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# Capital Cities at War: Paris. London. Berlin 1914-1919

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Comparative history lives more in the ambition than in the execution - or it did. The title of this impressive volume alone announces something special, but it does not prepare the reader for what is to come - what must surely be the most powerful, distinguished and innovative work of recent social history to be published in the last twenty years. This is true comparative history in the sense that the authors apply a single agenda and questionnaire to each of the three cities. Statistical data and other evidence are secured and standardised, allowing close comparisons between the three cities over the whole range of their structures and activities. Social change in wartime is related to four great areas: labour, incomes, consumption, and demography, which run through the book The thorough, painstaking treatment recalls some of the great American city surveys of the 1 920s. This in itself is no unworthy lineage, but to undertake a comparative, historical analysis of three of the world's most challenging capital cities and to complete it to this standard is unprecedented to the knowledge of this reviewer.

Funding patiently built up from British, French and German sources has allowed the employment of a large

number of national and local specialists. Twelve authors have contributed to the text, some of them in an adjunct capacity which has allowed a handful of senior writers to maintain continuity and consistency throughout the book. The authors take every care to ensure that the contribution of the adjunct authors - which is considerable - is defined and acknowledged. There is no 'slave labour' here and the quality and consistency of the text clearly reflect the happy relations between the team members, and the enlightened, generous management of the senior authors.

The argument of the book rests on the assumption that local communities take part in modern war as economic and social units based on people's daily lives, whereas the national entities which normally dominate histories of modern war have little more than a political and legal identity which separate them from ordinary people. News of the arrival of the buff telegram would spread through a household in seconds, and through a street in minutes. After the war, the bereaved would go to read the names of family and friends on the local war memorial. Those spared military service would work on through the war, their employment and their attitudes almost always disturbed by the war effort. Events at national level were less important for them. The 'unknown soldier' at the Arc de Triomphe and the even more remote 'empty tomb' in Whitehall expressed a national symbolism from which the millions of dead were curiously excluded. The real people, dead and surviving, were members of local communities. Their war was a local war.

This community approach to war is not relevant only to small towns and villages, however. It allows large cities, and above all the capital cities with their wealth of documentation, to be singled out and compared. Within them, districts and neighbourhoods can often be identified as communities in their own right, linking the intimate life of the locality to the capital 'nerve centre' as a powerful machine and, sometimes, vortex of political events. However, the authors see the family and the local community of the street, the lanes, or the crossroads as the basic social unit of wartime, as in peace. This is pure orthodoxy, of course, especially among the social historians of France among whom Jean-Louis Robert is so distinguished. However, the great, socially homogeneous streets which drive across Charles Booth's East End, and the Rue Saint-Denis and other Parisian arteries old and new, enhanced by cheap transport, suggest a greater mobility by 1914. So do the richer gradations of social class, including those among manual workers. Finally, the growth of the labour movement propelled by the war, and longer hours, created more of a workplace identity. However, the concept of a local community linked to the embracing capital city unit is a very useful one and the authors have done well to develop it so clearly. Furthermore, they do not question that the people of all three cities, however local their experience, knew that they were living in the national capital and had a clear idea of where their city stopped and countryside or peripheral town began.

Moreover, a great advantage of the capital city is that a wealth of information is available. The First World War came at the end of a century of statistical progress in which social inquiries had increasingly focused on the cities. From the 1 870s Germany took the lead in the collection of urban statistics, but Britain, and to a lesser extent France, kept in touch, encouraged by the growing world statistical organisations. As large, capital cities, Berlin, London and Paris had similar institutions, so that policies and opinions can be compared. Each had a similar structure of problems, such as crime and poverty, which secured greater attention in wartime because of their likely effect on the war effort. Popular experiences were similar, and their treatment in the press and, later, in memoirs, was richer than in smaller places .

Admittedly, these are large, complex places with suburbs spreading over the official boundaries. Before social policy can be approached, much effort has to be devoted to explaining the administrative structure of the three cities. This is because their complex institutions were based to a greater or lesser degree on two or more tiers of government. The authors carry out this task very well, just as they explain the physical area of the three cities and the links between their different districts.

However, institutions and authority are never allowed to obscure the life of the people. This is a history of the masses, with the great city populations shaken by losses at the front, swept by panics and rumours, and divided by jealousies. Acknowledging recent linguistic concerns among historians, the-authors pay attention to the language of the newspaper and the music hall, seeking the meaning of war and its implications among the populace.

There were many similarities between the three cities and the problems they faced. However, the authors stress some important differences which affected the war effort and attitudes to the war. The most important was the 'system of entitlements' which determined the nature of individual benefits under the pressures of war. In London and Paris, the civil population retained the distributive share of advantages and benefits which it had enjoyed before the war. In Berlin, military needs were given priority and the implicit pact with the civilian community was broken, with basic supplies reduced and interrupted to the point where popular belief in the war was threatened. The authors maintain that this betrayal of the people affected the Berliners' contribution to the war effort, and, by 1918, their willingness to continue the war. Londoners and Parisians, while feeling keenly the losses and tribulations of the war, never gave up their allegiance to the allied cause and the unusual social and economic existence which it implied. In Berlin a sinister continuity becomes visible between the early garrison city of the Electors of Brandenburg, and the Reichshauptstadt of 1945, defended by its cheated Volksturm. A military strand extends throughout, while London and Paris, for all their imperial pomp, never fell under military thrall after the time of Bonaparte.

