Mollie Panter-Downes, born 1906
Gentle Voices: British Women Writers’ World War II Propaganda

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When Great Britain declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939, officially bringing the Allies into the Second World War, it was known that all assistance possible was going to be necessary to win this war. Looking back on World War I, Britain knew that the United States entering the war was a major turning point towards victory, and they felt that America’s assistance during this war sequel was crucial for victory as well.1 Viewing the United States as an industrial powerhouse, practically all countries wanted to “in some way solicit the friendship of the American people.”2 This push for American involvement was marketed through certain forms of propaganda; however, after World War I’s fierce propaganda attack with bombardments of magazines, films, and posters urging America to “Wake up.... [Because] civilization calls every man, woman, and child!,” American guards were up against foreign propaganda ploys.3 A new approach was clearly needed in order to gain American alliance in World War II. Despite the British government’s initial propaganda ban, British writers, especially women,

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independently wrote reports on the war situation towards the American public with the intention to gain their interest in the war; early on, they created prideful reports of the war to make England seem like a powerful ally choice, but when the conflict worsened and America was not responding with aid, the writers’ tone changed to panicked pleas for American involvement.

The British government knew that America would not stand for the same shameless propaganda tactics exhibited in the First World War, especially with American public opinion opposing U.S. involvement in World War II being echoed by influential Americans like Charles Lindbergh, who urged that foreign propaganda must be kept “from pushing our country blindly into another war.”4 Furthermore, the passing of the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1939, which put restrictions on the ease of political propaganda being distributed in America, caused an even greater need for a propaganda switch.5 Britain was thus forced to employ less obvious methods of propaganda. The new propaganda approach employed by Great Britain to the United States came to be known as a “no propaganda policy.”6 With fear of driving American support away from any contact with England, the British government “prohibited overt propaganda in the United States, even to the extent of barring the British Council, founded in 1934 for cultural

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outreach, from operating in America."  
Informal initiatives from British writers started to seep into American bookstores and newspapers, despite the British government's step away from propaganda, and it was not until 1940, when the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Information saw the crucial need for support, that they officially ended their silence in America. Even though Britain focused mainly on the production of propaganda through their BBC radio broadcasts, they welcomed the independent writings that had started to be distributed across the United States.

These British authors decided to target their literary talents towards America by producing works covering the war conditions in Great Britain, calling it their “patriotic duty.” Truthfulness was of the utmost importance with this alternative approach to propaganda, rather than over-exaggerating the war like the propaganda of the First World War; therefore, British writers took care to write about the war in a believable manner. The British hoped that this fresh direction would result in Americans seeing their publications not as propaganda, but rather as personal accounts and reports of the war. To make the truthful angle even more believable, a great number of writers wrote in the style of letters to friends or diary entries.

These initial writings can be categorized as the first propaganda phase in order to stimulate American public opinion towards involvement in aiding the Western Allies. Contrary to the male dominated pages of World War I with tales of battle, these letters were primary written by females heavily influenced by “their ability to cope with the


Ibid.

Ibid., 4.
exigencies of war on the home front as a measure of character.”10 Along with being written by women, the presentation that most of these letters exhibited clearly targeted women, who are known for the reputation of a maternal instinct to put their families, especially their children, above all.11 British writers tried to capitalize on that fact with writings, such as through Jan Struther’s fictional character Mrs. Miniver (written to represent an average Englishwoman during the beginning of World War II) and her horror of watching her children be fit for gas masks or Ruth Drummond’s accounts of the war, specifically in the article “You must get the children away, quickly!”12 The subject of children is presented through many of these works, and the importance of the war effort is supported with statements stressing the significance of the younger generation staying in Great Britain, as the war progressed, to “take part in this experience which the huge majority of children [in England were] going through.”13 This excerpt is a perfect illustration of the unshakable temper that was exhibited by writers early on during the propaganda effort. Originally, the tone exhibited in their writings presented the “indomitable spirit” of the British people.14 This slant can be clearly detected in numerous writings of the time period.

