

## SLIS Connecting

---

Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 7

---

2015

# United Kingdom Libraries during World War II

Matthew Leavitt MLIS  
*Brigham Young University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://aquila.usm.edu/slisconnecting>

 Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#), [Collection Development and Management Commons](#), [Information Literacy Commons](#), [Scholarly Communication Commons](#), and the [Scholarly Publishing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Leavitt, Matthew MLIS (2015) "United Kingdom Libraries during World War II," *SLIS Connecting*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 7.  
DOI: 10.18785/slis.0401.07  
Available at: <http://aquila.usm.edu/slisconnecting/vol4/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in SLIS Connecting by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact [Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu](mailto:Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu).

## United Kingdom Libraries during World War II

By Matthew Leavitt

British Studies Research Paper, September 2011  
University of Southern Mississippi

*"We all know that books burn – yet we have the greater knowledge that books cannot be killed by fire. People die, but books never die. No man and no force can abolish memory...In this war, we know, books are weapons."*  
– Franklin D. Roosevelt ("Books," 1997)

*"Let Us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say: 'This was their finest hour'."*  
– Winston Churchill ("World War II," 1997)

### Introduction

Cultural attacks, especially attacks on books, have been common place during conflict throughout history (Stubbings, 1993). Libraries in particular have been targeted since books and libraries are symbols of cultures (Valencia, 2002). Nazi Germany was not an exception to attacks on culture before and during World War II (Figure 1). A total war had begun under the Nazis which meant that no area of society was exempt from attack (Valencia, 2002).



Figure 1. St. Paul's Cathedral after bombing of Dec. 1940  
(Herbert Mason)

One of the first attacks on books in pre-WWII was in 1933 when a group of Nazi students burned a selection of un-German books, which caused uproar throughout the world (Valencia, 2002) but it did not deter or prevent the Nazi from continuing their cultural attacks. Private and public libraries were often raided by the Nazis and materials destroyed due to content being un-German (Valencia, 2002).

Destruction of libraries and books escalated once the war officially began. National and research libraries were targeted in occupied countries because these

libraries gave the people a cultural identity, showed the level of development, and afforded the people a chance to learn and maintain their culture (Valencia, 2002). Polish libraries and museums were targeted once the country was invaded by the Germans (Stubbings, 1993). Libraries and buildings were bombed, looted, and burned which continued throughout the war (Stubbings, 1993). The Germans wanted to keep the Polish as a working third class and destroyed the libraries in order to keep the people in this class (Valencia, 2002).

Some books and library materials were not destroyed like the Polish books and libraries. Jewish books and libraries were not destroyed, they were preserved and saved by the Nazis (Valencia, 2002). The Jewish culture and people were destroyed but the Germans wanted to keep a record of the culture to know how to combat other problem culture. Research libraries were established to study the Jewish Question and to produce a formula against problem cultures (Valencia, 2002).

Nazi Germany gained control of mainland Europe and the attack on the United Kingdom and London was inevitable. With the Nazis' actions towards other libraries in Europe, libraries in London knew that the city was going to be attacked and that they needed to protect and preserve their collections (Stubbings, 1993). The libraries with enough funding went through great strain to save their collections while other libraries struggled to protect their collections.

Sem Sutter describes the value of books and libraries to a culture and how important it is for a nation to protect these materials.

*In normal times we may not appreciate the extent to which books are symbols of national identity ... But when war, revolution or other forms of unrest disrupt the otherwise orderly world of libraries, we can see concretely how very much books matter and to whom and why. The lengths to which conquerors go to seize or destroy books, the perils that conservators courageously face to safeguard them, the efforts of rival political factions to possess them in order to gain the legitimacy that they can confer: all illustrate the powerful symbolism of the written word. (Valencia, 2002)*

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine how the British Library and St. Paul's Cathedral Library protected their collections from destruction during World War II. The study will also discuss the means to which services were provided to users and how the other libraries in the United Kingdom assisted in the preservation of these collections.

### **Research Questions**

R1: What are the strategies the British Library used to protect the library collection during World War II and what, if any, damages occurred to the collection?

