

# The Great Lakes Journal of Undergraduate History

---

Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 4

---

11-29-2014

## “A Cleaner, Better, Stronger Land”: The Causes of Anti-German Riots in Wartime London, 1914-1918

Haochen Wang

University of Wisconsin-Madison, [hwang275@wisc.edu](mailto:hwang275@wisc.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/gljuh>

 Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Wang, Haochen (2014) "A Cleaner, Better, Stronger Land": The Causes of Anti-German Riots in Wartime London, 1914-1918," *The Great Lakes Journal of Undergraduate History*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/gljuh/vol2/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate History Collections at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Great Lakes Journal of Undergraduate History by an authorized administrator of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact [scholarship@uwindsor.ca](mailto:scholarship@uwindsor.ca).

---

# “A Cleaner, Better, Stronger Land”: The Causes of Anti-German Riots in Wartime London, 1914-1918

## **Cover Page Footnote**

The author would like to thank Professor Daniel Ussishkin for his helpful recommendations and generous support.

**"A CLEANER, BETTER, STRONGER LAND":**  
CAUSES OF ANTI-GERMAN RIOTS IN WARTIME  
LONDON, 1914-1918

**HAOCHEN WANG**

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

---

**ABSTRACT**

During the First World War, anti-German sentiments manifested itself as riots in several occasions throughout the metropole. Several explanations and interpretations were put forward by contemporary observers and later historians. This essay aims to provide a more nuanced analysis of the causes of the anti-German riots. Wang demonstrates that the popular anti-German violence was a mixed product of press propaganda and local grievance caused by food shortage and economic inflation. Moreover, in analyzing the role of the state in relation to said riots, he argues that contrary to popular belief, the British government played a limited role in the promotion of anti-German chauvinism.

---

In September 1917, Arthur Conan Doyle published the short story “The Last Bow” in *The Strand Magazine*. His London readers, already weary of more than three years of arduous warfare, were delighted to learn that Sherlock Holmes, the celebrated detective and faithful patriot, was still serving Great Britain. In the story, set on the eve of the Great War, Holmes, assisted by his loyal companion Dr. Watson, successfully outwitted and captured a German spy. At the end of the story, the triumphant detective issued an inspiring and enthusiastic declaration of patriotism and England’s invincible strength:

There’s an east wind coming [foreshadowing an imminent confrontation with Germany] ... such a wind as never blew on England yet. It will be cold and bitter, Watson, and a good many of us may wither before its blast. But it’s God’s own wind none the less, and a cleaner, better, stronger land will lie in the sunshine when the storm has cleared.<sup>1</sup>

Doyle intended to instill a spirit of confidence and perseverance in the minds of the London public. However, contained in the reflection of the detective was a darker and more sinister message: the British soil could only remain “cleaner, better, stronger” if all menacing Germans were removed by resourceful and courageous men such as Holmes and Watson. Thus, “The Last Bow” conveyed strong anti-German sentiments. Unfortunately, in several occasions throughout the Great War, the masses demonstrated this violent form of Germanophobia during several anti-German riots.

During the First World War, anti-German sentiments manifested themselves as riots in several occasions throughout London. Contemporary observers, and eventually historians, put forth two divergent interpretations. Sylvia Pankhurst, the celebrated suffragette and fervent anti-fascist, witnessed the disturbances and acknowledged the influence of anti-German hysteria, but insisted that it was essentially a hunger riot and a collective protest by working class against wartime food shortage.<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, traditional historiography tends to emphasize the vicious role played by the state and press. An early study on the British home front by Arthur Marwick blames governmental propaganda and public sentiment for the violence:

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Last Bow: The War Service of Sherlock Holmes,” *The Strand Magazine* 54 (September 1917): 236.

<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Home Front: A Mirror to Life in England during the First World War* (London: The Cresset Library, 1987):171.

The *Lusitania* incident [A 1915 riot following the sinking of the *Lusitania* by German submarines] shows well the relationship between popular hysteria and official propaganda. The riots ... have every appearance of a spontaneous outburst of hatred which grew on a diet of harrowing sensationalism and righteous indignation. However, Lord Newton, head of Foreign Office propaganda, improved the shining hour by having large quantities of the medal said to have been issued by the German Government to commemorate the occasion reproduced for circulation in Britain and abroad.<sup>3</sup>

His claim is echoed by historians. Panikos Panayi, who conducts extensive research in the lived experiences of German immigrants in wartime Britain, argues that government and media utilized various forms of propaganda to incite and fuel anti-German violence. He demonstrates that government exploited public outrage and initiated mass internment and deportation of enemy aliens, eventually uprooting a thriving foreign community from British soil.<sup>4</sup> Panayi dismissed Pankhurst's claim by explaining that working class population experienced an improvement of living standard during the war, thus weakening the possibility of hunger riot.<sup>5</sup> Modern scholarship has reached a consensus over the character of the riot as primarily xenophobic. Clive Bloom and Sven Muller went as far as to label the intentional, well-organized campaign and the consequent violence as a deliberate "pogrom".<sup>6</sup>

This essay will provide a more balanced discourse on the causes of the anti-German riots. I will demonstrate that the popular anti-German violence was a mixed product of press propaganda and local grievance caused by food shortage and economic inflation. While this essay does not aim to fully exonerate the British government, I will demonstrate that in some instances, the role of authority was quite limited in terms of promoting anti-German hatred.

### ANTI-GERMAN VIOLENCE

After Great Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914, anti-German hostility permeated throughout London. Throughout the Great

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1965): 131.

