The New Jersey Council for the Humanities has funded the mini grant “When Did World War II Start.” Dr. Christopher Bellitto, Department of History will serve as the PI and Dr. Jonathan Mercantini as the Co-PI. This presentation is part of a larger conversation on War and Peace in both a Global and Local context that Kean University is hosting throughout the 2011-2012 Academic Year.

The project also fits into Kean’s new General Education course called Worlds of History with war and peace as one of its themes. Kean University will be hosting a two day event in March 2012 on “War and Peace” which will examine conflicts such as the Crusades, the American Civil War, and the conflicts in the Modern Middle East to examine questions similar to those under consideration in this forum.

The soul of this Forum is grounded in the humanities as we ask participants, especially classroom teachers and students, to examine this question from a variety of perspectives, which frequently will conflict with one another in uncomfortable ways. There is simply no way questions of war and peace can be examined adequately outside a broad humanities context. We will ask not only about the history of these questions and ideas, but also about their impact and real-life applications in the past and present. By beginning our study of World War II in the 1930s, as opposed to 1941 as an American audience would, we highlight new issues about the nature and justice of that conflict. Furthermore, we expect that by placing that seminal conflict “The Good War” in a broader context, we can begin to ask more difficult and uncomfortable questions about contemporary wars with the goal of achieving a more complete understanding of the imperatives of war and peace.

This year-long project will bring humanities scholars to Kean University to explore fundamental questions about this timely and timeless topic. The goal is to have humanities scholars ask participants to think deeply and historically about the goals of war and the means to achieve peace so that they may be more informed consumers of information and actors in our world today. Whether we are protecting ourselves, our families, property, countries or ideas, taking up armed defense (be it a fist, a baseball bat, a gun, or a smart bomb) raises ethical dilemmas. Can I fight a war in order to achieve peace? How far can I go to defend myself? Is it permissible to launch a first strike to knock out a threat? If I protect a few of my own but kill many enemies, even civilians, is that acceptable since my first priority is my own safety? What do we do when our quest for peace and prosperity conflicts with another group's quest for the same goals? Is my nation's common good more important than my opponent's? What about our shared human bond? What are the human, economic, and moral costs of a war even when it is generally agreed to be "just"?