

# 1914/18 – Pictures from the Border

The First World War not only gave rise to a new kind of devastating war machinery and heretofore unknown means of mass destruction, it was also the first war in which modern mass media and visual communication (film and photography) played a major part. Although photo-reportage of the kind familiar to us from the Second World War was not yet so highly developed, a wealth of photographic evidence still exists, proving direct and lively insight into everyday military and civilian life, as well as into the feelings and thoughts of a whole generation.

Photo postcards were among the most informative pictorial documents from the period of the First World War. These cards, sent in their hundreds of thousands by soldiers from the border to their loved ones at home, were not just simple industrially-produced printed matter. Often they were original photographs taken on site by amateurs and enlarged on photographic paper in small editions: portraits taken outdoors, scenes from the field kitchen or hospital, views of men socialising or in contact with the civilian population. Given their superficial harmlessness, they seem like a collective sedative, a mass medium for repressing anxiety and uncertainty. Yet they also indicate how the Swiss border occupation of 1914/18 was experienced at everyday level and how the Great War was perceived – with subliminal messages about the absurdity of war, about solidarity in a community with a common destiny, about endless waiting for the emergency and about powerlessness in the face of geopolitical developments.

Over the years, the Fotostiftung Schweiz has collected more than 1,000 of these touching pictorial witnesses and is presenting them now for the first time – parallel to the installation of large tapestries by Stephan Schenk entitled “The Way of the Cross”. The arrangement chosen by the Fotostiftung is not intended to provide a documentary illustration of the reality of the First World War. Nevertheless, it represents a highly authentic reflection of a world in a state of emergency.

## **Documentary film:**

The documentary film “Schöner wär’s daheim” by Heinz Büttler (production: NZZ Format / Fotostiftung Schweiz) takes viewers on a journey to that “postcard territory”, respectively to the Swiss border in those dark times. Availing of the visual potential of the photo postcards, with their portraits and small scenarios, the film addresses the juxtaposition of the most diverse perceptions of the “primal catastrophe of the 20th century”. What does world history look like from the viewpoint of a country that was spared the worst? What preoccupies the ordinary man who has to wait inactively for months at the border? Do the many individual postcards convey a collective or national sentiment? And in which form are the contradictions and absurdities of war expressed?

Beatrice von Matt, Anton Holzer, Georg Kreis and Peter Pfrunder set out together on a journey back in time, immersing themselves as they went in the photographic situations, scenes, persons, settings and snapshots related to the border occupation of 1914–18, and expressing what is known about that period and what preoccupied and moved them personally about the episodes narrated in the images.

The film is being shown as part of the exhibition and is a component of the DVD “Bilderwelten vom Grossen Krieg. 1914–1918” by Heinz Büttler and Alexander Kluge (production: nzz tv / dctp.tv, 2014).

## **Publication:**

To accompany the exhibition the Limmat Verlag, Zurich, published the book “Schöner wär’s daheim”, edited by Peter Pfrunder / Fotostiftung Schweiz.

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### **Swiss border occupation**

On 3 August 1914, 220,000 Swiss men received a call to arms, the largest mobilisation of troops in the country's history so far. Bracing themselves for a European war on an unprecedented scale, the Swiss government and parliament decided that securing the national borders was a matter of urgency so as to prevent any encroachment on Swiss territory and to safeguard the country's neutrality. This decision would lead to the collapse of economic, civilian and social structures. Overnight men were forced to abandon their families, who received no financial compensation while their main breadwinners were in conscripted service, and many firms and industries saw their production come to a virtual standstill. As the farewells, separations and a general feeling of uncertainty grew, so too did the need to communicate. The millions of postcards sent by the soldiers stationed at the border to their loved ones bear witness to this state of social emergency.

### **The postcard as mass medium**

According to Swiss Postal Service statistics, 44 million postcards were sent in Switzerland in 1900. By 1913, 111 million cards were posted either inland or abroad. Many were photo postcards featuring images printed on photo paper, which were produced either as a single copy or as part of a very small edition. This new means of communication was as important in the years between 1914 and 1918 as SMS and MMS are today. Although the number of postcards sent during the first year of the Great War fell to 76.7 million due to the sharp decline in tourism, the Feldpost – the free post service for serving members of the military – helped to drive the postcard boom during World War I. In Germany alone, some 7 billion postcards were sent to and from soldiers serving at the front and their families back at home.

