Stereoscopy History Series

The Great War

Nevers 1914

ANDRÉ RUITER



Nevers 1914

A unique collection of stereo negatives from the opening days of the First World War in the French city of Nevers.



The *Stereoscopy History Series* explores the history of stereoscopy in Europe between 1850 and 1930, unveiling the stories of the people, companies and their remarkable instruments and images that captured the imagination of an era.

Foreword

In 2020, a collection of stereo glass plate negatives appeared on eBay. I was intrigued by their size—the negatives were 8 x 18 cm– and the fact that the images were dated and described. It turned out they were taken during the early days of the First World War in the French city of Nevers. Photographs from the first year of the war are relatively rare so I decided to bid.

24 negatives were offered and all slides were auctioned individually. I managed to acquire 21 slides. Unfortunately, I was outbid on three slides, which was disappointing because this collection should have stayed together.

The two cardboard boxes with notes were shown during the auction, but were not part of the sale. Afterwards, I contacted the seller and asked if I could buy the boxes, or get a high resolution scan. The seller was kind enough to offer the boxes for free because I bought most of the negatives. After receiving the negatives and the boxes, I started tracing the story behind this fascinating collection.



Nevers

Nevers lies on the right bank of the river Loire and serves as the prefecture of the Nièvre department in the Bourgogne–Franche-Comté region of central France. On the eve of the First World War, the city had around 28,000 inhabitants.

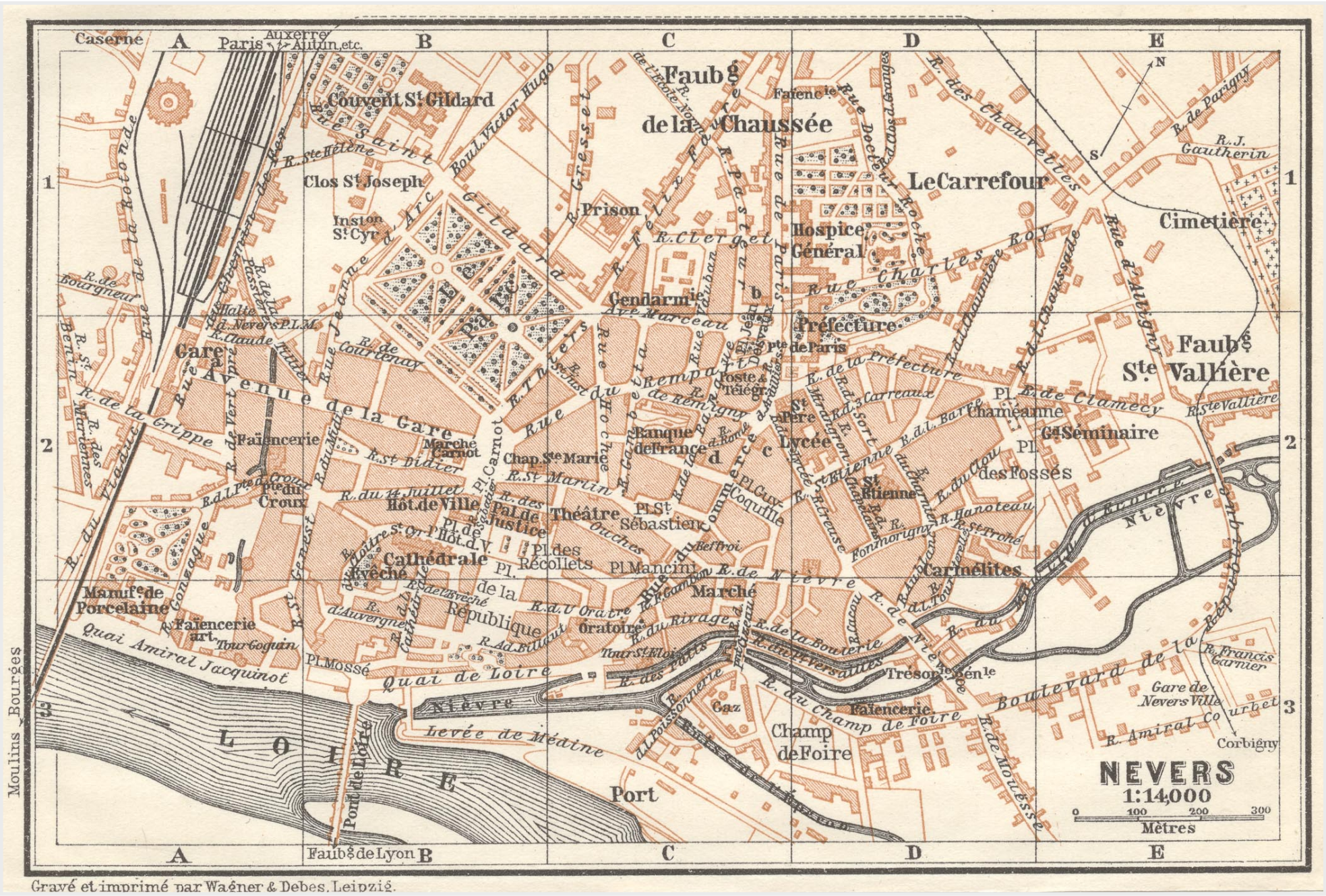
Construction of a railway line to connect the city began in the 1840s. In 1850, the station was inaugurated with the arrival of the first two trains from Paris. A locomotive supply depot was built nearby and entered service in 1861. Work on the Atelier du matériel de Nevers began in 1912; it housed workshops for the maintenance of locomotives and wagons. These facilities ensured that Nevers became an important logistics hub.

