

Cultural Heritage and Preservation: Lessons from World War II and the Contemporary Conflict in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

The collective efforts of librarians, politicians, scholars, and ordinary citizens to resist the Third Reich's broad-scale acquisition and destruction of European cultural heritage is an object lesson for contemporary disaster management in wartime, both in its power to remind librarians and others of the persistence of archival looting and destruction as a tactic of cultural dominance and to provide models for contemporary practices by which such losses can be prevented. A review of cultural preservation efforts during World War II illustrates the value of collaborative prevention, preservation, and recovery strategies. This article examines cultural preservation efforts during recent conflicts in the Middle East against this backdrop. It argues that the cultural heritage of humanity threatened during times of conflict or war can be preserved if professionals in the field and other groups, such as governmental and nongovernmental authorities, scholars, and citizens, cooperate.

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KEY WORDS

Cultural heritage, Preservation, World War II, Conflict zone, Monument Men, Middle East, Syria, International cooperation, Destruction of cultural heritage

War is a fact of life in many countries throughout the world today. In addition to the tragic loss of life that attends these wars is the looting or destroying of humanity's cultural heritage at libraries, museums, and other cultural sites. Civilization is inextricably linked with its history and its artifacts. Hence, it is important for scholars, librarians, and others to consider what can be done to save cultural heritage, in both current and future conflicts.

In this article, I examine two cases in parallel: the collaborative strategies implemented for the preservation of cultural heritage endangered by the Nazi occupation before and during World War II and similar efforts by contemporary scholars, archaeologists, librarians, the authorities, and nongovernmental organizations to preserve an important cultural heritage site in war-torn Syria. Together, these cases illustrate that preserving cultural heritage in a conflict zone requires a group effort among scholars, librarians, archivists, arts history specialists, the international community, the public, and others, supported by policy and the active participation of political and institutional leaders. I conclude the article with lessons derived from the case studies and suggestions for archivists designed to help protect our cultural heritage from being destroyed in conflict zones.

Destruction of Libraries during Times of Conflict

According to Hansel Cook, in times of conflict, cultural heritage institutions, such as libraries, are sometimes simply destroyed as collateral damage. However, intentional destruction occurs too and may serve a number of purposes, including appropriating cultural and material wealth and underscoring the power of the conqueror. In some cases, looting is rationalized as a form of preservation, as in Napoleon's "rescue" of the artwork of Egypt. Most notably, though, Cook told us that "destroying the cultural institution that carries people's identity is like destroying the people themselves" and is considered a form of ethnic cleansing.¹

The destruction of cultural heritage is of current concern in the Middle East. The wars that started in 2001 in Afghanistan, 2003 in Iraq, 2010 in Yemen, 2011 in Syria, and 2012 in Libya present tragic cases of both loss of human life and destruction of cultural heritage. In this article, I focus on the destruction of cultural heritage, but do not thereby intend to diminish the loss of life.

Unfortunately, most libraries and archives in the Middle East do not have disaster management plans that can help to preserve cultural heritage. I found, in a survey conducted in 2014 of eighty-six academic, national, and public libraries and archives in nineteen Middle East countries, that these institutions are woefully unprepared to preserve materials in the event of human or even natural disasters.² The majority of institutions that responded, 84 percent, did not

have a written disaster management plan in place.³ Only thirteen institutions responded affirmatively, and another five respondents said that they were in the process of preparing disaster management plans. Of the thirteen positive responses, only seven (53%) reported having disaster management plans for times of both war and natural disasters (the other six institutions have disaster management plans only for natural disasters).⁴ This study suggests that, in times of conflict, most of the Middle Eastern libraries and archives surveyed would be at high risk of losing part or all of their collections.

Although no similar study could be found that surveyed museums and other cultural sites in the region for the existence of disaster management plans in times of conflict, it is reasonable to suspect there are few, if any, such plans in place. For example, in 2011, during the Arab Spring, the Egyptian Museum was attacked and looted. It appears that the museum did not have an emergency plan. Instead, people in the street formed a human chain to protect the museum, and the public was able to prevent the looting of all its items.⁵

The potential for destruction of cultural heritage to be used as a tool of political domination calls for librarians, museum curators, archaeologists, and archivists to assume responsibilities that may broaden current definitions of their roles. Rather than merely preserving and archiving materials, the professional in the field can take an active role in protection and recovery. At the same time, however, the complex nature of armed conflict and the limitations of national boundaries, as well as historical precedent, suggest that professionals in libraries, museums, and archaeological sites cannot accomplish these goals without the assistance of the international community, including local governments, nongovernmental organizations, scholars, and citizens “on the ground.”

