



George L. Mosse Program in History

**“1914: Then Came Armageddon”: An Exhibit Biography**

Curated by

Eric O’Connor  
Skye Doney

See also: <http://specialcollections.library.wisc.edu/exhibits/>

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The exhibit currently on view in the Department of Special Collections, Memorial Library is the result of more than a year of work. UW Libraries and the George L. Mosse Program in History engaged Skye Doney, a history graduate student whose research focuses on Germany, and Eric O’Connor, a graduate student in French history, to curate an exhibit commemorating the one hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of World War I in 1914. Their combined language and historical expertise covered much of the war’s western front. The project was to assemble an exhibit using materials held in campus libraries .

We started with the plan to look at several collections of primary and secondary sources in Special Collections, including: the William F. “Jack” Fry Collection on Italian history, the World War I Collection, and in particular the recently acquired Andrew Laurie Stangel Collection on modern German history and culture. As we worked through these sources we continued to learn of other holdings on campus. Most notable were the World War I posters at Wisconsin Historical Society. WHS reproduced images we selected from this collection and they are on display in the Memorial Library foyer. We also became aware of the extensive sheet music collection in the Mills Music Library. Three of these pieces are on display, including a song written specifically for men shipping out from Janesville, Wisconsin. Finally, we also located uncataloged items, such as the photograph of Winston Churchill inspecting troops along the Rhine River, which appears in the British case.

Having never before examined Special Collections’ World War I collection, we quickly became aware of its immense, and at first intimidating, size and scope. As modern European historians who had traveled many times to Europe for archival research, we were surprised and pleased to find such a rich trove of European primary-source material on our own campus, literally just a few steps from where we were writing our dissertations.

Our job was to review the collections and select roughly 80 items that might be suitable for exhibition. We primarily focused on the Andrew Laurie Stangel Collection and the broader World War I collection. The richness of the collections became immediately apparent when on our first day on the job we looked at the box of WWI-era postcards in the Stangel Collection and realized we could curate an entire exhibit out of just that one box of material. We still had about one thousand more items to look at.



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We worked together closely on the difficult task of choosing individual items from such splendid material. As we went through the collections we took notes and chatted about what we found compelling: book covers, surprising content, dust jackets, specific images, bold colors, and maps. This collaborative discussion allowed us to constantly make connections to earlier items, potential case themes, and to the historical literature. Any exhibit arrangement was always going to be incomplete, so we initially set aside the most riveting items no matter their topic. From this large pool of sources, we worked to impose some sort of order – to tell a story or pair complementary items – which eventually resulted in the 20 or so thematic cases in Special Collections on the ninth floor of Memorial Library.

We tried to play to the collections' strengths, as well as our own. We portray only the war's western front, given our own expertise and the emphasis on it in the university's collections. From the Stangel Collection, we exhibited sheet music, pins, anti-German propaganda, and postcards. From the broader WWI collection we chose certain photographs, anthologies, cartoons, poetry, art, and diplomatic papers. We also found an unexpected, unusual piece of material culture at the Wisconsin Historical Society: *El Teatro de Los Ninos*, a toy with which children could act out a play amidst the rubble of Reims. Overall we utilized the varied resources across the university to assemble WWI-themed materials that would not otherwise appear alongside each other.

We each gravitated toward certain items. For Skye, it was soldier's experiences. We came across a number of photo collections of soldiers both in the field and at their leisure. Most notable among these were the Jako Sitzmann Photo Diary from Special Collections and the Eduard Frankl photographs from the Wisconsin Historical Society. Both Sitzmann and Frankl traveled extensively on the western and eastern fronts. We have displayed a number of Frankl's and Sitzmann's photographs in the exhibit. Skye's favorites include the "Verschönerungsrat," or "beautification board," which features one soldier shaving another soldier's head. In another moving image, Austrian soldiers sit listless on the side of the road, huddled around their dead horse.

Eric found the pieces of satire created during the war most fascinating. Amidst such tragedy, some soldiers coped through humor. We see that in the *Wipers Times*, a trench newspaper that preceded today's *Onion*, and Bruce Bairnsfather's cartoon "Fragments from France." There seemed something very human and authentic about men expressing their angst through wry satire. "Are we as offensive as we might be?" they asked themselves tongue-in-cheek in the *Wipers Times*.

The title, "Then Came Armageddon," appeared as a caption beneath an image of Franz Ferdinand's assassination in a WWI-era anthology. This phrase pointed to the main theme of the exhibit: the war undoubtedly brought something resembling armageddon to the western world.