<sup>4</sup> Panikos Panayi, *The Enemy in Our Midst: Germans in Britain during the First World War* (New York: Berg, 1991): 223-258.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>6</sup> Clive Bloom, *Violent London: 2000 Years of Riots, Rebels and Revolts* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 2003): 290; Sven Oliver Muller, "Who is the Enemy? Inclusion and Exclusion in Britain during the First World War," *European Review of History* 9, no. 1 (2005): 64.

War, the city witnessed four major anti-German riots, occurring in October 1914, May 1915, June 1916, and July 1917.<sup>7</sup> The first large-scale Germanophobic unrest originated in Deptford two months after the outbreak of the war. The sensational news report over the fall of Antwerp and the alleged German barbaric behaviors in Belgium, as well as the arrival of 800 Belgian refugees in London, was responsible for triggering the extensive disturbance against German shops. Men, women, and children gathering along Deptford High Street quickly transformed themselves into rioters. After the mobs had smashed windows of a German owned confectionery, around fifty drunken men burst into the store and began looting, and climbed up to the second floor and threw furniture out of the window, before a group of police arrested them. A pork butchery narrowly escaped destruction due to police protection.<sup>8</sup>

On May 7, 1915, a German submarine sunk the luxury liner RMS *Lusitania* off of the coast of Ireland.<sup>9</sup> In the following days, the anti-German hysteria escalated and the metropolis drifted to anarchy. The resulting riot and looting proved to be the one of the most violent and destructive episodes in the history of London. *The Times* summarized the chaos and lawlessness in vivid details:

The damage done by the rioters was very great. Not content with smashing doors and windows and looting the whole of the furniture and the contents of the shops, the interiors of the houses were ... greatly damaged. Staircases were hacked to pieces and ceilings were knocked down. Shops were completely wrecked before the police had time to arrive upon the scene ... horse-drawn carts, handcarts, and perambulators – besides the unaided arms of men, women, and children – had taken everything away from the wrecked houses.<sup>10</sup>

Ultimately, 257 people were injured and the total property damage was estimated to be £195,000.<sup>11</sup> The same report also contained a list of regions that were worst hit by mobs. It turned out that a number of them lived in predominantly poor and working class neighborhoods from the East End, including Canning Town, Limehouse, Shadwell, Stepney, Wapping, and

<sup>7</sup> Panikos Panayi, "Anti-German Riots in London during the First World War," *German History* 7 (April 1989): 186.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 186-188.

<sup>9</sup> Ian Beckett, *Home Front 1914-1918: How Britain Survived the Great War* (Kew: The National Archives, 2006), 216.

<sup>10</sup> "Rioting in London," *The Times*, May 13, 1915, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Stella Yarrow. "The Impact of Hostility on Germans in Britain, 1914-1918," in *The Politics of Marginality: Race, the Radical Right and Minorities in Twentieth Century Britain*, ed. Tony Kushner and Kenneth Lunn (London: Frank Cass, 1990): 101.

Aldgate.<sup>12</sup>

In June 1916, the third large-scale riot broke out due to the death of Lord Kitchener, a widely respected military commander who died when Germans sank his battleship off the coast of the Orkney Islands.<sup>13</sup> The newspapers did not hesitate to promote another witch-hunt against enemy aliens and accused German spies of leaking the routes of his voyage. In Acton, Islington, and Tooting, even shops belonging to naturalized Germans were not spared by mobs.<sup>14</sup> The last wave of xenophobic violence was partially provoked by air raids carried out by German airplanes in July 1917. Less than five hours later, a group of mobs looted a butcher shop in London Fields, although the shop was closed following the 1915 riot. Other victims included two bakeries, located respectively in Tottenham and Westgate Street.<sup>15</sup>

### PRESS PROPAGANDA

While the extent of the damage was highly visible, the real causes behind the riot are more difficult to determine. First, the power and influence of press propaganda requires a careful reassessment. A large number of first-hand accounts, mostly published and written in the inter-war periods, sharply criticized the proliferation and shamelessness of anti-German reports carried out by media. "There can be no more discreditable period in the history of journalism than the four years of the Great War," one contemporary remarked bluntly.<sup>16</sup> In particular, the right-wing newspapers under the ownership of Lord Northcliffe received a great deal of denunciations. Northcliffe press started to fabricate and circulate atrocity stories shortly after the German invasion of Belgium. The myth of the so-called "Rape of Belgium" and "evil Huns" was invented and sustained through the heavy and deliberate use of sensational and even eroticized language, while distorting or simply ignoring the reliability and accuracy of the source.<sup>17</sup> The journalist, without visiting the battlefield, either invented or exaggerated German cruelty and Belgian suffering, writing of cruel German soldiers bayoneting children and ravaging maidens.<sup>18</sup>

Considering the timing of the first two anti-German riots and it coinciding with the surge of fabricated stories about German barbarianism in

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Beckett, 217.

<sup>14</sup> Panayi, "Anti-German Riots in London during the First World War," 199-200.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 200-201.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Ponsonby, *Falsehood in War-time: Containing an Assortment of Lies Circulated Throughout the Nations during the Great War* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1929): 134.

<sup>17</sup> Cate Haste, *Keep the Home Fires Burning: Propaganda in the First World War* (London: Allen Lane, 1977): 79-85.

<sup>18</sup> Ponsonby, 128-134; and, Nicoletta Gullace, "The Blood of Our Sons": Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002): 25.

Belgium, the contribution of press propaganda towards public xenophobia and animosity is evident. Nevertheless, the effect of newspaper propaganda over the British population cannot be overstated. Working class families—while definitely benefiting from mass literacy and greater availability of cheap, mass-produced publication—did not have enough time and earning to purchase and read newspapers regularly. Robert Roberts, who grew up in a slum at Salford during the early twentieth century, recalled most residents were only interested in horseracing news.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, the connection between the provocative rhetoric of Fleet Street and the actual destruction inflicted by the working class is tenuous.

