



Transforming Photographs into a Digital Catalogue. A Study of Two Museums and Their Collections

By
Mariusz Gąsior

Abstract

In this article I focus on three aspects of the digitisation of photographic collections which I have had the opportunity to deal with professionally in two museums, in the UK and Poland. In 2014, the Imperial War Museum in London (IMW) implemented an online project of the portal/monument, *Lives of the First World War*, commemorating all citizens of the British Commonwealth who took part in the First World War (WWI), both in uniform and in civil services. Users registered on the portal could attach documents, photographs, reports to each commemorated soldier-keyword, thus expanding the database. One of the key elements of the project was a collection of portrait photographs bearing the title *Bond of Sacrifice*. These comprised over 16,000 photographs of soldiers of the British Commonwealth, handed over to the Museum by their families in the years 1917–1919. After nearly a hundred years, the Museum decided to comprehensively develop, digitize, and make the collection available in the form of an online catalogue. In the meantime, the Museum digitised a huge collection of WWI photographs, the so-called Q Series (ca. 115,000), the most important part of which was British official photography. By 2016, the entire collection was scanned and made available in an external catalogue of the Museum on the basis of a non-commercial license. Since then, the photographs have taken on a life of their own: they are used in academic works, press articles, TV productions, and in social medias. The second project includes numerous photographs of the Polish Armed Forces. This phenomenon is dealt with in the second part of this paper, which discusses the online photographic collection of the Silesian Museum in Katowice. The third and final part of this article is devoted to the impact of digitization and on-line accessibility on the making of temporary exhibitions. This is explained using the example of the author's last exhibition at the museum about

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women in industry; based entirely on digital reproductions of photographs from the collections of many museums from Europe and the U.S., amongst others the US National Archives and the IWM. This is due to the fact that the author selected the entire material with the use of online catalogues of these very institutions.

Keywords: WWI photographic collections, digital access, photographic databases, photographic exhibitions

The author of the article served as curator of historical photographic collections and projects based on them in two major museums – the Imperial War Museum London (IWM), Great Britain; and the Muzeum Śląskie in Katowice (Silesian Museum), Poland. The object of this article is to portray the process by which both museums have digitised and made their collections available to the public in the form of online catalogues. The article shows this has made access to valuable historical collections straightforward and easy, and in many cases even possible in the first place. The approach to the subject is more practical than academic, which is reflected in the construction of the article.

The Imperial War Museum and Its Collections

The IWM is an institution with over 100 years of history, having been established on March 5, 1917, by a decree of the British War Cabinet (Gaynor 1988). The collecting of appropriate historical and archival material began almost immediately; the first object officially acquired for the Museum collections was a play entitled *Dick Whittington. A Pantomime: in Three Acts* played on the Macedonian Front for the troops of the British Salonika Force during the First World War.¹ Since then the museum has collected nearly 12 million individual objects of all types – three dimensional objects, books and scripts, documents, oral history recordings, films, and above all photographs, the latter being the main concern of this study. Such rich collections mean that the IWM is, as a result of its hard work over last century, in the very comfortable position of having enough objects to support practically every type of exhibition project, publication, educational programme etc. falling within its mission; a position rather uncommon in the broad museum world. Also, due to it having a permit from Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO), it is able to make substantial financial gains by selling licences to use digital images of the Museum's artefacts to third parties for commercial projects.

The IWM photographic collection is, numerically speaking, the largest part of the Museum's archival holdings and comprises nearly 11 million individual photographs, grouped in around 18,000 sub-collections. The material is as diverse as is possible, containing photographs by both amateur and professional photographers, private and official, employed by the government and press agencies alike. The photographs themselves are in the form of negatives, glass and celluloid, including rare transparencies, positive prints, in black and white and colour. A sign of modern times is visible in the increasingly large numbers of original digital photographs which have entered the museum's collections register over the past few years.

So where does such a vast amount of material come from? While it comes from various sources i.e., private donations, occasional purchases etc., the overwhelming majority of pictures are deposits from the Ministry of Defence, as the Museum has since 1958 been an official repository of photographic and film material recorded by various agendas of the Ministry. Thus, all official photographs of the British Armed Forces since the WWI are deposited and held in the Museum's storerooms. This carries with it an obligation on the part of the Museum to do everything possible to make this material available to the public, which is a legal requirement tied to its depository status.

The Museum holds three different research facilities – a general Reading Room for library and documents; a Photographic Archive Reading Room; and a Film Archive Room. In this way researchers have access to practically everything the Museum stores. In addition, all three rooms provide easy access to all

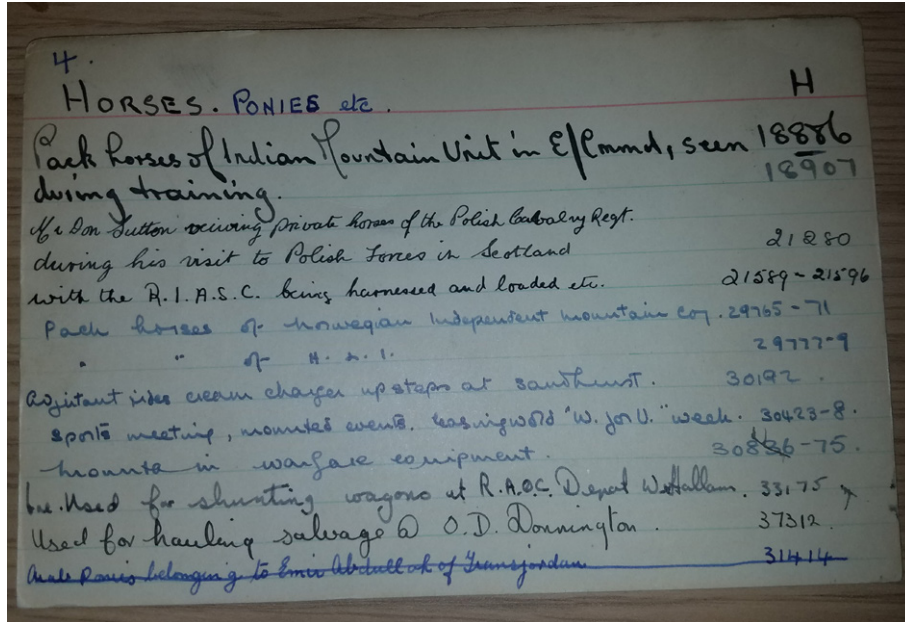


Fig. 1. An example of an index card from the H Series, one of the Second World War official series, with reference to horses and ponies in the service of the British Army on the Home Front. There are several thousand of them still in use in the Museum's research facilities. Copyright: Mariusz Gąsior

digitised material available on specially dedicated computer stations. All this is possible because the Museum has made and continues to make massive efforts to digitise as much material as is physically possible. This is a huge task taking into consideration vast numbers of its collections, but the results are quite promising – over 800,000 individual objects have records online, accessible to everyone interested around the world². More than half of them are photographs alone.

Before the digitisation era, the access to the photographic collections was provided by means of the index cards system; a set of small library-type cards, meticulously written by hand, with reference to signature numbers and physical descriptions of the photographs. The compilation of these cards was undoubtedly a huge task, as it gives directions to images by signatures, tagging words, themes, historical events, geographical names etc (Fig. 1).

