

“Why Study World War I?”

Lorie A. Vanchena, Associate Professor, Germanic Languages & Literatures, and
Academic Director, European Studies Program

March 4, 2016

KU Libraries opening reception for exhibition *Eastern Front 1914-1918: An exploration of the conflict*

I. Introduction

Thank you, KU Libraries, for the honor and pleasure of speaking at the opening reception of your wonderful exhibition, *Eastern Front 1914-1918: An exploration of the conflict*.

We first discussed the idea of this exhibition about two years ago; it is exciting to see it realized and to view the valuable collections and engaging scholarship on display.

Why study, or why commemorate, WWI? Many of us involved with the University of Kansas WWI Centennial Commemoration 2014-2018 have been asked this question in the last three years. Here is one answer we have used: The centenary of World War I has been prompting scholars, students, journalists, libraries, archives, and museums to explore how the conflict dramatically changed the world in the early 20th century and how it continues to shape and inform our lives in the 21st century. Since the start of our Commemoration, however, KU faculty, students, staff, and guests—many of whom have work featured in this exhibition, have generated additional answers to this central question. As I hope to demonstrate, their insightful responses constitute convincing reasons not only to study WWI but to do so at the University of Kansas.

My talk arises in large part from my involvement with the KU WWI Centennial Commemoration, which is coordinated by the European Studies program. To date, this effort has involved more than 30 collaborative partners on campus, in Lawrence, and in the region. We have created a Twitter-based e-reenactment of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand;

presented and heard lectures; organized panel discussions; read, recited, and discussed literature; taught and taken classes on WWI offered by the History department and the Humanities Program, for example, as well as in the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences Mini College and the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute; and attended concerts, screened films, and viewed exhibitions.¹

KU faculty conduct research on WWI, as evidenced by this exhibition, discovering new knowledge that broadens, deepens, and reshapes our understanding of the conflict and its long-lasting impact. We often do so with undergraduate and graduate students, engaging them in learning about a global crisis that 100 years later remains relevant. The centennial also aims to call attention to the rich resources available in libraries, archives, and museums at the University of Kansas and in our region, and it urges us to study the languages of the conflict as well as the literature, music, and art created in response to the war.

My interest in the First World War and how it relates to our world today began in spring 2010, with an exhibition at the Spencer Museum of Art, *Machine in a Void: World War I & the Graphic Arts*. Thought-provoking prints compelled viewers to grapple with the destruction of human lives, animals, and the landscape by modern war machines. The exhibition increased my understanding of a conflict I had barely covered as an undergraduate history major. As Celka Straughn, Andrew W. Mellon Director of Academic Programs at the SMA, perceptively observed: “how we start to interpret the [Spencer’s WWI] material plays a role in how we understand today and how we understand our past.”² The unique collection has on many

¹ For a comprehensive list of KU WWI Commemoration events, see the European Studies webpage <http://european.ku.edu/events-0>.

² Joanna Hlavacek, “Spencer Museum’s WWI art helps recall past, understand present,” LJWorld.com, December 6, 2014, <http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2014/dec/06/spencer-museum-art-wwi-helps-us-remember-past-unde/>.

occasions generated discussion about contemporary topics such as veterans' issues, health care, and the United States' place in the world. Many of you know that the holdings displayed in *Machine in a Void* were augmented in spring 2014 by more than 3000 works of art made during the First World War, a gift from noted art historian and print dealer Eric Gustav Carlson. Steve Goddard, Senior Curator and Associate Director of the Spencer Museum of Art, described the significance of this collection: "Anyone studying the imagery of the First World War will want to visit the area to take advantage of our holdings and those at the National World War I Museum in Kansas City."³

In 2013, just as planning for the KU Commemoration was beginning, I read "The Rhyme of History: Lessons of the Great War," an essay by eminent Oxford historian Margaret MacMillan. She makes a strong case for viewing history as a way to understand the present, an idea that has threaded through the centenary: a better understanding of the Great War and how it changed the world will help us better understand so much that has happened since and is happening today. In her essay, MacMillan urges us to compare our contemporary world with the one "shattered in 1914":

The one-hundredth anniversary of 1914 should make us reflect anew on our vulnerability to human error, sudden catastrophes, and sheer accident. So we have good reason to glance over our shoulders even as we look ahead. [...] Still, if we can see past our blinders and take note of the telling parallels between then and now, the ways in which our world resembles that of a hundred years ago, history does give us valuable warnings."⁴

³ Christine Metz Howard, "Thousands of World War I era art pieces gifted to Spencer Museum of Art," press release, May 9, 2014, <http://news.ku.edu/2014/05/08/thousands-world-war-i-era-art-pieces-gifted-spencer-museum-art>.