Furthermore, one must remain cautious to the assertion that right-wing British newspapers were full of misleading information. In order to verify such claim, Adrian Gregory, a rather skeptical Great War historian, systematically reviewed the content of *Daily Mail*, one of the most notorious conservative tabloids blamed by contemporaries and later historians for warmongering.<sup>20</sup> While admitting to many instances of dramatic reports filled with details of German cruelty and savagery, he also showed that, from the opening stage of the war, relatively few page spaces were spent on describing and condemning the callous behavior of Germans.<sup>21</sup> Contrary to the traditional thought about the heavy emphasis on atrocity stories, less than five percent of the news concerned war atrocity stories.<sup>22</sup> There is evidence that one *Daily Mail* journalist, who did report directly from Belgium, remained faithful to the principle of journalism by conscientiously checking the authenticity of alleged atrocities under difficult circumstances.<sup>23</sup>

Further analysis of the *The Illustrated London News* (ILN) reveals that facing a lack of photographic evidence, the ILN produced sketches of hypothetical German brutality based on “fertile imagination rather than observation”.<sup>24</sup> This analysis parallels that of Gregory’s as several pictures did portray the cruel and ruthless behavior of German troops in Belgium. An especially powerful and captivating sketch showed a line of German infantrymen shooting at hapless and armless civilians fleeing from burning houses along a village street (Figure 1). In the foreground, a huddle of anxious women, children, and infants was under the guard of Uhlans, one of them intimidating a boy with the butt of his rifle.<sup>25</sup> However, such im-

<sup>19</sup> Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971): 129.

<sup>20</sup> Playne, 286.

<sup>21</sup> Adrian Gregory, “A Clash of Cultures: The British Press and the Opening of the Great War,” in *A Call to Arms: Propaganda, Public Opinion, and Newspapers in the Great War*, ed. Troy Paddock (Praeger: Westport, 2004): 26-30.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>24</sup> Haste, 88.

<sup>25</sup> “The German Reign of Terror: The Tragedy of Cortenberg,” *The Illustrated London News*, September 12, 1914, 385.



ages were the exception rather than the rule. In other words, the coverage of German misdeed focused on the destruction of personal property and cultural institutions, rather than mutilation and murder of innocent civilians. In some issues, several pages were devoted to the photographs of wrecked buildings and bridges.<sup>26</sup> Instead of emphasizing German guilt, the majority of war illustrations tended to portray either the gallantry of British soldiers on the battlefield or the magnanimity of Royal Navy sailors on the ocean.<sup>27</sup> Apparently, the editors saw praise and glorification as a better and more effective way to bolster morale and patriotism at the home front.

In any case, press fabrication notwithstanding, the aggressive and destructive nature of German invasion and occupation is undeniable. The research of military historians indicates that war crimes against civilians were indeed committed, in violation of the war conduct stipulated in the Hague Convention. Incidents of both premeditated mass execution and spontaneous massacre did occur.<sup>28</sup> In total, approximately 250,000 Belgian non-combatants perished owing to German occupation.<sup>29</sup> Taking such appalling devastation into consideration, the contents of *Daily Mail* and other newspaper were not based on entirely on fiction. Generally, the accusations against wartime media, while reasonable to some extent, were weakened by the potential of being excessively biased in a historical context.

### FOOD SHORTAGE AND INFLATION

In comparison, the interpretation of the riot in relation to food shortage and inflation received relatively little attention and was rejected by most mainstream historians. The unique explanation by Pankhurst was closely linked with her personal experience during the war. Already a renowned suffragette and pacifist before the war, Pankhurst was heavily involved in the poor relief program, and later wrote a highly critical account of the living conditions in the East End. A significant portion of her wartime memoir depicted the plights endured by destitute working class families. Numerous people, in hunger and despair, visited Pankhurst to address their ordeal:

... white-faced mothers, clasping their wasted babies, whose pain-filled eyes seemed older than their own. Their breasts gone dry, they had no milk to give their infants, no food for the elder chil-

<sup>26</sup> "Ruin Spread by the 'Cultured' Germans in Two Historic Cities: Destruction at Louvain and Liege," *The Illustrated London News*, September 12, 1914, 398-399.

<sup>27</sup> "How History Repeated Itself at St. Quentin: A Stirrup-Charge," *The Illustrated London News*, September 12, 1914, 392; and, "British Chivalry Towards a Defeated Enemy: Rescuing German Crews off Heligoland under Fire," *The Illustrated London News*, September 5, 1914, 341.

<sup>28</sup> John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001): 74-78, 435-439.

<sup>29</sup> Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 45.

dren, no money for the landlord.<sup>30</sup>

In order to validate the theory and narratives she supplied, we must closely examine the logistical transformation of wartime food supply in London. In particular, we must consider how the ongoing conflict affected the availability of staple foods, or more broadly, the quality of living, among the impoverished population. In general, historians have agreed that compared with its allies (France and Russia) and enemies (Germany and Austro-Hungary), British wartime food policy was quite successful, and government did a decent job in maintaining the food supply and nutritional standards from 1914 to 1918.<sup>31</sup> Such optimistic consensus notwithstanding, it is still too simplistic to conclude that laboring class was free from food crisis. The possibility of mass starvation and the consequent public disorder, though successfully prevented, remained a haunting concern throughout the war. As a matter of fact, the implementation of the food measurement was not a smooth process, which meant that several problems concerning the food production and distribution disrupted the food accessibility to the London poor on an intermittent basis.

