



## Using Photographs for Research

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**B**ECAUSE I WRITE historical fiction set between 1914 and 1945, I have a lot of material I can use for research. There are films, newspapers, diaries, novels and endless other contemporary versions of the period I'll be looking at. However, because my novels are invariably set either in totalitarian regimes or wartime (sometimes both), a lot of the sources are not entirely reliable. Propaganda takes many forms and it's often created by ordinary people as much as it is by states: something that we see a lot of these days.

What are often more reliable are photographs, particularly when taken by the same ordinary people. They may have an agenda but the actual physical representations of the people and places in the photograph can be relied on and are often very revealing. I've written an entire novel based on a photograph album owned by the adjutant and commander of Auschwitz and the more I looked at the images he chose to preserve in the album, the more I saw. This is also the case with another photograph of two soldiers that I bought on eBay a few years ago.

It was printed as a postcard to be sent home by soldiers and was probably taken by a commercial photographer who travelled around the front lines, or at least behind the front lines (indeed, if you look closely at the background, it seems to be a painted set). It was cheaply produced and is not very good quality but on the back is written 'Uncle Fred and Uncle Stanley, 1917' which dates it to one of the worst periods of the war for ordinary British soldiers. At first sight, that might seem to be all the information the photograph can give the viewer but that's not the case.

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On closer examination, they have different cap badges, which probably indicates they were in different regiments. That's interesting, but in Stanley's case the badge is the only one of his brass buckles and buttons which is shiny, in contrast to Fred's which are all gleaming. I think this means that Fred's role was in the rear, whereas Stanley fought in the trenches where a shiny badge or button would have been a target for a sniper. In addition, if you look at the cleanliness of their uniforms, Stanley's is filthy which is consistent with his spending time in the trenches. To be fair, Fred's isn't in great condition either, and it suggests to me that, unlike in movies where uniforms are often immaculate, the reality of warfare then was that the soldiers were often caked in mud whether they were in the front line or not, and that they had very infrequent changes of uniform.

Another interesting difference between the two men is the shape of their caps. Stanley's has had the stiffener taken out of it, so it has a much softer shape, perhaps so that it could be worn under a steel helmet, whereas



Fred's has not. Again, there was no heating in the trenches so any warmth you could generate was welcome.

It's also curious that both men are smoking. Stanley has a fat, self-rolled cigarette hanging from his lower lip while Fred has a pipe. It's a reminder that this is not a formal photograph. Perhaps it was a chance meeting between the two men, the photographer was there with his backdrop and the photograph was taken. Or perhaps this is how their family would recognise them — it was a joke they were sharing with their loved ones back home.

Both men look absolutely shattered, which is to be expected, but for me, anyway, reveals something about the stress under which they lived, and often died. Perhaps when it was taken, neither Fred nor Stanley thought that they would see their family again, and this photograph was intended to leave a memory behind. One which, curiously, I'm still discussing, 105 years after the image was captured.