Part 1

Premises

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In August 1914, the German artist Max Beckmann drew a series of sketches of the crowds gathered in Berlin during the first days of the war. Among them is a drypoint print entitled Declaration of War 1914. It shows a group of people trying to get a glimpse of a newspaper with the latest war news. Their faces show a range of reactions, from shock to concern to apparent detachment.¹ This book is about what happened to them, and to people like them living in Paris and London between the outbreak of hostilities in August 1914 and demobilization in 1919.

Nation, city, and community

The history of the Great War has been told time and again within a national framework. Almost all students of the period have been imprisoned, to a greater or lesser degree, within this framework of analysis.² Its main drawback is that it tends to conflate into aggregates quite different and frequently contradictory experiences. The best way to penetrate behind the illusory veil of a unitary ‘national experience’ is to describe the character of community life in wartime.

At first sight, the national bias in the historical literature is curious. Nations do not actually wage wars; groups of people organized in states do. Of course, in an abstract, legal sense, ‘France’ and ‘Britain’ waged

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Fig. 1.1 Max Beckmann, Declaration of war 1914

war on ‘Germany’; a declaration of war was ratified by the appropriately empowered bodies; funds were earmarked, and enabling acts opened the way to armed conflict. But the concrete, visible steps taken by Frenchmen, Germans, or Englishmen to go to war, to provision the men who joined up, and to adjust to the consequences – the human dimension of war – were almost always taken within and expressed through collective life at the local level: communities of volunteers or conscripts; communities of munitions workers; communities of the faithful and bereaved.

We take ‘community’ to mean social and geographical entities around which ordinary people construct their daily lives. In this sense a neighbourhood is an ‘experienced community’; a ‘nation’, as Benedict Anderson tells us, is an ‘imagined community’; a city is at the meeting point of the two, with both an imaginative and a visible

existence, one much closer to the neighbourhood than to the nation.4

It is not our intention to enter the rhetorical minefield leading to a universal answer to the question as to what constitutes a community. We try to use the term descriptively rather than normatively, thereby avoiding at all costs the kind of warm glow of Gemütlichkeit the term ‘community’ can convey when used uncritically.5 Nor do we subscribe to any analytical model separating ‘community’ from ‘economic society’ and drawing a straight line, called ‘modernization’, from the one to the other. We use the word ‘community’ in the way contemporaries did in these cities: to describe the environments – both material and cultural – in which they worked and resided.

The distinction between ‘experienced’ and ‘imagined’ communities is best understood as a heuristic device. All experience is imagined in a myriad of ways; it is never a unity, and the cultural dimension of work, wages, and consumption in the urban context is essential to the story we tell in this book. But one of the challenges of such research has been to escape the trap of idealism in social history, to avoid the fashionable current in which only representations exist. Wartime cities were full of such images, but the realities of daily life in wartime all too frequently deflated them by bringing to the fore the physical realities of conscription, shortages, and spiralling food prices. Urban populations faced these tangible, visceral difficulties in one way or another every day of the war. How they did so is essential to an understanding of the differences and overlap between ‘imagined’ and ‘experienced’ communities. All we claim is that these levels of perception and adaptation can be explored more effectively on the local than on the national level.

Whereas the history of nations at war has produced a literature of staggering proportions,6 the history of communities at war is still in its infancy. There is a substantial body of writing on the urban context of wars and civil wars;7 publications on the American Civil War or the

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5 For a lively demolition of such an approach, see Joanna Bourke, Working-class cultures in Britain 1890–1940 (London, 1993).
6 Just to keep up with the recent deluge in this literature is a full-time job. For a sense of its mass and quality, see the summary notices in the journals War and Society Newsletter, Bulletin du centre de recherche de l’Historial de la grande guerre, and Militärhistorische Mitteilungen.
7 Among the richest collections on this subject are the Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine in the University of Paris – X, Nanterre, the Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte in Stuttgart, and the Centre de recherche sur l’histoire des mouvements sociaux et du syndicalisme, at 9 rue Malher, Paris. The centre accommodated meetings of this research group throughout its period of activity.
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Paris Commune, for example, fill entire libraries. The range of memoirs about daily life or ‘my time’ in wartime London, Paris, or Berlin also provides much material of interest to historians. There is as well the evidence of the literary imagination, which provides glimpses, albeit highly subjective ones, of these cities in wartime. But with the exception of studies of revolutionary movements, mostly in Germany and France, the wartime social history of all major European cities, including the great metropolitan centres of Paris, London, and Berlin, has yet to be written.

Capital cities are special cases. They were the ‘nerve centres’ of the war, the places where the key decisions were taken and confirmed or changed by key political groups and individuals. But they were also like other cities: clusters of quarters, the identities of which were never subsumed fully by the city as a whole. And within these quarters, smaller units, many defined by family ties, were where the war was actually lived. In a study of urban history, these more intimate identities and loyalties can never be ignored.

