‘Mobility under Pressure: Civilian Rail Traffic in Britain during WWII’

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War is generally considered a powerful inhibitor against mobility. A major military conflict would put a strain on a nation’s transport system, as war-related movement takes precedence over civilian movement. This general assumption, however, does not entirely apply to Britain’s rail traffic during WWII. Although the railway system was officially under state control, and priority was given to military movement, Britain’s railways continued to carry a large number of civilian passengers and goods. In fact, the level of ‘ordinary’ passenger travel increased during the war, which appeared despite government’s efforts to dampen people’s desire to move around. This paper provides some insights into the seemingly contradictory situation of an upsurge of civilian mobility in wartime.

The early phase of the war involved frantic activity in both military and civilian movement. Nation-wide evacuation of civilians was carried out simultaneously with the strategic military deployment within and beyond the British Isles. The war had a visible impact on travel patterns and logistics, but that did not include a reduction in traffic. The well-earned fear of aerial bombings changed residential patterns, which created a large population of commuters who worked in the city but lived in suburbs where it was less vulnerable to enemy attacks, thereby furthering the already existing trend of suburbanization. Many of the newly recruited munitions factory workers despised living in officially provided hostels and preferred to commute from their family home. People demanded, and made, holiday trips in defiance of the ‘holidays at home’ campaign. The government was no doubt wary of the people’s unabated proclivity to travel, and made a series of attempts to discourage ‘unnecessary journeys’, but the message was often ignored.

With its experience in WWI, the British government was relatively well-prepared for emergency transport planning. Still, dealing with the travelling public proved to be a difficult business. The major factor of the untameable appetite for travel was cultural. Britain’s travelling public embraced a mobility culture that was nurtured and informed by the infrastructure, practice and experience of travel and traffic during the interwar period that saw a significant rise in the general traffic level, coupled with a strengthening desire for consumption in general.

Mobility studies tend to associate free movement as the norm, undervaluing the situation of mobility under pressure. This paper examines this relatively neglected field by exploring various aspects of wartime civilian mobility. The situation of rail traffic during the war reveals the resilience and resistance of mobility culture even to the extent of making official intervention ineffective. The last section of the paper will compare the positive and negative implications of the vigorous mobility culture to mobility’s past and future.