A look back at the history of U.S. policy regarding the protection of cultural heritage sites and artifacts suggests that neither assigning responsibility to librarians, archivists, and other professionals, nor collaboration between the academy and the military, are particularly radical ideas. Rather, U.S. government intervention on behalf of cultural heritage during times of conflict, and that of archivists and ordinary citizens, predates the United States’ entry into World War II. It was not until World War II, however, that the idea of preserving cultural heritage during war emerged. As the Nazi occupation of Europe began, the German army seized cultural objects, library materials, and artworks, and destroyed what the regime did not need. Many museums and libraries were destroyed and their collections looted, while other museums and libraries were able to move their collections into safe storage. The destruction of cultural heritage in the Middle East since 2001, especially in Syria during the war that began in 2011, has been compared with what happened to cultural sites during World War II.

Implementing the suggested strategies, then, is not as formidable as it might appear, but is rather a creative redeployment of strategies proven effective in an actual case of war. In the following section, I will examine the collaborative strategies utilized during World War II and the major players in their deployment.

Case Study from World War II

Although the losses of both human life and cultural heritage during World War II are beyond comprehension, my focus in this section is on the loss of cultural heritage. Evidence suggests that as many as fourteen libraries were lost as a result of the German occupation of various European countries between 1939 and 1945.⁶ For example, the National Library in Warsaw lost about 700,000 volumes, including all of its manuscripts and its map collections.⁷ On the “eve of liberation,” the German army burned the main stacks of the Warsaw Public Library and approximately 15 million of the 22.5 million volumes in all Polish libraries were destroyed.⁸ The Germans also took possession of 24,000 volumes after they burned the Jewish Theological Seminary in Lublin. In France in 1944, German troops blew up the Dieppe Municipal Library, and the Municipal Library of Douai lost over 95 percent of its holdings. Moreover, because the extent of losses of private libraries and collections is unknown, these numbers represent only a fraction of the total European losses during the Second World War.⁹

The Harvard Group and the Creation of the Monuments Fine Arts and Archive (MFAA)

While the world lost untold numbers of books and manuscripts during World War II, a significant number were preserved and repatriated through the collective efforts of librarians, scholars, and ordinary citizens. By 1940, poet and recently appointed librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish was already rallying librarians in the United States to wage their own war against fascism through the preservation of European cultural heritage. In his essay “Of the Librarian’s Profession,” MacLeish argued that “[i]n such a time as ours, when wars are made against the spirit and its works, the keeping of these records is itself a kind of warfare.”¹⁰ MacLeish’s statement is significant in that it proposed an explicitly activist role for librarians against the destructive power of the Third Reich. But MacLeish clearly understood that librarians, however committed, could not contend with broad-scale political conflict on their own. During this period, he also actively lobbied the State Department to engage in recovery efforts in Europe and called for the *collaborative* relationship between archivists and the armed forces that ultimately came to pass.

While MacLeish was highly instrumental in the U.S. government's protection and recovery of European cultural heritage sites and artifacts, he was not alone in his efforts. Rather, he was a member of a collective known as the American Defense Harvard Group, known as the Harvard Group. In 1940, this organization of artists, librarians, professionals, and scholars, including many who were members of the Harvard University faculty, alerted the American government to the potential destruction of European cultural heritage sites and artifacts in the wake of the Nazi occupation of Europe.¹¹ Paul J. Sachs and George L. Stout from the Fogg Museum led the group, whose goals included obtaining a commitment from the federal government to protect European cultural sites and collecting and providing intellectual resources and expertise to the army to support this effort. In a letter to the government, Stout argued for the importance of the preservation of cultural heritage, in part because of its unifying force:

