
Cultural Policy in a Time of War: The American Response to Endangered Books in World War II

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ABSTRACT

For the first time in U.S. history, the protection of books and other cultural resources became an official war aim during World War II. Examining the broad historical process by which this policy was formed and executed, this article focuses on three key factors: the new role of intellectual and cultural elites, who forged close ties with the state; the expansion of intelligence gathering and its unintended consequences for the preservation of cultural material; and the extraordinary actions of individual librarians, curators, and ordinary soldiers on the ground, who improvised solutions to the problems of preservation and restoration.

In April 2003, as American combat operations in Iraq gave way to the early days of occupation, journalists reported widespread looting and damage to Iraqi museums, libraries, and archives. At a news briefing on April 11, responding to questions about the failure to protect Iraq's cultural heritage, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously replied: "Stuff happens!" Complaining about the recurring broadcast of "some boy walking out with a vase," he observed, "it's untidy, and freedom's untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things." He went on, "They're also free to live their lives and do wonderful things, and that's what's going to happen here" (U.S. Department of Defense, 2003). The early reports indicated a catastrophic loss of art, archaeological artifacts, and rare manuscripts. Later investigations showed that Iraqi officials had removed many treasures for safekeeping, and that some American military officers had acted quickly to guard the National Museum and recover stolen objects (University of Pennsylvania Museum,

n.d.; Bogdanos, 2005; Johnson, 2005). Still, the destruction and disorder underscored the limited forethought given to protecting such resources. Freedom and fatalism seemed to go hand in hand.

Such planning was hardly outside the realm of possibility or imagination. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, in a directive of December 29, 1943, during the Allied invasion of Italy, addressed the protection of “cultural monuments,” by which he meant not only historical buildings and churches but also portable forms of culture, such as books and art. His words are worth quoting at length:

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. . . . Nothing can stand against the argument of military necessity. That is an accepted principle. But the phrase “military necessity” is sometimes used where it would be more truthful to speak of military convenience or even of personal convenience. I do not want it to cloak slackness or indifference.¹

The difference is striking across sixty years—in the message, tone, and assumptions of wartime leaders, and in the policies and procedures they oversaw. There are several immediate reasons one could give for the disparity between 1943 and 2003. The most obvious is that Americans esteem European civilization as their cultural inheritance and, perhaps, as a source of cultural superiority; Islamic tradition and Arabic culture do not have such resonance. This may well be true, but it hardly explains why the government instituted a program of cultural protection during World War II and but apparently did little in the run-up to the Iraq war. Americans’ Eurocentrism did not lead inevitably to Eisenhower’s directive, nor were present-day policymakers and the military unaware that cultural sensitivity was necessary in Iraq.

Why, then, was cultural protection a war aim in World War II? How was a policy effected, and to what extent did it address the specific question of endangered books and libraries among other treasures? How might we comprehend these efforts—and their limits—in the social, cultural, and political currents of the 1940s? Are there insights from the World War II experience that might help us better address the challenges to books and other cultural resources in current times of crisis and war?

At the outbreak of World War II, leaders of learned societies, philanthropic foundations, research libraries, museums, and professional associations began to anticipate the impact of war on cultural resources. The Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, and other institutions put in motion plans to safeguard their most treasured documents and books. The leadership of the American Library Association (ALA), with its strong

internationalist bent, saw a prominent role for libraries on the home front. Indeed, when the United States entered the war, many libraries offered public programs, mounted exhibits, and created information centers on a host of issues, from defense jobs to rationing. Librarians joined those who mobilized the world of learning and culture for the national defense (Becker, 2005; Kraske, 1985; Lincove, 1991).