Nevers was also a garrison town for the French army. The first barracks were built in 1777. In 1887, they were renamed Caserne Pittié, after General François Pittié (1829–1886), a native of Nevers. From 1883 until its dissolution in 1940, the barracks housed the 13th Infantry Regiment, also known as the “13e de Ligne”. Another part of this regiment was stationed at the Caserne Charbonnier in nearby Decize. The regiment departed for the front in August 1914 and would distinguish itself on various battlefields during the First World War.

After the outbreak of the conflict, Nevers contributed to the war effort through its local industry, which produced weaponry, and by hosting refugees and wounded soldiers. Several temporary hospitals were established to care for the injured[1], and the Atelier du matériel de Nevers was used by the British Red Cross. The city also housed a prisoner-of-war camp[2].

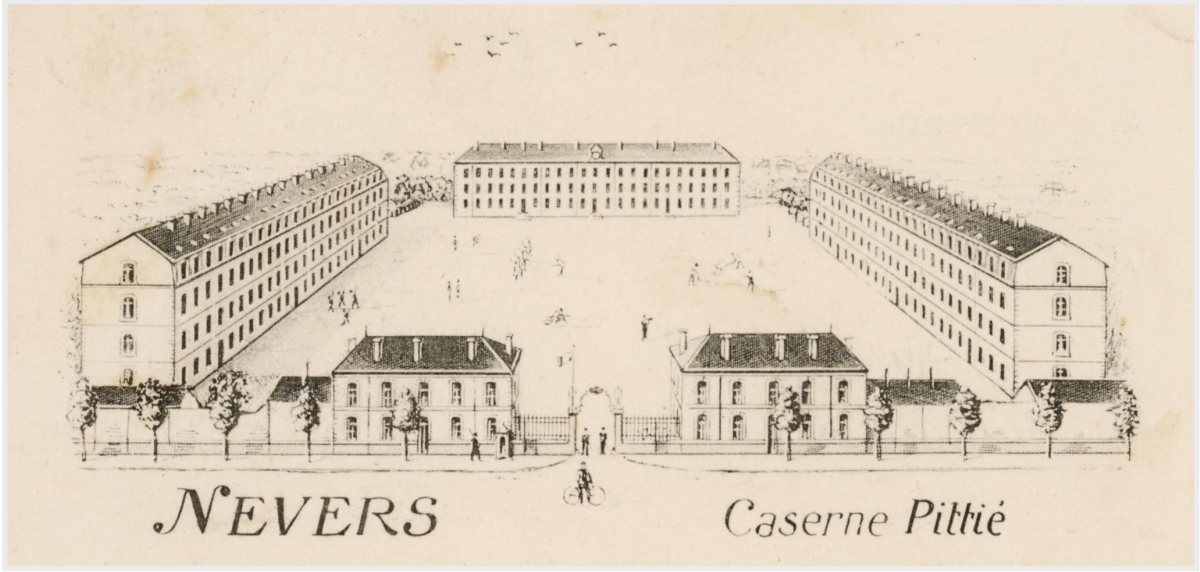
The horrors of the battlefields and enemy occupation were not directly experienced by the city, but shortages and high prices caused social unrest, occasionally leading to strikes[3].

In July 1917, American troops arrived in Nevers, following the United States’ entry into the war on the Allied side. The Americans built the Nevers cut-off—a railway line and bridge over the Loire that bypassed both the station and the city. This shortcut was completed in October 1918, shortly before the end of the war. It remained in use until August 1919 for the evacuation of troops, after which it was dismantled.



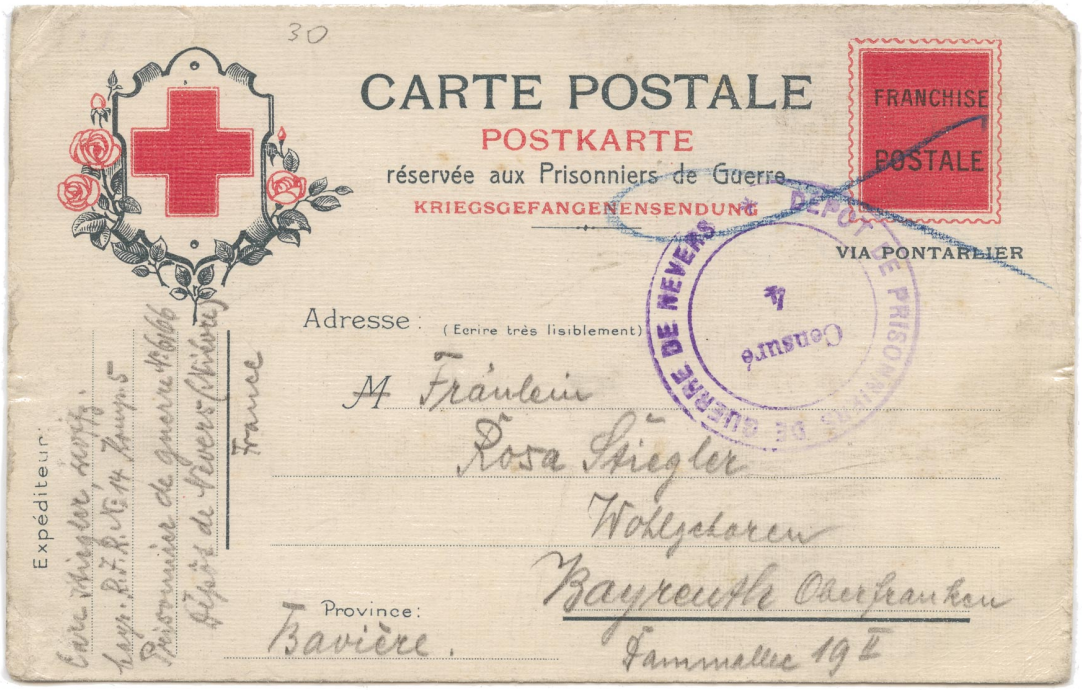
A map of Nevers from 1909. The station is visible at the top left, and the Caserne Pittié can just be seen in the far upper-left corner.


