de la Défense (SHD), 16 N 1448: GQG, 2ème Bureau, Contrôle postal crée de Abbeville, Amiens, week of 24 May 1917. ↑
 19. Liddle Collection, Special Collections, University of Leeds Library (subsequent references to materials from the Liddle Collection will be given as “Liddle Collection”. Correspondence of Gunner Wilfrid J. Cove. Wilfrid Cove to Ethel Cove [December 1916]. Although every effort has been made to identify the birth and death dates of all individuals cited in this essay, this information is not readily available for everyone, including the Coves. In general, such biographical data are more accessible for the men who served in uniform than for their mothers, wives, and children. ↑
 20. Ministère de la Guerre, Etat-Major de l’Armée – Service Historique, *Les Armées Françaises dans la Grande Guerre*, tome XI: *La Direction de l’Arrière*, Paris, 1937, p. 395. ↑
 21. Roper, *The Secret Battle* 2009, p. 9, p. 93. ↑
 22. Roper, *The Secret Battle* 2009, p. 94; Goebel, Stefan: *Schools*, in Winter, Jay and Robert, Jean-Louis (eds.): *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914 – 1918*, vol. 2: A

- Cultural History, Cambridge and New York 2007, p. 220; Pignot, *Allons enfants de la patrie* 2012, p. 86; Healy, Maureen: *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I*, Cambridge and New York 2004, pp. 243 – 244; Hämmerle, Christa: *Von 'Patriotischen' Sammelaktion, 'Kälteschutz,' und 'Liebesgaben': die 'Schulfront' der Kinder im Ersten Weltkrieg*, *Beiträge zur Historischen Sozialkunde*, 24/1 (1994), pp. 21–29. ↑
23. Liddle Collection. Correspondence of Wilfrid Cove. Wilfrid Cove to Ethel Cove, 14 November 1916. ↑
24. Canadian War Museum Research Center (hereafter CWMRC). Correspondence of Lawrence Rogers. Laurie Rogers to May Rogers, 8 April 1916, 18 April 1916. ↑
25. R. A. L., *Letters of a Canadian Stretcher-Bearer*, ed. Anna Chapin Ray, Boston, 1918, p. 90. ↑
26. Masson, Maurice: *Lettres de guerre, août 1914 – avril 1916*, Paris, 1917, p. 261. Sergeant Valois to Mme Masson, undated. ↑
27. de Fontenay, Charles and de Fontenay, Etienne: *Lettres du Front, 1914-1916*, Paris 1920, p. 217. Etienne de Fontenay to his parents, 14 November 1915; Roper, *The Secret Battle* 2009, p. 94. ↑
28. Section Historique de la Défense (Vincennes): 1Kt T458 Correspondance entre le soldat Paul Pireaud et son épouse 10 jan. 1910 – 1927. Paul Pireaud to Marie Pireaud, 13 March 1916, 28 March 1916 (all subsequent references to the Pireaud correspondence will be to this collection; Maret, Fernand: *Lettres de la guerre 14-18*, Nantes 2001, p. 80. Letter dated 22 February 1916. ↑
29. Liddle Collection. Correspondence of Herbert Oates. Herbert Oates to Beatrice Oates, undated [letter #24]. ↑
30. CWMRC, Correspondence of Lawrence Rogers. Laurie Rogers to May Rogers, 10 October 1917. ↑
31. Liddle Collection. Correspondence of Herbert Oates. Herbert Oates to Beatie Oates, letter #26, December 1916. ↑
32. CWMRC. Correspondence of Lawrence Rogers. Letter of Laurie Rogers to May Rogers, 1 December 1916. ↑
33. Hämmerle, "You Let a weeping woman call you home?" 1999, p. 170. ↑
34. Letters of Hans Spieß, dated 25 June 1916, 12 March 1917, and 16 December 1917; of Josef Beigel, dated 2 March 1917, as cited in Ulrich, Bernd and Ziemann, Benjamin (eds.): *German Soldiers in the Great War: Letters and Eyewitness Accounts*, trans. Christine Brocks, Barnsley 2010, pp. 159, 161, 162, 165-166. ↑
35. Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire* 2004, p. 31. ↑
36. On the demoralizing effects of unequal access to food within the Central Powers, see: Watson, Alexander: *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale, and Collapse in the*