⁴ Margaret MacMillan, "The Rhyme of History: Lessons of the Great War," Brookings Institute Essay (2013), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/essays/2013/rhyme-of-history>.

One parallel MacMillan mentions is the Middle East, which consists largely of countries whose present borders were determined as a consequence of World War I; when the French and British redrew the map of the Ottoman Empire, they created some of the troubles we see in the region today. Dr. Dale Urie, Senior Lecturer in the KU Humanities Program, has been teaching “How the First World War Changed the World,” a first-year seminar for both the Humanities and the European Studies programs. She also accords the past an important role in this context: “Studying WWI and its aftermath,” she contends, “is the path to understanding the modern Middle East and the current territorial goals of the Islamic State (ISIS).”⁵

Another reason for studying WWI concerns its profound impact on the world. KU History Professor Jennifer L. Weber enumerates many aspects of this impact: “Besides killing millions of people, it introduced the world to industrial warfare, including chemical warfare. For the first time, governments were paying for scientific research that could produce weapons, and some of what the principals used on the Western Front we would now call weapons of mass destruction [...] Every empire east of the Rhine and south of the Baltic Sea was destroyed. The experience that colonials had in the war set in motion their efforts to obtain independence. Many women in most of the countries involved also had their first experience working outside the home as they toiled in munitions or other factories or became nurses. Experience with shell shock led to a push to understand the psyche better, and the number of men who lost limbs led to improvements in prosthetics. The war also created the conditions that allowed a pandemic, the Spanish flu, to begin and sweep the globe. The United States took on a prominent role in the international community that it had never had before and has never given up. Finally, without WWI there would not have been a WWII.”⁶ Weber and Professor Nathan D. Wood, also in

⁵ Dale Urie, e-mail message to author, February 29, 2016.

⁶ Jennifer L. Weber, e-mail message to author, February 26, 2016.

History, are team-teaching their department's WWI course this spring, HIST 334: The Great War: The History of World War I, which attracted 60 students.

On this occasion we must recognize the central importance of WWI-related holdings in KU Libraries, without which we would all have a harder time studying the Great War. Jon Giullian, Head of International Collections and Associate Librarian for Slavic and Eurasian Studies, recounts: "Over the past decade and especially during the run up to the 100-year anniversary of World War I, there has been a large body of work being published about the Eastern Front. Materials include multi-volume encyclopedias, scholarly monographs and monographic series, albums of photographs, posters, and other visual art forms; music and musical scores; and diaries, letters, memoirs, and other previously unpublished archival documents. KU Libraries has been actively collecting these materials in English and Slavic languages (primarily Russian, Polish, and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian) in response to increased attention to World War I. The acquisition of newly published Eastern and Southern front resources, added to KU's historically strong and continually growing collection on the Western front, distinguishes KU Libraries as a tremendous repository of resources for exploring the conflict on all fronts."⁷

Two students have high praise for our librarians and the collections they oversee. Last fall history major Will Machado took a section of HIST 301: The Historian's Craft; taught by assistant professor of history Erik Scott, the course focused entirely on World War I. This semester Will is writing an honors thesis on the Armenian Genocide under the direction of Professor Scott. It is important to study WWI, Will writes, because "it is a clear example of how a little political dysfunction can cause massive damage to humanity. [...] Even 100 years later it

⁷ Jon Gillian, e-mail message to author, February 29, 2016.

is important to understand that, so that we make responsible political decisions that may avoid such apocalyptic consequences.” He continues: “I think KU is a great place to study WWI, because of the professionalism of the professors and library staff who are so apt at encouraging students to look beyond the obvious explanations and to investigate further, thus providing a much richer learning experience that [brings] not only the reward of learning about a certain topic, but most importantly, the investigative skills critical to all facets of citizenship and professionalism.”⁸

The second student, Drew Burks, is writing a dissertation under the direction of Professor Wood on how the war changed everyday life in two cities in present-day Poland. Drew studies the First World War “because it and its outcome are critical factors in how modern Europe (and the world) became what it is today.” While he did not come to the University of Kansas to study WWI, he has found it to be an excellent place to pursue his scholarly interests: “In the History Department, scholars regionally pertinent to my own research, as well as the department’s strength in military history, have contributed to an academic environment conducive to WWI research. Language training at KU has also aided me in this task, particularly because few universities offer Polish and Ukrainian within the US. Last, but certainly not least, the extensive Slavic collections in the KU libraries, both in English and in Slavic languages, have been indispensable to my research.”⁹

Marta Pirnat-Greenberg, Lecturer for Slovene and Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian in the Department of Slavic Languages & Literatures, echoes Drews’ comment on the importance of languages to the study of history. She integrates the First World War into her language courses: “[S]ince I deal with the area where WWI was ignited, I thought [the Centennial

⁸ Will Machado, e-mail message to author, February 27, 2016.