As soldiers of the United Nations fight their way into lands once conquered and held by the enemy, the governments of the United Nations will encounter manifold problems. . . . In areas torn by bombardment and fire are monuments cherished by the people of those countrysides or towns: churches, shrines, statues, pictures, many kinds of works. . . . To safeguard these things will not affect the course of battles, but it will affect the relations of invading armies with those peoples and [their] governments. . . . To safeguard these things will show respect for the beliefs and customs of all men and will bear witness that these things belong not only to a particular people but also to the heritage of mankind.¹²

The Harvard Group's success in influencing government policy and harnessing the power of a diverse array of decision makers and agents underscores the power of collaboration among librarians, scholars, and policy makers in the service of cultural preservation. Through their personal contacts, the members of the Harvard Group were able to reach out to and work closely with politicians and other government officials. In his role as librarian of Congress, MacLeish had personal contact with key officials within the government, including members of the Supreme Court, the War Department, and the State Department. Along with his colleagues, he worked to expand the preexisting government policy for cultural preservation, originally established by the State Department in the 1930s with the creation of the Division of Cultural Relations and National Archives. David Finley, director of the National Gallery, approached the War Department and other government offices to reach President Franklin Roosevelt with the Harvard Group's plan. In 1943, at the request of Chief Justice Harlan F. Stone, President Roosevelt established the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas, collectively known as the Roberts Commission.¹³ The Roberts Commission contained

the seeds of the Monuments Fine Arts and Archive (MFAA), the agency that brought together American and British troops in a shared mission and that gave rise to the creation of the specially tasked soldiers known as the Monuments Men.

Under the auspices of the Roberts Commission and in accordance with the mandate of the MFAA, the Monuments Men were assigned the following tasks: to minimize looting and identify looted items, to give first aid to art and books, and to engage in the recovery and restitution of cultural materials. To accomplish these goals, the Roberts Commission worked to identify and assign officers and enlisted men with the necessary qualifications and created two committees tasked with preparing the information required by the armed forces in the field. The American Council of Learned Societies and the Harvard Group provided the army with maps indicating the locations of cultural sites and monuments to avoid during Allied bombing raids. The MFAA also provided information to familiarize troops with the local culture, with the understanding that such knowledge would help them effectively protect each country's cultural heritage. For example, in Italy, where the MFAA began operations, the Monuments Men prepared a summary of the organizational structure of the Italian Ministry of Culture to help identify and locate officials in positions of responsibility who could assist their operations.¹⁴ The two groups further gave MFAA officers the names and locations of repositories to use for storage during the war. Within a short time, the MFAA deployed more than 350 men to thirteen countries around the world on "the greatest treasure hunt in history."¹⁵

General Dwight D. Eisenhower's message to the troops in June 1944 on the eve of the invasion of Normandy is also the fruit of the Harvard Group's labor. In his speech, Eisenhower charged American soldiers with a specific and vitally important responsibility: not only must they defeat the Axis powers, they must also protect the cultural heritage of Europe:

Shortly we will be fighting our way across the continent of Europe in battles designed to preserve our civilization. Inevitably, in the path of our advance will be found historical monuments and cultural centers that symbolize to the world all that we are fighting to preserve. It is the responsibility of every commander to protect and respect these symbols whenever possible.¹⁶

In his reference to the power of cultural artifacts to "symbolize . . . all that we are fighting to preserve," Eisenhower pointed to the inextricable relationship between civilization and its productions (to preserve one, we must preserve the other) and, more important, to his acceptance of the armed forces' responsibility for the protection of both.

Eisenhower's message and the Harvard Group's efforts to mobilize archivists and the armed forces in the protection of European cultural heritage were not in vain. By the end of the war, the number of librarians and archivists

working in Europe and the Mediterranean had increased, and both American and Allied forces were actively involved in locating thousands of looted items hidden by the Nazis in an estimated 1,500 repositories.¹⁷ The work of the MFAA did not stop with the end of the war, however. For example, after the fall of the Third Reich, MFAA officer Captain Robert K. Posey discovered many Nazi art repositories in salt mines south of Salzburg and helped recover paintings as well as books. In the years after the war, through the efforts of the MFAA, Rome received a total of 26,568 repatriated items, the Netherlands received 78,000 items, 700,000 items were sent to the Prussian State Library in Berlin, and 153,000 items were sent to France.¹⁸ By the end of 1949, the MFAA, in partnership with the Allied forces and local governments, had returned a total of 2.8 million items to their owners in fourteen nations or to responsible institutions or persons if the original owners were unknown or deceased.¹⁹

The overwhelming success of the MFAA demonstrates the power of collaborative effort and serves as a model for the preservation of cultural sites and materials affected by conflict. But the cooperation of the MFAA with American archivists and academics was not the only effort of its kind; the effectiveness of such partnerships is evident in the protection of the YIVO Library by the Paper Brigade and in the preservation of the Seminary of Pelplin by the British Museum, which, in different ways, demonstrate the power of broad-scale participation in the protection of national archives.