- German and British Armies, 1914-1918, Cambridge and New York 2008, pp. 127-129; Davis, Belinda: Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin, Chapel Hill 2000; and Healy, Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire 2009. ↑
37. As cited by Ziemann, Benjamin: War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914-1923, trans. Alex Skinner, Oxford and New York 2007, p. 77. ↑
 38. Rousseau, Frédéric: Paroles de femmes de poilus: Jours de guerre au féminin sur le front intérieur Languedocien, Annales du Midi, 12/232 (2000), p. 486. ↑
 39. Abbal, Oddon: Le Témoignage de la correspondance des prisonniers languedociens, in: Canini, Gérard (ed.): Mémoire de la Grande Guerre: témoins et témoignages, Nancy 1989, p. 185. ↑
 40. Connes, Georges: A POW's Memoir of the First World War: The Other Ordeal, trans. Marie-Claire Connes Wrage, ed. Lois Davis Vines, Oxford and New York 2004, p. 48. ↑
 41. Speed, Richard B.: Prisoners, Diplomats, and the Great War: a Study in the Diplomacy of Captivity, New York 1990, pp. 74-75. ↑
 42. Jones, Heather: Violence against Prisoners of War in the First World War: Britain, France and Germany, 1914-1920, Cambridge and New York 2011, pp. 192-3, 195. ↑
 43. Ibid., p. 246. ↑
 44. On censorship in the Austrian army, see Hämmerle, 'You let a weeping woman call you home' 1999, p. 155. ↑
 45. As cited in Ulrich and Ziemann (eds.), German Soldiers in the Great War 2010, p. 124. ↑
 46. Morton, Desmond: When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War, Toronto 1993, p. 238. ↑
 47. Lyons, Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe 2013, pp. 79-80; Ulrich and Ziemann (eds.), German Soldiers in the Great War 2010, p. 126. ↑
 48. Liddle Collection. Correspondence of Herbert Oates. Herbert Oates to Beatie Oates, letter #26 (undated). ↑
 49. Library and Archives Canada, MG 30 E149: Letters of Agar Adamson: vol. 7. Agar Adamson to Mabel Adamson, 6 April 1917. ↑
 50. Maret, Lettres de la guerre 14-18 2001, p. 202. ↑
 51. CWMRC. Correspondence of Capt. William Coleman. William Coleman to Della Coleman, 28 March 1916. ↑
 52. CWMRC. Correspondence of Lawrence Rogers. Laurie Rogers to May Rogers, 9 June 1916. ↑
 53. Marie Pireaud to Paul Pireaud, 1 June 1916. ↑
 54. Liddle Collection. Correspondence of Frederick and Mary Corfield. Frederick Corfield to Mary Corfield, 3 April 1915, 10 April 1915. ↑
 55. CWMRC. Correspondence of George Ormsby. George Ormsby to Maggie Ormsby, 6

