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16th British Cultural Studies Conference

Britain at War
Rostock, 17-19 November 2005

Under Tony Blair's premiership Britain has gone to war five times (Operation Desert Fox in Iraq 1998, Yugoslavia 1999, Sierra Leone 2000, Afghanistan 2001 and Iraq 2003). Most of these campaigns were short, and in four of the five Britain was the junior partner of another military power. If this arrangement is of a more recent stamp, the willingness of British politicians to wage war over threatened or coveted zones of influence is not.

Indeed, one will be hard put to find a decade in the twentieth century when Britain was not involved in some military conflict. Those who believe that the Victorian age was more peaceful, framed as it seems by only the Crimean and the Boer Wars, will be surprised to learn in Ian Beckett's recent book on the subject that the Victorians went to war no less than 226 times! And, of course, one can go back much further in history. For the last three hundred years British governments – and they were not alone in this – have considered war as a perfectly legitimate instrument of foreign policy and economic expansion. An important side of that historical dimension is obviously Britain's rise as a Great Power, and its decline in the twentieth century.

Crucially, after the Civil War and Revolution very few of these wars were fought on British soil. The din of battle remained decently distant – until the Blitz. Moreover, Britain, in contrast to France or Germany, has been spared the trauma of defeat and occupation.

These historical experiences have shaped British attitudes to war. Britain's pride in its military past is visible everywhere: in monuments nationwide, in the banners on display in churches, in commemorations and marches, in the well-kept cemeteries in foreign lands.

More recently, anyone living in Britain for some time will have been confronted with the pervasive presence of Nazi Germany and the Second World War in the public mind, from the Colditz episodes on TV to the tabloids' 'militarisation' of England versus Germany football matches.

The Conference should address these deep-seated and long-held habits of mind. We invite historical, political and socio-psychological examinations of the subject. We are interested in cultural representations of all aspects of war, from the battlefield to the home front, especially in such media as feature film, television series, documentary and photography. We would like speakers to reflect on commemorations and exhibitions, on the role of the public school OTCs and the work of the War Graves Commissions. We welcome investigations of war propaganda and media campaigns, of the stereotyping and demonisation of the enemy, but also of the actions and treatment of war resisters.

Suggestions for papers should be accompanied by an abstract (c. 150 words) and reach us not later than 31 January 2005. We shall try to notify speakers by early April. Bear in mind that the 2005 Bamberg Anglistentag will also host a section on 'Violence and War in Anglophone Culture' and that more strictly literary critical papers might be better placed there.

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