At this time, a small number of individuals turned their attention to the looming devastation of European culture, with the hope of finding ways to safeguard it. These were, by and large, men of the nation's intellectual and cultural elites. After the fall of France in June 1940, Harvard faculty formed the American Defense-Harvard Group to combat isolationism and provide intellectual backing and expertise for the war effort. Paul J. Sachs and George L. Stout of the Fogg Museum of Art, spurred by reports from abroad, worked with the leadership of the Metropolitan Museum and the National Gallery of Art to push for a federal commitment to protect cultural resources. David Finley, director of the National Gallery, used his political connections in the War Department, the Office of Strategic Services, and most crucially with Supreme Court Chief Justice Harlan Stone to approach President Franklin Roosevelt with a plan to safeguard cultural sites in war areas. The American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) had begun its own discussions and established a Committee for the Protection of European Cultural Material in January 1943; led by William Bell Dinsmoor, director of the Archaeological Institute of America, its membership included Archibald MacLeish, then Librarian of Congress, and Solon Buck, archivist of the United States. It too lobbied for a commission.²

Roosevelt approved the plan, and in June 1943 the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas, chaired by Associate Justice Owen J. Roberts, began its work. Cooperating with the Harvard Group and ACLS, the Roberts Commission provided maps and lists of cultural sites to the military and identified army personnel qualified to safeguard cultural resources in the field of battle. Although it included the Far East in its mission—including “war areas” in its title—it remained focused on the threat to European civilization. The first Monuments Officer, Harvard classicist Mason Hammond, was sent to North Africa in 1943 and then accompanied the troops into Italy. The Allied command created a unit called the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives section (MFAA), whose small band of officers tried to cordon off historic buildings, minimize looting, and give first aid to art and books; when the war ended, the MFAA turned its attention to the recovery and restitution of cultural objects.

This was a remarkable decision: the first time the American government had established the cultural protection of art, books, and historic buildings as a war aim. The importance of cultural property had begun to be recognized in international law since the late nineteenth century, but vaguely

stated principles had produced few concrete results, even in World War I. By the early 1940s, a convergence of events, memories, ideology, and individuals led cultural leaders to transform their mounting alarm into action.

New methods of organized violence—from the aerial bombing in World War I and the Spanish civil war to the Nazis' systematic attacks on property and persons—had intensified awareness of the vulnerability of artistic and intellectual resources. The destruction of books in particular loomed large in the collective memory of intellectuals and cultural elites of the time. The ruin of the University of Leuven's library, as German soldiers stood by and watched the flames, was one of the shocking moments of World War I; it conveyed modern warfare's threat to civilization (Graves, 1929).³ The Nazi book burnings of 1933 similarly opened a window onto the violent tactics and fascist ideology of Hitler's new regime. Many people would come to see "libricide," as Rebecca Knuth (2003) terms it, as a crime against humanity. Not everyone took the measure of this event at the time—Patti Clayton Becker (2005, p. 22) notes that the library journals did not comment on it—but influential intellectuals and politicians condemned the Nazis' actions and thousands marched in protest in American cities (Kantorowitz, 1944; Stern, 1985).⁴

Information about the fate of cultural institutions trickled out of Europe in the earliest years of the war in personal correspondence, through encounters with refugees, and from statements by governments in exile. Some events, such as the second destruction of the Leuven library and the bombing of Coventry Cathedral, received coverage in newspapers and on radio. But much of the available information circulated only among professionals in cultural fields. During the Blitz, British librarians and museum staff wrote their American friends and colleagues, assessing damage to their collections and suggesting air raid precautions; their letters were often reprinted in professional journals. Although many valued works of art, manuscripts, and rare books had been sent to safe havens away from the urban centers, incendiary bombs destroyed large portions of the libraries at the University of London, King's College, and the Guildhall. "To a book-lover, it is heart breaking to see so many books in such a sorry plight, soaked with water or charred by fire," commented the librarian at Richmond.⁵ By 1942 and 1943, Germany's systematic looting of occupied countries, including the plundering and forced sale of art collections in Belgium and France and the wholesale destruction of culture and learning in Poland, became more widely known.⁶