19. NEVERS. — Caserne Pittié


NEVERS
Caserne Pittié



Nevers railway station



A postcard from a German prisoner of war, sent from Nevers.

The collection

The original *Nevers 1914 collection* consisted of 34 negatives in two boxes, of which four slides were most likely not related to the war. Only 24 slides were offered on eBay, so it seems that the collection was no longer complete when it was auctioned.

The photographs were mainly taken in and around Nevers station, where troops were embarked for departure to the front. The two boxes are numbered with the Roman numerals XXX and XXXI. Notably, they bear the titles *Guerre 1914–1915* (War 1914–1915), reflecting the common expectation that the conflict would be short-lived. At the time, few could have imagined that it would continue until the end of 1918.

The photographer of the images is unknown, though he may have been a professional. The large 8 x 18 cm negatives required an expensive, large camera and the skills to operate it —conditions less typical for an amateur. Moreover, all the negatives are meticulously indexed and well preserved, further suggesting professional practice.

The photographer was probably from Nevers or the surrounding area, as the photographs were taken on different days in August and October. A local photographer could reach the site quickly. He may have been a journalist, though it is equally possible that he was hired by the French army. Many of the photographs were staged, suggesting that the photographer had permission to work.

The First World War was the first major conflict in which photography played a significant role. In May 1915, the French army established its own photographic unit, La Section Photographique de l'Armée (SPA). Before the creation of the SPA, the French army may simply have commissioned professional photographers to record the mobilisation—either for documentation or to inform the public through newspapers.

An interesting question is why the photographer used a stereo camera to capture the events. Stereoviews were primarily intended for entertainment and not typically for publication in albums or newspapers. Perhaps it was simply the only camera he had available, and the large size of the negatives allowed half-stereos to be used for producing prints.

On the following pages, the original negatives are shown alongside a cropped section. The negatives have been digitised, inverted and edited with minor contrast adjustments. They have not been transposed[4]. The negatives are followed by a series of anaglyphs, allowing the images to be viewed in three dimensions using 3D glasses.



Box XXX - No. 1
22e Infanterie colonial
9 August 1914



Germany had declared war on France on 3 August 1914. The first photograph is dated 9 August. The atmosphere at the station is relaxed. The war was welcomed by many countries, and the horrors of the trenches were still far away.



Box XXX - No. 4
3e Tirailleurs Algérien
10 August 1914



Images in the collection depict soldiers from the French colonies. The Zouaves and Tirailleurs were regiments made up of troops from France's North African colonies, such as Senegal and Algeria. These units became increasingly important from 1915, after the French army had suffered heavy losses in the first year of the war. The images show that colonial soldiers were already present in the early days of the conflict.



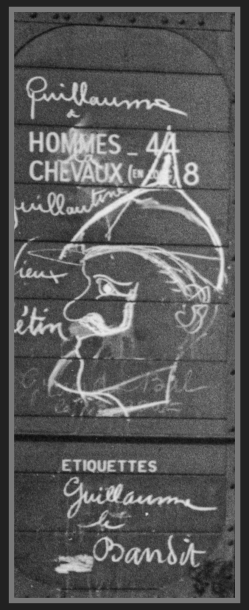
Box XXX - No. 5
46e Infanterie
11 August 1914





Box XXX - No. 6
46e Infanterie
11 August 1914





Some wagons bear painted texts and images, including a caricature of the German Emperor Wilhelm II, labeled a bandit (“Guillaume Bandit”).



Box XXX - No. 7
213e Infanterie
11 August 1914



Soldiers with full equipment march along the Rue du Chemin de Fer towards Nevers station.