⁹ Drew Burks, e-mail message to author, February 29, 2016.

Commemoration] was a perfect opportunity to involve my students of Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian in learning the language with timely content. I also wanted to show them that knowing the language is essential for studying this part of the world and its history, including WWI. Breaking down the language barrier could be an important contribution to bringing our knowledge and understanding of the war on the Eastern Front on par with that of the Western Front.”¹⁰

This year, one highlight of the KU WWI Centennial Commemoration has been the lecture series, *Everyday Life on the Eastern Front*, conceived of by Professors Wood and Scott.¹¹ At one point it was suggested that we should focus on the Western front, because that is the front in which people are most interested. All the more reason, we thought, given the KU faculty and students with expertise and interest in this region; given our Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies; and given KU Libraries’ collections, to bring four nationally recognized scholars to our campus. Indeed, the long list of co-sponsors for this series attests to the interest that the topic generated across campus.¹² The following text by Wood and Scott appeared in the program for each lecture:

The experience of World War I, particularly on its Eastern Front, shaped the modern world in ways that many of us may not realize. The Eastern Front was where the empires of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, and the Ottomans collided and ultimately collapsed, giving rise to new states in Europe, Africa and the Middle East. While the Western Front was defined by trench warfare, the Eastern Front was longer and often

¹⁰ Marta Pirnat-Greenberg, e-mail message to author, February 25, 2016.

¹¹ For information about the series, see Kristi Henderson, “WWI series will shed light on Eastern Front experience,” press release, October 15, 2015, <http://news.ku.edu/wwi-series-will-shed-light-eastern-front-experience>. See also the CREES Spring 2016 Newsletter for an extensive interview with Professors Nathan Wood and Erik Scott, <http://crees.ku.edu/crees-newsletter-archive>.

¹² Co-sponsors for the lecture series include the following campus units: KU Common Book; Big XII Faculty Fellowship Program; Center for Russian, East European & Eurasian Studies; Center for Global & International Studies; Department of Germanic Languages & Literatures; Department of History; Dole Institute of Politics; European Studies Program; Hall Center for the Humanities; Humanities Program; Jewish Studies Program; Max Kade Center; Office of Graduate Military Programs; University Honors Program; University Press of Kansas.

porous. It shifted back and forth across civilian populations with dramatically transformative effects, impacting lives at the everyday level. In the region, the Great War was inseparable from revolution, undermining imperial allegiances, generating social and national movements, and changing attitudes about gender and authority.

Our guest speakers presented their research in public lectures and engaged our community in ways that aimed to uncover existing and also identify new connections between WWI and contemporary issues. I will offer two examples of how guest speakers in the series did just this. Heather Perry, Associate Professor of History, University of North Carolina-Charlotte, spoke in October on “Recycling the Disabled: Army, Medicine and Modernity in the First World War.”¹³ She discussed how the pressures of warfare transformed not only medical ideas and treatments for injured soldiers, but also social and cultural expectations of the disabled body in Germany and in other belligerent nations. She met with students in Professor Wood’s first-year seminars at the Dole Institute of Politics, where she showed archival materials she had used in her research on medical history. Audrey Coleman, Assistant Director and Senior Archivist at the Dole Institute, shared materials on disability from Senator Dole’s archives. The group had an eye-opening discussion about how perceptions of disability during and after WWI might inform thinking on the issue of veterans’ disabilities today, and how today’s thoughts on veterans’ issues might help shape our understanding of WWI.

KU History Department alumna Laurie Stoff, Senior Honors Faculty Fellow, Arizona State University, presented the second lecture in the series, “More than Binding Men’s Wounds: Women’s Wartime Nursing in Russia during the Great War,” a discussion of how nurses in Russia “far from merely binding wounds, provided vital services that put them squarely in

¹³ For more information on “Everyday Lives on the Eastern Front,” see <http://european.ku.edu/ku-wwi-lecture-series>.

traditionally masculine territory, both literally and figuratively.”¹⁴ She spoke with undergraduates in Dale Urie’s first-year seminar about how the war changed traditional gender roles and how these changes continue to influence society today.