Profiteers were a constant bugbear in all the cities and they are given close attention here, notably by Robert. Following Amartya Sen, the authors detect well-being in terms of fairness of distribution rather than the physical amounts available. Profiteers were seen to break the common rules of equity and they were a constant target in the press, with even honest market traders suffering from abuse during shortages. The introduction of rationing from the middle years of the war was a partial solution, but it created a clearer space for illicit trading and allowed the underground economy to carry on after the war. Here again, it was in Germany that this new phenomenon did most to destabilise post-war society. The use of numerous cartoons and other illustrations to convey the popular image of the profiteer is very productive. Set against the treatment of the urban food supply by Thierry Bonzon and Belinda Davis, this section sets up a contrast between the problems of country production and the deficiencies of urban distribution. Berlin was the main victim, with even the humble potato often unobtainable there. 'The German potato must defeat England', ran a German poster of the day. Instead, it helped defeat Germany.

It was not only food that Berlin lacked, however. By the end of the war coal distribution had slumped from adequate levels in 1914 to become a threat to the war effort and to the tolerance of the Berlin working class. Here, as in the food problem, lay the foundations of the big Berlin Communist Party from 1918, and the continuing strength of the Socialists.

Jon Lawrence's economic history of the three cities during the course of the war is rich and thorough, and, as complemented by Thierry Bonzon on mobilisation and the labour market and Joshua Cole on demobilisation, worthy of expansion into a book in itself. Britain's slow transition to full mobilisation helped London's labour to adapt to new requirements, while Paris ultimately adjusted well enough to more brutal changes. It was Berlin that was the big failure of the three, along with Germany as a whole, where an organised, war-oriented labour force never emerged. With Britain and France achieving a high level of organisation towards the end of the war, Germany's relative weakness was on the home front, rather than on the battlefield. In this sense, Berlin helped to lose the war, while Paris and London won it.

Incomes, wages and wealth are discussed in a separate section, followed by social policy. In all three cities there was a shift towards a system of public support based on the principle of rights, replacing the philanthropic approach which had still prevailed in 1914. In Berlin, however, this concept of basic rights and minimum entitlements was not fully established, a result which left Berlin and other German cities open to the shocks of the post-war years.

If food and coal were open to measures to increase supply, and to improve distribution, housing was not. New housing in the big cities was out of the question, while the arrival of extra labour for metropolitan war industries was bound to increase rents. In all three cities the solution was rent control, which undermined the property owners and put tenants in a stronger position to resist the effects of inflation. As a means of distribution, however, rent controls were ineffective and overcrowding existed side by side with under-occupation. Following Martin Daunton, this account suggests that house-owners were the only men of property to suffer from the war, making the post-war extension of the public housing sector inevitable in all three countries.

The study rests on a great volume of comparative statistics and these are the product of great effort and care. Equivalent categories have been established with perception. Much of the account rests on tables and graphs and there is a long statistical appendix. This firm base allows the authors to identify trends and comparisons which are of national as well as local importance, with international variations in living standards, for instance, underlying a variety of social phenomena and attitudes.

Understandably, demography is given thorough attention, at the hands of Jean-Louis Robert. Census and health statistics are rich in each city and the categories are universally comparable. There are some problems with boundaries but Robert resolves these readily enough. Some of the comparisons are striking and even surprising. Paris, for instance, emerges as a city of high in-migration, partly because of a low birth rate, while London is seen as a city of children despite its low birth rate, mainly because of its low rate of in-migration.

Robert uses similar techniques to compare the three employment structures. London's position as world financial capital and centre of wealth produces large proportions of non-manual workers, including domestic servants. Paris is not very different, as the continental centre of capital and favoured residence of the French and international rich. Berlin is more fragmented, its new industries sustaining numerous manual workers and its lack of an international community reducing the numbers of the idle rich and their households. Robert goes on to compare spatial and housing structures, with London's low residential densities contrasting with the multi-storey habitat of the other two cities.

The comparison of military losses in the three cities is harder to achieve than one might expect, and Adrian Gregory's treatment of this topic is no routine. In fact, his is a tour de force, drawing out aspects and interpretations which rarely figure in more specialised treatments. The delayed build-up of British forces in France meant that London lost 6.9 per cent of its population of military age while Paris lost 11.2 per cent. The big surprise here is that Berlin lost 9.0 per cent, apparently because the enlistment rate there was lower than the national average for Germany. Robert provides a useful discussion of the possibility that men from the land were- favoured as front-line soldiers while unreliable urbanites were placed in safer positions or not mobilised at all. He shows that this argument works well for France but those mobilised in Berlin suffered very high losses.

Passing from statistics to experience, Robert provides a varied appraisal of the experiences of some of those who died and of those who survived. Hospitals and remedial treatment are discussed, where they were located in the capital cities. Memorial ceremonies and monuments are compared. This discussion provides a wealth of information and thought on some neglected aspects of social experience. As elsewhere, Robert goes on and on from one perception to another, creation a rich tableau of social history which will inspire researchers for years to come.

For all the originality of this study, the authors are touchingly careful to acknowledge and thank those who have contributed, however indirectly, to this brilliant result. This includes not just the authors of influential literature, but those who have contributed to seminar discussions or have read drafts. This conveys an impression of joint enterprise which does credit to the historical profession, and emphasises the great heuristic potential of international history. It also suggests that the European historiography of the future is already with us? in the form of multi-lingual pioneers like Winter and Robert, and their associates.

Modestly, the authors make scant reference to the fact that-this is only the first of two volumes, with another already in preparation on social movements, experiences and mentalities. With all this in prospect, historians of the twentieth century will have even greater cause to be grateful to this creative team.

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