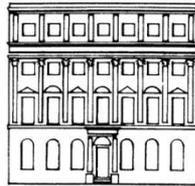


# German Historical Institute London



## BULLETIN

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Dorothee Wierling and Richard Bessel:  
*Inside World War One? International Workshop on Ego Documents and the  
Experience of the First World War*  
Conference Report  
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*Inside World War One? International Workshop on Ego Documents and the Experience of the First World War.* Conference organized by the German Historical Institute London in collaboration with the London School of Economics and Political Science, and held at the GHIL, 23–25 Oct. 2014. Conveners: Dorothee Wierling (GHIL), Richard Bessel (York), Heather Jones (LSE), and Sönke Neitzel (LSE).

As the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War approached in 2014, interest in the war predictably increased and research about the war developed in new directions. The workshop ‘Inside World War One?’ aimed to combine two of these new directions: the increased interest in ego documents from the Great War, and the increased interest in the First World War beyond the Western front, which for so long has dominated both academic debate and public commemoration. While British and French perceptions of the war have understandably focused largely on the Western front and German perceptions, too, have drawn largely on the war in the west, more attention has recently been paid to both the Eastern front and the non-European battlefields. In fact, the war on the Eastern front involved as many soldiers, left behind as many dead, and had consequences as significant as those stemming from the war in western Europe; at the same time, the label *World War One* is now finally being taken seriously, with recognition of the global nature of the conflict, which involved parties from every continent and soldiers of numerous ethnic backgrounds.

The workshop aimed to discuss the value of ego documents emerging from the First World War, both against the background of a broad belief in the ‘authentic’ access to historical events they seem to promise and through their use to professional historians trying better to understand the war and how it was experienced and communicated. At the same time, it aimed to extend our understanding of the war both geographically and culturally, bringing East and

This conference was organized as part of the Gerda Henkel Visiting Professorship jointly established at the German Historical Institute London and the Department of International History at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and held in 2013/14 by Dorothee Wierling. 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)>.

West into the frame, comparing the nature of ego documents from different cultures, and analysing the subjective interpretations of those who had been there. The discussions drew on eighteen pre-circulated papers covering a wide range of regions, genres, individuals, and social groups as well as experiences and perspectives.

Offering a non-European perspective, Mustafa Aksakal's (Georgetown) paper drew on personal documents written by elite soldiers in the Ottoman army as well as by Europeans living in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. In her paper Anna Maguire (Imperial War Museum London) analysed perceptions and reactions of British officers encountering colonial troops from India, South Africa, and New Zealand.

An important focus was on occupation regimes. A number of papers focused on Warsaw. Robert Blobaum (West Virginia University) critically assessed the potential of ego documents for the study of everyday experiences in occupied Warsaw, while Marta Polsakiewicz (Frankfurt/Oder) looked at the personal papers of the German Governor General to analyse his perspective on the city's population and his understanding of what constituted a satisfactory occupation regime. This also surfaced in Stephan Lehnstaedt's (GHI Warsaw) paper on the same Governor General and his perceptions of Polish Jews, who at the time accounted for 15 per cent of the population in occupied Poland, comparing his views to those of the Austrian envoy in Warsaw. Belgium offered another example of occupation experiences, explored by Sophie de Schaepdrijver (Penn State), who based her analysis on both Flemish and Francophone diaries. In his paper, Alexander Watson (Goldsmiths, University of London), used police records dealing with civilians' reports on atrocities committed by Russian soldiers during their invasion of East Prussia as ego sources for experiences with, and perceptions of, the invaders.

Experiences on the Austro-Hungarian/Italian front provided another focus of the papers. Pavlina Bobic (Birmingham) analysed letters from Slovenian soldiers serving in the Austro-Hungarian army, and was able to demonstrate how religion, in particular, Catholicism, compensated for the lack of national coherence to create a sense of belonging and unity. John Paul Newman (Maynooth) examined one Serb activist's writings in post-war Yugoslavia and showed the extent to which the First World War was perceived in the

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region as a continuation of the earlier Balkan Wars as well as being inseparable from the civil war that followed in its wake. Marco Mondini (Italian–German Historical Institute, Trento) based his paper on letters and memoirs of Italian reserve junior officers, all volunteers, and interpreted them in terms of generation and class. Roberta Pergher (University of Indiana, Bloomington) compared letters and memoirs of Austrians on the Alpine front and showed how the nationalist interpretation of the war experience is largely absent in the former and seems to be a product of post-war discourses and adaptations. Christa Hämmerle (Vienna) looked at (mostly unpublished) memoirs of nurses in the Austro-Hungarian army and asked how and why they did not fit into the post-war Austrian discourse on the war experience.

Christa Hämmerle's paper also fitted into another group of contributions, which dealt with members of the medical profession and their perspectives on the war. Andrea von Hohenthal (Freiburg) analysed medical reports by psychiatrists as ego documents of an expert group which was crucial to the war in the attempt to understand and deal with new phenomena, such as shell shock and other psychological reactions. Sönke Neitzel (LSE) focused on the diary of a German physician who not only served on various fronts, but also regularly returned to his hometown to continue his practice there. His diary is complemented by his letters to his wife and the memoirs he wrote in 1947. The texts provide evidence not only of a typical bourgeois existence and world view of the time, but also of significant shifts in attitude through the extreme confrontation with violent war experiences.

