

**“Still at War!  
From Poison Gas to Drones”**

**European Cultural Days 2014  
Opening Address on Friday, 16 May 2014**

*Prof. Dr. Caroline Y. Robertson-von Trotha*

– original speech held in German; check against delivery –

## **INTRODUCTION**

Dear Lord Mayor Dr. Mentrup, dear political representatives, distinguished city councillors, distinguished speakers, dear representatives of the press, ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Centre for Cultural and General Studies at the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, I would like to very warmly welcome you to the opening night of our international symposium. Lord Mayor, you have kindly pointed out that the Centre for Cultural and General Studies as well as its predecessor institution have been organising symposiums within the framework of Karlsruhe’s European Cultural Days for quite some time now. This is the 12th time we have organised such a symposium, the first one being in 1992. So I would like to thank everyone who has made this possible, for your interest over the years and for your trust in our work – as a representative of all those who have supported us, I would like to welcome the Festival Director and Head of the Cultural Office of the city of Karlsruhe, Dr. Susanne Asche.

When we decided on the title of our symposium, “Still at War! From Poison Gas to Drones”, one thing was clear to us: a great degree of continuity in the phenomenon of war can easily be demonstrated, even if war occurs in very different forms and to very different extents. This applies to the time long before the so-called “Great War”, the First World War, which is the focus of the European Cultural Days, but also of course for the time after the end of the Second World War. We could not have guessed how topical our theme would be: It finds expression in the certainly very exaggerated yet not entirely unfounded assertion by the Ukrainian Interim Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk that Russia wants to instigate a Third World War. After all, Europe once again finds itself confronted with an unexpected and quite explosive situation. Europe: the consensus and simultaneously the great merit of postwar European politics; and it is even a guarantor of peace – wars take place elsewhere. In the April survey of the Allensbach Institute, when asked the question “What does the European Union mean for you?”, 59% of respondents answered “political stability” and 61% “the security that people will no longer wage war.”

In the heart of Europe, there are less and less people who have personally experienced the horrors of war. The younger generation of our students was born after the end of the Cold War. This standpoint allows for three observations to be made:

1. Peacekeeping is an ongoing and active process that must be carried out on many levels.
2. Empathic sympathy with the suffering of civil societies caused by armed conflicts in many parts of the world is often not possible in the democratic states of Europe due to a lack of personal experience with such suffering.

3. Questions of a generally accepted global corporate social responsibility can easily fall out of view when it comes to answering the question of if and how Germany should take part in multi-lateral crisis interventions.

In the current context of the Crimea and Ukraine, we can list a few phenomena as potential theses that we will discuss in a broader context over the course of our symposium. The dialectics between peace and war, between geopolitical interests and security policy, between an ethics of responsibility and an ethics of conviction, and between cultures of remembering, forgetting, and forgiving make up the complex context within which we want to, at the very least, delve into some prominent issues. The question of cultures of remembering and forgetting, of identities and how those identities are presented in the media, comes up time and time again. It is, in my opinion, not possible to find a final solution to this issue. The cultures of remembering and the scientific analysis of those cultures are too different. Each generation must approach this set of problems anew, and must take this on as a central social task.

Another point to which Herfried Münkler has also drawn attention is the interaction of random constellations, the personality structures of policy makers, and finally the triggering role of individual events, all of which together can lead to (military) action. In his much-discussed work *Der große Krieg* (The Great War), the renowned political scientist presents the so-called question of guilt in a very nuanced way, and sketches out the reasons why the First World War – contrary to all rational considerations – did not end in the late autumn of 1914. The Battle of the Vistula River alone, in September and October 1914, led to 42,000 dead and wounded. Had the war ended then, we would not have seen the introduction of poison gas in 1915 under the guidance of the scientist Fritz Haber, who taught and conducted research in Karlsruhe. According to the calculations of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the number of poison gas victims of the First World War amounts to 91,000 dead and 1.2 million who were injured more or less seriously.

### **Still at War!**

Still at war! In the social sciences, the following questions remain central, and very controversial: to what extent can (the readiness to do) violence be viewed as an anthropological constant, and to what extent can violence be traced back to social phenomena such as repression or living conditions that are perceived to be unjust? The degree to which ethnic, cultural, and religious group identities can be mobilised as factors that bolster violent conflicts, and the extent to which these appear in an amplified manner in the age of globalisation, remain questions of crucial significance. We unfortunately have to admit that under certain situational conditions and constellations – which are often unrecognisable in advance – the readiness to do violence can be mobilised alarmingly quickly. From an empirical point of view, there are an enormous number of different forms of violence that occur both within and outside of warfare – these can be implemented in a strategic-instrumental manner, or else can be carried out as individual and “illegitimate” war crimes, which do indeed occur on a large scale.

