

## World War I and Effingham County, Illinois

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### Introduction

The First World War has a unique place in American history. Far from the forgotten war, World War I is remembered as a precursor to World War II, even an interesting prelude, but nothing compared to its more famous sequel. Asking high school students what they know about something is almost always a good indicator of popular perception on a topic; answers often come in a string resembling this: “We won, right? That’s the first time we beat the Germans.”<sup>1</sup> In essence, the students are correct; the United States allied itself with the Triple Entente and Germany was on the losing side. The war and its aftermath led to great changes in Europe, America, and the wider world, arguably leading to World War II, but many Americans seem relatively unfamiliar with how World War I impacted the country, from its largest cities to its small towns.

Perhaps it is the fact that America entered late in the war or the stigma resulting from the failure of the League of Nations. Whatever the reason, World War I is becoming an increasingly forgotten war. What is startling about this revelation is the prevalence, the sheer thickness of the history all around us and waiting to be reopened. Hidden in family collections and public libraries across America is the physical evidence of a past that is quickly disappearing. If we are to keep World War I from becoming the forgotten war, historians, both amateur and professional, must turn to the area around them—to preserve and sustain the past for ourselves and posterity. That is the purpose of this paper: to piece together, if only in part, a small story from among the many in Effingham County Illinois. What this project seeks is to demonstrate how German-Americans in Effingham County responded and adapted to challenges to their self-identity during the First World War. Before delving too heavily into the subject of the paper, a little background on America’s involvement in the First World War, Effingham County itself, and a write-up on the research methods employed, would be appropriate.

As already alluded to, the United States did not enter the fray immediately. Despite calls from within the country and without to join, President Woodrow Wilson maintained an isolationist policy through his first term; he even ran for and won a second term under the slogan, “He kept us out of war.” War raged between the Allied and Central powers for three years when the interception of the infamous Zimmerman Telegram, proposing an alliance between Germany and Mexico, prompted Wilson to ask for and Congress to declare war on Germany on April 6, 1917. Compared to the major powers of Europe, the U.S. Army was relatively small, but by the summer of 1918 millions of men had been drafted, trained, and sent “over there” to fight. Historiography on the effect American entry had on the outcome of the war is variously contested; whether Germany was already on the ropes and the sight of fresh soldiers hammered home the reality of an eventual defeat, or its heavy losses in combat against American soldiers necessitated an armistice, can never be known for sure.

Whatever the cause, Germany signed an armistice agreement with the Allied powers that effectively ended the war at 11 a.m. on November 11, 1918. Major leaders from the Allied

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<sup>1</sup> This vignette is derived from my experience teaching World War I at Neoga High School as a student teacher in Spring 2009.

powers, most notably George Clemenceau of France, Woodrow Wilson of the United States, and Lloyd George of Britain met in Paris after the war to draft the official peace agreement and draw out the plans for a League of Nations—an extra-governmental body that would ensure no more such conflicts would ever occur. The high hopes of the League of Nations would ultimately end in failure. Without the means to enforce its own authority and keep the peace, and without the support of the United States, whose Congress refused to sign off on the charter, the League of Nations would do little to stop the onset of the Second World War. It is this legacy that leaves World War I in a precarious position historically speaking. Possibly, the failure to prevent this second war, which ended in a more decisive victory, is part of the reason behind America's fading memory of the war.

Located in south-central Illinois, Effingham County was established in 1831. Legends regarding the origin of the county's unique name abound; credit has been attributed to the individual who first surveyed the region, a British General, and even a mysterious Lord Effingham—Lord of what and where is never specified. Though the county seat resides in the city of Effingham, largest by population and area, many of the villages and towns in the county have retained their own distinct identity. The overwhelmingly German composition of the county, especially evident in the village of Teutopolis where many residents were first generation American citizens at the outbreak of the war, makes Effingham an interesting case study. As we will see, loyalty became a matter of serious contention, particularly in Teutopolis.