During the interwar years, the sense of culture's fragility had been countered in various ways by civic, professional, and voluntary organizations. The campaign to rebuild the Leuven library, for example, involved the Carnegie Endowment, Herbert Hoover's Commission for Relief in Belgium, and countless college students, alumni, and schoolchildren. The library profession had taken on a number of international commitments

during and after World War I, for example, the Library War Service and the American Library in Paris; the international orientation of the ALA leadership—despite the apathy or opposition of many rank-and-file librarians—began in this period. The robust response of men at leading universities, learned societies, research libraries, and museums during World War II thus built on a history of private initiatives. They knew and worked with each other and possessed the confidence and authority that elite status and expert knowledge often produces. This must have been true of earlier generations of cultural leaders. What was different in these years was their growing intimacy with the state.

The New Deal established important precedents for a governmental policy toward endangered cultural heritage. In the 1930s the federal government had defined a state interest in cultural matters, through such domestic programs as the Federal Arts Project and the Historical Records Survey, and in initiatives in public diplomacy, notably the Division of Cultural Relations in the State Department. New national cultural institutions emerged, such as the National Archives and the National Gallery, founded in 1934 and 1937 respectively.

The individuals who lobbied to protect cultural monuments in wartime were not necessarily New Dealers. Rather, they had made close personal connections with key members of the government—on the Supreme Court, in the State Department, among Roosevelt's set of advisers, and with Roosevelt himself. David Finley, for example, had hitched his star to Andrew Mellon, Secretary of the Treasury under Calvin Coolidge; Mellon created the National Gallery of Art before he died, and Finley became its founding director in 1938 and a key figure in Washington. Archibald MacLeish likewise moved effortlessly between the worlds of culture and politics. A poet, playwright, and writer associated with the left, MacLeish became a member of the Roosevelt administration, serving as a speechwriter, Librarian of Congress, head of the Office of Facts and Figures, and later as an official in the Office of War Information and the State Department. Both Finley and MacLeish used their connections to promote cultural policy in wartime.⁷

In turn, government officials and military leaders embraced the proposal to protect art, libraries, and cultural sites for both pragmatic and idealistic reasons. The decision came as they planned the invasion of Italy. Officials in the Civil Affairs Division and the Schools of Military Government, making preparations for occupation governments, were especially receptive. Although concerned foremost with feeding, housing, and providing security to local populations, they also addressed the need to restore such social institutions as libraries, schools, and museums.

During the early stages of combat in Italy, civilian and military leaders saw that culture would become a battleground in the war for public opinion—in the United States and in Europe. Bombing transportation, communication, and production targets inevitably threatened churches and

historic buildings that dotted the Italian landscape. The Vatican repeatedly pressured the Allies to protect these sites, and Roosevelt's advisors were fearful of offending the sensitivities of Catholic voters, including many of Italian descent. But the military responded not merely to a voting bloc but to a broader, if diffuse, public that found meaning in the world of books, art, and culture. As *New York Times* columnist Anne O'Hare McCormick wrote, "A great many oddly assorted Americans are deeply stirred and worried by the fate that hangs over Rome" (1943). As might be expected, she had heard from a classics scholar and a Catholic bishop, but less predictably from "a soldier in a Midwest training camp, from a woman worker in a Jersey munitions plant, from teachers and businessmen." She concluded, "There can be no doubt that the American people's conception of victory is to save everything in Europe that we can."

Historians tend to ignore this constituency for high culture when they characterize the 1920s and 1930s as the era of motion pictures and radio. Librarians, along with educators and many commentators, certainly lamented the apparent triumph of mass culture and low-brow taste over the culture of arts and letters. But high schools, public libraries, and "middle-brow" book clubs all made versions of European art, music, and literature widely available, and they spread the idea that European cultural heritage was an important component of American national identity. Even radio attracted listeners who preferred Toscanini to soap operas; although only a small part of a day's entertainment, performances of classical music and informative shows about books and culture were regularly broadcast in the 1930s.⁸ Whatever the extent of such cultural tastes, the wartime American government and military believed in the existence of such a constituency, and some counted themselves a part of it.

