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From the Chair's Desk

Greetings from Bay State Road!

As chair of the History Department, I included in this issue of the newsletter essays from the Department of History's Sawyer seminar series that is focused on revisiting the narrative of the 20th century. The seminar series is open to all alumni and I hope if you are in the area you will consider joining us (times and dates are available on the department's web site at http://www.bu.edu/history/sawyer/). The next event will be a lecture by Cynthia Enloe to be held on January 27th. I've also included a summary of a recent event we held to honor Professor Barbara Diefendorf, who will be retiring at the end of the year.

In this season of giving, I'm hoping that you'll consider making a gift to support the History Department. While a small gift will enable a student to present original

research at a conference, a slightly larger gift lets a professor take students into the field or sends a student to an archive. You can rest assured that your donation will go directly to the department and help us to maintain its record of excellence in scholarship and community service.

Particularly in these times of tightened budgets, we rely more than ever on your generous gifts to be able to do the extraordinary and extracurricular things that often have a tremendous impact on our students. If you want to join us in enhancing the student experience, please visit the university's online giving form (bu.edu/give) and indicate that you'd like to support the History Department in the designation box.

Thank you for supporting excellence in the History Department.
Please keep in touch! Send stories, jokes, adventures, misadventures, cautionary tales, and any other material to me at ferleger@bu.edu or just email history@bu.edu.

Louis Ferleger

Chair, Professor of History, History Department

The History Department Bids Farewell to Professor Diefendorf
By Katie Rice

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On October 23, 2014 the History Department hosted a Symposium titled “Wars of Conviction and the Cultural Legacies of War” to honor Professor Barbara Diefendorf, who plans to retire at the end of the semester. The event was hosted in style at the Boston University Castle and received a large attendance by both the faculty and students. Professors Brooke Blower, James Johnson, and James McCann all gave addresses, and Professor Jeffry Diefendorf delivered final remarks on behalf of Natalie Zemon Davis. It was clear to all who attended that Professor Diefendorf will be sorely missed, and that her career as a scholar, a writer, and a mentor all stand as examples of excellence in the field of history.

Opening remarks were delivered by Professor Phillip Haberkern, who shared some of Professor Diefendorf’s remarkable accomplishments, including the publication of two award-winning books and countless articles. He remarked, “It is clear that Professor Diefendorf has been, continues to be, and will be a massively productive scholar, who sets the bar incredibly, terrifyingly high.”

Following Professor Haberkern was Professor Blower, who discussed the lessons that contemporary historians can learn from early modern history. During her address,

Professor Blower described the excitement and enthusiasm that Professor Diefendorf's writing inspired in her own work, and remarked that the vivid, sensory stories expanded the methods and boundaries of history. Blower left the audience with the five life lessons for historians, according to Professor Diefendorf: 1) Pay attention to rock-throwers and arsonists, 2) Always check the price of grain, 3) Don't worry if the king burned all of your records, 4) Don't run away from dead cats, and finally, 5) Don't be seduced by swarthy knights in shining armor. Perhaps most importantly, Professor Blower reminded listeners that "Cultural History is not what you study, but how you study."

Professor McCann fondly discussed Professor Diefendorf's commitment to building a strong and supportive community within the History Department at B.U. He also praised her willingness to nurture and support his own PhD students, broadening their horizons beyond their fields of African history and guiding them as they explored the realm of social history. Professor McCann remarked that Professor Diefendorf is of the tradition that believes, "If we want to understand our current world and long-range future, we must also understand our longer-range past."

Professor Johnson discussed Professor Diefendorf's influence as a scholar, which ranges far beyond her own field of early modern French history. He began by remarking that Professor Diefendorf is a tribute to her own teachers—pioneers Nancy Rolker and Natalie Zemon Davis. He too was inspired by Professor Diefendorf's writing, which he called "immediate and concrete…vivid and particular." However, Professor Johnson considered Professor Diefendorf's greatest accomplishment to be her ability to take "remote and disturbing events and shown that they are relevant today."

