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## **LONDON IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR: QUESTIONS OF LEGACY**

### **ABSTRACT**

The impact of the First World War on London has long been unduly overshadowed by the war that came after. In fact, the years 1914 to 1918 proved transformative for the future direction of both London and the Londoners. The unprecedented employment prospects of the war years revolutionised the working lives and living standards of the London poor. The metropolis expanded to accommodate new industrial areas that formed the nucleus of London's suburban development in the interwar years. As part of that, the war ensured that the economic fortunes of West London would be tied to the aeroplane, quickly adapted for civilian uses once hostilities ceased. This wartime capital, which depended so heavily on women's labour to oil the machinery of government and of munitions manufacture, would never lose its dependence on women in the new industries that emerged from the economy of total war. And the experience of London's workers during the war began a tendency that altered for generations their political alignment; the Labour Party in London continues to reap the harvest sown during the First World War.

### **KEYWORDS**

London

First World War

Industry

Suburban development

Women's labour

Standard of living

Politics

## LONDON IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR: QUESTIONS OF LEGACY

The end of the war was, of course, a moment of great joy, especially in London where so much of the national rejoicing was centred, and a moment of much sorrow too for many who had lost loved ones. But it was also a moment of considerable apprehension. For some the approaching end of the war was itself an alarming prospect, like the waitress in Mary Ward's *Harvest* earning 7 or 8s a day in late-1918, 'And now the war's goin' to stop. Do you think I want it to stop? I don't think. Me and my sister'll be starvin' again.' This fear of the future shaded the Armistice: 'no citizen knows what is going to happen to himself or his children, or to his own social circle, or to the state or the Empire,' thought Beatrice Webb in Grosvenor Road, Westminster, a week before the final maroons of the war sounded.<sup>1</sup> And although Armistice Day pushed these feelings to the back of most minds they undoubtedly revived in the run-up to 1919. What sort of London would the 7 million Londoners face as a new postwar era began to assert itself? London had been greatly changed by the war. But would those changes last?

Some changes were the stuff of tragedy, and their consequences lingered for a generation. This was a postwar city that had to live with the dreadful consequences of the war in men killed and wounded, the enduring pain of bereavement, and the legacy of remembrance, symbolised so powerfully in the capital through Edwin Lutyens' monumental Cenotaph, unveiled in its final state on 11 November 1920, and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the body interred in Westminster Abbey that same day. London would be, and still remains, the capital of remembrance in the United Kingdom and to a certain extent the Commonwealth too.<sup>2</sup> The British lost some 745,000 men killed out of the 6.2 million who enlisted, or 12 per cent; a further 1.7 million were wounded (27 per cent), with 1.2 million disabled officers and men still receiving pensions in 1921. Just how many of these were Londoners is unknown. It is likely, given the enthusiasm with which London men enlisted voluntarily in the early months of the war, that something above the capital's share of the nation's men of military age would have suffered, at least 100,000 men killed and around 230,000 wounded; these, together with the casualties from air raids, were the direct costs in flesh and blood of the First World War in London.<sup>3</sup>

Then many things had to be undone to restore the city to something approaching normal life. Demobilisation of 2.6 million men from the army at the rate of some 10,000 and more a day nationwide proceeded through the first six months of 1919. Demobilisation for the London District began at Wimbledon Common but moved to Crystal Palace in January 1919 as it offered better comforts for the men waiting to be processed.<sup>4</sup> Many of London's employers, like Sainsbury's and the London General Omnibus Company, honoured as best they could their promise to take men back who had volunteered for service. They did so largely at the expense of women workers. Over the same period 90 per cent of the nation's women munition workers were discharged from their employment, many unwillingly. And many government offices largely staffed by women during the war closed altogether or replaced their staffs with ex-servicemen. This was not effected without protest, with deputations of workers to Whitehall and some protest marches of men and women workers alike in early 1919.<sup>5</sup>

For men and women returning to the labour market, employment in London remained buoyant until a slump in engineering brought something approaching large-scale worklessness back to the capital as to many other industrial areas of the country from February to August 1921.

Yet even when things got back to 'normal', with the dislocation of women workers and the return of periodic boom and bust, everything had changed. When, at the end of the 1920s, social scientists at the London School of Economics came to update Charles Booth's poverty investigations of forty years before they found that

Across every path of gradual progress the Great War of 1914-18 cut a deep gash which has not yet closed up. The reader of the present volume will again and again be confronted with the fact that the most fruitful comparison is not so much between now and forty years ago as between post-war and pre-war conditions – so much greater and more striking have sometimes been the sudden changes wrought in the conditions of London Life and Labour by the great catastrophe, than by the slighter and more gradual movements of the whole of the preceding generation.

We are living too near the events of the war [this was written in 1930] and of the years immediately following it to be able to see the changes as a whole

and in due perspective. We can however already see enough to be sure that there can be no mere reversion to pre-war conditions, but that a new chapter has opened in our social and economic history, of which as yet it is difficult to forecast the contents.<sup>6</sup>

That was written, as I say, about London. Probably, to a very large extent though not entirely, what was true for London was true for the nation as a whole. But it was frequently the case that what the nation experienced, London felt more sharply and to a greater degree than the rest of the country. Take, for instance, the return to domestic service of women from one kind or another of war work.