After Pearl Harbor, this sense of the value of European culture inevitably became politicized, fodder in ideological warfare. Fascist radio broadcasts maligned Americans as uncivilized vandals who would loot Europe, "materialists without intelligence and civilization," "gangsters" who bombed religious and cultural sites "out of a sheer and senseless lust for destruction." In their view, the United States had no true culture of its own. As one fascist newspaper in Milan observed, "Their art treasures are the longest and most ugly bridge in the world, the highest and most ugly building in the world and the largest and most ugly statue in the world."⁹

Perhaps Americans saw a hint of truth in these charges, as the military went out of its way to disprove them. In step with Eisenhower's 1943 directive, they always underscored the primacy of saving soldiers' lives but repeatedly asserted that, with precision bombing and military discipline, the cultural heritage of Europe could be saved as well. Journalists were invited aboard the planes that bombed Rome to witness how the Air Force carefully protected sacred sites, and newspapers regularly ran aerial photographs to show that no damage had occurred (Matthews, 1943; Dasenbrock, 2005).

Government officials and editorialists forged an explicit connection between European cultural heritage and American ideals of democracy and freedom. "A history of civilization and liberty is written in the artistic and historic monuments of Europe," noted the Roberts Commission. But this history required a fabricated European past in which castles and cathedrals symbolized the Four Freedoms. One of the more tortured expressions of this view appeared in a letter to the *New York Times* praising the Acropolis and other treasured buildings of Athens as "government-made work . . . the result of an ancient New Deal," thus sanitizing Greek slave labor into a Works Progress Administration program.¹⁰

If individual works of art testified to the unique contributions of Europe, attention to the fate of books and libraries tied the New World to the Old in a different way: the printed word available to all, a cornerstone of American ideals. Thus the war brought about the increasingly political, even transcendent figure of the librarian as a front-line defender of freedom. Archibald MacLeish probably did more than anyone to produce this image. Even before Pearl Harbor, he had called on librarians to declare war against fascism. Describing the librarian's profession in 1940, he wrote: "In 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. The keepers, whether they so wish or not, cannot be neutral"¹¹

These words resonate powerfully across the decades. But they raise the question, did MacLeish's call to arms influence the making of a policy toward cultural protection in wartime? The place of librarians and archivists in this effort was, in fact, a vexed one. The mandate of the Roberts Commission and the military's Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives unit included the protection of books and archives, but it did so more as an afterthought than as a primary mission. At the meetings of the Roberts Commission, only MacLeish spoke about the needs of libraries; he did so repeatedly, yet the minutes show that few of his colleagues responded substantively to his concerns and suggestions. In late July 1944—as the military grew more confident that victory was in sight—MacLeish observed that there were no archivists and only one librarian doing cultural work in the European and Mediterranean theaters of war. Nor was there an effort to locate looted library collections. "There is nothing in the field of books that corresponds to the work in the field of art," he complained.¹² By the end of the war, the number of librarians and archivists in the European theaters had increased, but they continued to feel sidelined. Sargent Child, who had been sent from the National Archives to Germany to organize the collecting and restitution of archives, repeatedly griped about the dominance of the "art boys." As he put it to his contact at the Library of Congress, "God damn these little art empire builders."¹³

To be sure, the American policy toward cultural resources did protect a number of libraries and historic buildings holding private book collec-

tions. The MFAA officers in the field found frequent instances of looting, mayhem, and the thoughtless use of books and manuscripts. Local residents and Allied forces burned books and bookshelves for warmth in unheated buildings and placed manuscripts on hard floors for makeshift mattresses. In one case, a Monuments officer discovered a shopkeeper using eighteenth-century manuscripts for wrapping paper. The breakdown of troop discipline was especially apparent in Naples, where a special commission investigated damage to prominent buildings and educational institutions. It found that "Allied troops broke into the National Library on more than one occasion, and in addition to ransacking offices and leaving them in a state of great disorder, forced open a safe from which they removed seven 19th century gold medals." Books had been strewn on the floors, laboratory equipment smashed, and animal specimens destroyed. MFAA officers tried to prevent troop billeting in such places and argued for posting guards and "off limits" signs; they also sought to educate officers and troops about the value of European culture.¹⁴

