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Jim Crow and John Bull in London: Transatlantic Encounters with Race and Nation in the Second World War

Abstract:

The arrival of a segregated American army on British shores during the Second World War forced the UK government and the public to confront questions of race and nation in new ways. This article places London, the imperial metropolis, in a central role in this wartime drama by deploying evidence compiled as part of the Mapping Black London in World War II digital history project. The article reveals a hitherto under‐acknowledged range and scale of African American activity in the capital, with a cast of characters including newspaper correspondents, musicians, social workers, nurses, political activists and, of course, many thousands of service personnel – both men and women. For an African American public back home, these metropolitan activities were viewed both as part of the international war effort and also from the perspective of a domestic American scene affected by rural to urban migration and an upsurge in racial protest and tension. The result was a short, sharp but transformative transatlantic encounter that highlights the connections between historical trajectories often considered in separate terms: the US civil rights movement, British domestic race relations, and the international forces – not least the decline of European empire fomented by war – that bound them together.

Introduction:

‘London went wild’ on hearing the news that Japan had surrendered in August 1945, according to British Pathé News’ Peace on Earth. Crowds were seen celebrating jubilantly outside Buckingham Palace, before the film moved on to emphasize the cross‐class nature of victory. Down‐and‐outs were shown toasting each other with cocoa under Hungerford Arches, before members of a high‐end club did the same with wine. What was shown next was perhaps more surprising, as the film progressed to Charlie Brown’s pub in Limehouse where ‘all nations rejoiced’. Black pub‐goers, presumably members of London’s East End community of seafarers and dockworkers, were depicted dancing arm in arm with a multiracial roster of patrons, including, briefly, a mixed‐sex interracial couple (British Pathé News 1945). That the film should emphasize inter‐racial as well as inter‐class unity in this victorious moment pointed towards the visible presence of black people – a diverse mixture comprised of Londoners of several generations’ standing and newer arrivals from Africa, the Caribbean, and the USA – in London and Britain throughout the course of the Second World War.

Back in Piccadilly, however, an altogether different scene was unfolding as day turned to night. According to reports in the African American press, celebrations turned into a ‘bloody brawl’ with guns and knives. The spark for this ‘race riot’ hinged on a dispute between white and black troops outside a ‘club frequented by Negroes’. When rumours started to spread that someone had been stabbed, a mob of white service personnel reportedly ‘dashed down Gerrard Street’ [in Soho] and ‘seized two Negroes’ who were ‘brutally pummeled’. A deputation of police from the US military and London’s Met moved in to restore order, eventually arresting 23 black troops, two whites and three women. From the perspective of the African American press, this violent injustice resonated strongly. A sub‐heading in the New York Amsterdam News read: ‘white troop mobsters turn Piccadilly Circus into Georgia lynching as three are injured’ (New York Amsterdam News, 25 August 1945:1,11). The spectre of interracial violence reminiscent of the Jim Crow South breaking out in Piccadilly seemed a world away from the harmony depicted at Charlie Brown’s; however, this contrast offers a perfect departure point for an examination of transatlantic encounters of race and nation in London during wartime.

Questions hinging on race and nationality have, quite rightly, been given attention by scholars examining both sides of the Atlantic during the Second World War. In the US, the war years are often afforded a central role in longer‐range histories of the African American experience, where concepts such as the ‘Double V for Victory’ campaign for a fight against fascism overseas and racial injustice at home gained traction.1 In Britain, meanwhile, the arrival of a largely segregated American Army after 1942 has been understood as a seminal moment when questions of race became unavoidable on social and political levels. With the publication in 1987 of Graham Smith’s When Jim Crow Met John Bull marking an important milestone, certain features of the racial dynamics of wartime Britain are comparatively familiar (Smith 1987).2 This literature has discussed the ambivalent response of a UK government nervous of accepting the importation of a colour bar wholesale, but content to let US forces maintain segregation within barracks on British soil and unofficially in the towns and villages by which they sat. In addition, attention has also been paid to the mixed reactions of the general public, which ranged from curiosity and hospitality to wariness and outright antipathy, particularly when it came to the vexed questions raised by interracial sex (Bland 2017; Wynn 2006). Events outside of London, where the majority of African American service personnel confined heavily to support roles under the Services of Supply (SOS) division were stationed, have received the most sustained attention. The so‐called ‘Battle of Bamber Bridge’ in June 1943 is a case in point: a revealing, if unusual, event that saw interracial friction in the US Army burst to the surface in a small Lancashire village, where the heavy‐handed tactics of white military police were met with a violent response from black GIs in the 1511th Quartermaster Truck Regiment. Extreme though this case might have been, similar frictions were reported in places ranging from Bristol in the southwest to Huddersfield in the north and even in Northern Ireland (Smith 1987:142–45).