### **A sedative and a sign of life**

For loved ones left behind, photo postcards constituted a kind of guarantee that the sender was still the same person underneath the army uniform and new military identity. In some cases, the writer himself worried that his family would no longer recognise him on the postcard he sent: *"I'm also on the photo, but at the very back."* These cards were also a way for the men to show that they were part of a tight-knit community. Reference to fellow soldiers who also featured on the card, photos of group meals, as well as displays of physical proximity such as brotherly hugs enabled the sender to feel like a fully-integrated member of his new 'surrogate family'. The photo postcard was not only a source of comfort but also tangible proof that the person was alive and well: *"Sending you a photograph of me to prove that I'm still alive."*

### **Laundry bags with hidden extras**

Most of the photo postcards were the work of unknown photographers, amateurs or semi-professionals, for whom these activities constituted a welcome additional source of income. All they needed was one of the new lightweight cameras and access to a dark room or photo shop. For example, the Emmental postman, Ernst Fankhauser, took a series of photographs during his military service, at the request of his father who ran a small photo shop back in Grosshöchstetten. Ernst would then post the negatives, which were carefully wrapped up in his laundry bag, to his father. Fankhauser senior developed the negatives and enlarged the photos before returning the finished postcards, once again in the laundry bag, to his son, who sold them to his comrades serving at the border. It was rare for a soldier to turn down the chance of buying a picture of himself. Many photo postcards were also collected as mementoes and placed in albums to be leafed through once the war was over.

### **Authentic snapshots**

The mass circulation of unofficial photo postcards by amateur producers also paved the way for a new photographic style. During military service, it was vital that the photos could be taken quickly and simply. Authenticity was prized above the aesthetic quality of the image. This authenticity was in no way compromised by an incorrectly exposed frame or poor composition. These flaws, coupled with the directness and artlessness of the visual language of the cards, lent them even greater credibility. With their lifelike depiction of people and events, these snapshots bear no relation to the formal studio photos of the time and, to some extent, can be considered as a forerunner of photo journalism.

### **Light-hearted interludes**

Many of the photo postcards depict the soldiers engaged in pursuits other than their military duties, such as playing games and generally fooling around. The modern observer may find the subject matter unsettling given the gravity of the situation at that time, but we should remember that these semi-private, informal photography sessions were mainly held during rest days, lunch breaks or in the evenings when the men were off-duty. Frequently, the men posed for photographs as if they were at a holiday camp, concealing the pain of being separated from their wives and children with unconstrained insouciance. Feelings of powerlessness were offset by something positive and meaningful like camaraderie. In the end, photography was used to immortalise these brief moments of respite and make them 'real'.

### **Veiled criticism**

The informal photo postcards sent by the soldiers manning the borders are the antithesis of the official army cards, which often consisted of nothing more than graphic designs showing the bravery and readiness of soldiers to defend their country. The humorous and grotesque 'performances' depicted in the photo postcards can be interpreted as an act of protest to the morale-sapping tedium of everyday military life. The unheroic imagery in these amateur snaps echoes the critical and despondent tone of certain messages: *"I'm fed up to the back teeth with this never-ending military service. If only the devil could come and fetch me and my kitbag (nothing but a lot of old rubbish, of course). Best wishes, Emil."* Yet, these 'subversive', postcards were never censored. It was only during the war years that the impact of photography on public opinion would be much better understood.

### **Events accompanying the exhibition:**

Wednesday, 9 July 2014, 6.30 pm: "Die Fotopostkarte 1914/18: Ein Massenmedium", guided tour of the exhibition with Sabine Münzenmaier (in German).

Wednesday, 27 August 2014, 6.30 pm: Thomas Buomberger "Schweizer Alltag 1914/18" Historian Thomas Buomberger compares the photo postcards sent from the Swiss soldiers stationed at the border with images of everyday life. What was life like for the conscripts' families who were left behind? Special guided tour presented by Peter Pfrunder (in German).

Sunday, 7 September 2014, 11.30 am: Elisabeth Joris "Und die Frauen?" Elisabeth Joris, a leading researcher in the field of women's history, discusses the role of women during the Swiss border occupation (1914–1918). What were their day-to-day worries and concerns? How did they react to the state of emergency? Special guided tour presented by Peter Pfrunder (in German).

# 1914/18

## Stephan Schenk, The Way of the Cross

As a counterpart to the exhibition of photo postcards dating from 1914–1918 entitled “Pictures from the Border”, the Fotostiftung Schweiz is presenting an installation of large works by Stephan Schenk in which the artist questions the very possibility of depicting the catastrophe of the First World War – which cost more than eight million soldiers and seven million civilians their lives. “The Way of the Cross”, a work done over the past three years, is based on 14 photographs of the largest battlefields of the First World War in Europe and overseas. Schenk deliberately narrows his focus, limiting himself to a small section of the ground the size of a soldier’s grave. By opting for this fragmentary perception of reality he denies himself and the viewer an overview, thus underscoring the irrational, unimaginable dimension of the events involved. Schenk also consistently questions the medium of photography and the objectivity it purports to have. He had his photographs woven into monumental tapestries, thereby falling back on ancient forms of pictorial transmission. The works installed on the walls of the exhibition space constitute a different, associative, emotional and non-documentary form of commemoration culture.