R2: What services did the British Library provide to users during this time?

R3: What are the strategies St. Paul's Cathedral Library used to protect the library collection during World War II and what, if any, damages occurred to the collection?

R4: What services did St. Paul's Cathedral Library provide to users during this time?

R5: How did the National Library of Wales assist both the British Library and St. Paul's Cathedral Library during World War II?

### **Importance of the Study**

Libraries and books are very important to a nation or ethnic culture. The Nazis during World War II attacked libraries and books trying to destroy other cultures. When mainland Europe fell under the control of Nazi Germany, libraries in London decided to move their collection in order for these collections to be preserved. This study examines how the British Library and St. Paul's Cathedral Library, two large libraries in London, tried to protect their respective collections.

Since World War II, libraries and archives have been continuously attacked by opposing forces. Knowing the strategies these two London libraries established to protect collections can benefit other libraries in the future. The study will also demonstrate how collaboration with other libraries can allow for more efficient preservation of collections.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Events Leading to WWII**

The immediate years following World War I were still hectic with land and border disputes between various countries (Stokesbury, 1980). By 1924 peace seemed to have arrived in Europe (Stokesbury, 1980), but it was only the calm before the storm. Peace and stability lasted until 1929 when the world's economy crumbled. Each country of the world had their own economic problems and different ideas to fix these respective problems.

A small political group in Germany appealed to the German people and gained a fraction of power in the government during the 1930 elections (Stokesbury, 1980). In 1933 Adolf Hitler, the leader of the Nazi party, was named Chancellor of Germany and set forth the Nazi Revolution (Stokesbury, 1980). Soon the government was stripped of power and all Aryan-Germans would go into the future together (Stokesbury, 1980).

In late 1933, Hitler and Germany withdrew from the League of Nations' disarmament talks and eventually left the League of Nations all together. These actions bought Hitler the allegiance of the private German military (Stokesbury, 1980). Hitler moved military divisions into the demilitarized Rhineland in 1936 and received no resistance from the League of Nations.

Two years later, Hitler refurbished the head of the German military and annexed Austria into the German Republic (Stokesbury, 1980). When 1939 came, Hitler and Nazi Germany were poised to expand the Third Reich.

Hitler set his sights on the Sudetenland and Czechoslovakia which he took control of in 1939. People who opposed the new regime and Jews were killed in large numbers in this newly conquered land. Poland was the next area that Hitler wanted under his control and he continued demanding more land from the League of Nations (Stokesbury, 1980). Shortly after the Nazi invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, Britain and France declared war on Germany which began World War II (Stokesbury, 1980). Poland was under Nazi control fairly soon after being invaded and the Nazis continued their land grab. The next logical area of land advancement was France and the Germans surprised the French on where the attack occurred. France fell to the Germans which gave the Nazis and its allies control of most of mainland Europe (Stokesbury, 1980).

The bombing of Britain began in August of 1940 (Stokesbury, 1980). After failing to cripple the British Air Force, Germany turned its sights on conquering Britain through night bombings on cultural significant London. London had been bombed at night for months but the will of the citizens did not falter. On December 29, 1940, Hitler sent a large number of the Luftwaffe to bomb London and break the will of the people (Gaskin, 2006). This night would be the heaviest London would be bombed, with many historical sites of the city being the targets of the Germans. The city was relentlessly attacked but the will of the citizens did not break regardless of the damage that was done to the city (Gaskin, 2006).

### ***Libraries during World War II***

Accurate literature about libraries during World War II was very important to this study. This literature explains how libraries were treated and viewed by the European people and why the British libraries took such great care to protect library collections.

A 1993 book by Hilda Uren Stubbings entitled *Blitzkrieg and Books: British and European libraries as Casualties of World War II* gives a basic background of the usefulness of libraries to cultures and how libraries have been targeted throughout history. The majority of the book is concerned with libraries in Europe and Britain during World War II. The book also gives specific information concerning the libraries of interest in this study.