However noteworthy the Roberts Commission and the MFAA, their actions must be weighed in relation to other wartime activities. In a classic case of unintended consequences, the government's need for intelligence had a greater impact on the fate of books than did the organizations whose mandate was cultural protection. The war brought librarians squarely into a relationship with the intelligence-gathering arm of the state through the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), as well as the intelligence units of the armed forces. Created out of whole cloth, the OSS remains famous for its unorthodox methods and talent. Although its alumni ran the gamut from Herbert Marcuse to Julia Child, the OSS usually recruited experts from Ivy League institutions and top-ranked research universities. Despite its reputation for glamorous exploits, much of its work, perhaps a majority of it, involved prosaic tasks of gathering and analyzing published materials. Its founder, William "Wild Bill" Donovan, believed that intelligence could be learned from open sources, and he sought broad-based, contextualizing information about, for example, industrial production, transportation patterns, and the psychology of the enemy.

Toward this end, the OSS set up an interagency group called the Interdepartmental Committee for the Acquisition of Foreign Publications (IDC) and recruited librarians, scholars, and others with linguistic ability and international experience to staff it. These included Frederick Kilgour and David Clift, who would become leaders in the library field after the war; John K. Fairbank, the noted China scholar; and Adele Kibre, a linguist, classicist, and experienced microphotographer before the war. The IDC established outposts in neutral cities—Lisbon, Stockholm, New Delhi, Cairo, and Chongqing among them—where agents could collect enemy newspapers, periodicals, and technical publications. Although they sent numerous originals back to the United States, the operation depended on

microfilm, which greatly reduced the weight and volume of materials for transport. Publications were microfilmed on the spot and sent to Washington and London for processing and distribution.¹⁵

Microfilm had emerged as a modern means of preservation and access by the 1930s, touted especially by the documentation movement. The war put this technology to the test. From a trickle in 1941—Donovan was thrilled when the first feet of microfilm arrived—microfilm reels soon flooded official Washington. In an eight-month period from November 1942 to June 1943, the IDC microfilmed nearly 82,000 published items and collected over 23,000 original publications; in the same period, it distributed nearly three-quarters of a million items to a variety of war agencies.¹⁶

This massive microfilming effort itself preserved many publications that would otherwise have disappeared from the human record, including obscure journals with small print runs, underground newspapers, and resistance pamphlets. Indeed, the Library of Congress had hoped that the IDC would generally acquire publications in the humanities and sciences for its collections at a time when the European book trade was disabled and the fate of book stocks unknown. Early on, it had struggled with the OSS for control of the IDC, contending, in essence, that the IDC's most important purpose was to ensure the continuity of recorded knowledge. The OSS won that battle, arguing that, for the duration, acquisitions must be instrumental, a means to victory in the war. Although it had not bent the IDC's mission to its desires, the Library of Congress remained one of the chief recipients of original and microfilmed publications from Europe and Asia during the war.

Attached to the OSS, the librarians began to transform themselves, as Frederick Kilgour put it, "from an acquisition group to an active producer of intelligence."¹⁷ This came about partly out of necessity. The microfilm bounty quickly proved a curse, as complaints poured into the OSS. Not only were copies indecipherable, but the compilation of materials seemed to have no rhyme or reason—an Italian newspaper, German technical manual, and French telephone directory might appear in quick succession. Over time, the librarians in the IDC's Washington headquarters solved these problems by understanding their product more as information than as material texts. They created specialized subject classifications, indices to the microfilms, cross-reference cards, biweekly reports on new acquisitions, and abstracts of articles, and they even offered full-text translations to their government clients. The organization hired a legion of indexers and translators, many of them women and émigrés, to accomplish what computers do now.

