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War and Displacement in the Twentieth Century

Global Conflicts

Edited by
Sandra Barkhof and Angela K. Smith

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and Angela K. Smith**

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War and Displacement in the Twentieth Century

Human displacement has always been a consequence of war, written into the myths and histories of centuries of warfare. However, the global conflicts of the twentieth century brought displacement to civilizations on an unprecedented scale, as the two World Wars shifted participants around the globe. Although driven by political disputes between European powers, the consequences of Empire ensured that Europe could not contain them. Soldiers traversed continents, and civilians often followed them, or found themselves living in territories ruled by unexpected invaders. Both wars saw fighting in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and the Far East, and few nations remained neutral. Both wars saw the mass upheaval of civilian populations as a consequence of the fighting. Displacements were geographical, cultural, and psychological; they were based on nationality, sex/gender or age. They produced an astonishing range of human experience, recorded by the participants in different ways. This book brings together a collection of inter-disciplinary works by scholars who are currently producing some of the most innovative and influential work on the subject of displacement in war, in order to share their knowledge and interpretations of historical and literary sources. The collection unites historians and literary scholars in addressing the issues of war and displacement from multiple angles. Contributors draw on a wealth of primary source materials and resources including archives from across the world, military records, medical records, films, memoirs, diaries and letters, both published and private, and fictional interpretations of experience.

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Introduction

The No-Man's-Land of Displacement

Angela K. Smith and Sandra Barkhof

One consequence of war is human displacement. This has always been the case, as earliest records show. Homer's conquering Greek heroes of *The Iliad* were forced away from their homes and loved ones for ten years awaiting the fall of Troy. The defeated Trojans were displaced *en masse* as their city was sacked. Although these stories are myths, they hold fundamental truths about the experience of war through the centuries. Even in the medieval world, major battles rarely took place on the doorsteps of those participating. The rank and file, the ordinary soldiers, the cannon fodder, were always required to leave their homes, displacing themselves from all that they knew in order to carry out the necessary service to their Lord. Through the centuries, women and children have been left behind to fend for themselves as their menfolk were called away or, worse, uprooted from their homes to make way for some advancing army.

With the growth of the European empires in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the sites of warfare became more disparate. British soldiers, for example, found themselves fighting in the burgeoning nation of America, in India and the Far East, and in Africa in an attempt to preserve or to develop the nation's territorial assets. As competition for empire began to grow, soldiers were further displaced, dying of typhus in the Crimea or engaging with the complex racial politics of South Africa in the Boer War.

But the global warfares of the twentieth century brought displacement to civilizations on an unprecedented scale. The two world wars shifted participants around the globe. Although driven by political disputes between European powers, the consequences of empire ensured that Europe could not contain them. Soldiers traversed continents. Civilians often followed them, or found themselves fleeing from or living in territories ruled by unexpected invaders. Both wars saw fighting in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and the Far East. Few nations remained neutral. And both wars saw the mass upheaval of civilian populations as a consequence of the fighting. Previously the soldiers had traveled to the sites of war. In the First and Second World Wars, the conflicts themselves overtook countries and communities more used to hearing war news from afar. Displacements were geographical, cultural, and psychological; they were based on nationality,

sex/gender, or age. They produced an astonishing range of different human experience, often recorded by the participants in multiple different ways.

Although the displacement caused by the two world wars has been acknowledged by both historians and literary scholars, there has been surprisingly little focused work on the experience. Many of the existing academic publications on war displacement tend to focus on case studies of specific conflicts, such as Kebbede's (1999) *Sudan's Predicament: Civil War, Displacement and Ecological Degradation* or Wilson's (2011) *The Spatial and Social Impacts of Sierra Leone's Civil War 1991–2001: Internal Displacement and Household Destabilization*. Often, war displacement is analyzed in terms of migration and humanitarian crisis, such as Nafziger, Stewart, and Väyrynen's (2000) *War, Hunger, and Displacement: The Origins of Humanitarian Emergencies* or White and Reinisch's (2011) *The Disentanglement of Populations: Migration, Expulsion and Displacement in Postwar Europe, 1944–49*. With few exceptions, migration historians have been reluctant to consider other phenomena of war displacement (such as POWs) as proper *migrations*. As a result, POWs or displaced civilians have rarely been addressed as *migrants* in academic inquiry. Most studies have focused on their captivity or immediate experience, ignoring their interaction with the surrounding social and cultural landscape.