One article written by Miriam Valencia in 2002, "Libraries, Nationalism, and Armed Conflict in the Twentieth Century" gives a thorough discussion about how libraries have been targeted during military conflict. Libraries and books are described as being one of the main components of a culture. The author describes how Nazi Germany attacked libraries and books to try to destroy the culture of the people that were being suppressed.

### ***British Library***

A 1977 book on the British Library during World War II, *The National Central Library: An Experiment in Library Cooperation*, gives a history of the National Central Library before it combined with other libraries to become the British Library. Chapters of the book describe how the National Central Library functioned before, during, and after World War II. These chapters illustrate the importance of funding and how it relates to the preservation of a library collection.

In *A History of the British Museum Library, 1753-1973* (1998), Harris wrote that the British Museum Library was one of the libraries that combined to form the British Library. A chapter of this book gives a detailed record of the processes and procedures of the British Museum Library during World War II including the evacuation of the collection, bomb damage that occurred to the building, and how the librarians catalogued and acquired material during this time.

The British Library Web site includes "History of the British Library," which provides a short history of the libraries that combined to constitute the British Library as well as a brief history of the British Library after the joining of the libraries.

### **St. Paul's Cathedral Library**

Literature concerning the St. Paul's Cathedral Library during World War II is scarce. The oldest literature is entitled *Saint Paul's Cathedral in Wartime, 1930-1945* published in 1946. The literature describes how St. Paul's Cathedral was targeted and functioned during World War II. The book makes mention of how the library transferred materials to the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth where the materials were looked after by the librarians of that library. Bombs also penetrated the Cathedral and the first bomb landed in the Library aisle but was extinguished before damage could occur. This demonstrates the importance of relocating the library to a safe location.

Another piece of literature comes through personal communication with the Librarian of St. Paul's Cathedral Library (J. Wisdom, August 19, 2011). The communication provided extracts from Chapter minutes of the St. Paul's Cathedral Library from 1939 to 1944 that demonstrates how the library decided to move the collection and other valuable pieces to more secure locations.

The Web site of St. Paul's Cathedral Library includes a brief history of the Cathedral during the Second World War. The Website states that St. Paul's Cathedral was hit 28 times by German bombs during the Blitzkrieg night attacks. Miraculously the Cathedral and the Library did not suffer considerable damage during the attacks and stood for the courage of the British.

### **National Library of Wales**

Literature concerning the National Library of Wales during the Second World War was difficult to locate. After communication with a librarian, a book was located documenting the library during World War II. The book was written in 2002 by David Jenkins of the National Library of Wales and is entitled *A Refuge in Peace and War: The National Library of Wales to 1952*. The book includes a specific chapter documenting the materials that were stored during World War II for other libraries.

### **Methodology**

The study was organized by subject and then information was gathered through the use of many different resources. All subjects were searched using scholarly databases and library catalogs. The databases that were searched include: *Library Literature & Information Science Full-Text*, *ERIC*, *EBSCOhost Electronic Journals Services (EJS)*, *Academic Search Premier*, *Google Scholar*, and *WorldCat*.

The first subject that was researched was the British Library. The British Library's Web site gives a brief history of the library and of the libraries that were combined in 1971 to form the British Library. The compiled information from the British Library Web site was used to search the scholarly databases and library catalogs.

The next subject that was researched was St. Paul's Cathedral Library. The Web site provided a timeline of the events of the Cathedral and information concerning the library. Scholarly databases were used to find information on the library with limited results. Personal communication with the St. Paul's Cathedral librarian provided information concerning documented minutes and direction to other resources.

The third subject was the National Library of Wales. Information concerning the National Library of Wales could not be located through scholarly databases or library catalogs. Personal communication with the librarian of the National Library of Wales was required to locate relevant resources. This communication provided direction to resources obtained using interlibrary loan.

After locating resources and literature concerning specific libraries of the United Kingdom, literature concerning the history of the time was a necessity. First, scholarly databases were searched for information about the histories of libraries and a relevant article retrieved; a similar book was located through Google Books.

A list of books on the history of World War II was compiled and book reviews consulted about the content. The most relevant book was determined and located through Google Books.

