

Evening Talk

PV XII Thu 20:00 Audimax

The Scientists Go to War: Questions, Contexts and Consequences, 1914-1918 — ●ROY MACLEOD — University of Sydney — Max-von-Laue-Lecture

In August 2014, the world will commemorate the outbreak of the Great War of 1914-18. The occasion will cause many to rethink the causes and the consequences of the war for our time. For many, the war was a catalyst of modernity, and in the popular phrase, 'the cause of nowadays'. Looking back, it was also the first installment of what historians have come to call the Great World War, 1914-45. From the global struggle, emerged one great idea among many: victory was destined to favor those best able to communicate, cooperate, and innovate in the mobilization and management of resources and the applications of science.

This task fell largely, and most often, to a generation of scientists and scholars who saw a role for science and culture in nationalism and

nation-building. The first international war to engage the entire industrial world quickly challenged established Enlightenment ideals of fraternity, internationality, and communality. Crusading, often ahead of their political and military leadership, scientists won praise for their patriotic service. Afterwards, many saw the war – all war – as a heart-rending waste of talent and resources; for others, however, it was an opportunity to show what science could do. As Emil Fischer put it, 'modern warfare draws its means from the progress of the sciences'. And for George Ellery Hale, Foreign Secretary of the US National Academy of Sciences, the war was 'the greatest chance we ever had to advance research'.

This presentation will outline leading features of the 'scientific war' between 1914-1918 and will reflect on the war's effect on redrawing the scientific landscape, revising pre-war hegemonies, and inaugurating a vision of scientific internationalism that was, in the end, to fail before it could succeed. It is in this wider context that we find the war's most enduring contributions to the changing social role of modern science.