



The role of Postcards in World War 1

How far do postcards reveal what happened in World War 1? How far do postcards write the history of ordinary people in World War 1?

[Teacher Material](#)
[Activity Plan](#)

Student Material

[Students' textbook and historical maps](#)

[Selection of postcards](#)

[Historiana multi-stranded timeline of World War 1](#)

[Historiana poster collection of World War 1](#)

Acknowledgements

Learning activity written up by Ineke Veldhuis-Meester, from a draft design and content by Bob Stradling, within the Europeana Creative project with support of the Historiana learning and historical content teams and EUROCLIO trainees.

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More information about the sources is included in the material for teachers.

This activity asks students to look at the different ways the war is presented by the postcards that both soldiers from the front and their family and friends from home sent each other. These postcards enable them also to have a look into the daily lives of ordinary people. They mirror the mood of the troops and the nation; by matching the message and mood presented in the postcards with the phases of the war students can detect when the postcards are sent, and how they reflect the course of the war or what the home front should be told. Students will discover that postcards are also a propaganda tool like recruitment posters. Postcards can take different forms like drawings, cartoons, photographs and combinations of these; Students can get an insight in values and habits of the world of 1914-1918.



War time postcards form a visual bridge between the military front and the home front. This collection of World War I postcards is no exception to that. The cards were sent by both soldiers from the front and by their family and friends from home. In a way the illustrations on the postcards follow the moral of the troops and the nation. In the beginning of the war the cards were very positive and cheerful, but as the slaughter of the trenches continued, the postcards got more grim and depressing.

An important attribute of the cards that transcends that of "mirror of the mood" is propaganda. The war effort, "the soldier" and the "glorious homeland" are important features of this propaganda. In this regard the war effort is always depicted successful or at least hopeful. The soldier is depicted as an example of courage, reliability and modesty. In addition the homeland is presented as peaceful, pure and proud. Besides this "positive" propaganda there is also a "negative" variant where the enemy is depicted as evil, weak and incapable.

These postcards enable us to have a look into the daily lives of ordinary people. They show us what clothing people were wearing, the streetscape of small towns and what people considered funny, romantic or cruel. Postcards can take different forms. There are for example: drawings, cartoons, photographs and combinations of these; giving us a unique insight in the world of 1914-1918. In a way these postcards write the history of the anonymous common people during World War 1, and in this regard they are invaluable for the field of social history.



Postcards are not only a visual source; they are also a written source. On the back of the card people wrote, telling each other about their lives. This feature adds to their value in regard of the history of the common people. It shows us how they experienced the war, but they also offer us an insight in the manner people addressed each other and which topics they found worthwhile writing about during war time. It is however often difficult to read the backside of these postcards

Learning outcomes

Students will

 1-2hr

- Practise their skills of close observation of pictorial source material i.c. postcards (and possibly recruitment posters) 14-18 years
- Compare and contrast sources to tone, origin, time and intention
- Order sources along the timeline of the war
- Discuss what type of information has been given, for what purpose, which what effect
- Discuss for which questions the source can be useful
- Debate why a source can be useful regardless its reliability of what really happened