In 2012 the Museum decided to digitize its main WWI collections for the upcoming centenary of the Great War. It was decided that all official photographs, as well as the most important private ones, would be thoroughly digitised and catalogued. Amongst the many collections from that period of time, the IWM holds two very special ones: the Bond of Sacrifice Collection – a set of over 16,000 photographic portraits of British and Commonwealth soldiers; and the Q Series – a vast assemblage of over 115,000 images covering all aspects of the conflict.

Digitising of the Bond of Sacrifice Collection

The Bond of Sacrifice is a priceless collection and one of the oldest in the Museum's holdings. The IWM began collecting these images as early as mid-1917, i.e., just a few months after its founding.³ The idea was to collect as much material as possible about the combatants from the families, and the response was so strong that in a few months the Museum had to stop the programme as it was overwhelmed with the material. Over 16,000 images were donated to the Museum, together with a similar number of letters, memoirs and other types of material. However, the photographs were then left in the storage room shelves for nearly 100 years; only a few hundred images were digitised and used as examples in a few minor projects. One may say that the collection waited patiently for its time to come.

And in September 2012 the time arrived. The go-ahead was given for the first batch of boxes with images to be transported from storage facilities at the IWM Duxford to the All Saints Annexe in London (one of the official sites of the Museum). At that time, I was put in charge of a team of willing volunteers, and the work started. At the time it was the largest singular digitisation and cataloguing project the IWM had undertaken to date.

The collection wasn't in any way catalogued; no numbering system was applied; and the images were kept in boxes organized in alphabetic order. The first task was thus to physically number them. While on the surface this was seemingly the easiest thing to do, it proved to be rather problematic. Despite all the attention to detail which was applied, the sheer size of the collection meant that mistakes were quite easy to make. For example, one of the volunteers, while writing numbers with a pencil under the pictures, applied one number less on one of the images and carried on with that mistake for quite a few days before it was spotted. As each photograph and record must have unique numbers assigned to them, in consequence a few thousand images had to be renumbered. And this was only the first problem to be dealt with.

Initially it was decided to employ an outside company to digitise the series, the assumption being that it would be done on the Museum premises so the material would never leave the safety of its walls. One of the offices in the All Saints Annexe's basement was assigned to the company for the duration of the project, a scanner was placed there, and the digitisation work started soon thereafter.

Photographs, all as positive prints, were physically glued to large cardboard sheets with typed information and sometimes newspaper cuttings or obituaries stuck on the reverse side (Fig. 2). So, for the sake of the best type of preservation the Museum management decided to order scans of each photograph in three versions – the image itself, the whole averse of each sheet and, if there was anything there, also the reverse. That meant that potentially up to 50,000 scans would have to be made to complete the digitisation, as there were over 16,300 cards to be processed.



Fig. 2. Digital scans of a portrait of Lieutenant George Kazimierz De Janasz, the Royal Army Service Corps, ref. HU 121138 – the avers of the cardboard sheet and the photograph itself. Bond of Sacrifice Collection. Copyright: © IWM HU 121138.

After a few months the first 3000 images were scanned, but further problems occurred – the external company decided to quit the project and abruptly abandoned it. The work thus had to be carried on by the IWM internal digitisation team, which also had to rescan already done images, as they had been scanned to lower resolution and quality than agreed upon. So, the work on digitisation had to start over from the beginning. Altogether it took over a year of systematic scanning to finish the digitisation part, and by the end of 2013 all photographs from the collection were scanned three times, processed, and optimised (airbrushed for better quality).

Meanwhile a very extensive effort was put into cataloguing the numbered and digitised images on the part of the curatorial team, which consisted of myself supported by a number of volunteers. The IWM as their curatorial tool uses the Adlib computer programme, the Swedish-designed cataloguing software, based on SPECTRUM, the British collection management standard. It allows curators to catalogue individual objects in great detail, and through its connection with the server and websites publishes created archival records online automatically. Each photograph had to have a counterpart record on Adlib (Fig. 3-4) with the same reference number and a digital image attached. The next step was to fill empty records with all necessary information about the subjects captured on the pictures.

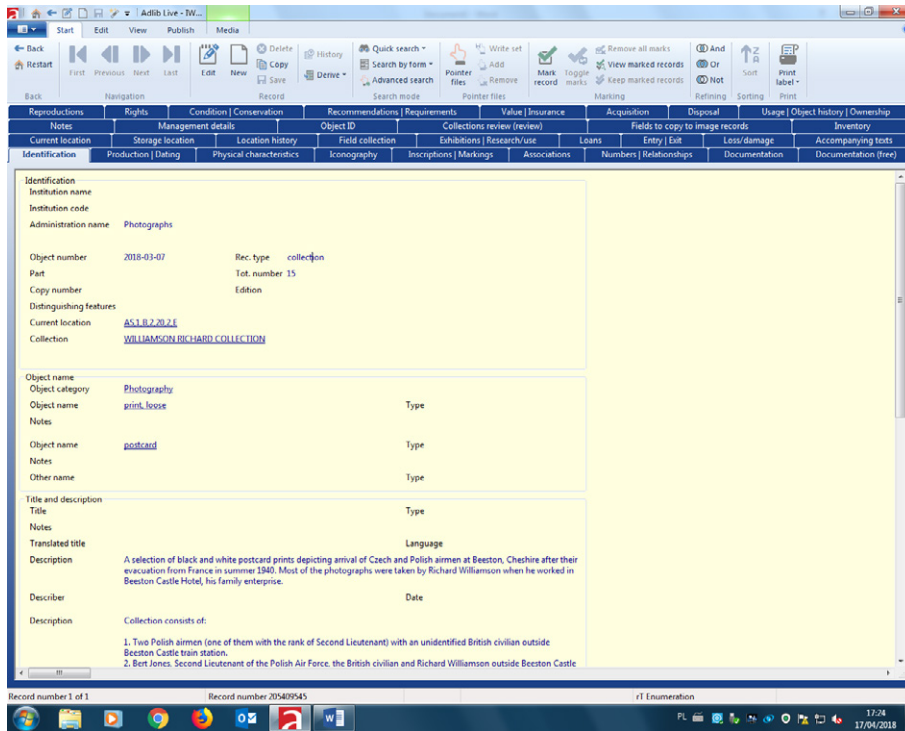


Fig. 3. A screenshot of an Adlib record no. 2018-03-07 (seventh collection recorded in the month of March of year 2018) with basic information about a photographic collection – reference number, name of the collection, type of material, description, number of objects, physical location of the storage etc. Copyright: IWM.

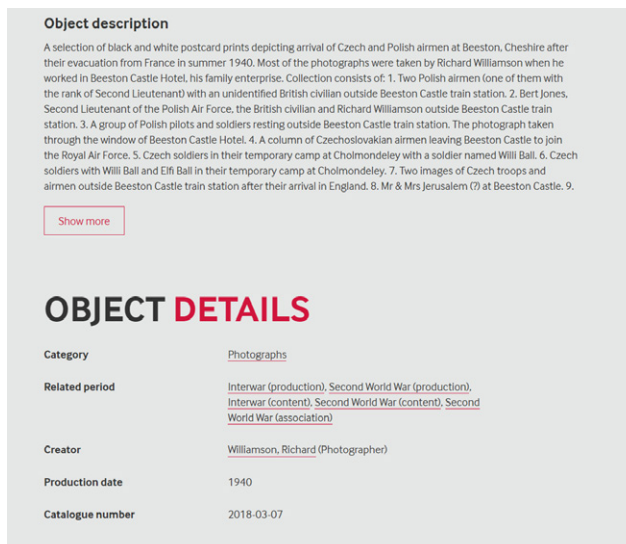


Fig. 4. A screenshot of the same Adlib record placed on the IWM on-line collection search engine, displaying the same information⁴. Copyright: IWM

The cataloguing of all individual photographs was arguably the biggest task in the project; it included finding and recording all available information about the soldiers. Photographs are themselves extremely precious. But without details about the soldiers' lives their historical significance is not complete; only the combined informative weight of images and historical data represents its true value. The Adlib software makes it possible to catalogue objects in a very versatile way; curators can (and should) enter all necessary historical information i.e. create biographical entries for the photographers and other creators; register an acquisition or provenance history for each object or collection; record contact details of donors; and provide, dimensions and physical state of objects etc. Sensitive data (donors' addresses and other personal data) is blocked from public view on the online catalogue, but the rest is available for researchers to examine. Curators are required to register all above information, in this way creating a comprehensive source of historical information. This is the standard practice and is applied to all types of artefacts in the Museum's possession i.e., photographs, three-dimensional objects, documents etc.