The war put paid to the vast inexhaustible market for women domestic servants that had prevailed in prewar London. There were two main breaks with the past: first, the supply of domestic servants evaporated with astonishing speed from 1915 as women filled the ranks of munitions workers and every kind of industrial employment. And second, in response, the middle-class housing market shifted rapidly from the West-End town house or mansion on four or five floors to simpler living in flats or in the suburbs. After the war both these factors continued in play. In early 1919 it was reported that there were 'an exceptionally large number of big houses to be let in Mayfair and Knightsbridge', with rate yields to Westminster City Council down in these districts over five per cent and over nine per cent respectively; very large houses were empty because they were considered now 'unmanageable' as a result of the 'domestic servant problem'. At the same time the 'demand for maisonettes and flats in London' was 'unprecedented'; they were 'practically unobtainable', with one estate agent registering over 150 enquiries a week, despite rents of West-End flats doubling in value even from 1917 levels.<sup>7</sup> It was from this time that the commercialisation of Mayfair and other parts of the West End for use as offices, and for wholesale and retail distribution gathered pace between the wars. And it was from this time too that the 'servant problem' was 'reflected in an ingenious variety of labour-saving devices' that became such a draw at the Ideal Home Exhibition at Olympia, as early as 1920: 'Electricity has been pressed into service as a regular maid of all work', *The Times* enthused. 'Among the jobs it carries out efficiently are laundry-work, charing, washing-up after meals, ironing, working the sewing-machine, and so forth.'<sup>8</sup>

The servant problem itself, of course, was there because domestic service, especially of the live-in variety, was not popular. The 'dearth of servants proper – that is, of cooks, house and parlour-maids, and other house servants', it was said at the end of 1920, 'is almost as great as it was during and after the war. The taste for the freer life, developed by the countless other occupations that were then open to girls and to women, is as compelling as ever.'<sup>9</sup> In 1920, some nursed the hope that as these jobs seemed no longer there the women would come back to work in middle-class homes, but in fact opportunities for young women's employment continued to grow apace in London. By 1921, the numbers of domestic servants in the County of London had fallen by a third, though it still totalled some 157,000, 'and there is no doubt that the reduction has continued to the present time', the New Survey concluded around 1930: despite this, a year later the census found that the numbers of London's domestic servants had recovered to some extent.<sup>10</sup> The fall was most marked among young women under the age of 25, for whom factory work in London was becoming ever more readily available; and the long-present hostility of the London-born girl and young woman to domestic service was maintained, young servants almost always coming from the provinces, a not insignificant factor in London's huge draw for the nation's young people in the 1920s and 1930s. For those who did return to this work or take it up anew, the New Survey noted with satisfaction how wages and conditions for this smaller number of London domestics had vastly improved over prewar conditions.<sup>11</sup> Here, then, there was no going back: the numbers of domestic servants never again matched those of pre-war London; and the old oppressive exploitation of the 'general' servant had become a thing of the past.

There was no going back, either, in the opportunities for young women's work that had opened up in London during the war. Some opportunities were closed off – in road and rail transport, for instance, where women were virtually eliminated by men. But there were entirely new jobs for women in the expanding manufacturing industries of postwar London and in the ever increasing demand for shop and office work in the capital.<sup>12</sup>

These opportunities had a distinctly metropolitan characteristic, unmatched by the nation as a whole. And once more, the war had a decisive impact here.

The war marked a longterm westward shift in the economic balance of power within London. Until 1914 London's industrial might had tended to look eastward for expansion along the River Thames and around the Port of London, and to a lesser extent to the north-east along the River Lea. That was true in 1914 for London's armaments industries, London the centre of the nation's weapons trade, which were then based along the Thames at Woolwich, Erith and Crayford, and along the Lea at Enfield and Waltham Cross. But much armaments manufacture in London during the war newly planted itself in the west, exploiting under-used road and rail connections rather than river traffic, and building on the new industries – especially motor and aeroplane manufacture – that had begun to settle in west London even before 1914. Entirely new industrial areas had grown during the war almost overnight in Park Royal, Perivale and Greenford, straddling the borders of Wembley, Willesden and Acton; the already emerging industrial areas at Southall, Norwood and Hayes were greatly extended; and Hendon, Colindale, Northolt and Hounslow saw the expansion of aeroplane manufacture and a multiplication of aerodromes during the war.

These districts saw the most extraordinary industrial expansion for manufacturing a huge variety of war matériel. Engineering had been no stranger to west London before 1914. In particular, London's motor and aircraft industries had found a congenial mix of cheap land and suburban housing attracting skilled workers to places like Acton, Chiswick, Fulham and elsewhere a few years before the war. That labour pool was now extended by the servant girls and working-class housewives of west London who generally lacked the work opportunities and traditions offered by the clothing trade and small workshop industries of the East End. There was one more factor in west London's favour. London was the railway hub of the nation; but most feeder lines, railway termini and junctions lay on the western side of the capital, connecting it to the engineering districts of the Midlands and the North West, and in the south-west to the main ports sending men and munitions to France. King's Cross, St Pancras, Euston, Marylebone, Paddington, Victoria, Charing Cross and Waterloo enmeshed west London in a network of steel. Within it, especially in the north-western suburbs, munitions factories quickly took root during the war.

