

Introduction

Wrought from militarism, nationalism, and imperialism, the Great War broke empires, challenged established gender and race relations, and destroyed millions of lives. Mail became the critical link for families separated and desperate for news. Governments responded to these developments and to the disruption of communication networks, and they also struggled to determine who should be able to communicate with whom and about what.

The Tenth Winton M. Blount Postal History Symposium, “WWI and Its Immediate Aftermath,” brought together postal historians at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum in November 2018 to address these issues and to mark the centennial of the armistice that ended the fighting on the western front. The papers and philatelic exhibits examined two broad interrelated questions: How did the logistical and human needs created by the war shape postal services and their communities? And what can we learn by studying the philatelic and archival materials themselves?

In answer to these questions, the presentations and philatelic exhibits addressed topics as diverse as the mail of prisoners of war, military officials, diplomats, and the general public; the production and use of postage stamps and war savings stamps; shifts in communication networks, including the increasing importance both of women in the workforce and of alternative means of communication, such as the telephone and telegraph; and censorship of letters and newspapers. The presentations told stories of the United States, South America, Africa, Asia, and Europe.

During the symposium, in addition to viewing the symposium’s philatelic exhibits and asking questions of the specialists, the attendees could tour the museum’s exhibition, *My Fellow Soldiers: Letters from World War I*, with the curator. The exhibition considered the war through the individual relationships expressed in the letters, as well as the cultural ubiquity of letter-writing, whether in newspaper columns or referenced in advertisements or popular music.

As the presentations, exhibits, discussants’ comments, audience questions, and participants’ discussions all made clear, the postal history of World War I is a remarkably diverse field. Our knowledge remains incomplete, however, as so much more remains to be done.

The essays here and the conference materials available at the American Philatelic Society’s website, <https://stamps.org/Postal-History-Symposium>, provide an excellent introduction to the field of World War I postal history.

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