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# 'Thomas Cook's Tourists': the challenges and benefits of inter-theatre service in the British army of the First World War

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the movement and integration of combat formations and commanders between the British army's various operational theatres during the First World War. By considering the physical mobility of these individuals, it also examines an important corollary: the mobility of knowledge. It shows that not only did formations have to negotiate tactical and geographical difficulties, but they also had to overcome a variety of organisational barriers relating to service history and identity. In some cases these barriers served to decelerate their integration into a new expeditionary force. To overcome these barriers the army employed a series of institutional and informal methods that aimed to rapidly and effectively integrate these formations into their new force. These methods were sophisticated and recognisably modern, resonating with contemporary notions of how complex institutions organise and integrate 'newcomers'. Despite the challenges of these environmental and organisational barriers, the movement of personnel was beneficial. These formations and commanders acted as knowledge conduits, promoting the establishment of cross-theatre learning networks within the army, and proving to be a necessary development in a war in which success was predicated upon the swift and efficient transfer of knowledge and experience.

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William Tibbs, a former private in the 2/15th Battalion London Regiment, was proud to recall how his battalion was 'called the [Thomas] Cook's Tourists because of our many travels'.[1] Tibbs' battalion had formed part of the 60th (2/2nd London) Division, which had seen service in three different operational theatres during the First World War: France, Salonika and Palestine. The 60th Division was not unique in this respect. Although the majority of the British army's manpower remained on the Western Front – the principal theatre of operations – over a third of its combat formations saw service in another theatre. These formations not only represented the movement of bodies and *matériel*; they also reflected the movement of knowledge and expertise.[2]

The dominance of the Western Front, both at the time of the First World War and today, has coloured perceptions of the conflict. Prevalent images of the war include trenches, barbed wire, mud and shell-pocked terrain. These images have engendered the belief that physical mobility was non-existent during the war, that stillness was the norm. Soldiers are perceived as being spatially fixed to trenches or concrete emplacements. This perception of fixity is exacerbated by the dominance of artillery and machine guns, leading to the creation of a fire-swept zone. Frontal assaults were incredibly dangerous. The perception of immobility is given further credence by the lack of a truly mobile arm: the tank was in its infancy, and the cavalry, particularly on the Western Front, was rendered largely redundant.[3] Senior commanders were thus confronted with the stark, interrelated problems of both strategic and tactical level immobility.

Yet, despite these perceptions, the First World War was very much a mobile war. However, it is a conflict whose im/mobilities have yet to be teased apart. Part of this comes down to the relational and contextual nature of mobilities. Certainly, in comparison to future conflicts, particularly the high-intensity counterinsurgency operations of decolonisation, the First World War appears

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[1] J. Knight, *The Civil Service Rifles in the Great War: All Bloody Gentlemen*, Barnsley, 2004, 147.

[2] Discussion of similar movements can be found in the literature on the mobility and circulation of ideas, see J. Urry, *Mobilities*, Cambridge, 2007; M. Sheller and J. Urry, The new mobilities paradigm, *Environment and Planning A* 38 (2006) 207–226.

[3] The cavalry was not entirely redundant in other theatres. Both mounted regiments and the Imperial Camel Corps were used in the more mobile conditions in Palestine. See S. Badsey, *Doctrine and Reform in the British Cavalry*, Aldershot, 2008.

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static. However, let us reflect on the experience of the soldier in the front line trench. The confined space and the immobilities associated with endless waiting leads to an assumption of fixity. Yet he is mobile.[4] From his physical circulation behind the line up to the front, to his walking the trenches, to his going over the top, there is no absolute immobility to his existence. Indeed, as Peter Adey notes, everything is mobile, yet this largely comes down to differential and relational perspectives.[5] The logistical infrastructure required for war provides us with another example of the dialectical – rather than dualistic – relationship between mobilities and relative immobilities. The sending of letters and parcels and the movement of men and *matériel* required kilometres of rail network infrastructure, both in the UK and abroad. While railheads are spatially fixed and the train itself is destined to spend all its time on the rails, the military's logistical needs were reliant on the complex mobilities within and beyond the railhead, which provided fuel, supplies and information.[6] As Steven Gray demonstrates in his own article in this special issue, infrastructures, despite their veneer of permanence and stability, are precarious.[7] They require constant support and maintenance. As Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift suggest, infrastructural systems are often 'black boxed' with limited attempts to acknowledge their 'inherent and continuous unreliabilities'.[8] Infrastructures in the case of the First World War are more than just railways and rolling stock working collectively; they are, instead, complex and mobile assemblages bringing together all manner of human, non-human and natural agents into a multitude of continuous connections across a geographic space.[9]

Although the physical movement of personnel and *matériel* during the war has received some attention, scholarship on the global movement of knowledge or ideas about warfare during wartime has not been as well covered. In First World War scholarship, with the exception of medical and communication knowledge, the transfer of military knowledge is underdeveloped in the historiography. Where knowledge transfer or learning has been considered it is often restricted to studies on the Western Front. A similar gap exists in the 'new mobilities' literature. Studies on mobility have tended to focus on civilian or peacetime movements with a particular focus on the mobility of 'peoples and things'.[10] Although there is a burgeoning scholarship on imperial knowledge networks, research on the 'mobility of ideas' in a military context is less developed.[11]