Box XXX - No. 9

Infanterie

12 August 1914





Box XXX - No. 10

2e Zouaves

13 August 1914

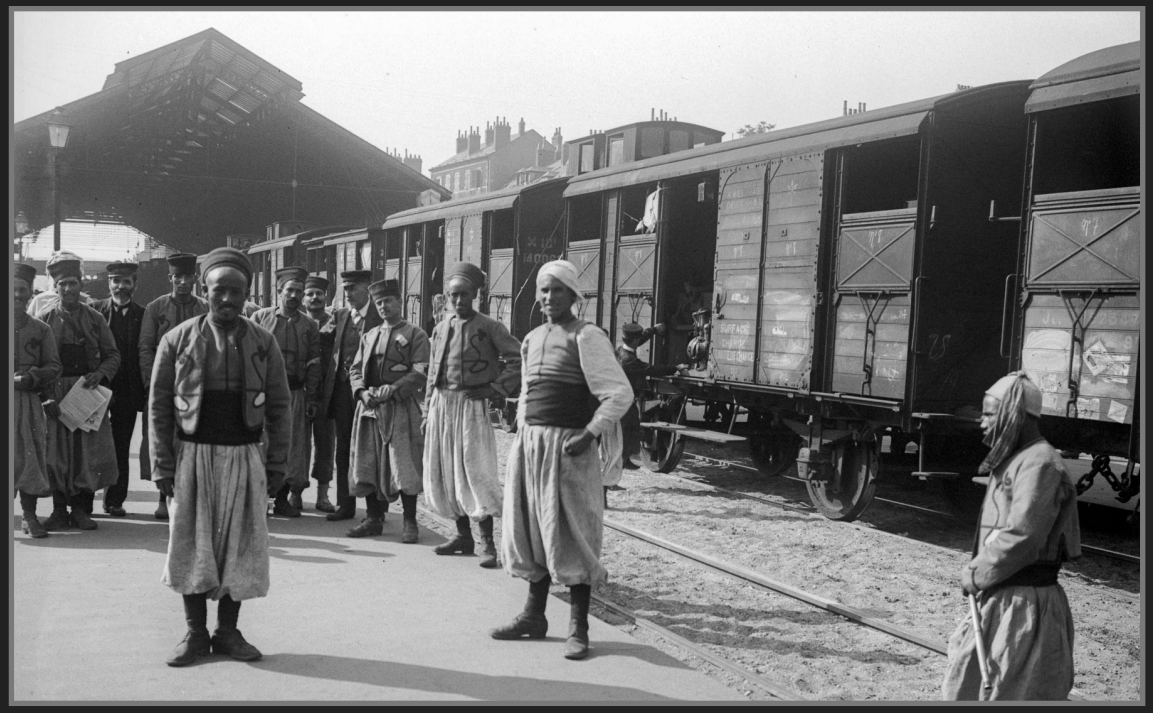


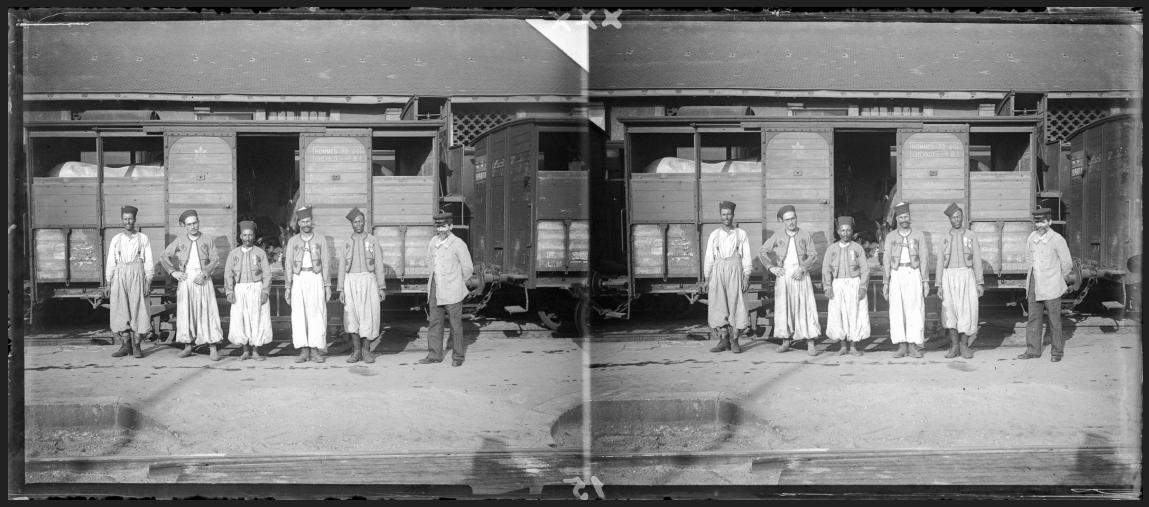


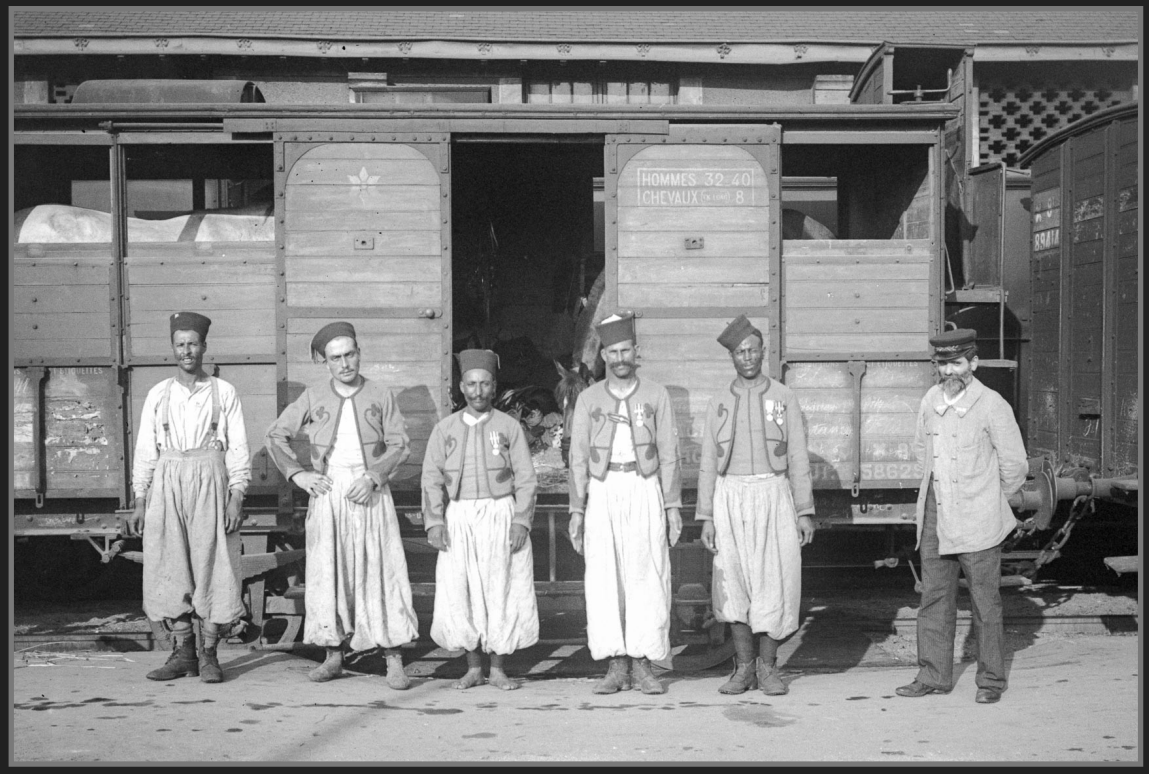
Box XXX - No. 14

2e Tirailleurs

13 August 1914







