

# Firefighters

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## 1. Introduction

In the US, firefighters are considered the paragons of bravery. The London Fire Brigade fought for every life during the catastrophic fire in Grenfell Tower and received waves of praise because of it. After their resolute work during the Notre Dame Cathedral fire in April 2019, the Parisian *Brigade des Pompiers* experienced a rise in its status. The German *Feuerwehr* (fire service, literally: fire defence) took first place in the *2019 Public Value Atlas Germany*.<sup>[1]</sup> In the entire Western world, both volunteer and professional fire brigades are held in high esteem. Given the political and economic conditions of the modern era, they are among the few [heroic figures](#) who seem to be lastingly stable, and are rarely criticised.<sup>[2]</sup> In light of the tasks they perform in the line of duty – fighting fires, rescuing people and property, offering aid and assistance – this might be seen as self-evident, but it is not: in countries in which the fire service is a poorly paid job for poorly trained and equipped personnel, this form of hero construction applies only to a limited extent. One reason for this is the fact that heroic action, on the one hand, is always a social attribution, but, on the other hand, it is strongly tied to objects, which is especially true for this group of professionals: firefighters who only arrive after hours, whose vehicles and pumps do not work properly due to deterioration and missing parts or lack of maintenance, and who cannot save lives for lack of protective equipment are perhaps still heroic personalities. However, because of the obvious system failures, this goes unseen in the popular reception. Skill-oriented volunteer systems, in contrast, are closely related to forms of syndicalism, with post-capitalist tendencies.<sup>[3]</sup>

## 2. Extinguishing fires until the 18th century

The beginning of organised firefighting can be traced back to the *vigiles* of ancient Rome, who were generally slaves entrusted with this dangerous task. They disappeared with the invasions of the Germanic tribes. After that and up to the early modern period, most Western European cities had regimes in place that laid out – in great detail in some cases – the functions that every household was to perform in the event of a fire: in most instances providing buckets with extinguishing contents, and assistance in the bucket brigade. One of the night watch's duties was to keep an eye for fires; urban servants were usually the only individuals who were trained in how to fight fires. However, they were unable to prevent the frequent and devastating fires that nearly every European city experienced, some of them more than once. The development of the first hoses made from leather and of large, manually powered fire engines that required considerable effort and personnel to operate showed how necessary it was to have trained crews working together as a team.[4] Three forces drove the development. First, there were the cities and towns, who were seeing their infrastructure damaged again and again by the massive blazes. For this reason, in France and Great Britain, fire brigades were often organised alongside the establishment of police; in some cases emerging out of the [military](#) or as an arm of the police. Second, fire insurance companies were formed, who of course must have had an interest in there being as little fire damage as possible. These companies hired and paid their own workforce or – at much less cost – sponsored volunteer fire brigades, either financially or complete with equipment and apparatuses. Third, citizens founded fire brigades, which acquired fire engines and other equipment either with the assistance of their communities or through associations and voluntarily organised fire control and protection.[5]

## 3. Volunteer firefighting

With the transition from conscription to forms of self-organisation, the parameters of heroism changed. First in the US (starting in ca. 1730), then in Great Britain, and from ca. 1830 in the German countries, volunteer groups initially formed as mutual aid organisations. However, only a few years later, these were expanded into assistance programmes for entire towns or neighbourhoods. The humanist ideal behind this type of self-organisation simultaneously constitutes part of the foundation of republican conduct: a system that can only function if all members apply their skills collaboratively on behalf of the community, and the greatest collective mutual benefit is thereby achieved.[6]

Against this background, the classic larger-than-life, boundless and often particularly powerful hero of antiquity and the Middle Ages was reduced to the courageous ordinary citizen who was – and was entirely expected to be – remunerated only by the respect and admiration from his fellow citizens. (Using 'his' here applies especially with regard to firefighters since it was almost entirely men who were recruited for volunteer fire companies until the later 20th century.) Furthermore, with their service, ordinary citizens often commended themselves for other public offices as well.[7] Several American presidents and other prominent politicians were members of volunteer fire departments for at least a short period of time; Benjamin Franklin is particularly well known for having been the founder of the Union Fire Company in Philadelphia in 1735.[8] The fireman was linked to the classic hero topos essentially by being a role model for coming generations. In particular, the retelling of anecdotes about heroic rescues in both lithographs and anthologies projects onto that resolute effort, primarily in the US and Great Britain, an iconographic mixture of different Christian hagiologies, from the analogy to the slaying of the (fire) dragon by St. George (fig. 1) to the St. Christopher symbolism in the act of rescue, especially where the individual being rescued is a child (fig. 2).

