The meeting was held in the Saltmarsh Rooms at King’s College from 9.15 on Saturday 4 September, ending at 13.00 the following day. Papers were received from Catherine Merridale, Josie McLellan, Tarak Barkawi, Mike Finn, Dan Todman, William O’Reilly and Simon Wessely. The themes discussed, which all related to the basic question of why soldiers fight, included ideology as a motivating factor, ethnicity and group identity, the role of officers and of training, the role of primary groups (‘buddies’), differences of technology and war-making, peacekeeping, and the psychiatric and psychological view of motivation and de-motivation, including stress and PTSD. We also debated the difficulty of sources, especially in view of the extreme stress involved in combat.

The discussions were very lively, and the participants agree that this was a stimulating first meeting, giving everyone material that will help in the refining of a collection of papers that will address aspects of these questions using specific cases. It was also agreed that the issue of motivation has been neglected by historians and social scientists (it tends to be the preserve of ‘military history’, and therefore to be excluded from serious debate), and that more research and debate are needed. Armies, after all, have a massive impact on the places where they fight (and on their inhabitants), and soldiers and veterans are also significant actors in the contemporary world. Our papers, all of which will be edited with our collective discussion in mind, deserve to be further debated at a second meeting, and also to be submitted collectively to the Journal of Contemporary History.

For a number of reasons, some members of the original discussion group could not attend this meeting, often having to cancel at relatively short notice. The smaller group that resulted was lively and interactive, but it is still felt that additional papers will be needed to cover crucial aspects of the problem, such as religion.