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London and the First World War¹

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Abstract: This article, which introduces a special issue, outlines the relationship between London and the First World War. The metropolitan dimension of total war is an emerging field of research at the intersection of military history and urban studies. The article (and special issue) aims to set out an agenda for historians of war/the city. While it is true that *what happened at the 'home front' generally occurred in the capital city too*, the London experience of the Great War was in many respects distinctive. The nerve centre of both the national and imperial war effort, the metropolis was the site of heightened anticipation, dense experience and concentrated commemoration. For London, the First World War proved an accelerator and incubator of socio-cultural change. Even so, *London's stability vis-à-vis other imperial capitals was remarkable*. The true impact of the war and its legacy can only be gauged by contrasting it with the state of London around 1914. Thus the article begins with a survey of London on the edge of war and concludes with an exploration of core distinguishing features of the metropolis at war.

The First World War is a significantly underrated episode in the history of London. While the Blitz of autumn 1940 has come to occupy a central place in the collective memory of Londoners, Britain's Great War does not generally conjure up vivid metropolitan images. In this respect, popular memory is surprisingly congruent with academic accounts of modern London history. Up to now, The London Journal had published merely three articles related to the First World War.² Moreover, surveys of London and British urban history tend to mention the First World War in passing only; they certainly do not afford the war the same space as general accounts of modern British history do.³ The exceptions are the air raids – but only because this episode in the history of London seems to have foreshadowed things to come in an even greater war. The First Blitz is the title of several popular history books that revisit the First World War from the standpoint of 1940.

[Fig. 1 about here: Bomb crater in Bartholomew Close, 8 September 1915 (COLLAGE, 37000)]

But perhaps there are good reasons why London in the First World War is a relatively unknown chapter of its history. After all, the British capital was never close to the front line (unlike Paris), never experienced near-starvation (unlike Berlin), never faced the danger of social implosion (unlike Vienna), never witnessed urban insurrection (unlike Dublin) or political revolution (unlike St Petersburg), and was never subjected to military occupation (unlike Constantinople).⁴ For London the years 1914 to 1918 proved not nearly as disruptive as for other metropolises, and yet – as this special issue shows – the war left a deep and lasting imprint on the city, often with unexpected long-term consequences. It is a terrible irony that the war, though enormously costly in lives and resources, also had many positive effects for the metropolis in the twentieth century.

While Paris and the First World War was the subject of an academic study as early as 1926,⁵ the impact of the war on London was first systematically addressed within the framework of a comparative research project on European Capital Cities at War during the 1990s and 2000s. In two volumes an international team of historians has studied how urban societies adapted both materially and culturally to wartime conditions. While the first volume (1997) analyses the history of social relations and structures, the second volume (2007) – under the influence of the ‘cultural turn’ – explores signifying practices and sites of symbolic exchange.⁶ To be sure, these scholars defined themselves as historians of war who used the capital city as a case study; their research questions were shaped principally by the burgeoning social and cultural history of modern warfare. Urban historians have been slow to respond to this incursion into ‘their’ domain. However, stimulated by the centenary the urban/metropolitan history of the Great War is now an emerging field of historical enquiry. Jerry White’s comprehensive history of London between 1914 and 1918 is a case in point.⁷ Likewise, the war and its legacy occupy considerable space in Friedrich Lenger’s magnificent panorama of European urban history since 1850.⁸ This special issue on London and the First World War sits critically within the current historiographical trend, bringing into dialogue urban studies with the (cultural) history of war.⁹ It seeks to understand whether London represented merely one case among other, illustrative of socio-cultural trends at the ‘home front’ generally, or whether the experience of the First World War had a distinctive metropolitan quality. The true impact of the war and its legacy can only be gauged by contrasting it with the state of London around 1914. Thus the article begins with a survey of London on the edge of war before introducing the articles of this special issue.