Most of the research was conducted at the Helen Mathes Effingham Public Library, with generous assistance and resources provided by the Effingham Genealogical and Historical Society. A majority of the information for the paper came from examining microfilm of the weekly Effingham Republican between 1917-1918 and several local history publications of the Effingham Genealogical Society. Invaluable direction from Eleanor Bounds of the Genealogical Society and Bill Grimes of the Effingham Daily News pointed this research toward two main topics: Company G of the Illinois National Guard and the government's suspicions of a German plot in Teutopolis. Unfortunately, there are far too many stories that will be left untold by this paper, but in picking up on just a few we can see, if only in part, the impacts of an immense, international conflict on one small county in Illinois.

## **Company G**

Effingham County's quota for servicemen was 56, but by the end of the war the county far exceeded that number through draftees and volunteer units.<sup>2</sup> The most well-known elements were Company G and the Dietrich Machine Gun Company,<sup>3</sup> both units of the Illinois National Guard originally formed by W.W. Austin. Leadership of the Company would pass on to Captain Albert Gravenhorst before the unit set off for Camp Logan in Texas.<sup>4</sup> Updates on the movement and doings of the company came largely from the letters of Clem J. Weidman. Information on the Dietrich Machine Gun Company was more sparse and came only occasionally in the *Effingham Republic*. What made the Machine Gun Company famous was that 76 young men, out of a town of only 600, voluntarily formed their own company.<sup>5</sup> Both groups would eventually merge with the 133<sup>rd</sup> Illinois Infantry per Presidential order, which made

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<sup>2</sup> "Board of Exemption Receives Master List," *Effingham Republican*, 2 August 1917. (There are no page numbers in the *Effingham Republican*, but the majority of the stories used were found on the first page.)

<sup>3</sup> There seems to be some confusion in the sources as to the independence of the Dietrich Machine Gun Company. Initially the Company is treated separately, but eventually it is mentioned synonymously with Co G.

<sup>4</sup> Clifford Stevens, "Effingham County's War Records," *Effingham County Illinois—Past & Present*, ed. Hilda Feldhake, (Effingham: Effingham Regional Historical Society, 1968), no page number.

<sup>5</sup> "Machine Gun Company," *Effingham Republican*, 24 May, 1917.

them official members of the United States Army.<sup>6</sup> As new letters from Clem Weidman come in, readers are treated to tales of life in military camp, training drills in barracks, and harrowing combat experiences when Company G arrives in France near the conclusion of the war.

What is perhaps most fascinating about Co. G, beside the various stories related through published letters and dispatches, is its prominence in the collective memory of the county, especially in comparison to draftees from the town. While researching for this paper, Co. G was the most frequently mentioned regarding the war in Effingham County. The Effingham Genealogical Society's folder on World War I contained mostly information about Co. G, with especial attention paid to the Dietrich Machine Gun Company. While asking around and trying to find any information at all about the war, Co. G was generally the lone item mentioned. Even within its own time Co. G was handled quite differently than other groups of soldiers serving from the town.

The *Effingham Republican's* articles concerning Co. G refer to the troops as "our boys" and other such endearing terms. By comparison, articles referring to new draftees shipped off to camp and a weekly occurrence by the latter half of the war are delivered in a curt, official manner. The titles to these articles are simple, almost business-like, "Left for Camp Taylor"<sup>7</sup> "12 Leave for Camp Taylor,"<sup>8</sup> etc. In contrast to the somber nature of the draftee announcements, we find an enormous crowd turning out to greet a single member of Co. G passing through Effingham, separate from the unit as a whole on the way to telegraph training school. First Sergeant Ivar Knowles received a grand welcome, with food, well-wishers, and music from the people of Effingham.<sup>9</sup> The story is nice and implies the love and support of the people for their soldiers, but it seems a bit overblown for only one soldier passing through, certainly not an out-of-the-ordinary event for a town with a major railroad running through it. As we have seen, one group is treated as family, the collective sons of the town, while accounts of the other read more like numbers from a stock ticker. Surely it is not mere coincidence, but this begs the question, what is the difference between one group of soldiers and the other?