Most important of these developments was at the disused Royal Agricultural Society showground of Park Royal and the land adjoining it in north Acton, Harlesden and Willesden. The empty showground had been part-developed as a stadium for

Queens Park Rangers football club but this was commandeered by the army when professional football folded in 1915. By the end of the year a giant National Filling Factory was opened on a 120-acre site making fuses, detonators and gages (explosive-filled triggers connecting shell nose caps to the TNT filling). By mid-1917 it was making 1.8 million shell components each week; at its peak that year it employed 5,250 workers, 4,850 of them women. In the nearby suburban towns and villages other munitions factories were quickly planted: a cartridge-filling factory at Hayes employed 10,600, over 80 per cent of them women; the former White City exhibition ground was turned over for munitions production; a gas-shell filling plant at Greenford employed 1,000 workers; a factory making liquid oxygen for weaponry was set down in Willesden; tank engines were built by the Aster motor company at Wembley; and a trench-mortar bomb-filling factory was established further south at Fulham. There were doubtless many more enterprises than these in this increasingly industrialised sector of west London.<sup>13</sup>

West London also proved especially fruitful for the expansion of London's aircraft industry. Napier's motor factory at Acton Lane developed a large aero-engine plant besides building army lorries and motor ambulances: 'Never had the company had such business', the company's historians tell us, as in these years of total war. Nearby, aircraft were built by the Aircraft Manufacturing Company (Airco) at Hendon, the site of London Aerodrome from around 1911, with Geoffrey de Havilland taken on as designer just before the outbreak of war; the Fairey Aviation Company had their London factory at Hayes and tested planes at the Royal Flying Corps aerodrome at Northolt; Handley Page were based at Cricklewood; Hooper and Company of Wembley made wings for the Sopwith Camel, assembled at Sopwith Aviation Company on the river at Kingston; there were aircraft component works at Barnes, Feltham, Dollis Hill, Colindale and Kilburn. Most of these munitions, vehicle and aircraft factories were entirely new additions to the industrial landscape of west London; even those there before the war were now operating at such a completely different capacity they were essentially new enterprises.<sup>14</sup>

These wartime developments, even when decommissioned for government and military uses, were quickly resurrected for peacetime functions. So redundant but well-built Ministry of Munitions factories, all connected to good transport links and to gas and electricity supplies, were sold off to manufacturing and distribution

companies from 1919, disposals that gathered pace after their former ministries' warehousing and storage functions were no longer needed, from around 1922. The new industrial areas of west London were all seeded or ripened by war: along the Edgware Road from Cricklewood to Colindale surplus government buildings formerly making armaments and aeroplanes were converted to peacetime manufacturing, and spawned new factories alongside; the same was true in Wembley and in the Perivale-Greenford Area, in the Vale at Acton, in Southall, Norwood, Hayes, in Heston and Isleworth, from Feltham to Staines, and from Uxbridge to Slough. In all these areas the wartime industrial concentrations were expanded greatly in the 1920s, and especially to the west.

The most astonishing case was at Park Royal. 'The rapid development of factories in this district is truly remarkable', it was said in 1933, 'and it is doubtful if any other area of Greater London has been so rapidly industrialised.... Prior to 1914 the whole district was practically rural and under grass.'<sup>15</sup> Development had another push from 1928 when the final tranche of ex-munitions land was put on the market. By 1933, in an area of two square miles, there were at least 130 factories employing some 19,000 workers. Many were household names, not just in London but nation- even world-wide: United Dairies, Lyons Bakeries, McVitie and Price, Guinness, Heinz, Stork Margarine and many more. Some, like the giant Hoover factory further out on the Great West Road, were making many of those labour-saving devices for middle-class suburban homes extolled by the Ideal Homes Exhibition of 1920. The firms who moved there were roughly evenly divided between new enterprises altogether and firms relocating from central London, like Virol, a branch of Bovril Foods, which took the opportunity to expand on a 13-acre site on former munitions plant at Park Royal at the end of 1919, and with a smattering of wartime enterprises whose products were in even greater demand in peacetime, like the Fellows Magneto Company.<sup>16</sup>

With industry came labour, and with labour came housing, the western suburbs the great growth node of outer London before 1939. In west and north-west London. 800,000 people were added to the population between 1921 and 1939. This was as though the population of Manchester had migrated lock and stock to west London in fewer than twenty years. It represented a decisive shift westwards in London's centre of gravity, many areas doubling in population in the 1920s and doubling again in the

1930s. It was small wonder that the first postwar London railway, the Ealing and Shepherd's Bush line with a station at East Acton, was built to relieve congestion in this increasingly crowded district, as early as July 1920. The prospect from East Acton was said to afford 'the cheerful view of many new houses in the course of erection.'<sup>17</sup> Prospects were booming for London even when they were at their nadir in the nation as a whole. In 1931, in the middle of Britain's Great Depression, along the Great West Road and North Acton alone, '15 new factories were built during the year'; for three months of that same year just one of Scotland's eighty-three blast furnaces was firing.<sup>18</sup> As the economist M.P. Fogarty wrote in 1945, 'London was outstandingly prosperous before the war' – he meant the Second World War. 'London's industries and services were not merely not declining; they were advancing rapidly....'<sup>19</sup>

Much of this turned to dust, of course, in the deindustrialisation of London, which had its roots in the Second World War, was strengthened in the 1960s, and gathered such pace that it became a vortex in the 1970s and 1980s. But one significant element of the growth of west London would provide London's greenest shoots in these very decades of industrial slump. And this too had its foundations laid during these years of the First World War.

