Mass slaughter at the command of the state was characteristic of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As we approach the second decade of the twenty-first century, it shows no signs of abating. Now is the time to remind ourselves that war is not a metaphor for social crisis (the ‘war on drugs’) or an excuse for apocalyptic fantasies (the ‘war on terror’). War is also much more than the enactment of international ‘politics by other means’, as the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz famously put it, through the purposeful destruction of another nation’s infrastructure. Rather, war is the deliberate infliction of suffering and death on other people.

This course explores the major debates in the cultural history of warfare. We will be interrogating the experiences, representation, and memory of war for British and American societies during the First World War, Second World War, and the Vietnam War.

The first part of the course looks at aspects of the body, war medicine, and psychiatry. Combat places immense strain on men and women in the firing lines. How did
conscripts cope with the need to kill in combat? Did they make a distinction between ‘legitimate killing’ and atrocities? The laws of war are complex: how can we explain the ways laws and other regulations concerning lethal violence changed over time? Sexual violence is a particularly prevalent form of atrocity in wartime. What distinguishes wartime rape from its peacetime counterparts?

Military psychiatry and medicine have generated a sophisticated literature. How did ‘shell shock’ morph into ‘PTSD’? Are they the same pathology, simply given different names? We will look at military medicine and surgery are well, focussing on facial mutilation and dismembered limbs. Historians like asking the question: ‘Is war good for medicine or is medicine good for war?’ We will investigate competing answers to that question, but also ask whether it is the right question in the first place.

We then turn to the position of women in military context. To what extent did notions of femininity change as a result of war? What about female bellicosity? Virginia Woolf claimed that ‘scarcely a human being in the course of history has fallen to a woman’s rifle’. Was she correct?

The emotions engendered by war are complex: we will explore the competing and often contradictory ways that emotional responses to war were incited and managed. How has military violence been represented in art and literature? We will also analyse representations of war in war memorials. How were these three conflicts commemorated? These classes aim to promote and advance research into the relationships between war and culture.

Finally, should we be pessimistic about a future in which violence is placed outside the realm of possibility? The frustrations resulting from imbalances of power and perceived injustices, the bellicose personalities of politicians and other leading state officials, ideological imperatives, and the territorial ambitions will always be with us. But does that mean that war is inevitable? What can be done to forge more peaceful worlds?