The Museum considers its photographic collections mostly as records of historical events, many of them of outstanding importance, and therefore focuses more on documenting data related to their core historical meaning. The photographic technique, type of equipment used, spiritual approach of a photographer to their work etc. therefore rather remain in the background, although these aspects are also recorded if they played an important role in the creation of the objects in question.

While some of the photographs in the "Bond of Sacrifice Collection" had obituaries and newspaper cuttings attached to them, the majority were described in a very basic way, i.e., rank, first initial, surname and a regiment, so there was not much to begin with. And there aren't many detailed sources from which such information can be extracted. The most obvious one, being the British soldiers' personal records, were held at The National Archives (TNA) in the London district of Kew and were largely destroyed during the German bombing of London in the Second World War (WWII). Fortunately for the project as well as those seeking the family history, one very significant WWI archive survived intact, which is the British Army medal index cards 1914–1920, also held at TNA. There are over 5 million medal cards of the British and Commonwealth troops of the Great War, and they provide very basic information about their military service – rank, name (or initial), surname, regiments (often in abbreviation), and medals and decorations awarded (Fig. 5).⁵ Distinguishing between troops with the most popular surnames i.e. Smith, Jones etc. is quite a big problem, but the database still gives researchers a good chance to identify a particular soldier. Therefore, it was used very extensively for the needs of the project.

Name	Corps.	Rank	Regt. No.
DE JANASZ	3/Reg. B. Amb. C	2/Lt	
G. K. A.	R. A. 56	2/Lt	
George Kajinich Arthur		Kapt	
VICTORY R.A.S.C. x BRITISH	OFF/1	252 ^e	Remarks INX/3670 of 25.7.22 EF/6/9270
STAR	---	---	
Theatre of War first served in	France		
Date of entry therein	30.12.16		
16.6.22			EF/6/9270 K. 1380

Fig. 5. A medal index card of Lieutenant De Janasz, one of five million similar documents available in The National Archives' collections. The card was essential in cataloguing Lt. De Janasz's record on the IWM database. Copyright: TNA.

Another very useful source of information is the database of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC), which lists all deceased military and civilian personnel of both world wars (Fig. 6). Because many troops listed in the Bond of Sacrifice Collection actually perished in combat, the CWGC database provided a wealth of information about them. Each CWGC record usually contains information about rank, name, surname, regiment, and place of burial for each commemorated individual. Very often the names of next-of-kin are included and even citations for medals awarded to them. Thanks to the meticulous work of the CWGC staff, information about deceased British and Commonwealth troops is much easier to find and access than information about those who actually survived the war. Both the TNA and CWGC databases, quite often provided cross-reference information about particular individuals, which made it possible to create very detailed records for some photographs.

As already mentioned, the IWM digitisation project was officially completed by the end of 2013 – all photographs had their records on Adlib created with scans attached, and the records contained enough information to identify the majority of soldiers portrayed in the collection (Fig. 7). However, it should be noted that work on updating the information in the records continued well into 2015, as the collection was simply too large to finish it in just one year.

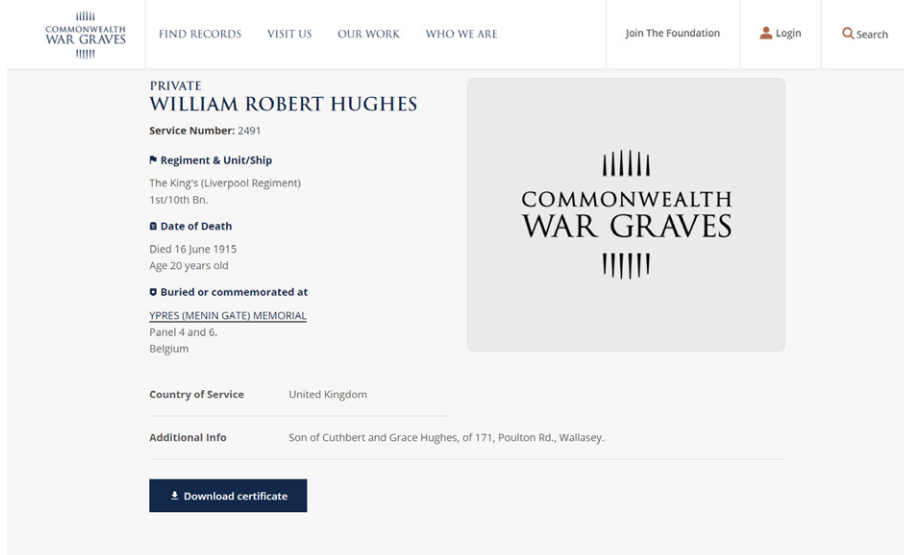


Fig. 6. A screenshot of a record of Private William Robert Hughes of the Liverpool Regiment, who perished on 16 June 1915 in Ypres and today is commemorated on the Menin Gate Memorial in this city⁶. A record of his photograph on the IWM database is HU 116035. Copyright: CWGC.

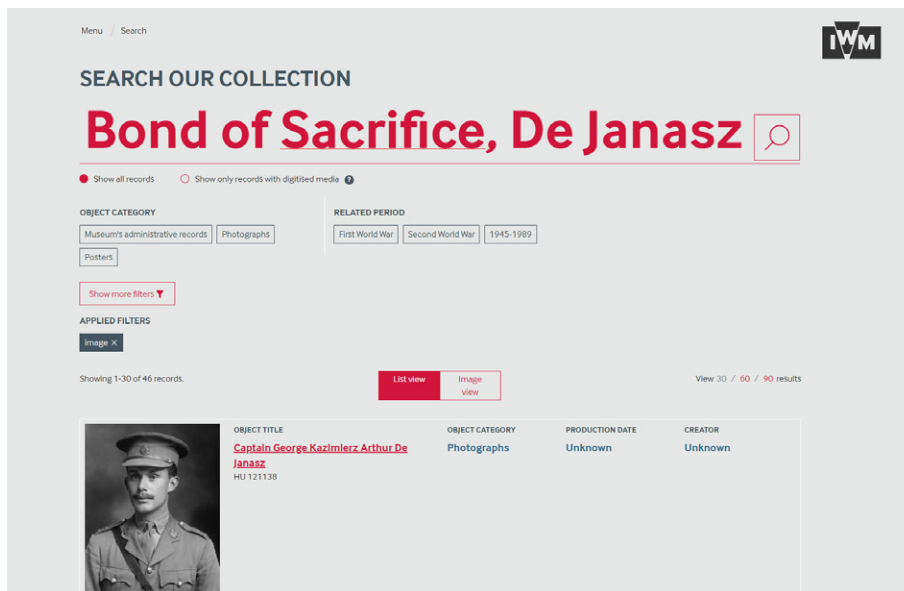


Fig. 7. A screenshot of Lieutenant de Janasz's record on the IWM website⁷. Copyright: IWM.

