

Future Wars, Imagined Wars: Towards a Cultural History of the pre-1914 Period.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Conference organized by the

Centre International de Recherche de l'Historial de la Grande Guerre

in association with the

German Historical Institute, Paris

9-10 November November 2011

and the participation of the
Institut Universitaire de France
and the

Centre for First World War Studies, University of Birmingham.

Proposals are invited for papers to be given at the above conference. They should be no more than one page in length and sent to the Director of the Centre International de Recherche, Mme Caroline Fontaine (research@historial.org), **by Monday, 13th September 2010.** Proposals may be in English or French.

This conference stands at the crossroads of three trains of thought concerning the history of the Great War, each of them at once conceptual and empirical.

1. The cultural approach to the history of the war initially sought to recover the experiences of the conflict itself – its violence, its hidden dimensions (invasions, atrocities, occupations, prisoners-of-war, etc.). This involved dismantling the retrospective myths of the war in order to reconstitute the main experiences of the conflict in all their complexity – entries into war, life at the front, and so on. This same approach has also been applied to the consequences and legacies of the war, such as trauma, memory, commemoration, cultural demobilizations and remobilizations, etc. However, a cultural historical approach has not yet been applied systematically to the pre-war period. The latter thus represents the last significant terrain to be explored from this point of view.

2. The pre-war period leading up to 1914 raises important conceptual questions. Because of the gulf between the immediate political and diplomatic causes of the Great War and the war's unforeseen consequences, pre-war perspectives bore little relationship to the eventual experiences of the war, despite being a major determinant of them. Reconstituting the multiple senses of a future war, or wars, which existed before 1914 would thus contribute the final panel to an interpretative triptych of the Great War as a fundamental rupture in modern history – the future war, the war experienced, the war in retrospect.

3. For a long time the pre-war period dominated the historiography of the war in the form of the “responsibilities” question. Reactivated by the Fischer thesis in the 1960s and the debates to which that gave rise, this question has never entirely disappeared even if it ran out of steam in the 1990s by comparison with the dynamism of the new questions being proposed by the cultural history of the conflict. The “responsibility” for the outbreak of the war is a prime example of the classic tradition of military and political history, focused on questions of cause and consequence. Since cultural history has concerned itself more with experience and the multiple ways in which experience is constituted and transmitted, it has had less to say about causality, without ever totally ignoring it.

The reintegration of cultural with political and military history is currently emerging as one of the main challenges of historical writing and it poses precisely the question of the causal weight to be assigned to questions of experience, the imaginary and representations. A conference on the pre-war period is thus an ideal vehicle for addressing this challenge in its more general implications. What was the precise historical relationship between the causes of the war and these imagined future wars that never came about?

In order to explore these three lines of reflection, it is necessary to take into account the entire spectrum of possible causalities. The mental horizons and cultural and political assumptions of the principal actors (generals, political leaders) are firmly on the agenda. So, too, are the wars of the future as they were imagined by major literary figures and by the press. Equally important are the ways in which contemporaries understood the conflicts of the pre-war period, including the colonial dimension as a terrain for imagining future European conflicts, and the lessons they drew from them for future wars. The conference would also provide an opportunity to revisit the place of war in the imagined futures of different kinds of activist – nationalists, feminists, socialists, etc.

The nature of the subject (notably the importance of the Balkan Wars and Russia) offers the opportunity to include specialists of Eastern Europe, South-Eastern Europe and Russia. The same is true for Italy, given the significance of Futurism and the Italian-Turkish War of 1911-12. Countries such as Spain, which participated fully in the “pre-war” period (crisis and “generation” of 1898), though remaining neutral during the war itself, equally come within the ambit of the conference.

Programme.

1. Introduction: What is a “pre-war” period? What was the “pre-war” period of 1914?
2. The long pasts of future war.
3. War in the short-term future, 1899-1914.
4. International crises and the imminence of war, 1911-1913.
5. The crisis of July 1914
6. Epilogue: the arrival of the future, August-December 1914.