Numerous examples remind us that the mistreatment of prisoners of war is in no way limited to dictatorial powers or so-called rogue regimes. We can still recall the pictures from the Abu Ghraib torture scandal. In retrospect as well, myths about the good treatment of prisoners of war that we once so gladly believed are undergoing revisions: the newly published book *Cruel Britannia* by Ian Cobain, for example, shocked the British public. According to him, British soldiers tortured German prisoners in the Second World War. The systematic humiliation of the enemy belongs to this category and extends from strategic military actions to large-scale attacks on the civilian population, as in – I am inclined to call it the “classic case” – the rape of women, often in front of their families.

It is almost banal to note that the phenomenon of armed conflict can be observed at all times and in all eras, and thus demonstrates a great degree of continuity, despite all the changes. In his 1993 book *A History of Warfare*, the renowned British military historian John Keegan, who passed away

in 2012, reminds us that wars are almost as old as humanity, that they are thousands of years older than states, diplomacy, and strategy. In this context, he criticises the now-famous thesis of Carl von Clausewitz about war being the continuation of politics through other means. In particular, he criticises Clausewitz's propagation of "absolute" war, which Keegan viewed as a recipe for the twentieth century's wars of annihilation.

Historical military research, war research, and peace studies research are now their own differentiated disciplines. They are now interdisciplinary in orientation and have increasingly distanced themselves from the simplistic approaches of descriptive observation. We were thus able to invite established experts from the fields of research and practice. I would like to very warmly welcome the presenters of our symposium and I would like to thank you all for coming.

In this evening's keynote address by Dr. David Rodin of the Oxford Institute of Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict, we will be investigating the question: "Can Humanity Tame War?"

Tomorrow, at the beginning of the symposium at the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, we will hear the opening lecture of Prof. Dr. Herfried Münkler of the Humboldt University of Berlin. His reflections, under the title "Learning in the War – Learning from the War", as well as the following lecture by Prof. Dr. John Horne of Trinity College Dublin on the topic of "The Changing Face of War in the Twentieth Century" will provide us with further foundational analysis and more in-depth questioning.

### **New Wars and New Techniques**

There is no doubt that technology and the continued development of weapons technologies in particular play a crucial role in both waging and preventing war. The discussion is often focused on the relations between the economics of global trade and the current debate about profits from dealing in arms; the functions and networks of lobbyists in this milieu; the responsibility and reach of the relevant governments and parliamentary supervisory bodies; and the level of success or failure of customs, police, and other institutions with regard to tackling the illegal weapons trade.

In the German Bundestag, there are renewed critical discussions about the structures and processes of the licensing procedures for weapons exports, with the goal of achieving "significantly more transparency and democratic control". That's one part of it; the other part deals with the practice of paying bribes, which German weapons manufacturers and German producers of air defence systems also make use of. As a comprehensive study from Transparency International showed in 2012, this is still a very common practice. However, even if it sounds cynical: peacekeeping cannot mean keeping out of everything in order to let the "others" – whoever is meant by that term – do what they will. The Hamburg-based Working Group for Research on the Causes of War (AKUF) lists 238 wars from 1945 to 2007. According to conservative estimates, since 1997 alone ongoing violent conflicts have led to more than 6.7 million dead and even more wounded.

One can also engage in heated debates about the empirical data on the development, necessity, and scope of the defence budget. But when we were preparing this symposium, it seemed more important to single out two very fundamental questions. First: Is it possible to detect systematic changes in armed conflicts, and can the international community take adequate action with regard to these changes? Second: Can international law or even simply attempts at peacefully resolving conflicts keep up with the accelerating technological innovations and developments in weapons systems? The first question, which we will be investigating in tomorrow's midday session with an analysis of new wars, reveals important shifts in warfare, not all of which are entirely new. Many recent wars can be subsumed under the concept of asymmetric warfare, a form of engagement that is carried out by two parties that differ greatly with regard to their combat capabilities – these conflicts mostly occur at the expense of the civilian population.

## **A Balancing Act for Germany: Political Action between Ethics of Responsibility and Alliance Commitments**

In his speech to open the European Cultural Days, the President of the German Federal Constitutional Court, Prof. Dr. Andreas Voßkuhle, spelled out the constitutional basis for fulfilling – but also limiting – German participation in multilateral crisis interventions. From 1993 to 1994, a military contingent from the German Armed Forces took part in the United Nation's stabilisation mission in Somalia. This question of the participation of the German Armed Forces in international operations remains one of the most hotly debated. In a panel discussion tomorrow afternoon, we would therefore like to consider the German balancing act with regard to political action: between an ethics of conviction, an ethics of responsibility, and alliance commitments. Allow me to remind you: the still-valid foundation of the security policy of the Western European Union (WEU) was decided upon in the "Petersberg tasks" at the ministerial meeting in June 1992 at the Petersberg hotel near Bonn. Possible task domains of the armed forces of the then-new WEU states were defined as follows: "humanitarian and rescue tasks", "peacekeeping tasks", as well as "tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peacemaking".

