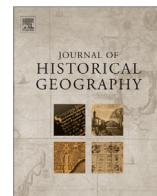




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Feature: European Geographers and World War II

Afterword: geographers, historical geographies, war



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Abstract

This paper provides a commentary on the articles in the special issue. In their introduction, the editors identify three linking themes: the varieties of wartime experience, of geographers and others; moral geographies, including the moral bases to the interpretative categories used to write about those experiences; and the contrast between 'major' and 'minor' historical geographies of war. Building upon, but also extending from these concerns, this afterword addresses three topics in order to elaborate upon the arguments of the several papers: the connections between biography, geography and memory; the importance of the intellectual and political context before 1939 in understanding the nature of geography and the experiences of geographers in Europe during the Second World War; the co-constitutive relationships between the arts of geography and the acts of war, including geography's material and civic expression.

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In his *The Passing World: Science and Social Progress* (1948), the British chemist Sir Thomas Henry Tizard, Chief Scientific Advisor to HM Government (and, later, founder of the Government's Flying Saucer Working Party investigating UFO sightings in Britain), reflected upon the connections between science and war: 'It is a mistake to suppose that science advances rapidly in a war. Certain branches of a science may receive a special stimulus, but on the whole the advance of knowledge is slowed'.¹ Tizard knew well the world whereof he spoke: a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps in the First World War, Tizard was from 1934 involved in the Scientific Survey of Air Defence as it was then called (later Air Warfare), and, later still, in developing airborne radar and the ASDIC system of submarine detection.² Tizard's words prompt reflection on several topics: on the nature of science's advancement, on the relations between science and technology during times of war, on the institutional and social context of

science's place in war and, not least, upon the specifics of science's 'certain branches', including, of course, geography.

Tizard's office-based war, one spent leading technological developments, and his retrospective view of it, was not shared by others. Looking back in 1947 upon her own wartime experiences, the geographer and historian of exploration and technology Eva Taylor noted that 'War is... also part of our social history, and the older among us have twice experienced the rise of geographical prestige which occurs in wartime'.³ Taylor taught in Birkbeck College, then in the war-torn City of London, during the Blitz: she, too, knew first hand whereof she spoke. Her interpretation of geography's rise in prestige (contra Tizard) was precisely because of the subject's association with wartime utility and geographers' presence in the institutions managing the war.⁴ Was this then British geography's finest hour? Was geography's seeming exceptionalism

DOI of original article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2014.12.001>.E-mail address: c.w.j.withers@ed.ac.uk¹ T.H. Tizard, *The Passing World: Science and Social Progress*, London, 1948, 47.² I.C.B. Dear and M.R.D. Foot, Tizard, Sir Henry, in: *The Oxford Companion to World War II* (Oxford, 2001); R.W. Clark, *Tizard*, London, 1965.³ E.G.R. Taylor, Geography in war and peace, *Geographical Review* 38 (1948) 132–141, quotation from page 137. The paper, originally published in *The Advancement of Science* 4 (1947), was her presidential address to Section E (Geography) of the Annual Meeting of the British Association in Dundee in 1947. The 1947 meeting was held in Dundee as a continuation of the 1939 meeting, first held in September 1939, which was initially disrupted and later postponed following Britain's declaration of war upon Germany.⁴ As Taylor put it, 'In broad terms, geographical intelligence of every kind becomes vital, and while many of our number were seconded to various Ministries during the war – to the Ministries of Information, of Economic Warfare, of Supply, and so on – others have honourable records of organising and supplying geographical intelligence to the various Commands, and in many cases of adapting, interpreting and applying such intelligence to the novel and intricate demands of commandos, bomber-pilots and others engaged in particular operations': Taylor, Geography in war and peace (note 3), 137; On Eva Taylor's life and geographical work, see H. Clout and A. Maddrell, *Eva Germaine Rimington Taylor* (1879–1966), *Geographers Biobibliographical Studies* 31 (2012) 1–29.<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2015.02.003>

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a reflection of the 'special stimulus' afforded some branches of science, as Tizard noted? Or was Taylor, in recourse to remembered experience, over-playing British geography's standing? Such questions may, of course, be misconceived. In times of war, notions such as 'science' or 'geography' take on a certain abstract dimension in the face of trying to stay alive and defeat the enemy.