The YIVO Library and the Paper Brigade

The formation of the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR), or Rosenberg Special Task Force, in 1939 established the German “annexation” of archival materials as an explicit tactic of ethnic cleansing. Anne Rothfeld characterized the ERR as “a commando organization of cultural robbery.”²⁰ Under the auspices of the Third Reich, the ERR administrator systematically collected Jewish books, documents, and manuscripts from libraries, schools, universities, and private collections. The looted materials were subsequently destroyed or spread among German institutions for what they described as “scholarly” purposes.²¹

In June 1941, the German army captured the town of Vilna and began a similar campaign there. One of its first conquests was the YIVO Library, which, at the time of the invasion, was the largest and most important repository of Jewish culture in the world. Established in 1925 and funded by the city’s Jewish scholars and intellectuals, the collection contained materials focusing on all aspects of Jewish life from approximately three hundred synagogues and various private collections from all over Eastern Europe. The Nazis sent the most valuable materials from the YIVO Library to depots such as the Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage (Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question) in

Frankfurt.²² While other Lithuanian national institutions and private collections were appropriated, Jewish materials were clearly targeted: a week after the capture of Vilna, a German official by the name of Dr. Gotthard began to visit the city's museums, libraries, and synagogues in search of Jewish collections and scholars.²³ By July, Gotthard had ordered the Gestapo to arrest three Jewish scholars so that they could compile lists of incunabula and rare books: Noyekh Prilutski, the Yiddish folklorist and the director of the YIVO Institute during Soviet rule in Vilna; Eliyohu Yankev Goldschmidt, a Yiddish veteran journalist and director of the Ansky Jewish Ethnographic Museum; and Chaikl Lunski, the head of the Strashun Library, Vilna's Jewish communal library.²⁴ In February 1942, Dr. Johannes Pohl, who had studied Judaism in Jerusalem, joined Gotthard in Vilna to help seize the Jewish books on the list, as well as other collections. Because the materials looted from the city were too numerous to be sent to Frankfurt as the Nazis had done previously, Pohl hired twelve Jews from the Vilna ghetto for their ability to read Yiddish and Hebrew to sort, organize, and ship the seized materials to the Institute for the Study of the Jewish Question. Herman Kruk, the head of the Vilna Ghetto Library and Zelig Kalmanovich, who had been one of the directors of the YIVO Library, supervised the operation. This group worked under the direction of Dr. Pohl at Universiteska3, a high-priority building previously belonging to the Vilna University Library.²⁵ There the collection was separated, with part of it sent to Frankfurt and the rest slated for destruction at the local paper mill.²⁶

Between 1942 and 1943, the twelve Jewish scholars pressed into service by Pohl were able to smuggle thousands of books and tens of thousands of documents from the YIVO collection out of the hands of the Nazis. They came to be known as the Paper Brigade. The bravery and resourcefulness of the Paper Brigade illustrate the vital role that local groups and ordinary citizens can play in the preservation of cultural heritage. According to historian David Fishman, the Jewish workers used various tactics to save the books and documents from destruction. Those who helped process the books sent to Universiteska3 also helped rescue books marked for pulping at the paper mill. Many of those materials were smuggled out of the facility inside the workers' clothing and hidden inside walls, floors, and attics in the Jewish ghetto or in the houses of non-Jewish friends. Others were hidden inside materials being shipped to Frankfurt. Occasionally, Paper Brigade members were able to obtain permission from the Germans to take "wastepaper" back to the ghetto and instead took priceless and irreplaceable letters and manuscripts. Through these methods, the Paper Brigade was able to save from destruction the works of prominent authors and scholars, such as Tolstoy, Gorky, and Bialik.²⁷

Members of the Paper Brigade who survived the Holocaust returned to Vilna after the war and recovered many of the items they had hidden or redirected.