September 1915. ↑

56. Liddle Collection. Correspondence of Frederick and Mary Corfield. Frederick to Mary Corfield, 11 October 1914, 31 October 1914. ↑
57. Finn, Michael: Local Heroes: War News and the Construction of 'community' in Britain, 1914 - 1918, *Historical Research*, 83/221 (2010), p. 528. ↑
58. Fielding, Rowland: *War Letters to a Wife: France and Flanders, 1915 - 1919*, Walker, Jonathan (ed.), Staplehurst 2001. ↑
59. Tompkins, Stuart Ramsay: *A Canadian's Road to Russia: Letters from the Great War Decade*, Pieroth, Doris H. (ed.), Edmonton 1989, p. 187. Letter dated 2 December 1916. ↑
60. Liddle Collection. Correspondence of Frederick and Mary Corfield. Frederick to Mary Corfield, 15 October 1916. ↑
61. *Lettres des tranchées: Correspondance de guerre de Lucien, Eugène et Aimé Kern, trois frères manitobains, soldats de l'armée française durant la Première Guerre mondiale, lettres choisies et présentées par Claude de Moissac* (St. Boniface, Manitoba 2007), 86 - 87. 25 February 1915. ↑
62. Maret, *Lettres de la guerre 14-18* 2001, 5 August 1916. ↑
63. Hans Spieß to his parents, as cited in Ulrich and Ziemann (eds.), *German Soldiers in the Great War* 2010, p. 159. ↑
64. Lyons, *Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe* 2013, p. 157. ↑
65. Roper, *The Secret Battle* 2009, pp. 61, 67. ↑
66. Bickersteth, John (ed.): *The Bickersteth Diaries, 1914-1918*, London 1996, pp. 55, 59, 220. ↑
67. Bacconnier, Gérard et al: "Quarante millions de témoins," in: Canini, Gérard (ed.): *Mémoire de la Grande Guerre: témoins et témoignages*, Nancy 1989, p. 148. ↑
68. Pignot, *Allons enfants de la patrie* 2012, ch. 4. ↑
69. Rosa Pireaud to Paul Pireaud, 15 January 1915. ↑
70. Roper, *The Secret Battle* 2009, p. 51. ↑
71. For example, Marcel Prévost of the Académie Française exhorted French women to resist the urge to write letters that would undermine the confidence or resolve of men at the front; they were, instead, to fill their letters with "comforting truths." Prévost: *Pour Celles qui écrivent aux Soldats*, *Bulletin des Armées de la République* (3 mai 1916). Marie Pireaud kept a copy of this article among the letters she preserved from the war. ↑
72. CWMRC. Correspondence of Lawrence Rogers. May Rogers to Laurie Rogers, 17 October 1917. ↑
73. Fair, Reginald and Fair, Charles: *Marjorie's War: Four Families in the Great War, 1914-1918*, Brighton 2012, p. 324. Marjorie to Charles Fair, 23 November 1917. ↑

74. Liddle Collection. Correspondence of Wilfrid Cove. Ethel Cove to Wilfrid Cove, 31 January 1917. ↑
75. Tompkins, A Canadian's Road to Russia 1989, p. 173. Letter dated 17 November 1916. ↑
76. Letter from Edie Bennet to Edwin Bennet, 9 July 1917, as cited in Grayzel, Susan R.: At Home and Under Fire: Air Raids and Culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz, Cambridge and New York 2012, p. 76 ↑
77. Liddle Collection. Correspondence of Frederick and Mary Corfield. Frederick Corfield to Mary Corfield, 31 December 1916. ↑
78. Healy, Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire 2009, pp. 40–41; Zahra, Tara: 'Each nation only cares for its own': Empire, Nation, and Child Welfare Activism in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1918, American Historical Review, 111/5 (2006), p. 1391. ↑
79. Davis, Home Fires Burning 2000, pp. 96, 113; Engel, Barbara: Not by Bread Alone: Subsistence Riots in Russia during World War I, Journal of Modern History, 69/4 (1997), p. 712 ↑
80. <http://www.canadianletters.ca/letters.php?letterid=4345&docid=1> (retrieved 1 October 2014). Letter from Roy Gullen to Mary Gullen, 4 September 1916. ↑