For Britain more generally, and following an enquiry made of British geographers involved in the Second World War, William Balchin noted several fields where geographers served with distinction: 'Academic geographers were well represented in intelligence in various forms; surveyors gravitated towards survey and map-making, climatologists appeared in the meteorological services, explorers took on an active role in special operations, political geographers contributed to Dominion, Colonial and Foreign Office activities and economic geographers in economic warfare'.⁵ In noting, too, that 'Geography has always been vital to the prosecution of war' in three ways – intelligence, logistics, 'and in action as geographical features enter into the disposition of forces, questions of topography and so on' – Balchin's survey offered a seemingly neat fit (perhaps too neat?) between types of geography and geographers and areas of wartime activity, and presented a largely institutional overview: geographers at work in the Royal Artillery, the Royal Engineers, Ordnance Survey, Hydrographic Department, and in preparing the Admiralty Geographical Handbooks.⁶

In continental Europe, things were different. Memories of the war were different too. This is certainly the sense one gets from Jean Gottmann's view of French geography in the Second World War in his speaking (in 1946) of 'fecundity through ordeal' in respect of that 'great number of important works [which] have been published by French geographers since 1940 or have been written and are awaiting publication'.⁷ Contrast that view with Aimé Perpillou's recollections of geography in France during the war where, in his experience, geography was greatly restricted, such work as was published largely reflecting research undertaken before 1940.⁸ The difference may reflect Gottmann's view of the war from outwith the European theatres of occupation and conflict (as a Jew, he was helped to escape to the United States) in contrast to Perpillou's war years teaching in Paris before entering the university system, in Lille, in 1945. In the United States, several

American geographers were associated with the US Office of Strategic Services in that nation's capital, an experience which profoundly shaped their view of America, the world, and of the possibilities for geography after 1945. For one, 'World War II was the best thing that happened to geography since the birth of Strabo'.⁹

What are we to make of such briefly configured historical geographies of mid-twentieth-century war when they were, variously, being lived and fought from back-room laboratories, experienced in different theatres of war, remembered by non-combatants in hurried escapes to air-raid shelters, in a flight for one's life, or in the near cessation of scholarly research in the face of pressing daily exigencies? The relationships between the subjects 'geography' and 'war' have complex historical antecedents. Strabo long ago contemplated them with reference to terrain evaluation and conflict.¹⁰ They are also the subject of considerable contemporary interest from historical geographers and others: espionage, mapping and war, the geographies of bombing, the genealogy of the term 'military geography' and the shift from military geography toward the geographies of militarism being only part of these connections.¹¹

These six papers present us with insights into geographers' personal experiences of the war in Europe 1939–1945. To draw upon one of the editors' 'major' introductory interpretative themes, the papers speak to the intersections between biography, geographical discourse, and the circumstances of geographers' lives and of institutions of geography in a period of continental and global conflict. This focus has had the effect, of necessity, of marginalising other potential features: differing ideological commitments to geography in given social settings, matters of technology and instrumentation, including aerial photography and terrain evaluation, and the structural and gendered distinctions within those institutions at work in waging war.¹² It has highlighted, too, other features which merit more attention than either the individual authors, or I, have space for here. These include the simple but vital contingencies of archival survival. This a key question in explaining the different recorded lives in British, German and Swiss intelligence files of Sándor Radó, and in offering yet fuller explanation of the context to Soviet geography in the Second World War

⁵ W.G.V. Balchin, United Kingdom geographers in the Second World War: a report, *Geographical Journal* 153 (1987) 159–180, quotation from page 160; For an earlier view of wartime geography, see L. Wilson, Some observations on wartime geography in England, *Geographical Review* 36 (1946) 597–612.