The historic connection between west London and air travel, which later had such a stunning impact on the economic fortunes of the capital, was cemented from 1914. There were some 120 aerodromes and landing grounds nationally that were surplus to the requirements of the RAF and agriculture after the war, a number of them previously utilised for the air defence of London, both east and west of the built-up area. Some of the numerous aerodromes of west Middlesex like those at Hendon, Northolt and the 'London terminal aerodrome at Hounslow', close to what became in the 1940s London Airport at Heathrow, were relinquished by the Air Ministry for civil aviation within six months or so of the Armistice. Civil aviation began tentatively with fifteen-minute 'flips' from London's aerodromes and others on May Day 1919, but things got serious very quickly. Seven commercial civilian routes were planned at first, all between cities within the UK apart from the 'Dutch Route' to Amsterdam, Schiphol also a product of the war years; Hounslow was the only aerodrome to operate all seven.<sup>20</sup> Hounslow closed in 1920, the operation moving to Croydon, yet by 1930 the skies of west London were so crowded and the risk of collision so great

that restricted flight zones under 2000ft were put into operation; they affected aerodromes at Feltham (Hanworth Park) for National Flying Services Ltd, Harmondsworth (Heathrow) aerodrome for the Fairey Aviation Company, Heston Air Park (for Airwork Ltd) – it was from Heston, courtesy of British Airways, that Chamberlain made his trips to Hitler in the autumn of 1938 - Northolt for the RAF, and Stag Lane aerodrome for De Havilland. All this was to protect flying from the RAF's London Aerodrome at Hendon, close by. Heathrow had opened in this chrysalis form in 1929; it would take over from Croydon as London Airport after the Second World War.<sup>21</sup>

So the industrial hypergrowth of London during the First World War sparked changes that went well beyond the Second. London after 1918 did not return to prewar economic conditions because investment still flowed into those very same areas where it had flourished between 1914 and 1918.

Because the industrial base of London continued to go from strength to strength many other gains of the war years proved robust too. Preeminent among them, the economic gains won by working-class Londoners from 1914 to 1918 were never reversed. These wartime gains were enormous, based largely on the bedrock of full employment for all, and secondarily on gains in real wages for the poorest unskilled workers. It was a revolutionary impact, widely remarked upon by commentators at the time. The poorest felt the improvement most. In 1913-14 the LCC had fed an average of 35,000 poor schoolchildren with 146,000 dinners each week; by 1918-19 it had dropped to 9,500 children receiving just 22,500 dinners each week. In 1918 it was said that the proportion of 'poorly nourished' schoolchildren in London was 'considerably less than half the percentage in 1913'.<sup>22</sup> As with food, so with clothing. By 1918 the LCC's school "clothing cupboards", from which exceptionally necessitous children used to receive garments before the war, are no longer resorted to....<sup>23</sup>

There were many comparable signs too in the sharp fall in London of those workers having to rely on the poor law to keep body and soul together. 'No one, we think, could have predicted that the war would have had such a remarkable effect in reducing pauperism as it has had,' noted an editorial in *Charity Organisation Review* in January 1916. By then the London workhouse casual wards, providing one or two

nights' accommodation for vagrants and unemployed looking for work, were almost empty; and for that same class the war saw the beginning of the demise of the privately-owned common lodging house or 'doss-house' in London, numbers in the County falling from 308 in 1914 to 211 in 1918. They never recovered. Similarly, residents abandoned the more up-market Rowton Houses, now turned over to Belgian refugees and soldiers on leave. Despite the stresses of war and a probable rise in London's population, the number of 'certified lunatics' in metropolitan mental hospitals was lower by almost 16 per cent between 1914 and 1918. Even more dramatically the number of men received in the London prisons fell by nearly 63 per cent between 1913 (33,776) and 1918 (12,631). The Commissioners of Prisons concluded that 'the prisons of the country may be largely emptied of the petty offender when the conditions of labour are such as to secure full and continuous employment for all...'<sup>24</sup> Even many among the aged poor were somehow magicked out of the workhouse, taken back by relatives who could now give them a home, or winning once more an independent existence through work. The decline of pauperism – not a measure of 'the poor' but only those turning to the state for subsistence – was remarkable, falling by about a third in all forms of relief during the war, with under 47,000 'indoor paupers' in London workhouses in August 1918 compared to over 69,000 four years before.<sup>25</sup>

