Call for papers

Initiations?
Primordial Experiences of the First World War

International Conference organised at the Péronne Historial, France
30th June - 2nd July 2014

In November 2011, the Research Center of the Péronne Historial organised a conference on the anticipation of warfare before 1914. For the 1914 Centenary, the Center is now preparing a conference on the unanticipated: how did contemporaries make sense of the primordial experiences that marked the conflict and shaped its representations?

Beware Marc Bloch’s caveat regarding “embryogenic obsession”! We do not seek to argue that the First World War was necessarily a foundational experience for its participants. Proposals are encouraged to question the very concepts of “primordial experiences,” “first times,” and “initiations.”

Papers are not restricted to that which was truly “new” during the First World War; proposals might instead attempt to understand the emotions and sensations as felt for the first time by contemporaries.

We must look beyond 1914, past societies’ and soldiers’ baptisms of fire, to apply the “first time” as a historical tool to better understand the First World War experience.

The Western Front is only one theater among many; proposals are encouraged to examine these concepts on other fronts and from various comparative perspectives. Multi-disciplinary approaches, also encouraged, might draw from anthropology, psychology, or law.
Conference themes

1. Initiations
This panel addresses foundational experiences and the other kinds of “initiations,” broadly defined. Linked to the war’s environments, these might include: training soldiers; baptisms of fire; discovery of the battlefield; re-learning the injured body... Initiations need not be restricted to 1914, and might include experiences linked to the introduction of gas and tanks. Works of military history are welcome, including proposals related to primary groups and learning curves.

2. Movements
The second session examines the spatial and social meanings of “the first time,” and includes both physical and mental experiences of displacement. Papers might address how individuals adapt to new surroundings—in spaces real or imagined. Collective experiences of displacement in wartime (for e.g mobilization, desertion, strategic troop movements, exodus, or deportation) might be approached as social histories on various levels of analysis.

3. Separations and encounters
Relationships between individuals are central to the conference; papers might address how these rapports were refashioned by war. Proposals might focus on separations between lovers, friends, family members, colleagues... or on encounters that helped build wartime identities. First contacts are central: experience of occupation, meetings between allies, commerce of all kinds... Papers might focus on linguistic, social, political, or religious encounters. Transnational perspectives are particularly encouraged.

4. Senses and emotions
This panel is based on a history of emotions and senses—first blood, first tears, first fear, first smells. In other words: first contact, physical or psychological, with war and its violent nature. How were these events felt and described? Papers need not be limited to the manifestation of emotions; proposals might instead pay particular attention to the narratives written by this history. The influence of period literature, medicine, psychology, and military science might be considered.

5. Interpretations
The final panel will investigate how contemporaries constructed wartime narratives. Proposals might recall the early forms of commemorative language and early museographic attempts. Papers are encouraged to place these early interpretations within the wider political, social, ideological, and economic discourse of the interwar period.

Scientific Advisory Board:
The members of the directory board of the International Research Center of the Péronne Historial act as the scientific advisory board for the conference.

Organising Committee:
Nicolas Beaupré (UBP Clermont, IUF), Franziska Heimburger (EHess), Benoît Majerus (Université du Luxembourg), Manon Pignot (Université de Picardie, IUF), Emmanuel Saint-Fuscien (EHess), Alexandre Sumpf (Université de Strasbourg), Gene Tempest (Yale), Arndt Weinrich (German Historical Institute Paris) and for the CIRHGG its director Caroline Fontaine.

Your proposal may be submitted in English or in French (the two working languages of the conference) by email to peronne2014@ehess.fr by 30th May 2013. Please include a proposal of max. 500 words and a brief academic CV.