After nearly 100 years, the Bond of Sacrifice Collection finally became available to the public on the Museum's online catalogue for the first time since it was acquired in 1917. But this wasn't the end of the IWM's involvement in other commemorative programmes. On May 12, 2014, the Museum opened the landmark digitisation project titled *The Lives of the First World War*, the aim of which was to record stories of all WWI servicemen, military and civilian and British and Commonwealth alike (Fig. 8). Individual records were based on British Army medal index cards and The Bond of Sacrifice images became its core photographic part. Anyone interested was able to register a free account and contribute any family material in their possession – letters, photographs, documents etc. The project ran for five years till March 2019. During its existence users opened over 160,000 accounts,⁸ contributed to 7.7 million stories,⁹ and created over 8000 communities (dedicated groups of interest).¹⁰ All in all it was a truly impressive scale of public involvement.

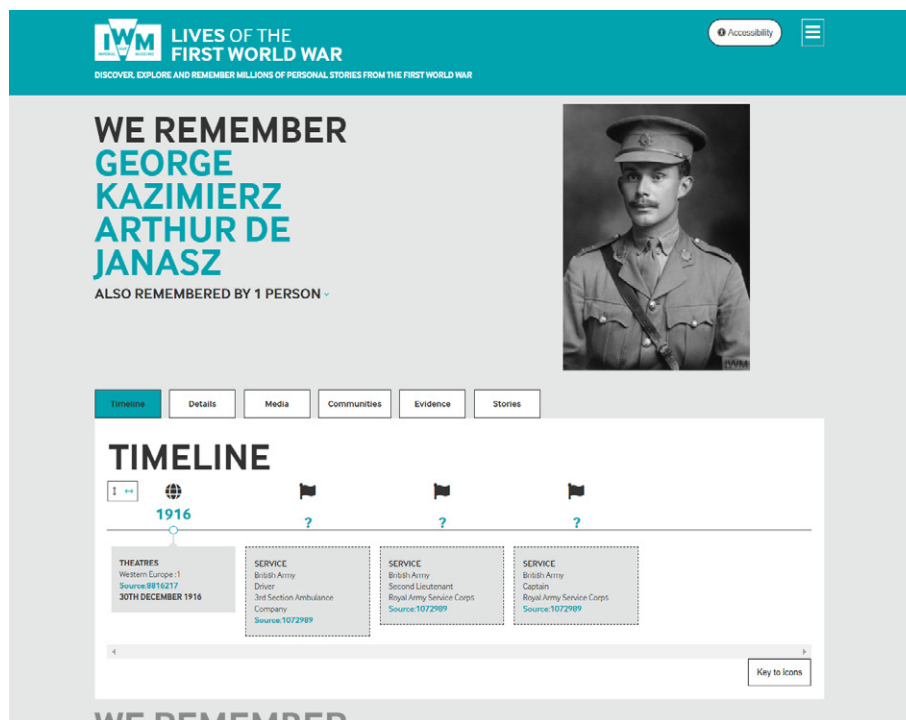


Fig. 8. A screenshot of Lieutenant De Janasz's record on the Lives of the First World War database¹¹. Copyright: IWM.

The Q Series

The Q Series (the name of which derives from the prefix “Q” which precedes every record in this collection) is actually a compilation of many hundreds of sub-collections. Its size is enormous; officially it comprises over 115,000 individual photographs, representing every type of photography – official, press, private, recorded on every known kind of photographic material – negatives, glass and celluloid, positive prints etc. Thematically the series covers most of aspects of WWI, but the most important part are the British official photographs of the Western Front. Those were taken by two well-known war photographers of that time – Ernest Brooks and John Warwick Brooke – who were sent to the front prior and during the British offensive on the Somme (Brooks in March and Warwick Brooke in July 1916) (Carmichael 1989). Both took nearly 10,000 photographs while in service with the War Office, and this material is now entirely in the holdings of the IWM, mostly in the form of original glass negatives. The images were the subject of extensive research by many historians, and since then have been used in numerous publications, articles, TV documentaries, exhibition projects etc. But once again the research was never done systematically with the intention of creating a detailed catalogue.

Brooks and Warwick Brooke were soon joined in the frontline by other official photographers i.e., Thomas Aitken, David McLellan and a team of Royal Engineers photographers whose names sadly never got recorded. Altogether British official photography from all battlefronts amounted to over 22,000 individual pictures, which constitutes a priceless record of the British Army’s effort during the Great War.

The register of collections within the Q Series is too long to list here. It is, however, worth mentioning the works of Horace Nicholls on the Home Front, especially his numerous photographs of women workers involvement in the war economy; and copies of German official photographs (roughly 5,000 of them) which the Museum acquired through exchange programmes with German archives in the Interwar period. Most of the originals didn’t survive the bombing of German cities during WWII, so the holdings of the IWM are thus particularly valuable today.

As with the Bond of Sacrifice Collection, the Museum decided to digitise and catalogue the entire series methodically in preparation for the WWI centenary. The project was put in motion and officially started in mid-2013. This time the work was much easier: the photographs were already numbered, most of them had adequate descriptions, and because of their significance some substantial input had already been provided by museum curators and other researchers. The biggest problem was the collection’s enormous size and the very limited human resources the Museum could assign to this particular venture.

The project again was assigned to the author of this paper, assisted mainly by a number of volunteers – mostly students who sought to gain some work experience. As before, the first task was to create empty records on the Adlib cataloguing programme so that the digitisation team had a platform to attach scans of processed images to (Fig. 9, 10). This was achieved by creating a set of Excel sheets with basic information about each sub-collection within the Q Series and the records assigned to them. Each sheet had specific tables with information which needed to be transferred to particular parts of each record on Adlib. Inasmuch as this was the first scheme of that sort run by the Museum, some minor mistakes were made, and some information ended up in wrong sections of the electronic records. These mistakes had to be later rectified during the manual cataloguing of the records. In a normal situation this would not have been a big problem, but in this case the sheer scale of the project made it much more difficult. Consequently, in later stages of the projects the Excel sheets were not used anymore, and the digitisation team created completely empty records with scans attached to them. The curators' and volunteers' job was to fill them in with the relevant information in a timely fashion.

Fig. 9. A screenshot from the IWM online search engine with details of the 1900-02 collection, 301 photographs created by the Royal Engineers No. 1 Printing Company in 1916, which constitutes the first sub-collection within the Q Series, reference numbers Q 1 – Q 301¹². Each of those photographs also has an individual record on Adlib and in the Museum online catalogue. Copyright: IWM.



Fig. 10. One of the most iconic images of the First World War, Royal Irish Rifles on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1 July 1916. Its reference no. is Q 1, which means it's the first image of the Q Series. Its creator was one of the unnamed photographers of the Royal Engineers N.1 Printing Company. Copyright: © IWM Q 1.