The general transformation was remarked on by all with eyes to see. Michael MacDonagh, a *Times* journalist and sympathetic observer of London life, witnessed the traditional working-class holiday at 'Appy' Ampstead', Whit Monday at the end of May 1917: 'The great thing is that there was no sign in the crowd of the old ugly squalor of poverty. More has been done for the social betterment of the labouring classes by three years of this frightful War than by the garnering of the harvests of peace for many generations!' A few months later he thought that 'there is now no such word as "poor" in our social vocabulary.' Chartres Biron, the magistrate at Lambeth police court during the war, recalled how 'the war seemed to have abolished poverty.' And Arthur Gleason, another middle-class celebrant of this most surprising feature of London's war, summed it all up with a biblical ring: 'Comfort and well-being, the margin of leisure, the elements of happiness, are greater for the mass [of] people than at any other period. A sullenness and despair have gone from the earth. The curse is being removed.'<sup>26</sup>

The fears of Mary Ward's waitress that peace would return her and her sister to starvation were understandable but proved gratifyingly groundless. The war largely wiped away the absolute poverty that Charles Booth uncovered in the 1880s and '90s and which had continued to blight the lives of millions of Londoners right up to the end of 1914: 'the reduction of the proportion of persons in poverty in the forty years is enormous, whichever figures we take,' the *New Survey* concluded, with one measure in east London showing that family poverty of 38 per cent around 1890 had fallen to 6 per cent by 1930. Although unemployment and casual labour kept levels of poverty high in parts of the inner East End at times when the main breadwinner was short of work, conditions never returned to those exposed by Booth.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly too, the effects on men and women out of work were mitigated after the war by improvements in unemployment insurance benefits and in the new-found readiness of London poor law authorities to give relief to the poor outside the workhouse. These were both new departures and they seemed an inevitable consequence of the shared experience of war: there would be no return to the harsh regime of incarceration and dependence on charity that had been the lot of the pauper before 1914. In charting the changes to poor relief in London, the *New Survey* noted how Booth had accepted the view that poor relief was granted only in the workhouses, with a tiny proportion of expenditure made to the poor in their homes: 'that remained true', the *New Survey* explained, 'until ... the war exploded it sky-high.'<sup>28</sup> When industrial conditions in 1920-21 worsened in London, there was widespread resort to the poor law authorities for relief. It was a move urged on by labour leaders like George Lansbury in Poplar with the cry, 'Go to the Workhouse!' In fact, it was no longer to the workhouse that they had to look but to outrelief, doles or benefits in kind disbursed to the poor in their own homes, given in sums never known before, and with a decency of treatment and sympathy that had always been absent in prewar London. The relieving officer had a bad press in London during the 1930s, and no doubt deservedly so, but there was no comparison with the treatment accorded to the starving poor in the years before 1914. The transfer of poor relief from the Boards of Guardians to County Councils in 1930, in the process becoming renamed as 'public assistance', was another humanising step forward in a process that had begun in the war years.

There were many other effects of the war that marked a permanent shift in the life of the majority of Londoners. One followed from the continuing restrictions on access to alcohol that seem to have impacted so much on levels of public drunkenness in London and that reaped unquantifiable but surely momentous benefits to the quality of family life among the poorest. Londoners spent similar proportions of their income on drink before and after the war, but from 1915 they got so much less for their money. 'It is certain', reported the *New Survey*, 'that less intoxicants of all kind are drunk per head in present-day London than in the London of Charles Booth's time, that individual drinking is less often excessive, and that the average potency of liquors is noticeably less.' In general, consumption of alcohol fell by around a half between 1914 and 1929. We might judge the impact on the collective life of London's streets by the numbers of arrests for drunkenness of all kinds before 1914 and after: there were some 70,000 arrests in London in 1913; in 1939 there were 18,000.<sup>29</sup>

There were other consequences of far-reaching importance. London and the nation both were affected by the political shifts that the war hastened in the rise of the Labour Party and the increasing importance of trade unions in the economic and political life of the nation. The war brought about an early love affair between Londoners and the Labour Party that, though periodically on and off, seems not to have exhausted itself even yet. Its first flowering was spectacular if brief. The London Labour Party was formed on the very brink of war so was not five years old when it had to fight the first postwar municipal elections in 1919. Its showing in the LCC election was respectable enough for a new party facing two old-established blocs; indeed its rise effectively marked the end of the Progressive Party, the left wing of the Liberals, who had been uniquely powerful in London. There was then an astonishing victory, virtually from nowhere, in the Metropolitan Borough Council elections that November, when Labour won twelve out of twenty-eight boroughs, and respectable numbers of seats in many more. Most were lost in a concerted ratepayer backlash just three years later. But between the wars Labour steadily established itself as political party of choice for most of those voting in local elections; Labour secured the London County Council in 1934 and held it without break for the next thirty years, indeed until its abolition in 1964. By 1934 too it controlled 15 out of 28 boroughs and 17 from 1937, some of these boroughs having no other representation than Labour.<sup>30</sup>

If there was one single element above any other in Labour's London stronghold it was the housing problem, and the war played a part here too. For the great frustration for working-class Londoners during the war had flowed from the contradiction between the opportunity for the first time to secure improved domestic comforts through full employment, while the capital's housing problem worsened through starvation of capital investment for improvements and the virtual cessation of housebuilding. The Labour Party promised a municipal housing programme for London from 1919 onwards and it was a message congenial to large numbers of working-class voters in the capital, perhaps especially the many women voters among them.<sup>31</sup>