## Results

*R1: What are the strategies the British Library used to protect the library collection during World War II and what, if any, damages occurred to the collection?*

The British Museum Library and National Central Library are two of the libraries that joined together to form the British Library (Library). During World War II these libraries were separate entities and functioned as such.

The National Central Library was the main component of the interlibrary loan system for all British libraries (Stubbings, 1993). When the war started in 1939, it was uncertain if the library would survive the war due to lack of funding (Filon, 1977). A Rockefeller Grant was awarded to the library which allowed the library to remain open for day to day operations (Filon, 1977). When the war started, the Information Department with the reference books and catalogs were moved to Bourne Lodge near Berkhamsted in a rented lodge (Filon, 1977). The most valuable and irreplaceable materials were safe outside of London while the main collection remained in London (Filon, 1977).

In April 1941 an air raid occurred that seriously damaged the collection of the National Central Library (Filon, 1977). On the night of the 16<sup>th</sup>, incendiary bombs hit the roof of the library igniting a fire. The fire soon spread to the lower levels of the building and the library collection (Filon, 1977). Fire crews were occupied and when the librarian arrived at the library on the 17<sup>th</sup>, most of the collection was destroyed (Filon, 1977). All records and books of the Adult Class Department, except books on loan, were destroyed by fire or water damage (Stubbings, 1993). Many other books were destroyed from this attack. Before the damage the National Central Library had 170,000 volumes in the collection; after the damage the collection decreased to 72,600 volumes (Filon, 1977). It was fortunate that some of the collection was evacuated and that the rest of the collection survived the fire and water damage.

The British Museum Library started discussing the evacuation of materials in 1933 and implemented this plan on 24 August 1939. All members of staff were used to pack the collection and by the end of the first day, ten tons of materials were being shipped to the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth. By September 2 the National Library of Wales was housing 100 tons of materials from the British Museum Library which included 12,000 books, 12,000 manuscripts, and three-quarters of the Department of Prints and Drawings collection (Harris, 1998). Only 0.2 percent of five million books were moved to the National Library of Wales with the rest of the collection being moved to other locations within London.

Throughout the war more materials were evacuated to the National Library of Wales but it was still a fraction of the entire library collection. Even with evacuations and the removal of materials, the library felt that more needed to be done to protect the collections and buildings in London. The library established precautions against air raids that included fire fighters being located on site in Bloomsbury (Harris, 1998).

Unfortunately, damage did occur to the British Museum Library building and collections (Figure 2). Some minor building damage occurred during bombing raids in the autumn of 1940. Initially only a small amount of materials were damaged by the bombing.

Approximately 1,500 volumes were damaged but many of these materials were located in other collections or could be easily replaced. The major damage to the collection of the British Museum Library occurred on May 10, 1941 (Figure 2). The roof of the building caught on fire after dozens of incendiary bombs hit the building. A great deal of damage occurred to the buildings but the most significant damage occurred to the book collection. The extent of damage to the materials was approximately 240,000 volumes which included 175,000 books (Harris, 1998).

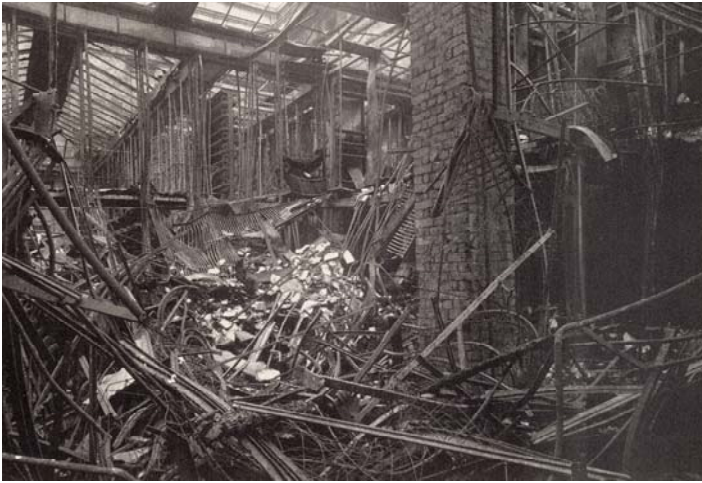


Figure 2. British Museum SW Quadrant Damage, May 1941 (Harris, 1998)

After this bombing, the Germans started to use heavier incendiary bombs that would do more damage to the buildings in London. Due to this fact, the first two floors of the Museum and Library were cleared for precautionary measures. Other precautionary measures were taken after the bombing of May 1941 and more materials were evacuated to outside locations throughout the war. By 1943, an additional 88,000 books were evacuated in order to preserve the collection (Harris, 1998).