10 Ibid.
11 Scientific studies have been conducted which show evidence of a woman’s maternal instinct where “a mother’s impulse to love and protect her child appears to be hard-wired into her brain.” (Tara Parker-Pope, “Maternal Instinct is Wired into the Brain,” New York Times, March 7, 2008.)
13 Margaret Kennedy, Where Stands a Winged Sentry (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), 181.
14 Diana Forbes-Robertson and Roger W. Straus, Jr., War Letters from Britain (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1941), vi.
One predominant British author writing to America was Mollie Panter-Downes. Panter-Downes frequently graced the pages of the American magazine *The New Yorker*, providing the American public with a look into British life during World War II in her periodical “Letter from London.” Her letters were ever popular in America, having the readers of *The New Yorker* hanging on her every word. American and fellow contributor to *The New Yorker*, Brendan Gill, wrote that, to America, “She was as much an embodiment of the gallant English spirit as Churchill himself.”\(^{15}\) Panter-Downes drew the picture of the British’s stiff upper lip with their reaction of the war early on being that of “calmness and cheerfulness,” qualities which she described as “part of the national character” of the British people.\(^{16}\) According to Panter-Downes, the British were “proud of the fact that outwardly their town [was] not much altered by the war,” and the everyday, happy British lifestyle was unaltered with examples like “the Festival [of the Spring]... open as usual.”\(^{17}\) In these early letters, Panter-Downes communicated the impression that the British military was strong enough to keep their people’s lives unaffected by the war, which made Great Britain seem like a powerful ally to the American readers. Even as circumstances quickly worsened during the first year of the war, Panter-Downes showcased Britain’s stamina by writing how everyone continued their calmness and “increasingly dogged determination to hold back for bitter months—or years, if necessary.” Panter-Downes for months continued to convey her reports of Great Britain’s competence, not just as a military nation, but even more so that they were a powerful nation personally with their strong citizens ready to take on anything.


Another author keeping with the same style of publishing letters to America about the British war life was Diana Forbes-Robertson, with her fellow editor Roger W. Straus, Jr. in their books *War Letters from Britain* and *Women of Britain: Letters from England*. Britain’s strong demeanor can be seen through Forbes-Robertson’s works with specific tales being told by a wide array of British citizens witnessing the hardships of the war firsthand. One entry from a school teacher to a friend in America depicted a train full of British soldiers coming back from battle looking “unshaven and dirty,” but “their cheerfulness was beyond words and their faces were lit up and shining through the sunburn and dirt.” They were saying, “we held them; they were ten to one, but we held them.” The schoolteacher wrote that “it was no beaten army, it was a triumphant one, confident of the future and eager to get out and come to grips with the enemy again.”

Other entries include the story of the unstoppable morale of the British solider as with an Englishwoman’s letter about her encounter with two young soldiers who were “as cheerful as [could] be” during the trip from the hospital to the train station. One had lost a leg and told her that “he was hoping... to get back into the Army.” Like Panter-Downes, Forbes-Robertson presents her American audience with the unbeatable attitude of the British. She takes it one step further though by not only reporting of the people’s everyday outlook, but also displaying the resilience of the British soldier. These stories were accompanied with warnings given to the American audience throughout about the consequences of staying neutral in the war, such as with this young Englishwoman’s

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19 From an Englishwoman to a friend in America, in *War Letters from Britain*, 98.
statement: “I fear the bombs that destroy Europe are of the incendiary type, and that not even all the water of the Atlantic can stop them from spreading if not quenched at the source.” Forbes-R Robertson’s editing presents the daunting feeling that these situations of men with lost legs may very well reach America if they continued to practice their isolationist policy and refuse to take up arms along side these gallant British soldiers.

Husband and wife authors Fryniwyd Tennyson Jesse and Harold Marsh Harwood published two books containing letters to America, which have an interesting approach on the letter writing propaganda. Not only do the works include their personal letters from England to America, but they also include responses from the supposed American recipients. Prideful tension can be sensed between Britain and the United States in the first book London Front: Letters Written to America, 1939-1940 with Jesse’s statement, “I hope sincerely that the U.S.A. will never come into [the war] to ‘protect’ us or France. I hope they’ll wait till they hate the Germans so much that nothing will keep them off them.” Jesse conveys that Britain does not need to be belittled, but rather they want the realization to occur that “it is America’s war because it is the war for a decent way of living that we are fighting and that sooner or later the world that is closing in so rapidly and becoming smaller and smaller will close round America also.” One of the American friends responded to Jesse’s letters of complaint by saying Britain had done themselves “much harm in American eyes by not going to war over Czechoslovakia that it would ‘take a great deal more than Hitler’s attack on Poland’ to arouse American eyes.” Jesse is

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20 From a young Englishwoman to a friend in America, in War Letters from Britain, 82.
appalled by this remark, lashing out, “any American who urged [Britain] to go to war was in the unpleasant position of asking us to step up and take the first slap on the check.”\textsuperscript{22} Jesse continued her attacks on America by quoting an American congressman: “Surely there is no excuse for us to send millions of our best men into a foreign war, as we did some twenty years ago, and be left with the bag to hold?” Jesse’s response to this statement echoed her prideful manner throughout the entire book saying, “Nobody has asked for American men; we don’t want them; we have the greatest men in the world.”\textsuperscript{23} The American statements that Jesse addressed in her letters show the isolationist mindset remained predominate in the States. Most authors realized this fact; therefore, a shift in the propaganda endeavor began.

