



## *Art, Propaganda and Aerial Warfare in Britain during the Second World War* by Rebecca Searle.

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In *Art, Propaganda and Aerial Warfare ...*,<sup>1</sup> historian Rebecca Searle (Univ. of Brighton) explores the ties between state propaganda and artistic endeavor in the United Kingdom's response to the air war with Nazi Germany. She focuses chiefly on works sponsored by the War Artists' Advisory Committee (WAAC) and its uneasy relations with its parent body, the Ministry of Information (MoI), and the propaganda branches of the Ministry of Aircraft Production, the Air Ministry, and the Ministry of Health. Searle also assesses sponsored artworks "within the broader cultural landscape of wartime Britain to further understand the artistic record bequeathed by the WAAC and explore the ways that art can contribute towards our broader understanding of the Second World War" (1-2).

The first of the book's five chapters concerns the origins and aims of the WAAC, as conceived by its architect and chairman, Kenneth Clark of the National Gallery, with particular attention to debates within the artistic community and state administration about what constituted good contemporary British art and its place in wartime. The works sponsored or purchased by the committee were meant on one level to form an independent artistic record of the conflict; and yet, through public exhibition, their subject matter and perspective were also intended to shape public opinion: "The development of cultural propaganda meant that art was recognized as a vehicle through which a positive image of the nation could be conveyed" (19). Searle's purview extends from aircraft construction through the Battle of Britain and the Blitz to the bombing of Germany by the Royal Air Force (RAF).

One way newly created art was expected to contribute to the war effort was through positive images of airplane manufacturing. Hence the attention to works of John Ensor and Raymond McGrath, which "presented an image of a modern, technologically sophisticated and highly productive industry" (38). The increasing stress that authorities placed on willing factory hands, especially female volunteers, was reflected in the canvases of artists like Leslie Cole and Elsie Hewland. Styles varied, but owing to official insistence, artwork sponsored or bought by the WAAC concentrated on those elements of construction where parts of aircraft-in-the-making were discernible within the frame. More repetitive and unglamorous piecework associated with making small electrical and other components went largely unrecorded on canvas, as did the unrelenting boredom of factory work in general: "scenes of this sort were totally absent from the WAAC collection, which instead concentrated on images that complemented the wider schema of industrial propaganda" (38).

The commission also had a hand in deciding who might serve as official artists for the Air Ministry in time to create a visual record of the Battle of Britain: the extended struggle for daylight air supremacy over England (summer 1940) in which RAF pilots eventually triumphed over

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1. The first monograph in Bloomsbury Publishing's New Directions in Social and Cultural History series.

their German adversaries. The modernist paintings by Paul Nash on the subject are now iconic, but the WAAC chairman, who directed public relations at the Air Ministry, much preferred Eric Kennington's portraits of individual flyers. These evoked the heroic, knights-of-the-air images popular in World War I. Though containing contemporary as well as traditional compositional elements, these portraits, often reproduced in later decades, were popular with the public, if not always critics, precisely because of "the likeness between subject and image" (65).

Then came the matter of how the WAAC would illustrate the long-anticipated German nighttime bombing of London and other urban areas in 1940–41. The MoI likely favored more upbeat depictions than Henry Moore's monochrome air-raid shelter drawings or Graham Sutherland's washed-out scenes of street devastation. But, in the end, much of the work of sponsored war artists concurred with the officially sanctioned London-Can-Take-It version of events. Unsurprisingly, official war artists only obliquely portrayed bombing casualties and survivor fear. Nonetheless, given the degree to which Londoners in fact kept calm and carried on, "in producing images that accorded with the propagandist portrayals, the WAAC artists were recording a fundamental part of the experience of living through the Blitz" (94).

The flipside of the German attacks was the RAF's own nighttime bombing campaigns against German cities: from the middle of the war onward this entailed ever larger attacks that wrought death and destruction on a far greater scale than anything the German air force had been able to achieve, albeit with similarly inconclusive damage to civilian morale.

During the war itself, British artists like Laura Knight might emphasize bomber aircrew teamwork while upholding the official fiction that Bomber Command aimed to destroy legitimate military objectives such as arms factories rather than entire urban populations. Despite strong hints as to the true situation in a 1944 modernist work by Paul Nash, even artists who saw the effects of area bombing in the wake of Allied advances on the ground in 1945, for instance, Julius Stafford-Baker, painted ruins in the context of attacks on specific targets or later, like Laura Knight, suggested on canvas that the Nazis were reaping the whirlwind they had sown. "Once artists were freed from the constraints of working for the state, [though] violence and horror would forcefully reassert itself in their work" (116). Searle concludes that

Despite the WAAC's insistence that war art was not propaganda, key elements of the propaganda war resonated throughout the collection. In a war against a Nazi state who [*sic*] exercised total control over artistic production, the very existence of the WAAC and the impression that Britain sponsored free artistic expression was itself useful propaganda. The ascendancy of romantic art, which consciously positioned itself within the national cultural heritage, meant that war art could be presented as the embodiment of the abstract value the nation was meant to be defending. On occasions, such as its coverage of industrial production, the committee responded to direct invitations to produce propaganda; other times it chose to ignore requests such as the Ministry of Health's demand for cheerful [air-raid] shelterers. Viewing the collection as a whole, the key themes of the propaganda war are easy to detect. (117–18)

While noting earlier studies of the War Artists' Advisory Committee,<sup>2</sup> Searle delves more deeply into a set of specific sponsored subjects such as the cinema, public opinion reports of Mass-Observation, and, crucially, the committee holdings at the Imperial War Museum. Unfortunately, her book is a version of a nearly decade-old PhD thesis that has not been updated to include more recent biographies of her principal figures or reflect newer secondary literature on

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2. E.g., Brian Foss et al., *War Pictures by British Artists* (London: Liss Llewellyn Fine Art, 2016).

various aspects of wartime British society and culture. Nonetheless, this slim volume will engage and inform scholars interested in the art and propaganda in the modern state in general and twentieth-century Britain in particular. An illustrative color-plate section would have been most useful, but also prohibitively expensive. Instead, the many helpful black-and-white reproductions scattered through the book nicely complement the stimulating observations and insights in the text itself.