Twenty tons of YIVO papers were discovered intact at the paper mill, and thirty more tons were found in the courtyard of the Trash Administration.²⁸ Some of the YIVO materials sent to Frankfurt by the ERR and stored at the Offenbach Archival Depot were also recovered after the war. While the MFAA repatriated a number of materials from the Offenbach depot, they did not redistribute most of the Jewish materials, instead sending them to the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Agency (JCR), which organized the allocation of the materials to European and American Jewish communities. The JCR sent 158,000 items to American libraries such as the Library of Congress, Harvard University, Hebrew University, New York University, Brandeis University, and the Jewish Institute of Religion.²⁹ After the war, a group of Jewish scholars also reestablished a museum in Vilna, there housing 25 Yiddish and Hebrew texts, 210,000 volumes of Judaic texts in European languages, and 600 bags filled with commentary materials from the YIVO archives.³⁰ Thousands of other books and documents survived the war through the efforts of Lithuanian librarian Antanis Ulpis, who hid materials in the basement of the Lithuanian National “Book Chamber,” a former church where they were rediscovered in 1953.³¹

The Seminary of Pelplin

Like the collections of Italy, Germany, and Lithuania, the archives of the Seminary of Pelplin, Poland, was spared from destruction through the cooperation of archivists, civilians, and the government. The core collection of the seminary’s library came from a Cistercian monastery established in 1274; by 1927, the library had 30,000 volumes, including 316 manuscripts. In 1939, the seminary librarians carried out a plan to save most of its holdings and assisted other churches in cataloging and hiding their own important archival materials, such as photographs, religious books, and artifacts.³² The seminary librarians stored some of the most valuable books in a bank vault, and, when the war began in Poland, two of the bank officers transported the books to safety, first to Romania and later to Paris, where the Polish government was established in exile. The exiled Polish government attempted to collect and store the library treasures in Paris, but the progression of the war across Europe required their repeated removal to safer locations. Once Germany attacked France, Polish officials decided to move the books again, this time to London. A wartime trip by sea was a risky proposition, but everything arrived safely in London, where many British museums and libraries were already relocating their valuable holdings to castles, country houses, and underground slate quarries.³³ Polish officials once again had to move their materials out of the path of the war, finally settling them safely in Canada for its duration.

The collective effort of librarians, politicians, scholars, and ordinary citizens to resist the Third Reich's broad-scale acquisition and destruction of European cultural heritage is an object lesson for contemporary disaster management, both in its power to remind librarians of the persistence of archival looting and destruction as a tactic of cultural dominance and to provide models for contemporary policies and practices to prevent such losses. The sheer volume of materials preserved, protected, and recovered during and after World War II through the efforts of librarians working in partnership with the Allied military forces, local government, and international nongovernmental organizations argues powerfully for the effectiveness of their strategies.

After World War II: International Organizations

After World War II, international organizations recognized the need to create conventions or laws to help protect cultural sites and materials in conflict zones, so that the devastating destruction would not happen again. In 1954, the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was created to assure the protection of cultural heritage around the world in time of war. New organizations were also needed to follow up and implement laws created to preserve cultural heritage.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was created in 1945 in response to the destruction of cultural heritage during World War II.³⁴ UNESCO is an organization focused on preserving cultural heritage around the world. The goal of the organization is to assist countries that need to preserve their educational and cultural resources. It originally focused on museum and archaeological sites but later included Oriental studies, the study of prehistory, and finally established "the Documentation and study center for the History of Art and Civilization in Ancient Egypt." The organization has 195 member states, 2,000 professional staff members, and hundreds of advisory nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). UNESCO's advisory bodies include the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), and the International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM).³⁵

Unfortunately, UNESCO cannot take direct action due to its limited funds. UNESCO partners with other affiliated international bodies that cover different areas in preserving cultural heritage.³⁶ These bodies include the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), the International Council on Museums (ICOM), the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS), and the International Center for the Study of Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM). These organizations work together to protect

cultural heritage in conflict zones. For example, the International Council on Monuments and Sites is a nongovernmental organization “dedicated to the conservation of the world’s monuments and sites.”³⁷ Most of ICOMOS’s work focuses on historic architecture. Additionally, the organization helps the World Heritage Committee (WHC) evaluate the nomination list of cultural heritage sites to receive UNESCO’s protection.³⁸ Another UNESCO partner is ICCROM, an intergovernmental organization that serves primarily as a research center offering region-specific training on conservation of paper, mosaics, and archaeological monuments.³⁹

