This is an abridged translation of the essay "Zwischen den Zeiten. Feldpostkarten als Gegenstand historischen Lernens in einer veränderten Welt," published in Lara-Marie Hägerling and Michael Ploenus (eds.), *Im Gewebe der Geschichte(n). Biographische, didaktische und andere Stoffe* (Meine: Verlag Reiffer, 2026).

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Between the Times. Field Postcards as a Subject of Historical Learning in a Changing World.

Lara-Marie Hägerling

In May 2026, we had the opportunity to show the exhibition *Nothing remained unchanged but the clouds* by Alan J. Ward and Jeffrey Knopf at the *Wissenschaftsschaufenster* in Braunschweig. The exhibition was accompanied by school workshops that revealed an unexpected depth of response that has inspired this written contribution.

As the students struggled to decipher individual words on the postcards and examined the photographs of soldiers printed on them, initially almost dispassionately, conversations slowly emerged that made clear how deeply the young people identified with the images of the soldiers. The mundane requests from soldiers barely older than themselves became a mirror for the students' own concerns in a world in which war has returned as a real-life threat.

This intensity of engagement with the sources surprised me. The students' responses to the field postcards differed from my own experiences at school, and they also differed from the way in which the use of such sources is discussed in scholarly literature. A distinctive form of contemporary relevance emerged – one *self-generated* by the students – that goes beyond the 'classic', often distanced, externally imposed, and morally charged connection between then and now that often characterises history teaching.

But what accounts for this intensity? And what is different today from just a few years ago?

My contention is that the so-called 'Zeitenwende' – the 'turning point' marked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine – has fundamentally altered the conditions under which historical learning takes place. Young people no longer read such sources from the safe distance of a stable peace order, but from within the immediate experience of an unstable present. They read this material with the unsettling sense of an uncertain future that can no longer be reliably planned. The conditions under which these field postcards can potentially unfold today, have changed fundamentally.

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Nothing remained unchanged but the clouds

The project 'La Vojo Returne' has shown the great potential of field postcards and, with his work, Ward has revealed the complexity of this medium. He engages with the cards not primarily as a conventional documentarian, but as a sensitive mediator: he travelled to Grandpré, he sought the historical locations, and he reconstructed and restaged them in his photographs. Historical and contemporary images enter into a dialogue; in his works, layers of time overlap in the most literal sense.

The workshops offered as part of the exhibition aimed to foster historical thinking through creative engagement, and they demonstrated the enormous didactic potential that the postcards can carry. The field postcards from Alan Ward's collection are autobiographical material that offers insights into everyday life and thus a subject-centred approach to history that makes universal human experiences tangible. The 'decoding' of postcards written in, for example, Sütterlin script creates a moment of curiosity and enables not only young people to recognise and deconstruct the way the medium waves between private, deeply personal moments and official war propaganda. In addition, they offer a valuable complement to the school source material that tends to focus on political figures. Furthermore, they enable a multi-dimensional analysis as a kind of hybrid medium that fosters multi-perspectivity. Field postcards make it possible to perceive the perspective of 'ordinary people' and thereby offer greater scope for identification. The students recognise timeless, fundamental human experiences in the soldiers' mundane needs.

In the course of the project with Ward, and especially during the workshops in France, it also became clear that the field postcards function as transnational sites of memory, with which young people as well as adults can reflect on their own identity in a globalised world. In terms of identity formation, this is an important dimension that responds to the need for orientation that is inherent to the discipline of history.

History teaching and the 'Zeitenwende'

During the workshops with students in Braunschweig, it became clear – and this has already been established in the literature and corresponded to my expectations *before* the school workshops – that field postcards offer significant opportunities for historical learning.

Autobiographical sources depicting the suffering of young soldiers serve as testimonies of horror and as warnings. Gerhard Schneider addresses this

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when he identifies the potential of war postcards ('propaganda postcards') particularly in allowing students to "examine the 'home front' and especially the society's sentiment"[1] and on this basis to analyse the enemy images among the war parties that emerge. He emphasises that this type of source generates student interest, attributing it less to the perspective of ordinary people than to "the tastelessness we encounter on war postcards, the lack of real piety and the hypocrisy in dealing with death in war, the hatred, that leaps out at us from some of the postcards […] and which leaves us, adults and young people alike, speechless."[2] Given the social media content that today's students encounter, the effect Schneider described almost thirty years ago is likely to be negligible today.

What is crucial, however, I argue, is that the reception of this kind of (autobiographical) source has changed. Now, they are being read from within a different horizon of the present, due to a development that has its roots in an increasingly insecure and uncertain world impacting the individual and creating this new sensitivity.

The teaching of the First World War in German history classrooms took place in the context of a post-war society that, after the experiences of the Second World War and the Holocaust, had witnessed a mostly successful European integration and then, with the end of the Cold War and German reunification, had apparently experienced the 'end of history': the triumph of the liberal and democratic world order. This was intertwined with a pacifistic expectation of the future; while at the same time teaching of the First World War was shaped by the teleological narrative of the German 'Sonderweg' leading to National Socialism and the Holocaust.