All of this was accompanied by a growth of local health and welfare services across London that also once more built on progressive ventures projected during the war years. These too were of special interest to mothers and prospective mothers. Before the war local maternity and child welfare services in London were woefully threadbare: the Finsbury Milk Depot (1904), the St Pancras School for Mothers (1907) and the North Islington Maternity Centre (1913) had offered pretty much the only infant welfare support in the capital. The evident need to protect infant life with so many lives destroyed on the Western Front drew a response from most local authorities in London who, with the aid of government grant, began widely to employ health visitors during the war to support new babies and their mothers at home. Many also established infant welfare centres for ante- and post-natal advice and practical assistance. By May 1919 there were ninety-three health visitors employed by metropolitan borough councils, though unevenly distributed. Many other councils in both London County and the outer ring provided infant welfare centres for medical treatment and advice, with dozens established from Acton to Woolwich by the end of the war. Centres run by voluntary action and funded by subscribers paying for premises and medical staff were also set up in many places. These trends continued apace after the Armistice. By 1930, Metropolitan Borough Councils employed 200 health visitors and were spending a quarter of a million pounds each year on maternity and child welfare services.<sup>32</sup>

Many changes then proved enduring. But not all things brought about by the First World War in London did so. In this context we might mention here two further specific consequences of the war for London that had an important impact for a

generation or so to come, but which did prove transitory. One was the decline in its foreign-born population of London, reversing a trend towards the making of a cosmopolitan metropolis that had begun to establish itself powerfully from the 1880s. The fall of some 16 per cent in persons born abroad in London by 1921 compared to 1911, some 28,500 fewer people, was largely made up of the drastic reduction in the numbers of Germans and Austrians living in London, perpetuated by anti-alien immigration restrictions that tightened after the war. Even the French and the Italians, allies both, did not quite return in the numbers they had reached before 1914. London, very much against the grain of the previous 30 years, had suddenly become more insular and remained so for another generation until a new cosmopolitan revolution began rapidly to assert itself from the late-1940s on.<sup>33</sup>

Another consequence arose from the bitter experience of the air war against London. As war once more began to look a probability from the late-1930s, with attention shifting to rearmament and the defence of the realm, two conflicting preoccupations with London emerged. On the one hand there was a determination not to repeat the confusion and incompetence that compromised the safety of the Londoner during the Great War. So the planning of air raid precautions in respect of warnings, shelters, welfare provision and evacuation, all so woefully lacking for the first war, was put in place for a second, though implementation on the ground would prove less successful.

But on the other hand there grew a conviction that no amount of planning could in reality protect this enormous city and its people from the bomber. 'I think it is well also for the man in the street to realize that there is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed,' Stanley Baldwin famously told the House of Commons in November 1932; 'Whatever people may tell him, the bomber will always get through.' When he said this, Baldwin must have had in mind the experiences of London and Paris during the Great War but within a few years his argument gained plausibility from the horrors of bombing in Abyssinia and Spain.

This vulnerability of London to aerial bombardment was one element in the emerging consensus among planners and politicians in the 1930s that the capital was far too big and needed to lose both industry and people to protect not just itself but the nation as a whole. The extraordinary resilience of London's diverse economy during

the years of the Great Depression was thought by many to have been at the expense of the nation, especially the distressed areas of the north of England, of Wales and Scotland. The clamour for government to do something not just to stop London growing on the ground, but to relocate its people and their jobs to other areas, grew deafening. The fears of bombing in the late-1930s added urgency to the need, not just because there were so many civilians in London but because so many of the defence industries continued to be clustered there as they had been between 1914 and 1918. Decentralisation policies of the 1930s and 1940s had their roots in these arguments, and they in turn were fuelled by London's wartime experiences between 1914 and 1918. As the Barlow Commission on the distribution of Britain's industrial population concluded in August 1939, 'the persistent pull of the Metropolis and the growth in the density of its population ... are enlarging the Metropolitan target and rendering it more and more vulnerable to aerial attack. In the view of many who have given evidence before the Commission – a view with which we find ourselves in complete accord – the circumstances are such as to demand that steps be taken without delay with the object of checking its further growth.'<sup>34</sup>

By August 1939 it was all too late. But it's possible to see in the Barlow Commission and the weight of opinion that pressed on it by the end of the 1930s the roots of the decentralisation policies of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, in the New Towns, in the Location of Offices Bureau and in the planning policies of the LCC and even the early years of the Greater London Council that continued to shed jobs and people from London.

In many ways, then, the impact of the First World War on London reverberated for generations to come. Would these changes have happened without the war? The struggle for votes for women, and through the vote an improvement in women's standing in society, would have won through in the end; and so would Labour's struggles for better living standards for the poorest and more welfare for the majority. But the gains would not have come so swiftly or so easily as they did through the agency of world war. Perhaps the most protean effects were on the future industrial and residential expansion of the metropolis in the interwar years. Although west London had established something of an industrial base in new industries before 1914, its place in the metropolitan economy was transformed beyond recognition over the following four years. This growth in the industrial capacity of west London

helped generate both jobs and homes at an astonishing rate up till 1939. The war thus proved not only a revolutionary accelerator of tendencies already apparent before 1914, but it did indeed change London and the Londoner for much of the rest of the twentieth century – and even (when we think about west London and Heathrow today) - beyond.

