

“The Great Fire of London, 1940” Exhibition

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Aim: Using an art exhibition as a gateway, the aim of this project was to draw the American public into a personal narrative and shared experience of the Blitz in order to bring the United States into the war as a British ally.

Scenario: From the early years of World War II, the British government engaged in an extensive campaign to draw America out of neutrality and into an active role in the fight against Germany, treading carefully to avoid backlash against overt attempts at manipulation. A major tactic became to emphasize shared experience to foster a sense of solidarity and unity, creating very personal narratives that drew the American public into the British experience of the war. To this end, the London Blitz marked a major milestone. While London prepared for the worst, there was also a recognition that the anticipated German bombardment could provide a crucial opportunity to turn American sympathy into action. When the Blitz did come, American coverage was indeed deeply personal, captivating the American public and building a strong sympathetic bond with the Londoners under attack. In his final broadcast from London, American commentator Eric Sevareid announced, “When this is all over, in the days to come, men will speak of this war and they will say: I was a soldier, or I was a sailor, or I was a pilot; and others will say with equal pride: I was a citizen of London.”

The Blitz experience and the celebration of British “Blitz spirit” became a central narrative in the British-American relationship, and the Ministry of Information (MOI) moved quickly to take advantage of the opportunity to mobilize American sentiment to their advantage.

Program Activity: In February 1941, the MOI had a propaganda opportunity dropped in its lap by an unexpected source: the London Fire Brigade. A London Fire Services Major had discovered that among his firemen were a number of talented artists who had produced pieces depicting their experiences battling the great fires of the Blitz. The War Artist Advisory Committee recognized the collection’s potential as “valuable propaganda,” and the MOI soon arranged for an exhibition in the United States.

An overarching narrative for the project was carefully cultivated. As laid out in an MOI memorandum, the objective of the exhibition would be to serve as “propaganda for our cause,” with an emphasis on three main themes for its American audience:

1. *This must not happen to you. Help Britain to keep away the Nazi menace*
2. *The courage of London firemen – citizen soldiers manning the new front line*

3. *Art in wartime – how culture and art can be kept alive and even stimulated in Blitz conditions*

It is important to note the order of the themes above, with the explicit goal of drawing America into the war as the primary purpose, with the positive projection of British spirit as a secondary goal in direct support of the first.

To this end, a committee of art curators selected 107 works to be included in the touring collection, all produced by volunteer firemen and women of the Auxiliary Fire Service who had personally experienced the scenes depicted. Subjects ranged from thrilling scenes of firemen battling great fires to quiet, personal portraits of firemen at rest. A dramatic installation was also added: a showpiece made of relics from the bombings - the jacket of a fireman killed in action, pieces of bombs and shrapnel, equipment melted by the heat of the fires - all of which dramatically evoked the destruction of the Blitz.

Another crucial component of the project emerged when it was decided that three London firemen would accompany the exhibition on its tour. All three had been in the raids from September 1940 to May 1941, and were selected to maximize the impact of the project: a senior fireman with technical expertise, a veteran who had been seriously burned while fighting fires in the Blitz, and a fireman artist whose work was displayed in the collection. The men would provide a personal face and voice for the project, making public appearances and lectures, and would also hold training sessions with American firemen on how to battle similar blazes.

Under the title of “The Great Fire of London, 1940,” the exhibition made its way through the U.S. Both the collection and the firemen ambassadors were met with high praise by press and public alike. Responses were so positive, in fact, that the MoI arranged for a parallel exhibition to tour simultaneously with the first, in order to maximize the project’s reach and audience. By the end of 1942 more than 600,000 people had attended talks and appearances by the British firemen, while total viewing of the collection topped half a million. Not surprisingly, the MOI deemed the project “phenomenally successful.”

Analysis: The success of the Great Fire project highlights the essential, foundational role of credibility in Public Diplomacy. The American public was still suspicious and stinging from a sense of being “duped” into WWI by manipulative propaganda; the authenticity of the Great Fire exhibition facilitated openness in a population otherwise primed to reject overt attempts of persuasion.

It is important to remember that the artworks were not originally designed as propaganda, but were genuine spontaneous reflections of personal experience. As a result, the collection had an organic authenticity very difficult to artificially replicate. The American public instinctively responded to this: as one critic noted, these were “not compositions worked out at leisure in a peaceful studio, but first-hand impressions of experiences, horrors and trials valiantly met by men and

women.” Similarly, the firemen ambassadors, two of whom bore visible injuries from their service, benefitted from an innate legitimacy that allowed them, in the words of the American Ambassador in London, to “spread far more good will for Britain than do our sleek diplomats.”

That authenticity of the collection came from outside of the government does not mean that the state had a passive role. Indeed, the initiative’s real success lay in the MoI’s ability to recognize and capitalize on the innate strengths of the original collection. The MoI used the art as a *gateway* to a personal and strongly sympathetic perception of the British cause – which, in turn, encouraged greater public support for American involvement in the war in support of the British.

Learning Points: The Great Fire exhibition dramatically demonstrates the power of authentic, personal voices in Public Diplomacy efforts. While persuasion without credibility will be perceived as propaganda and often result in a negative backlash, personal narratives from a legitimate source create a sustained receptivity in a target audience on which relationships can be built.

Key Sources:

For a detailed overview of the exhibition, see Anthony Kelly’s *Taking the Blitz to America* <http://www.historytoday.com/anthony-kelly/taking-blitz-america>

Museum Records:

- National Gallery of Art <http://www.nga.gov/past/data/exh3.shtm>
- Imperial War Museum
<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1050000684>

Newspaper Archives:

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<http://search.proquest.com/docview/105675804?accountid=14749>
- Paintings of blitz on london shown. (1941, Nov 11). *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, pp. 8. Retrieved from
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