

Operation METHODICAL: Protecting London's Art During a Nuclear Attack

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ABSTRACT

On the 6 November 1972, detailed orders were issued by HQ United Kingdom Land Forces for the removal of major national art treasures from London in the event of a nuclear attack on the UK. The codeword METHODICAL was given to this operation. Lessons for evacuating significant works of art from London during the Second World War had been adapted and expanded for re-use during the Cold War, which also saw considerations for collections in both Edinburgh and Cardiff. Given that the international security context has shifted back towards competition and state-on-state conflict from one of international terrorism and state failure in the post-Cold War era, perhaps now is the time to reconsider how nationally important artworks and collections can be safeguarded and their security integrated into homeland defence planning.

KEYWORDS

Cold War; homeland defence; evacuation; British Army

Introduction

In October 2024, forty years after its initial transmission during the height of the Cold War, B.B.C. Four rebroadcast the 1984 apocalypse drama-documentary *Threads* written by *Kes* author Barry Hines. This programme depicts a nuclear attack on a British city and its aftermath, following heightened tension between the West and the then Soviet Union beginning in the Middle East. *Threads* clearly provides uncomfortable modern parallels.¹

In one pre-attack scene in *Threads*, curators of an art gallery are shown removing artworks from display and packing them away for safekeeping. Preparation, the drama suggests, is essential for survival.

Galleries, and by extension, museums, and archives, are an easy target in warfare – in terms of both deliberate targeting and collateral damage. Some have also been targeted for destruction as a means towards cultural cleansing. These institutions contain the collective memory of a society and exhibit the cultural expression and identity of a people; they also reflect how we wish to understand and present the past. It for these reasons that aggressors have sought to attack museums and archives, for example:

- The Royal Library of Ashurbanipal was destroyed in 612 BC by a coalition of Babylonians, Scythians and Medes, an ancient Iranian people.

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- In 1814, the Library of Congress was destroyed by British troops during the Burning of Washington in retaliation for the burning of the Canadian towns of York and Niagara by American troops in 1813.
- The Königsberg City Museum, which contained an exhibit on Immanuel Kant (a German philosopher and one of the central Enlightenment thinkers during the eighteenth century), was destroyed in August 1944 by Bomber Command during an attack on Königsberg in the final weeks of the Second World War;
- The destruction of artefacts in Mosul Museum became public on 26th February 2015, when the group known as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) released a video showing their destruction;
- During the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Kherson Art Museum was looted by Russian troops during the occupation of the city. A short time before the city was liberated by Ukrainian forces, the collection was moved to the Central Museum of Taurida in Simferopol in Russian-occupied Crimea;
- The IT 8-bit computer museum was destroyed in 2022 during the Siege of Mariupol, and;
- The Al Qarara Cultural Museum, near Khan Yunis in the Gaza Strip, was destroyed by Israeli forces in October 2023.

On 4 September 2024, reports were also emerging of mass looting at the National Museum of Sudan in Khartoum amid the country's ongoing civil war and humanitarian crisis. Satellite images showed evidence of a 'large-scale looting and smuggling operation' by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary force at the museum, with some artefacts trafficked to South Sudan.² Thirteen days later, material from the National Museum was appearing on eBay – though some were removed from sale.³ UNESCO implemented emergency measures in five archaeological museums in Sudan: Kerma, Gebel Barkal, El Damer, Red Sea and Sinnar where the collections 'were packed, safe havens prepared and more than 1700 objects [were] inventoried and digitized'.⁴ UNESCO's intervention came too late for Sudan's National Museum, which was then in an area under direct RSF control (Mohammed Salih 2024), and it is likely that through its control of the museum, the RSF is generating capital through the sale of looted antiquities. Similarly, the Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office recently stated that artefacts of cultural value looted by Russian troops from Ukrainian collections and archaeological sites have now surfaced on the international black market.⁵

The looting of Sudan's National Museum, coupled with that undertaken by Russian forces in Ukraine – particularly at Kherson Museum in 2023 – and accusations of looting in Gaza by Israeli forces since October 2023⁶ has shown, once again, the vulnerability of museums to attack in the absence of adequate preparation.

However, this poses immediate questions for institutions in the UK with regard to the consideration of the safety of our own art collections today, given uncertainties around current global security. In preparing for a direct attack, some indication of the scale of destruction was broadcast by the Russian propaganda channel, Tsargrad's Telegram in 2024, which showed a simulated 750 kiloton nuclear detonation over London. The broadcast illustrated, in contravention of the Geneva Convention, the impact of a nuclear bomb on the city, its institutions and population,⁷ In reality the UK can look back to preparations

made during the two World Wars, as well as Operation METHODICAL during the Cold War, for the safeguarding of movable cultural property and significant collections.