In 1916 a Londoner in uniform was asked whether he was fighting for the empire. His answer was an emphatic yes. What he had in mind was the Empire music hall in Hackney. It is, therefore, essential to attend to the strength of local loyalties expressed in national or imperial phrases, the celebration of mundane and none the less important daily realities in an elevated language of nation, race, and empire. It is certainly true that the history of Paris and Berlin was transformed by the upheavals in the history of their nations, in particular by the war of 1870–1, but even in


these two cities, urban identities, and with them, a sense of place within a district,\textsuperscript{12} were never eclipsed by or subsumed completely within national or imperial realities.\textsuperscript{13} Some men fought for nation and empire, for King and country. Others fought for their part of London in a way they never fought for England; and even when they saluted England in song and verse, their ‘England’ was envisioned as a very local and particular place, bounded in many cases by the streets they knew, and the daily lives they led.

All cities are stunningly complex structures, and capital cities are more complex than most. They contain widely diverse populations, the variations among which will be probed at all stages of this study. But one of our key assumptions is that each city was a reality, albeit one full of myth and a mystique carefully cultivated over time by a host of writers, poets, politicians, painters, and tourists. We must not forget, though, that each capital city had a visceral identity, and was not merely a legal artefact created for collecting taxes and organizing the water supply. Each was a complex of urban villages and neighbourhoods whose collective existence was so obvious to its inhabitants that it did not have to be established for them. Others dreamed of ‘Paris’; local residents saw a more prosaic, but none the less vivid, urban reality. Those who lived or worked within the boundaries of the twenty arrondissements or in the adjacent suburbs of Paris knew what it was. They could walk from one end to the other on a leisurely day. It took longer to traverse London, but the material sense of a city was shared by millions of Londoners, despite the blurring at the edges of the administrative county into Kentish London or Middlesex. Similarly, being in Berlin was no mystery in 1914. Whether or not the suburban districts of Charlottenberg or Spandau were in Berlin was a matter of administr-
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tive nicety, not lived experience, as the incorporation of these and other areas into Greater Berlin in 1920 suggests.

Why select these urban communities? For the obvious reason that to write the history of communities in wartime France, Britain, and Germany without Paris, London, and Berlin would be very odd indeed. Their sheer size invites attention, as does their character as the residence of political, financial, and military leaders. The well-being of these urban conglomerates had a special meaning during the war, and their history – to a varying, though substantial, degree – governed that of the nation as a whole. When the Spartacist uprising failed in Berlin in 1919, it doomed insurrection elsewhere. Had Paris not held out in September 1914 or April 1918, the success of the Allied cause as a whole would have been in doubt. Certainly it would be wrong to read the history of other cities simply as an extension of what happened in the capitals, but no social history of the Great War will be complete without an analysis of metropolitan life during the conflict. That this has never been attempted before is both an indication of the difficulties of such a comparison and a challenge to undertake it.

Strategies of comparison

Comparing these three cities is an attractive and difficult task. Their spatial geometry, their architecture, both public and domestic, varied substantially. Their administrative histories were widely divergent. Yet they also shared structural and functional similarities, and archival and statistical records of sufficient richness to enable rigorous comparisons to be made.

Some parallels are obvious. These cities were centres of the press, transportation, and culture, national, European, and imperial.\(^\text{14}\) They were the foci of financial and political power, of commerce and manufacture, and any disruption to essential supplies and services was of immediate concern to those who ran the war.

The administrative history of each capital city presents some striking resemblances to that of the other two. Each city was an administrative unit both distinct from central government and controlled or overseen in a number of important ways. Public order, public health, housing, education, food provisioning in the metropolis, were always on the agendas of municipal, county, and central governments during the war. Who had final authority was a difficult enough question in peacetime; it was an explosive one in wartime.

One reason why these questions have never been answered is that most urban histories respect the conventional boundary of 1914, and therefore either end their narratives with the outbreak of hostilities or leap over the war years entirely. 15 With notable exceptions, 16 scholars in this field have done little to fill this gap. 17

This is true despite the fact that wartime administrative headaches have left a vast array of sources available for comparative study. Army, police, surveillance, and labour records are particularly abundant for Paris. Health and local data are fullest for Berlin; and local authority records are richest for London. This difference in archival materials is no artefact: there is no British series comparable to the collection of police surveillance reports in Paris or in Berlin because the structure of the central state and the links between central and local authority were entirely different. Nevertheless comparisons are rarely possible on the basis of identical sources, and metropolitan history ran along similar lines in wartime. Finding enough coal for Parisians in the winter of 1916–17 was not very different from the same task faced by administrators in London and Berlin. Who had the responsibility to do so varied, as did the degree to which they succeeded. But the choices they faced were much the same.

The physical location of the three cities with respect to the theatre of military operations was of fundamental importance in their wartime history. Here the divergence between Paris – near the front lines – London and Berlin – remote from them – is obvious. But, despite the differences arising from proximity to what the French later called the ‘red zone’, what is surprising is how many parallels remain within wartime metropolitan history.