As regards the curatorial input to the project, after lengthy deliberations on how to catalogue the Series, the curatorial team decided to focus on the most important sub-collections, rather than going from the first record to the end, as filling 115,000 records with detailed captions was too large a venture for one curator and a group of inexperienced volunteers to complete in the foreseeable future. Thus, it was necessary to do a calculation. An experienced curator could complete between fifty and one hundred records a day, providing he or she was released from any other duties, and a volunteer considerably less. Theoretically, in order to complete the project, a team of five curators (which was the entire IWM Photo Archive team) would have had to work on the project for as long as five to eight years, perhaps even longer. The Museum simply couldn't afford to spare so much manpower to one project, however important, for such a long period of time. The more practical approach had to be applied and the most important collections were to be completed first; with the rest being finished when and if there was or is time to do so.

Thus, an order of importance was established. Private photographs taken between 1914 and 1915 were given top priority in order to finish them for the centenary of the outbreak of the Great War; to be followed by the British official photographs, especially from the Western Front. Next the team catalogued the German official photographs to provide a necessary balance of interpretation of the conflict; then anything which applied to the Eastern Front and French official photography. Once those priorities were completed, the team began to systematically catalogue the rest of the Series. Of course, this approach to the work had to be fairly flexible. If anything urgent came up, for example a particular topic suitable for the upcoming First World Gallery (which was being designed in parallel), the images were identified, scanned, and catalogued ad hoc.

The work was painstaking in both legs of the project. The digitisation team was gathering negatives or prints, scanning them systematically, carefully assigning reference numbers to the freshly created scans, then optimising and attaching them to the relevant records on Adlib. Simultaneously the curatorial team was updating records with historical information, paying the utmost attention to identifying all the relevant information, i.e., historical context, important individuals, exact geographical locations, types of equipment etc.

For the curatorial team one of major problems was the mass of non-unified keyword terms and content names/subjects, i.e., the names of individuals, geographical locations etc. which already existed in the catalogue of the Adlib software. These had to be unified because on the Museum online search engine they all had the status of live links which grouped object records together. For example, there were five versions of Ernest Brooks' name in Adlib, and it was necessary to apply one consistent name to all his photographs in order to group them together; otherwise, there would be five separate pools of photographs,

one for each term used. The same rule applied to any other individual (creator, artist, officer etc.), place (city, village, region etc.), or army unit (regiment, brigade, division etc.). They all had to be unified using singular terms.

Another major problem was determining the copyright status of sub-collections and individual photographs within them. This issue was all the more important because it defined whether or not the Museum could use them in upcoming projects, whatever their nature i.e., educational, exhibition or publishing. The Museum also wished to use the photographs for commercial reasons to support its budget, which would not be possible without a thorough determination of the intellectual rights of its collections, especially with regard to photographs and film footage.

Attention to detail was thus another aspect which the curatorial team had to constantly keep in mind; in particular any spelling mistake had to be avoided at all costs. The aim of the whole project was to make the Q Series available to the public via the search engine on the IWM website, and spelling mistakes meant that records would be unsearchable, which in turn would make the online catalogue unusable, or at least incomplete. Random check-ups had to be carried out on a weekly basis to weed out any potential mistakes and keep the project under control.

The progress was slow but steady, and the cataloguing team kept working through the agreed-upon stages in their given order of priority. Results were updated to the online database on a regular basis, and more and more previously unknown photographs were made available to researchers and history enthusiasts. The digitisation process was finished by the end of 2015. All digital scans were by then present online, regardless of whether or not they had any description. By mid-2016 the curatorial team also finished its task; most of the Adlib records were filled with enough information to find and identify them through a simple keyword search, so the primary objective of the project was fulfilled. There are still some empty records left for future cataloguing, but the vast majority of them are today available for anyone interested in the Museum history. After that the attention of the Museum was diverted toward preparation of two new permanent expositions – the Holocaust Exhibition and the Second World War Exhibition. Both were opened on October 20, 2021, at the IWM London, the organisation's main branch.¹³

The Second World War Official Series

As soon as the Q Series catalogue was complete, the IWM began planning another huge project, that is the digitisation of the British Armed Forces official series of the Second World War. There was another very important date on the horizon – the eightieth anniversary of the start of WWII – and the Museum felt obliged to

make relevant collections available again. Also, in order to make enough room for both exhibitions (each of them is going to take around 1000 m²), the Museum had to thoroughly reorganise its available space. The area hitherto designed for storage and research purposes was to be allocated to exhibition projects. This greatly limited public access to most of the collections, and their digitisation would resolve this problem.

The British official series of that period is a legacy of work of the British Army Film and Photographic Unit (AFPU), the sections of which covered operations on all fronts where the British Army fought. Thus, the AFPU Sections 1 & 2 served in the North Africa and Italy; AFPU Section 5 operated in the North-West of Europe; and AFPU Section 9 in the Far East. The IWM inherited these from the Ministry of Defence also after the war. Various sub-collections were created and labelled in the following order – all images from the Middle East received the prefix “E” i.e., E 15000; photographs from the Italian Campaign were marked with prefix “NA”; the North-Western Front pictures were named “B” and “BU”; and images related to the Far East were branded with the prefixes “SE” and “IND”. The official series

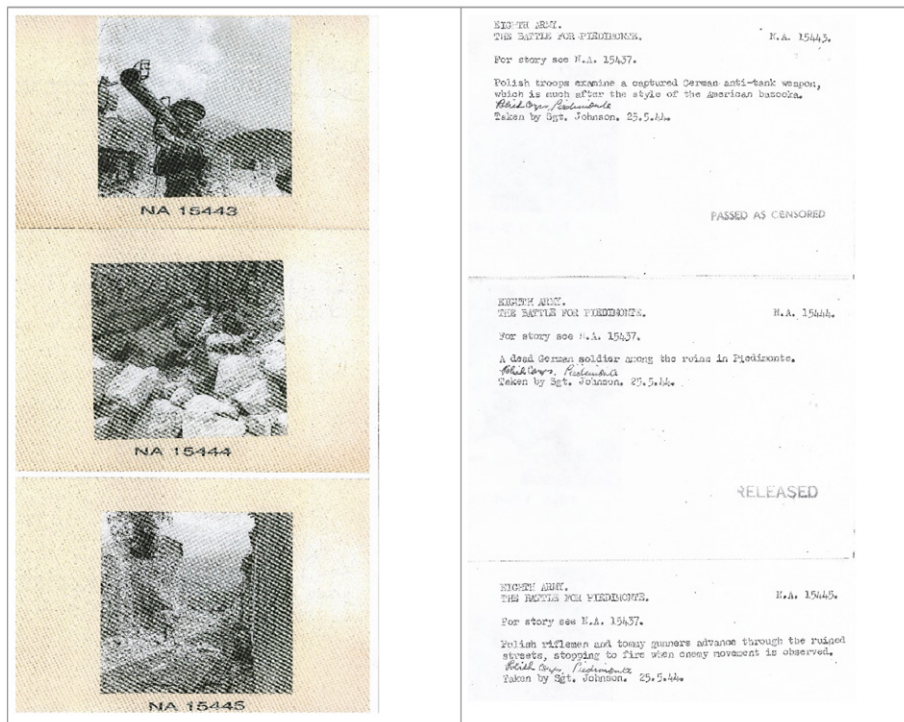


Fig. 11. An example of contact prints and their captions in one of the albums within the NA Series. Photographs illustrate combat in the Piedimonte San Germano near Monte Cassino on the Italian Front, May 1944. Copyright: Mariusz Gąsior.

also includes photographs illustrating British home defences (prefix “H”); works of the Royal Air Force Film and Photography Unit (prefix “C” and its derivatives); and shots of the Royal Navy operations (prefix “A”).

