The one-day workshop “Enmity, Loyalty, Empire and Nation; Languages in the Great War” was jointly organized by the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Social Science History (University of Vienna) and the Centre for War Studies (Trinity College Dublin) which hosted the event.

The workshop aimed to discuss the speakers’ current research on the role of languages during World War One but also to link their work through a series of thematic, historiographical and archival questions. Since there is a significant gap in the historiography of languages and translation at war, speakers were asked to select examples from different multiethnic and multilingual empires and armies (such as Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain) to delineate common challenges, frameworks and particularities, but also to trace an outline for possible future research on the question of languages during war.

Dr Isa Blumi (Georgia State University) employed the Yemen as a microcosm of linguistic entanglements where the Ottoman army was forced to fight a counter-insurgency, which required personnel with requisite language skills. His conclusions illustrated the importance of contingency in such fluid situations. This stood in contrast to Dr Tamara Scheer’s contribution (Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for Social Science History) which focused on the problems inherent in maintaining the morale of soldiers in a multi-ethnic army, whose ethnic identities (and hence their languages) were seen as disloyal to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Her research highlighted the way in which multi-lingual recruitment; training and instruction manuals were used to in an attempt to remedy this linguistic fragmentation. Dr Franziska Heimburger (EHESS, Paris) compared the ways in which French, British and German armies prepared their soldiers and officers for encounters with allied and enemy languages. Similarly to Tamara Scheer, her work demonstrated the level of preparation put into this by these armies while highlighting telling conceptual and cultural differences between their approaches.

These case studies were book-ended by two papers which expanded the timeframe by providing examples from before and after WW1. Dr Sylvie Kleinman (TCD) used the example of French strategy for invasions of Ireland in the late 18th and early 19th century addressing the problem of how to "translate" political interests and aims for the local population. Prof Hilary Footitt (University of Reading) concluded the workshop with an overview of post-1918 problems with a particular focus on historiography and methodologies when dealing with languages at war.

Thanks to the Trinity Long Room Hub at Trinity College Dublin we are able to provide podcasts of the papers.

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Dr. Tamara Scheer