To conclude the evening, Professor Diefendorf's husband, Jeffry Diefendorf, presented a few remarks from Barbara's own mentor, Natalie Zemon Davis titled, "Barbara Diefendorf: Historian, Teacher, Friend." Davis recalled Professor Diefendorf's "quiet intensity" as a graduate student at UCB, and described her as a trailblazer, master of language, and most importantly, a great friend. It was the perfect end to an evening that toasted Professor Diefendorf both as a historian and as a colleague.

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Reinterpreting the 20th Century: A Mellon Sawyer Seminar Series

By Zach Fredman, Mellon Fellow

Photographs by Niki Lefebvre, Mellon Fellow

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A large crowd gathered at the B.U. Photonics Center on the evening of September 30 to hear Georgetown's David Painter deliver the inaugural lecture in the History Department's Sawyer Seminar Series, "Reinterpreting the Twentieth Century."

Painter's talk, "Oil and the International History of the Twentieth Century," kicked off our 2014-2015 program. Painter is the first of eight speakers coming to B.U. from around the country to participate in this Mellon Foundation-funded series. Speakers seek to answer several overarching questions: What is the Big Story of the twentieth century? What turning points and new chronologies best reveal the century's meaning and significance? With what implications for the present day?

Painter argued that we cannot understand the international history of the twentieth century without first recognizing the role played by oil. Access to and management of oil resources, he contended, go a long way toward explaining the rise of American and Soviet superpower as well as the decline of European imperial powers.

Painter emphasized especially the central place of oil in wartime. Across the Pacific,

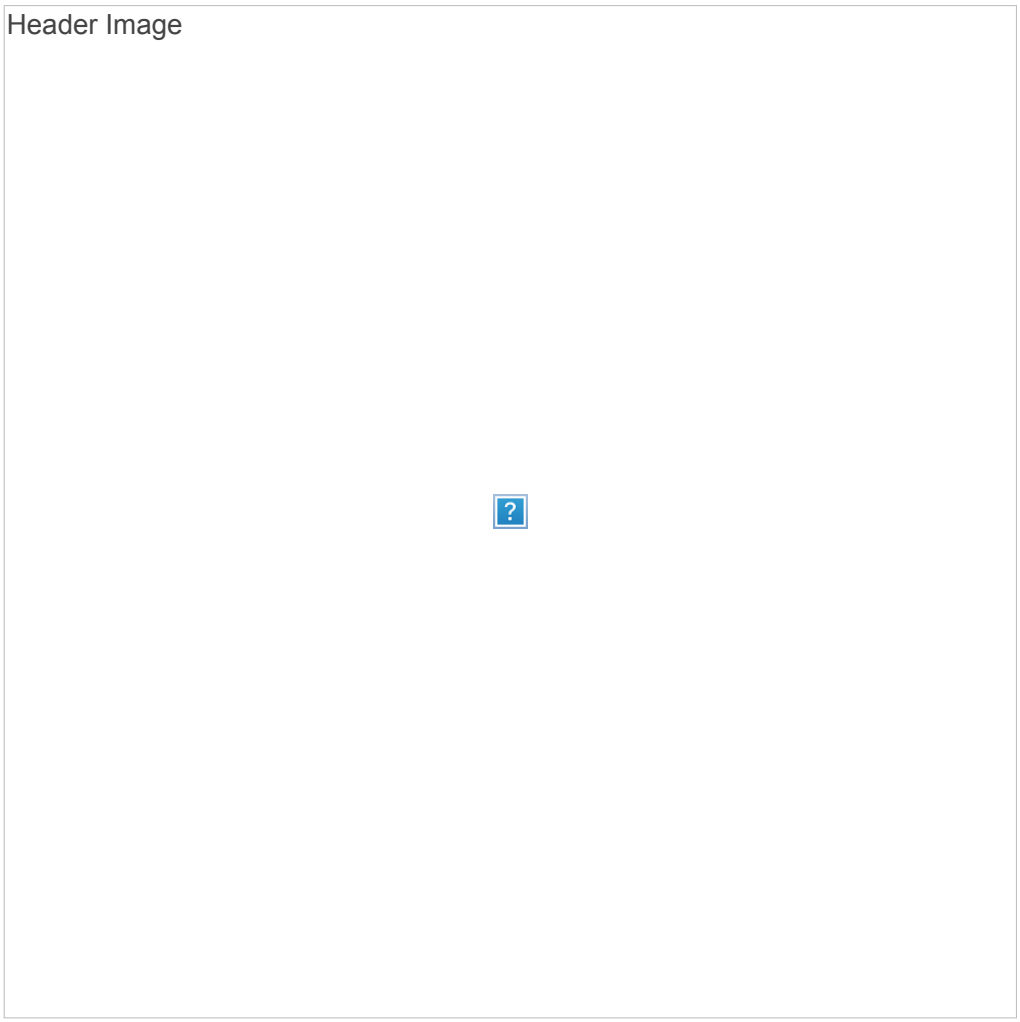
he argued, Japanese oil production peaked in 1915, compelling Tokyo to look elsewhere. Total war—from 1914-1918, and again from 1939-1945—was constrained by access to petrol. When the Japanese and German militaries went on the offensive during the Second World War, they counted on occupying and exploiting the vast oil fields of Sumatra and the Caucuses. The United States, still far and away the world's leading oil producer, provided 80% of the Allies' petroleum needs. The oil-starved Axis could do little to halt the Allies' mechanized onslaught. Oil helped win—or lose—the wars of the twentieth century.