Two potential explanations came to mind during the research. For the first explanation we might look at the author of the majority of letters from Co. G, Clem J. Weidman. Examining each printed letter we find that a majority of them are addressed to one Herman R. Schlebarth, none other than the editor and publisher of the *Effingham Republican*. It is entirely possible that Schlebarth paid more attention to Co. G because one of his best friends was serving in the unit and he could count on consistent information coming in through his letters. Given this, it should be no surprise that Co. G would receive more attention, but there are problems with this hypothesis. Several of the publications of the Effingham Genealogical Society indicate that Clem J. Weidman's letters were also reprinted in the *Effingham Register* and the *Effingham Democrat* simultaneously.<sup>10</sup> What we can draw from this is that news of Co. G was valuable to Effingham County readers; stories about Co. G were generally very popular with readers of Effingham newspapers. This tells us little, however, about the enthusiasm with which the people of the county regarded Co. G. This dead end brings us to the second postulation, which reveals the underlying apprehension over the racial and national identity of the people in Effingham County.

<sup>6</sup>"Co. G Now Mobilizing," *Effingham Republican*, 26 July 1917.

<sup>7</sup>"Left for Camp Taylor," *Effingham Republican*, 20 September 1917.

<sup>8</sup>"12 Leave for Camp Taylor," *Effingham Republican*, 4 October 1917.

<sup>9</sup>"We are Patriotic People," *Effingham Republican*, 24 January 1918.

<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, neither of these newspapers was available for examination at the time of this research, the microfilms and originals have apparently been lost since they were used by the Effingham Genealogical and Historical Society.

## Loyalty and Patriotism

The 2000 Census indicated that 39.5% of the population in the city of Effingham was of German descent.<sup>11</sup> That number might have been considerably higher in 1917 at the outset of American involvement in the war, when larger numbers of first and second-generation German immigrants lived in this country. The number would have been even higher in the village of Teutopolis, which boasts strong ties to German culture even to this day. Other studies have paid considerable attention to the persecution of Americans of German descent throughout the United States, but Effingham County offers a unique case to study. Its high density of German immigrants and German descendants meant that there was not a great deal of ethnic distinction within the county. Simply put, fewer citizens in Effingham County would have conflated German culture and habits, more or less shared by the majority of the population, with disloyalty than in other communities. Despite this, the evidence shows that there was a great deal of concern paid to representations of patriotism and loyalty on the part of the people of Effingham County themselves. Through public performance and proclamation the people of Effingham County, particularly in the heavily Germanic community of Teutopolis, sought to present themselves as loyal Americans and combat suspicions of deceit from those outside the community.

Suspicion of German aliens within Effingham County seemed to come from both federal and local authorities not directly tied to members of the community. Given the large population of Germans in the county, it is entirely possible that there were unregistered aliens living in the community. Those who lived in the community knew who could be trusted and who could not, but this was not the case for lawmakers who were only vaguely aware of the community's demography and character through census information and related reports. As such, there was apparently some concern over these "enemy aliens". David L. Wright, Assistant Registrant/Postmaster, issued a call for registration of these individuals in the February 7, 1918 edition of the *Effingham Republican*. The article instructs enemy aliens, obviously Germans in this context, to report to the post office between February 4<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> to provide four unframed photographs for registration. The article warns of penalties for non-registration, but does not mention what those penalties entail.<sup>12</sup>

Language became a matter of contention and patriotism during the war. To this day there are several residents in Effingham County who primarily speak German and that number is likely to be substantially greater during World War I. The State Utilities Commission heard complaints by residents who questioned the legality of the Watson and Gelmare Telephone Company's injunction to its customers banning the speaking of German over its telephone wires.<sup>13</sup> Though a verdict was not printed in any of the available papers, we can assume that the Commission ruled in favor of the citizens. In the greater war narrative this dispute was ultimately inconsequential, but as a part of the extreme suspicion regarding anything that might be subversive to the United States government, the dispute over spoken language was a key indicator of what exactly laid at the heart of this German-American identity crisis in Effingham County.

The German language spoken by many residents of Effingham County connected them more with the enemy in Europe than their English-speaking neighbors in America. Although

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<sup>11</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "62401 Fact Sheet: Profile of Selected Social Characteristics-2000," available from [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/QTTable?\\_bm=y&-geo\\_id=86000US62401&-qr\\_name=DEC\\_2000\\_SF3\\_U\\_DP2&-ds\\_name=DEC\\_2000\\_SF3\\_U&-lang=en&-redoLog=false&-sse=on](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/QTTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=86000US62401&-qr_name=DEC_2000_SF3_U_DP2&-ds_name=DEC_2000_SF3_U&-lang=en&-redoLog=false&-sse=on), accessed 12 November 2009.

