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Bertrand Tillier, ed., *Cartes postales illustrées en guerre (1914-1918)*. Preface by Annette Becker. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2021. 397 pp. Figures and notes. €26.00 (pb). ISBN 9-78-2271133045.

Review by Libby Murphy, Georgia College and State University.

Scholars, students, and collectors interested in popular, print, and visual culture of the First World War will find a useful resource in the generously footnoted and richly illustrated essays in *Cartes postales illustrées en guerre (1914-1918)*. The authors build upon the work of Marie-Monique Huss in her landmark 2000 study *Histoires de Famille, 1914-1918: Cartes postales et culture de guerre*, and on other studies of Great War postcards that followed. Unlike more encyclopedic albums, which feature illustrated postcards alongside the vast array of photographic postcards that circulated during the war, this volume, as its title suggests, focuses on illustrated postcards by both well-known and anonymous illustrators.[1]

The work of historians, art historians, curators, and archivists, *Cartes postales illustrées* situates illustrated postcards produced between 1914 and 1918 within the framework of Great War culture and within the porous and often overlapping networks of print media—popular prints, newspaper illustrations, cartoons and covers of satirical magazines, war bonds posters, photographs, children’s books—used to mobilize hearts and minds during the war. The postcards analyzed in the volume are primarily from the Agnès and Henry Parent de Curzon collection. The essays grew out of an effort to digitize and contextualize this unique collection of nearly 10,000 Great War postcards, assembled during the 1980s and sold at auction in 2017.[2]

The book is divided into three sections of seven essays each, framed by a preface by Annette Becker and an introduction and conclusion by the volume’s editor, Bertrand Tillier. Part one, “Un objet mobilisé et ses usages,” examines the specificity of the postcard as a medium and as a historical artefact, placing postcard production, distribution, and reception within the wider context of the “orage de papier” unleashed by the war.[3] Part two, “Mots et motifs,” and part three, “Violences et performativité,” explore the recurrence, across media and among the postcards themselves, of a repertoire of imagery, iconography, rhetorical devices, and thematics, aimed primarily at glorifying the French and their allies and denigrating the German enemy. The Parent de Curzon corpus, of mostly French origin, is, like all collections, circumscribed by the practices and preferences of its collectors. The collection contains only unmarked, unsent postcards, with no handwritten messages on the back. It contains humorous and satirical postcards, staged photographic postcards or *bromurines* (although most of those featured in the volume are from a private collection), army-issued pre-stamped postcards, hand-embroidered and hand-colored postcards, postcard series by famous illustrators, and a selection of some 100 *cartes*

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*à system*--interactive, mechanical postcards that were more expensive to produce and more limited in circulation than most cards.

One of the most original essays in the volume--in terms of both content and analysis--is the concluding chapter by Bertrand Tillier. It explores the physical and psychic mechanisms by which these mechanical cards--Tillier likens them to toys for adults--allowed reader-viewers to enact symbolic violence on the enemy--kicking (or penetrating) his behind, making him vomit or defecate, relieving oneself in his helmet, etc. The mechanical cards allowed the reader-player to narrativize, through the manipulation of wheels, slots, and pull-outs, the same humorous (and often humiliating) scenarios depicted in a great number of wartime postcards and analyzed by a number of the authors in the volume (Zmelty, Cronier, Gardes, Willer, Roynette). The manipulation of the mechanical pieces of a *carte à system* implies, for Tillier, a significant level of reader-viewer interaction with--and perhaps investment in--the content conveyed by the image.

The question of viewer reception of Great War postcards is, of course, of great interest to historians. Who sent postcards during the war? To whom? Why? What dictated the choice of a postcard? Does the simple fact of buying or sending it mean that you adhered to its message? And how did the humor of these cards land? As Laurence Danguy points out, it is one thing to identify elements that were designed to make people laugh and another to show that the humor actually worked (p. 329). The authors ask probing questions about the unique--or not--status of postcards within the porous network of Great War print media and within *la culture de guerre* more broadly. Postcards were situated, several of the authors argue, between the public and private spheres, and between the individual and collective sensibility. As a lightweight, inexpensive medium, postcards could circulate more widely and rapidly than books, magazines, or posters. Unlike posters, postcards more deeply penetrate the private sphere. Certain more risqué content could, in the postcard format, fly slightly under the radar of public scrutiny and decorum. Whatever their content and form, postcards, like all correspondence, served as a vital link between people separated by the war and desperate for news of their loved ones.

