



## Short communication

## 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.

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## 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.

To conclude, World War II (and other wars) could be described as a series of shocks consisting of the fear of war, the onset of war, acts of war, and also of the cessation of war, and then the unforeseeable post-war consequences. The concept of *shock city* depicts well the multidimensional environmental crises that World War II signified for towns and cities.

## 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.

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By December 1942, a report commonly known as the “Beveridge Report” recommended that the government should provide adequate income, health care, education, housing and employment for all after the war. Because most Britons were urban residents, towns and cities had a central place in these plans for a new society. In brief, the planned model city was an expression of this politically radical version of a new model society: the welfare state. However, wartime planning of this model city was not solely limited to socio-economic reforms. Also urban nature and environment had to be reconsidered in the future model city. Due to the new ethos of the public good and the increased powers of the public authorities, new plans to protect urban nature were launched during and after the war. Hence it is helpful to address the concept of a *model city* as well in order to understand the revolutionary nature of wartime political developments and related post-war urban reforms.

### 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 “footprint”?

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.

There was of course a dark side. It dramatically weakened opportunities for action in nature conservation, animal protection, and environmental protection during or after the war. The other by-products of reversed urban development included famine, malnutrition, poverty, infectious diseases, worsening hygiene, emergence of pests, abuse of animals and non-human life in general, and overexploitation of local natural resources. Hunting and gathering gained importance in some cities. House sparrows and feral pigeons almost disappeared in Leningrad. People scavenged dumps or bombed sites in order to find something edible or otherwise useful materials. Finally inhabitants had to move to the countryside to be able to find or grow food. In practice, wartime urbanization of the countryside and ruralization of cities enabled nature to gradually take over cities. In the end urban devolution signified returning to the origins of urbanization – to nature.

### 5. Is there any need to explore the urban environmental history of World War II?

Historical studies have something important to offer current and future cities. If we think that the experiences of World War II are so distant that we have nothing to learn from them, we are being ignorant. If we think that the environmental awareness we have today did not exist in any form before the war, we are misguided. If we think that the implications of war will not or cannot be adopted today or in the future because World War II was such an exceptional time, we are being naïve.

Now we face a climate change, which will be more rapid than most of the previous changes. Consequently few of us believe that the future environmental changes that the world will face will take place without grave socioeconomic crisis and political conflicts including mass violence and wars. Fortunately, urban environmental history of World War II shows how rapidly both crises and in response public power and urban citizens can change urban societies and environments. Therefore World War II may have some important implications for the future. It is time to take a look at the urban environmental history of the Second World War.

### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Simo Laakkonen:** Writing - original draft.

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