Behind Closed Doors: Off-Street Commercial Sex in the Interwar Years

On 6 November 1916, police officers from D Division were keeping observation on a collection of European cafés that had recently sprung up in the side streets around Tottenham Court Road and Goodge Street. With names like ‘Restaurant Francais’, ‘Au Drapeau Belge’ and ‘Roumainian Kosher Restaurant’, these businesses were owned by a collection of French, Belgian, Russian, Italian and Romanian men (and a few women), and were opened into the early hours of the morning. During the first years of the war, the sound of their electric pianos and raucous crowds spilled out into the streets, and in their vicinity could be found a suspiciously large number of drunken soldiers, long after the hour had passed when the new licensing laws determined alcohol must not be served. Police suspected that at least twenty of the twenty-seven cafés allowed prostitutes to frequent the premises and to use them as a space in which to solicit soldiers; quite a few, meanwhile, were thought to be ‘brothels’, renting rooms to these women and their soldier clients above the bar.¹ Sex was also for sale in the streets surrounding them: on the very same night that Superintendent Billings wrote his report about his men’s observations on the cafés, he also penned his first of many reports on the arrest of Nellie Johnson.²

These cafés were a product of the war in a number of ways. Their owners were largely refugees from the war on the Continent, seeking the shelter and the consumer market of London in the face of upheaval, uncertainty and danger at home. Their male patrons, meanwhile, were almost entirely soldiers from the colonies and other parts of Britain, whose voracious appetites for booze (during and after legal hours), for sex (both paid and unpaid), and for an all-around good time kept almost thirty of these establishments going in an area little bigger than a square mile. The cafés were also an ironic product of attempts to control wartime vice: with the war came heightened anxieties about the misbehaviour of soldiers and civilians (especially female civilians), and in 1914 the Defence of the Realm Act introduced stricter...
licensing laws, which, among other things, significantly limited the hours in which liquor could be served, for instance no later than 9:30 at night.\(^3\) With the demand for alcohol increased rather than reduced by a state of total war, it is no surprise that cafés like ‘Au Drapeau Belge’ were quick to step forward and offer illicit alcohol after hours. These café owners – alongside hoteliers, boarding house keepers, landlords and restaurateurs – also recognized that commercial sex, like alcohol, was more restricted and yet in higher demand than ever before, and frequently allowed (or at least turned a blind eye to) women selling sex in their establishments. These kinds of places were spread over the whole of the metropolis: boarding houses in Bloomsbury and Russell Square were reputed to be ‘soldier’s brothels’, cafés such as the ‘Blue Peter’ in Well Street, Stepney, catered to the illicit tastes of the foreign sailors around Limehouse, and, in the West End, Soho’s position as the centre of London’s commercial sex scene was challenged by nearby Shepherd’s Market and Curzon Street with their walk-up flats, around which soldiers milled.\(^4\)

The passing of the Aliens Restriction Order in 1916 meant that police, authorized by the Secretary of State, could close alien-owned premises if they were found to have a ‘criminal or disloyal association’ or were ‘conducted in a disorderly or improper manner prejudicial to the public good’.\(^5\) The sale of illegal alcohol, the disorderly conduct in and surrounding the cafés, and the ‘harbouring of prostitutes on the premises’ therefore compelled D Division officers to act against them, and in late November Superintendent Billings sent three men undercover in plain clothes to several of the cafés in order to gain evidence for prosecution. The operation was a complete failure. According to the officers, this was due to the fact that ‘the customers are all foreigners or soldiers and a stranger out of uniform is looked on with suspicion.’\(^6\) They were told by patron and owner alike that no alcohol was available, as they were not licensed and the hour was late, and that sex was not for sale.

After spending the night sipping soft drinks and coffee under the resentful eyes of what we can assume to be an increasingly smaller and increasingly sober crowd, the officers devised a better plan for gathering evidence against the cafés. On 21 November 1916, Superintendent Billings contacted Police Commissioner Edward Henry, asking for permission to borrow two Canadian uniforms. The Commissioner passed the request on to the Commander of the Canadian forces in London, who begrudgingly agreed.\(^7\) Officers sporting these uniforms blended seamlessly with the typical café crowd, and soon had plenty of evidence to prosecute two of the cafés. Superintendent Billings was hopeful that the prosecutions would serve to sever the other cafés’ connections with prostitution, if not with alcohol.\(^8\) The women who had once sold sex behind their closed doors, meanwhile, were now obliged to listen to the sound of the laughing crowds and the electric pianos from the street. It could well be that Nellie Johnson, who was