The historical information was plentiful in comparison with the First World War Series. All photographs exist in two formats – original negatives, both glass and celluloid, and positive contact prints, glued to small paper cards with historical captions printed meticulously on the back. Each series (H, NA, E, SE etc.) also has a set of specifically printed caption books with the same captions and wider historical context included in prefaces to each event captured on those photographs (Fig. 11).

The tasks surrounding the Second World War Official Series digitisation were bigger than all trouble with the Q Series, as the collections were roughly estimated as 330,000–350,000 individual photographs, i.e., three times larger than the Q Series, on which the Museum spent four years developing for public access. A different solution had to be worked out. After quite long deliberations between Museum departments two proposals were put on the table. Proposal one was a high-resolution digitisation (300-600 dpi) of images’ negatives with scans being attached to empty Adlib records, which then were to be gradually filled with historical information. This was more or less the same approach as with the Q Series previously. A quick calculation estimated that it would take four years to complete the digitisation, and around 10 years to catalogue records with curatorial input. Proposal two was a low-resolution digitisation (100 dpi) of images’ positive prints, with all information printed on the back and attaching scans to empty records (Fig. 12). Since there wouldn’t be any organised effort to systematically fill them with curatorial information, the historical content would be recorded on scans. In this way researchers would still have to search for images through the previously mentioned index cards, note reference numbers, and then search for them online. Better quality scans would again be done ad hoc when necessary. This task was calculated to take around a year to finish, and since it was more realistic it finally was chosen to be implemented.

Fig. 12. A screenshot from the IWM collection search engine showing a record of the same image with three digital scans attached – a high resolution one, and reverse and averse of the contact print in low resolution¹⁴. Copyright: © IWM NA 15443.





Fig. 13 An example of usage of IWM photographs in exhibition projects, in this case in an outdoor exposition about the Polish Armed Forces in the West on the fence of the Polish Ministry of Justice in Warsaw, October 2018. Two images on the first panel are ALG 8 and B 8827 from the IWM official series, and there are many more on further panels as well. Copyright: Mariusz Gašior.

Even though by this time the Museum had quite extensive experience in planning and conducting the digitisation of large and very large collections, still this was at another level. Even without the need to catalogue in detail the task remained gargantuan. The project officially started in late 2016 and very soon the first albums with contact prints were moved to digitisation labs. Today the core of the official series, meaning the British Army campaigns in Europe, are now a part of an online catalogue and constitute a spectacular source of historical information.

It is necessary to note here that the Museum has been digitising photographs (and other content) since its purchase of a first piece of scanning equipment, but until now it was usually carried out on the ad hoc basis to meet the needs of various projects and the Image Sales department. The three digitisation projects described in this paper were the first to be conducted in a systematic way, planned and completed for specific reasons, i.e., the anniversaries of both World Wars. Regardless of the reason the results are truly astonishing, as today hundreds of thousands of photographs (and other material) are available in a digital format online, in most cases for the first time ever. The IWM has always had a very open policy in regard to sharing its historical collections, and this approach has brought about very substantial results – IWM photographs (and film for that matter) have been featured extensively in such a wide variety of scientific or exhibition projects that it's difficult to list them all (Fig. 13).

The Silesian Museum, its Photographic Collections and Digitisation Projects

Muzeum *Śląskie* w Katowicach (The Silesian Museum in Katowice) is a regional museum with the mission to collect everything regarding the Upper Silesian history, culture, art, ethnography, archaeology etc. The institution is very interdisciplinary in its nature and the collections reflect this accordingly. . The Museum possesses collections of Polish and Silesian art, including works of the famous “Janowska Group”; representatives of brut art; historical artefacts with a strong representation of industrial heritage; and ethnographic items related to Upper Silesia and Poland. There is also a dedicated department of photography, which deals with the subjects from two perspectives - Silesian heritage on photography i.e., the iconography of cities, people and events etc.; and the photographic heritage of Silesia, for example works of famous Silesian photographers. The collections can be divided in three sections – historical, artistic and documentary.

The Museum’s history is as turbulent as Poland’s own fortunes have been. Established in 1929, it shared its quarters with the Silesian Voivodeship (province) offices in Katowice for its first decade. A new building, specially designed for the needs of the Museum, was built between 1936 and 1939, unfortunately only to be demolished by the Nazis in 1941. The German occupiers also closed the institution down after the invasion of Poland in 1939. The Museum was reinstated only in 1984, thirty-nine years after the war, as its role after the war was taken over by the Upper Silesian Museum in Bytom, which also took care of both institutions’ collections – at least those which didn’t get destroyed in the war turmoil. After thirty years of being housed in a former hotel building, the Museum in 2015 received new headquarters, and is now a very modern and beautifully designed complex of under- and over-ground structures, situated in the former “Ferdinand” coal mine in Katowice’s city centre. The new quarters have over 25 000 m², of which 6000 is designated for exhibitions, storage rooms and digitisation labs with state-of-the-art equipment.¹⁵

The digitisation of the Museum collections started quite late, i.e., in 2015 when all the Museum teams moved to the new site. The aim of the digitisation is the same as at the IWM – to transform them into a digital catalogue to meet the needs of the Museum’s own projects and to offer general public access. There is one significant difference between the two institutions – Muzeum *Śląskie* shares its collections for free, while the IWM charges quite hefty prices for rights to use its objects in projects which can even remotely be considered commercial.

As the Muzeum *Śląskie*’s digitisation department is well equipped and staffed, the digitisation process generally goes smoothly and most of collections’ objects are already either scanned or photographed. The digitisation process as such is different than at the IWM, as paper objects and photographs are rather

photographed than scanned (even negatives) – this is considered equally efficient but much quicker in the digitisation of object after object. Also, scans are generally not optimised in order to appear as exact copies of originals, as is a normal practice at the IWM (Fig. 14–15).




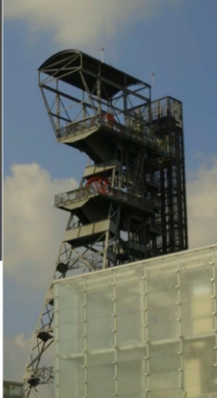
— Powrót 20

Opis przedmiotu

Typ obiektu	fotografia czarno-biała
Tytuł / temat	Armia włoska na Górnym Śląsku, 1920-1922 r.
Chronologia	1918-1929
Czas powstania	1921-04-30
Autor	autor nieznany
Miejsce powstania	Rybnik, woj. śląskie, Polska
Wymiary	wys.: 9 cm, szer.: 14 cm
Materiał	papier fotograficzny
Technika	fotografia żelatynowo-srebrna
Nr inwentarzowy	MŚK/F/p/5574/1
Własność	Muzeum Śląskie w Katowicach

Słowa kluczowe

PODDZIAŁ GÓRNICTWA ŚLĄSKA, PRZEJĘCIEM ŚLĄSKIE, PLEBISCYT NA GÓRNYM ŚLĄSKU, WROTAK PRZED SKŁEPEM Z WINAMI JOSEPHA ALTMANNA, KUPCA ŻYDOWSKIEGO, NA RYNKU W RYBNIKU, 30 KWIECIA 1921 R. SKŁEP ZNAJDOWAŁ SIĘ POD NUMEREM 6. PO LEWEJ WIDOCZNY JEST KWATEL WITRYNY DOMU TOWAROWEGO EMILIA PRAGERA, OD 1914 R. W RĘKACH ŻYDOWSKIEJ RODZINY LESCHZCZYNER, MIESZCZĄCEGO SIĘ NA RYNKU 5.