<sup>12</sup> "Notice to Alien Enemies," *Effingham Republican*, 7 February 1918.

<sup>13</sup> "Wants Ban on German Talk," *Effingham Republican*, 4 April 1918.

the majority of German-Americans remained loyal, many Americans remained suspicious of their cultural ties to Germany. German-Americans in Effingham County needed to find ways to prove their loyalty; they did this by drawing on traditional constructs of patriotism and adapting them to suit the specific need or opportunity as it arose.

We now come back to the second explanation for the fascination with Co. G that seemed to engulf Effingham County during the war. In an article titled "Letter from France," readers are offered correspondence from George E. Borries, serving "somewhere in France." Borries' brief remark that he cannot really write anything of worth or send pictures for fear of censorship has the potential to disappoint the historian, but his discussion of pride in service to country is the truly valuable aspect of the letter. He tells his family that he is proud that he signed up with the regular army and did not have to be drafted against his will to serve. He derides the young draftees from back home, even going so far as to question their courage.<sup>14</sup> The men of Co. G and Borries have in common that they signed up of their own volition to join in the fight to protect their country. No one forced them to do it; they heard the call and answered. The men of Co. G, despite their largely suspect German background, could prove their unswerving loyalty on the battlefield, with real, tangible actions. By supporting Co G in every way possible, German-Americans back home in Effingham could further assert their own American identity. In this way, the young soldiers as well as their family and friends could mutually provide a means for the performance and reification of each other's patriotism; in this way Co G was an outward manifestation of loyalty for everyone to see and supporting them became a duty.

Supporting Co G could only partly help to present their community in a patriotic light. German Americans in Effingham County needed to put on a show, to perform, as it were, for those outside of their community who might become suspicious of their customs and culture. A story that seems at first to be nothing more than a novelty piece becomes important when viewed in the context of national identity and provides an excellent jumping off point for an analysis of self-representation and defense. On Thursday, February 1, 1917, the *Effingham Republican* reprinted a story from the Chicago Tribune about an Effingham resident named Fred Stahl. A merchant by trade, the article describes Stahl as a respected, upstanding member of society, but it is not his community work or business that set Stahl apart, but his relation as a 2<sup>nd</sup> cousin to Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany. The fact that an Effingham man could be so closely related to one of the most powerful men on Earth was startling enough but the story of his lineage is the fascinating part. His grandfather, George Powell Stahl, was a gargantuan man of nearly 7 feet tall and weighing 475 pounds. The elder Stahl's stature drew the attention of King Frederick,<sup>15</sup> who made him a general and eventually offered his own sister in marriage to him. Family history holds that George's son, George Jr., tired of the "distasteful" life in the German army and moved to the United States, eventually settling in Effingham County.

At the time of publication the United States remained neutral in the conflict, but there is evidence, in the story, criticism of German culture and praise for America. George Jr.'s dislike for the German army represents not only his general aversion to military life, but also for German culture, which was, by this time, heavily conflated with militarism. George's escape to the United States demonstrates the superiority of one country's progressive culture over another country's backward, Spartan values. An accompanying story in the same article, hardly believable, describes how the Kaiser (which one, we are not told) offered George Jr. the fabulous sum of \$100,000 to return to the fatherland, only to be turned down. We can imagine

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<sup>14</sup> "Letter from France," *Effingham Republican*, 6 December 1917.