*R2: What services did the British Library provide to users during this time?*

During World War II, the National Central Library continued to offer library services. These services were offered even though materials were being evacuated and library staff members being called to duty in the military. Issuance of books fluctuated throughout the duration of the war. During the first year, the number of books issued decreased from 58,000 to 50,000 and then to 39,000 in the second year of the war. The decrease in the number of books issued was due to the lack of need in government and research. The decline of books issued did not continue. By the third year of the war the number of books issued increased to 43,000 and in the fourth year 50,000 books were issued (Filon, 1977). Even though book usage fluctuated during the war, the National Central Library provided services to any person that needed library materials.

The British Museum Library offered various services during the Second World War. Factors influenced the services provided by the British Museum Library. Similar to the National Central Library, some of the staff members of the British Museum Library were called to serve in the military (Harris, 1998). This greatly diminished the number of staff of the library but it did not shut down the daily operations. Accessioning and cataloging continued to occur throughout the war not only in London but in the locations where materials were stored (Harris, 1998).

The greatest factor that limited library services was the bombing of the city. On September 3, 1939 the Reading Room was closed because most of the staff were occupied with evacuating the collection. Even though the Reading Room was closed, certain readers were allowed to use the materials if the research was classified as urgent public importance. The Reading Room fully opened on September 18 but limited to daylight hours due to the blackout conditions of the city (Harris, 1998).

In 1940, limited special exhibits were opened to the public after the endorsement of Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries. After bombing of the building occurred in the autumn of 1940, the exhibits and some of the departments of the library were closed for the duration of the war. The damage to the areas around the Reading Room in late 1940 required it to be closed during repairs. The readers could still access the materials because the library opened the North Library for readers to use as a Reading Room (Harris, 1998).

*R3: What are the strategies St. Paul's Cathedral Library used to protect the library collection during World War II and what, if any, damages occurred to the collection?*

The library at St. Paul's Cathedral, and the Cathedral itself, took measures to protect the building and collections from damage (Matthews, 1946). The Library's main measure of protection of materials was evacuation. In 1939, most of the collection of the Library was evacuated and moved to the National Library of Wales for safekeeping (Wisdom, 2011). Items that were too large to be evacuated were either moved to the Crypt or covered. One measure

of protection implemented by the Cathedral was the designation of watch guards (Matthews, 1946). In case a problem arose with the condition of the Crypt, a watch guard was placed in the Crypt each night to sleep (Matthews, 1946). Other watch guards were in place around the Cathedral to determine if problems arose with the building.

Damage did occur to St. Paul's Cathedral during the German bombing raids but most damage occurred on December 29, 1940 (Gaskin, 2006). The first bomb of that night penetrated the roof and fell in a library aisle. Fortunately the small fire was extinguished quickly and no damage occurred to any materials (Matthews, 1946). Unfortunately the damage to St. Paul's and the surrounding areas was not over. Bombs continued to fall on and around the area of St. Paul's. The bombing was so heavy, Prime Minister Winston Churchill communicated with the watch guard in the area that "St. Paul's must be saved at all costs" (Gaskin, 2006).

The watch guards were stretched thin across London that night but the volunteers continued to demonstrate resiliency and protected St. Paul's Cathedral and its library (Matthews, 1946). Miraculously St. Paul's Cathedral escaped major damage that night and by the morning the famous photo was taken of St. Paul's amidst the smoke of burning buildings (Gaskin, 2006). The collection of the St. Paul's Cathedral Library also escaped the damage of that night and survived the war undamaged (Matthews, 1946).

