



Corresponding  
with  
Conflict  
Text by Richard Aslam

**ARCHIVE I:** Sheets of paper in various sizes and qualities, some hand written, some printed, carefully filed and stored in cardboard cartons, labelled according to provenance. Alongside them, other artefacts and ephemera. The cartons fill shelf after shelf in a series of locked rooms, away from natural light. The cold of the earth seeps up through the concrete floor and into the soles of my shoes. It is tempting to think of this archive as the sleeping, silent body of history. Done and dusted, wrapped and boxed, put away for safe keeping. This sense of totality, however, is misleading. These sheets of paper, artefacts and ephemera are just the shed skin cells of a body long gone. Collected from corners and mantle pieces, swept up by enthusiasts, preserved by accident and oversight, or by dint of sheer odd luck. History, I remind myself as I walk down a narrow aisle, shelves high over my head on either side, is people. Each piece of paper here, each artefact, is the result of the deliberate labour of some warm human hand. These are not leaves, mute and perfect, fallen from the tree of history, but rather the outcome of skin, muscle, intention and identity. The results of holding a pen, of loading paper onto a printer, of folding, of smudging. There is a path we can follow leading from every document and every object that leads us back to someone. In some cases, the path is clearly signposted – a letter written in a firm hand, a name signed across a photograph, dramatic personae. In others, it requires detective work – an uneven fold across a playbill to fit it to a breast pocket, a typewriter ribbon installed upside down, either by accident or design, so the text is half red, half black, a typed transcription, spellings corrected. What is said, what is left unsaid.



