Conference Report

Metropolitan Catastrophes: Scenarios, Experiences and Commemorations in the Era of Total War

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This conference addressed the impact of total war on metropolitan areas across a range of European periods and contexts. While London loomed large in the presentations, this review, like the conference itself, ranges beyond London to explore the relationships between war and the metropolitan condition. The papers were divided over the two days into sections addressing the scenarios, preparations for, experience, and commemoration of urban warfare. However, as many of the contributions attested, linear chronologies and essentialist understandings of places and events are not always appropriate. Eric Hornberger showed that the New York riots of 1863 had multiple and intersecting causes, while Carl Abbott illustrated the interflow between reality and fiction in imagining disaster in American cities. Finally, many of the papers dwelt on the mutual constitution of feeling and materiality in the city, as changing circumstances altered the morphological and emotional landscapes of the metropolises under consideration. As such, this review will highlight several of the recurrent themes that emerged during the two days, namely: interactions with the material urban environment; the emergence of vulnerability, anticipation and resistance as a result of war; and commemoration, nostalgia and places of peace. It will conclude with comments on the post-9/11 relevance of these works and the spectral presence of colonialism at the conference.

The urban experience

Anthony Beevor sketched out an accepted image of warfare in the cities of Stalingrad and Berlin, during which traditional models of disciplined conflict disintegrated in the pulverised urban landscape. Stalingrad signified the twentieth century’s return of the siege, after its decline in (western) warfare since the 1700s. However, as against the sheer destruction of the urban landscape between the forces of Stalin and Hitler, there were other equally catastrophic actions within wartime cities. Tim Cole charted the evolution of Jewish ghetto policies after Germany occupied Hungary in March 1944 – what he referred to as ‘a spatial revolution on anti-Semitic lines’. The policies varied from designating bathhouses, hotels, restaurants and other services that Jews could or could not use until the policy of ghettoisation – whether of areas or particular houses – was accepted across eastern and central Europe. The indecision over the scale and location of ghettos was caused by two competing opinions. Jewish communities often occupied the nicest parts of the cities, and thus attracted the attention of land speculators gambling on their expulsion. However, it was also
believed that the Allies would not bomb Jews, and thus it was thought best to keep
them dispersed throughout the cities. This often lead to the compromise of Jews
being located near important bridges or industries, irrespective of their lack of influ-
ence on bombing patterns, after being 'cleansed' from prestigious areas.

In terms of less radical restructuring, Maureen Healy described the experiences of
Vienna under the two world wars. Following the Anschluss (plebiscite) in March
1938, Austria had been merged with Germany, which led to a restructuring of the
state in line with Nazi principles. Hitler violently disliked the cosmopolitan, multi-
ethnic city of Vienna, leading to the promoted development of other cities and the
reclassification of the Austrian capital as the 'Alpine and Danube Region'. Mark
Hatlie outlined the more comprehensive and ongoing re-workings of Riva under the
influence of Tsarist, German, Latvian and Bolshevik occupiers. Each regime influ-
enced, to different extents, the mapping of power within the city; whether this was in
the location of influential institutions, place naming and street nomenclature,
parade routes, church denominations or the placement of monuments.

Joe Nasr and Peter Larkham also showed that this thoroughgoing urban transfor-
mation was not one that ended with armistice or victory. The term 'momentification'
was used to differentiate the marking and treatment of church sites from the formal
erction of monuments and memorials to the war dead. After initial bombing many
churches were cleared or reused (although Wren's London churches were preserved
at all costs), leaving commemoration to come later and at a smaller scale. Such acts
included erecting pillars or posts, amending First World War memorials, chiselling
dedications into the church fabric, landscaping the surroundings of ruined
churches, or even demolishing and rebuilding them

However, processes of memory and forgetting also shaped the urban experience
in dimensions other than the material or administrative. Janet Ward suggested that
war often led to contradictory feelings of despair and optimism: the opportunity to
start from scratch in the ruins of war. As Graham Greene commented, if all the
streets of which he had memories were destroyed, he would have been free from
previous confinements. Such sentiments express the feelings of exposure, weakness
and expectation that the prolonged catastrophe of urban warfare induced.