### **Forgotten Wars**

We will also take up a topic that we believe has been irresponsibly abandoned in the public domain. Heidelberg University's Conflict Barometer shows that there have been 30 conflicts between 2011 and 2013 that reached the intensity level of a war. With the exception of the military disputes between the drug cartels and the government in Mexico, the main war zones were in sub-Saharan Africa as well as in the Near and Middle East. The primary countries affected were Somalia, Nigeria, Sudan and South Sudan, as well as Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan. As conflictmap.org has shown, in early 2013 Iran took up more space in news coverage than all the other conflicts put together. Iran's nuclear programme is certainly an extremely important topic, but what about all the regions in which people are killed on a daily basis, or in which people are suffering extreme hardship, or being forced to flee?

There are of course news broadcasts and programmes that cover these conflicts, such as the *Auslandsjournal* here in Germany. But where are the big documentary films, which could have immense importance in terms of education and raising awareness given television's broad level of acceptance and credibility? These could provide a more accurate picture of the complexity of the conflict situations, the difficulties involved in finding solutions, and the immense suffering of the people subject to these conflicts. Therefore: fewer romantic movies, thrillers, and questionable contests, and more of an effort to get at what is really going on in this world. This problem seemed so important to us that we made suppressed and forgotten military conflicts a theme of this gathering.

### **Ethics in Science and Military Research**

On Sunday we will turn to an always-controversial topic, namely the role of science in military research, or in what is called military research. The diverse makeup of the panel means that we can certainly expect an extremely heated debate – I hope, however, that the highly nuanced scientific contributions of the symposium and the arguments and viewpoints from the domain of practice will inform this debate.

It is fitting – and from my point of view it is even an obligation – for a large scientific institution such as KIT to critically examine one's own history together with the most recent insights and discourses that pertain to it. Public Science and Science in Dialogue assume open listening without – so far as possible – ideological or institutional preconditions. New and nuanced assessments and opinions must be possible on both sides. I would also like to remind you: scientists are always also citizens, and thus bear a special ethical responsibility. We are now familiar with the concept of the "citizen

scientist”, according to which citizens bring their knowledge from the domain of practice into that of science. The inverse concept of the “scientist citizen” is much less common, however.

With our concluding presentation, we will discuss the specific problem of Fritz Haber, the Nobel Prize laureate in Chemistry from Karlsruhe. He himself interpreted his role as a scientist in a disastrous manner, for he subordinated himself not only as a citizen but also as a researcher to the dictate/primacy of nationalism and not to the ethos of a reflective and independent science: “I see Archimedes as a role model who in times of peace served humanity through his scientific work, but who in times of war served his homeland, for the defence of which he devised war machines.”

I am pleased that we can once again complement the themes of the symposium with an artistic perspective through our always fruitful cooperation with the Baden State Theatre: I would like to invite you to the so-called bi-national performance “Gloire und Glanz” (Shine and Glory) tomorrow at 6 p.m. at the State Theatre, and to a reading of “Farben” (Colours) on Sunday at 3 p.m. in the State Theatre – these will only indirectly deal with Fritz Haber, for they focus on his wife Clara Immerwahr.

Ladies and gentlemen, quo vadis? **Still at War! From Poison Gas to Drones.** In the dispute over perceptions, some of the positions represented see a decreasing likelihood that the individual will die a violent death (Steven Pinker) – this is viewed as a consequence of historical progress, coexistence, conflict resolution through diplomacy, but also through technological developments. Others predict an even bloodier future for us, with the tendency to revert back to the archaic model of “absolute war”. I repeat: a world without war is currently unimaginable, but it is still a realisable utopia toward which an international community must work long and earnestly. In armed conflicts, comprehensively protecting the civilian population remains the top priority. Syria is the most striking example of our time, where a war with limitless brutality against the civilian population is taking place. Quo vadis? It is a matter of discussing, on the basis of sober analysis, the complex simultaneousities of the origins of war and the formats in which war is conducted, limited, and – of course – whenever possible prevented; but above all else, it is also a matter of acting accordingly. I hope our symposium can contribute to this. For history also teaches us that non-decisions can be the most disastrous of all. Thank you!