CFP- Great War geographies of militarism and the resonances of total war

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As the centenary years of the “War to End All Wars” draw to a close, now is the ideal time not only to take advantage of the popular and academic surge of interest in the First World War but also to stress the distant and lasting impacts of this and other conflicts beyond the battlefield and after the official cessation of hostilities. Geographical concerns have been at the heart of cutting-edge Great War historiography from Wilson’s (2012) discussion of the co-constitution of battlefield landscapes and soldiers’ identities on the Western Front, to Johnson’s (2003) work on the routes of memorial parades as political statements in Ireland, to Ziino’s (2007) exploration of the way physical distance structured postwar grief in Australia. These and other works echo arguments made by Woodward (2005) and others for the need to engage with a critically informed “geographies of militarism,” stressing that the implications of military practices and ideologies are more broad, intimate and persistent than can be understood through a myopic, objectivist focus on terrain or wartime.

World War I in particular offers a rich source for scholarly work in military, cultural, historical and population geography, as well as spatial analysis. The pieces cited above suggest the potential for further study of the First World War through investigations of human-environment interactions, scale, mobilities, embodiment and corporeality, and the material and discursive construction of space. For instance, Cronier (2007, 58) has written that the distinction between home and front was “not just a geographical distinction but a normative one” yet this dichotomy was problematized by soldiers maintaining relationships with the civilian population or being present in ‘civilian’ spaces while on leave. How did material and discursive constructions of military versus civilian space structure these dynamics in places other than the European capitals that Cronier studies? There is a robust body of work on WWI memorials, but less so on the (dis)connection between mourning in public versus private spaces, on ‘utilitarian’ memorials, on memorials themselves as sites of conflict, or indeed on how veterans and their histories were present in other ways in postwar places (Trout, 2010). How might the study of the postwar world be invigorated by a focus on those who returned from emplaced battlefield experiences, who literally embodied the conflict, and whose place in civilian life needed to be renegotiated in the years and decades after the armistice? Nuanced discussion of race, gender and intersectionality have filtered back into social histories of the war, providing a better bridge between studies of individual experience and societal context – a necessity in the study of total war, according to Chickering (2011); engaging with these topics through mapping or critical quantitative methods is an avenue almost completely unexplored. How might the study of the Great War be furthered along this front?

Great War studies and other critical conflict studies also have much to gain from being put into conversation with each other. Saunders and Cornish’s (2013) discussion of how Italian causalities were removed from named graves along the Isonzo Front to mass graves to serve the purposes of the fascist government resonates with other work on the reshaping of the geography of death for political ends, whether on thanatopoltics in 20th century Cambodia (Tyner, 2009) or on the construction of “the grievable death” in the 21st century War on Terror (Romanillos, 2014, 8). The construction of home and front during the Great War was strongly gendered (Capozolla et al, 2015); the spatialized normativity of women’s roles in WWI were echoed in responses to the Cold War Women’s Peace Camp at Greenham Common as described by Cresswell (1994). Although some WWI work is deliberately framed to speak to current patterns of militarism (e.g. Kinder, 2015; Hawkins, 2014), casting such inquires through an explicitly geographical lens promises to bring further insight into total war, its evolution, and our changing understanding of conflict.

With these motivations in mind, I am proposing a session at the 2018 AAG meeting on critical military geographies with a special emphasis on the First World War. Submissions from a diversity of subfields and employing a variety of methodologies are welcomed. Although papers with a strong focus on the Great War are particularly encouraged, papers on other conflicts will also be considered. A ‘pre CFP’ issued some weeks ago has already stirred nearly enough interest to compose a full session. Should there be sufficient further interest in Great War geographies of militarism and its resonances, I will propose a second session. Please submit abstracts by October 18 and direct your 8-digit program identification number and any questions to angela.cunningham@colorado.edu.

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