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Punch and World War I

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Various source media, *Punch* Historical Archive 1841-1992



Introduction

Wars are not commemorated in a jocular fashion. This is perhaps all the more true in the case of the First World War, which has the reputation of being an especially 'bad' or 'wasteful' conflict. Remembrance Day is marked by silence rather than laughter. Still, humour played a role in the Great War. All wars have been conducted and experienced with a generous helping of humour, and scholars have begun to recognise the role played by humour during conflict [1]. As a satirical publication, *Punch* helps us appreciate how humour was deployed during wartime. Of course, the usual provisos apply: *Punch* was not read by everyone, and it cannot be taken as representative of the humour of the period - yet that caveat could be applied to any source.

From the outset of the war *Punch* defined itself as a source of patriotic entertainment [2]. During the conflict *Punch* drew on its archives to publish seven patriotic supplements, all of which are accessible to researchers in the database. The series began with a satirical summary of the twenty-six years of Kaiser Wilhelm II's reign entitled 'The New Rake's Progress'. Another collection, 'Our Voluntary Army', traced *Punch's* impressions of the Territorial Force established in 1907 and its forerunners, the Volunteers Corps and the Yeomanry. Despite the movement having received occasional blows from Mr Punch's club from the mid-Victorian era onwards, by the time the supplement was published on 3 March 1915 the volunteer spirit had more than vindicated itself. Mr Punch informs readers that his earlier swipes at the volunteers just go to show how Britain, which is 'almost alone among nations can afford to laugh at its own

foibles'. Those who had once been derided as white-collar workers playing at being soldiers during their holidays now played an important role not only on the battlefield but in shaming the 'slacker and the shirker' (3 March 1915: 162).

In order to illustrate how to use the *Punch Historical Archive* to explore the representation of the First World War, this essay focuses on the image of the trench and how *Punch* can be used to supplement the historiographical debates about the effects of the conflict on both the home front and the front line. This is, of course only one element of the war upon which Mr Punch cast his beady eye, but it is one that lends itself to teaching and learning activities. In the latter part of this piece I will suggest some ways in which the *Punch Historical Archive* could be employed in teaching and learning about the image of the trench in the First World War. These teaching and learning activities could easily be adapted to address any other element of the war.

Trench life

Although trenches had long been a feature of warfare, their use in the Great War expanded beyond a specific siege or battlefield. Trenches played an important role in a war of attrition. In the eyes of artists, sculptors and others, the trenches came to be seen as graves for the living [3]. A consideration of *Punch's* depiction of the trench provides an idea of contemporary imaginings of the 'trench'. As a satirical publication *Punch's* trenches were not the same as those of the front line. Nonetheless, in some respects they were more 'real' because the distortion exposes feelings and

perceptions that did not emerge in more staid accounts.

Unsurprisingly, a number of images note the discomfort of life in the trenches. Bedraggled or exhausted troops convey a sense of the effects of time spent on the front line. It is perhaps no coincidence that the majority of these images of war-worn soldiers were published during the autumn or winter months as many of those on the home front contemplated the experiences of soldiers who manned a cold front line (1 September 1915: 199; 29 December 1915: 525; 26 January 1916:77; 14 February 1917: 115). Among other things, the example below demonstrates how the static nature of the war changed the role of the cavalry.

The uncomfortable trench became a counterpoint to the idea of a comfortable home. Notions and memories of home played an important part in maintaining morale at the front, as seen in letters and, to a lesser extent, diaries that stressed domestic matters [4]. Not only was the home somewhere that soldiers longed for, while at war the soldier could maintain elements of his domestic identity. On the one hand, the trench stood as an antonym to home; on the other, as a sheltered place it offered opportunities to maintain some fragile but significant traces of home life. Images of the trench in *Punch* exaggerated this sense of the trench as home by depicting soldiers tending gardens under shell fire and playing 'trench cricket'. Both of these cartoons are all the more ironic because they were published during the early stages of the Somme Offensive of 1916.

The 'Alienation Thesis'

One of the questions that pervade the historiography of the war is the extent of the psychological distance between the front line and the home front. An influential work on the impact of combat presents what has been called the 'alienation thesis' [5]. More recently, others have argued that too much emphasis has been placed on the gap between the fronts, both in the sense of non-combatants' knowledge of the war and their sympathy for those who served [6]. A survey of the references to 'trench' and 'trenches' in *Punch* could lend support to either side of this debate. Three illustrators depict similar scenes in which well-meaning individuals make comments that illustrate a poor grasp of what life was like in the trenches. In one case, a mother helpfully recommends her son 'avoid trenches with a north-east aspect'. In another, an aunt tells a departing nephew 'send a postcard to let me know you are safely back in the trenches'.