In the field, too, IDC agents pushed at the constraints of their job description. They began to supplement microfilmed publications with their own observations and reports on conversations and rumors. Some became downright skeptical of the value of what is now termed "open-source in-

telligence,” arguing that publications had to be actively combined with agents’ assessments of people and events. “Much of this general plan for omnivorous and utopian book gathering . . . has no great bearing on the winning of the war,” field representative George Kates wrote from China in 1944. “Some of the most vital information that this organization can gather is not in printed form, nor does it seem likely that it will become so.”¹⁸

Whether or not Kates was right—that the acquisition of publications made a limited contribution to the war effort—it is fair to say that this activity had a notable impact on cultural preservation. As the war in Europe moved into its final stages, the IDC became a smooth quasi-military operation. Its agents interrogated German prisoners-of-war in England about the location of library collections, archival records, and book stocks that had been moved and hidden. Working with military intelligence and regular soldiers in groups called “T-forces,” they followed the advancing Allied armies, combing through buildings, caves, and mines to cart out all forms of printed and archival material.¹⁹ This wholesale collecting effort had several purposes: to learn about the immediate military and political situation in Germany and Japan, to anticipate the intentions of the Soviet Union, to compile records for war crimes tribunals, to help establish the postwar occupation government in Germany, and to begin a process of de-Nazification by collecting and segregating Nazi publications.

Whatever the specific strategic intentions, the result was a considerable effort to preserve books and other cultural objects, one that simply had not been anticipated by civilian or military leaders. Despite their earlier planning, the T-forces, Monuments officers, and OSS men were unprepared for what they saw and found. Even as they encountered unbelievable devastation, they daily turned up treasure troves. Across the American zone of occupation in Germany, wrote one MFAA official in July 1945, “we now know of more than 800 mines, castles, country houses, churches, hospitals and other public buildings which contain works of art, archives and libraries.”²⁰ Ultimately, they would find 1,400 repositories.

In a program of organized pillage, the Nazis had removed entire collections from Poland and other occupied countries and had seized a vast array of Judaica from Jewish homes, synagogues, and institutions for a planned “Museum of an Extinct Race.” German officials had also belatedly moved their own book collections out of cities, where Allied bombing campaigns severely damaged library buildings and archives. These collections had been relocated to various salt mines and caves, where volumes were often piled up willy-nilly. The status of the Prussian State Library suggests the enormity of the problem. When the Americans arrived in Berlin in 1945, they found few books still in the library building. Most had been evacuated to over two dozen sites, many in what would become the Soviet zone of occupation, as well as in Poland. Of the one and a half million volumes sent to one town in the U.S. zone, about one in eight had been lost or damaged;

others were never recovered when the owners of the storage facilities had themselves become refugees and could not be located (Poste, 1958, pp. 234, 257; Hill, 1946).

The MFAA repeatedly drew attention to the “tragic need for more personnel to cope with the staggering exigencies of the present situation.”²¹ The immediate requirement was to protect these sites by shoring up roofs and walls, moving materials away from damp and mold, and posting guards and off-limit signs. Looting by soldiers, visiting officials, and local residents was a particular concern. Looting could be systematic, but more often it occurred opportunistically and it was nearly impossible to control. The longer range goal, of course, was to figure out what to do with all the objects they had found.

The Allies discussed and agreed on some general principles about the disposition of cultural objects, but few decisions about policy and procedure were reached. Soviet and French claims for reparations muddled the issue of cultural restitution and no agreement was reached on a single policy covering the four zones of occupation. As Michael Kurtz (1985, 2006) and Leslie Poste (1958) have written, the American occupation government established its own policies toward looted and displaced cultural materials, setting up collecting points in the American zone where books, art, and other items were gathered, cataloged, and repatriated. Despite urgent requests, however, the MFAA received little support for this effort; a small number of American personnel, along with local Germans cleared of a connection with the Nazi Party, were assigned to this enormous task.