<sup>15</sup> The article simply describes the German King as "Frederick." It may be Frederick William IV or Frederick III, though Frederick William IV is more likely given the rough timeline offered.

that anyone would brag about such a story and their relation to a figure as illustrious as the Kaiser, but the newspaper informs us that Fred Stahl, a “leading citizen,” never mentioned his heritage, preferring instead to be judged on his own merits. However preposterous, the story allows the reader to reaffirm the difference between German aristocratic culture, where wealth and respect are built on heritage, and American culture, where every man is equal and is respected only for what he has done. In this case, Fred Stahl has earned respect through his good citizenship and business savvy. What the story also does is present a picture to the outside world, increasingly wary of enemy aliens in their midst, of a loyal German-American.<sup>16</sup>

Loyalty meetings were an important milieu of patriotic representation. The celebration served as an affirmation of commonly held values, a collective experience of release and celebration, and a stage on which to play the part of the loyal American. The *Effingham Republican* makes regular mention of upcoming meetings and summaries of the events afterward. One particularly large loyalty meeting on March 15, 1918 acted as a war fundraiser, with speeches by the heads of the local Red Cross, Knights of Columbus, and the State Council of Defense.<sup>17</sup> As with any social performance, the many displayed acts of the loyalty meeting operated on the basis of distinction and separation. The announcements were forceful, demanding, and rebuking; those who did not attend without good reason was noted by the community. Everyone would know who did not do their part to keep morale high and rallied support for the cause. At the same time, attendees to the loyalty meeting were given a chance to distinguish themselves, to create shades of difference among one’s peers. In this way, the loyalty meeting was a public arena; a field of possibility where German Americans, or any individual for that matter, could fashion for themselves a socially approved identity.

### **Representation in Teutopolis**

The heavily German town of Teutopolis appropriated the imagery of the loyalty meeting to counter suspicions of disloyalty and claims to a German conspiracy. Questions of their allegiance came as early, in an April 12, 1917 article in the *Newton Democrat* titled “Loyalty of Teutopolis.” The author of the article, one Dr. Johnson, questioned the conspicuous lack of American flags hanging in Teutopolis. Dr. Johnson wondered whether the dearth of patriotic support could be attributed to mixed feelings or, even worse, conflicting loyalties. Dr. Johnson’s claims, in the scope of historical criticism, read comical, but during a time of tremendous social and emotional upheaval, contemporary readers could never be too careful. The *Teutopolis Press* was quick to issue a rebuttal to the *Newton Democrat*, criticizing it for poor fact gathering regarding the history of the town and its hypocrisy, considering that in the same issue that attacked Teutopolis of its lack of flags another article complained of few flags in Newton. The Teutopolis response went on to claim that its young men had volunteered to over and above the town’s quota, here we return to the motif of voluntary service as a display of loyalty, proving its commitment to the American cause.<sup>18</sup>

The human mind is difficult to control, once a notion such as doubt has crept in, it is often impossible to eliminate; it remains in the recesses of our consciousness, informing our actions and feelings in subtle, incomprehensible ways. Such was the case with the doubt surrounding Teutopolis’ allegiance. Reverend Theodosius Plassmeyer of Teutopolis preached rousing, patriotic sermons, such as “Our Allegiance to Civil Authority,” but criticism from without the community continued to persist. As had been done in countless towns across America, the

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<sup>16</sup> “Related to the Kaiser,” *Effingham Republican*, 1 February, 1917.

<sup>17</sup> “Big Loyalty Meeting,” *Effingham Republican*, 14 March, 1918.

<sup>18</sup> “Teutopolis—A Dangerous Town?” in *Teutopolis Sesquicentennial 1839-1989* (Effingham: Kingery Printing Company, 1989), 52.

loyalty meeting operated as a display of commitment to the United States for the people of Teutopolis. Under the direction of Rev. Theodosius, the town held a large and impressive loyalty meeting at the Society Hall on April 14<sup>th</sup> at 2:30 in the afternoon. Other prominent speakers, at the well-attended rally, included Edward Schneider, who represented the State Council of Defense. In the lawn outside the Society Hall, Rev Theodosius blessed the “Service Flag” in honor of the young men serving in the town.<sup>19</sup> The *Effingham Republican* was effusing in its praise for Teutopolis’ loyalty meeting, affording it more space than any of the articles on similar meetings in other towns.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the immensity and seeming success of the loyalty meeting in Teutopolis, distrust lingered. It was later discovered after the war that a plain clothes government agent remained in the town throughout the remainder of the conflict, attempting to investigate hidden munitions factories and enemy training grounds in the Teutopolis area—the searches came up empty.<sup>21</sup> Putting aside these doubts, the people of Effingham County continued to do their part throughout the war to give aid in any way possible. The mask of death passed over Effingham County, as with many other places throughout the world, when the “Spanish Influenza” epidemic arrived in 1918. Starting in late summer, the *Effingham Republican* reported, with increasing frequency, deaths related to influenza. On October 24<sup>th</sup> the *Effingham Republican* front page was filled with the obituaries of sixteen young men and women, most in their late teens and early twenties, who had succumbed to influenza-related pneumonia within the past week.<sup>22</sup> For a series of communities so readily engaged in public activity, the ban on congregation in public spaces in early October 1918 by the health board was difficult to live with, but a necessary action. Finally as the deaths began to subside and the threat lessened, the ban was lifted in late November, though citizens were still ordered to take extreme precaution to protect themselves from contamination.<sup>23</sup> Influenza, though it exacted a severe toll on the county, served as only one more obstacle for the communities to collectively overcome, forging ahead with a unique cultural and social identity fostered by communal obligation and cooperation.

