Anglo-American Attempts to Protect Cultural Heritage During the Second World War

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We are considering in this session the gloomy topic of catastrophes that threaten or have overtaken some of the world's cultural treasures, with whose care we are charged. No catastrophe that has occurred to date matches the world-wide impact of the Second World War. And no other period of history reveals more about the cultural assumptions concerning international heritage that we have inherited in present generations, or the lessons that can be learned when disaster strikes. We have also inherited from the generations of World War II, some differences of opinion among nations, as to what constitutes national versus international heritage, and what are the ethics underlying our approaches to the problem. The history I will describe here briefly and very selectively may be familiar to many of you, but I hope it will help frame some of the discussion about our present and future responsibilities. My focus is on the activities of the Anglo-American Allies in Europe, and especially in Italy. Since most of us in this meeting are librarians and archivists, I will devote particular attention in the second part of my paper, to the work of archivists who were attached to military forces during the war. This is part of a work in progress, based for the most part so far on research in British government archives relating to the war in Europe, although those archives also contain a certain amount of American, French and German material.

In November and December 1943, the British War Office Adviser on Monuments and Fine Arts visited the Italian theater of war and reported on the threat to monuments and works of art. The British adviser was one of the most knowledgeable and influential members of the cultural and academic establishment it would have been possible to appoint: the renowned archaeologist, and excavator of the Babylonian city

of Ur, Sir Leonard Woolley. As a result of Woolley's report, General Dwight D. Eisenhower issued on 29 December 1943 an order for the protection of ancient monuments: "Today we are fighting in a country which has contributed a great deal to our cultural inheritance, a country rich in monuments which, by their creation, helped and now in their old age illustrate the growth of the civilization which is ours. We are bound to respect those monuments so far as war allows. " He went on to say that while the safety of Allied troops must always take precedence, all forces must be instructed in the whereabouts of important historic monuments, and must not use the phrase 'military necessity' to cloak indifference or mere convenience. An Anglo-American court of inquiry into the actions of Allied troops in Naples met in the following month, and administrative orders were issued that spelled out the requirements for correct treatment of historic buildings and other treasures, as the armies moved northwards through Italy.

These were not mere pious words on paper. The governments of the United Kingdom and the United States put very considerable efforts into the preservation of this shared cultural inheritance. The Roberts Commission in the United States and the Macmillan Committee in the United Kingdom, each chaired by a distinguished judge and composed of senior museum directors and other experts in the field of cultural property, met both separately and some members occasionally together, from early in 1944 until after the end of the war, to consider and steer policy on " the preservation and restitution of works of art, archives and other material in enemy hands", to use the title of the British Macmillan committee. A third, self-constituted committee, of sporadic influence in the deliberations of both governments, was headed by the exiled Frenchman Paul Vaucher, and brought together representatives of the governments in exile of Nazi-occupied Europe, meeting in London. Reporting back to these committees, steering their work, and coordinating efforts at preservation in the midst of war, were numbers of military personnel who had come from peace-time occupations as museum curators, archivists, librarians, archaeologists and art historians. These individuals often felt themselves to be struggling against impossible obstacles of bureaucracy, military priorities, and sheer incomprehension on the part of their superiors and central authorities. But with the rueful benefit of hindsight, it seems now

quite remarkable that the Allies, engaged in all-out warfare on an unprecedented scale, did devote significant resources to the care and preservation of the past, in a world whose future they were trying to save.

A fundamental question that occupied the Allied authorities during and after the war was the issue of ownership. Here it is necessary to juxtapose the Third Reich's and its satellite governments' understanding of ownership with that of the Allies. Ownership of personal property was, notoriously, not well respected by the Nazis. The elaborate administration of the Einsatzstab Rosenberg existed for the express purpose of gathering together and removing to Germany the property of Jewish families in France and northern Europe. The legacy of confiscations from Jewish families, and also from those who openly defied the regime, from societies of Freemasons, and several other groups, haunts us still today. Strenuous efforts were made by the Allied governments and by museums, galleries, archives and libraries during and immediately after the Second World War, to identify the legitimate owners of material that had been "unlawfully taken", and return their property to them. In the recent past and the present day, those efforts have been renewed by governments of North America and Western Europe. There will be other references during this conference to Holocaust restitution, and I will return to the subject briefly later. But I want to turn now to the way different European governments and their agents regarded ownership by nations or peoples. In order to appreciate the Allies' policy on cultural heritage, it is helpful to know what they were up against.