Fig. 1 - 2: Heroizing portrayals of 'firemen'

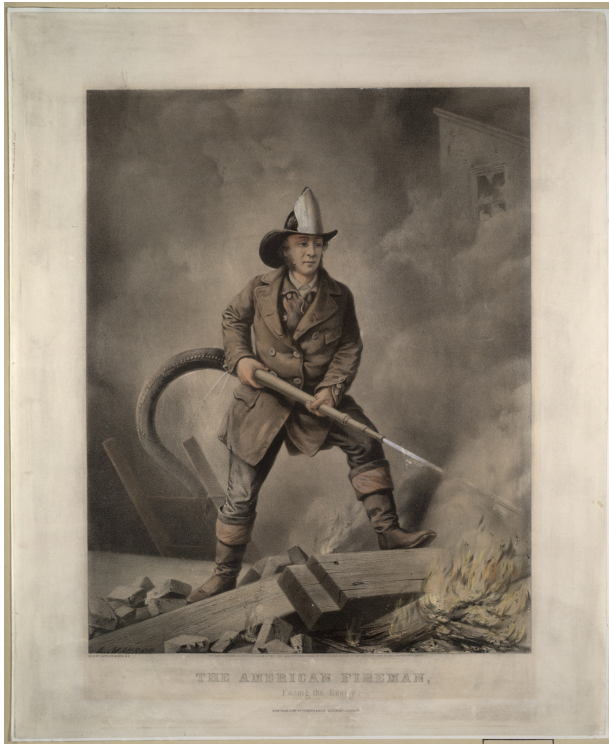


Fig. 1:  
Currier & Ives: "Facing the Enemy"

1858, hand coloured lithograph, 16 x 20 in.,  
from the series "American Fireman".

Source: [Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Inv.-No. ppmsca 01579](#); published in: Currier & Ives: A catalogue raisonné / compiled by Gale Research. Detroit, MI : Gale Research, c1983, no. 0166.

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Fig. 2:  
Volunteer Firemen Monument, Austin, TX

1896, designed by J. Segesman.

Source: [User:Daderot / Wikimedia Commons](#)  
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The dominant saint in the German-speaking world is St. Florian, who is portrayed as a firefighter primarily in Catholic regions. There, the volunteer fire brigades experienced a first wave of popularity in connection with the revolutions of 1848/49 because the gymnastics ('Turner') clubs, many of which had participated in, or supported the revolution were put under political pressure, or banned entirely. In many places, they reorganised into fire service associations. However, this democratic background was almost entirely overshadowed by the militarisation of the volunteer associations during the decades of the German Empire (1871–1918).[9] Moreover, during the Third Reich, the fire service was integrated into the Nazi system of rule as *Feuerschutzpolizei* ('Fire Protection Police'). In addition to fighting fires, fire brigades were then also entrusted with police functions.[10] However, German firefighters – who in the last years of World War II were often a mixture of older men, prisoners of war, forced labourers, women, and *Hitlerjugend* members – did objectively show great courage and heroism during Allied night-time bombing raids. After the war, the reaction in the West German zones of occupation was to strictly separate the police and the fire service. In contrast, in the German Democratic Republic, fire brigades remained a part of the police system until 1990.

#### 4. Professionalisation

Although volunteer organisations are considerably cheaper to pay and maintain than professional fire brigades, an influential lobby of business owners managed to arrange the professionalisation of firefighting in the large cities of the US around the middle of the 19th century, using as a pretext the fact that some volunteer companies had allegedly mutated into hardly controllable bands of young men, many of which had also come under the influence of political parties. William 'Boss' Tweed, who practically embodied the systemic corruption in the city of New York in the mid-19th century, began his career as an officer of a volunteer company, later propping himself up on the political and sometimes violent support of his people.[11] The reciprocal sabotage, and brawls between members of different companies when they arrived at fires, became legendary.

The transition to a professional occupation that took place between 1840 and 1865 in all major American cities meant municipal control and management, the establishment of uniform training regimes, a boost in technology and subsequently greater reliability. Factory owners and business people no longer had to anticipate that the volunteer fire fighters among their employees and labourers would suddenly leave for a fire. Profits were secured, while the costs of professionalising firefighting were passed on to the general public.[12] The heroic image of the volunteer was consequently modified and supplemented in the transition to the professional system, to the effect that the technical equipment of most urban fire departments, with their new, horse-drawn steam-powered fire engines in lieu of the hand-drawn and manually powered fire engines, turned firefighters into heroes of the new, technical age in addition to embodying the heroic notion of those who rescue people from fire. With only some veterans joining from the discredited volunteer units, the first generation of professional firemen consisted primarily of poorly regarded and even more poorly paid immigrants, often from Ireland; thereby laying the foundation for the strongly Irish-inspired traditions of firefighting especially in the big American cities. Poor payment was compensated by a sacrifice myth established in cultural discourse, informed by Christian elements and linking firefighters' frequent [deaths](#) on the job with heroism. This motif was also disseminated in pictorial representations, popular poetry, and on the melodrama stage. It became an integral part of American firefighters' self-image: more than in other countries, American firefighters seem willing to take life-threatening risks, even though this has not improved their success rate – on the contrary: an estimated sixty of the 343 New York firemen who died when the World Trade Center collapsed were actually off-duty; they and others could have survived if the chain of command had been observed.[13] However, the FDNY has always enjoyed the reputation of not being strictly compliant with the rules and systems of command and obedience.[14] Long before 11 September 2001, the

FDNY had a heroic image. After the attacks, they attained extra [martyr](#) status. This, however, has not improved the threat environment: many who came into contact with toxic dust during rescue and recovery efforts in the ruins of the WTC are immortalised in heroifying images as they are dying from the aftereffects.

