

Call for Papers

Unthinking the Imaginary War. Intellectual Reflections of the Nuclear Age, 1945-1990

International Conference, jointly organised by the Centre for Peace History, University of Sheffield, and the Arbeitskreis für Historische Friedensforschung, in collaboration with the German Historical Institute London and the German Historical Institute Rome

Date and Venue: German Historical Institute London, 4 November – 6 November 2010

All politics during the Cold War took place under the threat of nuclear annihilation. While recent research has pointed to civil wars and insurgencies in Latin America, Africa and Asia to highlight the violence that the Cold War brought, our understanding of the importance and relevance of the nuclear arms race for the social and cultural history of the Cold War is still underdeveloped. The war-like character of the Cold War in the western world did not consist of injuring human bodies; it consisted of a sustained attack against the imagination (Michael Geyer). The Cold War was an ‘imaginary war’ (Mary Kaldor). The nuclear bombs that were used to destroy the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 form part of a conventional war effort. As an all-out nuclear war never occurred thereafter, it could only be imagined through the military’s combat exercises, the government officials’ calculations of the destructive power of nuclear weapons, as well as computerised simulations and war-games on the one hand; and, through the often apocalyptic scenarios that Cold War critics drew up on the other hand. These simulations and images of nuclear war, and the fears they created, were a crucial aspect of the Cold War.

The proposed conference will take these ideas as a guideline for an exploration of the intellectual history of the Cold War. It aims to bring together historians, philosophers and scholars from cultural studies who are interested in intellectual, political and artistic reflections of the ‘imaginary’ reality of a nuclear war in the period from 1945 to 1990. It will discuss how the atomic bomb and its imaginary impact has served as a signifier in political, intellectual and artistic discourses, and how philosophers, writers, artists, but also defence intellectuals tried to think and unthink the political and strategic realities of the nuclear age.

The conference seeks to be as broad as possible in its geographical scope and in the range of intellectual reflections which come under scrutiny. Hence, we invite papers on Western and Eastern Europe, on the USA, but also on Japan, which played a crucial role in the intellectual critique of the nuclear age.