As far as Mussolini's fascist government in Italy was concerned, the nations under their dominion in North Africa were "the symbol and the promise of the rebirth of the ancient Roman Empire". (FO 945/296, p.10) For them, the ownership of this legacy led to lavish expenditure on preserving and even reconstructing the classical remains of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. To quote from the official account by Woolley to the UK War Office, "It is true that scientific research was throughout made subordinate to, or, more often, was altogether abandoned in favour of theatrical display; but no visitor could fail to be struck by the imposing effect of the excavations, and to the Italian

Fascist they did indeed symbolize the glories of his traditional ancestry. It was a bitter blow therefore that wrested from his grasp this imperial heirloom. We could be certain that our treatment of the Roman monuments would be jealously watched and any shortcomings used to our discredit."

There were some cases of negligence and damage, and of looting by Allied troops when they first overran these sites, but the speed of the campaign in North Africa meant that most war damage was caused from the air rather than by troops on the ground. Thanks to the watchful and expert eye of Woolley and other senior officers, the situation was brought under control, and the main monuments were guarded by troops trained to understand the importance of what they watched over. It was Woolley's experience in North Africa, however, that led him to be especially careful as the Allied advance into Italy began. In Italy itself, it was clear that Italian citizens were anxious to preserve their heritage, and felt a profound sense of ownership that the Allied armies would disregard at their peril. Italy signed an armistice with the Allied forces on 3 September 1943, but that was only the beginning of the fierce fight northwards up the peninsular that would set at risk a large proportion of Italian cultural heritage.

The German government's approach was not quite the same as the Italian government's, although there were similarities that may reflect the characteristics of fascist states. Most conspicuously, the sense of historical entitlement to a large chunk of cultural property in the possession of other nations reflected an imperialist and expansive view of their respective peoples' past that Hitler and Mussolini held in common. The officials of the Third Reich sought to "restore" to German ownership a great swathe of archives from France which, in their view, rightfully belonged to the history of the German people. Their claim was reinforced, in a way that the Italians could not claim in North Africa, by a background of French appropriations from Germany going back to the seventeenth century and especially to Napoleon. But there was a further dimension to Nazi cultural imperialism. As the Polish scholar Karl Estreicher expressed it in a memorandum to the Roberts and Macmillan committees, " In addition to mass murders and executions, expulsion of hundreds and thousands of the

local population from their ancient abodes, beside mass deportation of the population to forced labor, the leaders of the European 'new order' declared a ruthless war on the spiritual culture of the subjugated nations. All manifestations of national life in the sphere of culture are regarded by them as dangerous for the future colonization…."

Meanwhile there were other strands of opinion on the subject of ownership. Was "cultural patrimony" something that related to a nation's past wherever it might be held, as members of the Vaucher committee came close to claiming? In this view, Dutch paintings held in a French museum would be cultural patrimony, in a way rather parallel to the Nazi government's view that all archives held in France that illustrated the history of the German people should be removed to Germany. Alternatively, and this opinion could be held simultaneously with the first and by the same people, when the time came to make restitution, if a stolen work of art had been destroyed or irreparably damaged, the government or persons guilty of despoiling it should give back another object of equal financial value. The interplay of these conflicting opinions is evident in the official and personal records of the committees and individuals involved throughout the war.

Against this background of conflicting values, the goal of the Allied governments was first to win the war and only second by a long way, to ensure justice in the preservation and ultimately the restitution, of cultural and scientific heritage. And yet, they did indeed devote scarce military resources to protecting the inheritance of the countries in which they were fighting, an inheritance that was clearly identified as something held in common across national boundaries, and part of a shared human history. There was also, at the highest levels of the military command, a clear sense of the importance of reputation. As in the report on protecting archaeological sites in North Africa, Allied officials not only felt a strong sense of personal responsibility towards the protection of cultural heritage, but they knew that other nations were watching them. Their stewardship was a matter of national pride, and there resounds through the records a deep concern for posterity.

Not only the army but also the Allied air forces took great pains to put an administrative structure around their policy and make it a reality. The Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives sub-commission, staffed by both American and British officers, fought to gain recognition of its status with the military establishment, and succeeded in putting in place documentation to help forces on the ground and in the air avoid inadvertent damage to monuments. In Italy they drew on copious reports from the American Defence Harvard Group Committee on Protection of Monuments and the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments, especially as the Allies advanced towards Rome. Despite serious printing difficulties, seven regional booklets on the location of monuments and art treasures were produced in the first half of 1944. In Naples, the first testing ground for the new arrangements, a depot of inflammable medical supplies was eventually removed from the National Museum, and visiting patrols of military police improved the discipline of troops touring Pompeii in their time off. On the other hand, the Royal Palace suffered much structural damage from bombardment, and depredations by troops, before being taken over as a canteen and club for British troops, with consequent further damage and destruction. Woolley's post-war account observes drily, "At least it can be said that the experience of the Royal Palace at Naples was never repeated in the course of the Italian campaign, and it should be stressed that the damage was to works of relatively secondary quality. The experience was worth the price". (FO 945/296)

