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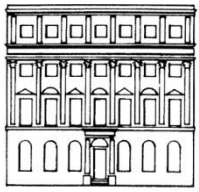

BULLETIN

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Felix Römer:
The Sounds of the First World War. Introduction
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THE SOUNDS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR INTRODUCTION

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On 7 June 1917 the sound of the Great War was carried back to Britain. When British troops south of Ypres detonated about a million pounds of explosives packed in mine chambers under the German trenches at Messines, the blasts reverberated across the Channel.[1] According to newspaper reports, Prime Minister David Lloyd George had ordered that he was to be roused in the middle of the night to listen to the unprecedented operation in Flanders from his residence in Surrey.[2] For eyewitnesses on the ground the detonations felt like an 'earthquake' and looked like 'volcanoes' that 'leaped roaring upwards' before the 'echoes of the awful explosions' shaded into the thunder of the unfolding artillery barrage: 'It was all blinding shimmer and noise and stupefying splendour.'[3] Typically, even this account dwelled more on the sights than on the sounds, just as the acoustics of the battlefield long featured only as background noise in modern historiography.

Sound and hearing, however, have received increased academic attention in recent years. The multidisciplinary field of sound studies emerged from disciplines such as media studies, musicology, and anthropology, but it was not until a decade ago that it also attracted historians.[4] Sound history studies revolve around questions about

[1] See John Keegan, *The First World War* (London, 1998), 382–3.

[2] See 'The Messines Battle: A Brilliant Success So Far', *Manchester Guardian*, 8 June 1917: 'He was roused at that hour, and he and others heard clearly the tremendous shock. Other people in the district were awakened by it and persons in the neighbourhood of the Premier's official residence in London also heard what they judged to be heavy guns across the Channel.'

[3] See 'Graphic Story of the Great Battle: The Enemy Flung Back Two or Three Miles', *Manchester Guardia*n, 8 June 1917.

[4] See Jan-Friedrich Mißfelder, 'Period Ear: Perspektiven einer Klanggeschichte der Neuzeit', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 1/38 (2012), 21–47; Daniel Morat, 'Zur Geschichte des Hörens: Ein Forschungsbericht', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 51 (2011), 695–717; Jürgen Müller, ' "The Sound of Silence": Von der Unhörbarkeit der Vergangenheit zur Geschichte des Hörens', *Historische*

the historical specificity and cultural variability of hearing, the perception of sound in its specific social and political contexts, the utilization of sound for political purposes, and the long-term impact of sound on culture, arts, and collective memory. Historians apply this approach to a growing spectrum of themes and fields, ranging from urban history and media history to the history of collective violence.[5] Some historians are also starting to explore the sound history of the First World War.[6]

As historians are rediscovering the auditory dimension of their subject, the German Historical Institute London marked last year's centenary with a special lecture series devoted to this new strand of research, entitled 'First World War Noises: Listening to the Great War'. This themed issue of the *GHIL Bulletin* brings together contributions by British and German scholars analysing the significance of sound, in both contemporary experience and the aftermath of the war, from different angles and disciplinary backgrounds.

The series was opened by Mark Connelly (Canterbury) with a lecture on 'War Noises in Silent Films', focusing on British instructional films from the inter-war era. These largely forgotten films were hugely successful portrayals of battle reconstructions, attempting to depict the realities and costs of the war. Sound effects and music were added to enhance the viewing experience. The frequent use of soldiers' songs in the musical accompaniment encouraged audiences to sing along, turning a screening into a community experience resurrecting memories and emotions. The lecture demonstrated how

Zeitschrift, 1/292 (2011), 1–29; *Politik und Kultur des Klangs im 20. Jahrhundert,* special issue of *Studies in Contemporary History*, 2/8 (2011), online at <http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/2-2011>, accessed 30 Jan. 2015; Mark M. Smith (ed.), *Hearing History: A Reader* (Athens, Ga., 2004); Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* (Oxford, 2012).

5 See e.g. Daniel Morat (ed.), *Sounds of Modern History: Auditory Cultures in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Europe* (New York, 2014); Robert Maier (ed.), *Akustisches Gedächtnis und Zweiter Weltkrieg* (Göttingen, 2011).

6 See e.g. Gerhard Paul and Ralph Schock (eds.), *Sound des Jahrhunderts: Geräusche, Töne, Stimmen – 1889 bis heute* (Bonn, 2013), 80 ff.; Yaron Jean, 'The Sonic Mindedness of the Great War: Viewing History through Auditory Lenses', in Florence Feiereisen and Alexandra Merley Hill (eds.), *Germany in the Loud Twentieth Century: An Introduction* (Oxford, 2012), 51–62.

representations of sound in popular media contributed to shaping the way the war was understood and remembered in its immediate aftermath.[7]

The scrutiny of the connections between the soldiers' experiences on the battlefields and their reverberations in culture, media, and science continued in the lecture delivered by Julia Encke (Berlin) on 'The Beleaguered Ear: On Fighting Underground and Learning to Listen in the Great War'. Based on her original research on the sensory perception of the First World War and its echo in inter-war Germany, she combined historiographical methods with approaches from literary studies to analyse how soldiers in the trenches, engineers, physicists, acousticians, and novelists responded to the hitherto unheard-of importance and ubiquity of war noises.[8]

The question of how war noises resonated in the arts was pursued by Stefan Hanheide's (Osnabrück) lecture from the perspective of musicology. Drawing on extensive research about the relations of music and war, his 'Reflections of War Sounds in German Concert Halls' traced how composers in the belligerent countries commented on the hostilities in their works, using a variety of war noises and their musical representation as semantic symbols.[9] As the war progressed, more and more tones of sorrow, grievance, and denunciation entered the music. After 1918, sarcastically distorted military music and noises from military life were used to express criticism of the unprecedented carnage. Astonishingly, German composers picked up many sounds from military life and played with patriotic wartime anthems, but mostly refrained from incorporating noises from the battlefield into their music, even though the musical means to depict the sounds of bursting shells or machinegun fire were available at the time. As Hanheide argues in his article, this was mainly due to stylistic considerations.

[7] For this paper, not included in this issue of the *GHIL Bulletin*, see Mark Connelly's book, *Creating Celluloid War Memorials: British Instructional Films and the Great War, 1921–1929* (Exeter, forthcoming 2016).

[8] See Julia Encke, *Augenblicke der Gefahr: Der Krieg und die Sinne, 1914–1934* (Paderborn, 2006).

[9] See Stefan Hanheide, Dietrich Helms, Claudia Glunz, and Thomas F. Schneider (eds.), *'Musik bezieht Stellung': Funktionalisierungen der Musik im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Göttingen, 2013).

Mirroring Hanheide's analysis of German musical history, Jeremy Dibble (Durham) pursued the same questions, focusing on the British case. In his lecture 'War, Impression, Sound and Memory: British Music and the First World War', he discussed the impact of the war on British composers and traced what composers made of the war in their works. As he demonstrates in his article, British composers not only adopted a new cultural nationalism, but also attempted, in different ways, to represent the sights and sounds of the war in their music. Like their German counterparts, however, they made hardly any references to combat noises. Whether this followed from artistic conventions or arose from trends in the remembrance cultures of both countries remains a fascinating conundrum that demonstrates the potential of sound history to open up new avenues for research, not least in comparative perspective.