

Nationalism at War: Conflicting Narratives of Tennis, 1914-18

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Tennis in Scholarly Work: Sport in WWI

- Tennis largely ignored in previous scholarly work on sport in WWI (e.g. Mason & Reidi 2010; Taylor 2002)
 - Assumption of a 4-year hiatus in play
- Underestimates of its presence as a leisure activity at home (in Britain) and at the front
 - Ignoring potential role of tennis as platform to express ideas about the war:
 - *How we should approach/understand it*
 - *How we should support Allied efforts in it*

Aim

- Examine various narratives of how tennis featured in the Great War:
 1. As a lens to view British responses to the war
 - *Reflecting amateur ideals*
 2. As a platform to both condemn and support the playing of recreational sport during war time
 - *‘The gentleman in tennis flannels’ as a symbol of ridicule*
 3. As a means to understand how ‘regular’ people contributed to the war effort
 - *Enlistment of players; tennis club roles; charity*
 4. As a vehicle for propaganda, from both sides

Methodology

- Discourse analysis (Aug 1914-Dec 1918):
 - Articles in the national press (mainly *The Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Financial Times*, and *Daily Mail*)
 - Articles in the local press in Britain (limited to digital access)
 - Articles in sport and tennis periodicals/magazines (especially *Lawn Tennis & Badminton*)
 - Supplemented by player biographies, autobiographies and club histories where discussions of the war featured



1. Immediate Responses

‘... it seemed that most of our fellow countrymen were utterly unable to form any conception, even a remote one, of the magnitude of the issue forced upon us. Who does not remember the cricket matches at Lord’s, the lawn tennis, and all the other amusements which for a time went on just as before, as if we were completely unaware that the trumpet of Armageddon had sounded?’ (The Times 28 Mar 1918: 9)



1. Immediate Responses

- *LT&B* reported cancelled tournaments abroad and queried ‘what effect the European conflagration will have on home tournaments’ (August 6 1914: 875).
- Numerous tournaments were abandoned as players immediately ‘answered the call’, but there was a feeling of lament at the knee-jerk reaction of cancelling tournaments



1. Immediate Responses

- The tournament committee at Eastbourne, *‘wisely decided to adopt the policy of “Business as usual”’*
- This reflected British stoicism and resoluteness – ‘stiff upper lip’
- Their approach to war matched their amateur approach to sport
 - The language of one was peppered with the language of the other
 - War is ‘the greater game’; sport is ‘mimic warfare’



2. Appropriateness of Tennis Play: Advocates

- Tennis play as therapeutic
 - Break from drudgery of war work
 - Deflect minds from anxiety
 - Entertainment to boost morale
- Tennis play as an act of defiance against the enemy
 - Functional: for fitness
 - Highlighting British stoicism/fortitude
 - To cease playing would be propaganda for the enemy

‘No good can be done by sitting still and twiddling one’s thumbs’

‘Britons, be normal. Spend wisely and amuse yourselves rationally’

2. Appropriateness of Tennis Play: Opponents

- Tennis play as inappropriate or immoral
 - To 'play' while countrymen fight abroad is disrespectful
 - Frivolous distraction at a time of grave seriousness
- Tennis players misjudging the national mood; unpatriotic
- Building tennis courts as a waste of resources

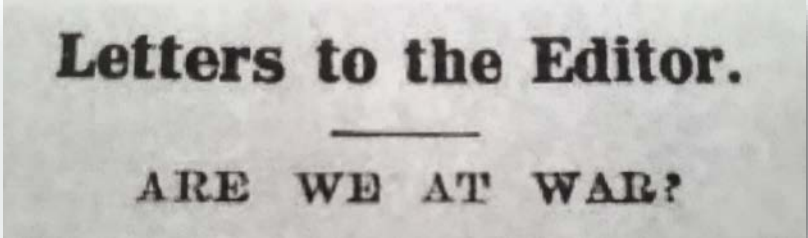
DROPPED SPORTS.
—
**SIGNS OF A NATIONAL
AWAKENING.**
—
PUBLIC OPINION IN ACTION.

WASTE OF MEN.
—
**WIRELESS OPERATOR MAKING A
TENNIS COURT.**

2. Appropriateness of Tennis Play: Opponents

- The ‘gentleman in tennis flannels’ became a source of derision in various letters to editors:

- *‘I will not insult our brave boys in khaki by calling them men’; they are ‘flannelled fools’*
 - Rejecting tennis play as emasculating
- *‘Tennis is a game for swanks’; ‘such foolery’*
 - Rejecting tennis play as pretentious/elitist



Letters to the Editor.
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ARE WE AT WAR?