Protection During the First and Second World Wars

During the First World War, portraits were taken off the walls of the National Portrait Gallery and stored in its basement, with others stored in Aldwych Underground station (which had been taken out of use in 1914) and in stations of the Post Office Railway Company – a small underground train system used for delivering post throughout London. By January 1918, as bombing in London had increased in intensity, some 500 additional portraits were packed and sent to the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.⁸

Following this experience, London museums prepared comprehensive evacuation plans in the 1930s. A large proportion of the Natural History Museum's exhibits had been evacuated to country houses before the war, although some sandbagged skeletons remained in their display cases.⁹ For the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), plans included utilising disused sections of the London Underground railway network, such as Brompton Road and Aldwych stations, for storing objects. Additional arrangements were also made with property owners in the countryside, such as at Montacute House, an Elizabethan mansion near Yeovil, Somerset (now a National Trust property), and at Westwood Quarry, near Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire, to provide safe storage.¹⁰ Westwood was also used to store artefacts from the British Museum.¹¹ Manod Slate Quarry (with a capacity of 1500 m²) at Blaenau Ffestiniog, Gwynedd, was used by the National Gallery for wartime storage (B.B.C. 2019) while the Royal Scottish Museum (now the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh) sent packed exhibits to Borthwick Castle, Midlothian, for safekeeping.

Manod proved so successful that in the 1950s it was the planned destination for artworks in the event of a Third World War and the site was kept as a 'prepared quarry' until the early 1980s.¹² The utility of Westward Quarry was once again recognised in a review of major underground depots while in Scotland, art treasures would go to Newbattle Abbey in Midlothian.

Operation METHODICAL

1960 was a dangerous year for the nuclear powers: The United States deployed PGM-19 Jupiter medium-range nuclear missiles in Italy and Turkey and Soviet ground forces shot down a US U2 spy-plane and detained its pilot, Gary Powers. British and Commonwealth forces were fighting communist guerillas in Malaya while the National Liberation Front (NLF), a nationalist communist insurgency, was formed in South Vietnam. The West would come to know the NLF as the Viet Cong. In addition, US President Eisenhower endorsed a CIA plan to overthrow the Castro regime in Cuba by supporting an invasion by Cuban exiles – giving rise to the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, and ultimately the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

Amid this extremely tense period during the Cold War – when the two superpowers of the US and USSR came closest to nuclear conflict – the National Gallery in London wrote to the Treasury, asking for £400 for a 'dress rehearsal' of a plan to evacuate works of art in case of nuclear attack. The plan was 'to pack up some pictures not at present on display in Trafalgar Square and send them up by rail to Manod.' A Treasury official thought this idea

‘preposterous’ and in any case, they believed that the evacuation of paintings would be secondary to the authorised evacuation of the population.¹³

A year later, in July 1961, the Ministry of Works – as the Department responsible for the artworks themselves – sought to clarify matters with the Treasury by asking whether plans for the safety of the artworks should actually be developed in conjunction with the Ministry of Transport (MoT), or whether the Treasury was ‘prepared to write [the artworks] off.’ The Treasury relented. Thus, began Operation GOYA, later renamed Operation METHODICAL. That November, an inter-departmental group met with the directors of the five museums from which objects would be evacuated: the National Gallery, the Tate Gallery, the British Museum, the V&A, and the Wallace Collection, together with the Keeper of Public Records.

By the time the Cuban Missile Crisis began in October 1962, a draft plan had been developed which would see twelve vehicles from the MoT, each with a driver and two soldiers, dispatched to the museums and to Buckingham Palace (to evacuate the Royal Collection). The objects, which would have been selected in advance by the directors, would be driven to Manod and Westwood quarries. The routes were to be worked out in detail by MoT ‘so as to avoid areas which might be subject to nuclear attack’.¹⁴ The direct route to Manod would have seen the artworks travel along the M40 towards Birmingham and entering Wales via Telford, while the quickest route to Westwood would have been along the M4 towards Swindon. Both of these routes might well have been compromised by the time the collections departed.

