Art in time of war; 1939-1945

The cultural mediation of violence - WWII

The war itself can be construed as a deep failure of the values that make us human beings with regard for our fellow creatures.

The banality of Evil – Hannah Arendt

*Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power's disappearance* (On Violence).

When we come to examine the art created and performed during the years of WWII, there are several questions that we need to consider:

- what roles have the arts performed in times of war?
- how far did artists support the war effort of their respective nations? perhaps becoming a propaganda arm of those fighting?
- did the quality of their art necessarily suffer?
- Could art remain above the war? Can the artists remain with what they thought of as purely ‘artistic’ action → might this not involve the risk of aestheticizing and even neutralising pure horror?

From the perspective of the official timeline, the years of the Second World War are 1939-1945. However, the Spanish Civil War is considered to be the ‘first battle’ of the war, at least to the Europeans. On 26 April 1937, Nazi German and Italian bombers attacked the Basque city of Guernica. Over the course of three hours, they destroyed three-quarters of the ancient town, killing and wounding hundreds of people. The raid was “unparalleled in military history”, according to reports at the time – and it inspired one of the most famous anti-war (at least so interpreted at that time and still today) paintings in history – the monumental painting ‘Guernica’, created by Pablo Picasso as an immediate reaction to this bombing.

![Fig. 1 Guernica](image)

After the bombing, Picasso was informed of what had gone on in his country of origin. At the time, he was working on a mural (a wall painting) for the Paris Exhibition to be held in the summer of 1937, commissioned by the Spanish
Republican government. He deserted his original idea and on 1 May 1937, he began on Guernica.

Picasso himself summed up his decision, remarking in 1937: “I have always believed and still believe that artists who live and work with spiritual values cannot and should not remain indifferent to a conflict in which the highest values of humanity and civilisation are at stake.”

Guernica is blue, black and white, 3.5m tall and 7.8 m wide, a mural-size canvas painted in oil. The discarding of color intensifies the drama, producing a reportage quality as in a photographic record. In terms of genre, his work is seen by art critics as a mixture of pastoral and epic styles. This painting can be seen in the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid.

The protagonists of the pyramidal composition can be divided into two groups: animals and human beings, a ‘collective hybrid’ mixed together into a background of broken hard-edged geometric shapes. While art critics enjoy analyzing the use of colour in Picasso’s "rose" or "blue" periods, in the mostly monochromatic painting Guernica the predominant "colour" is a black, which reminds perhaps of death itself. Picasso’s Guernica is most likely influenced by another Spanish artist, Francisco de Goya, who often painted not only war paintings, but also bullfighting art.

**The War Artists Advisory Committee**

In Britain, During World War II, the British government’s Ministry of Information funded a War Artists Advisory Committee (WAAC). This larger-scale mid-century program supported artists who travelled with the armed forces, as well as capturing the happenings on the homefront. The war artists who participated in this program, were also embedded in army units on far flung campaigns, where they went through the same extremes as soldiers, from tedium to tension, equatorial sun and freezing winters.

Artists like **Paul Nash** and **Graham Sutherland** both continued the trend of their WWI paintings to portray mainly the suffering of the war-torn landscape, in a neo-romantic style that somehow looks back to the Romanticism of William Blake, William Turner and Samuel Palmer. They followed a longstanding trend in British art in which landscape painting is being associated with a quest for national identity, an issue that was taken up by the left and right of the political spectrum alike.
“Battle of Britain” is “an attempt to give the sense of an aerial battle in operation over a wide area”, according to what the painter wrote for the WAAC. The “parched country” and the “mounting cumulus concentrating at sunset after a hot brilliant day” situate the campaign, visually, in the long summer of 1940. “Against the approaching twilight,” Nash wrote, “new formations of Luftwaffe, threatening…”

“Battle of Germany” was commissioned by the WAAC in 1944 and was originally intended to depict a flying bomb. Nash wrote a text to accompany the painting:

“…The moment of the picture is when the city, lying under the uncertain light of the moon, awaits the blow at its heart. In the background, a gigantic column of smoke arises from the recent destruction of an outlying factory which is still fiercely burning. These two objects pillar and moon seem to threaten the city no less than the flights of bombers even now towering in the red sky.”

Albert Richards was just three months into a scholarship at the Royal College when he was called up. He was four years into this service, in the paratroops, when he was given the chance to be an official war artist. In this, he shared much with the soldier-artists of the First World War – he was not simply an observer, but close to everything that filled his canvases.