Yet even though black regiments were stationed mostly outside the capital, some of their GIs operated in London and many more visited on leave in just the same fashion as other American personnel. There has not, however, been a detailed study of these soldiers’ activities and impact on the city.3 That this is an omission worth rectifying is emphasized by the plethora of scholarship that seeks to untangle the ‘myth of the Blitz’ and probe wartime notions of national identity and patriotism. Within this body of work, London looms understandably large, but black troops in the capital – and the associated questions of race, identity and citizenship they provoked – do not (Calder 1991; Rose 1997). The existing literature does, however, provide sufficient anecdotal evidence to show that this is a fruitful line of enquiry. Consider the response of Winston Churchill during a Cabinet discussion on the presence of black GIs in Britain and instances of discrimination that had emerged. When Viscount Cranborne explained one of his black staff members in the Colonial Office had been refused entry to a restaurant because of opposition from white US Army officers, Churchill purportedly replied: ‘That’s all right: if he takes his banjo with him they’ll think he’s one of the band’ (Smith 1987:76–78).4 Seen as a sign of Churchill’s flippancy, and the government’s attempts to steer a course between accepting segregation completely and opposing it outright, this episode also points to something that is obvious but easily overlooked: the restaurant in question was in London, and not only were other London hotels controversially starting to exclude black guests as well (the ejection of Trinidadian cricketer Learie Constantine from the Imperial Hotel in 1943 was the most well‐known case of all), but Cabinet discussions of national policy were taking place in a city where questions of race and racism were actively being worked out in its public and private spaces.5

This article examines the meeting between ‘Jim Crow’ – the nickname given to the legal and extra‐legal methods of segregation used to deny black Americans their formal constitutional rights after the formal abolition of slavery in the USA – and ‘John Bull’ in London between 1942 and 1945. The approach takes its inspiration from the national‐level relationship first examined in the 1980s, but brings into the conversation more recent work in urban and cultural studies where questions of setting and place have come to the fore. For example, useful work before and after the war has examined how the city’s social geography shaped experiences ranging from imperial symbolism and display to sexual subcultures and the interconnected questions of race, class, gender, and nation they provoked (Driver and Gilbert 1999; Mort 2010). There are three additional prongs to the methodological approach. The first is to scour existing work on wartime London for references to the black American presence, including work on a coterie of pan‐African intellectuals and activists and studies by popular historians of black Britain more broadly.6 Aggregating these disparate accounts can, in and of itself, point towards the ways in which black Americans navigated a city with a small but growing black presence with personal and ideational connections to the wider world. Second, the article deploys new primary evidence gathered from a selection of black reporters sent over to cover overseas experiences for an interested African American public, as well as other first‐hand accounts and British governmental sources. Third, these sources are analysed together as part of the larger digital history project Mapping Black London in World War II which uses Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to plot this activity and analyse how the city shaped historical events (Mapping Black London 2020).

The result is a new perspective on both the range and intensity of the black American presence in wartime London. We find African American journalists, musicians, actors, political activists and, of course, troops on leave and at work, not just blending into the background but engaging with what they saw, heard, and experienced. African American women played active and important roles too, as entertainers on the London stage, running the social affairs of American Red Cross clubs, as members of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), and reporting on these activities for the public back home. Paying attention to questions of space, moreover, also allows related realities about time to come into view. The article argues that a shift occurred in the dynamics of the interracial encounter between the years 1942/43 and 1944/45. This change was precipitated by the course of the war moving from defence to attack, from American GIs being welcomed as temporary allies to being perceived as a semi‐permanent and increasingly unwanted presence, all fostered by an intensification of meetings in London as thousands of service personnel on leave from the continent flocked to the capital. The cumulative result was that London became a lightning rod for a range of interwoven historical forces – from African American civil rights to British attitudes to race at home and empire abroad – and that it both affected and effected the connections between them.

1935–1947: The African American Presence in London:

In nine months of work in 2020, the Mapping Black London in World War II project team gathered evidence of the African American presence in London as part of a larger effort to document all activities in ‘Black London’ between 1935 and 1947. In relation to Americans, the project discovered 100 individuals visiting 74 specific places, collecting 153 individual data points. Sources included secondary work by Bourne (2010; 2012), Breese (2001), Dabydeen et al. (2007), Derrick (2008), Goode (2002), Matera (2015), McDuffie (2011), Newton (2011), Pennybacker (2009), Robeson Jr (2001), Schwarz (1996), Smith (1987), Von Eschen (1997), and Whittall (2011). Primary sources included Baltimore’s Afro‐American newspaper (multiple editions), Black (1947), Colonial Office Files (847/7/2), Goodman (1944), The Boston Globe (multiple editions), The Chicago Defender (multiple editions), The Crisis (1943), the National Register (1939), and The New York Times (multiple editions). Data were collected across the period from 1935 to 1947 in order to capture a full sweep of activity from the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (a seminal moment in the history of wartime black London) to the year before the arrival of the SS Windrush in 1948, often positioned as the starting point of mass immigration from the Caribbean. Only information mentioning specific locations was recorded in order to plot the activity accurately, meaning that generalized references to people visiting London were not captured. Figure 1 displays one of the ‘master maps’ that was created as a result, showing the locations associated with all known African American activities in the capital between 1935 and 1947.

This ‘master map’ provides some important starting points for investigation, demonstrating the range and intensity of activities. The northernmost point was provided by John Payne, a singer who performed at the League of Coloured Peoples’ (LCP) annual garden party at Dr Cecil Belfield Clarke’s house in 1936; the southernmost point records the fact of jazz singer Adelaide Hall performing to a crowd in the midst of an air raid at Lewisham Hippodrome in 1940. Out west, John Henry Lewis was an American boxer who defended his light‐heavyweight title in a dramatic bout with Englishman Len Harvey at the Empire Pools in 1936, while the furthest east is David H. Orro, a journalist who visited Billingsgate fish market in 1943 as part of his lively reports on city life for The Chicago Defender. These four points illustrate that, despite the fact that the American presence in London exploded in the period from 1942 to 1945, African Americans were active in the capital before this. The range of activities they were engaged in, moreover, is also important to note. Among the people and occupations represented were soldiers, officers, reporters, musicians, actors, boxers, athletes (including Jesse Owens, who visited London after his success at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games), political activists (including well‐known figures like Walter White and W.E.B. Du Bois), members of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps including nurses, and also permanent residents like Ellis and Jessie Jackson, who were living in Brixton at the outbreak of war (Mapping Black London 2020).