The contradiction—strong statements of American policies to protect and restore European cultural heritage but a limited commitment to implement those policies—should not be surprising. This was a new and uncertain venture for the government, whose foremost concerns were winning the war, safeguarding American troops, and ensuring a strong position for the United States in the postwar world. An exclusive focus on political and military leaders, however, obscures the extent to which wartime policy toward culture was made “on the ground,” by librarians, archivists, art curators, and scholars, as well as army officers and ordinary GIs. The chaos of a war-torn territory, its privations and illegibility, produced quick decisions and makeshift procedures. The policies themselves were ambiguous and left ample room for interpretation and enterprise. In caves, mines, and bombed-out buildings, these men found themselves improvising solutions to preserve and return the millions of books and objects they had discovered.

One of the more intriguing examples is Douwe Stuurman, who had been a Rhodes scholar and teacher at Santa Barbara College before he joined the army as an ordinary GI. On his own, he began retrieving Nazi books and pamphlets; future generations needed to know this history, he believed, and these publications would provide concrete proof. One day

Stuurman showed his archive to Sargent Child, and the amazed Monuments officer could not contain his excitement. Stuurman had “run from Vienna to Nürnberg like a brilliant open field runner—he has gained access to cellars, attics, storerooms—thru [*sic*] the help of German and Austrian scholars—and by playing no tricks with them so that they learned to trust him—has come up with the beacon.” With an unofficial nod from his major, who quietly loaned him trucks, shelving, and space in a warehouse, Stuurman had collected over 100,000 items documenting the rise and fall of Nazi Germany.²² The principled call to preserve and document was, for Stuurman, a necessary rejoinder to looting and indifference.

The MFAA curators, archivists, and librarians in charge of the collecting points across the American zone showed similar initiative and sense of ethical purpose, although perhaps without Stuurman’s flair. American civilian and military leaders had determined that the restitution of cultural property would be made to the nations from which it had been taken; each nation was then responsible for restoring works to private owners. They had not set up procedures for the collecting points, however, and simply ordered the MFAA personnel to develop them. Thus art historian Craig Hugh Smyth, put in charge of the Munich Central Collecting Point, quickly decided how to arrange the work process, creating, for example, separate “national rooms,” where representatives from formerly occupied countries could come and, with the help of an assigned curator, research the provenance of the cultural property there.²³

This procedure seems to have worked relatively well for many art and book collections, but looted Judaica—over 2.5 million books, in addition to art and sacred objects—were stateless items and posed an especially difficult problem. The occupation government established the Offenbach Archival Depot for these materials (Poste, 1958, pp. 333–95; Waite, 2002; U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d. b). Led by Jewish-American librarians and archivists, the staff had the anguishing task of searching for rightful owners and deciding what to do with books whose owners had been murdered or could not be found. Many groups laid claims to these orphaned books, including the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, which had relocated from Vilna to New York in 1940; and the Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, whose research director was Hannah Arendt. The Polish government called for the repatriation of books stolen from Polish Jews, although most had been killed in the Holocaust; the Library of Congress wanted works whose owners could not be identified.

The Americans who worked at Offenbach were always aware of what the volumes represented—the displacement or death of millions of Jews—and they seem to have approached the task with a striking degree of reverence and empathy. “I would come to a box of books which the sorters had brought together, like scattered sheep into one fold,” Captain Isaac

Bencowitz wrote of his experience. "I would find myself straightening out these books and arranging them in the boxes with a personal sense of tenderness as if they had belonged to someone dear to me, someone recently deceased." He observed, "How difficult it is to look at the contents of the depot with the detachment of someone evaluating property or with the impersonal viewpoint of scholarly evaluation."²⁴