Box XXX - No. 15

2e Tirailleurs

13 August 1914



Box XXX - No. 16
64e Territorial
17 August 1914



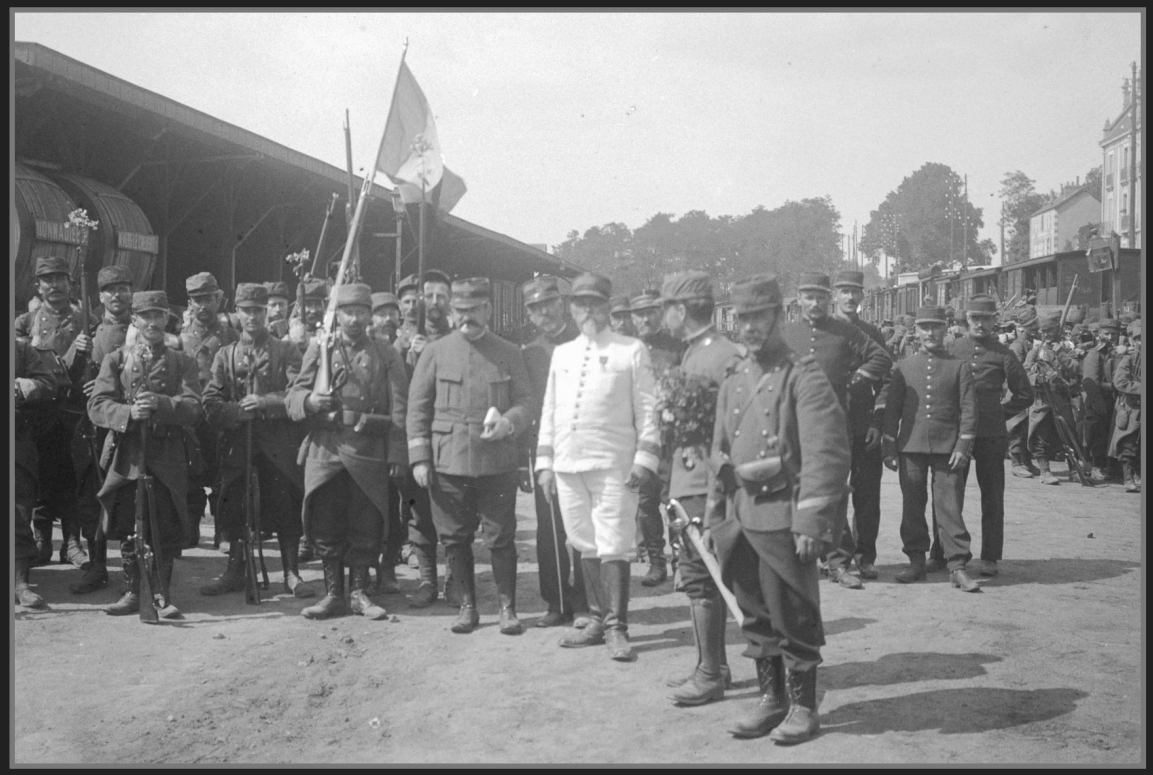
French territorial troops were older reservists assigned to home defence, support, and secondary duties during World War I.