Selected Bibliography

- [Canini, Gérard \(ed.\): **Mémoire de la Grande Guerre. Témoins et témoignages**, Nancy, 1989: Presses universitaires de Nancy.](#)
- [Cook, Tim: **Shock troops. Canadians fighting the Great War, 1917-1918**, vol. 2, Toronto, 2008: Viking Canada.](#)
- [Davis, Belinda: **Home fires burning. Food, politics, and everyday life in World War I Berlin**, Chapel Hill, 2000: University of North Carolina Press.](#)
- [Dossena, Marina / Del Lungo Camiciotti, Gabriella: **Letter writing in late modern Europe**, Amsterdam; Philadelphia, 2012: John Benjamins Publishing Company.](#)
- [Hanna, Martha: **A republic of letters. The epistolary tradition in France during World War I**, in: The American Historical Review 108/5, December 2003, pp. 1338-1361.](#)
- [Hanna, Martha: **Your death would be mine. Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War**, Cambridge; London, 2008: Harvard University Press.](#)
- [Healy, Maureen: **Vienna and the fall of the Habsburg Empire. Total war and**](#)

[everyday life in World War I](#), Cambridge, 2004: Cambridge University Press.

- [Huss, Marie-Monique: **Histoires de famille. Cartes postales et culture de guerre**](#), Paris, 2000: Noésis.
- [Hämmerle, Christa: **'You let a weeping woman call you home?' Private correspondences during the First World War in Austria and Germany**](#), in: Earle, Rebecca (ed.): *Epistolary selves. Letters and letter-writers, 1600-1945*, Aldershot, Hants, England; Brookfield, Vermont 1999 Ashgate, pp. 152-182.
- [Jones, Heather: **Violence against prisoners of war in the First World War. Britain, France, and Germany, 1914-1920**](#), Cambridge; New York, 2011: Cambridge University Press.
- [Lyons, Martyn: **The writing culture of ordinary people in Europe, 1860-1920**](#), Cambridge; New York, 2013: Cambridge University Press.
- [McCartney, Helen B.: **Citizen soldiers. The Liverpool Territorials in the First World War**](#), Cambridge; New York, 2005: Cambridge University Press.
- [Morton, Desmond: **When your number's up. The Canadian soldier in the First World War**](#), Toronto, 1993: Random House of Canada.
- [Pignot, Manon: **Allons enfants de la patrie. Génération Grande guerre**](#), Paris, 2012: Éd. du Seuil.
- [Roper, Michael: **The secret battle. Emotional survival in the Great War**](#), Manchester; New York, 2009: Manchester University Press.
- [Ulrich, Bernd / Ziemann, Benjamin: **German soldiers in the Great War. Letters and eyewitness accounts**](#), Barnsley, 2010: Pen & Sword Military.
- [Ulrich, Bernd: **Die Augenzeugen. Deutsche Feldpostbriefe in Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit 1914-1933**](#), Essen, 1997: Klartext Verlag.
- [Vincent, David: **Literacy and popular culture. England, 1750-1914**](#), Cambridge; New York, 1989: Cambridge University Press.
- [Vincent, David: **The rise of mass literacy. Reading and writing in modern Europe**](#), Cambridge; Malden, 2000: Polity.
- [Ziemann, Benjamin: **War experiences in rural Germany, 1914-1923**](#), Oxford; New York, 2007: Berg.

Citation

Martha Hanna: War Letters: Communication between Front and Home Front, 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/ie1418.10362](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10362)

External Links

- [Badsey, Stephen: News from the front \(British Library\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Clements, Kate: Voices of the First World War, Podcast 21: News From The Front \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Audio\)](#)
- [Davidson, Jared: Seeing Red. Postal Censorship during the First World War, 24 September 2015 \(National Library of New Zealand\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Fieldpost, letters, Große Briefsammlung von Mitgliedern des akademischen Gesangvereins Münchens \(Europeana\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [First World War letters: Letters from staff of the Great Western Railway audit office in Paddington, from The National Archives \(Flickr\) \(Database\)](#)
- [How did 12 million letters reach WW1 soldiers each week? \(BBC\) \(Article\)](#)
- [How to Help the Tommy, 1916 \(Imperial War Museum\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Letters from Home: the work of the Postal Department at the Front, 1916 \(Imperial War Museum\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Letters of Arthur Lamb to his Mother 1916-17 \(Europeana\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Liebesbriefe zwischen Fritz Kreisel und Trudel Joseger \(Europeana\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Love letters from Pierre Fort and Denise Brüller \(Europeana\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Mason, Amanda / Parton, Ellen: Letters To Loved Ones \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Morselli, Francesca: Private Memories of the First World War, Archival Research Guide](#)