London in 1914 could be measured only in superlatives. Greater London was a city of 7.25 million people, the largest population of any urban centre in the western world and outclassing anything comparable in Europe. It was nearly twice the size of what became known as Greater Berlin and larger than the municipalities of Paris, Vienna and St Petersburg combined (see Adrian Gregory’s article in this special issue).¹⁰ If it overshadowed its European competitors, London dwarfed the great provincial centres of Great Britain. It was

home to more people than all of Edinburgh, Dublin, Belfast, Cardiff and the next twelve biggest cities of Britain and Ireland put together. The staggering growth of London throughout the nineteenth century had begun to ease off from the turn of the twentieth, but even so Greater London added 67,000 people (more than the population of Blackpool) every single year between 1901 and 1911. Despite a slowdown in house-building, some 140,000 houses and flats had been built in the decade before 1911; almost all the new houses were in the London suburbs, many designed for middle-class occupation.¹¹

London was not only 'great' in size but in wealth. It was the financial centre of the world, its great merchant banks lending capital to governments and joint-stock infrastructure projects across the globe, the Bank of England a symbol of probity and international credit, unconditionally guaranteeing to give gold for its notes (Fig. 2).¹² London's place at the hub of the worldwide circulation of capital was matched too by its position in the global trade in moveable commodities. The Port of London, stretching from Tilbury to London Bridge, was one of the busiest and most prosperous in the world. It moved much of Britain's exports, shipped in goods both for Britain and for onward transit to European ports, and was a centre for transatlantic and dominion trade with routes over all the world's oceans.¹³

[Fig. 2 about here: Traffic outside the Bank of England in Threadneedle Street, 1914 (COLLAGE, 49792)]

British India and Ceylon as well as Australia were two of the greatest sources of imports to London and recipients of exports from it, which reminds us that London in 1914 was the great imperial city, home to the Imperial Parliament, main residence of the king emperor, with its own imperial style of grandiose architecture for government buildings in place since the 1860s. The half-mile or so north and south of Charing Cross, from Parliament Square to the Temple, with an important outpost in the museums of South Kensington encapsulated the imperial metropolis. Dominion banks clustered in the City, eleven from Australia alone by 1906.¹⁴ The imperial presence in London was continuing to deepen as the war grew near: Australia House, a neo-Roman effusion of domineering bulk for the Australian High Commission, was begun in the Strand in 1912; its completion would be delayed by hostilities until 1918. The empire would continue to leave its imprint on the fabric of the metropolis in the era of the Great War, notably in the form of commemorative schemes (see John Siblon's article).¹⁵ But 'empire' had permeated all of London, including everyday sites and practices before 1914.¹⁶ During the war the monumental and the mundane, imperialism and urbanism was to become entwined in the perambulations of a new group of visitors: soldiers from the Dominions exploring the (un)familiar city whilst on leave from military duty (see Anna Maguire's article).¹⁷

The City and the port of this Imperial London, the hub of circulation that brought money and goods in and out of early twentieth-century London, brought people – new residents – too. The world's banks and finance houses brought bankers and investors with them; the merchandise of the world was accompanied by merchants and seamen from across the globe. London took its share, too, of the great movement out of European peoples fleeing stagnant economies and political and religious strife that fuelled transcontinental migration in the second half of the nineteenth century. Over the last twenty years of the nineteenth century

and the first decade of the twentieth, these twin tendencies combined to momentous effect. In 1914 London was a more cosmopolitan city than perhaps at any time in the previous thousand years of its history.

A significant part of London's population growth from 1880 onwards had thus been made up by migration. London's draw on young people of working age had never abated in the countries of Britain and the provinces of England, but London now attracted increasing numbers from Europe too. The largest of these minorities was made up of Russians and Russian Poles, mainly Jews who had settled in the East End. In 1911 they totalled some 68,000, not counting those born in Britain since their great emigration had begun thirty years before. The next largest migrant group by far was the German-born, 30,000 in the County of London and 5,000 or more in the outer suburbs, two-thirds of them men; there were another 10,000 or so Austro-Hungarians who might generally be added to the German-speaking minority in London. They were frequently an integrated group, penetrating many metropolitan networks – nothing indicated the violent disintegration this community would witness during the war (see Richard Espley's article).¹⁸ The German governess was a common feature in numerous elite London homes for instance, and many middle-class families visited friends in Germany for their summer holidays. German Londoners all far outnumbered the French, London's oldest-established European minority, 14,000 of them in the County of London in 1911, and the Italians, around 12,000. All of these foreign-born communities had increased in number since 1901 and in all likelihood continued to do so in the few years immediately before 1914, despite notional restrictions on 'undesirable' aliens put in place from 1905.¹⁹