[Kup bilet](#)

Grupa oficerów armii włoskiej, części kontyngentu wojskowego Międzynarodowej Komisji Rządzącej i Plebiscytowej na Górnym Śląsku, przed sklepem z winami Josepha Altmanna, kupca żydowskiego, na Rynku w Rybniku, 30 kwietnia 1921 r. Sklep znajdował się pod numerem 6. Po lewej widoczny jest kwateł witryny domu towarowego Emila Pragera, od 1914 r. w rękach żydowskiej rodziny Leschzczyner, mieszczącego się na Rynku 5.

Images 14 and 15. A comparison between an original photograph, ref. MŚK/F/Fp/5574/1, and its digitisation on the Muzeum Śląskie online catalogue, showing minimal interference in the image's physical appearance¹⁶. The image portrays a group of Italian officers outside a wine shop in the city of Rybnik, 31 April 1921. Copyright: Mariusz Gašior and Muzeum Śląskie.

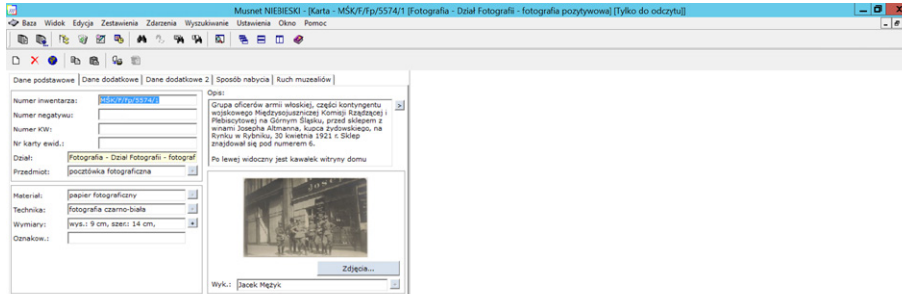


Fig. 16. A screenshot of a Musnet record for the same image, showing some of the information included also in the online counterpart. Copyright: Muzeum Śląskie.

While there weren't too many technical problems with digitisation of photographs, the same cannot be said about the level of their curatorial description on a cataloguing software. In 2018 very few of the photographic records were ready to be transferred to an online database. They had very rudimentary captions, generally uncompleted and in need of serious research, as quite often even very obvious information wasn't recorded (i.e., the surnames of known individuals etc.) And there were large gaps in a numerical sequence, even up to 10,000 records. As a result, most records in the Department of Photography had to be catalogued from scratch. It was again necessary to set up a team of volunteers, mainly students on work-experience programmes, and the essential work of creating and updating existing records to a good curatorial standard began immediately. However, the process is still in progress today.

The Silesian Museum uses quite an old and outdated cataloguing software, Musnet, which lacks most of the features of a modern programme of that type; one of which is an option to update records to an online collection search engine automatically. Thus, the Museum's online catalogue, which is based on the Wordpress platform, has to be updated manually by curators themselves; meaning all information in each record needs to be copied and pasted from the Musnet to the website (Fig. 16). The same is true for uploading digital scans to records – they must be cropped and attached one by one manually. Understandably this is a rather time-consuming exercise, and the online collections database displays just over 13,800 objects.¹⁷ The photographs accounted for 2340 uploaded records.¹⁸ The Museum is very much aware of this situation and is seeking to purchase a

modern cataloguing software, which very likely will be based on the SPECTRUM cataloguing system. But until that happens the process of sharing Museum objects online in a digital form will continue to be slow and time-consuming.

Both institutions, the IWM and the Silesian Museum, put a lot of effort into creating online catalogues to share their collections. It is worth examining how such inventories convert into functional research tools by looking at an example of the impact the digitisation of photography can have on the process of selecting material for museum exhibitions. In September 2019 the Silesian Museum opened a temporary exhibition titled *Prohibition, Exclusion, Superstition. A Photographic Tale of Women in Industry*, which dealt with the employment of women in various industries over the ages. It was curated by the author of this paper and focused mainly on the problems which women faced while working in industry, especially the social resistance against them obtaining that type of job (Fig. 17).¹⁹ The exhibition was entirely based on reproductions of digital photographs, twenty-nine altogether, from various museums and archives around the world, most notably from the IWM, the Silesian Museum itself, the US National Archives, and several other institutions in Belgium, the United Kingdom, Poland and Canada.



Fig. 17. The layout of the "Prohibition, Exclusion, Superstition" exhibition with a good view of some of the photographs on display. The three images in the centre came from the Museum Śląskie collections, while the rest of those visible were licensed by the IWM and the Canadian Memory Project. All images can be easily accessed through the collections databases of all three institutions. Copyright: Mariusz Gašior.

Almost all the images displayed in the exhibition were obtained through the online catalogues of those institutions, and a keyword search revealed a wealth of suitable, digitised material. With two exceptions – an image from the State Archive in Gdansk, Poland and another one from collections of the Musée de la Vie Wallonne in Liège, Belgium – it was necessary to write an enquiry with a request to check their collections for adequate material. In both exceptions the results were successful and the digital images were provided free of charge with license to display. The IWM provided several high quality images, which were sent by a download link as soon as the payment for them was completed. The US National Archives allowed for downloading scans directly from their database with no charge, but could only offer lower resolution digitisations. Some of the other images were purchased from professional picture libraries i.e. Alamy, which also possesses a professional online search engine to allow for easy access to their commercial offer.²⁰

Regardless of their approach to sharing historical collections, whether free or for commercial gain, almost all the above institutions made great efforts to digitise photographs, provided solid curatorial information, and released them for the public online. Today this is a prevailing trend amongst museum and archival institutions, and online and electronic catalogues have quickly become the norm, which the cases of the Imperial War Museums and the Silesian Museum described herein can be considered as ample proof of.

Conclusions

It is easy to see that there is a huge disproportion between the digitisation tasks and projects run by the two institutions discussed in this article. While the IWM undertakes massive projects which, due to their importance and scope, have a huge impact on the process of historical research, and thus on our understanding of the past, the Silesian Museum focuses primarily on the systematic scanning of collections, without combining this task with any important anniversary, community program, or other initiative. Results of such an approach can be quite serious, for example Silesian memory institutions, including the Silesian Museum, very recently failed to present in an organised and systematic way collections related to the Silesian Uprisings of 1919-1921 on the occasion of the centenary of their outbreak. There wasn't any program to digitise them thoroughly across all institutions with such holdings; furthermore there was also no organised attempt to enrich those collections, which would bring an opportunity to scan and present previously unseen collections.

IWM's collections, also thanks to their digitisation, are used in great variety of publications, documentary programs, and exhibitions in many countries, which

greatly influences not only the popularisation of knowledge, history and culture, but also enhances the worldwide reputation of the Museum, which is already considered as one of the most important museum institutions of the kind. The Silesian Museum popularises its collections mainly in the form of printed catalogues of exhibitions organised at its premises; their range is mainly regional; and the online catalogue itself, as already mentioned, still exists in a very basic form.

So where does this disproportion come from? The main reason is the relatively small size of the collections of the Silesian Museum and their weakness in terms of content. The Museum does not hold any large and thematically-related collections which would enable it to initiate and lead such serious projects. The numerical value of the Museum's entire collection is only 130,000 objects, of which approximately 27,000 are photographs, a very small number for an institution of such rank and importance²¹. In comparison, the IWM estimates that over 800,000 of their collection objects have their online records available on the Museum's website.²² And there are literally millions more waiting to be processed²³.