However, in considering the need to evacuate the artworks, Government officials also warned of the need to keep pictures on display ‘for national morale reasons’, noting the concern that the removal of the nation’s best-loved artworks would trigger an exodus from London and other cities. To avoid sparking panic, Operation METHODICAL was to be put into action only when Ministers were actively considering readying the country for nuclear war.¹⁵

By May 1972, the groundbreaking Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I) signalled the beginning of a détente between the US and USSR through the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. SALT I was intended to reduce governmental pressures to build more weapons to maintain deterrence. Nevertheless, the threat of nuclear attack remained, and the UK Government developed a list of 106 cities, towns and military bases as ‘probable nuclear targets’.¹⁶

Six months later, in November 1972, preparation for Operation METHODICAL was sufficiently advanced to enable detailed written orders to be issued by HQ UK Land Forces (UKLF) for the British Army to remove major national art treasures from London, including material from the Royal Collection, in the event of a nuclear attack on the UK (Figure 1). Detailed arrangements were made for the artworks to be loaded into vehicles at the national institutions and for them to be transported to places of safety. HQ London District was to provide three armed detachments to act as protection escorts during the loading, transit and unloading. This information was issued on a need-to-know basis.¹⁷

Destinations remained largely as planned during the Second World War: Manod Quarry, Gwynedd (for the National Gallery, with the National Portrait Gallery, the Tate Gallery and the Royal Collection) and Westwood Quarry, Wiltshire (for the British Museum, with the Public Record Office and Guildhall Library and Museum, the V&A and the Wallace Collection) were to be re-used. Museum staff were to drive the vehicles containing the

artwork (assuming that the drivers were available to do so and not trying to evacuate or shelter with their families); military escorts were to travel in their own vehicles.¹⁸

On receipt of the codeword 'Methodical Stage 1' from HQ UKLF, troops detailed for the operation were brought to a 6-hour state of readiness. On receipt of the codeword 'Methodical Stage 2', the escorts were to report within six hours to their allocated museum or gallery where loading would commence. If it proved impossible to reach the planned destinations, the artworks were to be deposited at Elmore Court, Gloucestershire (for Manod) and Stonor House, Henley-on-Thames (for Westwood).¹⁹

For service support, the military escorts were to be armed and carry 50 rounds of 7.62 NATO rifle ammunition as well as 3-days' rations. Vehicles were to carry sufficient fuel for a round-trip and the escorts were to be issued seven-days advance pay to cover emergencies. Orders for the use of lethal force against the civilian population were provided.²⁰

While the codeword METHODICAL was RESTRICTED, its meaning was classified as SECRET. It is not clear if Operation METHODICAL was ever rehearsed in the 1970s, but the principle of the evacuation of major art treasures (led by civil authorities) from London, Cardiff and Edinburgh continued throughout the Cold War.

However, in a review of Cold War emergency planning in Sweden, it was suggested that the evacuation of large volumes of cultural property out of cities for practical reasons was never a realistic scenario; rather evacuation, of a minimum of carefully selected objects, records and books would likely have worked.²¹

New Safeguarding Measures

Systems and infrastructure for the UK to defend against – and survive – a nuclear attack, and to recover, were dismantled in stages after the end of the Cold War in 1991 and the fall of the Soviet Union, but it was the repeal of the Civil Defence Act 1948, and its replacement by the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, which saw the effective end to Cold War planning by the Cabinet Office. This was a logical response to an international security environment in which the threat had shifted from armed attack by a hostile state to one of international terrorism and state failure in the post-Cold War era. It followed the co-ordinated Islamist terrorist suicide attacks carried out by al-Qaeda against the United States in 2001.

Within this context, the then UK Government's integrated review of *Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* set out how the UK's national resilience will be developed.²² This suggested that resilience will be a national endeavour with priority actions being: (i) to establish a 'whole-of-society' approach to resilience, (ii) to consider threats and hazards in the round and (iii) to develop more capabilities – people, skills and equipment – that can be used across a range of scenarios.

This latter priority action was to explore measures to further use military reservists to support the full range of national security priorities and explore options to create a wider civilian reserve.²³ Perhaps the responsibilities of these organisations could include operations to safeguard works of art and moveable cultural property by making use of the military's cultural and logistical experts.

However, a fundamental element of the 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict ('the 1954 Convention'; ratified by the UK in 2017) enables States Parties to prepare, in times of peace, for the safeguarding of cultural

property against the foreseeable effects of armed conflict by taking appropriate measures (Article 3). Such measures can include the identification of refugees intended to shelter cultural material (Article 8). In addition, Article 5 of the Second Protocol to the 1954 Convention enables preparatory measures to be made for the safe removal of movable cultural property. In ratifying the 1954 Convention, the UK Government issued implementation guidelines in Nov 2017 which recognise the preparatory measures suggested in the Second Protocol but places responsibility for implementation on existing owners, guardians, or trustees of relevant properties.²⁴

Current geopolitical instability has seen the security context shift back towards competition and state-on-state conflict. Some commentators have considered that we are either on the brink of World War 3 or that we have actually been fighting the Third World War for some time.²⁵ General Sir Roly Walker, Chief of the General Staff, said in July 2024 that the UK and its allies had to be ready 'to deter or fight a war in three years'.²⁶