A last group of papers was devoted explicitly to the process of representing the Great War in writing. Thus Gerd Krumeich (emeritus, Düsseldorf) discussed the value, both for propaganda and historical research, of letter collections published during and after the First World War in Germany, focusing on the influential Witkop collection of students' letters. Joshua Sanborn (Lafayette College) took up the social figure of the World War One 'peasant soldier' as constructed on the basis of the writings of Russian officers. Leonard Smith (Oberlin College, Ohio) explored the peculiar place of the First World War in the diaries of two French intellectuals, Henri Barbusse and Marc Bloch, focusing on the representation of time. Finally, Piotr Szlanta (Warsaw) presented the case of a Polish painter (based on his

letters and a memoir) who tried to avoid if not ignore the war while living and travelling in Poland under occupation.

The format chosen for the workshop was unusual. The papers were pre-circulated and had been read by the participants beforehand. In order to devote maximum time to discussion, there were no presentations of the individual papers. Instead, the papers provided material for thematic discussions: the workshop was structured around general themes so that all papers would be discussed under various headings. In this way the conveners hoped to tap the full potential of the papers, which were too rich and complex to be limited to just one aspect. This placed great demands on the chairs of the workshop sessions—John Horne (Trinity College, Dublin), Heather Jones (LSE), Richard Bessel (York), Hew Strachan (Oxford), Robert Gerwarth (University College, Dublin), and Adrian Gregory (Oxford)—whose thorough introductions and thoughtful moderation were instrumental to the success of the discussions.

After a short introduction by Richard Bessel and Dorothee Wierling, the first group of sessions was dedicated to discussion of the general perspectives of the ego documents presented in the papers. The first session in this group referred to the perception of contemporaries as well as historians that the First World War meant something fundamentally different on the Western and on the Eastern front. How was this assumption reflected in our sources? What was the broader discursive context in conceptualizing East and West so differently? How was the notion of different wars further cemented through the politics of history in western and eastern Europe? Other topics discussed in this session were military and civilian perspectives on the war, and the role of elites and experts vis-à-vis the broader population (both at the front and on the home front). Clearly, ego documents as a source privilege the perspective of elites and educated classes in general. Are there ways, however, to find out something about other social groups by learning to read their indirect presence in the ego documents available to us? Finally, women's and men's perspectives were discussed. The militarization of all societies involved in the war certainly privileged military and male perspectives on the war. Nevertheless, many women supported the fighting, were active as nurses at the front, and managed the home front, being indirectly involved in occupation regimes. It was therefore not because their role during the war was minor, but

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because it was an outcome of memory politics that women's war experiences were marginalized.

The next two sessions were grouped under the heading of 'theatres': the battlefield and life 'behind the lines', namely, under occupation. The papers were discussed with regard to concrete experiences at the front and home front, social relations and cultural clashes between soldiers and doctors, commanders and 'ordinary' soldiers, men and women, occupiers and occupied, Europeans and non-Europeans, and silences when it came to violence and death.

The third session was devoted to questions about memory and representation which concerned all the papers. How were the ego documents as texts socially and culturally formed and how was the experience of the authors mediated by literary conventions, emotional regimes, and dominant public narratives? What were the consequences for historians of working with these texts? How could we think of the potential of these sources not just as limitations, but also as paths to a subjective history of the First World War?

Finally, a roundtable of experts including historians and archivists discussed the practice of ego-document collections and the use made of them by a wider public. Gerhard Hirschfeld (former director of the Library of Contemporary History in Stuttgart), William Spencer (National Archives, Kew), and Marlene Kayen (Tagebucharchiv Emmendingen) described collections and talked about the limitations and opportunities of working with ego documents, while Joshua Sanborn discussed the archival situation in Central and Eastern Europe. The workshop ended with some closing remarks by Dorothee Wierling, summarizing the methodological issues dealt with in the discussions.

The papers brought to light the enormous richness of ego documents, with regard both to genres and the experiences dealt with. This concerns firstly the sheer abundance of sources, which come, however, with a striking imbalance: the male bourgeois author dominates the narratives, be it as the military leader or the young volunteer leader. In addition, much depends on the memory politics of post-war societies. On the one hand, where the war experience was superimposed on historical changes more central to the national narrative—regained statehood in Poland, the Bolshevik revolution in what became the Soviet Union, or the creation of a new multinational state in Yugoslavia—the war became a mere step towards the new

development. On the other, how it was publicly remembered became a function of the new national need for positive meaning and national unity. Therefore the direct comparison of unpublished and published texts by the same authors turned out to be especially fruitful; and the fact that in some Central and East European post-war countries ego documents of the war (with the exception of those by military elites) obviously were neither systematically collected nor published leads to a most unfortunate imbalance today.

The transnational comparison of ego documents revealed both variety and surprising commonalities. An obvious one is the generational and social make-up of the young volunteers, who shared not only age and status, but the same enthusiasm for the nation, a willingness for sacrifice, and world views built on reading the same authors, listening to the same music, and cherishing the same artists – in other words, sharing a canon of European culture that they sought to defend against each other.

Many of the questions raised during the workshop remained open, or could be answered only tentatively. The enthusiasm of some participants for the specifics of ego documents in understanding the First World War as experience was met with scepticism by others. The discussion is ongoing, and the conveners are most grateful for the commitment made by contributors, chairs, and discussants to keep it going.

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