This collection seeks to address this gap by connecting war displacement (the immediate experience) and migration (an inquiry into the interaction of these displaced people with their new environment). The aim of the book is to bring together a collection of works by leading scholars in the field, who are currently producing some of the most innovative and influential work on the subject of displacement in war, in order to share their knowledge and interpretations of historical and literary sources. The project is interdisciplinary, international, and collaborative. The collection brings together historians and literary scholars in a genuinely interdisciplinary exercise, enabling the production of a collection of essays that addresses the issues of war and displacement from many different angles, including both broader survey chapters and those with a more specific focus. The contributors draw on a wealth of primary source materials and resources, including archives from across the world, military records, medical records, films, memoirs, diaries, and letters, both published and private, and fictional interpretations of experience.

The First World War broke out over the course of several days at the end of July and the beginning of August 1914, but it had been expected by some of the participants for some time. But even those who anticipated and even desired the war had no notion of the scale of the conflict they were about to initiate, or the enormity of the upheaval it would cause. The German invasion of Belgium resulted in the first of many waves of civilian refugees; fleeing the oncoming armies, they headed to whichever country would accept them. Many sought safety in Britain. The expanse of the English Channel seemed to offer a substantial buffer. The years that followed saw refugees

moving across Europe, through Serbia and the Balkans, the Middle East, Russia, and across the globe, as colonial possessions were occupied because of the war. The displacement of these civilians is obvious. But we would argue that displacement was a universal experience of the war. Conscripts from across Europe and, indeed, the empires, were forced away from their homes to embark on a new lifestyle of violence and hostility, often very much at odds with their inclinations. Millions were wounded, killed, or taken prisoner of war (POW). These various displacements left scars, both physical and psychological, on many participants. The armistice, when it finally came in November 1918, bought little relief for many whose homes and livelihoods had quite simply ceased to exist.

The despair that must have infected many of these people when twenty years later they were faced with a repeat performance can only be imagined. Although lives had been rebuilt, they were easily shattered again. But the rise of the Nazi party and the ambitions of Adolf Hitler carried with them even more sinister prospects than the previous war. The 1930s had already sown the seeds for those who were prepared to look and acknowledge the dangers that were to come. The Jews of Europe already understood themselves to be targets, but other ethnic, political, and marginal groups were also threatened as Hitler's troops rolled into Poland on September 1, 1939. The upheavals of the First World War were soon matched if not dwarfed by the mass displacements of the second.

The Second World War was to an even greater extent both global and civilian. There is some dispute over casualty figures, but some estimates suggest the war saw as many as sixty million deaths worldwide, of which around thirty million to forty million were civilians. By comparison, the First World War, which was much more geographically focused, as Strachan argues,¹ resulted in around thirty-seven million casualties, including civilians, whereby around sixteen million died and twenty-one million were wounded. The shift is a dramatic one. Because Europe was no longer the primary site of battle, many soldiers were stationed across the world, thousands of miles from their homes and with no chance of leave to reunite them with their loved ones. To a much larger extent than during the First World War, as countries fell before the advancing armies of Nazi Germany and later Japan, millions of civilians faced displacement or death. So many people were uprooted, relocated, and displaced during this war that it took literally years to relocate them following the return of peace.

This collection explores some of these myriad experiences of displacement. To do so, to try and bring order to the chaos of displacement, it separates these experiences into two broad categories: military displacement, including displacement experienced by combat soldiers and POWs, and civilian displacement, including refugee displacement, which is characterized by physical displacement and its effects. Most of the displaced populations of the two world wars fall into one or even both of these groupings.

And each group represents significant and disparate experience. Together, they begin to piece together a bigger picture of the profound impact of displacement during the global conflicts of the twentieth century.

MILITARY DISPLACEMENT

The first experience of the combat soldier is displacement. The move from civilian to military life must inevitably lead to a change of world experience and perhaps worldview. The chapters in Part I examine some different ways in which soldiers experience alienation, and how they might choose to identify and articulate it.

