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# World War I Ephemera for Everyone

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## Archival Resources on the Web—Eric Willey, Assistant Editor, Illinois State University, Normal

Contact Eric Willey at [emwille@ilstu.edu](mailto:emwille@ilstu.edu) if you would like to guest author a column or have a good idea to share.

### World War I Ephemera for Everyone

By Rebecca Stowe, Illinois State University

With the centennial of World War I, museums and archives around the world are commemorating the event with exhibits in galleries both physical and virtual. Both online and offline, the way we look at World War I has shifted. World War I's political and military significance is no longer the only scholarly focus; an interest is growing in the lives of the soldiers themselves, whether British or German, American or French. People want to know what daily life was like in the trenches, what sort of letters soldiers wrote home, and what soldiers listened to or read to pass the time. American and British archives have caught on and are calling for the general public to donate items and ephemera and to share their World War I stories. This is creating a more comprehensive academic understanding of those who were caught in one of the bloodiest wars in history.

While the Library of Congress (LOC) is known for having the second-largest collection of books in the world, it has moved with the times by digitizing dozens of its collections and putting them online. Three of the LOC's online collections relate directly to World War I. The collection that provides perhaps the most insight into the lives of World War I soldiers is ***Stars and Stripes: The American Soldiers' Newspaper of World War I, 1918–1919*** ([memory.loc.gov/ammem/sgphtml/sashtml/sashome.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/sgphtml/sashtml/sashome.html)). *Stars and Stripes* was the newspaper of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF), which consisted of American troops overseas. The paper was published in France and distributed to US troops through a network of trains, automobiles, and motorcycles. The eight-page weekly paper comprised updates on the war, accounts of German atrocities, tips for “Doughboys” (slang for American soldiers), poems, jokes, and cartoons. At its peak, the “official newspaper of the AEF, by and for the soldiers of the AEF” had a circulation of 526,000 readers. These readers were encouraged to submit their own art and writing. The complete 71-week run of the newspaper between 1918 and 1919 is available to view for free.

Another collection is **World War I Sheet Music**, the LOC's assortment of over 14,000 pieces of sheet music, most of it from 1917 and 1918 (when the United States was actively involved in the war). Songs like George M. Cohan's “Over There” and his “Give My Regards

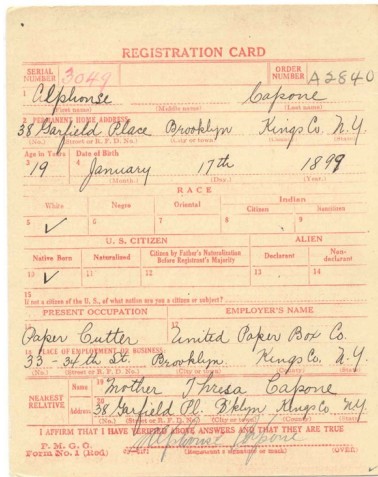
to Broadway” inspired American soldiers to fight for the homes they left behind. Other popular hits such as the peppy “K-K-K-Katy (The Stuttering Song)” and Irving Berlin's humorous “Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning!” can be viewed at [loc.gov/collections/world-war-i-sheet-music](http://loc.gov/collections/world-war-i-sheet-music).

The LOC's website also includes the Prints and Photographs Online Catalog, which features **Posters: World War I**. This collection consists of about 1,900 posters created between 1914 and 1920. World War I was one of the first wars during which mass propaganda was used to fight enemies in an entirely different way from the war on the battlefields. Posters became powerful tools that were informative, inspirational, and persuasive to both those in the trenches and those at home. The topics of posters in possession of the LOC range from recruitment to rationing, from advertisements to warnings. Among the most famous is the recruitment poster featuring Lord Kitchener staring down and pointing to the viewer, which later inspired the iconic Uncle Sam “I Want You” poster of World War II. Digital versions of these posters are accessible at [loc.gov/pictures/collection/wwipos](http://loc.gov/pictures/collection/wwipos).

When the United States became involved in the Great War in 1917, all American males who were born between 1872 and 1900 had to register for the draft. The **National Archives at Atlanta** (NAA) has about 24 million of these registration cards that men were legally required to fill out. These draft registration cards are a boon for any academic researcher or genealogist, whether official or aspiring, since they list details about where the applicant lived, his occupation, his race, his immigration status, and his next of kin. The NAA's records include cards from all 50 states and Puerto Rico. Digitized draft registration cards of “famous, infamous and intriguing people” can be viewed at [archives.gov/atlanta/wwi-draft](http://archives.gov/atlanta/wwi-draft). Anyone can browse through draft cards of actors and entertainers (such as Jimmy Cagney, Charlie Chaplin, Harry Houdini, and Fred Astaire) or literary figures (such as Robert Frost, T.S. Eliot, Sinclair Lewis, and Edgar Rice Burroughs). Other pop culture figures include Louis Armstrong, Babe Ruth, and Al Capone.