By comparing the time of the food rationing and the riots, we are able to lend legitimacy to the arguments in favor of the food riot. Such a comparison is necessary because historians usually credited rationing as the most effective food policy throughout the war. The rationing was rigorously enforced, consequently alleviating the pre-war food consumption inequality between rich and poor.<sup>32</sup> However, the government did implement rationing in early 1918, after all four riots had occurred.<sup>33</sup> Understandably, in spite of the state efforts, the food quality deteriorated during the war. On the eve of the Great War, British people were becoming increasingly well-fed and well-nourished. Right from the outset of the conflict, the national and municipal authority would have had to undertake the formidable task of feeding the civilian population of London. Apart from the enormous population size, several factors complicated the job. Most crucially, military provision took priority over civilian need.<sup>34</sup> In addition, the British food supply heavily relied on foreign imports transported via merchant fleets, including wheat (seventy-eight percent), meat (thirty-six percent), butter (sixty-two percent), cheese (seventy-four and a half percent), and most serious of

<sup>30</sup> Pankhurst, 19.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Dewey, "Nutrition and Living Standards in Wartime Britain," in *The Upheaval of War: Family, Work and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918*, ed. Richard Wall and Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988): 197.

<sup>32</sup> Beveridge, 233.

<sup>33</sup> Beckett, 218.

<sup>34</sup> Thierry Bonzon and Belinda Davis, "Feeding the Cities," in *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919*, vol. 1, ed. Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 311.

all, sugar (one hundred percent).<sup>35</sup> Unsurprisingly, the suspension of trade between Britain and Austria-Hungary, where two-thirds of British pre-war sugar consumption came from, immediately raised its price by 63 percent<sup>36</sup>, contributing to widespread alarm across London markets.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, the domestic agriculture was adversely affected, as vast bulk of farming tools and other apparatus were diverted to the army. For instance, horses were requisitioned for the purpose of cavalry stock and transportation. Nitrate and phosphate, two key ingredients in fertilizer, was heavily used for manufacturing gunpowder. The lack of those crucial resources severely disrupted land productivity and compromised yields.<sup>38</sup> When London approached the first anniversary of the war, or barely three months after the worst anti-German riot, the retail price of bread had increased by forty-four percent, while beef and mutton grew by forty-seven percent and fifty-one percent, respectively.<sup>39</sup> Naturally, the skyrocketing price caused acute hardships among the poor in the first stage of the war and Pankhurst's description was likely to be accurate.

As officials began to recognize the severity of the food crisis, government gradually took steps to regulate the production, import, and sales of the food. However, the process was slow and occasionally ineffective. The *laissez-faire* tradition of Great Britain rendered state intervention politically infeasible in the first two years of the war.<sup>40</sup> A Ministry of Food was established only in December 1916 and as mentioned above, another year passed before compulsory rationing was introduced in London.<sup>41</sup> To make matters worse, one month later, Germany announced unrestricted submarine warfare, meaning that even neutral ships in British water could be sunk without warning. Transportation of food over water ways became an extremely hazardous operation.<sup>42</sup> An Admiralty official in charge of organizing merchant ship recalled a truly perilous period when six sugar ships were destroyed within a few days, and the entire sugar stock in Britain could only last ten days.<sup>43</sup> The US entry of war on April 1917<sup>44</sup> promised a more rapid cessation of warfare, yet at the same time imposed a greater burden upon Britain, since from then on a great deal of ships was committed to transport US troops and supplies.<sup>45</sup> Thus, any international events

<sup>35</sup>. William Beveridge, *British Food Control*(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1928): 359.

<sup>36</sup>. Bonzon and Davis, 310.

<sup>37</sup>. Beveridge, 6.

<sup>38</sup>. Bonzon and Davis, 311.

<sup>39</sup>. *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>40</sup>. Marwick, 193-194.

<sup>41</sup>. Beckett, 217-218.

<sup>42</sup>. *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup>. Arthur Salter, *Memoirs of a Public Servant*(London: Faber and Faber, 1961): 90.

<sup>44</sup>. Beckett, 218.

<sup>45</sup>. Salter, 94.

were able to menace the lifeline on the sea and the British food imports declined steadily from 1914 to 1918.<sup>46</sup>

The list of scarce food items continued to grow. According to a *Times* article published in late 1917, London food market suffered from shortage of sugar, tea, butter, margarine, lard, dripping, milk, bacon, pork, condensed milk, rice, currants, raisins, spirits, and Australian wines.<sup>47</sup> From 1916 to early 1918 (on the eve of compulsory rationing), the fat stock of cattle, sheep, and pigs experienced a steep decline. The same bleak trend applied to the consumption of butter, bacon, and cheese.<sup>48</sup> In addition, the steady provision of food was occasionally interrupted by administrative incompetence. The worst case occurred from late 1917 to early 1918. In July 1917, the time of the last anti-German violence, a defective agricultural scheme fixed an excessively low price for cattle, resulted in an over-supply of cattle within the next couple of months, leading to serious meat shortage at the start of 1918.<sup>49</sup>

Soon long queues of people waiting for food became a common scene all over London. The home-front's well-being was certainly curtailed by time and energy spent on procuring food and the uncertainty over food availability.<sup>50</sup> The low-income laboring population, already afflicted by physical fatigue and mental anxiety, was quite vulnerable in another way, as the high transport cost restricted the option of small grocers in less well-off districts, who in turn minimized their own cost by adopting "linked sales". This system forced consumers to purchase rare commodities in conjunction with other items causing a marked increase in expenditure. The measure proved to be disastrous to families with constrained disposable incomes. These adverse factors were likely to promote the xenophobia, as workers tended to identify and target the enemy aliens as the scapegoat.

Furthermore, while the general success of food authority in maintaining nutritional intake must be acknowledged, the war did have a profound impact on the psychological status of the home front population. The consistency of nutritional provision was largely achieved through the long overdue ration and food substitutes, as fresh meat being replaced by bacon and butter by margarine.<sup>51</sup> The policy of substitute was inevitably unpopular. One economic historian noted that "[a] forcible alteration of food habits goes to the very heart of tradition, expectations and identity."<sup>52</sup> Many

<sup>46</sup> Peter Dewey, "Food Production and Policy in the United Kingdom, 1914-1918," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 30 (1980): 81.