The International Council of Museums aims to ensure the conservation and protection of cultural sites. ICOM is comprised of 136 member countries and 35,000 institutes and professionals. ICOM’s priorities include disaster risk management action and education and outreach to help ordinary people learn about the value of their heritage.⁴⁰

The Red Cross of cultural heritage preservation is the International Committee for the Blue Shield (ICBS). With a protected emblem status similar to the Red Cross, ICBS personnel are supposedly protected from attack when they are on the ground helping during wartime.⁴¹ ICBS was established in 1996 to protect the world’s cultural heritage from the threats of natural disaster and war. ICBS works with different heritage types that include books, monuments, cultural sites, museum objects, audiovisuals, and archives. ICBS is composed of five organizations: the International Council on Archives (ICA), the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Program for Preservation and Conservation (PAC), and the Coordinating Council of Audiovisual Archives Associations (CCAAA). The director of IFLA’s core Program for Preservation and Conservation, Marie-Therese Varlamoff, suggested that “we need to set up a disaster plan including preventive measures to take, long before the disaster strikes, and relating to the building, the equipment, the staff training, the emergency response.”⁴²

In 2008, the Association of National Committees of Blue Shield (ANCBS) was created to encourage the safeguarding and respect for cultural sites and to promote risk preparedness. The organization trains professionals in how to control the extent of damage and to aid in the recovery process.⁴³ The ANCBS cooperates with the International Military Cultural Resources Working Group (IMCURWG) to provide support for antiquity authorities in the prevention of looting and damage.⁴⁴

IFLA focuses on libraries more than the others and has several initiatives including the Program on Preservation and Conservation (PAC). PAC was established in 1984 with goals such as ensuring that library and archives materials, published and unpublished, in all formats, will be preserved and

accessible. The program conducts different activities, such as raising awareness among professionals, the public, and the authorities about the need to preserve endangered materials, and translating and publishing preservation literature to help professionals learn about the field. The program is also involved in preparing educational materials and organizing training courses, workshops, and seminars to help libraries around the world preserve their cultural heritage.

Using the examples of efforts to preserve cultural heritage during and after World War II as a frame of reference, in the next section, I will examine efforts to preserve cultural heritage amid the contemporary conflicts in the Middle East. In particular, I will explore whether the preservation and repatriation efforts brought to bear with such success in World War II have been applied to address the impact of contemporary conflicts in the Middle East, and if not, whether they could be.

Preserving Cultural Heritage amid Conflicts in the Middle East

Much cultural heritage has been lost throughout the Middle East as wars have raged there since the beginning of the twenty-first century. According to UNESCO, in 2003, 40 percent of the Iraqi National Library's 5,147 manuscripts were burned or looted.⁴⁵ In 2003, over 15,000 items were lost from the Iraqi Museum in Baghdad due to looting and destruction.⁴⁶ Looters took thousands of ancient stamps and cylinder seals, stealing 120,000 out of 170,000 artifacts. The Mosul, Nineveh, and Nimrud museums were also looted.⁴⁷ As a by-product of internal conflict in Syria since 2011, many museums and cultural sites have been looted and destroyed. Over the past several years, the fighting has hindered precise on-the-ground assessment of the extent of the destruction, though satellite images made since 2014 confirm that almost all of Syria's cultural sites have been damaged.⁴⁸ It remains challenging to estimate the actual number of items stolen or damaged during these ongoing wars.

