

## Book Review

David Dean

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**Mark Dunkley, Lisa Mol, and Anna Tulliach (eds), *Heritage at War: Plan and Prepare*, Winwick, Cambridgeshire: The White Horse Press, 2024, hardback £65.00, pp. xx+213**

According to UNESCO's most recent reports, the Russian invasion of Ukraine that began in February 2022 has led to 485 sites of cultural significance being seriously damaged, while 83 buildings of artistic and historical interest, museums, monuments, religious and archaeological sites in the Gaza Strip have been severely damaged or destroyed by Israeli forces who launched a retaliatory attack on the Palestinian territory in October 2023.<sup>1</sup> This interdisciplinary collection could not be more timely, and as a call to action for anyone concerned about the destruction of cultural heritage and wanting to do something about it, hardly less vital.

The genesis of *Heritage at War* was a 2023 conference held at London's Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). The background to this gathering is set out by Vernon Rapley in the final chapter of the book, particularly the creation of the museum's Culture in Crisis programme which was developed as the world witnessed the destruction of ancient cultural heritage sites in Iraq and Syria by ISIS and ISIL in 2015. The volume begins with a foreword from the V&A's director Tristram Hunt reflecting on the effects of the Second World War on the museum. In his preface, Peter Stone identifies the key international frameworks that readers will encounter throughout the book: UNESCO (formed in 1945); the 1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in Times of Armed Conflict; and the creation of the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS) in 1996.

The book's editors – Mark Dunkley, Anna Tulliach, and Lisa Mol – pull no punches in their introductory essay, suggesting, for example, that the destruction of sites in Gaza amount to acts of 'cultural genocide' (3-4). They offer a succinct historical account of cultural heritage threatened by being deliberately targeted, through accidental or collateral damage, as a consequence of being occupied and repurposed, and as victims of vandalism and looting, as well as protective measures taken before, during, and after the Second World War.

Three chapters gathered under the heading 'Learning from the Past' explore various historical examples. Kevin Malmquist's study of the Roman burning of the Second Temple during the First Roman-Jewish War shows that the destruction of cultural property in the name of military necessity is nothing new. Carlotta Coccoli traces the formation of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives (MFAA) programme in the context of Italy during the Second World War and Yang Chang-hun assesses attempts to protect cultural heritage during the Korean War. Two chapters in this section are more contemporary in focus: Roger Curtis and Mark Dunkley discuss how the United Kingdom has taken action to realize its legislated commitment to protect cultural property and Lisa Mol explores the investigative, forensic, and legal processes involved in assessing damage.

The second part of the book, 'Preparing for the Present', consists of five chapters that share experiences on the ground, focusing on the roles of the military and of heritage stewards in protecting cultural heritage at times of conflict. The theme of Cultural Property Protection (CPP) discussed by Chang-hun, and by Curtis and Dunkley, is taken up in accounts of how this has developed in the Royal Netherlands Army by Ankie Peterson and the French military by Tim Le Berre, both of whom are officers charged with protecting cultural heritage. Manana Tevzadze offers a lively account of how the threat to the Gori Museum during the Georgia-Russia War of 2008 led to the development of an effective disaster risk management strategy by the Georgian Blue Shield. Amira Sadik Aly reflects on the politics of war and cultural heritage and the vital role of non-governmental organizations such as

the Egyptian Heritage Rescue Foundation. This Foundation was formed in the aftermath of political instability that led to considerable damage to heritage sites across Egypt such as the looting of the Malawi Museum of Egyptian Antiquities by supporters of the ousted Muslim Brotherhood in August 2013.

The authors offer insights that might serve as a blueprint for successfully protecting cultural heritage at times of conflict: quickly and effectively communicating information about cultural heritage to armed forces; ensuring that there are adequate numbers of trained personnel ('soldiers of the arts' as Le Berre calls them [150]) on the ground to advise and supervise; and taking steps to harness local knowledge and expertise. Readers will encounter successes that were the result of military and civilian co-operation, of collaboration between governmental bodies and NGOs, and when such forces engaged and worked with local communities.

Most of the focus is understandably on tangible heritage, but a few contributors acknowledge the importance of intangible heritage although no contribution devotes much time to it. Le Berre invitingly draws attention to the need for processes of CPP to include cognitive, virtual, and digital heritage domains, noting that Russia's historical propaganda seeks to achieve the same goals as the destruction of monuments and sites. The issues of reparation and repatriation ghost the collection, but since Rapley ends the book reflecting on the V&A's returning of a gold ewer to the Museum of Anatolian Civilisations in Ankara perhaps this will be the focus of a future conference and collection.

This book successfully sets out the landscapes, frameworks, history, and realities of CPP. Yet, at the end of the day, one cannot help but come away thinking that ultimately the fate of cultural heritage depends on the hearts and minds of those on the front line. As Chang-hun notes, Korea's Haeinsa Temple and Deoksugung Palace were saved for future generations because individuals in the heat of battle took the decision that cultural value trumped military necessity. It is a tragedy that those attacking Reims Cathedral in France, the Malawi Museum in Egypt, the Temple of Baalshamin in Syria, Ukraine's Mariupol Theatre, or the Rafah Museum in Gaza did not do the same.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> These numbers reflect UNESCO, 'Damaged cultural sites in Ukraine', UNESCO 2025. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/damaged-cultural-sites-ukraine-verified-unesco>, accessed 3 March 2025; UNESCO, 'Gaza Strip: Damage assessment', UNESCO 2025. <https://www.unesco.org/en/gaza/assessment#:~:text=As%20of%2029%20November%202024,museum%20and%207%20archeological%20sites>, accessed 3 March 2025.

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