How the Boche killed off the Muffin Man

Robbie Millen enjoys a look at London life during the Great War

On the night of October 1, 1916, hundreds of thousands of Londoners stood still, transfixed by a moment of beauty in the sky. As one observer, from his vantage point on Blackfriars Bridge, wrote: "I saw high in the sky a concentrated blaze of searchlights, and in its centre a ruddy glow which rapidly spread into the outline of a burning airship. Then the searchlights were turned off and the Zeppelin drifted perpendicularly in the darkened sky, a gigantic pyramid of flames, red and orange, like a ruined star falling slowly to earth. Its glare lit up the streets and gave a ruddy tint even to the waters of the Thames."

When the stricken L31 finally hit the ground in Potters Bar "there arose a shout the like of which I have never heard in London before — a hoarse shout of mingled execration, triumph and joy".

London was not usually so lucky. During the war, 668 Londoners were killed and nearly 2,000 injured by the deadly payload of Zeppelins and Gotha planes. One of the worst raids was on June 13, 1917, when 14 Gothas bombed without interruption — 18 children were obliterated when the Upper North Street School in Poplar took a direct hit. Extraordinarily, the authorities refused to give warnings of raids, fearing panic and false alarms, until the following month. Then maroons were fired from police and fire stations, with policemen blowing whistles and wearing "Take Cover!" notices; the all-clear was given by constables jingling handbells and bugle calls, often played by Boy Scouts.

Jerry White in his lively history shows how the effects of total war wreaked profound change on London. Proletarian pleasures, for instance, were one of the first casualties, as starchy puritans in the name of national renewal cracked down on vice. The non-conformist David Lloyd George warned that "drink is doing more damage in the war than all the German submarines put together", so little wonder that early in the war there was a panic about "tippling among women". Temperance campaigners stood outside pubs to count the women going in. The result of this disapproval? The eminently relaxed prewar opening hours (5am to 12.30am) were cut to 8am until 10pm in 1914. And the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) banned "treating" — nobody could buy a drink for another.

Frederick Charrington, who renounced his fortune as a son of the brewery dynasty when he found God, was a noisy anti-pleasure campaigner. He took to the pitch at half-time during a match between Fulham and Clapton Orient at Craven Cottage. "I am here," he said, removing his silk hat, "to protest against football being played"; a fracas ensued and the Fulham chairman threw him out. Nonetheless, by 1915 there was no more professional football — and no Derby, Epsom, Ascot or Boat Race (or even opera at Covent Garden; it was turned into a furniture store for the Office of Works). A pamphleteer called Ethel Alec-Tweedie was more severe still in her fight against morale-sapping luxury — she called for the extermination of all pet dogs and cats to save food, a ban on fancy soaps, and golf courses to be used as potato fields.

And, of course, with millions of men in arms, there was a panic about loose women. Waterloo, the main station to the Western Front, was dubbed Whoreterloo, as there were supposedly so many prostitutes and girls up for adventure serving the men serving the country. Public-spirited women formed themselves into the Women Police Service to deter such immorality — there were soon complaints about their high-handedness. A mother in Wimbledon complained that one of these bossy patrols had told her 14-year-old daughter that she "ought not to crimp her hair and must put her hat on straight". More stringent still, DORA Regulation 40D made it an offence for a woman with a venereal disease to have sex with a soldier (though not vice versa); 100 women were convicted.

White reminds us that in 1914 there was a large, well-established German community; the German waiter and butcher was as common as today's Polish plumber. That could not last when the Bishop of London sermonised, in terms that you don't hear on *Thought for the Day*, that the nation's "great crusade [is] to . . . kill Germans. . . to kill the young men as well as the old". It soon became necessary for aliens to register with the police, and 50,633 Germans did so straight away, while many of their compatriots had already returned to the Fatherland. Internment followed. One camp in Islington was big enough — it had 700 inmates, many of whom had British wives and children — to have a newspaper.

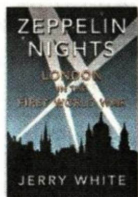
The novelist Ford Hermann Hueffer thought it wise to change his name to Ford Madox Ford; the German sausage was rebranded as the less-offensive luncheon sausage; Wiesbaden Road in Stoke Newington quickly became Belgrade Road. Germans in London were regularly harassed but the sinking of the liner RMS *Lusitania* provoked an "anti-German orgy". German-owned shops were smashed up and a crowd of thousands attacked Engel's bakery in Lower Clapton Road, Hackney. Some 866 arrests were made in the following days.

Zeppelin Nights is social history at its best — no dreary datasets or overbearing opining. Instead, it is crammed with anecdote. For instance, White tells us that up to 30,000 people crammed into the Rotherhithe tunnel at night for safety; that the familiar figure of the Muffin Man on London streets disappeared for ever when the manufacture of "light pastries, muffins, crumpets and tea-cakes" was prohibited in 1917; that Sainsbury's took the bold move of appointing its first female shop assistants as a wartime measure; and that the war pushed up wages for London's poor so much that the "doss-house" (or common lodging house), that staple of Victorian literature, started to disappear.

And what could be more old English than queueing for buses? Before the war, catching a bus or tram was a mêlée, but because of a bus shortage, Londoners had to learn to queue at bus stops. It's with these telling details that White creates a vivid picture of a city changed for ever by war.

The authorities refused to give warnings of air raids, fearing panic

MOB FURY German-owned stores in east London were targets for rage



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by Jerry White

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