*R4: What services did St. Paul's Cathedral Library provide to users during this time?*

User services at the St. Paul's Cathedral Library were nonexistent during the Second World War (Wisdom, 2011). No services were available at the Library because the entire collection was moved to the National Library of Wales (Matthews, 1946). Even though the evacuation of the library collection did not allow for any services to be provided, it saved the collection from any damage during the war.

*R5: How did the National Library of Wales assist both the British Library and St. Paul's Cathedral Library during World War II?*

The National Library of Wales was an evacuation haven for libraries during the First World War and it would become an evacuation haven for more libraries during the Second World War. Tensions in Europe started to rise in 1933, which prompted the National Library of Wales to develop a plan to store materials in case of war (Jenkins, 2002). Sir Evan D. Jones proposed that the materials be kept in a more secure location and suggested using a quarry that was located on library grounds. The idea was rapidly accepted and plans to build a tunnel from the main building to the quarry were developed. The building of the tunnel was expedited by the British Museum Library joining in on the expense of the project (Jenkins, 2002).

As tensions increased in Europe, more libraries and museums in the country moved irreplaceable materials to the National Library of Wales for storage. The only problem that arose from the influx of materials was the shortage of staff at the Library. To overcome the shortage of staff, the Library asked for assistance from the staff of the evacuated libraries (Jenkins, 2002). This proved to be helpful because librarians and archivists from these libraries relocated to the National Library of Wales to assist in the handling and preservation of these materials. The National Library of Wales continued to receive materials from various libraries in the United Kingdom throughout the war (Jenkins, 2002). Eventually the Second World War ended and the materials evacuated to the National Library of Wales were returned to the proper libraries. The evacuation and storage of materials by the Library preserved and saved many irreplaceable materials from destruction.

## **Conclusion**

The preservation of library materials during the Second World War was very important to the cultural stability of the United Kingdom. The British Library and St. Paul's Cathedral Library both took measures to preserve the most precious materials in the respective collections. Both libraries evacuated the precious materials in the collections to the National Library of Wales for storage in a quarry. This proved to be a valuable collaboration since severe damage occurred to many materials associated with the British Library. The fortunate



occurrence was that the materials damaged had duplicate copies available elsewhere in the collection.

The study demonstrates how important library collaboration is in preserving library collections during conflict. If it were not for the National Library of Wales or other libraries storing materials, irreplaceable resources could have been lost or destroyed in the Second World War.

### **Bibliography**

Bloomsbury (1997a). Books. *Bloomsbury thematic dictionary of quotations*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd.

Bloomsbury (1997b). World War II. *Bloomsbury thematic dictionary of quotations*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd.

British Library (2011). History of the British Library Retrieved from <http://www.bl.uk/aboutus/quickinfo/facts/history/index.html>

Filon, S. P. L. (1977). *The National Central Library: an experiment in library co-operation*. London: Library Association.

Gaskin, M. (2006). *Blitz: The story of December 29, 1940*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt.

Harris, P. R. (1998). *A history of the British Museum Library, 1753-1973*. London: British Library.

Jenkins, D. (2002). *A refuge in peace and war: The National Library of Wales to 1952*. Aberystwyth, U.K.: National Library of Wales.

Mason, H. (1940). St. Paul's Survives. *Daily Mail*, London, U.K. Retrieved from <http://www.amateurphotographer.co.uk/iconic-images/st-pauls-survives-by-herbert-mason-iconic-photograph-11041>

Matthews, W. R. (1946). *Saint Paul's Cathedral in wartime, 1930-1945*. London: Hutchinson.

Stokesbury, J. L. (1980). *A short history of World War II*. New York: Morrow.

Stubblings, H. U. (1993). *Blitzkrieg and books: British and European libraries as casualties of World War II*. Bloomington, IN: Rubena Press.

Valencia, M. (2002). Libraries, nationalism, and armed conflict in the Twentieth Century. *Libri*, 52(1), 1-15.



Modern View of St. Paul's Cathedral  
(photo by T.S. Welsh, 2012)