1942–1943: London’s ‘Gold Harvest’ :

The map also demonstrates that, this variety notwithstanding, the African American presence was concentrated in the centre of the city during an intense encounter between 1942 and 1945. The map captures a partial but instructive selection of this presence, although its true extent can only be estimated. With around 130,000 black troops passing through the UK as a whole, it is clear several thousand came to London, a figure that likely stretched into the tens of thousands given the popularity of the city as a destination for leave and the fact that, because they were confined heavily to non‐combat roles in logistics, black GIs were among the most longstanding visitors to Britain (Mapping Black London 2020). This last fact also meant that questions surrounding race relations were debated by the upper echelons of the American and British governments and armed services almost immediately after the US entered the war.

Following unsuccessful attempts by the British government to prevent their deployment in Britain at all (Reynolds 1985:115), the first black troops arrived in May 1942 (Smith 1987:39). Tellingly, the first reference to black GIs’ presence in London was made by Dwight D. Eisenhower, construing them as a problem. Although he supported using black troops in the UK and was well aware of their importance for essential preparatory work building barracks and runways, Eisenhower reportedly bemoaned in August 1942 that black GIs were prone to wandering ‘disconsolately’ on the city’s streets. This contrasted, apparently, with the welcome they received in smaller towns (Afro‐American, 22 August 1942:8). The desire for female ‘companionship’ was a related – and telling – concern. Rumours spread that black members of the WAAC would be sent to London to solve the ‘problem’. Baltimore’s Afro‐American asked the War Department to clarify statements made by Eisenhower on the subject, reporting assurances received from WAAC officials that this was not official policy. The concern was to emphasize that the WAACs being sent abroad were not ‘play girls’ but would be sent as part of the vital war work (Afro‐American, 5 September 1942:16). Whether Eisenhower was misquoted or not, the very fact that the presence of black troops in the capital was construed as a problem – and one related to sex – so soon into the period signalled the capital’s role as a focal point for related tensions throughout the war.

Connections can be made between Eisenhower’s characterization of the ‘disconsolate’ black soldiers and the official policy he set out shortly beforehand. In two directives from June 1942, Eisenhower ordered that American troops should be instructed on arrival in Britain to respect local customs and the lack of a colour bar and to avoid racial slurs. At the same time, white and black troops were to be kept largely separate by procedures such as issuing rotating passes to control leave off base, while heavily segregated units of black troops would be stationed in particular parts of the country, especially ports to the west (Reynolds 1985:117–18). The sprawling city of London, however, was ill‐suited to the attempt to keep black and white troops separate. American soldiers, moreover, were drawn to the capital form the early days of the ‘occupation’ in large numbers. A September 1942 survey found that a third of American personnel given more than a day’s leave had visited London, and the allure was obvious: the famous city housed myriad opportunities to let off steam beyond the strictures of regimental life.

This also meant it was in London more than anywhere else, according to David Reynolds, that GIs acquired the most negative aspects of their reputation, even though stories of drunkenness, sex, and crime were often overblown and masked the fact that Londoners often more than held to their end of the bargain (Reynolds 1995:254–57). Events in London, correspondingly, were part of official concerns over racial mixing from an early stage, both because the burgeoning multiracial groups of American troops in a confined space made it difficult to enforce segregated socializing, and because British and American military and civilian leaders were based in the city too. Stories soon circulated of white officers taking matters into their own hands and pressurizing establishments to refuse entry to black patrons – including the member of the Colonial Office staff discussed at the Cabinet table in Whitehall in October 1942.

Yet the experiences of African Americans in the capital were influenced by complex on‐the‐ground realities as well as official policy. On the one hand, black troops felt the same mixture of intrigue, excitement, and confusion experienced by all newcomers to the city, but on the other, they also confronted challenges conferred on them by their racial status amidst a majority white population. In general, the spirit in which these early meetings were recorded by correspondents like Ollie Stewart of the Baltimore Afro‐American was positive, with his initial dispatches reporting that the city was clean and Londoners courteous. Despite evidence of heavy bombardment and privation, Stewart said he had seen no hints of ‘color prejudice’. At the same time, having spent only a few days getting used to his new surroundings, neither had he seen any black soldiers. The tone reflected the optimistic outlook typical of much other wartime reportage (related partly to the presence of wartime censors), while Stewart furnished details on the quirks of London life – bananas being auctioned off for ludicrous prices and restrictions in hotels to one bath a week – to keep readers at home entertained (Afro‐American, 12 September 1942:1,5).

Beneath the froth, however, other comments deployed metropolitan frames of reference that reflected back on the urbanization reshaping the racial demographic landscape back home. Time and again, African American reporters used US cities to make comparisons: the London underground was deeper than New York’s subway, there were more black people in three blocks in Harlem than in all the UK (Afro‐American, 3 October 1942:5; 14 November 1942:1). The comparisons were about people as well as place. Vincent Tubbs, for example, wrote that Londoners were like New Yorkers: less sociable and more likely to let you ‘paddle your own canoe’ (Afro‐American, 21 April 1945:5). The war offered an opportunity to reflect on the nature of urban life in its different forms on both sides of the Atlantic, at an important juncture in the African American historical experience when cities became central hubs for political activism, especially in the field of employment discrimination (Ayers 2019). The war accelerated the urbanization of black America, a process central to the creation of an ‘African American’ identity where places like Harlem became focal points for connections between black peoples across the diaspora (Corbould 2009).