And why are the Silesian Museum's collections so weak? Polish museums, and the Silesian Museum is no exception here, generally struggle with a burden of outdated and overly bureaucratic procedures which hamper the process of new collections acquisition. At the IWM all curators have a right to make a decision on taking a new object in and a simple form with a signature of a donor is enough to close the case. At the Silesian Museum the same process has to go through a quarterly acquisition committee attended by all heads of curatorial departments. The standard practice is that decisions on new acquisitions are taken collectively by voting which means that some proposals can be rejected by the committee, even when the department in question advocates the acquisition. The author of the paper witnessed such cases more than once while working at the Museum. Minutes of the meeting then have to be signed by all attendees and the director of the institution; only then the new objects can be properly acquired and catalogued, the whole process can take months.

Unfortunately the Silesian Museum suffers greatly from this policy, as such a bureaucratic approach must have a negative impact on size and diversity of its collections. And the conclusion is obvious - less collections in storage means less digitised content in online catalogues.

Another problem, which also refers to many other Polish museums, is the political interference in the activities of the institution, which makes it very difficult to develop a coherent strategy for acquiring more collections and their subsequent digitisation. Since February 2020 the Silesian Museum has had three different managing directors, all nominated by the Law and Justice ruling party²⁴. While none of them had any experience of working in the museum sector whatsoever, all felt compelled to implement changes with far-reaching consequences²⁵.

Taking the protective role of museums into consideration, it's clear that the digitisation of collections is all the more valuable and desirable, especially when we are talking about photographs, as it allows for the initial preservation of an image that may have an unique historical and cultural value; even when the original format, a print or a negative, may get lost or destroyed. This is the case with the photographic collection of daily life in the Warsaw Ghetto, taken by Willy Georg, a German soldier serving in Warsaw, in the summer of 1941. The owner lent the original negatives to the IWM in the 1990s and the Museum produced copy negatives first and then digital scans; the originals were returned soon after. The original material is now most likely lost, but thankfully the whole collection – so extremely important and meaningful to the history of Holocaust – has survived in the form of digital copies²⁶.

Considering, thus, how small the collections of the Muzeum *Śląskie* are, the institution should care the most about their enrichment and successive digitisation, because it simply means preserving and securing the cultural heritage of Silesia, as broadly understood, for all concerned – researchers and scholars, local communities, Polish society, and also for future generations.

The examples of both museums show how the digitisation of collections can have a very positive impact on the development of institutions, but at the same time emphasises how irresponsible policies can easily curtail such opportunities. Digital collections in the online catalogues are now a standard and are not considered as anything special. That's how museums everywhere should understand their role in the society – as outposts of a modern approach to history, art, and culture, and as institutions prepared to share their knowledge and resources with the outside world; fully prepared to make their collections available to anyone interested. The IWM has made this the leitmotif of its operations; the Silesian Museum, like most Polish museums, is still in the process of preparing itself for this role. Let's just hope that this state of affairs will make rapid progress.

Author

Mariusz Gąsior was a curator of the military photography at the Imperial War Museum London (2009-2018) and Head of the Photography Department at the Muzeum *Śląskie* in Katowice (2018-2021). Currently he is employed as a Curator of Collections at the Association of Tarnowskie Góry Land' Devotees, an organisation with UNESCO World Heritage Sites in its care. He holds an MA in Political Science from the University of Silesia in Katowice. Gąsior is a co-author, together with Dr Jan Szkudliński and Artur Wodzyński, of an album based on the Second World War photography, entitled "The Daily Life of Soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces in the West 1939-1947", which is the subject he specialises in. He

has also published a number of articles on related topics i.e. involvement of the British Army in peacekeeping operations in Upper Silesia, 1921-1922.

¹ IWM website. Available online: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1500057931> (accessed 01/09/2020).

² IWM website. Available online: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections> (accessed 01/09/2020).

³ IWM website. Available online: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/a-closer-look-at-the-bond-of-sacrifice-collection> (accessed 01/09/2020).

⁴ IWM website. Available online: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205409545> (accessed 01/09/2020).

⁵ TNA website. Available online: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/british-army-medal-index-cards-1914-1920/> (accessed 25/08/2020).

⁶ CWGC website. Available online: <https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/casualty-details/1615347/WILLIAM%20ROBERT%20HUGHES/> (accessed 16/10/2020).

⁷ Lives of the First World War website. Available online: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205293349> (accessed 16/10/2020).

⁸ Lives of the First World War website. Available online: <https://livesofthefirstworldwar.iwm.org.uk/about> (accessed 16/10/2020).

⁹ Lives of the First World War website. Available online: <https://livesofthefirstworldwar.iwm.org.uk/ww1-life-stories> (accessed 16/10/2020).

¹⁰ Lives of the First World War website. Available online: <https://livesofthefirstworldwar.iwm.org.uk/communities> (accessed 16/10/2020).

¹¹ Lives of the First World War website. Available online: <https://livesofthefirstworldwar.iwm.org.uk/lifestory/1072989> (accessed 16/10/2020).

¹² IWM website. Available online: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205012585> (accessed 15/09/2020).

¹³ IWM website. Available online: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/support-us/donations/second-world-war-and-holocaust-galleries> (accessed 05/06/2021).

¹⁴ IWM website. Available online: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205260136> (accessed 01/09/2020).

¹⁵ Muzeum Śląskie website. Available online: <https://muzeumslaskie.pl/pl/historia/> (accessed 18/10/2020).

¹⁶ Muzeum Śląskie website. Available online: <https://muzeumslaskie.pl/pl/work/armia-wloska-gornym-slasku-1920-1922-r-mskffp55741/> (accessed 01/09/2020).

¹⁷ Muzeum Śląskie website. Available online: <https://muzeumslaskie.pl/pl/wyszukiwarka-zbiorow/> (accessed 04/06/2021).

¹⁸ Muzeum Śląskie website. Available online: <https://muzeumslaskie.pl/pl/kolekcje/fotografia/> (accessed 04/06/2021).

¹⁹ Muzeum Śląskie website. Available online: <https://muzeumslaskie.pl/pl/wystawy/zakazy-wykluczenia-przesady-fotograficzna-opowiesc-o-kobietach-przemysle/> (accessed 18/10/2020).

²⁰ Alamy website. Available online: <https://www.alamy.com/> (accessed 18/10/2020).

²¹ The Museum doesn't list any official statistics anywhere; the above numbers come from calculations by the author based on his experience of working in the institution.

²² IWM website. Available online: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/how-to> (accessed 05/06/2021)

²³ IWM website. Available online: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/photographs> (accessed 07.04.2022)

²⁴ Artforum website. Available online: <https://www.artforum.com/news/polish-museum-director-forced-out-by-local-right-wing-government-82098> (accessed 07.04.2022).

²⁵ Gazeta Wyborcza website. Available online: <https://katowice.wyborcza.pl/katowice/7,35063,26171025,-nie-ma-miejsca-dla-kutza-w-katowicach-moze-zabiore-go-tez-z.html> (accessed 05/06/2021)

²⁶ IWM website. Available online: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205002976> (accessed on 05/06/2021). Willy Georg passed the collection on to Dr. Rafael Scharf in 1980s, who then lent it to the IWM, the USHMM in Washington, and the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem. All three institutions digitised and published all photographs on their online catalogues. The information about missing original negatives was given to the author of this paper by Dr. Scharf's family in 2017.

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