Although Britain had a significant standing army in 1914, men for whom military life was a chosen path, they were far too few to carry the nation into a major European war. The recruitment drive that followed the declaration of war was unparalleled in the country's history, and created 'Kitchener's Army,' men who were essentially enthusiastic civilians. By 1915 it was clear that despite the surge of volunteers, they would not prove enough to win the war in the face of the new technologies of weaponry, capable of destroying large numbers of soldiers in a short space of time. The Military Service Act became law on January 27, 1916, putting Britain on an equal footing with many of her allies and enemies, including Germany, where conscription was already a part of the state infrastructure. The act applied initially to single men, but it was extended to include married men in May 1916. The enthusiastic volunteers were joined by an even larger and more reluctant civilian army, exacerbating existing feelings of displacement. Ilana R. Bet-El suggests, 'Between August 1914 and December 1915 2,466,719 men volunteered; but from January 1916 to the end of the war 2,504,183 men were conscripted into the army. This means 50.3% of all wartime enlistments were conscripts.'² In other words, half of the army had not chosen to fight; they were instructed to do so. This must have been an unsettling prospect. It also indicates how many of the men had been involuntarily displaced as part of the war machine. John Bourne has argued:

The 'citizen force' took a perverse pride in being unmilitary. Their self-image was self-deprecating. Soldiers' songs and slang provide a constant reminder of the army's civilian ethos . . . The bulk of Britain's urban working-class army did not find the courage to stick it out by accepting and internalizing the values of the pre-war Regular Army. Their values and their inspiration remained obstinately civilian.³

If Bourne is correct, such a mind-set could have a significant impact on morale across the new army. Bet-El's extensive work on the personal records of conscripts leads her to the same conclusion.

The present, the military existence, filled with routine and sheer horror, was constantly measured in the face of the past, and basically refuted. This meant that beyond their knowledge of themselves as human beings who had to function and survive, there was no viable or tangible element in their daily lives in France with which they could identify. Ultimately, therefore, these conscripts were neither soldiers nor civilians; at best, they could be defined as alienated civilians. It was a non-identity—a ‘No Man’s Land.’⁴

This notion of being an ‘alienated civilian’ must have been exacerbated by the reality of frontline experience in the First World War. Much work has been done exploring the dehumanization, the loss of identity of the combat soldier. Eric Leed, in his groundbreaking study *No Man’s Land* (1979/2009), argues, ‘In war men were “estranged” from their societies, and one must take this estrangement literally; they were “made” strange to the men and things of their past, and made strange to themselves.’⁵ All that was once familiar was defamiliarized in the alien landscapes of the western and other fronts. For Leed, the image of ‘No Man’s Land’ becomes a defining metaphor for the psychological impact of the war on the men who served in it. He goes on to suggest:

Astonishing numbers of those who wrote about their experience of war designate No Man’s Land as their most lasting and disturbing image. This was a term that captured the essence of an experience of having been sent beyond the outer boundaries of social life, placed between the known and the unknown, the familiar and the uncanny. The experience of war was an experience of marginality, and the ‘change of character’ undergone by the combatant could adequately be summarized as marginalization.⁶

This notion of marginalization appears to be a universal characteristic of global war experience, whether the participant is a soldier on the western front, a matelot on the China Seas in World War II, a German POW in Britain or a refugee Jewish child. It applies across the conflicts, creating a symbolic no-man’s-land that can be inhabited by all the dispossessed.

In 1939, Britain was already one step ahead of the game and conscription was brought in at the beginning of the war. On the outbreak of the war on September 3, 1939, the National Service (Armed Forces) Act replaced the earlier Military Training Act, intended to ensure that the army would be adequate to cope with the new threat. But this does not necessarily mean that the experience of being a conscript was welcomed. The same sense of psychological ‘No Man’s Land’ applies. In *The Soldiers’ Tale*, Samuel Hynes suggests, ‘For everyone except career soldiers, military service is a kind of exile from one’s real life, a dislocation of the familiar that the mind preserves as life in another world.’⁷ Hynes is, no doubt, thinking of his own

experience as a combatant in the Second World War when he adopts words such as 'exile' and 'dislocation' to explore the soldiers' experience. He goes on to quote a young Canadian soldier fighting in Italy, writing home, to reinforce the message:

The damnable truth is we are in really different worlds, on totally different planes, and I don't *know* you anymore, I only know the you that was. I wish I could explain the desperate sense of isolation, of not belonging to my own past, of being adrift in some kind of alien space.⁸

The first chapters in this collection attempt to make sense of some of the feelings articulated here by the young Farley Mowat. Through the exploration of a range of different combat experiences, the chapters bring together different narratives, alternative interpretations of this isolation, this alienation, this dislocation in order to try to understand some of the ways in which soldiers engaged with and attempted to overcome their sense of displacement.