Meanwhile, it was as a result of aerial bombardment that ninety-five per cent of the damage caused by the Allies to major monuments in Italy occurred. The American Roberts Commission had supplied a set of "Frick" cultural maps to both the USAir Force and the RAF, but it was only in February 1944 when the American Monuments Force (MAAF) published aerial photographs of seventy-nine Italian towns and cities, taken from their own special reconnaissance flights, that bomber pilots had really accurate guidance on avoiding important monuments. As the American Colonel Henry Newton remarked, no handbook could compare with "an aerial photograph clipped upon the operational clip board in the hands of the pilot as he drops into the bomb run". (ibid.) Both British and American commentators paid tribute to the Air Forces' active

desire to work tactically with the monuments officers. Tragic destruction still happened, such as that of the Mantegna chapel at the church of the Eremitani in Padua in March 1944, but the record steadily improved, and it was possible to point to specific acts of preservation that the collaboration between Air Force and Monuments officers had brought about.

The worst of the destruction throughout Italy occurred in Tuscany where, as Woolley commented, it was "a tragic stroke of fate" that the Italian campaign of 1944-45 should have reached its fiercest pitch. By the end of the war, there was hardly one undamaged town in the region. Tuscany also provided a case of one of the most flagrant attempts by Nazi officers to gather together the riches of Europe for the benefit of the Reich. No longer motivated by considerations of recording the German imperial past alone (and these had always been not only specious but indefinitely extensible), the German Kunstschutz based in the Tyrol had swooped on the treasures that Italian officials had hidden in cellars and caves for safe-keeping, and removed them to the northernmost part of Italy. There, although technically still within the previous Italian borders, there would be a good chance of keeping them within German possession in case the conclusion of the war turned out to fall short of total surrender. As the Allies advanced through Tuscany, deposit after deposit of treasures was found to have disappeared, and local people reported seeing German officers removing them. In late April 1945, the Allies finally received news of two huge deposits of Florentine treasure in the north. By then, all across Europe, the work of restoring archives and works of art to their rightful owners was under way.

At this stage, I would like to devote a little more attention to the threats posed specifically to archives during the Second World War, and the role of archivists on both sides. "The word 'Archives' ", wrote Sir Hilary Jenkinson, later Deputy Keeper of the Public Records in the UK, and the most distinguished British archivist of his

generation, "is here used to signify accumulations of Documents (Charters, Letters, Registers, Accounts, Minutes) which have come together by a natural process in the course of business of all kinds, public or private, lay or ecclesiastical, in all periods. They are not necessarily old or beautiful, though they often may be. Whether they date from early periods or from the present day, Archives are all in some sense unique and therefore irreplaceable; all are closely related to each other and to the life of the community which produced them; and they contain as a whole an incalculable quantity of unexplored knowledge. This mass of information is not only important for historical purposes but often essential for the conduct of the War or the reconstitution of Civil Life." (PRO30/75/42) This was Jenkinson's preamble to his survey of archives in Italy during the war, and it serves well to define why archives were valued by both sides.

Jenkinson spent much of the last two years of the war in Italy advising on the preservation of archives. But he had not always had such an unquestioned role. The papers of Lord Macmillan, head of the British Committee on Monuments, Works of Art and Archives, show that the committee turned down Jenkinson's request that an archivist should be a member, apparently assuming that the British Museum could represent the interests of all manuscript and archival materials. The definition provided by Jenkinson was very necessary in the circumstances, as indeed it still may be. In the field however, it quickly became apparent that the specific skills of archivists were badly needed to record material at risk and identify what it was. The attachment not just of art experts and museum curators but also of professional archivists, to army units was an impressive feature of the Allies' concern for the preservation of cultural heritage.

The German army's archival unit in France, as they reported to the supreme commander for France in 1944, carefully preserved and protected French libraries and archives, while also listing those they considered to be significant for German history and therefore to be removed. They believed that France contained more material of use in the great project of researching the history of greater Germany than any other country; and they had long memories. At the peak of activity, from January 1940 until

the winter of 1941-42, thirteen professional archivists plus a lawyer and a historian from the Reich Institute for the History of the New Germany, plus support staff, worked under the direction of the Prussian director of State Archives Professor Doktor Schnath to identify and often remove, all missing German archival material in some 176 state and municipal archives and uncounted numbers of private collections, including library manuscripts collections. A list of demands for removals, "as laid down by the Reich Ministry for Enlightenment and Propaganda" was submitted to Goebbels in 1943. It included 20,903 "objects" from some twenty-five French libraries and archives. This operation (to quote from the translated document in the UK National Archives) was "based on the well-known facts of the French removals of cultural material from Germany, especially in the time of Louis XIV, of the French Revolution and of Napoleon I". (PRO30/75/44) Professor Schnath's team additionally set to work to prepare a detailed catalogue of every scrap of archival material in France that had a bearing on German history.