He was excited by parachuting and came up with some lively paintings of paratroops training. The Drop (1944) is an action scene of falling figures gripping parachute straps in with feet close together or in jack-knife position.
Henry Moore was commissioned for the War Arts project on the basis of his drawings of the scenes in the London tube, where thousands of Londoners found shelter during the Blitz. Fascinated by that “huge city in the bowels of the earth,” he spent a year producing hundreds of drawings that became highly influential for British artists such as Bacon for example.

![Fig. 5 Henry Moore, The Subway images 1940-1941](image)

**The Crucifixion theme**

It is no wonder that during and after the war references to the crucifixion theme abounded. Particularly in times of war the Crucifixion has served artists as a symbol of suffering, death and redemption.

One of the most powerful examples of that imagery is “Three studies for figures at the base of a crucifixion”, a painting from 1944 by Francis Bacon. Like Picasso, whose crucifixion imagery strongly influenced him, Bacon used the image devoid of any religious significance as an “armature on which to hang feelings about human behavior,” as he claimed. Bacon’s representations of tortured humanity, of man’s isolation, what has been called Bacon’s iconography of disaster, are not really political. In fact, John Berger, the British art critic that saw all art as weapons and as non neutral expressions of power or ideology, condemned Bacon’s paintings for their supposed lack of indignation as decadent individualism somehow complacent to the establishment.

![Fig. 6 Francis Bacon, Three studies for figures at the base of a crucifixion, 1944](image)

**Women war artists**
Women have, since the turn of the 20th century, been interpreting and illustrating war, casting a fascinating light on the forgotten social, industrial and personal histories born from conflict which, while not as graphic as the front line, are invaluable in fleshing out a fuller picture of the human costs of the war.

At the start of the Second World War, women artists were given more freedom after the government's War Artists Advisory Committee was set up, though there were still severe imbalances. More than 400 artists were involved – only 52 of whom were women, the latter receiving fewer and shorter commissions, lower pay and far less publicity. Two women were given overseas commissions but only one, Evelyn Dunbar, was entrusted with a salaried position, and both were allowed to travel abroad only after the fighting had ended.

![Fig. 7 Evelyn Dunbar, The Queue at the Fish Shop, 1944](image)

This well-known war painting by Evelyn Dunbar, a mural and landscape painter, that was given a series of commissions during World War Two, is a good example of how the artist perceives the concerns of the general population: how to get food in times of rationing, what one has to put up with, an example of “life in all its aspects.” The queue fills almost the entire space of the middle ground and background of the painting, running off the edge of the frame on the left, suggesting it is interminable and, by extension, the queue at the food shop becomes the background to other activities of daily life, the backdrop against which others hurry to work, on foot or by bicycle.

![Fig. 8 Laura Knight, A Balloon Site, Coventry, 1943](image)

First used during the First World War, barrage balloons were also an integral part of Britain's defences during the Second World War and by September 1941 2,748 were in use. Coventry had been attacked by the Luftwaffe 14 and 15 November in response to a RAF attack on Munich. Firebombing destroyed the city centre,
including the medieval cathedral of St Michael. Some factories were also targeted. The ballet and the circus were frequent subjects of Knight’s paintings and it is the coordinated physical performance skills of the balloon team that she emphasises here. Knight, the painter, later served as the official artist at the Nuremberg trials.

Fig. 9 Elsie Hewland, A Nursery-School for War Workers’ Children, 1942

The painting hints at the changes not just for the children but also for their mothers called into unfamiliar duties. Nursery schools were a new, essential but temporary support for women conscripted into full-time employment, with over 1,300 schools established by 1943.

The Axis powers

It is common to dismiss Nazi and Fascist art, or that of Stalinist Russia or wartime Japan, as having been no more than crude propaganda. But all war art, whether by ‘good guys’ or ‘bad’, is bound to respond to the imperatives under which it was produced. So are people’s reactions to it, both at the time and subsequently.

Artists in the German army set out to record “purely human aspects of the war”, and subsequently had the work rejected by officials. Others struggled with what could be done with the beauty of horror. The artist Heinrich Klumbies poignantly described a Luftwaffe attack on London: “It was as if we looked into the jaws of hell, terrible to imagine but unbelievably beautiful to see.”

The art that sprung from Japan during the war awaited a similar fate to that of Germany. In Japan militaristic images permeated “all aspects of Japanese life”, a point chillingly illustrated by a child’s silk kimono exquisitely designed in a print featuring fighter jets, tanks and exploding bombs.
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