Victory and relief came at last to Effingham County with the end of the war on November 11, 1918. When the Armistice was signed, at 2 a.m. local time, sirens and whistles blew to announce it in Effingham, setting off a town-wide celebration that lasted until morning.<sup>24</sup> Upon the return of their boys from combat, the town commemorated a functioning clock, in the place of a dummy face, on top of the courthouse.<sup>25</sup> The experiences of tribulation and celebration in each small community forged a bond and a collective memory that remains strong, if covered by the dusts of time.

## Conclusion

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<sup>19</sup> “Loyalty Meeting at Teutopolis,” *Effingham Republican*, 11 April, 1918; Eugene Hagedon, *Historical Sketch of Teutopolis & of St. Francis Parish, 1851-1926*, (Effingham: E.W. Petty Company, 1976), 65.

<sup>20</sup> “Patriotic Teutopolis,” *Effingham Republican*, 18 April, 1918.

<sup>21</sup> *Teutopolis Quascentennial Celebration: Historical Booklet 1839-1964*, (No publication information provided and no page numbers, booklet is property of the Effingham Genealogical Society and can be found in the Helen Mathes Library in Effingham Illinois.)

<sup>22</sup> “Harvest of the Grim Reaper,” *Effingham Republican*, 24 October, 1918.

<sup>23</sup> “Influenza Ban has been Raised,” *Effingham Republican*, 21 November, 1918.

<sup>24</sup> “World’s War is Over,” *Effingham Republican*, 14 November, 1918.

<sup>25</sup> “Court House Clock,” *Effingham Republican*, 19 December, 1918.

This paper, on the history of Effingham County during World War I, has been woefully brief. Too much has been left out to even qualify it as a complete history of the county during the war. It is merely a snapshot of one set of experiences during the war, and how these experiences were shaped in part by their interactions with various material and cultural factors. For a collection of communities so proud of their German heritage, particularly Teutopolis, it must have been difficult, not so much to alter their means of representation, as it was to understand why they should need to express loyalty or patriotism. They had always been able to understand themselves as both German and American, why should now, during the war, be any different? It was a question and a task that individuals as well as whole communities needed to answer.

In examining these sets of interactions between German-Americans and those from outside and inside the community who criticized their cultural mores, we are given a glimpse of the process of meaning-construction. It was not a clear-cut process of call and response. There was certainly frustration and contestation over who had the right to define self-identity; the citizens of Teutopolis were placed in an odd predicament, not of their own doing, when their traditional way of life was questioned. To combat these encroachments, while still remaining loyal to government and country, members of the various communities took proactive roles in organizing loyalty meetings and fund-raising drives. Their actions helped to legitimate their identity and alleviate some suspicions, if only partially.

Histories of this sort, local ones that address both the typical social historical model and cultural approach, must become the trend and not the exception. New avenues and forgotten paths can and should be uncovered. Doing the research for this paper, it became evident that there is so much work already done by local volunteers and amateur historians, and that the professional historian needs only to extend his hand in cooperation. We cannot forget local history and must take care to preserve it in whatever form it is left, this is certainly true of the First World War. Too many stories are being lost in the mix, left in old cupboards or roll-top desks to decay. Historians of all sorts should take up this challenge. The material—the history—is out there; it has only to be searched for and freed.