In "Displacement and the Combat Soldier: Poetic Interpretations," Angela K. Smith examines the ways in which the soldier poets of the First and Second World Wars used their craft as a means to articulate and to address their own sense of displacement. These soldiers were often sent to places they would never have otherwise visited. Many of them were ordinary men conscripted into the army for the first time; often posted to strange and alien lands, they faced geographical uncertainty, but equally their displacement might be psychological, cultural, or emotional, as well. Poetry became one of the most important forms for communicating the trench experience in the First World War. Some of the poets were already established, but many were ordinary men looking for a way to articulate the unspeakable. The Second World War also produced its soldier poets, both published and private, in search of a suitable medium for addressing the traumas and uncertainties of wartime displacement. This chapter opens the collection by considering this most celebrated of genres as a mechanism for understanding military displacement in the twentieth century.

In "The French Resister in the Maghreb: French North Africa and the formation of the Forces Aériennes Françaises Libres 1940–41," G.H. Bennett explores the role of a handful of isolated French airman who, in the aftermath of the defeat of France in 1940, rallied to De Gaulle in London. Many came from the French colonies (Algeria, Morocco, Hawaii, Indo-China, and the Caribbean) or from expatriate families in the Americas. Their sense of the True France for which they wished to fight varied considerably: some fought for the France of the Revolution—others for Catholic and peasant France. Finding themselves under the wing of the RAF, they struggled with personal, cultural, geographical, and (in some cases) racial and religious displacement. This chapter examines the extent to which these collective difficulties were overcome in the formation of French squadrons

within the ranks of the Royal Air Force. The dislocations caused by war-time displacements continue to cast a shadow over French history.

Martin Goodman considers the difficulties faced by Canadian soldiers as English patients in "The Other Side of the Poison Cloud: Canadian Soldiers as English Patients after the First Gas Attacks." Canadian soldiers were the first victims of the gas attacks at Ypres in 1915. The trenches were one displacement, and toxic yellow clouds then wiped out all normal sense of earth. Normal breathing functions were displaced and had to be managed in doses by attendants applying new oxygen treatments. Soldiers were then amassed at the Connaught Hospital on the grounds of the Cleveland Estate in Taplow, where physicians attempted to cure them while developing the basis of modern oxygen treatment. So these soldiers were displaced from their homelands, their colleagues, their health, their occupations, their families, and the front line to become, in their new role as gas victims, participants in a groundbreaking experimental battle for health.

Yet, one of the most extreme displacement experiences of the combat soldier must be that of being taken prisoner. POWs were formally protected by the Geneva Conventions, a series of international treaties, the first of which was ratified in 1864. These set out and defined the human rights of all prisoners in war, both military and civilian. The conventions were updated in 1906, 1929, and finally in 1949. During the First World War, most countries observed the dictates of the Conventions, however, the brutality and disregard for the rights of so many in the Second World War indicated the need for a further update. Soldiers in captivity, many taken prisoner across the world, very far from their homes, were especially vulnerable to the trauma of displacement.

POWs in the First World War represented a smaller number of the overall casualty figures and have perhaps inevitably received less attention; an imbalance that this collection begins to redress. The Russians and the German and Austro/Hungarian alliance did take prisoners in greater numbers. Austrian POWs taken in Serbia after the initial invasion attempt was repelled in 1915 played an important part in providing orderly labor for hospitals there, many of which were British led, with thousands falling victim to the typhus epidemic that ravaged the country that winter. First World War POWs were not restricted to the main theater of war in Europe, however, as many colonial soldiers spent much of the war in POW camps far from home, displacing them not only from their families and home but also from their comrades in arms and 'duty' on the battlefield. Samuel Hynes has argued, 'Prisoner-of-war narratives are like women's narratives, in that they tell the story of the *other* side of war, where human beings suffer but do not fight.'⁹ This immediately marginalizes even the professional soldier, taking him out of the arena of combat and placing him alongside the civilian. Hynes also identifies a stigma attached to the POW, dating back to the time when to be captured meant failure and disgrace, a taint of which may have lingered into the twentieth century.

Although soldiers in modern global war often cannot avoid capture and, indeed, long subsequent periods of incarceration, there may still be an underlying sense of shame attached to their condition.¹⁰ This coupled with an inevitable sense of frustration at being left powerless and redundant must have contributed to already complex issues of displacement. Thus, the next chapters engage with the experience of POWs from both wars, identifying a range of different displacements.