<sup>47</sup> "Shop Queues: Demand for Better Distribution," *The Times*, December 10, 1917, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008):214.

<sup>49</sup> Beveridge, 146-148.

<sup>50</sup> Bonzon and Davis, 316.

<sup>51</sup> Beckett, 116.

<sup>52</sup> Avner Offer, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989):

Londoners had great difficulty in adapting to the new diet, which represented a violation of their time-honored cultural norm and culinary practice. For example, one contemporary was deeply disappointed by the vanishing of muffins, which were taken for granted before the war.<sup>53</sup>

The widely shared discontent was exacerbated by the presence of those who were enriched by the war. The public, being demanded to make unprecedented sacrifice, was enraged by the allegedly rampant practice of profiteering and hoarding.<sup>54</sup> A judge complained via letter to the *The Times* about the behavior of conspicuous consumption among wage-earning residents, stating that, "... there are ... no fewer than eight sweetshops, besides several shops for cakes, fried fish, cigarettes, fruits, etc. ... thronged from morning to night ... nearly all this is pure waste."<sup>55</sup> Overall, the compositional change of the food and the visibility of profiteers, either real or imagined, were able to depress self-satisfaction and morale among domestic population, thereby intensifying social tension.

### WAGE AND LIVING STANDARD

The impact of living standard over London population was a more complex issue. In spite of the inflationary pressure, it should be noted that, in general, wages experienced steady increase during the war, thereby somewhat offsetting the rapidly rising cost of living. Nonetheless, such optimistic description must not be taken at face value, and the standard of living for working-class Londoners during the Great War requires careful analysis. The contemporary observations yielded mixed attitudes. Contrary to Pankhurst's gloomy description, *The Times* journalist Michael MacDonagh noticed little trace of "old ugly squalor of poverty", attributing the unexpected prosperity among the laboring class to the generous wages enjoyed by workers and separation allowances given to soldiers' families.<sup>56</sup> Modern historians generally agree with his observation and explanation.<sup>57</sup>

In reality, the picture is quite complicated. The chief reason is that the war generated both winners and losers and the impact was also uneven within the same industry. Generally speaking, workers employed by the sector involved in the war effort and affiliated with military, such as munitions industry, benefited the most.<sup>58</sup> In contrast, people whose occupation and

<sup>53</sup> C. S. Peel, *How We Lived Then 1914-1918: A Sketch of Social and Domestic Life in England during the War* (London: The Bodley Head, 1929): 95.

<sup>54</sup> Peel, *How We Lived Then 1914-1918*, 77, 96.

<sup>55</sup> MacDonagh, 148-149.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>57</sup> Marwick, 123-130.

<sup>58</sup> Jonathan Manning, "Wages and Purchasing Power," in *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919*, vol. 1, ed. Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 261-262.

trade was peripheral to the war fared the worst. For instance, the garment trade incurred heavy losses from the war, in spite of slight gains in aggregate sense. By late 1918, the income of tailors, seamstresses, and milliners all lagged behind inflation.<sup>59</sup> Although army contracts of uniforms promised to improve standard of living, the predominately female workforce was often exploited by unscrupulous contractors, enduring harsh working environments and receiving a wage below the legal minimum.<sup>60</sup> Those who were left behind by the war boom were most likely to participate in the plunder, since the looters arrested ranged from cabinet makers and locomotive firemen to paper hangers and laborers, whose trades uniformly suffered from the war.<sup>61</sup>

Overall, while the direct evidence is lacking, we can still formulate the plausible assumption that a significant portion of the indigent population, frustrated by the plummeting quality of life, collectively decided to plunder food retailers. In other words, the loss of *Lusitania* helped to ignite the powder keg, but the fundamental nature of the disturbance was an act of desperation undertaken by indigent populace with empty stomachs. The mounting tension manifested during the war, when about fifteen women marched from working-class area to Harrods department store in search of sugar.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, as mentioned previously, substantial number of bakeries and butcheries fell victims to the looting.<sup>63</sup> Roberts, who quoted a contemporary report, best summarized a positive outcome for those who avoided being caught: "There would be many a breakfast table set better this morning than it has ever been."<sup>64</sup>

## ROLES OF GOVERNMENT

It must also be acknowledged that in some ways, the British government encouraged anti-German antagonism in order to achieve national unity and cohesion through the creation and vilification of an external enemy.<sup>65</sup> Shortly before the 1915 riot, the government organized a committee to investigate the German atrocity and published the Bryce Report (*Report on Alleged German Outrages in Belgium*) claiming to present an accurate account of German conducts in Belgium. Similar to the newspapers mentioned previously, the Bryce Report was based on unreliable and exaggerated evidence, thereby presenting an equally distorted version of the "Rape of Belgium". The committee interviewed only a small number of Belgian refugees

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 265, 267.

<sup>61</sup> Panayi, "Anti-German Riots in London during the First World War," 192.

<sup>62</sup> Bonzon and Davis, 329-330a.

<sup>63</sup> Panayi, "Anti-German Riots in London during the First World War," 186-188, 194, 200.

<sup>64</sup> Roberts, 155.

