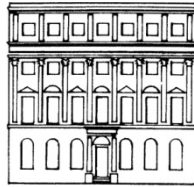


# German Historical Institute London



## BULLETIN

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*The World During the First World War: Perceptions, Experiences, and Consequences*

Conference Report

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*The World During the First World War: Perceptions, Experiences, and Consequences.* Herrenhausen Symposium organized by the German Historical Institute London, Leibniz University Hanover, Volkswagen Foundation, and Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), and held at the Herrenhausen Palace, 28–30 October 2013.

The centenary of the First World War has triggered a whole series of academic events in 2014, remembering it in various different ways around the globe. We do not yet know whether official commemorations will be limited to narrow national interpretations, or include reflections on the global dimensions of the war. Whose remembrance are we talking about when we discuss the memory of the First World War on a global scale? This was an underlying thread in the many questions posed at the international symposium ‘The World During the First World War: Perceptions, Experiences, and Consequences’, which discussed the causes, the course, and the consequences of the First World War, paying special attention to its global dimension. Analysing local, social, and political movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, its aim was to remove ‘research patterns from the constraints of a narrow European approach’.

The rich programme both reflected the shift from a predominantly military history to a broader focus on social and cultural history in First World War studies, and made space for new interdisciplinary and comparative approaches. The evening lecture, ‘The World, the War and the “Sepoy”: Words, Images, and Songs. A Literary and Cultural Excavation’, delivered by Santanu Das (King’s College London), in particular, reflected a new interest in the history of senses and soundscapes of the First World War. Analysing photographs, poems, audio recordings, memoirs, and material objects of Indian colonial soldiers, Das showed how ‘subaltern’ voices of the First World War can be heard.

In order to include all participants in developing broader lines of thought, general questions on the conceptualization and the historiography of the First World War, the regional effects of the war, its impact on political movements, and new methodological approaches in studying the First World War were debated in plenary sessions.

The full conference programme can be found under Events and Conferences on the GHIL’s website <[www.ghil.ac.uk](http://www.ghil.ac.uk)>.

## Conference Reports

The following panel sessions provided ample opportunity to present new empirical data and gave a chance for further conceptual debate. More than twenty speakers presented their current research with regard to the circulation of people and ideas, the human consequences of war in non-European societies, and new social and political movements. The highly stimulating conference debates can be summarized under the following headings.

### *Studying the First World War on a Global Scale: Challenges and Conceptual Constraints*

Participants in the conference uncompromisingly acknowledged the Great War as a global phenomenon. At the same time, the meaning of Europe in the war and the continuous 'discursive hegemony of Europe' in First World War historiography were critically remarked upon and even challenged in various discussions. In his keynote lecture, Stig Förster (University of Berne) took the audience on a global journey from the European metropolises to battlefields on the rims of empire, and in four steps outlined what constituted a world war, how it came about, how it was fought out, and what its consequences were. He concluded that the war turned out to be more catastrophic than predicted, and argued that it changed the economies, societies, and politics of Europe as much as of the world. In the discussion Förster was confronted with the critique that he was displaying a 'Eurocentric view' of the First World War. He stressed that it was a 'European war' despite its global dimensions because it had started and ended in Europe, was centralized in Europe in 1914, was fought over European affairs, and its main battles took place in Europe, in sharp contrast to the Second World War. Others challenged this interpretation by alluding to the participation of 4 million non-Europeans from colonial or dependent territories, whose experiences of the war were equally relevant.

