

14 — 18 Mission CENTENAIRE

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE:

THE MAJOR BATTLES OF 1916

CALL FOR PAPERS

The French Commission for the Centenary of the Great War, 1914-1918 (Mission du Centenaire 14-18) and its Scientific Council are organizing an international conference in Paris, 22, 23 and 24 of June 2016 about “The Major Battles of 1916.”

1. Problematic

The commemoration of the battles of 1916 runs the risk of treating the latter as if they are self-evident and thus of reducing them to their purely military aspects, whereas the very use of the term “battle” is anything but self-evident. What Maurice Agulhon described as: “a combined series of assaults, of attempts to break through the front or at least to ‘gnaw away’ at the enemy’s defensive lines and so push back the front” stands in sharp contrast to previous meanings of the term “battle.” Indeed, we might ask what a “battle” is in relation to operations covered by the terms: “war”, “campaign”, “offensive”, “combat” or “front”?

The conference will therefore take the “battles” of 1916 in their international dimensions as it is problematic.

Its object is two-fold: first, to advance knowledge by broadening perspectives and introducing international comparison; second, to introduce a broad audience to the approaches that have renewed the history of the battles of 1916 in recent years, notably on fronts other than the western front.

The timeframe is the whole of the year 1916.

The conference will encompass all the major battles, wherever they occurred and whatever their form and nature. This includes naval battles. The three great battles of Verdun, the Somme and the Brusilov offensive in Galicia will naturally occupy a central place. However, the interdependence of these battles and the desire for a comparative approach between different battles and fronts, make any narrow definition of the subject impossible.

The conference will be organised around three themes.

Constructing battle:

Battle was constructed first in the minds of the actors who conceived it and defined its temporal and spatial dimensions, decided on its organisation and made strategic and tactical choices. Those who took part, from the ordinary soldier to the commanders in chief, also constructed battles on the spot. Witnesses constructed them, too, whether as nurses, journalists or eventually through films. Civilians likewise constructed the battle by “public opinion,” by their prior imagery of battle, by their emotions and through the tales told by the “survivors” of battle. Words were crucial, for they inscribed a new reality in the field of experience, a reality of which by definition there was no prior knowledge.

Finally, battle was constructed retrospectively by the authorities that drew up the list of battles, by eyewitness literature, by histories and by commemorations that ranged from simple reminders to full-blown myths. Narrating battle was at the heart of its construction.

To sum up, the question is how the battle was constructed (or reconstructed):

By words

By actors

By the circulation of information and the tales of “survivors”

By memory, myths and historiography.

Experiencing battle:

The question here is how to reconstruct the experience of the soldiers in a way that sees them as more than suffering victims. This will be addressed by various criteria: the prior experience of combat, the relationship between space and time, the material realities of terrain and weather, the moment of intervention in a battle, bodily experience and the length of time spent in the line. Also important are the different possible exits from battle: relief by new units, being taken prisoner (but not the subsequent experience of POWs), evacuation with wounds, refusing to obey orders, desertion and fraternisation.

The experience of battle also encompasses the ideas that soldiers had of themselves and of others (the enemy, their commanders, civilians) in the midst of battle. It will be important to identify battlefield learning as this evolved, i.e. knowledge about weapons and their effects and also about terrain, both by the soldiers but also by the officers (detailed mapping, aerial photography).

Of interest, too, is the place of combat within the battle. Combat evolved from one front to another in relation to changing weapons, tactical ideas, unit organisation and the accumulation of experience. Being in battle does not necessarily mean engaging in combat; conversely, combat is not enough to make a battle.

To sum up: the question here is that of the practices and representations of battle in space and time:

Space and different bodily experiences

The experience of space and the question of scale

The experience of battle in terms of its duration

The use of weapons: combat within battle and the changes in combat in 1916

Representations of self and other in battle

Exiting battle: relief, capture, wounding, desertion, refusal to obey, fraternization.

Supplying battle:

Supplying battle is first and foremost a question of men. The manpower crisis is a central subject, with repercussions on military mobilization, the organization of units, command (how many officers in the line had been there since 1914?). It is also an international issue, since allies reinforced each other and transferred troops between fronts and sectors. It also entails the overestimation by each side of its own and enemy losses.

Supply is a matter, too, of feeding the combatants, which was a considerable undertaking, without forgetting their horses (a major source of draft power). Battlefield archaeology has much to teach us in this regard, as does socio-economic history. It is also a question of supplying the *matériel* (weapons, munitions, aircraft, lorries etc.) required by a battle: logistics was a decisive dimension entailing collaboration between allies that has barely been studied.

Finally, new forms of industrial mobilization raise an even broader question: that of civilians and their mobilization or re-mobilization. Supplying a battle means sustaining morale in the rear as well as on the front.

To sum up: this final theme deals with everything needed to make battle function:

The manpower crisis and transfers of men and *matériel* between fronts

Feeding the soldiers

Producing *matériel*

Ensuring the logistic of battle

Sustaining or reinforcing morale on the front and at home; re-mobilizations

SCIENTIFIC COUNCIL

The conference “The Major Battles of 1916.” is monitored by the Scientific Council of the French Commission for the Centenary of the Great War, 1914-1918 (please refer to <http://centenaire.org/fr/espace-scientifique/le-conseil-scientifique-de-la-mission-du-centenaire>) and more specifically by:

M. Stéphane AUDOIN-ROUZEAU, Directeur d'études à l'EHESS, président du Centre international de recherche de l'Historial de la Grande Guerre de Péronne

M. Nicolas BEAUPRÉ, Maître de conférences en histoire contemporaine, université Blaise Pascal, Clermont-Ferrand

M. Rémy CAZALS, Professeur émérite d'histoire contemporaine, université de Toulouse 2-Jean Jaurès

M. François COCHET, Professeur d'histoire contemporaine, université de Lorraine-Metz

M. Frédéric GUELTON, Historien, ancien chef du département de l'armée de terre – Service Historique de la Défense (SHD)

M. John HORNE, Professeur émérite d'histoire contemporaine, Trinity College, Dublin

M. Gerd KRUMEICH, Professeur émérite d'histoire moderne et contemporaine, université de Düsseldorf

M. Philippe NIVET, Professeur d'histoire contemporaine, université de Picardie-Jules Verne

M. Nicolas OFFENSTADT, Professeur invité, université de Francfort-sur-Oder (Viadrina)

M. Antoine PROST, Professeur émérite d'histoire contemporaine, université de Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne, président du conseil scientifique de la Mission du Centenaire

2. Organisation

The conference will last three days in late June 2016 and will be held in Paris.

Papers will not be read out by their authors but will be summarized in a report presented by a *rapporteur* in order to facilitate a broad discussion, during which the authors will be able to express their ideas.

The working languages of the conference will be French, English and German, with simultaneous translation.

Papers in Russian will be accepted.

Proposals for communication plans must reach the scientific secretariat of the Mission du Centenaire 14-18, 109 Boulevard Malesherbes, 75008 PARIS, (alexandre.lafon@centenaire.org) before the 4th of January 2016. They should consist in an outline of not more than 1,000 words.

The Scientific Council will examine the proposals. Those selected must be fully received by the end of March 2016, in order to allow their translation into French if necessary and for the *rapporteurs* to draft their reports on time.

In addition to the regular sessions consisting of the rapporteurs' presentation of the papers followed by the general discussion, there will be three or four keynote speeches, including one to open and close the conference. It is also hoped that at the end of the conference two daylong (but mutually exclusive) battlefield visits will be organized, one to Verdun and the other to Somme.