

Cultural Heritage, a Central Issue in European Wars during the Modern Period

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ABSTRACT

Two kinds of cultural property bear the stamp of war in Europe. On the one hand, the cultural heritage of belligerent countries can be affected during conflict when armies proceed with seizures (especially works of art and archives) in enemy territory, or damage or destroy—voluntarily or not—that country's cultural property. On the other, sometimes in connection with the seizures mentioned above, conflicts engender the creation of a specific cultural heritage: war-related collections that are created during hostilities in order to mobilize belligerent societies, and are enriched and developed after the war for commemorative and/or documentary reasons. Cultural heritage has thus represented a major strategic, ideological, and memorial issue in conflicts within Europe and beyond. After being a reason for confrontation between European countries, cultural property is now central to relations between Europe and the rest of the world, with the question of the restitution of artifacts seized in times of war still shaping the international cultural relations of numerous European countries.



Reims Cathedral after German bombardment in 1914. Source : Wikimedia Commons



Goebbels at the “House of German Art” in Munich. Visit of the Degenerate Art exhibition, February 27, 1938. Source : Bundesarchiv/Wikimedia Commons.



Man-shark, statue from Abomey, Benin, circa 1890. In 2016, Benin asked France to return some of the royal treasures of Abomey that French troops appropriated during a colonial expedition in 1892. Source : Musée du quai Branly Jacques Chirac/Wikimedia Commons.

Cultural heritage connected to war firstly takes the form of war-related collections, which were produced by and bear witness to the history of conflicts involving European powers. The term refers to collections created during hostilities with the goal of documenting them. The connections between war and cultural heritage are nevertheless not limited to these collections: the protection and conservation or, on the contrary, seizure and destruction of cultural property in European countries also reveal the ideological and memorial issues raised by material culture

during times of war as well as peace, with both the victors and the vanquished.

The emergence of “heritage awareness” during the nineteenth century

These two facets of cultural heritage during wartime emerged between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. As the national awakening of peoples was taking place, the seizure and vandalism of art objects sparked by the French Revolution and Napoleonic campaigns contributed to the emergence of “heritage awareness” (Bénédicte Savoy) in Europe. The management of cultural heritage subsequently became a factor in national affirmation. While in France a duty to conserve was born out of an internal dynamic connected to the destruction of the revolution, Napoleon’s conquests created the need for pillaged countries to conserve their artistic monuments. For example, upon their return from the Louvre (called the musée Napoléon at the time), the works of Nordic painters such as Dürer and Cranach embodied a legacy in the eyes of German patriots, one that promised hope and national regeneration.

This national and heritage awareness was accompanied by the creation of institutions specializing in the memory of war. The collecting of military trophies at the *Zeughaus* in Berlin (1883), or The Museum of the Patriotic War of 1812 in Moscow (1912), thus sought to legitimize the nation. A patriotic mission of the same order fell to libraries, such as the Royal Library in Berlin, which housed, in memory of the victory that enabled German unity, the documentation produced during the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871). This context of rising nationalisms was also one of imperialisms, with the late nineteenth century seeing the creation of museums of ethnology by European colonial powers, whose collections were sustained by the theft of objects during wars of conquest or punitive expeditions.

The passing of a threshold in 1914-1918

The violence of the fighting in 1914-1918 passed a threshold in terms of involving cultural property in hostilities. During this war, “enemy” cultural heritage was a central strategic and ideological consideration, and as a result was both targeted for destruction (Leuven library in 1914) and coveted. Collateral damage, intentional destruction, seizures, and despoliation became an integral part of modern war, as did measures to protect and develop heritage. The Great War sparked enthusiasm for objects of war on an unprecedented scale: public and private collections documented the unprecedented involvement of the entire society in this mass war. Bringing together postcards, posters, personal letters, children’s books, and rationing cards, they conferred legitimacy on the conflict, and contributed to the cultural mobilization of civilians. In Germany there were no less than 217 war-related collections in 1917.

These collections also led to the creation of museums, such as the Museo storico italiano della Guerra in 1921, and the Bibliothèque-Musée de la guerre (BMG) in 1917, which grew out of the collection of the Parisian industrial actors Louise and Henri Leblanc, became the Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine (BDIC) in 1934, and took the name of Contemporaine-Bibliothèque, archives, musée des mondes contemporains in 2018. These institutions enjoyed lasting success in victorious countries—the Imperial War Museum (created in 1917) was visited by nearly one and a half million people between 1920 (the year it opened to the general public) and 1921. They also played a role as conveyors of memory and ideology in vanquished countries, which used this documentation to clear themselves of responsibility for the outbreak of the conflict. It was with this in mind—but also by way of revenge—that the original of the Treaty of Versailles was taken to the Reich Chancellery in June 1940, and probably destroyed at the end of the war.

From the destruction of the Second World War to postcolonial issues

Under Nazism, the theorization of “degenerate art,” which the Nazis believed to be symptomatic of the biological degeneration of Germany, aimed to systematically liquidate modern art. All told nearly 21,000 works of art were

seized in German museums. The Second World War brought a new dimension to damage to cultural heritage, in the form of institutionalized despoliation on the part of Nazis in conquered countries, personified by the creation of the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR, Reichsleiter Rosenberg Taskforce). Confiscating both private (often belonging to Jewish collectors) and public collections, the ERR sought to create—in competition with the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA Reich Main Security Office)—a European space freed of “enemy” influences, but one that was also subject to the greed of Nazi dignitaries. A number of libraries and museums in Europe were subjected to this pillaging when their collections were not evacuated or shielded in time, such as the amber room at Catherine Palace in Tsarskoye Selo, which was stolen in 1941. The archives of belligerents were also seized, particularly for repressive ends.

In the face of this violence, the Soviets engaged in counter-pillaging, and after 1945 conducted a policy of compensatory seizures, taking with them the cultural property previously stolen by the Nazis, and still making its identification cumbersome today. Works of art were returned to the GDR, including 750 paintings from the museums of Dresden in 1956 (including the Sistine Madonna) and the Pergamon Altar in 1958, although the question of restitutions remains thorny: Priam’s Treasure is still exhibited at the Pushkin Museum, and of the 100,000 “book-trophies” of the Turgenev Library (created in Paris in 1875 by Russian immigrants), only 120 books have been returned to France.

This is also true of the memory of colonization: the restitution of “non-European collections” unfairly conserved, for example at the musée du quai Branly or the Ethnological Museums in Berlin and Leiden, is a major memorial and strategic issue for a Europe that is of course pacified, but that must nevertheless contend with its tormented past and claims made by the countries that emerged from decolonization. The cultural heritage despoiled during wars and the development of war-related collections by museums perpetuate familial, national, European, and global memories of war, as well as certain political and memorial conflicts between former belligerents.

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