**Vulnerability, anticipation and resistance**

Aerial bombardment brought the horrors of the frontline into the cities, the commu-
nities, and the homes of city-dwellers far from the borders, coastlines, and armies of
war. While the physical remnants of the bombing could be cleansed and commemo-
rated, the psychological impact was deeper, yet harder to trace. Susan Grayzel spoke
of the impact of the threat of aerial warfare in Britain between 1908–39. In different
novels and official discourses the threat of warfare was traced as it seeped into metropo-
lian areas, spreading the message: 'no place is safe'. While the Second World War
blitz overshadowed the bombings of 1914–18, the details of hundreds of women and
children killed led to widespread shock and imaginations of what future war would
be, whether total devastation or technological salvation.

These dystopian and utopian visions also competed in the field of architectural
design. Roxanne Panchasi examined the extent to which post-1918 urban planning
was haunted by an anticipation of aerial bombardment. Attention was paid to
improving circulation so that people could be quickly evacuated, to removing
crammed spaces in which gas could collect, and demolishing ancient walls of fortification that might hamper urban expansion. The Le Corbusien solution was to build housing towers that took up less space, allowed the circulation of air at the base and could even be mounted with defences, although others viewed the skyscrapers as the catastrophe themselves.

The reaction to the more sophisticated and systematic bombing of the Second World War developed through time and in context. Healy showed that the Viennese population were initially curious about the earlier air raids and only began to heed government advice during the ‘air terror’ of the 1940s in which 8,700 people were killed. The ‘blitz’ in London marked a similar mind shift, beginning on September 7th 1940 and lasting until May 10th 1941. The lack of air defence for the capital and the absence of psychological preparation for the attack led to some criticisms of the government, but Peter Stansky argued that there was a general lack of defeatist attitude. Helen Jones explored the reaction to the blitz through visual representations. Herbert Mason’s *Daily Mail* photograph of St Paul’s standing untouched amongst the smoking ruins became an iconic symbol of British grit and determination, despite the evident destruction and hardship of the London people. Henry Moore’s acclaimed shelter sketches were presented by Jones as a counterpoint, portraying a passive and dehumanised body of victims, entombed in air raid shelters and underground stations. This provoked a discussion with the audience over whether Moore depicted passivity or a spiritualistic endurance, an acceptance of the presence of death and exhaustion, but a determination to carry on.

These wartime representations embedded themselves not only in institutional representations of space, but also in the ways through which people were encouraged to enframe and experience London itself. Fiona Henderson’s paper examined attempts to re-establish tourism in post-war London. Routes were presented through the ruins, provoking not only a sense of loss, but also a visual appreciation of the ruins as a darker version of the remnants of antiquity. The guides were fronted with depictions of London that echoed wartime visualisations, whether the silhouette of St. Paul’s or views of London as from a plane overhead. Only a minority of the publications pointed out the fury and pain associated with the sites, as opposed to the ancient and anodyne ruins from the past. The refusal to live a life of fear was one form of resistance to the catastrophic urban environment, but in occupied Europe the need, and opportunity, for resistance was much greater.

Maureen Healy described the local Viennese reactions to Nazi restructuring and administration. Between 1939 and 1945 there were 14,000 prosecutions for anti-German jokes, critical commentaries and the refusal to donate money to the Nazi cause. Hitler’s image itself was ridiculed, just as the ‘Heil Hitler’ greeting and wearing the Swastika was refused. Similarly, in both wars the Viennese had treated captured opposition soldiers in the city (123,000 in the 1940s) with respect. Jovana Knezevic spoke of the more covert resistance in occupied Belgrade (1915–18). The Austro-Hungarian and German occupation led to a scarcity of information about loved ones and the war in general, making the procurement of information a subversive act in itself. Information became the glue of social places of interaction, in which the enemy often passed on rumours from the outside world. Letters were sent in code, or with messages underneath stamps or between glued together postcards. While these were the sort of acts that kept society going during wartime oppression, it is the larger acts of sacrifice that have usually been commemorated.
Commemoration, nostalgia and peace

The ‘mementoization’ described by Nasr and Larkham has been historiographically overshadowed by the grander commemorations of war memorials and cemeteries. However, remembrance also takes place at a variety of other scales, while memorials themselves are an incomplete sign, dependent upon contextualisation and symbolic processes of signification. Bernhard Rieger described the various attempts to re-signify a fifteenth-century statue in the German town of Bremen. The statue was taken up as a symbol of national pride in the First World War, but was not used as an anti-Versailles tool in the Weimar period. However, the Nazis were quick to repair the statue in 1937, symbolising national regeneration, and erected a mini-bunker around the statue in 1939 to protect it from air attack. Following the war the crisis of national representation was reflected in the inability to place the statue, given its triumphalist origins. The 550th anniversary of the statue in 1954 went unmarked, and later in the 1950s a statue depicting a Grimm fairy tale was erected in the same square. The apolitical design, by a sculptor who had been persecuted by the Nazis, marked a nostalgic return to childhood in the very space in which the very adult themes of war and identity had been played out for 50 years. 