Oil also played a central role in the Cold War. Of the twentieth century's great powers, only the United States and the Soviet Union possessed significant oil deposits within their borders. American petroleum lubricated the Marshall Plan, providing oil to western European countries in order to restart their economies and generate the wealth needed to purchase American goods. The Soviet bloc, meanwhile, failed to replicate the West's synergy. Moscow was forced to provide costly oil subsidies to Eastern Europe. It was oil, Painter suggested, that made possible Beijing's split from Moscow after the discovery of the massive Daqing oil fields in China's Heilongjiang province. In the 1980s, new oil discoveries led to a collapse in global oil prices and left the Soviets without the means to pay for Mikhail Gorbachev's ambitious reforms. More than two decades later, the United States remained the guardian of the oil-rich Persian Gulf, a legacy of Carter-era fears of a Russia on the roll.

Professor Painter's lecture fueled a lively discussion from the professors, students, and other guests in attendance. B.U. Sociologist Julian Go asked whether other commodities had played similar roles before the twentieth century. Yes: It was coal, according to Painter, that similarly fueled the British Empire up to World War I. In a follow-up seminar luncheon on Wednesday, Sawyer Seminar members discussed whether the nineteenth and twentieth centuries constituted a distinctive energy age. Wind previously powered ships, lumber fueled hearths, and man and horsepower determined success on the battlefield, but had increasing reliance on fossil fuels—both coal and oil together—brought domestic needs, economic growth, and geopolitical strategy together in new, interlocking ways?

Each Sawyer Seminar speaker gives a public lecture on Tuesday evening and then participates in the next day's closed seminar. Last week's respondent at that meeting, Professor Sarah Phillips of BU's History Department, added an important environmental perspective to Painter's story. Phillips led a discussion with faculty members from B.U.'s Pardee School, as well as professors in the History, Sociology, and Modern Languages and Comparative Literature Departments.

Both Phillips and Painter highlighted the challenges of overcoming our dependence on oil. Energy resources, Phillips showed, tend to aggregate rather than replace one another. Coal usage has not declined in the age of oil. Plastics, pharmaceuticals, and other petroleum-based products have also contributed to forms of environmental degradation that disproportionately harm poorer minority communities. Those pushing for environmental protection and alternative energy faced difficult challenges during the twentieth century, only succeeding when they provided alternative methods of growth.