Some newcomers from around the world found London easier to navigate than others. One of the greatest trading nations of the Port of London in 1914 was the United States of America, and Americans were prominent among travellers to London before 1914. American investors and entrepreneurs, notably Henry Gordon Selfridge in retail and Charles Tyson Yerkes in electric transit systems, were helping to change and to modernise the face of London. American writers and artists were finding London a congenial place to live and work as the capital of the English-speaking world: in 1911, some 6,000 Americans, half of them women, were living in London. It would be an important connection once war was declared.²⁰

Most of these American Londoners were working in one professional capacity or another or were employed in commerce in the City or retail. Among them would be some who benefited from London's centrifugal pull on the wealth of the world. The City's financial and merchant elites were among the richest of all the western nations and grew richer and more powerful in the years immediately before 1914.²¹ The City and commerce had also bred a well-established middle class (or rather, classes) and a rapidly growing lower middle class of clerks and shop assistants, men and women both, especially important in driving the suburban expansion of London in the two decades before 1914. It was this class, some thought, that had conspired to defeat the left-leaning Progressive London County Council (LCC) at the 1907 county elections, inserting an austerity-minded administration reluctant to burden the London ratepayers with expansive public works or welfare provision.²²

These elite and middle-class groups were unquestionably important influences on the government and social administration of this giant city. London had long outgrown the administrative arrangements established in the middle of the nineteenth century, and there was now no government for the built-up area of Greater London as a whole. An inner core, London county, had its important headquarters at Spring Gardens, Trafalgar Square, soon to move to a new County Hall on the South Bank which was under construction in 1914: its completion, too, would be delayed greatly by war (Fig. 3). A second tier of metropolitan borough councils, some with populations as large as a provincial city, governed London's inner districts. But outside this inner ring was a diffuse patchwork of county councils, county boroughs, urban and rural district councils administering services to nearly three million people, a fragmentation that would not be remedied for another half-century to come.

[Fig. 3 about here: County Hall construction site (with war slogan) seen from the south, 1914 (COLLAGE, 169623)]

Most of the people relying to some extent on the local government of London for their welfare and public health and wellbeing were working class. For if Londoners were governed in parliament in part by a metropolitan elite, and in their communities by a combination of local shopkeepers, lawyers, clerks and clergymen, Londoners themselves were mostly proletarian. London remained in large part a worker's city. The social investigator and shipping magnate Charles Booth had reckoned in the early-1890s that of 4.2 million people living in the County of London, 3.5 million (82 per cent) were working class (that is, working with their hands in some way) and that figure would have shifted little by 1914.²³ The proportion of workers would not have been as large in outer London but even there, at all points of the compass, were huge districts (West Ham, East Ham, and Acton for instance) where large majorities worked with their hands, moving goods or people, building houses and flats, cleaning the houses of the well-to-do, or making things in factories and workshops. For London in 1914 was the great centre of finished commodity production in the nation, 'Made in London' still a badge of virtue in commodities bought at home or sent abroad. The whole of inner London, apart from parts of Westminster and Kensington, was an industrial hive of limitless and infinitely flexible capacity. Small-scale workshop production was the archetypal business organisation in central London. But along the Thames, on both sides of the river and extending for nineteen miles of riverbank and canals east of London Bridge, were giant modern industries, factory-based, with a stratified and disciplined workforce that would not have been out of place in any of the great manufacturing centres of the Midlands or North.²⁴

The great size of London, its suburbs ever-growing, with industry and workplaces spread all over the city but with a great concentration at its centre, required the mass transit of millions every day. Most of these workers on the move, though by no means all, were men. Some parts of London, especially the City and the imperial centre around Charing Cross, were almost entirely masculine spaces. That was beginning to change by 1914 but only at the margins. Women worked in the home – as domestic servants or in a variety of 'outworking' trades in their own dwelling – or in workshops close to where they lived in the East End and other parts of central London. In these inner areas both men and women walked to work. But

if they lived any distance out, especially in the out-county suburbs, they relied overwhelmingly on public transport.²⁵

London street traffic was a daily incubus, especially in the City. The problem had received a hugely detailed examination in the report and supporting volumes of evidence of the Royal Commission on London Traffic of 1903-1906, since when things had generally worsened – until they would reach crisis proportions during the wartime ‘rush hour’ (see Simon Abernethy’s article).²⁶ Passenger journeys in Greater London by local railways, trams and buses rose from 972.5 million in 1903 to 2,007.3 million ten years later.²⁷ A third of those journeys were by omnibus, most vulnerable of all to the increasingly congested streets, competing for space with wagons, carriages and a rising volume of motor vehicles (Fig. 4). These were years of transition when horses and motors shared London in uneasy synergy, but motors had won the battle for omnibus supremacy by 1913.