Such gaps in comprehension about the 'trenches' provided comic material that may well have originated in actual differences between the inhabitants of the two fronts. Yet the illustrations in *Punch* put these misunderstandings in the mouths of a particular type: the older, female family member. For those who argue that the 'alienation thesis' has been overplayed, the selection of a stock comic type, such as the one below, does not support the argument that such miscomprehension was particularly widespread. Leaving aside such questions, *Punch* shows how the war was represented as something that could be understood or misunderstood and points towards the subject of the epistemology of the trench and, by implication, the war as a whole. Who knew the war, how

did they claim to know and what was the reaction to competing knowledge or perceived lack of knowledge?

Trenches as meeting places

The restricted space of the trench brought men into close contact with one another. The peculiar situation presented by a trench, being in the ground and close to the enemy, lent an even more intimate quality to military comradery. Trenches in *Punch* are places where the newcomer meets the veteran and the German meets the Briton. Social confines provide ample opportunity for humour and embarrassment, and the narrow physical confines of the trenches provided an ideal backdrop for such awkward situations. Well-known characters like the strict NCO and novice officer were taken from settings like the parade ground or barracks and inserted into the trenches. Leonard P. Dowd's depiction of a 'nervous' junior officer pausing to ask directions to 'the war' only works against the backdrop of the trench. Turning the corner, the jittery officer sees a group of Tommies who are very much at ease and are possibly enjoying the contents of a nearby Army Service Corps crate. For all its ridiculousness, this sketch illustrates a divide that was irrespective of rank between those who had been at the front and those who had just arrived. Seeing as *Punch* was read by those who were members of the officer class, and their families, this image may have rung a few bells [7].

Teaching and learning in the trenches

In 2014, there were numerous local, national and international acts of commemoration and television programmes that marked the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War. Many students will,

therefore, be aware of some of the images that are associated with the conflict. They will, however, be less familiar with the ways people at the time interpreted or came to terms with the war.

There are many ways in which the archive could be used to encourage students to engage with sources from the period. The following examples are taken from workshops and assignments that have focused on the representation of the trench and trench warfare.

What is funny about life in the trenches?: In pairs, students use an entire document search for 'trench(es)' between August 1914 and November 1918. On finding a humorous reference, the pair explains to the class why this is funny and demonstrates how humour provides a different lens through which to examine the conflict.

Drawing a contrast: Using the advanced search option, students individually select illustrations (cartoons) and search for 'trench(es)' between August 1914 and November 1918. After consulting the images, students identify two illustrators and note similarities and differences in the way they depict trenches by annotating two contrasting images.

Contextualising the trench: Along with a detailed timeline of the war, students are presented with a cartoon (from *Punch*) of a trench scene or a reference to trench warfare in a text. After consulting the timeline and using the database to browse the edition of *Punch* from which the source originates, students write a 500-word report on how the military context

shaped the source and how readers may have interpreted the reference to the trench.

Unnamed trenches: To help students appreciate the limitations of word searches, small groups of students will be assigned a month each and asked to browse editions of *Punch* looking for illustrations of trenches. As illustrated by the example below, a trench may appear in an image without being mentioned in the text. This example also provides a more sober counterpoint to the satirical depictions of the war. Therefore *Punch* offers students a means to contrast different types of representation within a single publication.

Trenches after the war: Using an entire document search for 'trench(es)' from the end of the war to outbreak of the Second World War, students select three examples and write a 1,000-word piece on how the trench was portrayed after the war. They are asked to pay particular attention to how the trench was related to other features of the war and how it was contrasted with life during peacetime. The search will also bring up other non-war-related references to trenches and will introduce students to the practice of selecting appropriate sources. Afterwards, students use images from the archive in a group presentation.

Conclusion

On the ground, trenches formed complex systems. Similarly, in the representational realm their images possess a complexity that defies a simple interpretation. Granted, the 'trenches' became shorthand for the war itself and by implication the

horrors of war. By digging a little deeper, though, we see that a trench was a 'home' that helped home appear all the more appealing, helped separate those who 'knew' the war from those who did not, and was a meeting place between different men, friend and foe alike. As the images and captions from *Punch* show, all trenches were communication trenches. Through studying the communication of the war in the depiction of trenches or any other facet of the conflict, students can be encouraged to think about how the war was and has been imagined.

NOTES

[1] Cameron C Nickels, *Civil War Humor* (University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, MS, 2000).

[2] *Sunderland Daily Echo*, 19 August 1914.

[3] Sergiusz Michalski, *Public Monuments: Art in Political Bondage 1870-1997* (Reaktion: London, 1998), p. 82.

[4] Jessica Meyers, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (Palgrave: London, 2012), p. 47; Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2009).

[5] Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and identity in World War I* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1979), p. 193.

[6] Helen McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers: The Liverpool Territorials in the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005), p. 89.

[7] *The Times*, 12 December 1914, p. 6.

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