Banana Wars, Maritz Rebellion, Senussi Campaign, National Protection War, Kaocen Revolt, Easter Rising, Arab Revolt, February Revolution, October Revolution, Russian Civil War, Soviet-Turkish War, Ukrainian War of Independence, Finnish Civil War, Georgian-Armenian War, German Revolution of 1918, Great Poland Uprising, Polish-Ukrainian War, Georgian-Ossetian Conflict, Armenian-Azerbaijani War, Estonian War of Independence, Soviet-Lithuanian War, Al-Khurma Dispute, War against the Bermontians, Polish-Czechoslovak War, Hungarian-Romanian War, Turkish War of Independence, Third Anglo-Afghan War, Portuguese Monarchist Civil War, Italo-Yugoslav War, Polish-Soviet War, First Silesian Uprising, Irish War of Independence, Greco-Turkish War, Franco-Syrian War, Franco-Turkish War, Viora War, Rif War, Polish-Lithuanian War, Second Silesian Uprising, Turkish-Armenian War, Zhili-Anhui War, Guangdong-Guangxi War, Red Army Invasion of Georgia, Third Silesian Uprising, Persian Coup d'Etat, East Karelian Uprising and Soviet-Finnish Conflict, First Zhili-Fengtian War, Irish Civil War, August Uprising, Saudi Conquest of Hijaz, Second Zhili-Fengtian War, Incident at Pech, Great Syrian Revolt, Nicaraguan Civil War, Northern Expedition, Chinese Civil War, Afghan Civil War, Sino-Soviet War, Iqbal Women's War, Yen Bai Uprising, Central Plains War, Sino-Tibetan War, Japanese Invasion of Manchuria, Kiumul Rebellion, Constitutional Revolution of Brazil, Ecuadorian Civil War, January 28 Incident, Chaco War, Letitia Incident, Salvadoran Feasant Uprising, Soviet Invasion of Xinjiang, Austrian Civil War, Saudi-Yemeni War, Second Italo-Abyssinian War, Arab Revolt in Palestine, Islamic Rebellion in Xinjiang, Second Sino-Japanese War, Battle of Lake Khasan, Hungarian Invasion of the Carpatho-Ukraine, Slovak Hungarian War, Italian Invasion of Albania, Battle of Khalikin Gol, World War II, Winter War, Franco-Thai War, Ecuadorian-Panaman War, Anglo-Iraqi War, Continuation War, Hukbalahap Rebellion, Ukrainian Insurgent Army, Jewish Insurgency in Palestine, Guerilla War in the Baltic States, Lapland War, III Rebellion, War in Vietnam, Indonesian National Revolution, Iran Crisis, First Indochina War, Greek Civil War, Paraguyan Civil War, Indo-Pakistani War, Pre-Korean War Insurgency, Arab-Kuomintang Islamist Insurgency in China, Redoubt Operations, Mau Mau Uprising, 28 Mordad Coup, Cuban Revolution, Laotian Civil War, Jabel Akhder War, Algerian War, First Sudanese Civil War, Vietnam War, Hungarian Revolution, Suez Crisis, Iri War, North Vietnamese Invasion of Laos, Tibetan Uprising, Baoguo Campaign at the China-Burma Border, Congo Crisis, Guatemalan Civil War, Mexican Revolution, First Great Kurdish War, Bay of Pigs Invasion, Bizerte Crisis, Eritrean War of Independence, Indonesian-Malay War, Sino-Vietnamese War, Sino-Vietnamese War, Kurdish Rebellion in Iran, Soviet War in Afghanistan, Savan Internal Conflict in Peru, Iran-Iraq War, Second Eritrean Civil War, Paquisha War, Paquisha War, Falklands War, War, Lebanon War, Ethiopian-Somali Border War, Invasion of Grenada, Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka, Sri Lankan Civil War, Second Sudanese Civil War, Afghanist, Stachen Conflict, Agacher Strip War, South Indian Civil War, Sino-Indian Indian Skirmish, Thai-Laotian Border War, Lords of the Dance Army Insurgency, Nagorno-Karabakh War, Mauritania-Senegal Border War, United States Invasion of Panama, Civil War in Afghanistan, Romanian Revolution, First Liberian Civil War, Insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir, Persian Gulf War, Rwandan Civil War, Tuareg Rebellion, Ten Day War, South Ossetian War, Djiboutian Civil War, Croatan War of Independence, Sierra Leone Civil War, Algerian Civil War, Somali Civil War, Georgian Civil War, Uprisings in Iraq, East Prigorodny Conflict, Civil War in Tajikistan, Burundian Civil War, Ethnic Conflict in Transnistria, War in Abkhazia, Bosnian War, Croat-Bosniak War, Civil War in Tajikistan, Burundian Civil War, Ethnic Conflict in Negaland, Russian Constitutional Crisis, Iraqi Kurdish Civil War, Chiapas Conflict, Civil War in Yemen, First Chechen War, Capivi Conflict, Geneva War, Insurgency in Qadafi, Nepalese Civil War, Civil War in Afghanistan, First Congo War, Albanian Rebellion, Clashes in Cambodia, Pool Department Insurgency, War in Abkhazia, Kosovo War, Eritrean-Ethiopian War, Second Congo War, Guinea-Bissau Civil War, Irun Conflict, War of Dagestan, Second Chechen War, Insurgency in the Presero Valley, Second Liberia Civil War, Itun Conflict, War of Dagestan, Second Chechen War, Insurgency in Nigeria, Six Day War in Rwanda, Second India-Pakistan War, Indian-Bangladesh Border Conflict, Insurgency in the Republic of Macedonia, War in Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom - Horn of Africa, First Ivorian Civil War, War in Darfur, Iraq War, Balochistan Conflict, War in Philippines, Operation Enduring Freedom - Horn of Africa, First Ivorian Civil War, War in Darfur, Iraq War, Balochistan Conflict, War in North-West Pakistan, Central African Republic Bush War, Conflict in the Niger Delta, Shia Insurgency in Yemen, South Thailand Insurgency, Kivu Conflict, Chadian Civil War, Mount Elgon Insurgency, Fatah-Hamas Conflict, Lebanon War, Mexican Drug War, War in Somalia, Insurgency in Somalia, Operation Enduring Freedom - Trans Sahara, Tuareg Rebellion, War in Ingusheta, Invasion of Anjouan, Cambodian-Thai Border Dispute, Djiboutian-Eritrean Border Conflict, Russo-Georgian War, Gaza War, Sudanese Nomadic Conflicts, Insurgency in the North Caucasus, Boko Haram Uprisng, South Yemen Insurgency, War in Somalia, South Kyrgyz Ethnic Clashes, Sudan Internal Conflict, Ethnic Violence in South Sudan, North Kosovo Crisis, Operation Linda Nchi, Post Civil War Violence in Libya, Post US Withdrawal Iraqi Insurgency, Northern Mali Conflict, Sudan-South Sudan Border War, M23 Rebellion, Central African Republic Conflict, South Sudanese Conflict, Pro-Russian Conflict in Ukraine, Northern Iraq Offensive