<sup>65</sup> Muller, 64.

and devoted lukewarm efforts into confirming their stories. The result was "a highly sexualized image of German monstrosity" and "an evocative, sentimental, and deeply gendered version of the conflict."<sup>66</sup> For instance, the report mentioned one female seeing a German soldier stabbed his bayonet into the stomach of a two-year-old child and lifted the victim into the sky, while singing with his comrades. While most incidents contained within the report cannot be verified by historians, "highly improbable accounts came to be accepted as sworn truth."<sup>67</sup>

Moreover, the government did not hesitate to impose physical confinement upon Germans amid the spy fever. Following the *Lusitania* riot, the wholesale internment of male enemy aliens of military age was decreed by the Prime Minister.<sup>68</sup> The dark side of the captivity, especially the mental pain inflicted upon prisoners, was clear.<sup>69</sup> According to Rudolf Rocker, an anarchist and activist who spent the majority of the war period in custody, the internees constantly complained of lack of privacy and a repressive sense of isolation. He loathed the meals and odor, calling one camp as "a sad and hopeless place ... grey and drab and miserable."<sup>70</sup> Several instances of abuse by the commanding officers were also reported.

However, a large number of evidence does prove the unwillingness of the government to pursue the anti-alien campaign to the extreme. The official reaction in the direct aftermath of the riot proved its commitment to law and order at a local level. In a number of instances, more injuries and property damages were avoided, thanks to the efforts of the police force in dispersing and resisting the angry crowds.<sup>71</sup> Following the 1915 riot, 866 looters were arrested and the majority received swift and firm penalty.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, it was clear that the authority had no intention to further the racial violence and the stern judicial measures strongly suggested that in the midst of mass hysteria, the lapse of due process was fortunately avoided.

Another piece of evidence supporting the absence of an intentional and well-organized prosecution by state is the relatively fair condition within the various internment camps scattered across Britain, despite the above-mentioned bitter memory of the prisoners. A drawing of one temporary detention center published on *The Illustrated London News* displayed a benign and dynamic, albeit crowded scene (Figure 2-3). A congregation of well-dressed and respectable-looking Germans were reading, smoking, writ-

<sup>66</sup>. Gullace, 19.

<sup>67</sup>. *Ibid.*, 17-19.

<sup>68</sup>. Panayi, *The Enemy in our Midst*, 78.

<sup>69</sup>. Yarrow, 107.

<sup>70</sup>. Rudolf Rocker, "An Essay by Rudolf Rocker," in *An Insight into Civilian Internment in Britain during WWI*, ed. Ronald Parker (Maidenhead: Anglo-German Family History Society Publications, 2002): 60.

<sup>71</sup>. Peel, *How We Lived Then 1914-1918*, 37.

<sup>72</sup>. Panayi, "Anti-German Riots in London during the First World War," 198.

ing, talking with one another, playing cards or listening to melodies from an accordion. Overall, a leisurely and peaceful milieu dominated the hall. Except for a suspended rope separating prisoners from uniformed guards, no artifacts or fixtures indicated a site of incarceration. Without the caption below the illustration, the readers would probably mistake it as a normal social gathering.<sup>73</sup>

The evidence supporting a systematic persecution is relatively weak. The living condition was equally decent in permanent camps and the prisoners were able to enjoy a certain degree of autonomy. They were usually organized into military unit, but they could elect their own officer and committee to assist the camp administration. For instance, in the Alexandra Palace, one of the largest internment centers located in London, distinctive committees took charge of dining hall and kitchen, as well as being responsible for planning events and mediating potential conflicts among prisoners.<sup>74</sup> Besides some controls over camp affairs, the prisoners across the country were reasonably well-fed during the first two years of conflict,<sup>75</sup> and their physical health was sound, thanks to the proper maintenance of hygiene.<sup>76</sup>

Moreover, the army authority's rather generous approach was evident in its genuine effort to help the captives find ways to occupy themselves, thereby enduring the boredom and monotony of camp life. Some craftsmen, such as tailors, shoemakers, and barbers, were permitted to carry out their former trade in specialized workshop and earned a tiny wage. To deal with the wartime shortage of manpower, a large fraction of the prisoners were contracted to work in agricultural, quarrying, and public work (road, canal) sectors. Furthermore, the prisoners participated in a number of activities for social, cultural, and recreational purposes.<sup>77</sup>

In general, as the daily experience of Germans behind barbed wire offers a glimpse of governmental attitudes toward enemy aliens, it can be reasonably concluded that the prisoners were treated decently, suggesting government's unwillingness to implement anti-alien policy to the extent comparable with that adopted earlier by imperial Russia or later by Nazi Germany.<sup>78</sup> Hence, the statement of an anti-German "pogrom" is a deeply flawed version of the captivity experience of German.

Substantial evidence speaks to the relative placidity of Germanophobia on the home front. While the Defense of the Realm Act (passed im-

<sup>73</sup> "German 'Prisoners of War' in London: Arrested 'Enemies' of Great Britain in Custody at Olympia," *The Illustrated London News*, August 22, 1914, 298-299.

<sup>74</sup> Panayi, *The Enemy in Our Midst*, 104-105.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>77</sup> Panayi, *The Enemy in Our Midst*, 121-124.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.



mediately after the break of the hostility) and subsequent wartime legislation (especially Aliens Restriction Act) could be judged by modern standards as unfairly harsh to German expatriates, the official fear of espionage was a legitimate concern. Additionally, German language courses never ceased in London schools.<sup>79</sup> And finally, the scientific community seemed to be miraculously immune to the anti-German craze. German born physicist Arthur Schuster was appointed as the president of the British Association in 1915, at the height of Germanophobia.<sup>80</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Anti-German violence in London in the midst of the Great War was a complex phenomenon, precipitated by several intertwining factors. On one hand, the riots can be viewed as the culmination of anti-alien hysteria. The state and media propaganda, intending to demonize the belligerent nations and their people, was partially responsible for the popular outburst of anger against enemy aliens. On the other hand, local grievances over food scarcity and declining living standard, aggravated by the advent of war, played a vital role in motivating a predominately working-class population to participate in the plunder. While it is tempting to blame government, the absence of a publicly sanctioned, systematic persecution somehow reduced its responsibility.