By mid-1940, not even inklings of support from the United States were surfacing, despite these authors’ efforts, and the war situation in Britain was quickly worsening. Therefore, Britain’s tough face began to fade, and writings with more tragic hardships started to emerge. Authors enacted a new propaganda angle, which reflected the intimidated state that Great Britain was in, with hopes to win compassion and entice America to come to their rescue. In Forbes-Robertson’s book \textit{War Letter from Britain}, the section entitled “Blitzkrieg” starts the second phase of propaganda where letters about the increase of war damage and bombings during the Blitz are described. Statements like “the days and nights are about the same—a nightmare” and accounts of

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 62.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 310-11.
homes being destroyed by bombs illustrate the greater concern for American involvement.24

The seriousness of the war is also presented through the letters by Panter-Downes. She reported that the pride of the British people was beginning to waver as they had come to “see far more clearly than the authorities realize that in this war it is neck or nothing.”25 Panter-Downes went as far as to compare the British people to puny insects among all the destruction as they try to rebuild their towns, something which never would have been seen in the first phase of propaganda: “Men were running up scaffolding around the damaged buildings, hurrying to and fro, like ants in a heap which someone had just kicked apart.”26 Hardships were presented to the American audience to bring about empathy, such as her reports on the Blitz saying, “For Londoners, there are no longer such things are good nights; there are only bad nights, worse nights, and better nights. Hardly anyone has slept at all in the past week.”27

In the sequel to London Front, While London Burns: Letters Written to America, July 1940-June 1941, Jesse kept with the same tone towards America with remarks like, “This isn’t a war for Britain. This is a war for the human soul. If America stays neutral, I hope it will be because she can help a good cause better that way, not because of the spirit which says that no mother’s boy should ever be a solider.”28 The prideful demeanor

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24 From an Englishwomen Her to Daughter in America, in War Letters from Britain, 156.
that Jesse exhibited in her first book is missing, however, and instead her writings are filled with stories of bombings and wartime causalities accompanied by reflections like “if only America had sent over ships to Ireland for our children and the refugee children... the ships would not have been attacked” or “by the time America makes up her mind [about entering the war], it may be too late for us.”

Another difference, however, is that the responses changed for the American friends by sympathetically responding how they wish they were “able to do something useful from [their] great distance.” These types of responses created a sense of guilt for the American reader, much like some writers during the first phase of propaganda strived to do, but they also attempted to plant the idea of support toward Great Britain in the minds of the American readers. All angles that these women presented towards the American readers spoke worlds of emotion and provided wonderful firsthand accounts of Britain during World War II.

There is debate over whether or not these authors’ publications had much of an effect on Americans’ judgment to join the fighting. Public opinion at the time concerning these type works was mixed. A review of Jesse’s *London Front* by the magazine *The Spectator* questioned the legitimacy of the “privacy” of the letters composing the work. Additionally, it does not paint a positive picture of the contents of the book saying, “The triviality, self-dramatization and self-pity of the English letters... are fairly matched, it is only fair to say, by the trivialities and snobberies of the America.”

Other reviews were very complimentary, such as the Kirkus Review of Margaret Kennedy’s *Where Stands a...*
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Winged Sentry, praising her book and deeming it as “intellectually stimulating, and a sharp emotionalism which gives the book its hold, makes it very near, very real.” It commends Kennedy’s work for her “emotional frankness,” calling it “very good” when compared to past books about England at war, thus, proving that these women authors’ new angle to provide the American audience with heart-felt, personal accounts rather than hard war facts, was accepted positively.32

Scholars have different opinions on the effects of propaganda, specifically propaganda of this manner. Not all who caught wind of this propaganda believed it was so successful. American sociologists Lazasfeld and Merton’s research concluded that the media did not have a large enough scope to create such drastic changes in the 1940s.33 Many agree that America’s talk of isolationism was “only silenced by the bombs at Pearl Harbor.”34 This statement holds that even though these propaganda efforts may have pulled on the heartstrings of the American people, the act of joining the war only came when America itself was attacked. However, propaganda has proven to have the capability of being a powerful driving force in societies, especially by influencing public opinions during war times.35 Historian Fred M. Leventhal’s work asserts that the influence of books and letters that were written are difficult to measure, but he does

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34 Norman Angell, Let the People Know (New York: The Viking Press, 1943), v.
contend, “with sales soaring into the hundreds of thousands, they had a significant impact in generating American sympathy for Britain.” Furthermore, he quotes Churchill saying that works of this kind, specifically Jan Struther’s Mrs. Miniver, “had done more for the Allies than a flotilla of battleships.”

He concludes that even though the ultimate decision to enter World War II was military and political, “it was palatable to American opinion at least in part because of the groundwork prepared by British cultural propagandist, many of them women, who had striven to win over transatlantic hearts and minds.”

America’s main goal has indeed always been to look out for themselves, and this is emphasized by the fact that action to enter the Second World War was not carried out until they were attacked on their own soil; however, the attempts made by these authors no doubt had an impact on the American opinion of Great Britain during World War II.

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36 Leventhal, “British Writers, American Readers,” 3
37 Ibid., 17-8.