Jay Winter’s paper focused on the tension between iconoclasm and nostalgia that war provokes. War necessarily instigates desires for a place and time before conflict, although these places may be fictional alternatives created by the present. Thus, as war destroys certain places or situations, whether an urban environment or gendered associations of particular places, they become regenerated as objects of desire. However, nostalgia need not be the only means of positively approaching catastrophic histories. Stefan Goebel spoke of his comparative work between Coventry and Dresden, both victims of intensive Second World War bombing campaigns. Following the bombings in 1940, Coventry went on to become an international symbol of peace and commemorative partnerships. Secondary elites such as municipal agents and the clerical leaders forged global links, with Dresden especially, as a symbol of reconciliation. Coventry became what Goebel terms a ‘commemorative cosmopolis’, an international network hub that reformed a catastrophic site into a place of peace. Perhaps the ultimate example of this is the transformation of Hiroshima from one of the global catastrophic sites into an international emblem of peace. Lisa Yoneyama traced how Hiroshima was crafted into a peaceful site, when this was very far from its obvious meaning in the late 1940s. The American occupation government actively encouraged this creation of a Peace Memorial Park, securely linking the nuclear bomb with post-war peace and, as such, recasting the victims as martyrs who sacrificed their life for national recovery. However, the site also contains various negotiations of forgetting and partial remembrance. The thousands of Korean dead present a problematic group in a site of national remembrance, while the universalising and anonymous epitaph claiming ‘we shall not repeat the mistake’ detracts attention from the local loss and suffering. This focus reveals many contemporary parallels, and unearths hidden catastrophes that are far from being solely metropolitan in character.

9/11 and colonialism

The terrorist attacks on New York and the subsequent war in Iraq was a recurrent theme throughout the conference. Beevor contrasted the war in Baghdad and
Stalingrad, while Stansky showed how comparisons between 9/11 and the Blitz had been deployed in press commentaries on the attacks. Winter made apparent that the historical studies presented in the conference must be channelled to the present. Yet it was Lisa Yoneyama who provided the most penetrating comparison between past and present metropolitan catastrophes. As she showed, both Hiroshima and 9/11 entailed the murder of innocent civilians, local deaths constituting a national loss, a debate about how to reconstruct the site, and a politics of memory formation that embedded an amnesia about national imperialist histories. In the case of Japan, the death of the Korean slaves in the city embedded a trace of imperialist policies that cannot be cathartically excavated from the ruins of history. As such, the idea of a purely ‘metropolitan’ catastrophe collapses under the gaze of peripheral populations. This leads to several research questions. Firstly, how can one commemorate events that do not have a ground zero? How does one place catastrophes that have become an everyday norm? This challenges the notion of the metropolitan as an urban space, but it also challenges a focus on metropolitan cores as against post-colonial peripheries. Yoneyama expertly brought these two foci together in her case study of female slaves brought back to Japan from the colonies. These women suffered physical and sexual abuse, yet this was not the exception but the rule, such was the de-legitimised status of the colonial and the woman in combination. Drawing on the terminology of Giorgio Agamben, we must ask: how does one commemorate the space of exception?1

However, non-metropolitan colonialism was an oddly absent presence at the conference. Metropolitan catastrophes had been occurring with a methodical regularity in European colonies since the sixteenth century. Fortress towns were besieged and conquered, insurgencies were crushed, while settled towns were placed under such levels of surveillance and reconstruction that previous forms of life were rendered illegitimate. Metropolitan and peripheral catastrophes were symbiotically interlinked, not just in imagery and tactic, but in the actual technologies of catastrophe, experimented with abroad then finally, during the pronounced dénouement of the Enlightenment, exported back to twentieth-century Europe. And these are technologies that continue to be used today. Yoneyama stressed how the Hiroshima case study has been used to fortify the myth of the war of liberation; that the simultaneous rehabilitation and renunciation of violence led to the successful occupation of Japan, as such, justifying the invasion of Iraq in 2003. It is through an historical investigation of peripheral catastrophes that the studies presented here can be more completely linked to what Derek Gregory has referred to as today’s ‘colonial present’.2

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NOTES
1. A. Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (Stanford, 1998).