The London encounter was part of a pre‐existing process, therefore, but it also afforded opportunities to form new transatlantic connections. These linkages had both intellectual and deeply practical dimensions. Stewart, for example, reported he had been helped to find his way around the city by reporters from the Caribbean – Trinidadian George Padmore and Guianan Rudolph Dunbar – both of whom ‘went out of their way’ to show him around. Padmore, as an influential anti‐colonial Marxist writer, spent much time in the 1930s drawing connections between various forms of racial oppression across the world (James 2015), but linkages with black America were forged by real‐world places as well as international political perspectives. These networks were established in places like the newsroom at the Ministry of Information in Senate House and at nearby Aggrey House in Bloomsbury (Afro‐American, 26 September 1942:3; 14 November 1942:2). In fact, Aggrey House – a hostel set up by the Colonial Office in 1934 to house and, so its critics charged, supervise students from the Caribbean and Africa – was labelled pejoratively by Padmore as a ‘little Jim‐Crow hostel’, but it was a favoured destination for the first black GIs in the capital (Mapping Black London 2020). The club, which closed down in 1943, was a place for African American GIs to meet people from other parts of the diaspora, and the British government officials knew about the arrangement (Colonial Office 1942: CO 876/14). Despite its popularity, however, a black trooper would often reportedly find his leave over ‘before he gets his bearings or meets a friend’ (Afro‐American, 24 October 1942:1). Aggrey House was popular for practical reasons: there was an acute lack of affordable accommodation for all visitors to the capital, given the lack of space and sheer numbers involved, but this problem was especially pointed for African American visitors because of their non‐white status. The US Army responded by using the American Red Cross (ARC) to provide accommodation. Five hostels were initially set up in London alone, but when it emerged that black GIs preferred Aggrey House to all of them, two new clubs were established geared specifically towards them. The first was the Duchess Club, located at No. 1 Duchess Street, just north of Regent Street and immediately behind the BBC’s headquarters at Broadcasting House. The Duchess Club opened on Christmas Eve 1942, with sixty bedrooms, reading rooms, and dining rooms. Accommodation and food were cheap, at 1s 6d a Figure 2. No. 1 Duchess Street night and 1s for breakfast. The Duchess partly addressed the problem of black GIs finding suitable accommodation in the city, but there were those back home who were critical of it from the outset. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP) official publication The Crisis informed its readers that the Duchess was ‘strictly Jim Crow’ (The Crisis, March 1943:76–77). The NAACP had earlier led protests against the ARC’s use of segregated blood, and it was quick to detect similarly discriminatory motivations in the ARC’s London clubs (Guglielmo 2010).

The racial composition of the Duchess remained contentious, with the Baltimore Afro‐American among those asking the ARC for an explanation. In response, an ARC spokesperson gave the official line that the English ‘have made it perfectly clear they do not want the burden of Jim Crow’, with some clubs’ different racial clienteles solely the result of which troops happened to be stationed nearby (Afro‐American, 5 June 1943:6). There was, of course, a clear intention to minimize socializing between the races; some time later, James Randall gave a more accurate assessment that there was a ‘drift to colored clubs’ from their earliest days (Afro‐American, 18 August 1945:15). The de facto social segregation that resulted, which had analogues in many cities back in the US, stemmed from both formal and informal policies and from a pragmatic response by African American personnel to address the problems of exclusion they faced. The Duchess Club was a large and impressive building that still stands (Figure 2), and its architecture influenced how it was represented and experienced at the time. Padmore, for example, described it as a ‘palatial’ building that was ‘out of the ordinary’ compared to other ARC clubs. It also stood comparison with other venues in the capital, making it, according to Padmore, ‘one of the finest social centers in the metropolis’. 7

Padmore wrote in a more upbeat style compared to his normally fierce indictments of British racism and colonialism, but he took time to emphasize the diasporic connections made at the Duchess: there was a ‘closer fraternal link’ being formed ‘between colored Americans and people of African descent from all over the world’, he argued, giving the example of meeting Kendrick Rawlins, a Trinidadian Flying Officer in the Royal Air Force (RAF), who enquired about the African Airmen of Tuskegee (The Chicago Defender, 30 January 1943:3). Another parallel with de facto segregation in the US was that the Duchess, and the Liberty Club established soon after near Euston station, demonstrated the existence of discrimination while affording a relative degree of autonomy. African American women were particularly conspicuous in administrative roles. Lucyle McAlister was appointed assistant director of operations at the Duchess in June 1944, while Geneva Holmes was another of the university graduates working at the club, many of whom had experience in occupations like social work and teaching (New York Amsterdam News, 24 June 1944a:8; 28 October 1944:12). Women’s prominent role in the running of the club raised again the question of whether they had been sent to provide ‘comfort’ for black GIs. Towards the end of the war in 1945, Vincent Tubbs reported that, at first, ‘some of the GI’s misinterpret their [the WAACs’] mission over here’ and had ‘carnal ideas’, before being set straight by WAAC members ‘quick, but good’. 8 These controversies over sex notwithstanding, some women found this work provided opportunities to tell their stories to people back home, making comparisons once again between London and US cities. One writer depicted London as ‘slower, wiser’ compared to New York, while praising the British for their courtesy. The same piece also revealed that relationships were still being made between different black people in the city, describing the ‘overtures made toward us by the British colonials of colored blood. West Africans and West Indians have opened their homes to us, and spent time and thought helping us around’ (Afro‐American, 26 June 1943:14). Elizabeth McDougald, meanwhile, was a university graduate and social worker form New York who detailed her experiences working at the Duchess Club and how it became a ‘home away from home’ (Afro‐American, 20 March 1943:14). McDougald also described how the club was visited by service members from Ceylon, the West Indies, and Canada as well as British RAF men. Quite literal questions about how to navigate the city were to the fore, with McDougald writing: ‘we have guides and maps of all descriptions’ which they used to try to guide visiting troops (Afro‐American, 20 March 1943: 14).