It lasted for four years, two months and 13 days. 28th July 1914, to 11th November 1918. It was just known as 'The War' at the time. It never occurred to anyone that it could happen again. They were not unused to sending their sons and husbands away, dressed in rough wool, but this was different. A delirious red tide of upheaval was coursing across the continent. Crowned heads were rolling, rage and frustration were bubbling. Mud and blood followed, a cauldron of fury that grew and grew. Trenches, explosions, gas. It threatened to take the whole world down with it. All this chaos and mess, sloppily painted over with a thick coat of adventure, held up by the struts and flutter of patriotism and underpinned with a claw of anxiety in the guts. Cold palms, disturbed sleep, an ever-present purple bruise of worry, grief around every corner. Headlines jar against sub-plots. Shining medals jangle against fluttering hearts. Stiff upper lips compete with trembling hands. They bring the war in with them, like the dust in their hair and the clay on their boots, into the offices, the print works, the dining rooms, the theatres and onto the stage. It sits in the audience, bold as brass, decked out with crests and rifles, its smell of rotting wool. It rests between lines of text, curling itself around what is not said, and what must be said. At the end of every paper trail, I find someone who knows what it feels like to walk the streets with the war beside them, lay in bed with the war beside them, sit in a theatre auditorium with the war beside them. They know it rages, close, loved ones in its grip. Grabbing. With the war beside them, how do they feel when the players on the stage stop, or falter, when the lights go up, or out? When the curtains close unexpectedly, or someone in a suit takes the stage and clears their throat. Is this it? Is it over? Is it won? Is it lost?

The archive waits in its cardboard cartons for archivists to sort it, volunteers to label it, academics to analyse it, artists to respond to it. I open the door and all the voices contained in the rows of boxes wash over me like the sea. I am half excited by the prospect of discovery, half daunted by the sheer scale of this tide of information. There are boxes here, I know, that are yet to be touched. Unlabelled, unsorted, unwrapped. I lift a lid and see letters, piled on top of one another in no apparent order. This order, I know, will be preserved. The accidental will be formalised. I leaf through the pile, looking for a detail, some smaller space to curl into. I pick up a letter, examining the grain of the paper against the light, noting the spots where the ink has penetrated the fibres and leaked through to the other side. The delicate crossing out of a misspelling, then a correction of a momentary glitch of the mind, replacing one word with another. The merest hint of an inky thumb print on a margin. I will attend to this one letter, I think, I will take it and examine every detail of it. I will uncover the identities of the people named in it, I will chart the biography of its author, I will track down the manufacturer of the paper and work out, through fibre analysis, whether it was manufactured before or after the outbreak of war. Perhaps a speck of dust or metal, some microscopic splinter from an explosion, will be locked into its weave, a remnant that will carry me deeper. As I drill down and down into the detail, there is a chance, I think, that I will get to know this writer, take her hands in mine and look into her eyes. I will somehow hear her voice. I hold the letter in gentle fingertips to avoid crushing it, forgetting that it has already outlived me threefold and more. I realise, suddenly, that there are only details, splinters. Theories and generalities can be found only in books. Just as waves carry sand, stones and the bodies of tiny creatures as they wash back and forth, so history bears us and our stories. There is nothing else. Once more, overwhelm washes over me, the letter still in my hand.

We know what the horrors of war look like – we see and hear them on our screens all the time, though we have swapped knee deep mud with sand and dust. Fighters, enemies, victims, engines, smoke, blood. The trailer for a war film comes onto the silver screen and the audience is rapt, silent in a way it wasn't for the mobile phone providers and the ice cream. 138 minutes in full colour with surround sound. I know what it looks like, but how does it feel? I can, perhaps, imagine running from an explosion, splinters in my clothes, ears ringing, time slowed down. I can imagine fumbling for my gas mask, an ecstasy of it, 'knock kneed and cursing through the sludge'. I can imagine grief flooding my lungs like fluid as I open the telegram telling me he is dead somewhere, days ago, my love letters returned unopened. It is the morning after I cannot imagine, getting back to work among neighbours with splinters in their clothes and fluid in their lungs. Four years, two months and thirteen days; the time it would take to play Stephen Spielberg's version of Warhorse, back to back, fifteen thousand, one hundred and forty times. Seventeen million dead. There's no analogue for that. I cannot imagine laughing, companionship, sweet tea, cigarettes and beer. Rope ladders out of the hole of despair. They laughed in the face of it. A fragment from France in two explosions, seven splinters and a gas attack. Explosions of laughter and hiding in plain sight. A gap. An injection of space. Huddling together for warmth and cheer, there is a constant forgetting and constant knowing.

## ARCHIVE II

These are all just signposts, ways in. These pieces of paper queue up, crowd in, wait. Each one is a metaphor for the person who made it, handled it, folded it, took solace from it. Each piece is a sign of a life lived alongside war. Neither the person nor the war is so easily handled. Neither is so easily filed, labelled, catalogued, analysed or responded to. Explosions, mud, lost sons, empty beds, ruptured habits. Each letter, each object, is a puncture point where our skins can be pierced, where the time that has elapsed can loop in on itself via an inky thumbprint on a margin. I fit my thumb to the inky stain in the margin, and still I cannot understand fully. The real thing, I think, as I put the letter back on the pile, is that which is lost, not that which has been preserved.