Another guest speaker, Chad L. Williams, Associate Professor of African and Afro-American Studies at Brandeis University and author of the award-winning *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era*, spoke here in November as part of the KU Common Book program sponsored by the Office of First-Year Experience.¹⁵ Williams shed light on the experience of 380,000 African American soldiers who fought in WWI for democracy, only to return home and realize they had not yet obtained their own freedom in a meaningful way. While speaking about the race riots in the Red Summer of 1919, Williams underscored the need for this chapter in American history to inform the present: he showed images of protests in Ferguson, Missouri that had been prompted by the shooting of an unarmed black teenager by a white police officer.

Archives and museums on our campus, in Lawrence, and in the region provide yet more reasons to study WWI. Jessica (JoJo) Palko, KU 150 Research Archivist in our University Archives, commented: “Everyone needs to study WWI at KU because its history surrounds us. The Union and Stadium are memorials to the 129 students, faculty, and alumni who gave their lives during the war. But this seems to have been forgotten. Study WWI at KU to remember and honor the courage and sacrifice of those men and women. Study WWI at KU to gain unique perspectives on how the war affected students and faculty: the University Archives holds student

¹⁴ Laurie Stoff, text used in programs and other promotional materials for “More than Binding Men’s Wounds: Women’s Wartime Nursing in Russia during the Great War,” lecture, November 2, 2016, <http://european.ku.edu/ku-wwi-lecture-series>.

¹⁵ Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

scrapbooks from the period [...] and photographs of the Student Army Training Corps (SATC) barracks on campus, for example—all resources that make studying WWI at KU a one of a kind experience.”¹⁶

Abby Magariel, Education and Programs Coordinator at the Watkins Museum of History, also emphasizes personal stories and the relevance of the war today: “We were lucky, as the local history museum, to get to tell multiple stories about people from Lawrence and Douglas County who experienced WWI at home, on the front lines, and everywhere in between. The war had a real impact on Lawrence and its residents—for instance, the once vibrant German community was forever changed by rampant anti-German sentiment and the closing of the Turnverein social club. Understanding this history as a local story can help inform decisions we make today about our communities, tolerance, support for veterans, the need for mental health care, and preservation of historic buildings, to name a few topics that were relevant during WWI and are still pertinent now.”¹⁷

We are fortunate to have the country’s National World War I Museum in Kansas City. Jonathan Casey, Museum Archivist and Edward Jones Research Center Manager, writes that, as an archives and museum during the centennial period, “we have a unique opportunity to explain why WWI is important and worth learning about and studying. This is a time when descendants can research their relatives in the war and better understand their family history.” He points out that WWI is not as much a part of the popular consciousness as other conflicts are, such as the War of Independence, the Civil War, and WWII, “so having a national museum with its resources provides an opportunity to study WWI to redress the lack of popular knowledge.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Jessica Palko, e-mail message to author, February 29, 2016.

¹⁷ Abby Magariel, e-mail message to author, March 2, 2016.

¹⁸ Jonathan Casey, e-mail message to author, February 27, 2016.

Our Lied Center and the School of Music have also helped the KU community explore World War I. In fall 2014 the Lied Center hosted a concert with the KU Symphony Orchestra and guest soloist Joshua Roman, who played Elgar's moving Cello Concerto, composed in 1919 as a response to the destruction unleashed by the Great War. At the time, Elgar was living in Sussex, England, where during the war he had heard the sound of artillery across the Channel. Anthea Scouffas, Engagement/Education Director at the Lied Center, invited artist, poet, and U.S. Marine veteran Folleh Tomba to KU while his exhibition, *A Grunt's War Diary*, was on view at Kansas State University. In one of the more memorable events of the KU Commemoration, Tomba discussed how WWI poetry influenced his art, and then he and a group of students, including several in KU's ROTC program, read poems from that era and shared their thoughts on why the poetry resonated with them. Scouffas offered her views on the value of the performing arts in understanding WWI: "Knowledge and skill are the focus of most of our educational curriculums. But without real understanding, that knowledge and those skills are simply not as useful. I believe the performing arts can help provide understanding. Understanding of complex issues, ideas, themes. Performing arts experiences that have ties to history provide a richer and more lasting learning experience."¹⁹

Exploring literature written during and about the Great War offers more reasons to study this period of global history. Humanities Program Professor Marike Janzen teaches *The Good Soldier Schwejk* and Berthe Suttner's *Lay Down Your Arms* in Peace & Conflict Studies 550: Classics of Peace Literature. She comments: "WWI is interesting to study for the way that specific and significant anti-war discourses and cultural practices emerged in its aftermath, especially in post-war arts and literature."²⁰

¹⁹ Anthea Scouffas, e-mail message to author, March 2, 2016.

²⁰ Marike Janzen, e-mail message to author, February 25, 2016.