[Fig. 4 about here: Omnibus (*with advertisements for the ‘Empire’*) in Fulham Road, 1914 (COLLAGE, 231967)]

Like all other aspects of life in the London of 1914, public transport was largely divided by class. The tramways were the workers’ domain, or largely so; the stigma was such that the wealthier suburbs of west London frequently refused to allow the proletarian tram to invade their districts by denying permission to lay the tracks. The two other competing systems of rail and omnibus carried a mix of classes, though rail was segregated by ticket price and time of travel: London’s local railways were given over to workmen in the early mornings when cheap fares were available. The buses, which had been favoured by the middle classes in the horse-drawn days, were by 1914 truly popular, taking more than a third share of metropolitan passenger journeys in 1913.²⁸

Despite the large numbers of passengers, many Londoners could not afford the daily cost of travel to work and thus of necessity had to live cheaply and as close to their work as possible. For despite the wealth of the City and Port of London, and despite the diversity of metropolitan industries, many Londoners were poor, some desperately so. Booth estimated there were 1.3 million who could be classed as living below the poverty line, or 30.7 per cent of all Londoners in the inner area. He divided those below the poverty line into the 400,000 or so “‘very poor’” – ‘at all times more or less “in want’”, ‘ill-nourished and poorly clad’ – and ‘the “poor’”, not in want but whose lives nonetheless were comfortless and ‘an unending struggle’, easily thrown into the ranks of the very poor by accidents, sickness, bereavement or industrial dislocation.²⁹

The fundamental causes of family poverty in London were two-fold: low wages and irregularity of employment. Most working-class families suffered at some time from both, especially when the breadwinner did not possess a skill valued in the labour market. For the ‘unskilled’, competition from the huge agglomeration of workers in London kept wages low and hours irregular. These pressures affected in particular ‘general labourers’ among men – the poor condition of the casual dock workers in the Port of London had long been notorious – and seamstresses and cleaners among women. And poverty condemned hundreds of thousands to slum living conditions in a housing market that struggled to provide decent

standards of space, repair and amenity for those even on good wages: three-quarters of a million people lived at a density of two persons per room or more.³⁰

Yet even for the London poor there were consolations to be had from living in the greatest city in the western world. Charles Booth had recorded of the London poor that ‘Their lives are an unending struggle, and lack comfort, but I do not know that they lack happiness.’³¹ Many London pleasures cost nothing. The parks, the heaths and commons were still within walking distance, and the excitements of the streets and markets were to be had both day and night. Londoners were participants in a burgeoning visual culture. Due to the sheer number of advertisements that infiltrated the city, the average Londoner was much more visually literate than his or her provincial cousin – and thus culturally more prepared for the flood of posters to come after summer 1914.³² Advertising sites created desires and needs. Even the poorest made provision for the occasional treat by squirreling money away or benefiting from a windfall or, very often, borrowed from the pawnbroker with the help of a pledge of movable property, ‘Uncle’ the ubiquitous banker to the poor.

Once scabbled together, there seemed to be more and more to spend their money on. The quality and quantity of entertainments open to the London working class improved greatly in the years before 1914. There were now some fifty-three theatres in inner London, some in working-class districts like Kennington, Whitechapel, Hoxton, Bethnal Green and Poplar, and a further fifty-one music halls and variety theatres catering largely to a popular trade. Entrance to the halls cost 2d. to 2s., and entry was free certain nights to soldiers and territorials in uniform (or so it was in south London in 1911).³³ Here the jokes and songs that were the currency of collective life gained a universal circulation. Another London entertainment was a relative newcomer but quickly becoming popular – the cinema. Some forty-nine ‘cinematograph theatres’ were licensed by the LCC in 1911 but in 1912 there were over ninety, with many other places also licensed to show films. This was one popular pleasure given a real boost in the years to come: weekly attendances at the cinema in London would rise from 7 million in 1914 to 21 million in 1917.³⁴

