

## World War I: Social and Cultural Perspectives

History 640  
Sarah Curtis

Spring 2015  
W 4:10-6:55

In this seminar, we will explore how European society was turned upside down during the "Great War" from 1914 to 1918 and in its immediate aftermath. Using primary documents, memoirs, fiction, poetry, film footage, images, and historical studies, we will examine such issues as the trauma of trench warfare, shell shock, women's work on the home front, the propaganda used to promote the war, objectors to the war, strikes and worker discontent, women's roles and gender anxieties, the "lost generation," and the construction of memory after the war. This seminar is not intended to be a diplomatic or military history of World War I, but rather an exploration of the societal and cultural transformations that accompanied the strains of Europe's first total war. The focus will be on the British, French, and German experience of war, but you may consider the other fronts in your research paper if you wish.

Besides introducing you to the cultural and social aspects of World War I, this course also requires you to write a major research paper from primary sources. It serves as a capstone course for your history major and History 300 is a prerequisite for this course. Some background in modern European history is also useful.

### Learning outcomes:

1. Students will demonstrate knowledge of the specific impact of World War I on European society and culture. More broadly, they will become aware of the transformative power of war on society and culture.
2. Through class discussion and short essays, students will learn to analyze and interpret primary sources about World War I, including letters, memoirs, fiction, poetry, film footage, and images. By reading and discussing secondary sources, they will also become familiar with historical debates about the social and cultural meanings of the war.
3. Students will demonstrate the ability to do historical research and to communicate the results within the context of major historiographical debates, using the conventions of historical writing, through the research and writing of a major (20-25 pp.) research paper and a short oral presentation.

### Office hours and contact information:

M 2:30-4, W 1-2, and by appointment  
office location: Science 267  
e-mail: scurtis@sfsu.edu

phone: (415) 338-2250  
website: <https://faculty.sfsu.edu/~scurtis/home>

**Reading:**

The following books are available for purchase at the bookstore:

Tardi, *Goddamn This War!*

Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*

Martha Hanna, *Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War*

Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*

Helen Zenna Smith, *Not So Quiet*

This book is not at the bookstore but is plentiful online (try AbeBooks or Amazon).

Jean-Yves Le Naour, *The Living Unknown Soldier*

Other readings, as indicated on the syllabus, are available on iLearn. Readings marked ER are available via the electronic reserve button (bottom right corner) on iLearn.

**Course requirements:**

The format of the seminar will be student-generated discussion. Students should come to class having completed the assigned reading and prepared to discuss it. Regular attendance is therefore very important. More than one missed class will affect your grade. **Please telephone or e-mail me in advance if you have to miss class.**

In order to facilitate discussion, students are asked to prepare responses to the questions listed under each syllabus topic. You are required to turn in five of these responses (out of seven) in the course of the semester. Each response should be typed, double-spaced, and no longer than two pages. **Late responses will not be accepted.**

The major writing project for the semester will be a 20-25 pp. research paper based on primary sources. See handout for some ideas about topics and sources. We will also have a library session with the history librarian, Kendra Van Cleave (kendrav@sfsu.edu), who will help you develop search strategies for finding both primary and secondary sources. A proposal and bibliography for the research paper is due on **March 11**. You will also be expected to give a short presentation on your research, scheduled for one of the last three weeks. The final paper is due **May 20**.

**Grading:**

Grades will be determined as follows: response questions 25% (5% each), proposal and bibliography 10%, research paper 35%, presentation 10%, class discussion 20%. If you are unable to complete the course requirements by the end of semester, it is your responsibility to withdraw from the course. I will issue no instructor-initiated withdrawals or incompletes. Student-initiated incompletes are reserved for serious medical excuses (with documentation) or other natural disasters within the last three weeks of the semester. The last day to drop a course without a "W" is Feb. 6; the last day with a "W" (except in extreme circumstances) is April 24.

Students with disabilities who need reasonable accommodations are encouraged to contact the instructor. The Disability Programs and Resource Center (DPRC) is available to facilitate the reasonable accommodations process. The DPRC is located in the Student Service Building and can be reached by telephone (voice/TTY 415-338-2472) or by email (dprc@sfsu.edu).

**Graduate students:**

Graduate students are eligible to take this course for graduate credit. Please see me for details. All graduate students will be assigned a week of the course for which they will be expected to do additional reading and present it to the class. You should come see me to discuss your reading and presentation at least two weeks before your assigned class period. This assignment will be included in your class discussion grade.

**SCHEDULE:**

**January 28**                    **Prologue**

**February 4**                    **Outbreak**

Hanna, *Your Death Would Be Mine*, intro, chap. 1  
Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, chap. 2-3  
Tardi, *Goddamn this War*, 1914  
War poetry (iLearn)  
Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, excerpts (ER)

**Question: According to these sources, how did Europeans feel about war when it started?**

**February 11**                    **Stalemate**

Hanna, *Your Death Would Be Mine*, chap. 2  
Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, chaps. 4-5  
Tardi, *Goddamn this War*, 1915, 1916

**Question: What were the conditions of war as reported in these sources?**

**February 18**

Meet in Library 285 for workshop with Kendra van Cleave  
Begin February 25 reading

**February 25**                    **Trench Warfare**

*All Quiet on the Western Front* (entire)  
Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, chap. 9  
War poetry (iLearn)  
Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, “The Great Battle” (ER)

**Question: What is the attitude towards war as reported in the primary sources (AQWF, poetry, Jünger)?**

**March 4**                      **Women at War**

Smith, *Not So Quiet* (entire)

Hanna, *Your Death Would Be Mine*, chap. 3

**Question: How is *Not So Quiet* a response to *All Quiet on the Western Front*?**

**March 11**                      **War Wounds**

Rivers, "The Repression of War Experience" (link on iLearn)

(<http://net.lib.byu.edu/estu/wwi/comment/rivers.htm>)

War poetry (iLearn)

**Research proposal and preliminary bibliography due** (in-class roundtable)

**March 18**                      **Antiwar**

Hanna, *Your Death Would Be Mine*, chaps. 4-5, conclusion

Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, chap. 7

Tardi, *Goddamn this War*, 1917

*The Wipers Times* (excerpts) (iLearn)

**Question: How was 1917 a particularly difficult year?**

**March 25**                      **SPRING BREAK**

**April 1**                      **The Lost Generation**

Le Naour, *The Living Unknown Soldier*

Tardi, *Goddamn this War*, 1918

War poetry (iLearn)

**Question: What does *The Living Unknown Soldier* teach us about grief and the mourning process after WWI?**

**April 8**                      **War Without End?**

Mary Louise Roberts, "A Matter of Life or Death" in *Civilization without Sexes* (ER)

Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, chaps. 8, 10

Tardi, *Goddamn this War*, 1919

**Question: How did politics and culture in the interwar period continue to reflect war anxieties?**

**April 15**                      **Individual meetings with instructor**

**April 22**

**April 29**

You will be assigned one of these dates. Bring to this meeting a complete bibliography, a preliminary outline, and a thesis statement.

**May 6**                              **Presentations**

**May 13**                             **Presentations**

**May 20**                            **Presentations**  
**Final paper due in class**