This interpretation allows us to gain a better insight into the popular sentiment around the time of the publication of "The Last Bow". While applauding the feats of Sherlock Holmes, Conan Doyle envisioned a powerful Great Britain devoid of evil German spy and certainly encouraged his readers to think likewise. Contrary to his expectation, some rioters preferred a broader interpretation of the term. To them, "a cleaner, better, stronger land" promised cheap bread and a decent quality of life, regardless of the presence of German people. When their anticipation was shattered by the harsh realities of war, they took matters into their own hands and launched one of the most devastating anti-alien outbursts in the British history.

<sup>79</sup> Marwick, 36-37; and, Stefan Goebel, "Schools," in *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919*, vol. 2, ed. Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 210.

<sup>80</sup> C. C. Aronsfeld, "Immigration into Britain: The Germans," *History Today* 35 (August 1985): 10.

## Bibliography

### Newspapers:

- “German ‘Prisoners of War’ in London: Arrested ‘Enemies’ of Great Britain in Custody at Olympia.” *The Illustrated London News*, August 22, 1914, 298.
- “The German Reign of Terror: The Tragedy of Cortenberg.” *The Illustrated London News*, September 12, 1914, 385.
- “Rioting in London.” *The Times*, May 13, 1915, 10.

### Primary Sources:

- Beveridge, William. *British Food Control*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1928.
- Doyle, Arthur Conan. “His Last Bow: The War Service of Sherlock Holmes.” *The Strand Magazine* 54, no. 321 (September 1917): 227-236.
- MacDonagh, Michael. *In London during the Great War: The Diary of a Journalist*. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1935.
- Middleton, Thomas. *Food Production in War*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923.
- Noschke, Richard. “Diary of Richard Noschke.” In *An Insight into Civilian Internment in Britain during WWI*, edited by Ronald Parker, 1-26. Maidenhead: Anglo-German Family History Society Publications, 2002.
- Pankhurst, Sylvia. *The Home Front: A Mirror to Life in England during the First World War*. London: The Cresset Library, 1987.
- Peel, C. S. *The Eat-Less-Meat Book: War Ration Cookery*. New York: John Lane Company, 1918.
- Peel, C. S. *How We Lived Then 1914-1918: A Sketch of Social and Domestic Life in England during the War*. London: The Bodley Head, 1929.
- Playne, Caroline. *Society at War: 1914-1916*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931.

- Ponsonby, Arthur. *Falsehood in War-time: Containing an Assortment of Lies Circulated Throughout the Nations during the Great War*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1929.
- Roberts, Robert. *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971.
- Rocker, Rudolf. *The London Years*. Translated by Joseph Leftwich. London: Robert Anscombe, 1961.
- Rocker, Rudolf. "An Essay by Rudolf Rocker." In *An Insight into Civilian Internment in Britain during WWI*, edited by Ronald Parker, 27-66. Maidenhead: Anglo-German Family History Society Publications, 2002.
- Salter, Arthur. *Memoirs of a Public Servant*. London: Faber and Faber, 1961.
- Wedgewood, Josiah. Speech to the House of Commons, July 11, 1918. *The Parliamentary Debates, Commons*, 5th ser., vol. 108 (1918), 545.
- Secondary Sources:**
- Beckett, Ian. *Home Front 1914-1918: How Britain Survived the Great War*. Kew: The National Archives, 2006.
- Bloom, Clive. *Violent London: 2000 Years of Riots, Rebels and Revolts*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 2003.
- Bonzon, Thierry, and Belinda Davis. "Feeding the Cities." In *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919*, vol. 1, edited by Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert, 305-341. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Dewey, Peter. "Food Production and Policy in the United Kingdom, 1914-1918." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 30 (1980): 71-89.
- Dewey, Peter. "Nutrition and Living Standards in Wartime Britain." In *The Upheaval of War: Family, Work and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918*, edited by Richard Wall and Jay Winter, 197-220. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

- Goebel, Stefan. "Schools." In *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919*, vol. 2, edited by Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert, 188-234. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Gregory, Adrian. "A Clash of Cultures: The British Press and the Opening of the Great War." In *A Call to Arms: Propaganda, Public Opinion, and Newspapers in the Great War*, edited by Troy Paddock, 15-50. Westport: Praeger, 2004.
- Gregory, Adrian. *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Gullace, Nicoletta. *"The Blood of Our Sons": Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
- Haste, Cate. *Keep the Home Fires Burning: Propaganda in the First World War*. London: Allen Lane, 1977.
- Holmes, Colin. *John Bull's Island: Immigration and British Society, 1871-1971*. London: Macmillan Education, 1988.
- Horne, John, and Alan Kramer. *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.
- Manning, Jonathan. "Wages and Purchasing Power." In *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919*, vol. 1, edited by Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert, 255-285. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Marwick, Arthur. *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1965.
- Muller, Sven Oliver. "Who is the Enemy? Inclusion and Exclusion in Britain during the First World War." *European Review of History* 9, no. 1 (2005): 63-83.
- Offer, Avner. *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.
- Panayi, Panikos. "Anti-German Riots in London during the First World War." *German History* 7, no. 2 (April 1989): 184-203.

Panayi, Panikos. *The Enemy in Our Midst: Germans in Britain during the First World War*. New York: Berg, 1991.

Yarrow, Stella. "The Impact of Hostility on Germans in Britain, 1914-1918." In *The Politics of Marginality: Race, the Radical Right and Minorities in Twentieth Century Britain*, edited by Tony Kushner and Kenneth Lunn, 97-112. London: Frank Cass, 1990.