This argument linked up to the opening remarks by Ulrike Freitag (ZMO), who suggested taking the global dimension seriously and identifying the ways in which the Great War was a world war by adjusting instruments of research and looking at the theatre of war through 'the eyes of a region', rather than merely enlarging the focus of research geographically. She pointed out that a period of wars,

from the Balkan Wars (1912) to the Turkish War of Independence (1923), caused severe ruptures in the Ottoman Empire. Thus the expulsion of Armenians during the war, or the indirect effects of the war, such as the Great Arab Rebellion of 1916, were interventions in the history of the region that were as severe as the First World War. Her implicit plea to revise the 'European periodization' of the war was another constant topic at the conference. This was emphasized by Helmut Bley (University of Hanover), who remarked that the organizers had initially thought of expanding the timeframe of 1914–18 because this 'European periodization' is less relevant once the First World War is perceived from a global perspective. The discussion highlighted that extending the periodization of the First World War changes viewpoints and research questions. For instance, in his paper 'Oil and Beyond: Shifting British Imperial Aspirations and Emerging Oil Capitalism in the First World War', Touraj Atabaki (University of Leiden) put more emphasis on long-term developments and placed the experience of the First World War into the context of the history of capitalism. Dirk Hoerder's (University of Bremen) paper took a similar direction. In it, he convincingly argued that the 'production' of mass labourers and of mass soldiers was intertwined. A large-scale Japanese interdisciplinary project, presented by Shin'ichi Yamamuro and Akeo Okada (University of Kyoto), similarly challenged the periodization and the notion of the First World War as the first 'total' war.

A further point of discussion with regard to re-thinking periodization was brought up by Jennifer Jenkins (University of Toronto), delivering the keynote lecture '1918 and Germany's Eurasian Moment'. She analysed imperial visions and the economic and political aspirations developed by the German foreign office in 'Eurasia' (today Iran, Georgia, and Ukraine) during the war. Jenkins put Germany's war aims in global perspective (vision of economic expansion, mobilization of dissident groups) and demonstrated the relevance of studying the end of the war, a subject that German historiography has long neglected because of the dominant research focus on the beginning of the war.

*Regional Perspectives: Comparison and Connections*

In the panel discussion 'The World Dimension of the First World War Rediscovered: The Regional Perspective', Latin American, African, Middle Eastern, and Chinese experiences of the First World War were centre stage. Stefan Rinke (Free University of Berlin) briefly sketched the political situation of Latin American countries, many of them neutral, on the eve of war. Analysing media representations of Europe, once the civilizatory role model, he showed how Europe came to be represented as a place of barbarism during the course of the war. Further, he elaborated on how this experience inspired a new national self-understanding and fostered the Argentinian student movement. Stefan Reichmuth (University of Bochum) stressed a similar changing perception of Europe in the representation of the war. He explained how new models of political institutions (monarchies, presidential states, mandate systems, and so on) were created during and after the war in the Middle East. He argued that the war represented a watershed for Muslim politics because of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, which led to the rise of socialist ideas and nationalist movements, and disillusionment for Islamist ideas as a result of the end of the Khilafat movement in India. Toyin Falola (University of Austin) presented the 'African perspective' on the First World War and the transformative results of the war in general terms for the continent. He concluded that the loss of German colonies led, firstly, to a rethinking of colonialism in Europe and Africa by making it possible to talk openly about (mis)management of colonies. It also created the notion of material well-being and the progress of colonies as a new international aspiration. Secondly, the war created a shift in international relations and gave rise to anti-colonial agitation as evoked by Woodrow Wilson's policies and the Russian Revolution. Further, the creation of an African elite by Western education and, finally, the development of nationalist movements in Africa were significant for the continent and the long-term outcomes of the war. Guoqi Xu (University of Hong Kong) argued that China was important for the war through its participation in key war events, its political involvement, its military and personnel contributions, and its participation in the Paris Peace conference of 1919. The war was pivotal to China because its involvement in the war allowed the country to redefine its role in the emerging world system of nation-states. It

therefore marked a watershed in the formation of national identity, for example, with regard to the May Fourth Movement of 1919.