Once again, the London setting was a place being navigated both in terms of international ties of race and in a more direct senses. Visiting GIs travelled southward from the Duchess to the sights of Westminster and the river and the social life of Piccadilly and Soho. David Orro was one of many who travelled this route, reporting on his favourite tours through the city that took him from the Liberty and Duchess Clubs to places like the Regent Street Cinema and Frisco’s Club in Soho. The reference to Frisco’s – run by an American named Bingham who went by the name of Frisco – was an important reminder of the African American presence in London’s nightlife (The Chicago Defender, 20 February 1943). Others included Jack Hamilton, who formerly played with Louis Armstrong and in 1942 set up the Cafe Society Club in Soho (Afro‐American, 25 April 1942); Adelaide Hall, a jazz singer who co‐owned a private members club on Bruton Mews; Elisabeth Welch, a singer and actress who performed regularly at the Stage Door Canteen (Bourne 2010:76,87); and Freddie Crump, a drummer who was the ‘showman par excellence’ at the Panama Club (Goode 2002) – all reminders that African Americans were key figures involved in both the production and consumption of entertainment and culture in London’s wartime West End. As for all GIs, visiting London was often a defining experience of their time abroad for African American soldiers: ‘Being in England does not mean a thing with our boys until they visit the big city’, as Ollie Stewart put it, before adding evocatively that pay day represented a ‘harvest of gold’, both for Americans keen to spend their money in the dance halls and bars and also for the cash‐strapped proprietors of the city’s restaurants and pubs (Baltimore Afro‐American, 24 October 1942:1; 31 October 1942:1). But as the map of these key locations shows (Figure 3), the African American presence in London was a story influenced strongly by geography. The Duchess and Liberty were the two most northerly of the ARC’s clubs, but both were still deeply embedded in the city’s centre; these two places offered a geographical counterpart to the larger fact that, despite attempts to keep them on the margins, African Americans were literally central to wartime London.

1944: ‘Jim Crow Existed in England Long Before’ :

Life in Britain settled into a strange type of normality in the two years leading up to the invasion of Normandy. Bases were built, training was undertaken, supplies were imported, and hundreds of bombing raids were carried out over occupied Europe. African American troops stationed in London or visiting on leave felt the mixture of anticipation, dread, and boredom that marked this stage of the war. Stationed in London at the start of 1944, Ollie Stewart told readers back home that troops were ready for the invasion but life was following a pattern that was ‘routine and in some cases dull’ (Afro‐American, 15 January 1944:1). Corporal James G. Hines, stationed in the city with the 2055th Quartermaster Truck Company, was ‘lonesome’ for news of home, although he felt well looked after by the Red Cross at Christmas, with a turkey dinner, presents, and music (Afro‐American, 5 February 1944:6). The longing for home was a symptom of the reality that American GIs had become a semi‐permanent presence across the UK, including in the capital. It was in this context that Walter White, Executive Secretary of the NAACP, visited London. White, who had blue eyes and could ‘pass’ as white and had an insight into prejudice on both sides of the fence, wanted to investigate how the war was treating black Americans. He travelled across middle England, meeting with soldiers in the rank and file as well as top brass. The London leg of his journey was especially revealing. On arrival, according to his account, White’s taxi driver – assuming he was white – tried to take him to the Rainbow Club on Piccadilly rather than the Liberty. On being corrected, the taxi driver responded: ‘Oh … the American Red Cross Club where the black boys go’. Once inside, White discovered some white service personnel visiting African American friends, an encouraging observation on the surface but also one that reinforced the NAACP’s earlier scepticism over ‘Jim Crow’ ARC clubs: whites were permitted at ‘black’ clubs, but not the other way around (White 1945:15,18–19). When it came to conversations with black troops, therefore, the ‘enemy’ they talked about most often were not Nazis but white Americans. White recounted soldiers’ frustrations with the ‘off limits’ rules, whereby they were restricted to visiting only certain villages or parts of the towns and cities near where they were billeted, and often just to one or two pubs. London, however, was noted as an exception where these restrictions did not apply (White 1945:18–19). This throwaway remark captured an important reality: just like the rotating passes system it was connected to, ‘off limits’ rules were not imposed so strictly in London due to the difficulty of policing the system in a sprawling city beyond the walls of the ARC clubs.

This comparative freedom, however, did not go unnoticed by whites, and was tied to the growing tensions witnessed in the city during the final years of the war. White himself pointed towards a related cause of these metropolitan flashpoints when discussing the conduct of troops in the capital at the Grosvenor Hotel, part of the US Army’s cluster of command buildings near its embassy (Reynolds 1995:144). White was afforded privileged access to high‐ranking officials – part of a government attempt to entertain him but also to keep him under surveillance – and he reported remarks made by officers concerned about sexual fraternization in general and in London in particular. According to General Alexander of Virginia, ‘If we could close up Piccadilly Circus for the duration our problem would be solved’. The conversation highlighted to White concerns about the interaction of black men with the ‘Piccadilly Commandos’, the prostitutes who had gained a reputation for soliciting American troops in the capital’s centre (White 1945:30,32). The concern with Piccadilly was a pointed example of the larger concerns over interracial sex that had been central to official discussions since the beginning of the ‘occupation’. By 1944, however, numerous flashpoints between white and black American soldiers had been recorded by American and British military and civilian officials. Dance halls across the country proved a recurring locus for sparking sexual competition and confrontation.