The popularity that professional firefighters enjoy is great enough that more and more women and members of minorities have been moving into this profession since circa 1970 – in some cases against considerable resistance and maltreatment and, in the beginning, only after enforcement with judicial support. Nevertheless, professional and volunteer fire departments are still largely a domain of the white lower middle-class male.[\[15\]](#)

## 5. New requirements and forms of organisation

Today, the work firefighters do is changing due to extensive fire protection measures and safety installations, social factors such as professional mobility and demographic change, and environmental influences like the unmistakable effects of an uncontrolled climate crisis. The opportunities for obvious [heroic acts](#) are disappearing at the rate the number of fires continuously declines thanks to structural fire safety, personal safety measures and fire safety education starting from kindergarten and schools. In places where emergency medical services are provided by other organisations, on average, more than 60 per cent of fire brigade operations is now no longer battling actual fires, but providing technical assistance. Even more striking, in places where fire departments are also tasked with emergency medical services, they often account for 70 to 80 per cent of their operations.[\[16\]](#) Neither the heroic act of rescuing people out of burning buildings, nor its trivialised variant of rescuing a cat from a tree, is part of the everyday experience of volunteer fire departments. However, there is also a growing disconnect between the everyday experience of professional firefighters and popular myth. Still, there are tendencies towards German firefighters being heroized in advertisements and, to an extent, in news reporting, using images that borrow considerably from American ones. The adoption of international regulations concerning equipment standards, and occupational health legislation, is at least partially responsible for this convergence; so is the range of American images, notably those originating with the Fire Department of New York, as role models. For decades after World War II, German uniforms and emblems continued to resemble patterns already in use during the Third Reich. Decreasing acceptability especially among younger people accelerated changes after the turn of the century.

## 6. Fighting wildfires

Fighting wildfires presents an immense physical challenge for firefighters. Their frequency and size has been increasing in Central and Western Europe due to conditions created by the climate crisis, without having yet reached the dimensions they have as seasonal phenomena in Southern Europe, North America, Russia and Australia where their size, duration and intensity, has reached catastrophic proportions.[\[17\]](#) The training, equipment, and operational readiness, of the units fighting these fires differ massively. In Russia, where fighting fires is a responsibility of the military, large wildfires have gone out of control again and again for years without any particular attention being paid to them until very recently. In the past, blazes across the globe were eventually extinguished by the regularly occurring rainfall. Due to the global climate crisis, however, this rainfall fails to materialise more and more often, and woodlands essential for the extraction of CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere go up in smoke.

For regular fire brigades, the wildfire is a time-consuming and exhausting additional duty. In Australia and North America, firefighters are for their wildfire operations equipped with light-weight

protective clothing and tools designed for the task such as hydration backpacks, 'Pulaskis' (an axe and hoe combination), 'McLeod' rakes, and 'Gorgui' combination tools. The highest esteem and hero status is enjoyed by the specialists of the 'hotshot crews', who either professionally or part-time attempt to bring forest and bushfires under control. The percentage of women among these crews, interestingly enough, is higher at almost 10 per cent than the roughly 5 per cent average among American fire departments. The glorification of deadly incidents is similar to [heroic narratives](#) about 'normal' firefighters, as can be seen in Norman Maclean's work of non-fiction *Young Men and Fire* (1992) about the 1949 Mann Gulch Fire, where 13 members of a team of smokejumpers perished (fig. 3) or the film *Only the Brave* (2018, Joseph Kosinski) about the Granite Mountain Hotshots killed in the Yarnell Fire in 2013.[18]

**Fig. 3: "The Mann Gulch Fire"**



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- 11 Hochbruck: Helfer in der Not, 2018, 34.
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- 13 In fact, 341 active firefighters and two paramedics were killed at Ground Zero. Another three retired firefighters died who had joined those on active duty. And roughly a dozen members of volunteer fire departments are counted among the civilian victims who were either at the World Trade Center or who had rushed there to provide assistance, see Glenn Winuk: "Volunteer firefighter's family to get 9/11 benefit". In: NBC News, 15 January 2008. Online at: [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/22671276/ns/us\\_news-life/t/volunteer-firefighters-family-get-benefit/#.XVp8vugzaUk](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/22671276/ns/us_news-life/t/volunteer-firefighters-family-get-benefit/#.XVp8vugzaUk) (accessed on 19.08.2019).
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## 9. List of images

- 1 Currier & Ives: "Facing the Enemy", 1858, hand coloured lithograph, 16 x 20 in., from the series "American Fireman".  
Source: [Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Inv.-No. ppmsca 01579](#); published in: Currier & Ives: A catalogue raisonné / compiled by Gale Research. Detroit, MI : Gale Research, c1983, no. 0166.  
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- 2 Volunteer Firemen Monument, Austin, TX, 1896, designed by J. Segesman.  
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- 3 "The Mann Gulch Fire" , Historical marker on the upper Missouri River, USA.  
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