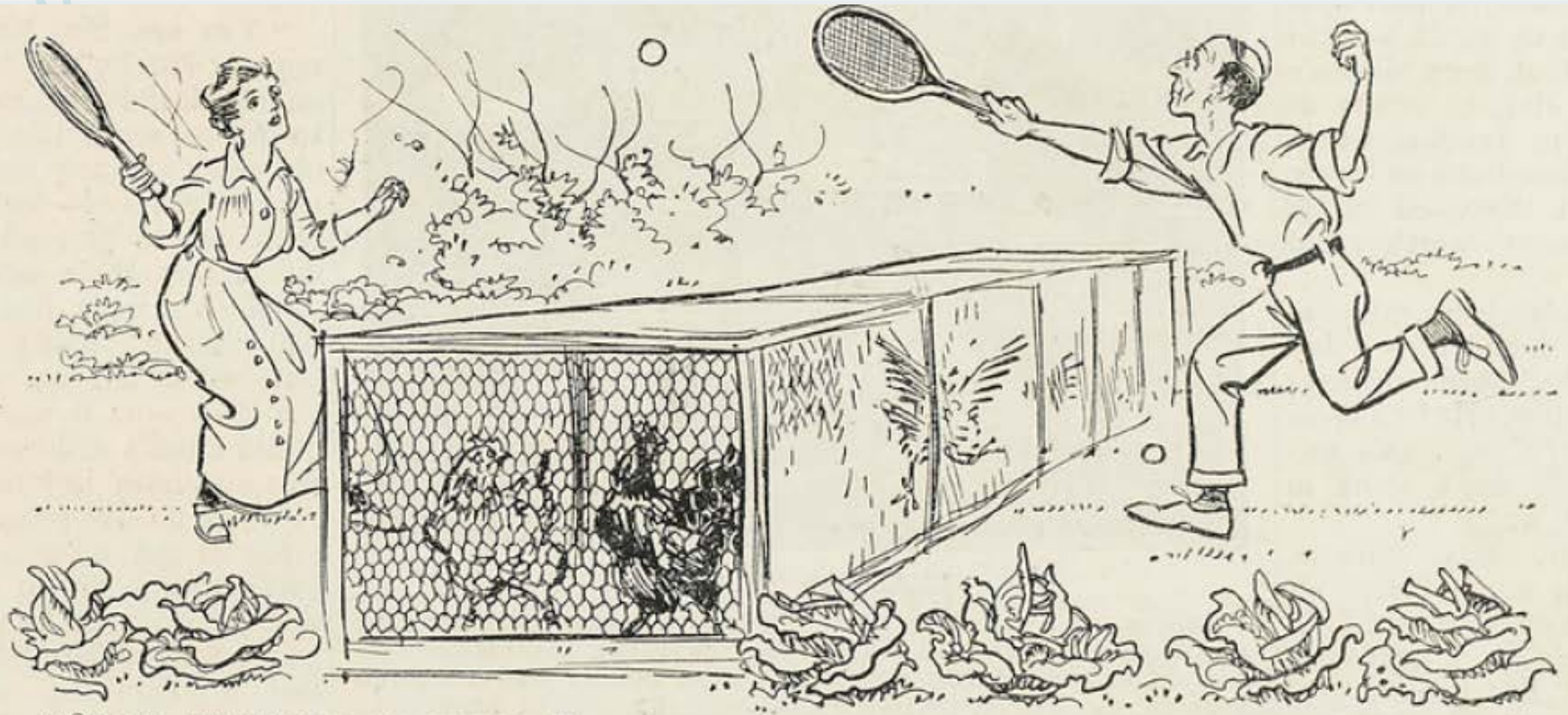


3. Tennis in the War Effort

‘serving with the colours’

1. Enlistment of club members
2. Clubs offered up for the war effort
 - Courts to officers on leave and convalescent soldiers, e.g. Carnoustie TC: *‘wounded soldiers would be allowed free use of the east-most tennis courts on the links free of charge during certain hours’* (Courier & Argus 2 May 1916: 2)
3. Clubs converting courts to vegetable gardens to ease the food shortage
 - *Punch* sketch poking fun at this...