Box XXX - No. 18
Train d'Infanterie
15 August 1914







Box XXXI - No. 1

Compagnie de dépôt 13e ligne

23 August 1914

The departure of a detachment of the 13th Infantry Regiment stationed in Nevers.

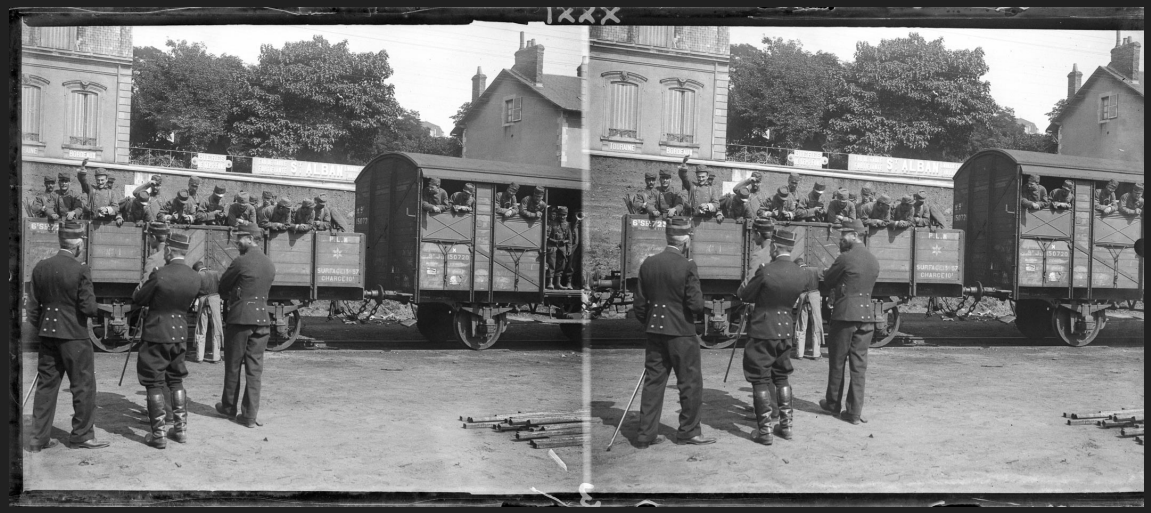




Box XXXI - No. 2

Compagnie de dépôt 13e ligne

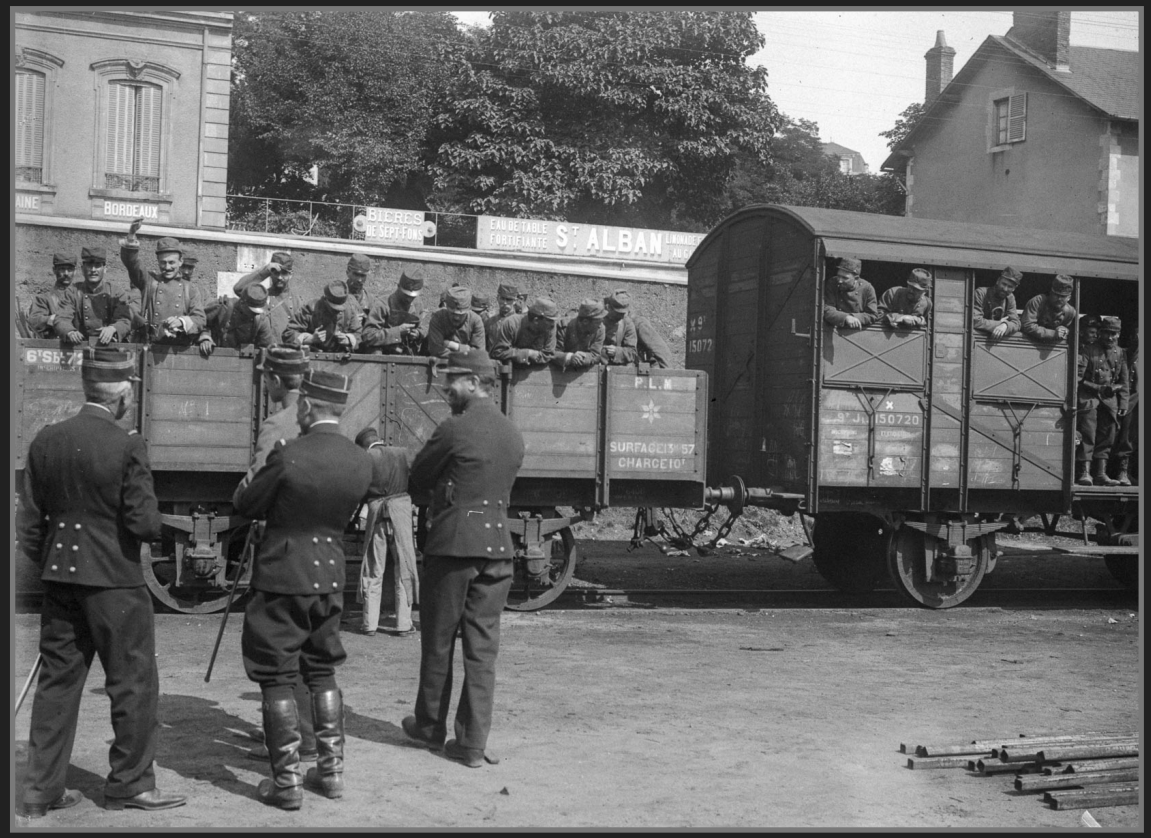
23 August 1914



Box XXXI - No. 3

Compagnie de dépôt 13e ligne

23 August 1914







Box XXXI - No. 4
Batterie de 75
24 August 1914

The 75 mm field gun was renowned for its rapid rate of fire and advanced recoil system, making it a key weapon of the French army.





Box XXXI - No. 5

Brancardiers 3e Tirailleurs

7 October 1914



Box XXXI - No. 7

Boulangerie Militaire intérieur

23 August 1914



The interior of a temporary bakery.





Box XXXI - No. 8
Officiers 5e génie
27 August 1914

Troops of lower rank were generally transported in goods wagons, while the officers travelled in passenger carriages.





Box XXXI - No. 9
Prissoniers Allemands
5 October 1914

German prisoners of war in a wagon, guarded by French soldiers. Following the Battle of the Marne and the Race to the Sea, the front settled into a static trench war that would continue until 11 November 1918.