In her chapter on the practice of postcard writing, Clémentine Vidal-Naquet explores the difficulty of recovering the full "texture" of epistolary exchanges during the war, and especially of exchanges by postcard (p. 58). She brings to bear on the Parent de Curzon collection insights developed elsewhere in her analysis of the archives of the *Grande Collecte*. In the majority of cases, she explains, the written messages on the backs of illustrated postcards make no reference to--or bear little connection to--the images on the front (p. 62). In some cases, a card might be chosen for the familial or conjugal relationship it depicts, illustrating or reinforcing the relationship between sender and viewer. And in the case of erotic postcards and scenes of war damage and destruction, the image might express what the writer could not or would not put into words--longing and desire, on the one hand, and fear and suffering, on the other.

Vidal-Naquet's chapter, like many of the chapters in part one of the volume, provides valuable wider context on the place of postcards in the massive daily epistolary exchange between the front and home front. Vidal-Naquet estimates that four to five billion postcards were produced and distributed in France during the war years (p. 57). Postcards were, she argues, an inexpensive option for working-class and farming families, who generally did not write long letters, and for children, whose emotions and imaginations were massively mobilized during the war (p. 61). If the Parent de Curzon collection is rich in satirical postcards--a favored genre for wartime (p.77) and postwar collectors--these were not the kinds of cards favored by families, Vidal-Naquet

argues. They were much more likely to choose photographic *cartes-vues* of towns or monuments or postcards with patriotic and sentimental images (p. 62). Indeed, as Martine Sadion and Laurent Bihl point out in their chapters, postcards inspired by the modern satirical press were less prevalent than postcards repurposing popular imagery, often in the style of *images d'Épinal*, cheap prints with a folk aesthetic that were widely-available during the nineteenth century and which remained in production until the 1930s (pp. 124-125).

The other chapters in part one explore the porosity and iconographic proximity (p. 31) between the prewar satirical press and the postcard industry (Bihl), the very limited censorship of postcards in both France and Germany during the war (Gilles), the workings of the prewar and wartime postcard industries, the major editors and points of sale (Bouillon), the specificity of postcard series and compilations (Sadion), and the postcard's role in exporting French cultural excellence (Aguilar) and national values (Branland) abroad. The essays in parts two and three explore the devices, including exaggeration, personification, allegorization, demonization, and animalization, deployed by postcard illustrators to degrade (and thus disarm) the German enemy. Then enemy is by turns personified as Kaiser Wilhelm (Kaenel), subjected to every bodily humiliation and affront imaginable in the arsenal of Great War scabrous humor (Zmelty), described, in gastronomically-inspired postcards, through a rich, food- and appetite-based visual vocabulary (Cronier), depicted as a voracious ogre or wild animal in need of taming (Chambarlhac), indicted for unspeakable violence and atrocities enacted upon innocent women and children (Bihour), or presented as a mutilated weakling, diminished by his war wounds (Wermester).

In his chapter "Rire de l'autre, rire de soi," Jean-Claude Gardes brings his knowledge of German prewar and Great War culture to bear on a comparison of French and German postcards, arguing that German depictions of French soldiers, though they rely on predictable stereotypes, are often less virulent and demonizing than French depictions of German soldiers (p. 298). Like Emmanuelle Cronier and Odette Roynette, he also analyses the use of humor in French depictions of French and colonial soldiers, finding in representations of *tirailleurs sénégalais* and other colonial soldiers, similar stereotypes--suggestions of cannibalism and cruelty--to those used to demonize the German enemy. As Odette Roynette shows in her chapter, "Les langages de l'humour," postcard writers also used approximate pronunciation as a marker of alterity to draw a clear (and condescending) distinction, not just between French and German soldiers, but also between French and colonial soldiers.

Roynette also analyses the ways in which prewar antimilitarist and barracks literature and the stage antics of the *comique troupier* provided a visual and verbal blueprint for constructing the figure of the *poilu*. The foundations had already been laid for showing the gap between the military ideal and the unglamorous reality of the typical citizen-soldier (p. 347) and for using irreverent working-class speech and Parisian slang and humor to showcase the "héroïsme de l'ordinaire" and the "démocratisation du courage" (p. 348). One of the most interesting finds in her essay is that of soldier postcard illustrator Ernest Gabard. Like trench newspapers, soldier-produced cards--rare but not non-existent--provided a counter-discourse, Roynette argues, to the dominant tone in humorous depictions of the always plucky *poilu*. Like Gardes, Roynette points to the use of dark, dissenting humor used by certain postcard artists in their depictions of the *poilu* and his daily struggle with the many hardships of life at the front (pp. 306, 354).