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*Al Capone's draft registration card, National Archives at Atlanta*

The National Archives UK (NAUK) has an extensive number of service records, prisoner of war interview reports, crew lists, and other official military papers in its World War I collection at [nationalarchives.gov.uk/first-world-war](http://nationalarchives.gov.uk/first-world-war). As part of its centenary commemoration of the Great War, the NAUK is teaming

up with the Imperial War Museum on an ambitious Zooniverse project. **Operation War Diary** ([operationwar diary.org](http://operationwar diary.org)) aims to provide catalog descriptions of 1.5 million pages of diaries. By making individual pages available free of charge, NAUK intends to allow “citizen historians” to view them and to help transcribe them for archivists. With the assistance of these citizen historians, previously inaccessible information could eventually be made available to academics, researchers, and family historians worldwide free of charge, “leaving a lasting legacy for the centenary of the First World War.”

The illustrious **British Library** has almost 500 images and digital versions of photographs, lithographs, articles, maps, excerpts of letters (including a letter from the poet Siegfried Sassoon to his uncle), and a manuscript of Wilfred Owen's poem “Dulce Decorum Est.” Unlike most of the online World War I archives mentioned so far, the British Library's online collections feature items from the German side of the war, such as phrasebooks and a German cookbook for the trenches, which likely proved useful since most men were unaccustomed to preparing their own food, at the time considered “women's work.”

Among the German ephemera is a digitized version of a children's picture book from 1915 called *Hurra!* that tells the story of a little German boy named Willi and his Austrian friend, Franzl. Together, Willi and Franzl butcher French, English, Russian, and Serbian soldiers, securing success for their side. Another book aimed at German children was not meant for entertainment, but for schoolwork—a math book with war-based calculations for

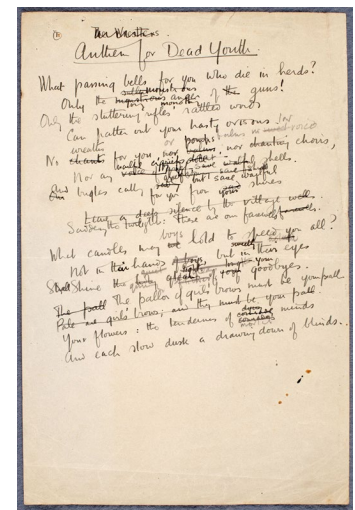


*German battlefield cookbook from the British Library's collections*

math problems. In one problem, the children are given a calculation using the statistic that two million prisoners of war had been taken by German troops. The problem then asks morbid questions such as “(A) Calculate the distance if all prisoners were lined up, allowing a 0.75m (29.5 inch) space for each person” and determine “(B) How many rows of

prisoners can be made if they lined up along the Hanover to Berlin railway line (256km or 159 miles long).” All of these and more can be found at [bl.uk/world-war-one](http://bl.uk/world-war-one).

The University of Oxford, often regarded as England's most prestigious university, has two World War I archives accessible online. The **Great War Archives** ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/wwlit/gwa](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/wwlit/gwa)) consists of items submitted by the general public in 2008. The digitization of the donations offers a wide variety of ephemera such as postcards, letters, paintings, sketches, autograph books, maps, informative booklets, and hundreds of images. Online viewers can closely examine high-resolution images of memorial plaques inscribed with the deceased's name and “He died for freedom and honor,” which were commonly referred to as “Death Pennies” or “Widow's Pennies.” Other kinds of media include short films of marches in support of



*This Wilfred Owen manuscript of “Anthem for Doomed Youth” is from The First World War Poetry Digital Archive, University of Oxford ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/wwlit](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/wwlit)); (c) [The Britten-Pears Estate].*



*This sketch by David Jones is from the First World War Poetry Digital Archive, University of Oxford ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/)); (c) The Royal Welch Fusiliers Museum / The David Jones Literary Estate.*

the war, recordings of music, and interviews with military officials.

This collection overlaps with Oxford's other World War I collection, the **First World War Poetry Digital Archive** ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/)), which features digital versions of memorabilia from poets like Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves, David Jones, Isaac Rosenberg, and Vera Brittain. Sketches by David Jones show his perspective on life in the trenches. Vera Brittain's poems emulate the heartbreaking work of being a VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) nurse. Letters from Siegfried Sas-

soon and postcards from Wilfred Owen give intimate glimpses into their personal lives.

With the rise of social media and the advancement of technology in archival science, ordinary people with access to the Internet can find out more about what life was like for their relatives almost 100 years ago. They are also able to contribute their own family stories and pieces of history for everyone's benefit. Online archival resources such as these encourage community engagement with historical ephemera that is unprecedented and certain to change our perspectives on archival and historical research.



*This David Jones sketch, "Rats Shot," is from The First World War Poetry Digital Archive, University of Oxford ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/)); (c) [The Royal Welch Fusiliers Museum / The David Jones Literary Estate].*



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