In "Diluting Displacement? Letters from Captivity," Oliver Wilkinson investigates how letters and parcels sent and received by British captives in Germany during the First World War were used to dilute the captured soldier's sense of physical displacement, that is, from his home, nation, and the battlefield, and the resulting psychological displacement from his civilian and military roles. Wilkinson examines how and why the captivity experience was represented in POW correspondence, looking especially at how prisoners responded to an 'imagined reader.' He also traces evidence of anguish that the POWs communicated in their letters either by conscious reflections or unwitting inferences. This demonstrates how letters and parcels created an 'epistolary space' that enabled men to transcend their displacement, allowing them to reconnect with their 'home worlds' and with their male roles in those worlds. This correspondence facilitated (re) negotiations and reassurance of self for captured men, which were vital in meeting the challenges that capture and captive life presented.

The Italian POW experience in Britain during World War II has often been remembered as a 'positive' case of war displacement. In media, fiction, films, and museums, as well as memoirs and oral history, the encounters between British civilians and Italian POWs have often been recollected as an exceptional story of solidarity, friendship, and romance in a context of total war. In "A 'Positive' Displacement? Italian POWs in World War II Britain," Marco Giudici, assesses the extent to which such recollections correspond to the displacement experience as it was recorded at the time in media and official reports. It explains why the Italian POW experience has subsequently been remembered in (exaggerated) positive terms in both popular culture and personal accounts, assessing the extent to which such memories have been influenced by the surrounding sociopolitical context. The chapter draws on a wide range of sources, including film, literature, media, museum exhibitions, and memorials, as well as governmental reports, camp diaries and surveys, memoirs, and interviews.

J.M. Goodchild examines the exploitation of POWs, as well as civilian aliens, in "Exploitation of Displaced European Refugees and Axis Prisoners of War in Britain, 1939-49." He examines the different forms and functions of 'exploitation,' particularly the role and influence of the British intelligence organizations. In discussion of these issues, this chapter examines the many ways in which Axis POWs and European refugees were exploited in Britain, as replacement labor, in the armed forces and the Pioneer Corps, in scientific research and development, and in Allied

intelligence organizations. The means of exploitation are analyzed within the context of British wartime internment policies and behavior. The predominant argument throughout is that both forced and volunteered forms of exploitation made significant contributions to the Allied war effort and subsequent victory.

“A Period in Limbo: Placing People and Punctuation in E.E. Cummings’s *The Enormous Room*,” by Hazel Hutchison, returns to the First World War and the awkward position of the POW who was not really a soldier. The young American writer E.E. Cummings was serving as a volunteer ambulance driver in France in 1917 when he was arrested on suspicion of spying and sent to a *depot de triage* where he was held for three months before diplomatic pressure from the American government secured his release. Cummings would later use this experience as the basis for his startlingly innovative war text, *The Enormous Room* (1922), in which his disruptive patterns of language are transferred from his usual poetic medium into prose. This chapter explores how the physical displacement of confinement in La Ferté-Macé results in the conceptual displacement of categories of judgment about the war, both in Cummings’s mind and in the minds of his fellow prisoners, whom he depicts with humor and at times admiration, almost reverence. In the topsy-turvy world of the detention center, where imprisonment means liberation from the burden of complicity in the war and virtue resides in defiance, moral values are upset, gender and national identities are renegotiated, and even spatial and temporal quantities cease to have their usual meanings. This study also shows how these disrupted concepts and values are communicated to the reader through Cummings’s playful and inventive distortions of language, in which words and punctuation marks are semantically and visually displaced, thus creating unexpected and startling responses in the reader. *The Enormous Room* therefore offers a profound exploration of the correlation, and sometimes the disparity, between internal and external worlds, and the language in which these are rendered by the literary artist.

CIVILIAN DISPLACEMENT

The First World War involved the civilian population more than any previous conflict. Civilians across the world, many already displaced by empire, found themselves embroiled in military and political situations that were quite unexpected. Although large numbers of civilians across Europe were forced to leave their homes during the First World War, civilian experiences of displacement during the First World War receive comparatively less scholarly attention, as they are often overshadowed by the Second World War, which caused mass civilian displacement on an unprecedented scale as millions were forced to relocate across Europe, at first because of Hitler’s occupation of other countries and then, in a