The Allied response to this evidence of systematic spoliation by German officials was to prepare a military directive, before the war had even ended, which read in part :

> Immediately after Germany surrenders, you will issue an ordinance mak[ing] it an offence punishable in military courts for any person in Germany willfully to destroy, remove, conceal or falsify Archives, Records and Documents….You will in your zone take immediate steps to secure against damage, dispersal, or mishandling all Archives and Records which may be designated to you by appropriate authority as of permanent importance.

Meanwhile, in Italy as no doubt also in France and across occupied Europe, there were heroic stories and some comical ones, about the hazards the war posed to manuscript collections, and the fortitude of some of their custodians. Jenkinson reported to Woolley on a visit to Italian archives, where some of the Archivi di Stato in the Villa de Soli in Gagliano were stored in bulk in a farmhouse. Some had been piled up to let American soldiers get through, and one room "they shared with the flour bins and

screens and with a hen which was hatching out a clutch of eggs in the middle of volumes of early accounts".

The young archivist H E Bell, commissioned as an archival officer in the British army with the rank of major, wrote to Jenkinson in 1945 about the respect that everyone he met in Italy showed for preserving archives, and how much he hoped that situation might continue after the war. He was worried about deterioration through lack of care, and described letting himself down into a cellar through a very small hole, to rescue some walled-up archives from damp. But devotion to protecting the archives was not lacking. Bell wrote of one Italian canon in a small town: "With great secrecy he led me to the place where he had deposited his chapter archives – along with the skeleton of the founder (it shook me a bit when that grinned out at me!). s I looked at the destruction in the town, I'm afraid I let slip the improper question 'How did you stick it?' and he replied, simply and sincerely, 'Why my archives and my people were here' and then pointed to a bench against the door of his deposit where he had slept when the shelling was at its worst, 'so as to be near the documents'". (PRO30/75/44) Bell found, traveling from town to town in Italy in the closing weeks of the war, that the work of the archivist was in every way privileged. "We are galloping ghosts, the admin. Officer's despair", he wrote, moving ahead of their orders to ensure the safety of the Italian archival heritage, and greeted everywhere with enthusiasm by the custodians of those priceless materials.

The aftermath of the war brought disappointments to the high hopes of the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives officers whose role in the armed forces had been so highly valued in safeguarding as much as possible of the European inheritance from the ravages of war. Despite the strong recommendations of both the Roberts Commission in America and the Macmillan Committee in Britain, the Allied Control Commissions after the war failed to set up a Restitution Commission to deal with claims for the return of personal property. In this aim they were frustrated by the relative indifference of the

Allied governments as they struggled to achieve a postwar settlement in which the voice of culture and learning was drowned out by the louder cries of hunger, re-education and reconstruction. No system for dealing with personal claims other than through governments was established. This meant, as both Roberts and Macmillan observed, that many of the victims of spoliation were in the position of having to claim against their own government.

On the other hand, thanks to their extraordinary dedication of resources and the high level of professional work during the war, the Allied governments and their respective control commissions in Germany and Austria had enough information to enable them to restore most objects and collections that had been removed from art museums, churches and archives. By October 1946, for example, the US Military Government Restitution Division was able to announce in Berlin that more than 40,000 separate paintings had been restored to their countries of ownership, the great majority to France. (FO 945/200) Even while the war was still going on, the Allies devoted considerable resources to restoring damaged works of art in the reconquered areas of Italy. And the archivists, after more than one hundred personal visits, and reports on a further sixty archives in Italy, were relieved to find little evidence of looting or spoliation. Fears that the partisans might loot some of the fine bindings from Siena, or other valuable materials, proved quite unfounded. Jenkinson was glad to report on the excellent work being undertaken by the Italian commander to whom he was handing over archival responsibility. He had made his own contribution by donating photographic copies of some Italian materials from the Public Record Office in London, and generally recorded a sense of satisfaction at handing back the management of Italian archives to the Italians.

The experience of the Allies in World War II suggests some general questions about the protection of cultural heritage in times of war and conflict. First, it is notable that both the British and American governments and their adversaries devoted scarce resources of time, transport, planning, money, and above all, skilled labor, to preserving the European inheritance. Although it is not within the scope of this paper to examine what happened in the other theaters of war, a similar concern characterized the Allied

armies there too. The values for which the war was fought applied not just to territory and the right of people and nations to self-determination, but it extended also to the preservation of their national identity. And beyond that, as the Eisenhower directive of 1943 affirmed, there was a greater good than national identity, and that was to preserve the origins and growth of "the civilization that is ours".