# VOLUNTARY ACTION HISTORY SEMINARS

VAHS seminar series at the Institute of Historical Research

**SEMINAR ABSTRACT**
**24th November 2014**
Dr Matthew Grant, University of Essex
**Historicizing Citizenship in Cold War Britain: Obligations, Voluntary Action, and Exclusion**

Citizenship is central to understanding the impact of the cold war on British society. Although not a 'war', the cold war certainly had war-like aspects. Fighting it had military and ideological consequences. People were mobilised into fighting the cold war in a number of ways (for example as National Servicemen or as voluntary civil defenders), and political choices were curtailed and stigmatised, with communist opinions particularly attacked. As such, the cold war altered the relationship of ordinary people to the British state, and to each other, creating categories of accepted behaviour. In short, the nature of citizenship in Britain was decisively reshaped by the cold war.

Citizenship, though, as Ruth Lister has noted, often runs the danger of meaning what people choose it to mean. Certainly historians have approached the concept in a variety of different ways, leading to a rich and diverse historiographical tradition on the topic. In this paper, I will examine how citizenship can and has been historicised, arguing that we need to focus on mapping ideas of citizenship in their specific historical and cultural context rather than as abstract political or social theories. Examining cold war British citizenship in the context of the wider postwar settlement, we can see three main 'registers' of citizenship: the symbiotic emphasis on rights and obligations, the identification and promotion of 'good citizenship' largely through voluntary action, and the stigmatizing of 'bad citizenship' leading to various levels of political, social or cultural exclusion. Understanding citizenship in this way allows conclusions to be reached about the role of the cold war in shaping British citizenship, as well as providing a more nuanced picture of how people conceptualised their own citizenship in postwar Britain.