The destruction of cultural heritage as a result of war in many countries in the Middle East reveals a number of parallels to the conditions during World War II, particularly in regard to the vulnerability of libraries and archival holdings to looting and destruction. The parallels between what happened during World War II and what is happening now at Iraqi and Syrian cultural sites in particular have attracted the attention of scholars. For example, Dr. Zainab Bahrani, a professor of ancient Near Eastern art and archaeology at Columbia University, stated, "To go back to World War II, you might remember that the biggest tragedy of World War II was the genocide against the Jewish population. But [the Nazis] didn't just take them to camps and kill them—they did their

best to destroy any personal property so that there would be no trace that Jewish people had ever lived there and were ever part of the population. What is happening now is quite similar.”⁴⁹ Bahrani was comparing the Nazis’ actions to those of ISIS, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, against the people and their cultural heritage, destroying important sights and killing civilians in both countries.⁵⁰ Another scholar, Dr. Michael D. Danti, a professor of archaeology at the University of Boston, saw similarities between the destruction during the Second World War and the recent destruction of cultural sites, noting that “the crisis of cultural heritage today is largest since World War II.”⁵¹

The determination of individuals in Syria trying to protect their libraries’ collections also reminds us of the ordinary citizens in World War II who risked their lives to save YIVO’s collection. In 2015, a group of students in Daraa, Syria, rescued 11,000 books, some even from a burning house, and built a library for the entire city to use. Not only did they save the books, they also volunteered to work as librarians and created a system enabling the citizens of the city to borrow books. They wrote the name of the owner on each book, hoping that one day the war will stop and the owners can reclaim them.⁵²

Many of the international organizations mentioned above help protect cultural sites in countries such as Syria and Iraq. For example, in 2013, ICOMOS collaborated with ICCROM and workers for the Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) in coordination with UNESCO to provide e-training for Syrian cultural heritage professionals. The goal of the e-learning course was to give the Syrian professionals information about emergency risk management, evacuation of collections, damage assessment, and recovery.⁵³ In 2015, UNESCO organized four training courses on illicit trafficking, emergency stabilization of built heritage, the protection of movable heritage, and the recording of intangible heritage. Over a hundred participants from Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Turkey attended the courses.⁵⁴

These international organizations have admirable goals, but constraints on their financial resources limit their effectiveness. These financial limitations prevent them from undertaking larger-scale actions similar to what the Monuments Men accomplished during World War II.

Other rescue missions similar to the techniques used during the Second World War have been undertaken in Syria. In the next section, I will present a brief case study of a group of international archaeologists and professionals who collaborated with the local authorities, international organizations, local archaeologists, librarians, and ordinary citizens to preserve an important site in Syria. At the same time, they trained Syrian professionals to protect their cultural heritage. This case will shed light on how current conflicts, such as the war in Syria, build on lessons of the past and also create new approaches to help preserve cultural heritage in war zones.

Case Study: The Operation to Save the Endangered Ma'arra Mosaic Museum

Syria has a rich and diverse heritage reaching back millennia; its cultural sites and artifacts date from the Bronze Age, and the times of the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Greeks, the Sassanians, the Persians, the Arabs, the Crusaders, and the Ottomans. The United Nations announced last year that nearly three hundred sites, including Palmyra, an ancient city in Syria that contains the monumental ruins of one of the most important cultural centers of the ancient world, have been looted and destroyed during the present conflict in Syria by the government, different militia groups, and the terrorist group ISIS.⁵⁵ Though not officially an international conflict, many international actors are involved, such as NATO and the Russian government.

The people of Syria have learned from the devastation that took place in Iraq as a result of the 2003 war, when many libraries and museums were aggressively looted and destroyed. Many volunteers in Syria have started to create local networks to protect their unique cultural heritage. They work to provide security for the archaeological sites and guard the museums across the country. The government is still in charge and it, too, is actively helping to prevent the loss of the country's heritage. For example, in 2011, the Syrian authority moved some of the items from Aleppo museums to a safer location. However, it did not successfully move items from the museums in Homs, Raqq, or Qala'at Jabar, and they were looted.⁵⁶ This led an international group of archaeologists, art historians, preservationists, and librarians to act together to organize a project called Safeguarding the Heritage of Syria and Iraq (SHOSI).

SHOSI was established by a group of scholars at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., who wanted to protect Syrian heritage during the conflict. The Office of the Under Secretary for History, Art and Culture at the Smithsonian Institution decided to engage actively in the protection of Syria's cultural heritage and reached out to the Penn Cultural Heritage Center at the University of Pennsylvania Museum. Out of this collaboration, the SHOSI project was created. The team includes Dr. Salam al-Quntar, a Syrian archaeologist who works with the Penn Cultural Heritage Center and who fled the conflict in 2012. The SHOSI team trains specialists in Syria in emergency packing, protecting a collection that cannot be moved, securing archaeological sites, and deciding when a collection should be evacuated and when it is better left in its present location.