By far the most pervasive pleasure of the London working class was drink. Beer was strong and readily available. In 1913 there were 6,566 licensed premises in the county of London in which beer might be consumed, many also serving wines and spirits. Drink was, unsurprisingly given the living conditions and financial difficulties of so many, a mainstay in making the best of things. But it came at a cost, and not just monetary. In 1911 the Metropolitan and City Police arrested and prosecuted some 62,700 persons for being drunk, two-thirds of them for aggravated offences.³⁵ Drunkenness could exacerbate the miseries of poverty and fuel domestic terror and violence, especially against women and children. It was these ill effects of drink in London before 1914 that made many working people firm advocates of one of the several branches of the temperance movement.

For men who drank and men who didn’t, the great pleasure on a winter’s Saturday afternoon, midday marking the end of the working week for millions, was professional football. In London there were five professional teams in 1913: Tottenham Hotspur and Chelsea in the Football League; Woolwich Arsenal, Clapton Orient and Fulham in the Second Division. They played in front of large gates to enthusiastic and committed fans for whom the club was already an important part of collective life, an imagined community that could transform the bounds of topography and even class – yet it was a community that

would come under fire for its alleged lack of patriotism in autumn 1914 (see Assaf Mond's article).³⁶

[Fig. 5 about here: Crowds watching a tug of war at White City stadium during the Imperial International Exhibition, 1909 (COLLAGE, 283676)]

To the horror of middle-class church-going Londoners, religion played little part in working-class culture in the metropolis on the eve of the war. A peacetime survey of the work of the London churches published in 1914 complained of congregations shrinking in the central districts as the middle classes leave for the suburbs; of insufficient churches in outer London; of 'indifference' to religion among both the poor and even in 'respectable villadom'; of 'two out of three' young people 'practically heathen' and 'thoroughly out of control when thirteen or fourteen years of age', "'idling about" ... and "growing up thoughtless, selfish and undisciplined"'. At the heart of the problem were thought to be the amusements of the Londoners. There was much 'impurity in the streets'; 'gambling is widespread and difficult to eradicate'; there were too many public houses and an 'increase of drinking among women'; in the cinema, the pictures 'usually shown in the poorer districts [are] sensational and on the whole demoralising'; and there was 'Sunday desecration', with men at home 'in shirt sleeves with pipes in their mouths when they should be in a place of worship', though this their only day of ease. Indeed it was thought that 'religion is of use very largely for what can be got out of it', an unsurprising conclusion given the plight of many.³⁷

These opinions, of course, were the spoken manifestation of class hostilities and London was riven with them. And there was increasingly a tendency for animosity to break the surface in disputation, even struggle, affecting numerous sectors of society. Tensions erupted even within classes, divided as they were by gender and the competing interests of men and women. The struggles of militant suffragettes, resorting to attacks on museum and gallery exhibits, even bombings of public buildings and the homes of public figures, led to many uneasy moments on the streets of London. The crisis in Ireland made the governing and military elites jumpy and fearful of impending civil war in that turbulent nation, with the possibility of repercussions on the mainland. Nonetheless, it was the class struggle, militant trade unionism combining with socialist rhetoric, that impacted most of all on the daily life of Londoners.

Its chief expression was the strike or the threat of strikes. Throughout 1914 the London building workers had been in dispute with the master builders over union recognition. From late January 1914 a general lock-out by the masters laid off some 30,000-40,000 men who were presented with 'The Document', a personal agreement requiring them to sign a pledge to work with any employee, unionist or not, before they would be taken on again. Surprisingly, in an industry where collective solidarity had long been undermined by traditions of casual labour and self-employment, the men held firm, indeed firmer than their leaders. The dispute gripped the trade union world and dragged on even through the European crisis that beset the nation at the end of July.³⁸