“I want to argue that we *already* have new ways of looking at the twentieth century,” Keith Lowe told the crowd in his October 14 Sawyer Seminar lecture. “It’s just that most historians haven’t quite noticed yet.” Lowe is well-placed to make these kinds of assertions: a London-based author (most recently of *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II*), his last two books have been about World War II. Lowe argued that the twentieth century is best revealed through stories and symbols “that we can grab hold of and remember.”

The foundational story of the twentieth century, Lowe concluded, is the Second World War. It overshadows all other events of the twentieth century, remaining the central

focus of collective memory across the world—in Russia, China, the United States, Britain, France, Germany, and elsewhere.

Lowe emphasized that people still remember World War II as a trauma. At least sixty million people died, though national groups suffered different scales of loss. While only around 2,000 Brazilians perished during the conflict, Poland lost around a sixth of its population. China and Russia were thrown into utter chaos, with tens of millions killed. In all, this global war killed around 2.5% of the world's population. More recently, Lowe noted that seventeen heads of state, including Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama, gathered in Normandy at the recent D-Day commemoration; not even international summits can attract so many world leaders to one place.

Lowe also described the mythical, religious language people use to talk about the war. Groups around the world have endowed victimhood with a kind of reverence. New war memorials are built each year, and each country has its holy dates and places related to the war.

Yet this sort of victimhood requires a perpetrator, Lowe reminded the crowd. One might look to the way the war is constantly resurrected in Chinese-Japanese relations or in domestic European politics to see the power the war still exerts over the present.

The speaker concluded by arguing that World War II has become a universal myth. It launched the Cold War and space race, spurred decolonization, and led to the creation of all our most important international organizations. In the United States, the war made countrymen into heroes. In Japan and Germany it offered a rebirth.

But elsewhere the war may not resonate so deeply. Professor Emeritus Andrew Bacevich, a Sawyer Seminar convener, questioned Lowe's assertion that 1945 marked the psychological and mythological beginning to the twentieth century. In Europe, Bacevich insisted, many people see the two world wars as two parts of a single struggle. In France, after all, one can find just as many memorials to the First World War as the Second: So why 1945—and not 1914? Meanwhile, in the Arab world, Bacevich suggested, 1948 remains a more traumatic memory. Much of the Global South was relatively untouched by the conflict. In India, for example, Professor Benjamin Siegel noted that World War Two was just a blip in a larger nationalist historiography dating back to the founding of the Congress Party in 1885.

The next day's closed seminar expanded on several of these questions. In her comments on Lowe's lecture, Duke University Professor Anna Krylova criticized the Western-centric approach to the study of World War II. She argued that Lowe's speech helped explain why people in the West have continued to downplay the Soviet role in the war.

Bacevich, Lowe, and seminar convener Professor Jonathan Zatlin wondered whether alternative narratives of the twentieth century had to be equally enticing. Is it our duty as historians to shatter the sort of myths that Lowe described? Lowe admitted that this might be an enticing narrative in itself. But if we take this approach, Krylova argued, we need to have ready a new master narrative. Zatlin suggested emancipation as a framework for bringing together seemingly disparate strands like Islam, Nazism, and the Cold War. His suggestion followed Bacevich's query about incorporating religion into the story of the Cold War and Krylova's call for the need to rethink the meaning of socialism as part of a new master narrative for the twentieth century.

The closed discussion brought some stimulating early conclusions. First, we recognized the extent to which we remain prisoners of a Western-oriented narrative. As Americans, perhaps we still tend to choke on the Soviet Union. Although it played such an immensely important role in the twentieth century, we still struggle to determine where it fits. The seminar left off with a series of important larger questions: How can we derive alternative forms of plotting? How do you set up stories? Should our work be more or less hagiographic? Does our focus on World War II overpower other narratives of the twentieth century? We will continue the discussion at our next event.

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