The SHOSI team also worked on the ground to help local Syrians save parts of the Ma'arra Museum, located between Aleppo and Homs and occupied by historic buildings dating to the Ottoman period in the sixteenth

century. The Syrian team on this project was a group of professionals trained by SHOSI in Gizan, Turkey. Their mission was to save very old and unique mosaics in the museum that had already been partially damaged by the conflict. SHOSI and the Syrian team prepared a plan to protect the building, the mosaics, and the remaining collection. The techniques that SHOSI used to save the mosaic site were similar to those the Monuments Men used during World War II: they applied water-based glue to the face of the mosaics to protect the tiny stones that line the walls of the old caravansary. The team built a wall of sandbags around the mosaics for extra protection. Later, barrel bombing inflicted extensive damage, but the successful preventative work done by the Syrian team minimized it. This rescue operation is an example of how successful preservation can be accomplished in conflict zones when international organizations and the local community cooperate. The work to preserve the mosaics in the Ma'arra Museum demonstrates the effectiveness of acting preemptively and establishing a prevention plan to protect cultural heritage. The SHOSI Project also shows the importance of building a network of people inside the conflict zone so that they can actively safeguard their cultural heritage.

The approach to preserving cultural heritage in wartime used in Syria demonstrates the value of acting during war to preserve cultural heritage. It is not enough to wait until after the war to act when the destruction has already taken place. However, action cannot be taken without building a bridge between stakeholders inside the conflict zone and the broader international community, the preservation experts, local authorities, and the army.

Challenges and Recommendations

Preserving cultural heritage in conflict zones presents a number of challenges. The level of expertise is low among those who work to preserve cultural heritage in the Middle East. The Syrian case study demonstrates that those who work in libraries or preservation both need training. The work of preserving library collections remains outside the scope of the international organizations and volunteers, and most publications about preserving cultural heritage in wartime focus on museum and cultural sites. International organizations and funding agencies should realize the importance of library and archival collections and support the training of their personnel in matters of preservation just as they support preservation activities around museum and cultural sites.

A number of recommendations emerge from this analysis. Individuals and organizations that wish to prepare disaster plans to preserve cultural heritage during wartime should consider the following steps and strategies:

- Promote disaster prevention measures to protect cultural heritage materials and sites.
- Create cost-effective methods to prevent disasters.
- Involve local nongovernmental organizations in educating the public about preserving cultural heritage and helping to stop the looting of cultural sites.
- Liaise between civilian experts and the military to identify important buildings and sites to limit damage and looting.
- Encourage the military to establish a standardized program and response policy to protect property responsively and dependably and to disseminate needed information to the appropriate people at the right time.
- Ask the military to train personnel before deployment in effective ways to protect cultural sites.⁵⁷
- Facilitate partnerships between critical groups such as academic specialists, civilian defense employees, uniformed military personnel, and nongovernmental organizations to win the support of politicians and civil servants who can be a source of support during emergencies.

Tactics that can be helpful during wartime include

- Hiding materials in secure spaces in the building that hosts them or smuggling them into homes and community venues such as churches; and
- Removing collections to remote locations or burying them underground.

Finally, without the collaboration of the public, the protection of cultural heritage will be very challenging. As Carla Grissman indicated, ordinary citizens, as part of the local community, are often in a unique position to help when a crisis occurs.⁵⁸ Thus, it would be good practice to communicate with the public on a regular basis about the need to preserve cultural heritage and prevent looting.

In conclusion, librarians, archivists, international organizations, and others are uniquely situated to cooperate in shaping and carrying out disaster management plans. To flesh out the roles of all involved and the substance of effective plans, more research needs to be done in the area of preserving cultural heritage in conflict zones. International organizations also need to update their goals and approach the preservation of cultural heritage as a humanitarian rescue mission. As Jennifer Otterson Mollick pointed out, “None of the BlueShield organizations has done anything to establish a framework for future co-operation between cultural property experts and relevant government and non-government authorities and agencies, including military.”⁵⁹ The development of such a framework is an important next step.

NOTES

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