The builders' dispute was the headline event but that spring and summer in London were marked by industrial strife in every direction. In May the militant London and Provincial Union of Vehicle Workers threatened a 'general strike' on the buses over hours,

wages and paid holidays, and there was trouble on the trams over the employment of boys in men's jobs in late-July.³⁹ A strike in May at Pink's jam factory in Southwark (Fig. 6) saw attacks on carmen driving wagons from the yard, the works closing pending negotiations (the strike ended on 28 May with advance payment of the Trade Board minimum wage and limited recognition of the carmen's union).⁴⁰ A campaign by shop assistants for shorter working hours tried to win over London churches and metropolitan borough councils in May.⁴¹ And on 3 July a strike at Woolwich Arsenal, the nation's premier armaments factory, brought out 1,500 men, members of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. One of their number had refused to erect a machine on a concrete bed laid by non-union labour and had been sacked, bringing the Royal Gun Carriage Department to a halt. A day later and some 8,000 were out seeking 100 per cent trade union membership – 97 per cent were thought already to be members – and in three days almost all the Arsenal's 10,000 workers were on strike. Mass picketing round the Arsenal gates led to some violent scenes, quickly quelled by the strike committee, anxious to get public opinion on the workers' side. Even Prime Minister Herbert Asquith was involved in settling the dispute. After four days the sacked worker was reinstated pending a Court of Inquiry into the dispute, and the Arsenal returned to normal working on 9 July.⁴²

[Fig. 6 about here: *Tabard estate with Pink's factory in Staple Street, 1915* (COLLAGE, 115657)]

Most worrying of all was the threat of a so-called Triple Alliance involving the miners', railwaymen's and transport workers' unions. Negotiations began in late May to establish that a strike by one union would mean a strike by all, London railwaymen prominent among the militants. The threat of a coalfields dispute anywhere in the nation bringing the country's rail network to a halt and closing the Port of London posed a nightmare for government and business. The prospect provoked both fear and wrath. So much so, that in July William Inge, dean of St Paul's Cathedral, denounced trade unions as criminal organisations led by men who deserved to be executed.⁴³

There was one other component of this industrial strife that had revealed itself eloquently on May Day 1914. Socialist internationalism was nominally cemented by European-wide workers' and political organisations and by the cosmopolitanism of London at this time. There were districts of London, notably 'Fitzrovia' north of Oxford Street and west of Tottenham Court Road, where workers from many nations met together and discussed their common grievances. Internationalism was a notable feature of the May Day rally at Hyde Park this very year and the day was notable for the large numbers of foreign workers present. They were given their own 'international platform, where several languages were spoken', French and German, one can assume, prominent among them.⁴⁴

Those May Day platforms in Hyde Park reveal London in 1914 as a great city whose fractures and tensions seemed more visibly to the fore than for many years before. The impending industrial crisis was probably uppermost in Londoners' minds but others trod sharply on its heels. Then, at the very end of July, a crisis to dwarf all others erupted apparently out of the blue from a place few could pinpoint on the map of Europe. Overnight,

on 4-5 August 1914, everything would be changed. And London would never be the same again.

On the eve of the outbreak of war it had seemed a distinct possibility that social conflicts could boil over. It was a revolution that never was. Even when the level of strike activity rose again in 1917 and 1918, the pre-war militancy was gone. London saw especially low levels of industrial unrest compared to the rest of the country (although, even in Red Clydeside, it was a rather muted affair).⁴⁵ Overall the British capital adapted much better (both materially and culturally) to the conditions of wartime than any other major European city: it went neither hungry nor cold; the black market was virtually non-existent; and civilian health was maintained roughly at pre-war levels, although the ‘Spanish flu’ was a temporary setback in 1918 and 1919.⁴⁶ What is more, despite war-weariness setting in during the final two years of the conflict, London still managed to remobilise symbolic resources (for instance, through the ‘tank banks’ in 1917 and 1918) that had long-dried up in other places (Fig. 7). London’s stability was remarkable.⁴⁷ The capital city did not even see the Peace Day disturbances that shook some provincial towns in England in 1919.⁴⁸

[Fig. 7 about here: War bonds advertisement (with a painting of the 1588 Armada) in Trafalgar Square, 1918 (COLLAGE, 282567)]

London’s relative exceptionality via-a-vis other imperial capitals is highlighted in Adrian Gregory’s comparative survey in this special issue.⁴⁹ Building on the findings of the Capital Cities at War project, he argues that London’s massive size looked like its most vulnerable point in 1914, but that – after a brief crisis of adaptation to war conditions – it turned out to be an asset. To be sure, London was the city most systematically attacked from the air, initially by Zeppelins and later by Gotha bombers. It was a target that was easy for attackers to locate from the air. Even so, strategic bombing was still in its infancy and the city so sprawling that London could take it. A decisive knock-out strike from the air was never a serious threat, even though it was a scenario that would come to haunt authors writing in the aftermath of the conflict. Thus the author of the 1937 study *War on Great Cities* suggested that London due to its unique status as capital, arsenal and port was the nation’s Achilles heel.⁵⁰ Yet, in Gregory’s analysis, such pessimism was unfounded. London’s magnitude and global position turned out to be assets rather than liabilities, and ‘the same assets would apply in a similar way in 1940-1941’.