## Appendix

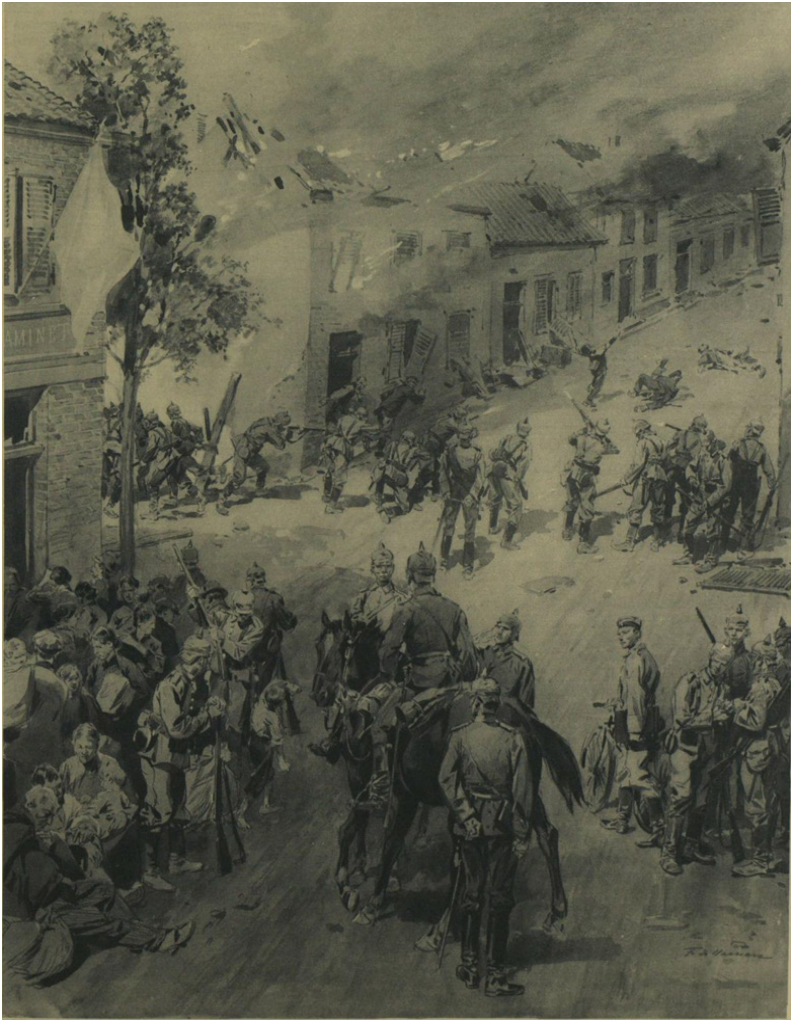


Figure 1. "The German Reign of Terror: The Tragedy of Cortenberg," *The Illustrated London News*, September 12, 1914, 385.



Figure 2. "German 'Prisoners of War' in London: Arrested 'Enemies' of Great Britain in Custody at Olympia," *The Illustrated London News*, August 22, 1914, 298.

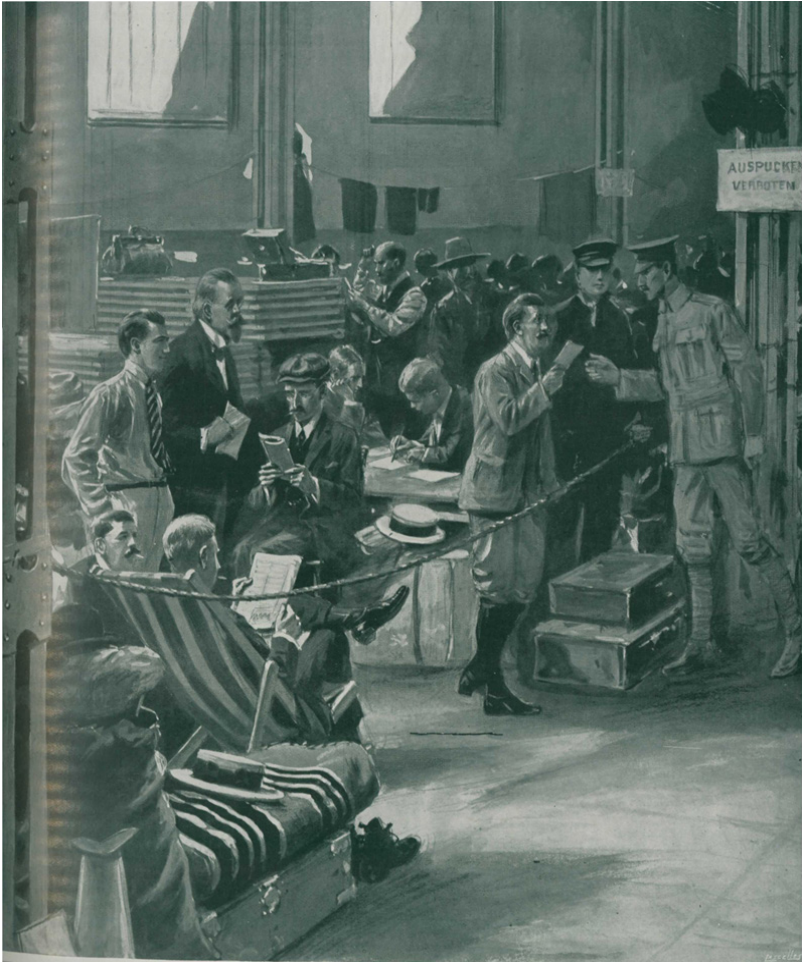


Figure 3. "German 'Prisoners of War' in London: Arrested 'Enemies' of Great Britain in Custody at Olympia," *The Illustrated London News*, August 22, 1914, 299.