Yet the war also of course brought one destructive legacy with it – the threat of more war, carried out from 3 September 1939. This is not to consider the legacy of that second great conflict for the metropolis. But it too would reverberate for generations on the fortune of both London and the Londoner.

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Professor Jerry White teaches modern London history at Birkbeck, University of London. His first book, *Rothschild Buildings: Life in an East End Tenement Block 1887-1920*, won the *Jewish Chronicle* Non-Fiction Book Prize for 1980; his *London in the Twentieth Century. A City and Its People*, won the Wolfson Prize for 2002; and his *Zeppelin Nights. London in the First World War*, was Spear's Social History of the Year for 2014. His *Mansions of Misery. A Biography of the Marshalsea Debtors' Prison*, is published by The Bodley Head in October 2016.

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs. H. Ward, *Harvest* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co, 1920) 208-9. MacKenzie, Norman and Jeanne (eds) *The Diary of Beatrice Webb. Vol. 3 1905-1924. 'The Power to Alter Things'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 315, 4 November 1918.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, M. Connelly, *The Great War, Memory and Ritual: Commemoration in the City and East London, 1916-1939* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002); A. King, *Memorials of the Great War in Britain: The symbolism and politics of remembrance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); E. Harrison, *Remembrance Today: poppies, grief and heroism* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012); S.J. Heathorn, 'The Civil Servant and Public Remembrance: Sir Lionel Earle and the Shaping of London's Commemorative Landscape, 1918-1933', *20<sup>th</sup> Century British History* (19:3, 2008) 259-87. For a discussion of the recent literature, see B. Scates and R. Wheatley, 'War Memorials', in J. Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, vol. III: *Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 528-56.

<sup>3</sup> For casualties see F. W. Hirst, *The Consequences of the War to Great Britain* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934) 231. C.A. Pennell, *A Kingdom United. Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 147, gives regional proportions of men aged 19 to 38 in London from the 1911 census, and the proportion enlisting before 12 November 1914. A. Gregory, 'Lost generations: the impact of military casualties on Paris, London, and Berlin', in J. Winter, J.-L. Robert et al., *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919*, vol. I, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 59 gives a higher estimate of 131,000 for deaths in active service of recruits from Greater London.

<sup>4</sup> *The Times*, 4 January 1919.

<sup>5</sup> *The Times*, 5 December 1918.

<sup>6</sup> Sir H.L. Smith (ed), *The New Survey of London Life and Labour. Vol. I, Forty Years of Change* (London: P.S. King and Son, 1930) 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> *The Times*, 3 and 4 January 1919.

<sup>8</sup> *The Times*, 9 February 1920. See generally, A. Forty, *Objects of Desire. Design and Society 1750-1980* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), especially chs. 8 and 9. The washing-up Machine Co. traded from Goldsmith Road, Peckham, from 1919: see *The Times*, 10 May 1919.

<sup>9</sup> *The Times*, 30 December 1920.

<sup>10</sup> Smith (ed) *New Survey Vol. II*, p428. In 1931, a depression year even in London, the census recorded 185,000 women in domestic service in the County of London. See also S. Alexander, 'Becoming a Woman in London in the 1920s and 1930s', in D. Feldman and G. Stedman Jones (eds), *Metropolis London: Histories and representations since 1800* (London: Routledge, 1989) 245-71; L. Lethbridge, *Servants. a downstairs view of twentieth-century Britain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Smith (ed) *New Survey Vol. II*, ch. VIII.

<sup>12</sup> For women and demobilisation see D. Thom, *Nice Girls and Rude Girls. Women Workers in World War I* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998) 187-93. See also the article by Simon Abernethy in this issue.

<sup>13</sup> For Park Royal see Grange Museum of Community History and Brent Archive, *Places in Brent. Twyford and Park Royal* (London: Brent Archives, c2001) 6-8; G.W.R. Gray, 'The Rise and Decline of the Park Royal Industrial Estate', Oxford Polytechnic, Department of Town Planning, MSc Project, 1980, passim.; P. Grant, 'Brent's Women at war and at peace, 1914-1919', 2010, [www.brent.gov.uk/archives](http://www.brent.gov.uk/archives), 2-3; A.C. Lee, *As I Recall, the Memoirs of Arnold Charles Lee* (Leicester: Anchorprint Group Ltd., 2010) 7. For Park Royal and west London generally see J.E. Martin *Greater London. An Industrial Geography* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1966) 30-1, 40; *History of the Ministry of Munitions*, 12 Vols., 1919-22, Vol. VIII, *Control of Industrial Capacity and Equipment*, Part II, (London: Naval and Military Press, n.d.) 166-7, 173-4, 183-4.

<sup>14</sup> C. Wilson and W. Reader, *Men and Machines. A History of D. Napier & Son, Engineers, Ltd. 1858-1958* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1958) 101-10; A. Vessey, *Napier Powered* (Stroud: Chalford, 1997) 30ff. For the west London aircraft industry see G. Hewlett, *Aviation in and around Brent during the First World War* (London: Brent Archives, 1984) passim.