‘In most cases, what happened elsewhere, happened in cities too, only more so’, comments Jay Winter.⁵¹ The big cities were sites of heightened anticipation, dense experience and concentrated commemoration of military conflict. The capital city as the nerve centre of the nation and the empire’s war effort must occupy prime consideration in any social and cultural history of the war, as Adrian Gregory’s *The Last Great War* (a general history of British society but with a strong metropolitan focus) aptly shows. Yet there was also a distinctly metropolitan dimension to the experience of the First World War that set London apart from the rest of the country and other capital cities. The collection of papers presented

here explore core distinguishing features of the capital city at war: communications; leisure; cosmopolitanism and empire; and commemoration.

One superb source for all facets of wartime London is Caroline Playne's writings about wartime society. Due to her eloquence and attention to the shifting moods in the capital, Playne has lately been rediscovered by historians (both military and urban) as an invaluable witness.⁵² However, Playne represents, as Richard Espley argues in his contribution to this issue, a much more problematic source than is generally acknowledged.⁵³ A London-based campaigning author, Playne was both an observer of and a participant in the events she chronicled. As a member of the Executive Committee of the Society of Friends' Emergency Committee for the Assistance of Germans, Austrians and Hungarians in Distress, Playne played an important role in the realm of voluntary organisations of which London was the hub. She was a compassionate helpmate to ostracised 'enemy aliens', aiming to curb anti-alienism in the metropolis. However, Playne did her utmost to conceal her own involvement in civil society in both her writings and (im)personal papers. In particular, the private archive that she amassed is as informative as it is deceptive; it offers a 'polymorphous paper collage' of London's wartime discourses but eradicates all traces of her own personality and life.

In her books Playne eschewed the insider knowledge she had gained as a wartime activist and relied on the evidence of the street instead. She was a self-conscious flâneur, strolling alone in the city. The way in which Playne perambulated the capital was perhaps unusual for a woman, yet the streets and transport system of the capital became increasingly feminised in wartime. Simon Abernethy's article pays close attention to the presence of women on the public transport network.⁵⁴ Previously perceived as casual travellers, women now frequented the tube trains, tramways and omnibuses to commute to work alongside male workers. Moreover, women in smoking carriages on the Underground – the subject of much pre-war debate – became an accepted sight. Overall the wartime transport network had to cope with increasing numbers of travellers. The morning 'rush hour' was a product of the war, together with the permanent acceptance of peak-time overcrowding. The history of London's public transport is a subject of perennial fascination, and Abernethy can show that the years 1914-1918 were a formative period rather than a mere 'interlude' as the official historians have it.⁵⁵ In addition, this article complements recent research into London's mainline railway stations as metropolitan gateways to the war.⁵⁶

For soldiers on leave the termini were entry points into the city. Many used public transport to traverse and explore the metropolis (thereby contributing to congestion on the network). Anna Maguire's article focuses on the experience of New Zealand soldiers visiting the mother country's capital.⁵⁷ The troops were anxious to feel at home in London, heading for historic sights of imperial significance they had heard or read about. Sightseeing helped them create a sense of cultural co-ownership of the city. Yet New Zealanders also sought out the exotic 'other' in places such as Chinatown, thereby turning an imperial gaze back on the metropolis. Maguire's article builds on the work of urban historians and historical geographers that has placed 'empire' at the heart of the urban experience.⁵⁸ At the same time, this article extends current research into tourism and the First World War. Studying the evidence of British soldiers touring French towns and cities, one scholar has argued that urban locations shaped the soldiers' broader combat experience.⁵⁹ Tourism was certainly a

communicable experience, something that the men found easy to write back home about, something that connected soldiers and civilians.