Black GIs, meanwhile, recorded their own perspective on events. One wrote home at the end of 1944 how he had found the British ‘hospitable’ and had been invited ‘to tea to many homes’. Tellingly, he continued: ‘you find Negro troops fraternizing with English white girls … wherever there are coloured troops’. In general, black troops ‘usually dominated the scene, for they are better dancers and have what it takes in socializing’. This trooper’s account was from outside London, spanning Martock, Bishops Lydeard and Frome in Somerset, and Brighton, where there was a ‘racial clash’ (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 24 December 1944). This incident did not reach the public eye, but nonetheless there was sustained metropolitan interest throughout 1944 over controversies involving interracial sex. The Leroy Henry case was the most widely such discussed and it generated substantial interest on Fleet Street and in Westminster. Henry was convicted of raping a white woman and the death sentence handed down by the US military court brought several issues to public attention: the rough‐and‐ready ‘justice’ meted out to African Americans, the tremendous degree of autonomy afforded to the US Army on British shores, but also British unease at interracial mixing. As attention grew in the British press, Eisenhower intervened just a few weeks after D‐Day and commuted Henry’s sentence (Roberts 2017). In that same pivotal month of the war, however, MPs asked several questions in Parliament about the conduct of American troops, the government’s lack of jurisdiction over death sentences passed down by a foreign power on its own shores, and the thorny question of relationships between races and sexes. Pushed onto the back foot, British Home Secretary Herbert Morrison replied blandly that ‘the conduct of American troops, both white and black, is exceedingly good’ (New York Amsterdam News, 24 June 1944b:1). As Parliament talked, other evidence emerged of racial prejudices on public display in the capital. That same month, one mile to the north of Westminster, a racially inflammatory pamphlet entitled ‘Ten Little N\_\_\_ Boys’ was discovered being sold ‘at practically every newsstand’ on Piccadilly Circus, as well as inside several theatres and being advertised in the London Evening Standard. The black soldier who raised objections to the leaflet saw it as evidence that, far from being solely imported by the US Army, ‘Jim Crow existed in England long before’. The soldier added he had heard the ‘n word’ more frequently in England than the US, and referenced the growing rumours that British women were being accosted on the streets: ‘Neither American white or Negro servicemen molest women in the streets of London’ (New York Amsterdam News, 10 June 1944:7). These rumours and scandals over matters of race and sex were part of the national wartime meeting between ‘Jim Crow’ and ‘John Bull’, but it was logical that they became especially heated in London – both a centre of interracial socializing and of government – in the final year of the war.

1945: The ‘British Want Us to Go Home’:

The national and racial make‐up of London’s streets changed through the summer of 1944. During the period around D‐Day, there was a vast withdrawal from the city as American service personnel of all types were sent to the front. African American soldiers performed a variety of tasks, including some in combat roles in addition to support tasks like stretcher bearers (Hervieux 2016). Ollie Stewart, gathering what news he could from the front in France and reporting it back home, was struck by the change in his immediate surroundings: the city was ‘partially restored to the people for whom it was built’, he reported of the first Sunday after the invasion. ‘Those of us who remain’, he continued, ‘have elbow room on the street and actually feel optimistic enough to dare hail a taxi on the street or expect a seat at a restaurant’ (Afro‐American, 17 June 1944:1). This American exodus from London, however, was short‐lived. The American presence in London actually became more pronounced in the final year of the war. The short‐term nature of soldiers’ leave from the frontline across the Channel meant alternative destinations became less feasible, and the government’s decision in August 1944 not to allow British troops to take leave in the capital made Americans of all backgrounds more visible. The result was that, as Reynolds explains, London became even more of a draw, with an estimated average of 17,000 American troops a day on leave in London towards the end of the war. Familiar problems soon increased in visibility: the high demand for accommodation and the ‘interaction of prostitutes, thieves and drunken GIs’, especially in Piccadilly (Reynolds 1995:398,403). It seems not coincidental that mixed‐race patrols of military police were established in London around this time. This approach was implemented by the US Army in other parts of the country too, especially after the so‐called ‘Battle of Bamber Bridge’ in June 1943, but the first news of the practice in London came in September 1944, with the predictably upbeat spin from officials that ‘absolute harmony’ had resulted. The press release detailed how twenty ‘colored military police, selected from various units … on the basis of their military experience and intelligence’ were patrolling the city, including its train stations, in mixed‐race groups.

Yet the fact that their presence was necessitated by less than harmonious relations in the city was hinted at in the very same article: they had been ‘commended especially for handling situations involving the races’ (Afro‐American, 9 September 1944:7; New York Amsterdam News, 9 September 1944:1). That these patrols were considered necessary by a US Army largely opposed to putting African American soldiers in positions of authority signalled an effort by military figures to control interracial mixing in London. Black experiences in the final year of the war, meanwhile, were similar to those of American GIs in general but with certain distinctive elements. Soldiers spent their leave where they could, and the Duchess and Liberty Clubs remained popular, as did the haunts of London’s nightlife. Here the pre‐existing presence of black entertainers on the London stage, and as patrons and owners of clubs, was a particular draw. This phenomenon was picked up by the Picture Post, which ran a feature on ‘London’s Coloured Clubs’ in 1943 showing pictures of interracial groups of men and women dancing. The accompanying text clarified that this was the Bouillabaisse Club (located on New Compton Street off Shaftesbury Avenue), a place where one could see ‘the light‐skinned Americans and the black Nigerian’ alongside other nationalities and accents, all ‘in an international steam’ (Webster 2013:613).