Amid these growing security concerns, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia (which lie on NATO's eastern flank) agreed to set up a common Baltic defence zone on their borders with Russia and Belarus amid growing security concerns – with Estonia in particular building hundreds of bunkers on its eastern frontier to deter the Kremlin's possible aggression there.²⁷ Further north, Sweden reiterated its commitment to its 'total defence service' in June 2024 where everyone between the ages of 16 and 70 forms part of Sweden's total defence and, if necessary, must help Sweden prepare for war.²⁸ In addition, the Polish government set out new details in October 2024 on its ambitious plan to build an extensive defence system known as the 'Eastern Shield' along the country's borders with Russia and Belarus. Inspired by lessons from both the Second World War and recent



Figure 1. During the Cold war, the British army of the Rhine (BAOR) was the UK's main contribution to NATO in the event of war with the Warsaw Pact, tasked with defending northern Germany. Sufficient troops remained in the UK to assist with the evacuation of 'major national art treasures' from London in the event of a nuclear attack.

conflicts, the over 500 miles (800 km) long Eastern Shield aims to include physical defences such as anti-tank ditches and concrete fortifications.²⁹

In considering wider these preparations for conflict, a recent conference on 'Cultural Heritage and Security' held in Riga, Latvia, saw the Latvian Culture Minister Agnese Lāce note that given the domestic threat posed by Russia, the Saeima's³⁰ task 'is to build a system where everyone knows how to protect cultural assets from the first minute of a crisis' - as part of wider defence planning. Lāce noted that it is important to develop a common strategy to include cultural heritage in security plans and training at all levels and recognised that 'effective protection of cultural heritage requires cooperation between the cultural and defence sectors'.³¹

In considering these preparations, the Cultural Ministries of the UK Home Nations could follow Latvia's lead and, in conjunction with their relevant statutory Advisory Bodies, the National Museums and the respective National Trusts, and with Defence assistance, consider scoping plans for the evacuation of movable works of art. Such preparation should include the identification of suitable refuges for the shelter of cultural property to be integrated within homeland defence. Within the terms of the 1954 Convention, such refuges may be placed under special protection and become immune from attack. The process then of selecting, transporting, finding safe locations to transport the property to, and determining how to monitor it, needs to be carefully planned during peaceful conditions in order to efficiently safeguard the collections during wartime.³² Only in this way can we be certain that significant works of art have a chance of survival should a missile alert be sounded.

Notes

1. Evans, "Threads: How Apocalyptic Pseudo-Documentary."
2. Kendall Adams, "Reports of 'Large-Scale looting'."
3. Flanagan, "War-Torn Nation's Priceless Treasures."
4. Al Taghyeer, "UNESCO Takes Measures to Protect Sudan's."
5. TVP World, "Ukraine Says Cultural Artifacts."
6. Librarians and Archivists with Palestine, "Israeli Damage to Archives, Libraries."
7. Hooper 2024; For comparison, the atomic bomb detonated over Hiroshima in August 1945 had an explosive yield equivalent to about 15 kilotons of dynamite.
8. National Portrait Gallery, "Evacuating the Portraits."
9. Natural History Museum, "The Museum in the First and Second World Wars."
10. Rapley, "Culture in Crisis – Supporting the World's," 192.
11. Campbell, *War Plan UK: The Truth About*, 349.
12. Molyneux and Crump, "33 Photos of Priceless Artworks."
13. The National Archives, Museums and galleries: plans to move national art treasures out of London in event of war emergency, 1960–1963, File Ref: T 227/2038; see <https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/the-cuban-missile-crisis-a-solemn-moment-for-the-fate-of-the-entire-world/Accessed>. June 3, 2025
14. Ibid.
15. Burke, "Revealed: Nuclear Bunker Plan."
16. Edwards, "UK Government's Secret List of 'Probable Nuclear Targets'."
17. The National Archives, Crisis management: Ministry of Defence War Book, Part 2 of 2, 1 October 1983–30 June 1984, File Ref: DEFE 24/2784/2
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.
21. Legnér, "The Protection of Movable Cultural."
22. HM Government, "Global Britain in a Competitive Age," 88.
23. Ibid.
24. DCMS 2017.
25. Dunkley et al., *Heritage at War: Plan*, 2.
26. Sabbagh, "Army Chief Says UK Must Double."
27. Politico, "Baltic States Plan Common Defense."
28. Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, "Total Defence Service."
29. Frich, "Bunkers and Dragon's Teeth European."
30. The Saeima is the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia. There are 100 MPs in the Saeima, see <https://www.saeima.lv/en/about-saeima> Accessed 3/6/25.
31. The Baltic Times, "Minister Urges to Include Cultural."
32. Legnér, "The Protection of Movable Cultural."

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