[Fig. 8 about here: *Sailors and a soldier outside an 'American Bar', 1918* (COLLAGE, 280609)]

New Zealand soldiers gazed at city landmarks, explored the parks, patronised the theatres and hooked up with women. What they could no longer enjoy was a proper match at Stamford Bridge or one of the other football grounds. Professional football had succumbed early in the war to the puritan assault on all forms of enjoyment. Assaf Mond examines how Chelsea Football Club and its supporters fought a losing battle to continue playing fixtures in wartime.⁶⁰ Spectator football had been an integral part of London's working-class leisure culture prior to 1914. It was a spectacle to be consumed on the stands or second-hand through the metropolitan press. First it was the virtual game that disappeared when newspapers stopped printing football news in autumn 1914, limiting their coverage to amateur clubs. The Chelsea F.C. Chronicle could not stem the tide. In the event, the Football Association called off matches for the duration of the war, and Stamford Bridge became inter alia an army training ground. This case study should be seen against the wider background of shifts in entertainments and leisure in wartime, a subject that has received some attention from historians. On the one hand, the war provided a stimulus to the urban entertainment industry (notably, it triggered a cinema boom); on the other hand, the space available for leisure and cultural life considered either illegitimate or non-essential shrunk dramatically. Thus not only football grounds but also museums and galleries (including an imperial beacon like the British Museum) faced the prospect of insignificance and even closure in wartime.⁶¹

Sports grounds were eventually fully restored to their original use, cultural venues reopened and the damage caused by air raids repaired. The key points in the cityscape that attracted visitors before and during the war were still there after 1918. Arguably, the war left its most visible mark on urban space only after the guns had fallen silent. London is dotted with markers of loss, bereavement and pride dating from the inter-war period.⁶² Even though no metropolitan war memorial per se was ever built, London became home to the Cenotaph and the Unknown Warrior (which represented all the British and empire dead), the Imperial War Museum (which moved from Sydenham to South Kensington and eventually to Lambeth) and the headquarters of the Imperial War Graves Commission (in Baker Street). The commemorative cityscape that sprung up after 1918 discloses in unmistakable ways the imperial character of the British capital, a feature which distinguishes it clearly from that of Paris. As a gesture of inter-Allied solidarity unknown soldiers were buried simultaneously in London and Paris on 11 November 1920. In the French capital imperial elements were discernible; in London they were dominant.⁶³ However, in his article John Sibbon reveals imperial absences in London's sites of memory.⁶⁴ Sibbon's research builds on the burgeoning literature in memory studies by highlighting what contemporaries forgot to remember.⁶⁵ Studying the Peace Parade of July 1919 and war memorials erected in Westminster Abbey and at Tower Hill, he suggests that these were designed as sites of exclusion. During the war it had seemed opportune to parade colonial troops from the West Indies in the Lord Mayor's Show, but in post-1918 commemorations the contribution of black soldiers from Africa and

the Caribbean was marginalised. Yet, as Siblón argues, the omission of black soldiers cannot be reduced to a conflict between colony and metropole, for it emanated as much from the empire as from within Britain.

War memorials mapped the empire (especially the Dominions) onto the city. While the war strengthened London's status as imperial capital, it irreversibly undermined its erstwhile cosmopolitanism. London in summer 1914 was more cosmopolitan than it had been for generations. Yet during the war five waves of anti-alien riots hit the German community. Russians and Jews were often caught up in the middle, and anti-Semitism was rampant.⁶⁶ The hostile climate of the war years (despite the efforts of enlightened individuals such as Caroline Playne), in combination with tighter immigration restrictions introduced after 1918, eroded in essence metropolitan life: London became less metropolitan and more insular, notes Jerry White in his conclusion to this special issue.⁶⁷ Still, as White points out, the upheaval of war was not an entirely negative experience, if seen in the long-term. Socially, the way welfare was dispensed became more humane; economically, new – and distinctly metropolitan – job opportunities arose in shop and office work and also in manufacturing industries, especially for women; politically, war conditions hastened the rise of the local Labour Party; geographically and perhaps most importantly, the war caused a long-term westward shift in the economic balance of power, with entirely new industrial areas established on the borders of Wembley and Acton. Some of these tendencies were already apparent before 1914, others were triggered by the war effort or its legacy. The First World War was both an accelerator and incubator of socio-cultural change in the metropolis; it was a truly 'Great War' for the capital city and its inhabitants.

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