KU Common Book 2015-16 is Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), which is set against the backdrop of the First World War. During a discussion in which I participated at the start of fall semester, freshmen shared their reactions to the novel. Most found the book quite relevant to their lives. They expressed particular interest in the love relationship between Henry and Catherine and in the women who were working and contributing to the war effort so close to the front. One student found the novel relevant because, as she pointed out, the U.S. had been fighting in wars and conflicts her entire life. The Spencer Museum of Art selected "Self Portrait" by German artist Otto Dix as the 2015-2016 KU Common Work of Art.²¹ Straughn observed: "Students always have lively discussions in the Museum about this work. Our hope is that as the Common Work of Art it will continue to stimulate rich thinking. [...] Identifying a work from the Museum's collection is a great way for students to consider how art connects with ideas in unexpected ways."²²

My own research involves working with three undergraduate research assistants on a collaborative project with Kansas State University that will create a digital archive of American WWI poetry. The KU branch, supported by a seed grant from the Institute for Digital Research in the Humanities, focuses on poems written by immigrants in the United States. Interestingly, we are finding poems that help inform our understanding of the German tradition of political poetry in the 19th century. The 1830s and 40s in particular witnessed the emergence of a German national consciousness, despite the absence of a German nation state. One patriotic poem that helped create a sense of German unity was "Die Wacht am Rhein" (The Watch on the Rhine)

²¹See SMA webpage, <http://www.spencerart.ku.edu/exhibitions/otto-dix.shtml>; also Joanna Hlavacek, "Otto Dix Painting Chosen as 2015-2016 KU Common Work of Art," September 6, 2015, LJWorld.com, <http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2015/sep/06/otto-dix-painting-chosen-2015-2016-ku-common-work/>.

²²Elizabeth Canost, "Otto Dix Self-Portrait Selected 2015-2016 KU Common Work of Art," press release, August 28, 2015, <http://news.ku.edu/2015/08/28/otto-dix-self-portrait-selected-20152016-ku-common-work-art#sthash.Y9BXdOR3.eHxluhut.dpuf>.

from 1840. Max Schneckenberger's poem was especially popular during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 and then again during WWI, not only in Germany but also in the U.S., as we discovered, where its publication generates complex new layers of meaning. The version you see on the screen appeared in 1915 in the pro-German German-American *The Fatherland*. The periodical was published in English in the German immigrants' new homeland, which two years later would be at war with Germany. The publication of this poem in this context speaks not only to the poem's long shelf life but also to the process of how German cultural material was transferred across the Atlantic and then refashioned to address a new historical context. Furthermore, this poem and so many others like it offer a means of studying how German immigrants created and then sought to maintain a hybrid cultural identity—both German and American—during years in which they, even before the US entered the war, often found themselves targets of anti-German sentiment.

To conclude, I would like to share with you thoughts my undergraduate research assistants articulated when I asked them: “Why study WWI?” Sophomore Caelan Graham observed: “In the history courses I have taken, we learned about the mechanics of war, the soldiers and the politics involved. But this project has allowed a glimpse into how the war in general affects people all over the world.” Senior Drew Crist noted: “For German immigrants in America, their heritage overseas and their identity as Americans came into conflict. These are timeless questions. Even the immigrant question today reflects some of the issues we see in this poetry.” Senior Janelle Fox observed that, as allies of Britain, “Americans looked down on the German-Americans, which is interesting because today German heritage is celebrated.”²³ I want

²³ Christine Metz Howard, “Researchers building digital archive on WWI poetry by immigrants,” press release, December 15, 2015, <http://news.ku.edu/2015/12/14/researchers-build-digital-archive-wwi-poetry-american-immigrants>.

to mention that the opportunity to work with these students and to see their enthusiasm for WWI poetry written by immigrants is one big reason I have for studying WWI here at KU.

The comments you have heard from many people and institutions involved in the KU Commemoration underscore the value of engaging our larger community in studying the First World War. There is not enough time to talk about the many other people involved with this initiative, but I do want to mention two: Jennifer Duhamel, Outreach Coordinator in the Center for Global and International Studies (CGIS), has been instrumental in collaborating with the Topeka Combat Air Museum, the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, and the KU Council for Social Studies (KUCSS) in the School of Education, each of which has expanded our notion of why it is important to study WWI. The Commemoration logo and fliers you have seen in the PowerPoint this evening are the artistry of Jessica Irving, Program Assistant and Office Manager in CGIS.

I will close by saying that we are looking ahead and planning for 2017 and 2018, the 100th anniversary of U.S. involvement in the war. Additional reasons for studying WWI, and for studying WWI at the University of Kansas, will surely emerge. I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening, and thank you for your attention.