3. Tennis in the War Effort



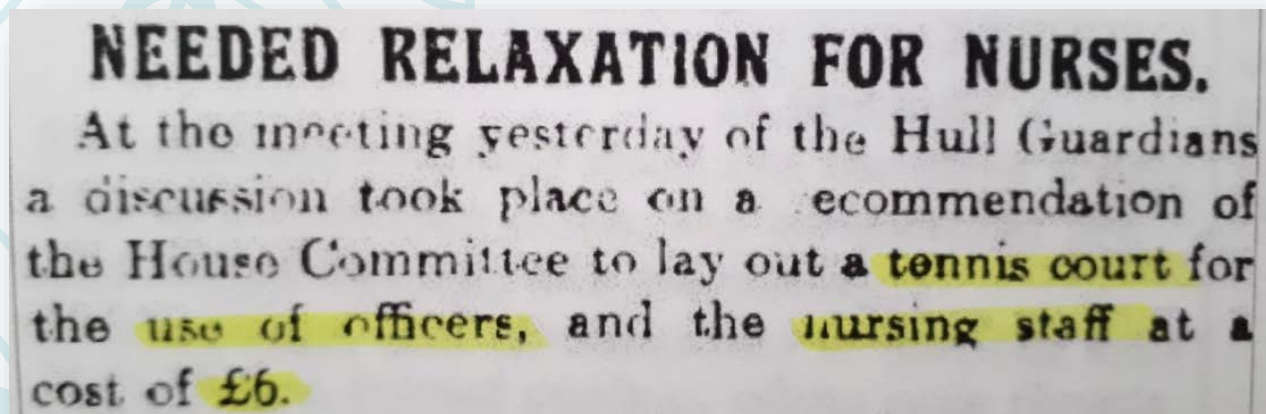
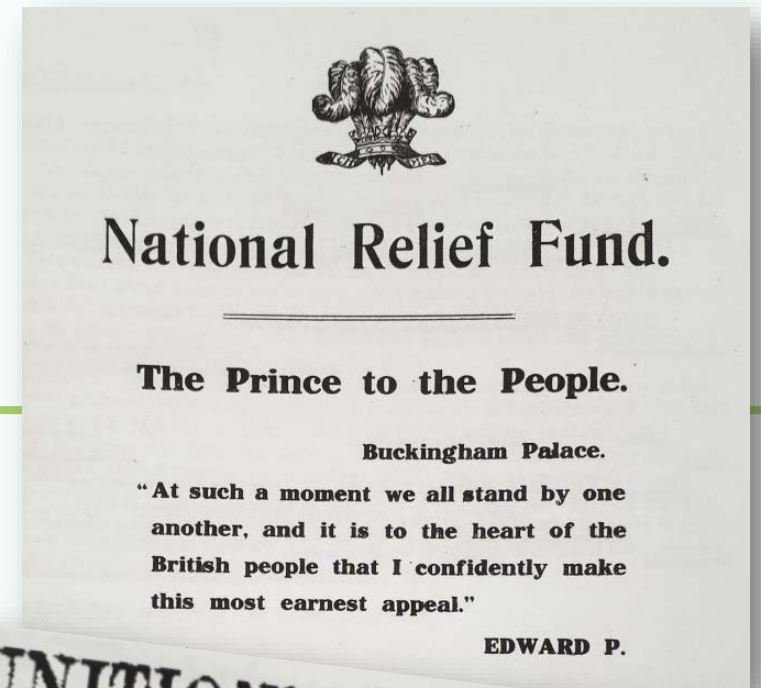
"OH YES, WE KEEP UP OUR TENNIS. THE CHICKEN-RUN REALLY MAKES AN EXCELLENT SUBSTITUTE FOR A NET."

