Call for Papers: A Holiday from War? “Resting” behind the Lines during the First World War

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Organised by Sarah Montin (EA PRISMES) and Clémentine Thomas-Disset (EA CREW)

Confirmed Keynote Speaker: Tim Kendall (University of Exeter)

His men threw the discus and the javelin, and practiced archery on the shore, and their horses, un-harnessed, munched idly on cress and parsley from the marsh, the covered chariots housed in their masters’ huts. Longing for their warlike leader, his warriors roamed their camp, out of the fight. (Iliad, Book II)

Situated a few kilometers behind the front lines, the rear area is the space where soldiers rotated after several days burrowed at the front or in reserve lines, surfacing from the trenches to join rest stations, training installations, ammunition and food supply depots, hospitals, brothels, command headquarters or soldiers’ shelters. In that space in-between which is neither the site of combat nor that of civilian life, the soldiers were less exposed to danger and followed a barracks routine enlivened by relaxing activities which aimed to restore morale. If some soldiers found there a form of rest far from the fury of the guns, others suffered from the encroaching discipline, the imposition of training or the promiscuity with soldiers that were no longer brothers-in-arms in this buffer zone where they spent 3/5ths of their time. Both a place of abandonment and a place of control, the rear area merges at times with the civilian world as it occupies farms and villages and hosts non-combatants such as doctors, nurses or volunteers. With battles being waged close by, the “back of the front” (Paul Cazin) is a meeting place for soldiers of different armies and allied countries, as well as for officers and privates, soldiers and civilians, men and women, foreign troops and locals living in occupied zones. The rear area is not only a spatial concept but also a temporal one: it is a moment of reprieve, of passing forgetfulness and illusive freedom; a moment of “liberated time” (Thierry Hardier and Jean-François Jagielski) indicating a period of relative rest between combat and leave, a short-
lived respite before returning to the front. If the combatant is entitled to repose and time to himself, military regulations demand that he never cease to be a soldier. As such we have to consider these moments of relaxation within the strict frame of military life at the front and the role played by civilian organizations such as the YMCA or the Salvation Army, who managed the shelters for soldiers on the Western Front.

What do the soldiers do when they are not on the battlefield? The broadening of the definition of war experience in recent historiography has transformed our spatial and temporal understanding of the conflict, shifting the scope away from the front lines and the activities of combat. Beyond the battlefield and its traditional martial associations emerges another representation of the warrior and the soldier, along with another experience of the war. Though seemingly incompatible with war experience, certain recreational activities specific to civilian life make their way to the rear area with the approval of military command. Moments of relaxation and leisure are encouraged in order to maintain or restore the soldier’s physical and emotional well-being, thus sustaining the war effort. They also ensure that the soldier is not entirely cut off from “normal” life and bring comfort to those who are not granted leave. Liberated time is not free time, just as periods without war are not periods of peace. These “holidays from war” are not wholly synonymous with rest as the men are almost constantly occupied (review, training exercises, instruction) in order to fight idleness and ensure the soldiers stay fit for duty. The rear is thus also a place of heightened collective practices such as sports, hunting and fishing, walking, bathing, discussions, creation of trench journals, film projections, concert parties, theatre productions, religious services as well as individual activities such as reading, writing and artistic creation.

Between communion with the group and meditative isolation, experiences vary from one soldier to another, depending on social origins, level of education and rank, all of which take on a new meaning at the rear where the egalitarian spirit fostered during combat is often put to the test. Sociability differs in periods of fighting and periods of recovery and is not always considered positively by the soldiers. However, despite the tensions induced by life at the rear, these “holidays from war” and spells of idleness are often represented as idyllic “pastoral moments” (Paul Fussell) in the visual and written productions of the combatants. The enchanted interlude sandwiched between two bouts of war becomes thus a literary and artistic trope, evoking, by contrast, a fleeting yet exhilarating return to life, innocence and harmony, a rediscovery of the pleasures of the body following its alienation and humiliation during combat.

In order to further our understanding of the historical, political and aesthetic concerns of life at the rear, long considered a parenthesis in the experience of war, this interdisciplinary conference will address, but will not be limited to, the following themes:

The ideological, medical and administrative construction of the notion of “rest” in the First World War (as it applied to combatants but also auxiliary corps and personnel); Paramilitary, recreational and artistic activities at the rear; the organization of activities in particular leisure and entertainment, the role of the army and independent contractors (civilian organizations, etc.);
Sociability between soldiers (hierarchy, tensions, camaraderie); the rear area as meeting place with the other (between soldiers/auxiliary personnel, combatants, locals, men/women, foreign troops, etc.), site of passage, exploration, initiation or “return to the norm” (“rest huts” built to offer a “home away from home”)...
from home”), testimonies from inhabitants of the occupied zones;
Articulations and dissonances between community life and time to oneself, collective experience and individual experience;
The historic and artistic conceptualization of the rear area, specific artistic and literary modes at the rear by contrast with writings at the front;
Staging life at the rear: scenes of country-life, idyllic representations of non-combat as farniente or hellscapes, bathing parties or penitentiary universes, the figure of the soldier as dilettante, flâneur and solitary rambler, in the productions (memoirs, accounts, correspondence, novels, poetry, visual arts, etc.) of combatants and non-combatants;
Cultural, political and media (re)construction of the figure of the “soldier at rest” (war photography, postcards, songs, etc.); representations of the male and female body at rest, constructions of a new model of masculinity (sexuality and sport), and their place in war production.

In order to foster dialogue between the Anglophone, Francophone and Germanophone areas of study, the conference will mainly focus on the Western Front. However, proposals dealing with other fronts will be examined. Presentations will preferably be in English.

Please send a 250-word proposal and a short bio before November 20, 2017, to montin.sarah@gmail.com and clementine.tholas@univ-paris3.fr. Notification of decision: December 15, 2017.

Proposals will be reviewed by the Conference scientific committee:

Jakub Kazecki (Bates College)
Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec (Université de Caen)
Catherine Lanone (Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle)
Mark Meigs (Université Paris Diderot)
Sarah Montin (Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle)
John Mullen (Université de Rouen)
Karen Randell (Nottingham Trent University)
Serge Ricard (Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle)
Clémentine Tholas-Disset (Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle)

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