Box XXXI - No. 10

Prissoniers Allemands

5 October 1914







Box XXXI - No. 11

Pièce de 75 retour du feu

5 October 1914

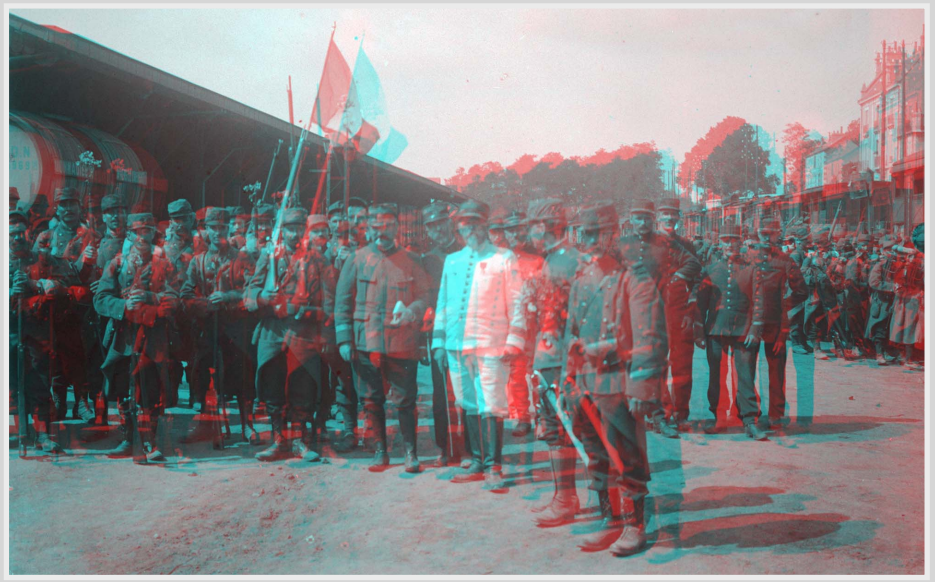







HOMMES 32 40
CHEVAUX






BORDEAUX
P.L.M.
SURFACE 13 57
CHARGE 10T


HOMMES
CHEVAUX
SURFACE
CHARGE
LIMITE DE CHARGE


ETAT


POSTE II
POSTE II

Box XXX

Box XXX contains 11 slides from the original set of 18.

Number	Title	Date	In collection
1	22e Infanterie Colonial	09-08-1914	Yes
2	24e Infanterie Colonial	10-08-1914	No
3	3e Tirailleurs Algérien	10-08-1914	No
4	3e Tirailleurs Algérien	10-08-1914	Yes
5	46e Infanterie	11-08-1914	Yes
6	46e Infanterie	11-08-1914	Yes
7	213e Infanterie	11-08-1914	Yes
8	Passage de Soupes	12-08-1914	No
9	Infanterie	12-08-1914	Yes
10	2e Zouaves	13-08-1914	Yes
11	2e Tirailleurs	13-08-1914	No
12	2e Zouaves	13-08-1914	No
13	6e Génie	13-08-1914	No
14	2e Tirailleurs	13-08-1914	Yes
15	2e Tirailleurs	13-08-1914	Yes
16	64e Territorial	17-08-1914	Yes
17	2e Tirailleurs	13-08-1914	No
18	Train d'Infanterie	15-08-1914	Yes