3. Tennis in the War Effort

4. Fundraising efforts

- Charity matches & tournaments

5. Lawn tennis encouraged for women at home



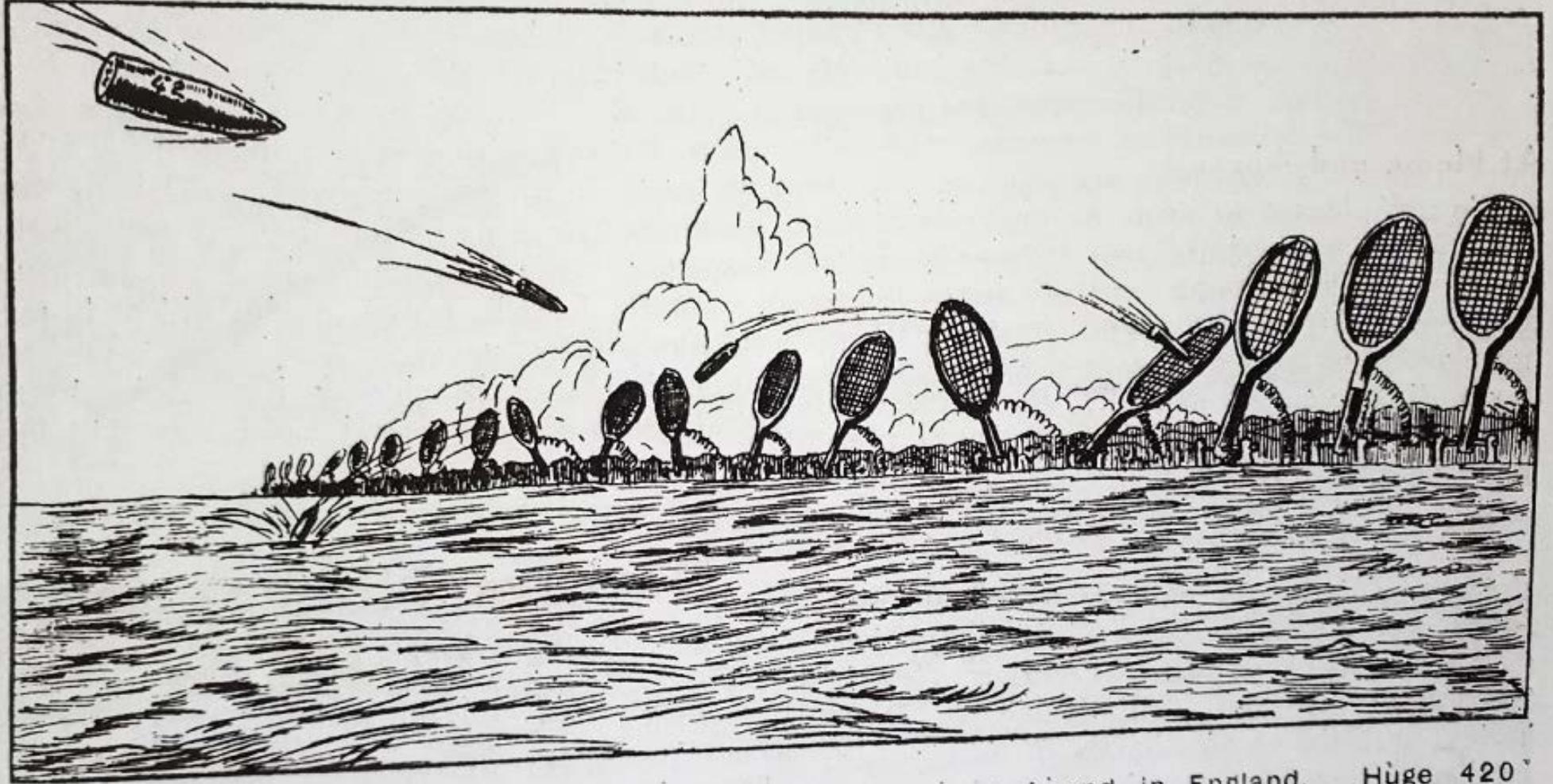
4. Tennis as Propaganda

- German criticisms of British approaches to war:
 - Continuation of tennis play during the war:
 - ‘Frivolous’; ‘lacking in understanding of the high seriousness of the war’; fight with a ‘profane light-heartedness’ (Cologne Gazette Oct 1914)
 - Viennese sketch (in *Die Musquete*) poking fun at this...

German Seriousness and English Frivolity.

The **Germans** have long complained that we are a **frivolous people**, and now the *Cologne Gazette* tells us that we are **lacking in understanding** of the **high seriousness** of the **war** and in appreciation of its moral importance.

Checkmate! A Viennese skit on England's Coast Defences.



"The danger of the 42 centimetre guns is no longer feared in England. Huge 420 centimetre rackets have been constructed which are said to be capable of catching the shells and hurling them back at the 'd---d Germans.'"

—Reproduced from a cartoon in *Die Muskete* (Vienna).

4. Tennis as Propaganda

'... probable that some of our German lawn tennis "friends" have been actual accessories in the nameless outrages in question...'

- Germans derided as 'unsporting' in their approach to warfare (Adams 2015; Mason & Reidi 2010; Phillips 1996; Williams 1998)
- 'An English commander might, in his vulgar sporting jargon, say that *it was not cricket* to make war on women and children' (*Times* 8 Oct 1914: 9)
- Comparing POW camps in Britain and Germany
- Tennis playing opponents as enemies in war

PRISONERS' HARDSHIPS.
—
OVERCROWDING AT HALLE.

