Urban resilience and warfare: How did the Second World War affect the urban environment?

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Abstract

Environmental studies tend to focus on peacetime development. However, people all over the world think that the most important historical event that has taken place over the past century is the Second World War. Could it be worthwhile to explore how the largest violent conflict in human history possibly affected the urban environment? In the following potential impacts of this war on urban development and urban environment are briefly discussed.

1. A shock city

World War II came as a shock to millions due to its unprecedented scale but also due to the introduced new technologies, strategies, and tactics. It was in absolute terms the world's most destructive war, claiming approximately 50–70 million human lives. In addition, the war injured millions of people and other living creatures. Also World War II gave birth to the Cold War, which threatened to desolate planet Earth with weapons of mass destruction. However, from an urban point of view, World War II was and remains still today a paradox. In public imagination omnipotent states and armies waged this total global war. Even towns and cities where decisive operations or battles took place were generally regarded simply as battlegrounds, passive sites where external active forces clashed. And yet due to the industrial nature of modern warfare, state powers were completely dependent on the innovations, products, and services provided by the towns and cities. Therefore no other war in human history has been waged with such ferocity and devastation done *to cities, against cities, and in cities.*

Towns and cities were of crucial importance to warfare during World War II. The war was waged by the most urbanized and industrialized powers in the world, including the United States, Germany, United Kingdom, and Japan. Warfare between the major powers depended completely on the mass production of industrial products in wartime boomtowns like Seattle, Los Angeles, Osaka, Krasnoyarsk, and Essen. Civilians and towns have always suffered from war. Yet World War II was the first war in which military strategies systematically aimed at and succeeded in devastating towns and cities and killing civilian populations on a massive scale. It was by no means an accident that the atom bombs were dropped on cities, too.

2. A model city

Yet, conceptualizing war as a destructive shock alone would generate a biased impression of the relationship between the urban and natural worlds. In addition to the wails of alarms, other voices could also be heard in towns and cities, especially at the end of war: "Streets like these; warehouses rising above endless rows of hideous houses, factories built over gardens, no space for playgrounds, churches tucked away behind railway arches – streets like these must have no place in the post-war Britain." These were the opening words of a propaganda film entitled *Model City* issued at the end of World War II in Britain. The message of the film was explicit. The new model city was to be a just and democratic city for all the inhabitants. The wartime coalition government established in Britain had understood that in order to win the war against Nazi Germany, the socially deeply stratified British society had to be radically reformed in order to make it worth defending. Consequently the socio-economic outlines of this better society were rapidly laid out and agreed upon during the Blitz.

3. Resilient city

The conflicting concepts of shock city and model city provide a common yet ambiguous framework for exploring the multifaceted urban environmental history of World War II. These coupled concepts emphasize that, in addition to being a destructive process, war promoted genuine progress. Consequently, shock city and model city are best understood as complementary and not contradictory images of a complex process. However, as a rule even the most hard-hit towns and cities, including even such extreme cases like Hiroshima, Chongqing, and Stalingrad, survived wartime destruction, recovered, and flourish today. Consequently, while the concepts of shock city and model city are used to make sense of the relationship between war, cities and the urban environment, the key concept is *resilient city*. It refers here to the capacity of towns and cities to function and provide realistic living opportunities to their human and non-human inhabitants no matter what adversities they encounter.

4. Reduced ecological "bootprint"?

Wartime resilience signified practical things. In order to use natural resources wartime towns and cities resorted to creative devolution. Heating and the average temperature of premises were reduced. Daylight saving was reintroduced to save energy. The more natural diurnal cycle in blacked-out cities was probably good for both urban inhabitants and nature. Saving, reuse and recycling of various raw materials became widespread. Decreased use of cars and increased use of collective transport, combined with cycling and walking made many cities more active, healthy, clean and quiet. Increased use of local natural resources including urban soil, urban fauna and flora, rain, ground and surface waters made people more aware of urban nature. Re-animalization of wartime cities transformed them to a strange "urban animal farm". The number of members in nature protection movements increased as well. These developments provide grounds to call many wartime towns and cities eco-cities.