We trace these parallels in five sections. After a preliminary presentation of aspects of the social history of the three cities on the eve of the

15 Among valuable studies which treat the war as a terminal date, see L. R. Berlanstein, The working people of Paris 1871–1914 (Baltimore, 1984). Treating 1918 as the beginning of another tale may have more justification in the case of Berlin. Still, the prior wartime experience is hardly mentioned in B. Graywale’s otherwise excellent Arbeit und Bevölkerung im Berlin der Weimarer Zeit (Berlin, 1988). One East German study (not surprisingly) chose 1917 as the great divide, but its teleology replaced reasoned argument: Kommission zur Erforschung der Geschichte der örtlichen Arbeiterbewegung, Geschichte der revolutionären Berliner Arbeiterbewegung. Vol. I: Von den Anfängen bis 1917; Vol. II: Von 1917 bis 1945 (Berlin, 1987).


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War, we discuss in part 2 the social relations of sacrifice: first, with respect to military mobilization and casualties; and secondly, in terms of wartime caricatures and invective on profiteering.

We then turn to the social history of material life in Paris, London, and Berlin. We trace the history of the social relations of work, wages, and consumption, attending both to quantitative evidence and to the perceptions contemporaries formed of their material condition in wartime. Finally, we describe public health policies and mortality trends among civilians, as a summary measure of the material problems evident in parts 3 to 5. In effect, in this, the first of two volumes, we try to sketch the material constraints operating on these three cities’ wartime social and economic history. In the second volume, we describe the ways groups of city-dwellers adapted to wartime conditions within families, quartiers, and social movements.  

Citizenship, adaptation, and well-being in wartime

Comparative urban history requires an analytical framework which can identify both convergences and divergences in the experiences of metropolitan populations. The organizing approach of this project is based upon an interpretation of the nature and determinants of adaptation and well-being in wartime cities.

Entitlements, capabilities, and functionings

One of our central arguments is that the nature of citizenship helped determine the efficacy of the war effort of the Allies and limited the efficacy of the war effort of Germany. This, we argue, was visible on the metropolitan level, and operated through the prior existence of what Amartya Sen has called a system of entitlements, a legal and moral framework upon which distributive networks rest. In Paris and London the entitlements of citizenship helped preserve communities at war by enforcing a balance of distribution of necessary goods and services as between civilian and military claimants. In Berlin, a different order of priorities existed. The military came first, and the economy created to service it completely distorted the delicate economic system.

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18 We benefited from the participation in our jours de travail of many colleagues who offered comments and criticisms on this and other analytical points. Among them are: Christof Conrad, Belinda Davis, Susan Pedersen, Alistair Reid, David Feldman, Cathy Merridale, Antoine Prost, Joanna Bourke, Lara Marks, Libby Schober, Deborah Thor, Richard Wall, Nick Stargardt, Gareth Stedman Jones, Christian Topolov, Joel Michel, Patrick Fridenson, Françoise Thébaut, Sigrid Stöckel, Dirk Müller, Wolfgang Ernst, Niall Ferguson, Tyler Stovall.

at home. Our claim is that Allied adaptation and well-being reflected a more equitable and efficient distributive system than existed on the other side of the lines.

To demonstrate this point, we have followed Amartya Sen’s innovative framework in departing from the well-established view that the standard of living is a measure of opulence. Instead of aggregating some measure of the value, in monetary or calorific terms, of a basket of consumables, Sen suggests a more fluid and complex approach to the issue of living standards. He urges us to see them in the form of what he terms ‘capabilities and functions’, of the freedom to be ‘able to achieve various personal conditions – to be able to do this or that’.20 Here health and sickness enter the equation. Once we admit the distinction ‘between being “well off” and being “well”’, then it follows that ‘while well-being is related to being well off they are not the same and may possibly diverge a good deal’.21

This approach departs radically from aggregative and absolute measures of well-being. ‘The standard of living’, Sen holds, ‘is not a standard of opulence, even though it is inter alia influenced by opulence. It must be directly a matter of the life one leads rather than of the resources and means one has to lead a life.’22

I have . . . called the various living conditions we can or cannot achieve, our ‘functionings’, and our ability to achieve them, our ‘capabilities’. The main point here is that the standard of living is really a matter of functionings and capabilities, and not a matter directly of opulence, commodities or utilities.23

Refining the concept further, Sen posits that ‘A functioning is an achievement, whereas a capability is the ability to achieve’, or in other words, an indication of ‘what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead’.24 As one sympathetic critic put it, ‘the multidimensional set of available capabilities of a person to function is what the standard of living is about’.25

For our purposes, this approach has many advantages. It suggests that the notion of well-being in wartime may be approached fruitfully as a problem of determining capabilities and functionings. That is, we need to discover not one global measure of well-being, but rather to analyse how the war distorted the way in which ordinary people went about their normal lives.

In dealing with the metropolitan experience, we have tried to build

31 Ibid., p. 15. 32 Ibid., p. 16. 33 Ibid.