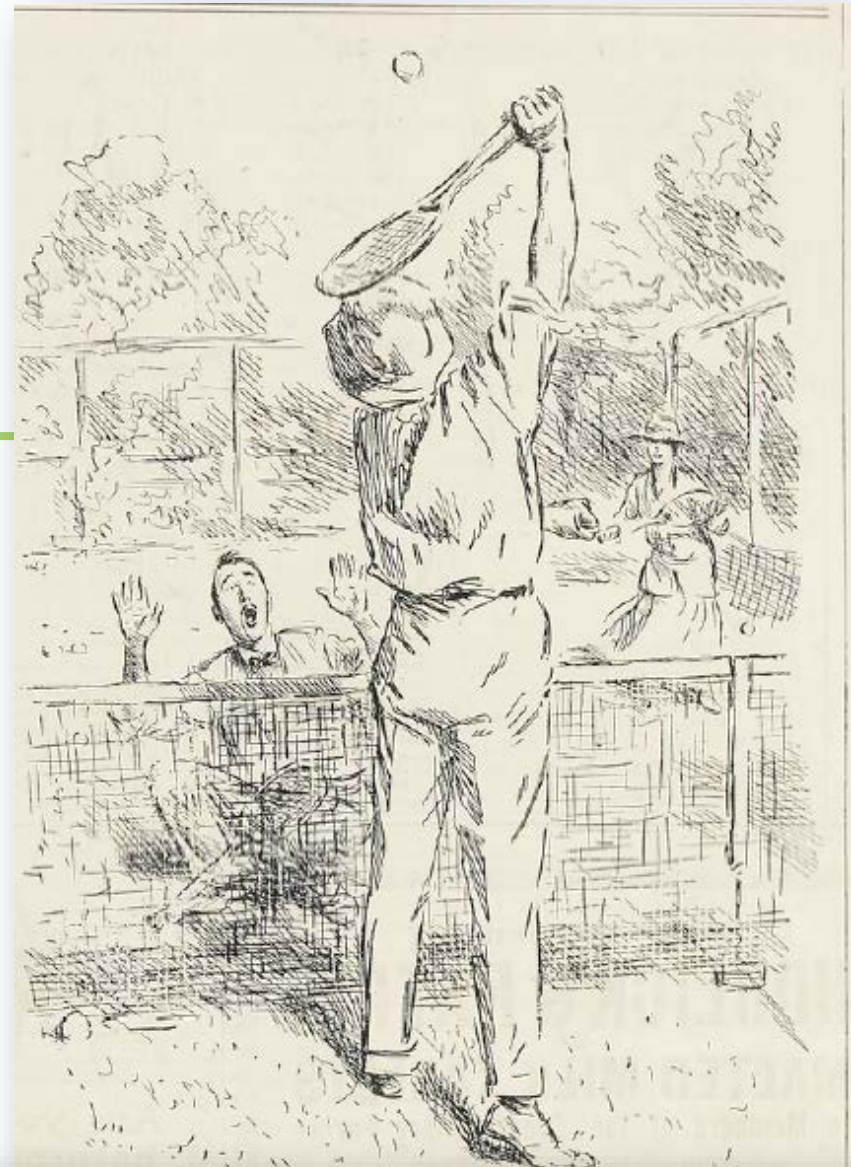
OUR GERMAN PRISONERS.
—
HOW WE TREAT THEM.

HARDSHIPS OF INTERNMENT.
—
BRITISH OFFICERS IN HOLLAND.
—
DISMAL WINTER OUTLOOK.

Plain Speaking on an Ugly Question.
A Reply to "Love-all" by "Victim."

4. Tennis as Propaganda

- British play as superior in tennis and war
- German play: reckless attacking, ruthless
- British play: patient, measured
- Imagining the spread of German ‘sporting’ ideals to Britain – in *Punch* cartoon



THE SPREAD OF KULTUR.

Tennis-player (whose partner has sent a weak return). "KAMERAD! KAMERAD!!"

Aftermath



**BOYCOTT OF ENEMY LAWN
TENNIS PLAYERS.**

-
- Germany and its allies were banned from competitions, including Wimbledon and the Davis Cup, until the mid-1920s
 - These competitions became sites of national and international importance, as sporting successes became recognized increasingly as barometers of national vitality and strength
 - Tennis progressed through a period of democratization and also opened itself up to greater participation of women
 - Britain experienced a decline in its global authority, but sustained its hold on amateur ideals in sport

Summary

- Analysis of tennis provided a context to:
 - Understand immediate responses to the war as reflective of distinctly ‘British’ character traits, underpinned by amateur sporting ideals
 - Discuss the appropriateness of leisure and sport among civilians ‘at home’
 - *The image of tennis as an effeminate activity during this time revealed in discourse around ‘shirkers’ playing tennis*
 - *Derided as unpatriotic, less than a man, and pretentious*
 - Consider the overall role the sport, mainly through its clubs, played in the war effort
 - Understand sport as a platform to compare approaches to war, through propaganda

Many thanks for
listening...

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