[\(CENDARI Collaborative European Digital Archive Infrastructure\) \(Article\)](#)

- [My Dearest, one family's archive of WWI letters \(Database\)](#)
- [Omissi, David: What Indian soldiers in the First World War wrote home about, 20 August 2014 \(The Caravan\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Red Cross comfort parcel, WWI \(Australian War Memorial\) \(Image\)](#)
- [The Essex Regiment, 1918, Minute 3:22, The Arrival of Mail \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Ulrich, Bernd: Die Augenzeugen. Deutsche Feldpostbriefe in Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit 1914-1933, Essen 1997 \(Clio-online\) \(Article\)](#)
- [War Letters 1914-1918 \(Institutional Website\)](#)

Metadata

Regional Section(s)

[Australasia](#) > [Australia](#)

[Australasia](#) > [New Zealand](#)

[Central Europe](#) > [Austria-Hungary](#)

[Central Europe](#) > [Germany](#)

[Eastern Europe](#) > [Russian Empire](#)

[North America](#) > [Canada](#)

[Western Europe](#) > [France](#)

[Western Europe](#) > [Great Britain and Ireland](#) > [Great Britain](#)

Thematic Section(s)

[Home Front](#)

Subjects

[Society](#) > [Everyday life, civilian war experience](#) > [Emotions, society](#)

[Society](#) > [Everyday life, civilian war experience](#) > [Private welfare](#)

[Society](#) > [Everyday life, civilian war experience](#) > [Rationing and shortages](#)

[Society](#) > [Family, generation](#) > [Children and youth](#)

[Society](#) > [Social groups](#) > [Working classes](#)

[The media](#) > [Censorship](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Battles, battlefields and campaigns](#) > [Battles, battlefields and](#)

[campaigns, Western Front](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Command and control](#) > [Internment and POWs](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Disobedience](#) > [Disobedience, other forms](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Soldiers, experiences and attitudes](#) > [Emotions](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Soldiers, experiences and attitudes](#) > [Everyday life](#)

[Warfare and the military](#) > [Soldiers, experiences and attitudes](#) > [Letters and diaries](#)

Author Keywords

Wartime correspondence; military censorship; letter-writing; food-parcels; military morale

GND Subject Headings

[Weltkrieg \[1914-1918\] ; Feldpostbrief](#)

LC Subject Headings

[World War, 1914-1918 ; Soldiers ; Correspondence](#)

Rameau Subject Headings

[Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\) ; Récits personnels ; Correspondance](#)

Key Person(s)

[Bickersteth, Morris](#); [Pireaud, Paul](#); [Fielding, Rowland](#); [Cove, Wilfrid](#); [Suter, Martin](#); [Rogers, Laurie](#); [Masson, Maurice](#); [Fontenay, Etienne de](#); [Maret, Fernand](#); [Oates, Herbert](#); [Wolf, Leopold](#); [Wolf, Christine](#); [Connes, Georges](#); [Coleman, William](#); [Corfield, Frederick](#); [Ormsby, George](#); [Kern, Lucien](#); [Bickersteth, Ella](#); [Bickersteth, Burgon](#); [Bickersteth, Julian](#); [Gullen, Roy](#)

Key Location(s)

Title

War Letters: Communication between Front and Home Front

Author(s)

[Martha Hanna](#)

Article Type

Handbook Article

Classification Group

Survey Article (Thematic)