Like the movement of physical entities, the movement of knowledge and ideas can be constrained and regulated. Ideas are subject to friction and are sometimes forced to wait for receptive audiences. As Tim Cresswell argues, we need to pay attention not only to the process of stopping, but also to the kind of friction that mobility experiences.[12] This friction – whether it is human, geographical or organisational in nature – is important to our understanding of how ideas and knowledge move across various spaces and between different sites.[13] For the military, the problem of friction is well known and best described by the military theorist Carl von Clausewitz. It is 'the force that makes the apparently easy so difficult'.[14] It comes in two forms: first, the physical difficulties of moving and fighting armies, and, secondly, the intangible factors relating to fear, danger and problems of information.[15] Both physical and intangible factors played a role in hindering the flow of knowledge and expertise in wartime. Indeed, the First World War is the archetypal example of friction at play in war, shaping its specific character.

This article will examine the movement and integration of combat formations and commanders between the British army's various operational theatres. By considering physical movement, it will also examine the movement of knowledge. While such an approach suggests a distinction or separation between these two types of mobility, the two are invariably entwined. Warfare is very much a 'complex of mobilities'.[16] Knowledge, for example, travelled in a number of different ways. It could be through the movement of personnel or formations, through material means, such as letters and military pamphlets, but also through embodied practices such as battle drills, marching and military customs, instilled through the training of bodies. Through these embodied practices, or the absence of such, we can see clear distinctions between the experiences and mobilities of regular soldiers and civilian volunteers, but also between distinct types of warfare in the different theatres.

The mobility of both military bodies and knowledge was intimately linked to the particular geographies of each operational theatre. These theatres were seen as both geographically distinct and distinctive sites, which were moved around and between in different ways. For industrialised theatres, such as the Western Front, an established railway network, supplemented by light railways, aided physical movement. Italy, while possessing its own railways and connected to the Western Front through an overland network, still relied on mule transport in its mountainous heights. For largely pre-industrial theatres such as East Africa, Mesopotamia and Palestine, there was a greater reliance on traditional mobilities including native porters, river transport or animal transport, prior to the establishment of railway networks.[17] These infrastructures – perceived as relative sources of strength – were vulnerable and subject to pinch points that could rapidly become choke points. In late 1917, for example, the overland supply route between the Western Front and Italy was suspended due to Italian reversals. Prior to its closure, 380 deadweight tons of stores per day were carried over this route to theatres such as Salonika and Palestine. However, during the period after the route reopened, this had

[4] R. Woodward and K.N. Jenkings, Soldier, in: P. Adey, D. Bissell, K. Hannam, P. Merriman and M. Sheller (Eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities*, Abingdon, 2014, 358.

[5] P. Adey, If mobility is everything then it is nothing: towards a relational politics of (im)mobilities, *Mobilities* 1 (2006) 76, 83.

[6] Adey, If mobility is everything, 83, 87.

[7] S. Gray, Fuelling mobility: coal and Britain's naval power, *Journal of Historical Geography* 58 (2017).

[8] S. Graham and N. Thrift, Out of order: understanding repair and maintenance, *Theory, Culture and Society* 24 (2007) 10.

[9] S. Graham, When infrastructures fail, in: S. Graham (Ed.), *Disrupted Cities: When Infrastructures Fail*, London, 2010, 9–11.

[10] For exceptions to this, see Woodward and Jenkings, Soldier, 358–366; C. Kaplan, Mobility and war: the cosmic view of US 'air power', *Environment and Planning A* 38 (2006) 395–407.

[11] T. Cresswell, Mobilities II, *Progress in Human Geography* 36 (2012) 651; E. McCann, Urban policy movements and global circuits of knowledge: towards a research agenda, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 10 (2011) 107–130. For examples of networks of knowledge scholarship, see J. Havia, *The Imperial Security State: British Colonial Knowledge and Empire-Building in Asia*, Cambridge, 2015; Z. Laidlaw, *Colonial Connections 1815–1845: Patronage, the Information Revolution and Colonial Government*, Manchester, 2005; C. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1880*, Cambridge, 2000.

[12] T. Cresswell, Towards a politics of mobility, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28 (2010) 26.

[13] Cresswell, Mobilities II, 651; Cresswell, Towards a politics of mobility, 17, 26; McCann, Urban policy movement, 121.

[14] C. von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated by M. Howard and P. Paret, Oxford, 1976, 68.

[15] E.C. Kiesling, On War without the fog, *Military Review* 81 (2001) 86–87; T. Cresswell, Friction, in: Adey, Bissell, Hannam, Merriman and Sheller (Eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities*, 107–115.

[16] Woodward and Jenkings, Soldier, 362.

[17] See V. Huber, *Channelling Mobilities: Migration and Globalisation in the Suez Canal Region and Beyond, 1869–1914*, Cambridge, 2013.

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