Centre for War Studies, Trinity College Dublin
Research Seminar

Monday, 5 November 2018, at 5.30 pm
Arts Building, Room 6009 (Level 6):

Dr Daniel Steinbach (University of Exeter)

Photographic Encounters:
British, Germans, and Africans in the First World War

Abstract
The First World War was not only the first truly global war, but also a turning point in the history of war photography: Ordinary soldiers were able to photograph and document the people and places they encountered in non-European theatres of war – creating a multi-faceted visual archive. These photographs not only allow insights into how Europeans captured their encounters with colonial soldiers and civilians, but also break the silence around the colonial subjects participating in the war, who were often non-literate and did not leave behind many written records.

This talk is based on photographs created by British soldiers shipped to fight against the German colonial army in East Africa. The particular circumstances of encountering Africa ‘accidently’ – that is, without specifically volunteering for service in the colonies and without any practical and intellectual preparation – allows for a rare insight into the perception of Africa by British men of different class backgrounds. Especially the photographs these men created, more so than their diaries and letters, portray their attempt to capture their encounter with the non-European world in a manner shaped by contemporary imperial aesthetics and popular anthropological perceptions. Arguably these photographs also provide insights into the activities of African soldiers during this campaign whose history is almost exclusively written on European evidence. Finally, these photographs document the destruction of the colonial infrastructure – a backbone of the myth of a ‘European civilising mission’ – and the devastating impact of the war in Africa.