Other evidence, however, pointed towards growing racial tensions in the build‐up to the violence of VJ Day, with a variety of black groups affected negatively. A report in the New York Amsterdam News, for example, detailed the complaints of Caribbean RAF members in the city who were enlisted in larger numbers during the last years of the war. The RAF men complained that female officers of the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) had been instructed not to associate with them ‘because of the Americans’. Once again, however, the blame did not lie solely with US racist policies, galling though they were. As the report put it astutely, ‘The American race “bogey” is being used by British authorities as an excuse’ for discrimination, echoing policies adopted informally since the start of the war (New York Amsterdam News, 20 January 1945:1–2). African American and Caribbean personnel – and for that matter other black civilians in the capital – shared their experiences of discrimination and the social spaces of the capital. Back at the start of 1944, for example, Walter White addressed the West African Students Union (WASU) in Camden. When the light‐skinned White stood up to speak, it fell to George Padmore, a voracious student of the international dimensions of race and racism to explain to the bemused audience: ‘He is the blackest white man in America’. African culture influenced American observers as well, with Roi Ottley reporting in the same article on his visit to an exhibition of African art featuring work he considered one of the most ‘penetrating criticisms of imperialism’ he had seen (Pittsburgh Courier, 10 March 1945:17).

London continued to host anti‐colonial activists from across the world throughout the war. As thoughts turned to the world that would be left in the war’s wake, many participated in conferences to debate these questions, including African American activists. W.E.B. Du Bois, a longstanding and influential civil rights spokesman, spoke at meetings at the Royal Albert Hall (McDuffie 2011:154) and at King’s Hall in east London (Sherwood 2017:18) during a trip to the UK which is better known for his appearance at the Fifth Pan‐African Conference in Manchester. Esther Cooper, of the Southern Negro Youth Congress, also spoke at the Royal Albert Hall meeting of the World Youth Congress in November 1945 (McDuffie 2011:153), while journalist Henry Lee Moon covered the World Federation of Trade Unionists meeting at County Hall (Von Eschen 1997:48–9). Although protests were less prevalent compared to the mid‐1930s, these visits from America signalled that the international political atmosphere had turned more restive in the second half of 1945.

Yet as important as global events were, these people were also passing through a city that had just undergone a large‐scale and impactful interracial encounter. In the preceding months, moreover, there was mounting evidence of discrimination. Some of these tensions echoed longstanding controversies surrounding the establishment of separate ARC facilities in the city. Bettye Phillips, who broke ground as the first African American woman to be sent abroad to report on the war, recounted that she was sent to stay at the club on Charles Street, only to be escorted to a separate room with the explanation from an elderly white woman that ‘this is the only room we have for you girls’. The article gave readers a clear‐cut impression of what happened, with its headline ‘ARC Jim Crow’s Women Officers’ (Afro‐American, 24 March 1945:12). Meanwhile, as mixed‐race patrols of military police continued to patrol London’s streets in the aftermath of VE Day (Afro‐American, 12 May 1945:13), black South African former prisoners of war discovered their own variation on this theme, as the South African government tried to stop them from visiting altogether. When a white South African official attempted to enforce this policy in London by threatening a visitor with arrest, the New York Amsterdam News reacted angrily branding the British and South African attitude ‘what the future postwar period has in store for colored people under the British heel’ (New York Amsterdam News, 21 July 1945:1). It was in this context of growing racial ill‐will – with questions centred on the fate of empire coming to the fore – that London hosted VJ celebrations with outbreaks of racial violence.

Although difficult to parse out the precise details of what took place in Piccadilly and the nearby streets of Soho, the reportage paints a useful picture of the combination of international and profoundly local forces at play. According to Padmore, an argument took place outside the Colonial Club between West Indian and African American and white American personnel. The black personnel were forced to barricade themselves inside as white soldiers and sailors threw bottles and threatened to lynch those inside. When one escaped, they were chased down Shaftesbury Avenue (another report told of a chase down Gerrard Street) before order was restored by a combination of US military police and London bobbies (Pittsburgh Courier, 25 August 1945:1). In the weeks that followed, several noted how things in London had soured. As Padmore put it, ever since the VJ Day violence, ‘interracial relations, [which were] never very good, have markedly degenerated, so much so that Africans, West Indians and other dark‐skinned Britishers are forced to walk in groups after nightfall for their mutual protection’ (Pittsburgh Courier, 29 September 1945:12). This evocative remark drew perverse parallels with the experiences of ethnically diverse groups of white Americans, who discovered their common sense of ‘Americanness’ through shared experiences in a foreign land (Reynolds 1995:257).

For diverse black people, a shared non‐white status drew some of them more tightly together, not just in abstract terms but in the context of their all‐too‐real experiences of racism on the streets of places like London. While some, Padmore included, continued to lay blame at the door of racist American attitudes filtering into UK society, home‐grown prejudices were springing to the fore as the US presence in the UK wound down. As Ollie Stewart, the most attentive of African American journalists to the London scene during the Second World War, put it in September 1945: ‘The British want us to go home and make no bones about it’. This was a general sentiment reflecting a weariness with the American ‘occupation’, but it had racially pointed elements. Stewart noted that some London newspapers had started ‘a smear campaign against colored troops’, with the stories of British women upset at the departure of their black boyfriends from places like Bristol a particular source of public ire. He also told of more mundane but revealing manifestations of this antipathy: a British civilian had reportedly marched into the Liberty Club to complain that the noise from inside was keeping him awake. Although part of this stemmed from ill‐feeling towards Americans and America in general, it was ‘safer to push the colored soldiers around’, and that was what was taking place (Afro‐American, 29 September 1945:1). Some observers maintained that American racism was to blame. As white liberal columnist Irene West put it, ‘London was liberal before Americans came with bigotry’, arguing that the city and nation had been ‘inoculated wholesale, with white American prejudice’ (Afro‐American, 28 October 1944:5).