Box XXXI

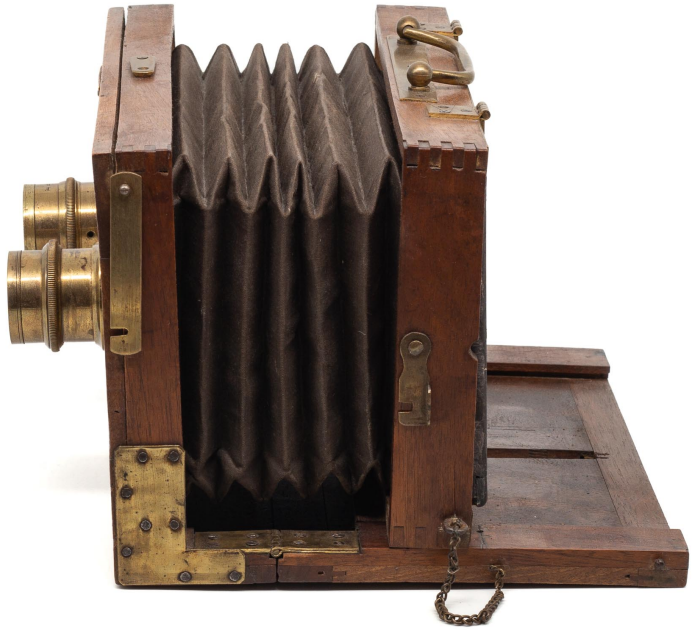
Box XXXI contains 10 slides from the original set of 16. The last four slides are dated only with the month and year, and the notes are written in a different ink colour. Their titles indicate subjects unrelated to the war.

Number	Title	Date	In collection
1	Compagnie de dépôt 13e ligne	23-08-1914	Yes
2	Compagnie de dépôt 13e ligne	23-08-1914	Yes
3	Compagnie de dépôt 13e ligne	23-08-1914	Yes
4	Batterie de 75	24-08-1914	Yes
5	Brancardiers 3e Tirailleurs	07-10-1914	Yes
6	Boulangerie Militaire extérieur	23-08-1914	No
7	Boulangerie Militaire intérieur	23-08-1914	Yes
8	Officiers 5e génie	27-08-1914	Yes
9	Prissoniers Allemands	05-10-1914	Yes
10	Prissoniers Allemands	05-10-1914	Yes
11	Pièce de 75 retour du feu	05-10-1914	Yes
12	Tirailleurs Sénégalais	07-10-1914	No
13	Machine	October 1914	No
14	Route de Sauvigny le Bois	October 1914	No
15	Après la Tempête	October 1914	No
16	Promenade faubg mou(?)	October 1914	No



No. 402 Chambre Stéréoscopique
9 x 18 cm glass plate negatives
Photo Vulgarisatrice, France, c. 1900

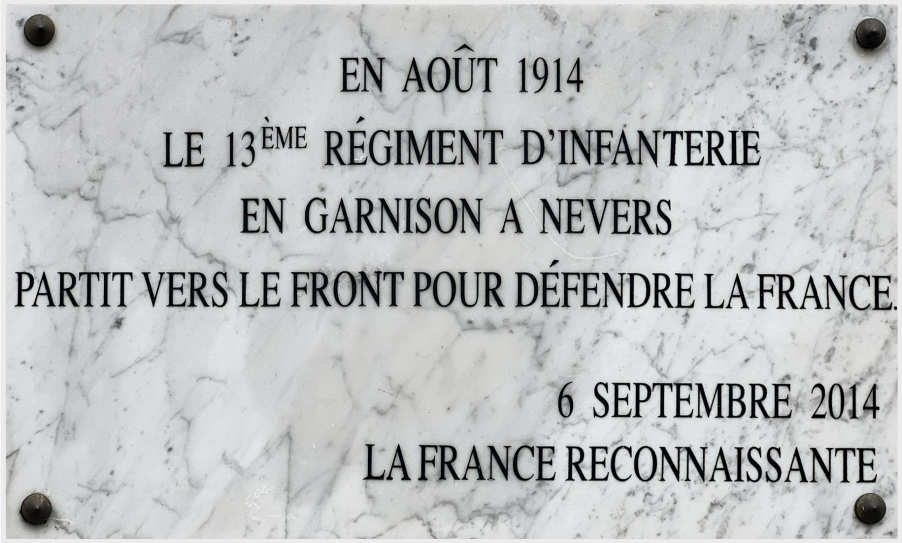
A similar type of camera may have been used by the photographer of the *Nevers 1914 collection*.



Epilogue

The images in this collection were shared in 2021 with the historical archives of Nièvre (Archives Départementales de la Nièvre).

In 2014, a memorial plaque was unveiled at the Nevers railway station to commemorate the mobilisation and departure of the 13th Infantry Regiment. However, the city had no photographic record of this event.
The shared images now form a welcome addition to the archives of the Nièvre department and the city of Nevers.



Memorial plaque at Nevers railway station.
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Notes and references

1. E-mail conversation with Michaël Boudard of the Archives Départementales de la Nièvre
2. Ibid
3. Charrier, J.B. (1984) *Histoire de Nevers*, pp. 329-332.
4. In developing stereo images, transposition is the process of swapping the left and right images so they appear in the correct order for viewing. Without transposition, the stereo pair produces reversed depth, making the scene look inside-out.

Bibliography

Nevers. Via: en.wikipedia.org

Gare de Nevers. Via: fr.wikipedia.org

Ancienne caserne Pittié de Nevers. Via fr. wikipedia.org

Histoires 14-18 : le cut-off de Nevers. Via: france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr

Revisions

1.0	14-08-2025	First edition

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