

WORLD WAR I REVISITED

A St George's House Consultation in partnership with the War Studies Department, King's College London and The Culture Capital Exchange

Monday 20 to Tuesday 21 January 2014

World War I transformed the political, economic, cultural and social fabric of Western civilization and had important consequences for the rest of the world. It decimated a generation of European men, killed millions of civilians, and made millions more vulnerable to influenza and other pathogens by virtue of the ravages of war, ethnic cleansing and the Allied blockade. It triggered a revolution in Russia, which had echoes in eastern and central Europe and more lasting resonance in China and Southeast Asia. It hastened the ascendancy of the United States as the world's leading economic power, led to the breakup of the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman empires, and set in motion a chain of events that did away with the British, French, Spanish and Portuguese empires as well. Collectively, these developments made it almost impossible to restore political and economic stability to Europe, paving the way for Hitler's rise to power, a second, more deadly bid for hegemony by Germany in alliance with Italy and Japan, and the Holocaust. World War II in turn gave rise to a Cold War that kept Europe divided for fifty years and its population centres and military bases the targets of thousands of nuclear weapons that at the push of a button could have turned the continent, if not much of the world, into a desolate, uninhabitable no-man's land.

World War I and the events that followed had equally profound cultural and intellectual consequences. Europe's self-confidence was lost along with its leading role in the world, a psychological turn that was manifest in the increasing defiance, doubt, confusion and alienation of post-war art, literature and music. Many artists and intellectuals sought refuge in a highly idealised image of Soviet-style socialism. Matters were, if anything, worse in the immediate aftermath of World War II. The United States became the leader of the self-proclaimed "Free World." It financed the reconstruction of Western Europe and Japan, imposed its political and economic institutions and practices wherever it could, and gained influence in a wider circle of states through aid, trade and investment and coercion. Unrivalled American levels of investment in education and research, and the immigration of thousands of Europe's leading scientists, artists and intellectuals, made the U.S. the world's leader in medicine, science, space exploration and the creative arts. Its popular culture became global in its appeal, leading some intellectuals to worry about Hollywood's hegemony and debasement of real culture and others to celebrate it as a "soft power" resource.

To appreciate the consequences of World War I we must know what the world would have been like in its absence. We cannot turn back the historical clock or access parallel universes to discover whether such worlds might exist. Our only recourse is to engage in counterfactual thought experiments. We will conduct two kinds of thought experiments in the course of a two-day consultation.



On day one, we will use counterfactual techniques to explore possible variations from the historical strategic course of the war in 1914, and the development of the famous trench stalemate. British, French and German officers will engage in a *kriegsspiel* of the crucial Western campaigns of August and September to explore whether a more decisive outcome might have occurred as in 1870 and 1940. We will then broaden the discussion to consider the possible military and political consequences of more radical alternatives such as a German decision not to invade Belgium or perhaps even France itself.

On day two, we will broaden our counterfactual explorations even further, to consider how what might have happened had war not broken out in 1914 at all. Was such a terrible clash inevitable sooner or later through one spark or another, and how might the world have developed had major war been avoided altogether? We will consider not just the political ramifications of this issue, but also the social and cultural differences which might have developed without the tremendous societal shock which the World War delivered.