The experiences of Douwe Stuurman and Isaac Bencowitz offer evidence that cultural policy during World War II, for all that it involved the gaining of national advantage and prestige, simultaneously had a moral dimension. Those who encountered looted books and art, bombed libraries, and damaged churches felt gripped by the destruction they witnessed. Librarians, archivists, and curators may have come into the battlefield with an allegiance to cultural preservation, but others in the government and military felt a similar sense of responsibility. As Major General John H. Hilldring pointedly observed to the Roberts Commission, "soldiers aren't the vandalistic people that some folks think they are."²⁵ Certainly it was often difficult, even impossible, to navigate the cultural terrain of war by an ethical compass; other considerations—from those of policymakers, with their geopolitical strategizing, to such practices "on the ground" as looting and black marketeering—often prevailed. But if culture is often a domain for the instrumental projection of power, it never is only that.

War necessarily entails traumatic loss, and in the case of World War II those losses were catastrophic. Governmental measures to protect cultural resources were limited and not always effective. Policymakers took these steps with an eye toward favorable public relations and the future international standing of the United States. Their actions undoubtedly reflected a Eurocentric understanding of human civilization. Still, the decision to effect a policy for the preservation of culture was a highly significant one. It had an impact in real terms, saving books, artworks, historic buildings, and other material objects that do, in fact, speak to the continuities of the past, to individual and communal efforts to create, to invent, and to understand. And in the longer term, these actions have helped to make the *idea* of cultural preservation and restitution a legitimate one as an aspect of human rights (Barkan, 2000).

What can we learn from the history of cultural policy in World War II? There may be no direct lessons, but there are several points worth making. The 1930s and 1940s nurtured intellectuals and cultural leaders who believed in a relationship with government officials, policymakers, and the military; they were able to draw on those ties when faced with the problem of preserving culture in wartime. For many reasons, this relationship frayed in the second half of the twentieth century. Reaching across the divide now seems impossible for both sides. Scholars, intellectuals, and cultural figures often prefer the purist's position of outsider and critic to messy interactions with civilian and military leaders. As was true in World War II, however,

recent wars in Bosnia and Iraq have spurred extraordinary efforts by individuals—in academia and the military—to preserve cultural heritage, restore stolen goods, document cultural crimes, and bring perpetrators to justice (Bogdanos, 2005; Riedlmayer, 2005). Their actions should inspire a new level of communication and commitment between the worlds of culture and politics. It would certainly be better to choose engagement than to rely on the law of unintended consequences.

Archibald MacLeish wrote in 1940, “It is the essential character of our time that the triumph of the lie, the mutilation of culture, and the persecution of the Word no longer shocks us into anger.”²⁶ As he knew, freedom and democracy were bound up in the protection of and access to books, art, and culture. His diagnosis and prescription—a call to librarians, scholars, writers, and lovers of democratic culture to abandon neutrality and engage in its defense—continue to provoke and challenge us today.

NOTES

1. Directive, Eisenhower to All Commanders, December 29, 1943, ACC Files, 10700/145/1 (Coles & Weinberg, 1992, p. 417).
2. See the records of the U.S. American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas, RG 239, Microfilm M1944, National Archives and Records Administration [hereafter cited as Roberts Commission]; Records of American Defense—Harvard Group 1940–45, HUD 3139, Harvard University Archives; Poste (1958), Nicholas (1994).
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6. See, for example, United States Information Office, “Germans Systematically Looting Material and Cultural Wealth of Occupied Countries,” January 5, 1942, E16, Press Releases, 1943–46; “German Army Has ‘Special Service Battalion’ for Plunder of Cultural Treasures,” *Information Bulletin, Embassy of USSR*, no. 138 (Washington, D.C., November 19, 1942), 3–4; “Europe’s Vanishing Art,” *New York Sun*, October 9, 1943, all on roll 39, Roberts Commission. See also Nicholas (1994).
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12. The American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas, Special Meeting, July 27, 1944, p. 11, roll 5, Roberts Commission.
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