PART THREE

MEMORIAL CULTURES
On July 19, 1919 cities all over Britain held a ‘Peace Day’ to celebrate the signing of the Versailles Treaty that marked the official end of the war. In Luton, 30 miles north of London, the town council had prepared a parade and banquet at the city hall, but had refused to allow the local branch of the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers, the largest veterans’ association at the time, to use the main public park for their own memorial service. In response, the Federation boycotted the celebrations, and on the appointed day veterans lined the parade route in protest and jeered the mayor’s speech. Tensions gradually escalated between the town leaders conducting the ceremonies and the crowds of veterans and their supporters, until rioting broke out, with the mayor and his staff besieged inside the town hall, police battling with the crowds, the hall invaded and smashed up, until eventually it and nearby buildings were set on fire. At one point fire hoses—at least those that hadn’t been cut—were trained on the crowds, with one man being hurled through a music shop window. Pulling him out of the shop, members of the crowd also wheeled a piano out into the street and joined together to sing the popular wartime tune “Keep the Home Fires Burning” as the city center went up in flames.1

To be sure, this outbreak of violence was extreme, even for the unstable postwar era.2 But like the numerous other early postwar disturbances involving veterans, the Luton riots were a product of deep-seated divisions between veterans, non-veterans, and the state,

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2 Though Peace Day disturbances occurred in several other English cities, none approached the damage caused in Luton. 1919 had also seen numerous other veteran-related disturbances, most notably the large number of strikes and riots in army camps in both northern France and England. For more on veterans’ postwar unrest, see Gill and Dallas (1985), and Rothstein (1980).