Articles That Link Here

[Negotiating and Mediating Conduct of War](#); [Warfare 1914-1918 \(Canada\)](#); [Moral Norms and Values](#); [Historiography 1918-Today \(France\)](#); [Great Britain](#); [Women's Mobilization for War \(Belgium\)](#); [Great Britain](#); [International Committee of the Red Cross](#); [Non-European Soldiers](#); [Centenary \(New Zealand\)](#); [Food and Nutrition](#); [Centenary \(Romania\)](#); [Museums](#); [Dominion Soldiers on Leave in Europe \(New Zealand\)](#); [Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War \(Canada\)](#); [Minorities in Germany \(Denmark\)](#); [Historiography 1918-Today \(Australia\)](#); [Revolutions](#); [Life and Death of Soldiers](#); [Responses to the War \(India\)](#); [Bereavement and Mourning \(New Zealand\)](#); [Making Sense of the War \(Great Britain and Ireland\)](#); [Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War \(New Zealand\)](#); [Centenary \(Czech Republic\)](#); [Propaganda at Home and Abroad](#); [Bereavement and Mourning \(Australia\)](#); [Social Conflict and Control, Protest and Repression \(Austria-Hungary\)](#); [Propaganda at home and abroad](#); [Centenary \(Internet\)](#); [Historiography 1918-Today: Bulgaria \(South East Europe\)](#); [Censorship](#); [Rear Area on the Western Front](#); [African Labour in Europe \(Africa\)](#); [Rural Society](#); [Literature \(USA\)](#); [Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War \(Indochina\)](#); [The Everyday as Involved in War](#); [Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War \(Germany\)](#); [Propaganda in the Colonies \(Africa\)](#); [Hospitals](#); [Censorship](#); [Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War](#); [Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War \(Indochina\)](#); [Sexuality, Sexual Relations, Homosexuality](#); [Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War \(Austria-Hungary\)](#); [Antisemitism](#); [Rape](#); [War Correspondents](#); [Apollinaire, Guillaume](#); [Bereavement and Mourning \(Great Britain\)](#); [Soldier Newspapers](#); [Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War \(Belgium\)](#); [Religious Mobilization and Popular Belief](#); [France](#); [Subjectivity and Emotions \(Great Britain and Ireland\)](#); [Press/Journalism \(Germany\)](#); [Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War \(Portugal\)](#); [Marraines de Guerre](#); [Howell, Evelyn Berkeley, Sir](#); [Children and Youth](#); [Propaganda at Home \(Germany\)](#); [Civilian Morale](#); [Historiography 1918-Today \(New Zealand\)](#); [Sepoy Letters \(India\)](#); [Literature \(Australia\)](#); [Women's Mobilisation for War \(Australia\)](#); [Centenary \(Education, Pedagogy, Youth Programs\)](#); [Press/Journalism \(New Zealand\)](#); [Propaganda at Home \(Portugal\)](#); [Masculinities](#); [War Letters \(Italy\)](#); [Belgian Soldiers](#); [Centenary \(Libraries\)](#); [Centenary \(France\)](#); [Bereavement and Mourning \(Germany\)](#); [Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War \(Great Britain and Ireland\)](#); [Brittain, Vera](#); [Centenary \(Russia\)](#); [Ferry, Abel](#); [Children and Childhood \(France\)](#); [Literature \(France\)](#); [Women's Mobilization for War \(France\)](#); [Centenary \(Madagascar\)](#); [Resistance \(Belgium and France\)](#); [Soldiers on Leave](#); [The Soldier's Sister](#); [Unruh, Fritz von](#); [Press/Journalism \(France\)](#); [Fear](#); [Military Board of Allied](#)

[Supply](#); [Centenary \(Serbia\)](#); [Women, Gender, Social Movements \(Switzerland\)](#); [Private Life \(France\)](#); [Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War \(Russian Empire\)](#); [Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War \(Russian Empire\)](#); [Women's Mobilization for War \(Russian Empire\)](#); [Bereavement and Mourning \(Russian Empire\)](#); [Markl Internment Camp](#); [Prager, Robert](#); [Witkop, Philipp](#); [Cru. Jean Norton](#); [Centenary \(South Africa\)](#) and [Barthas, Louis](#)