College of Europe
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Further information on the aims of the conference

Debates, both among historians and the wider public regarding the First World War have never been as dynamic as they are today. The increasingly global historiography of the conflict now encompasses social, economic, cultural and ideological transformations, while 'traditional' military and diplomatic history has also seen significant revivals. Such, too, is the War's presence in exhibitions in museums and galleries, public commemorations and discussions online and in the press.

The lessons to be learned from the war no longer seem as clear-cut as they did a generation ago. In part this is because historians are now giving more attention to events beyond the Western Front – the 'Flanders fields' which over many decades have come to symbolize the pointless waste of all warfare. By widening scholarly perspectives to foreground the more fluid but equally murderous Eastern Fronts, it has been possible to pose more questions about the sense and impacts of the First World War. The Russian, Habsburg, German and Ottoman Empires cracked under the strain and broke apart towards the end of the War. In their place several nation-states were born, reborn or expanded, presenting the victorious Allied Powers with *faits accomplis* to manage, rather than a *carte blanche* on which to remake Central and Eastern Europe as they willed. At the same time, the war also subjected the imperial powers of the West to great pressures. For example in Ireland, just as in parts of what had been the Ottoman, Russian and Habsburg empires, fighting continued into the 1920s, and when it was done, a new nation-state was in existence. The conference brings together scholars working on Western and Central and Eastern Europe, so that they can exchange insights.

The Great War was a war of peoples. Tens of millions participated in the Great War as combatants – many more were affected as family members, agricultural and industrial workers and as refugees. In the West refugees came from a comparatively limited area of Belgium, northern and eastern France and Alsace-Lorraine – which was however subjected to near-annihilation. In the East, as the fronts moved backwards and forwards, the physical destruction, the disease spread in the wake of armies and atrocities all made their impact on a greater area and on a greater number of civilians. To what extent did the war's impact on women – in the home, the workplace and in exile – differ between Eastern and Western Fronts? In what ways did the War affect male roles and identities, as combatants and breadwinners? And in what ways did these processes interact with those of imperial disintegration and national consolidation? Experiences of struggle, hardship and loss, mass mobilization of resources, disruption of communities and exposure to propaganda – often from competing sources – all made their impact on imperial and national identities and loyalties. Some of these were reinforced; more were transformed.

Memories of the First World War differ significantly, in intensity as well as in content, between different parts of Europe. Even within the Central and Eastern European region, the outcome of the war fulfilled the dream of statehood to some nations, but brought bitter disappointment to others. In the decades that followed some – especially in parts of the Habsburg Monarchy – became nostalgic for the age of empire. Frequently incompatible narratives of trauma, sacrifice and liberation should be compared, contrasted and confronted. Last but not least, we should ask about the legacies of the War, especially when seen from the East, for Europe as a whole. How did it mark (or scar) European civilization? To what extent did it contribute to an 'American century' in the history of European (mass) culture? Last but not least, to what extent did the First World War spur or hinder the advocates of European integration?

The Chair of European Civilization, founded by the European Parliament in Memory of Bronisław GEREMEK

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