

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.

We are especially interested in papers on three key themes:

Critique and Dialectics: Writers and Intellectuals

Papers may focus on academic and non-academic intellectuals who have reflected on the hypocrisy and the paradoxes of the nuclear age, ranging from well-known academics and theologians such as E.P. Thompson and Günther Anders and Don Primo Mazzolari to writers such as Kurt Vonnegut and musicians such as Bob Dylan.

Imagining the Unimaginable: Artists

This panel will focus on highbrow and popular culture, as well as on the visual arts, photography, painting and film. It will analyse how artists have tried to imagine the unimaginable, nuclear destruction, and how they refined their artistic techniques in an attempt to respond to the peculiar nature and physical qualities of nuclear radiation. This panel will also consider the possible cross-fertilisation between artistic endeavours and other intellectual currents.

Expert Cultures: Defence Intellectuals and Peace Researchers

Experts and counter-experts are the focus of this panel. Papers will analyse both the reflections of dissident-officers and nuclear physicists in East and West, the war-games of defence intellectuals and the academic critique of peace researchers. The contributions to this panel will try to ascertain how the floating of signifiers of nuclear annihilation between the realm of the military and the defence community led to the image of nuclear war as a 'simulacrum' (Paul Virilio).

The organisers of the conference invite proposals for papers from historians, literary scholars, political scientists, art historians, philosophers and from those with cultural studies backgrounds, as well as from scholars in related disciplines. Comparative papers on more than one country are particularly welcome. Please send abstracts of your proposed paper (400-500 words) and a short curriculum vitae (one page) to Dr Holger Nehring, Department of History, University of Sheffield (h.nehring@sheffield.ac.uk).

We aim to offer support for travel and accommodation to invited speakers.

Deadline for submission of abstracts: 1 December 2009.