

Version 1.0 | Last updated 08 October 2014

Soldiers' Humour

By [Alexander Watson](#)

Soldier's humour, as expressed in jokes, songs and slang, reflected a dark, ironic and sardonic mind-set common among combatants. It usually contributed to individual psychological resilience, group bonding and unit cohesion. However, it could also act as a subversive influence undermining military organisations.

Table of Contents

[1 Black Humour](#)

[2 Humour as a bonding mechanism](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

Black Humour

Soldier's humour, generally typified by ridicule, irony and "black" or "gallows" humour, has been identified by contemporaries and modern researchers as an important facet and expression of combatants' resilience between 1914 and 1918. Scholars of the British army have paid it particular attention, positing that British working-class citizen-soldiers drew strength from an industrial culture which – as exemplified by its music hall entertainment – prized sardonic, derisive and cheery resilience. However, other nations' forces, although filled with men from [rural cultures](#), similarly used humour to quash fear and cope with hardship, danger and death. For example, soldiers everywhere downplayed lethal [weaponry's](#) menace by conferring wry nicknames. Shells were dubbed "cook pots" by French troops, "blue cucumbers" by Germans and "Jack Johnsons" – after the African American heavyweight boxing champion – by the British.

Humour as a bonding mechanism

Beyond acting as a psychological coping strategy, soldier's humour underpinned military organisations by promoting group bonding. In-jokes and bawdy songs, such as the Germans' "Annemarie", helped draw men together. In the British army especially, music-hall-style "concert parties" employed humour to relax men and raise unit cohesion. Humour also offered an outlet for frustrations, as epitomised by the gentle mockery of the *Wipers Times*, the most famous of British [trench newspapers](#). In worse conditions, it might act as a medium of protest: Austro-Hungarian troops, for example, sardonically christened the dried vegetables prominent in their inadequate rations "Prussian hay" or "Karl-troop-cabbage" (after their emperor). While essential for individuals' and military units' resilience, humour could thus also be subversive and contribute to undermining an army.

Alexander Watson, Goldsmiths College, University of London

Section Editor: [Emmanuelle Cronier](#)

Selected Bibliography

Bergmann, Karl: **Wie der Feldgraue spricht. Scherz und Ernst in der neusten Soldatensprache**, Giessen 1916: A. Töpelmann.

Dauzat, Albert: **Albert Dauzat. L'Argot de la guerre, d'après une enquête auprès des officiers et soldats**, Paris 1918: A. Colin.

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

Kessel, Martina: **Talking war, debating unity. Order, conflict, and exclusion in 'German humour' in the First World War**, in: Kessel, Martina / Merziger, Patrick (eds.): *The politics of humour. Laughter, inclusion, and exclusion in the twentieth century*, Toronto; Buffalo; London 2012: University of Toronto Press, pp. 82-107.

Watson, Alexander: **Enduring the Great War. Combat, morale and collapse in the German and British armies, 1914-1918**, Cambridge; New York 2008: Cambridge University Press.

Citation

Watson, Alexander: Soldiers' Humour , 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/ie1418.10236](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10236).

License

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