<sup>15</sup> D.H. Smith, *The Industries of Greater London* (London: P.S. King and Son, 1933) 79-80.

<sup>16</sup> *The Times*, 27 May 1919 (Fellows), 18 June 1919 (Viro).

<sup>17</sup> *The Times*, 29 July 1920. Much has been written about London's suburban expansion between the wars, but for a modern take see R. Bowdler, 'Between the Wars: 1914-1940', in A. Saint (ed.), *London Suburbs* (London: Merrell Holberton, 1999) 103-29.

<sup>18</sup> J. White, *London in the Twentieth Century. A City and Its People* (London: Viking, 2001) 188-9

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<sup>19</sup> White *London in the Twentieth Century*, 190.

<sup>20</sup> *The Times*, 25 April 1919. The British Airways Ltd. flying Neville Chamberlain was formed from an amalgamation of smaller London airlines on 1 January 1936 and operated largely from Heston. It was merged into the state-owned British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) on 1 April 1940, so can be counted as one of the forebears of today's giant carrier.

<sup>21</sup> *The Times*, 9 August 1930.

<sup>22</sup> For school dinners see London County Council [LCC], *London Statistics Vol. XXVI, 1915-20* (London: LCC, 1921) 241. W. Beveridge, *British Food Control* (London: Oxford University Press, 1928) 327-8. No London-wide statistics on food samples taken by borough councils and found to be adulterated during the war.

<sup>23</sup> Parliamentary Papers, *Report of the Working Classes Cost of Living Committee, 1918*, Cd. 8980, 1918, p9.

<sup>24</sup> *Charity Organisation Review* (XXXIX, 229, January 1916) 1-2. LCC, *London Statistics Vol. XXVI*, 76, 78, 153, 217 and 92 (common lodging houses); M. Sheridan, *Rowton Houses, 1892-1954* (London: Rowton Houses Ltd., 1956) 52-5; LCC, *London Statistics. Vol. XXV, 1914-15* (London: LCC, 1916) 248; Parliamentary Papers, *Report of the Commissioners of Prisons and the Directors of Convict Prisons, with Appendices (For the Year ended 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1919)*, Cd. 374, 1919, 5.

<sup>25</sup> For elderly people no longer in the workhouse see Wandsworth Board of Guardians, Minutes of the Board, 27 March 1919, Triennial Report of retiring chairman, Canon Hubert Curtis. LCC, *London Statistics. 1921-23, Vol. XXVIII* (London: LCC, 1924), 66-9 for the historic trends of poor relief.

<sup>26</sup> M. MacDonagh, *In London During the Great War. The Diary of a Journalist* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1935), 196, 28 May; 237, 16 December 1917. C. Biron, *Without Prejudice. Impressions of Life and Law* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936) 273. A. Gleason *Inside the British Isles* (New York: Century Co., 1917) 105.

<sup>27</sup> Smith (ed), *New Survey Vol. III*, ch. VI.

<sup>28</sup> Smith (ed), *New Survey Vol. I*, 364.

<sup>29</sup> Smith (ed), *New Survey Vol. IX*, 245. White, *London in the Twentieth Century*, p266.

<sup>30</sup> See E.C.R. Hadfield and J.E. MacColl, *Pilot Guide to Political London* (London: Pilot Press Ltd., 1945) 159-96; B. Barker, *Labour in London. A Study in Municipal Achievement* (London: Routledge and Sons, 1946) ch. III; M. Clapson, 'Localism, the London Labour Party and the LCC Between the Wars', in A. Saint (ed.), *Politics and the People of London: The London County Council, 1889-1965* (London: Hambledon Press, 1989) 127-146; White, *London in the Twentieth Century*, 365ff.

<sup>31</sup> For London housing between the wars see LCC, *London Housing* (London: LCC, 1937; S. Parker, 'From the Slums to the Suburbs: Labour Party Policy, the LCC, and the Woodberry Down Estate, Stoke Newington', *The London Journal*, 24:2 (1999) 51-69.

<sup>32</sup> LCC, *London Statistics Vol. XXVI*, 45 (birth rate) and 88 (health visitors). For difficulties in Camberwell see Winter *Great War and the British People*, pp201-2. For a wartime survey of this new provision see E.W. Hope, *Report on the Physical Welfare of Mothers and Children, England Wales, Vol. I* (Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust, 1917) 206ff (and pp382-3 for St Marylebone); and for prewar provision, J.M. Campbell, *Report on the Physical Welfare of Mothers and Children, England Wales, Vol. 2* (Dunfermline: Carnegie UK Trust, 1917) 82-90. LCC *London Statistics Vol. XXXV*, 74 and 385.

<sup>33</sup> Smith (ed), *New Survey Vol. I*, 82.

<sup>34</sup> Parliamentary Papers, *Report of the Royal Commission on the Distribution of the Industrial Population*, Cmd. 6153, 1940, 201. For the fear of the bomber in the interwar period see S.R. Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire. Air Raids and Culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); M. Haapamäki, *The Coming of the Aerial War: Culture and the fear of airborne attack in inter-war Britain* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).