1 Translation Lara-Marie Hägerling, original: „die ‚Heimatfront' und hier besonders die Stimmung der Bevölkerung zu behandeln"; Gerhard Schneider, Kriegspostkarten des Ersten Weltkriegs als Geschichtsquellen, in: Udo Arnold/Peter Meyers/Uta C. Schmidt (eds.), Stationen eines Hochschullebens. Festschrift für Annette Kuhn zum 65. Geburtstag am 22. Mai 1999, Dortmund 1999, pp. 148-197, here p. 182.

2 Translation Lara-Marie Hägerling, original: „Die Geschmacklosigkeiten, die uns auf Kriegspropagandakarten begegnen, der Mangel an echter Pietät und die Verlogenheit im Umgang mit dem Kriegstod, der Haß, der uns aus manchen Postkarten entgegenspringt […] [und der] uns heute, Erwachsene wie Jugendliche, fassungslos [macht].", ibid., pp. 182 f.

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This is particularly evident in an essay by the peace researcher Karlheinz Koppe, who proposes an alternative to "war-oriented historiography".[3] He suggests understanding history as "a sequence of periods of peace, in which civilisations have repeatedly evolved".[4] "If we were successful", he concludes, "in emphasising the human-inherent urge for peace as well as universally established values, and to educate students in this sense, then the chances of shaping peace for our time and the future may also grow."[5] In light of the current state of the world, this reads as a utopia.

Young people reading field postcards from 1914 today, supposedly won't read them with the same conviction of lasting security as they would have just a few years ago. They read these sources within a present in which Russia's war in Ukraine has made war a real threat again in Germany and Europe. Today, in German classrooms there are students who might have experienced war themselves. The current debate about the reintroduction of compulsory military service may also contribute to the feeling that war is no longer an abstract historical category but is connected to the students' realities of life and future.

Therefore, the didactic potential of such sources needs re-evaluation. For students today, the question is not only what can be learned from this war for the future but maybe also what it means to live in a world in which war has once again has become reality. This might change the way historical ego-documents are being read and creates new demands for history teaching.

Since Olaf Scholz introduced the 'Zeitenwende', the term has become a cipher to describe the shifting and already shifted world order and the necessary rethinking accompanying it. Consequently, this change affects schools as well, and perhaps, it affects especially history teaching.

3 Translation Lara-Marie Hägerling, original: „der kriegsorientierten Geschichtsschreibung", Karlheinz Koppe, Wertebewusstsein und Friedenserziehung, in: Udo Arnold/Peter Meyers/Uta C. Schmidt (eds.), Stationen eines Hochschullebens, Festschrift für Annette Kuhn zum 65. Geburtstag am 22. Mai 1999, Dortmund 1999, pp. 27-37, here p. 31.

4 Translation Lara-Marie Hägerling, original: „Ablauf von Friedenszeiten, in denen sich immer wieder Zivilisationen entwickelt haben", ibid.

5 Translation Lara-Marie Hägerling, original: „Wenn es gelingt die Friedensfähigkeit von Menschen stärker ins Bewußtsein [sic] zu rücken und weltweit anerkannte ethische Grundwerte zu verdeutlichen, und vor allem junge Menschen in diesem Verständnis zu erziehen, dann können auch die Chancen wachsen, Frieden für unsere Zeit und die Zukunft zu gestalten.", ibid, p. 37.

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Wolfgang Sander, professor for didactics, discusses the implications of the 'Zeitenwende' for the social science subjects, arguing for overcoming the 'moralisation' of political conflicts in favour of strengthening European identity and democratic resilience.[6]

Historical learning is not the same as political education, and yet the educational mandate of history as a school subject is unambiguous in its aims: history teaching always is part of identity formation in the sense of reproducing the political system and therefore fosters democratic resilience. Sander raises the question of how this can be achieved "without mechanisms of propaganda and indoctrination".[7] From the perspective of history didactics, one would argue: (Resilient) history teaching means fostering the ability of historical sense-making, which becomes more urgent under the conditions of an unstable, shifting world order.

Field postcards, placed in associative contexts, can support this process by centring individual experiences of young people and their search for orientation in the contemporary world. Forming independent judgements, students actively bring in their own worldviews, shaped by present-day crises, and use them to interpret historical sources.

This was evident in the second part of the workshops, in which the students responded to a past that confronted them with their own visions as well as concerns by creating collages. This act of creative reconstruction generated impressive, moving conversations among the young people. The students used the collages to connect their own thoughts and anxieties about an uncertain future with historical experience, and *of their own accord* started discussions about military service and the value of freedom and democracy. This demonstrates that the potential of such sources lies in their capacity to generate conversations. Combined with the aesthetic impulses of the exhibition and anecdotes from France that Alan Ward shared, it became possible to understand the postcards as a medium that transcends national and temporal boundaries and to connect them with the great crises of the present. Most importantly, all of this happened without an over-didactic framework, relying solely on trust in the power of the historical record, in the artistic vividness of Ward's works and especially in the empathy of the young people themselves.

6 Wolfgang Sander, Eine ‚Zeitenwende' auch im Unterricht? Der Ukraine-Krieg und die gesellschaftswissenschaftlichen Fächer, in: Zeitschrift für Didaktik der Gesellschaftswissenschaften, 2/2022, pp.129-142.

7 Translation Lara-Marie Hägerling, original: „ohne in Propaganda und Indoktrination zu verfallen", ibid, p. 138.

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