THE MAIL OF PRISONERS OF THE GREAT WAR: PICTURE POSTCARDS AND AID-RELATED CARDS

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ABSTRACT

The First World War is usually considered a senseless bloodbath characterized by unbridled cruelty. Some historians blame Germany more than other belligerents and accuse it for using WWI as a prelude of the military crimes committed during the Second World War. The Great War was the first military conflict of colossal scale that took place after the introduction of the Hague Convention in 1899 as amended in 1907 in Geneva, and therefore the behavior of its participants was at least to some extent restricted by international laws. The Convention set certain restrictions on the treatment of prisoners, and all participants either attempted to observe it or at least pretended to do so. Among other obligations, the belligerents had to provide captured military personnel with the possibility to correspond with their home countries. Compliance with the Hague Convention and its amendments was overseen by International Committee of the Red Cross. Because of these regulations and good will of governments and private individuals, the Great War had a measure of humanitarian side to it that can be proven using both verbal and visual content of prisoners’ mail. Here, I will illustrate the humanitarian aspect of the Great War using philatelic evidence. I will discuss three types of mail related to the treatment of prisoners. First, it will be a selection from a multitude of commercial illustrated postcards sent from the captivity. I will not discuss messages written on formular postal cards which are usually rather uniform. Second, I will show postcards with illustrations created by prisoners themselves, either hand-made or printed. Third, I will present examples of mail related to aid sent to the camps by governments and by private benefactors. In conclusion, I will attempt to put this evidence in a larger context of the Great War and its consequences.