Other regional case studies, as presented by Radikha Singha (Jawaharlal Nehru University) on the experience and representation of the Indian Labour Corps in France, and by Babacar Fall (University Cheikh Anta Diop) speaking on 'Forced Labour in French West Africa 1900-9', showed how poor people from British India and French West Africa were sent to the European battlefields, demonstrating that 'class' was a relevant category across regions. The discussion stressed that such systematic comparative investigations of the war experience of social actors (soldiers, workers) across regions could allow for a 'common plebeian perspective' and provide a means of overcoming 'containers' or 'black boxes' of national or regional interpretations. With regard to comparison, it was stressed that comparative neutrality offers a promising new research topic considering, for example, Scandinavia, the Iberian peninsula, Ethiopia, or the role of the USA before 1917.

Another major issue of debate was whether the war was a catalyst for political movements across regions. Helmut Bley stressed that the First World War did not trigger political mobilization, but had radicalizing effects. In her paper Katja Füllberg-Stolberg (University of Hanover) discussed the development of the Pan-African movement during and after the war, while Patricio Geli (Universidad Tres de Febrero) showed the impact of war on the socialist party of Argentina. Ali Raza (ZMO) explored the transnational links of the Indian national movement in the interwar period, and analysed the impact of the Russian Revolution in shaping the Indian revolutionary movement. The role of the Gallipoli catastrophe in creating Australian national consciousness was discussed by Joan Beaumont (Australian National University) and contrasted with Michael Göbel's (Free University Berlin) findings for France.

### *A Global Social History of the First World War?*

The symposium showed how important it is to bring together social and global history by linking historical approaches with social science, not least in order to generate microstudies. Discussions centred on the question of how to merge global and social history in studies

## Conference Reports

of the First World War. The panel 'Pandemic and Healing', which discussed infectious diseases in a comparative and transnational perspective, was a good example of how to combine these approaches, as was the paper by Samiksha Sehrawat (Newcastle University), who discussed the networks and practices of humanitarian aid organizations with special reference to the Indian context. Another major topic of debate was the long-term effects for societies, as debated in the panel 'The Social Impacts of the War'. Sara Ellinor Morack (Free University Berlin) discussed how a focus on materiality, in her case, houses abandoned after the Greek-Turkish population exchange, can provide insights into the legal and social relationships between different ethnic communities, not only before and during, but also after the war. Others stressed that questions regarding the war as an accelerator of social mobilization, for example, in women's emancipation, had been asked in the 1970s in a national context. Discussing these questions on a global scale now seemed a promising but challenging endeavour with regard to its comparative regional dimension.

How to organize this in practical terms was debated in the session 'Open Research Questions and New Approaches to the First World War', in which Oliver Janz (Free University Berlin) introduced the international collaborative project '1914–1918 Online: International Encyclopaedia of the First World War', and Barbara Göbel (Ibero-American Institute Berlin) discussed structural obstacles in organizing international research projects with regard to Latin American studies. In the same panel Britta Lange (Humboldt University of Berlin), analysing examples of sound recordings from the Humboldt University's sound archive, addressed the issue of the authenticity of sources, power structures behind archives, and the challenges historians face in using these sources in research.

The conference showed that thinking about the First World War on a global scale does not mean just looking at different regions, but thinking of them together and fostering comparative, translocal, and interdisciplinary approaches. At the same time, it was obvious that many discussions at the conference were dominated by the paradigms of social history, such as 'class', 'capitalism', or 'gender', and were perceived by some discussants as neglecting research achievements that tried to break with such metanarratives. Some argued that interdisciplinary approaches should be strengthened by systematically including literary studies, medical history, or archaeology in the

study of the First World War. The implied tension in studying the 'World during the First World War' (as the conference title suggested) was critically remarked upon because it makes the war the central historical event for global societies and, as such, reproduces a European paradigm. Seeing the war as the background to historical events (such as the Massacre of Amritsar in 1919 or the Easter Rising of 1916 in Dublin) would produce a more nuanced picture of what had happened in different parts of the world.

The conference gave space to a large variety of presentations on non-European war experiences, and also critically remarked upon the challenges of studying the First World War on a global scale. For a wider public, the upcoming national commemorations will show what significance is accorded to non-European war experiences and perceptions.

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