“It was also a question of finding another materiality in which to do justice to the dimensions of the theme. I was fascinated by the idea of things being interwoven, not only by the threads that make up the picture, but also by the fates, by history, by processes which one can also not separate, even for oneself. This technique simultaneously leads to an optical dissolution. Normally, a detail emerges all the more clearly, the closer one gets to a picture. This is not the case with these tapestries. If you get too close to the work, it dissolves into individual threads and indefinable planes. This is irritating for viewers, as it is precisely the opposite of what they expect. It plays a game with distance and proximity and perception, corresponding to the difficulty involved in approaching a theme such as the First World War; it demands this mixture of proximity and distance.” (Stephan Schenk in the publication “Kreuzweg”).

### **Stephan Schenk:**

Born in Stuttgart in 1962, grew up in Backnang, Germany. Studied photography at the Bayerische Staatslehranstalt für Photographie in Munich. In 1985 he was received into the Association of Fine Artists in Württemberg. Active in the fields of photography and photographic laboratory work. Since 2000, museum technician at the Bündner Kunstmuseum Chur. Several solo and group exhibitions and book publications. Lives and works in Lünen, Graubünden.

### **Publication and Edition:**

To mark the exhibition both an artist’s book and an edition by Stephan Schenk will be published by Verlag Rothe Drucke, Berne. The Fotostiftung Schweiz will publish “Kreuzweg” containing a text by Klaus Merz and contributions by Stephan Schenk, Beat Stutzer and Peter Pfrunder.

Exhibition and Publication are supported by Federal Department of Culture, Migros Kulturprozent, Graubündner Kantonalbank, Kulturförderung Kanton Graubünden / Swisslos, the Stavros S. Niarchos Foundation, the Lienhard-Hunger Foundation.

**Original messages written on the postcards (a selection):**

Just sending you proof again that I am alive. We had our photograph taken as a souvenir. Weather's always lovely here. We can still hear the sound of gunfire coming from the French side. Greetings, Albert.

Dearest wife!  
Send me two pairs of socks and tobacco, and, if you can, bread or bread coupons, but only if you can, all we're given here is a small roll, and send me also some money because I keep having to buy extra rations to stop me from starving to death.  
Love, Arnold.

Auberge Prés d'Orvin, 13.IV.17.  
Dear Werner!  
The tobacco you sent me was a lovely surprise, even more so now that it snows every day on the Chasserel and you need to smoke just to keep warm. So, you have been a double help to me and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. There are still men who, despite having it good back at home, manage to spare a thought for their Swiss compatriots on the border.  
Best regards  
Yours, Alfred Fehr quartermaster sergeant  
Quartermaster sergeant school 1917

Dear Grandma.  
I've now been on duty for a month. No doubt you can tell from my face how much I'm enjoying myself! This never-ending soldiering is such a pain. But now and again we have a laugh too.  
With love, your grandson Franz Keller.

My dears.  
We witnessed aerial bombardments again this evening and this afternoon. Hope that spring will come soon. In good health.  
Kind regards to all, Erwin  
Asuel, 27 April 1917.

Dear Olga!

Just to let you know that the laundry bag arrived, and its contents – thanks very much. Sending you another little something, as well as clean underpants & vests. Don't have enough room to keep them here. Still no news about the request. Love and kisses to all, Ulrich.

Frauenfeld, 29 evening

My darling! Only 3 days to go before we're released!

How time has dragged.

Did you get the book, my love? Reading it might help the time go in more quickly for you.

Enclosed you will find a little greeting from my "gun" and I hope you still recognise me.

How do you spend your days, my dearest?

Sending you a deep and loving embrace and kisses on your lips that fill me with such longing.

Night, night and sweet dreams!!

Yours, Willy.

My esteemed colleagues!

Greetings from afar.

This is my company. Beside us are our chambermaids who are, of course, a great help to us.

I'll stop by on 20 October.

Best wishes to all from Tobler.

Bt. 83. III. 4th company, 3rd platoon.

Hello Willi!

Thanks alot for your card. Here's one from me.

What are you up to? I hope that, like me, you are keeping well.

I'm fed up to the back teeth with this never-ending military service.

If only the devil could come and fetch me and my kitbag (nothing but a lot of old rubbish, of course).

Best wishes, Emil