⁶ On the role of geographers on the Admiralty Handbooks, see H. Clout and C. Gosme, The naval intelligence handbooks: a monument in geographical writing, *Progress in Human Geography* 27 (2003) 153–173; On geographers in intelligence services other than in Britain during the war, see M. Rössler, Geographers and social scientists in the Office for Strategic Services (OSS) 1941–1945, *Netherlands Geographical Studies* 206 (1996) 75–85; T. Barnes, Geographical intelligence: American geographers and research and analysis in the Office of Strategic Services 1941–1945, *Journal of Historical Geography* 32 (2006) 149–168.

⁷ J. Gottmann, French Geography in wartime, *Geographical Review* 36 (1946) 80–91, quotation from page 80. Interestingly, contra Tizard, Gottmann began by noting that 'The war has furthered the advancement of science in many fields, including geography, and in many countries'.

⁸ A. Perpillou, Geography and geographical studies in France during the War and the Occupation, *Geographical Journal* 107 (1946) 50–57. On the lives and geographical work of Gottmann and of Perpillou, see Hugh Clout, Jean Gottmann (1915–1994), *Geographers Biobibliographical Studies* 25 (2006) 42–59; Hugh Clout, Aimé Vincent Perpillou (1902–1976), *Geographers Biobibliographical Studies* 31 (2012) 56–63.

⁹ K. Stone, Geography's wartime service, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 69 (1979) 89–96, quotation from page 89. This most pertinent quote is also used in the editors' introduction here. On the American experience, in addition to Rössler, Geographers and social scientists in the Office for Strategic Services (OSS) 1941–1945 (note 6); and Barnes, Geographical intelligence (note 6), see also E. Ackerman, Geographic training, wartime research, and immediate professional objectives, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 35 (1945) 121–143; C. Harris, Geographers in the US Government in Washington, DC, during World War II, *Professional Geographer* 49 (1997) 245–256.

¹⁰ D.W. Roller, *The Geography of Strabo*, Cambridge, 2014. On Strabo's geographies and their place in a critique of geography's genealogies; see R. Mayhew, Geography's genealogies, in: J. Agnew, D. Livingstone (Eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Geographical Knowledge*, London, 2011, 24–38.

¹¹ In a large field, see for example C. Flint (Ed), *The Geography of War and Peace: From Death Camps to Diplomats*, Oxford, 2005; S. Kirsch and C. Flint (Eds), *Reconstructing Conflict: Integrating War and Post-War Geographies*, Farnham, 2011; D. Gregory, The everywhere war, *The Geographical Journal* 177 (2011) 238–250; S. Graham, *Cities under Siege: The New Military Urbanism*, London, 2010; P.F. Diehl, Geography and war: a review and assessment of the empirical literature, *International Interactions* 17 (1991) 1–17; On geography in World War I, see M.J. Heffernan, Geography, cartography and military intelligence: the Royal Geographical Society and the First World War, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 21 (1996) 504–533; M. J. Heffernan, Professor Penck's bluff: geography, espionage and hysteria in World War I, *Scottish Geographical Journal* 116 (2000) 267–282; on military geography, see I.A. Zakharenko, Military geography, past and present, *Military Thought* 10 (2001) 32–37; and, for fuller overview, R. Woodward, Military landscapes: agendas and approaches for future research, *Progress in Human Geography* 38 (2014) 40–61.

¹² On the gendered dimensions of geographers' war work in Britain, see A. Maddrell, The 'Map Girls': British women geographers' war work, shifting gender boundaries and reflections on the history of geography, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 33 (2008) 127–148. For a fuller discussion, see A. Maddrell, *Complex Locations: Women's Geographical Work in the UK 1850–1970*, Chichester, 2009.

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