Other cards in the corpus strike a more serious tone in their idealized and heroicized depiction of the *poilu*. Far from being diminished by his war wounds, like his German counterpart, the *poilu* is, Catherine Wermester argues, sanctified. As Fanny Brühlhart shows in her chapter on theatrically-staged photographs imagining nurses and nuns near the front, the injured *poilu*, instead of being emasculated or abandoned, is celebrated for his sacrifice, encouraged in his recovery, and reminded—through the women caring for him—of the *patrie* for which he is fighting. The nurse and nun enter the repertoire of quasi-mythical figures—including Joan of Arc, La Marseillaise, Marianne, and an allegorized Alsace, with her recognizable folk attire and large black bow—appearing in cards across the Parent de Curzon corpus as foes of the German and friends of the *poilu*. Meanwhile, if the *comique troupiér* is repurposed in satirical postcards of the *poilu*, there is, Pierre Serna finds, a surprising absence of representations of other ancestors of the *poilu*, such as the *soldat de l'an II* as defender of the *patrie*. Likewise, Claire Maingan shows that the *grognard*, or common soldier of the Napoleonic Wars, is also absent from this corpus. Any filiation of the *poilu* with the soldiers of the Napoleonic Wars, familiar from nineteenth-century history paintings, is to be found, she argues, more in spirit or in “ressenti moral” than in iconography (p. 217).

While most chapters focus on the war years, both Jean-Claude Gardes and Maria Xypolopoulou touch on the theme of the soldier’s return as depicted in Great War postcards. Xypolopoulou analyses postcards depicting the war on the often-exoticized Eastern front, including Benjamin Rabier’s well-known 1918 postcard depicting the return of the *poilu d’Orient*, whose “bonne mine” is attributed to “Moustiquaire et Quinine” (p. 232)—malaria being a leading cause of death of among soldiers in the Balkans (p. 233). The rest of the postcards analyzed by Xypolopoulou are from a private collection. They are remarkable for their use of vibrant colors, light humor, and a bustling iconography of mustachioed men and veiled (but available) women. In “Rires coalisés, rires neutres,” Laurence Danguy also supplements the de Parent de Curzon corpus, this time bringing in examples from an online collection of Swiss wartime postcards, reminding us that neutral countries were also big consumers of postcards during the war. The chapter situates the work of Louis Raemaekers, one of the most prolific “neutral” illustrators, within a corpus of cards often criticizing neutrality itself. It highlights two distinctive features of cards about neutrality—the often-repeated depiction of a gallery of neutral nations watching the fighting from the sidelines and the use of different breeds of dogs to represent different nations.

The essays in this volume do an admirable job of articulating the challenges and limitations of using postcards as historical sources, while still extracting meaning from these sometimes reticent documents. They highlight the frustrating gaps in material sources, such as the absence, for most cards, of circulation figures or print run numbers, or the absence of publication dates or authorship information. If many of the questions posed by this volume are necessarily left without definitive answers, the essays help fill some of the gaps in our knowledge and inch us a bit closer to understanding these texts on their own terms. Because so much of the imagery and iconography analyzed in these essays reappear across the wider network of Great War print media, we can use this collection as a primer for decoding the meanings carried in popular culture and ephemera that, with the passage of time, can appear more and more opaque to our contemporary sensibilities.

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## NOTES

[1] Marie-Monique Huss, *Histoires de familles, 1914-1918: Cartes postales et culture de guerre* (Paris: Noësis, 2000); François Pairault, *Images de poilus: La Grande Guerre en cartes postales* (Paris, Tallandier, 2002); Claude Morin, *La Grande Guerre des images: La propagande par la carte postale, 1914-1918* (Paris: L'àpart éditions, 2012); Pierre Brouland and Guillaume Doizy, *La Grande Guerre des cartes postales* (Paris: Hugo Image, 2013); Georges Klochendler and Jean-Yves Le Naour, *Cartes postales de poilus* (Paris: First éditions, 2008).

[2] Cécil Coutin, dir., 1914-1918. *Orages de papier. Les collections de guerre des bibliothèques*, catalogue de l'exposition Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire de Strasbourg, 12 novembre 2008-31 janvier 2009. Cited by Anne-Sophie Aguilar, p. 104.

[3] A selection of 1,200 postcards from the collection was acquired by the Bibliothèque interuniversitaire Sorbonne and made available online as both a searchable collection and a virtual exhibit. Digitized collection at <https://nubis.univ-paris1.fr/ark:/15733/3sf4>; online exhibit at <https://nubis.univ-paris1.fr/s/cartes-postales-en-guerre--191/page/cartes-postales-en-guerre>.

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