Yet despite the fact that the US Army maintained a strict policy of segregation, and that white officers were behind several cases of black people being refused admittance to London’s restaurants and hotels, evidence of British prejudice also emerged in the capital. Writing in March 1945, Roi Ottley looked at the city around him and compared the accepted status of Jamaican broadcaster and poet Una Marson, employed by the BBC to broadcast to the Caribbean throughout the war from Broadcasting House next door to the Duchess Club, with the difficulties faced by black people in other lines of employment. Referring to black civilians in the capital (many contemporary estimates placed their number at about 1,000), Ottley stated job opportunities were ‘sharply restricted’, even in menial roles to which African Americans were relegated in the US. Ottley also offered a specific example to support his argument: the appointment of a black worker as a street sweeper by local authorities which caused ‘English temperatures to soar’ and who was subsequently ‘mobbed’ (Pittsburgh Courier, 31 March 1945:15). Anecdotal though it may have been, Ottley was trusted as an observer by the GI who wrote to Layle Lane a few months earlier praising his accurate portrayals in the Negro Digest (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 24 December 1944).

The observation that clashes stemmed from perceived economic competition also tallied with other instances of racial tension, including the 1919 riots in seaport areas like Liverpool and the East End and experiences during the period of mass immigration that soon followed thereafter. Conclusion The ‘paradox’ of acceptance and discrimination spotted by Ottley point to larger realities about Britain and London in wartime. The capital not only witnessed, but actively shaped, a large‐scale and impactful interracial encounter during the war where thousands of African American GIs and WAACs spent time in the city for days, weeks, and in many cases months at a time. In some ways the city was indeed ‘liberal’, in the sense that methods used to establish off‐base segregation elsewhere could not be applied here as rigorously. Service personnel found this sense of freedom bolstered by the connections made with civilians and service personnel from parts of the Caribbean and Africa with whom, on occasion, they shared accommodation and social space. London also fuelled a sense of curiosity and excitement among African American observers, offering opportunities to reflect on domestic processes whereby urbanization was reshaping racial identities and domestic protest politics in the USA. At the same time, racism was not just a pathogen imported from America; by 1945, there was mounting evidence of home‐grown resentment and prejudice alongside white American troops’ racial hostility.

That racial tension and the associated sexual jealousy were part of the American ‘occupation’ of Britain are not, of course, novel observations. What is worth emphasizing, however, is that the range and intensity of activities in London made it a special focal point for interracial mixing and, correspondingly, for elite concerns over the questions it generated surrounding race, sex, and citizenship – especially as the American presence in the capital became more pronounced in the last year of the war. The experience throughout was driven by a series of longer‐term entangled historical forces, especially African American civil rights, Britain’s domestic experience with race and immigration, and the international geopolitical situation that led to the end of formal empire. But it was in London – simultaneously the home of government, empire, military headquarters, and thousands of people from across the world – that the dots between these different historical forces were joined in particularly impactful ways. To put it another way, the contradiction between the images of racial harmony presented in British Pathé News’ Peace on Earth and the racial clashes in Piccadilly on VJ Day were not really a contradiction at all – they were two sides of the same coin produced by the same metropolitan transatlantic encounter.

Notes

1 Disagreements persist about the nature and efficacy of racial protest and progress in these years, however. See, for example, Ayers (2019), Guglielmo (2018), Kruse and Tuck (2012), Kryder (2000).

2 See also, for example, Reynolds (1995) and Schaffer (2010).

3 To put it simply, Smith’s (1987) pathbreaking work looks at black Americans but not the capital, while Reynolds’ (1985) wide‐ranging study looks at the capital but not the presence of black Americans within it.

4 Reynolds (1985). The original quote came from the war diaries of Alexander Cadogen. See Dilks (1971:483).

5 This is another anecdotal mention in the most detailed study of the government’s attempt to grapple with the question, which includes the comment from Reynolds (1985:131) that ‘One US diplomat in London in late summer 1942 found the city “filled with stories of the black and white problem, many of which are exaggerated” ’.

6 The literature on interwar radical voices is large and still growing. See James (2015) and Matera (2015). For useful popular histories see Bourne (2010) and the website of Jeffrey Green (2009–2020).

7 The emphasis on grandeur conjured ideas of class and respectability that drew upon British ideas of high society, but also on American ideas too. Officials from the National Urban League (NUL), a social work organization established in the US in 1910 to cater to the challenges faced by a rapidly urbanizing black population, were also to the fore in this new London venture. Sidney Williams, involved with the NUL in St. Louis and Cleveland, had a senior role early on, while Magnolia Latimer of the Atlanta Urban League was also on the initial staff, along with various other well‐educated staff members (Mapping Black London 2020).

8 Afro‐American, 21 April 1945. Some of the coverage of African American women’s work in wartime reflected that of women more broadly, with many described in affectionate but rather patronizing tones as the darlings or ‘sweethearts’ of the male personnel. Camille King Jones, for example, was a Chicagoan worker at the Liberty Club known as ‘London’s Sweetheart’ by black GIs (The Chicago Defender, 25 March 1944)

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