

Art and Culture in Times of Conflict

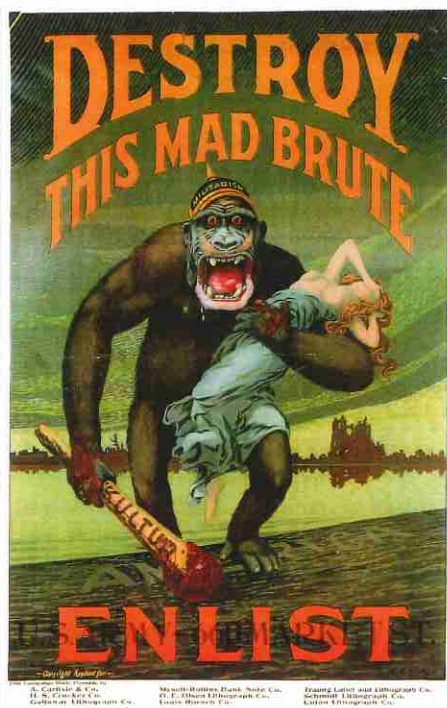
2014 was a year dominated as no other by commemorations of the First World War. Never before has the 1914-18 War generated so much public interest, a fact reflected in the exponential growth in the number of publications on the subject. One of those publications deserves particular attention: *Ravaged. Art and Culture in Times of Conflict*. It is the catalogue for the eponymous exhibition that was organised in 2014 at M museum in Leuven.

In thirty fairly short articles, the authors of the catalogue analyse an aspect of the history of war about which relatively little has hitherto been written, namely the ambivalent relationship between art and conflict. Throughout history, the destruction of art and culture has been an integral aspect of the prosecution of war. Plundering and destruction of cultural heritage during times of conflict is only very rarely regarded as 'collateral damage'; it is usually the result of deliberate actions which are intended to strike at the cultural and national identity of the enemy. The exhibition catalogue describes the symbolic value of such acts of deliberate military destruction throughout history. While the catalogue devotes special attention to the devastation wrought during the First World War, the reader will also find examples from all periods and from all parts of the world: from the destruction of the Library of Alexandria to the Protestant iconoclasm and the looting by the Spanish conquistadors in the sixteenth century, the plundering and destruction carried out by the French revolutionaries, the Maoists in China or, very recently, the Taliban in Afghanistan.

But the catalogue does not limit itself to the history of wartime destruction. Its approach is much more original, with the authors of the different articles also investigating the initiatives taken to protect national monuments, the importance of the art and culture that survives the ravages, and even the inspiration that several artists have drawn from these ravages since the sixteenth century. The book

opens by addressing precisely this question. As the first two articles demonstrate, the destruction of art has regularly been portrayed allegorically. Until the French Revolution, many artists drew inspiration from the theme of the struggle between the god Mars and the goddess Minerva to remind kings of the disastrous consequences of war. Other artists were particularly fascinated by the legendary accounts of ravaged cities, such as the Homeric Troy or Rome in 1527, and portrayed these events on canvas in an extremely dramatic way. After the horrors of two world wars, however, it became ever more difficult to portray the ravages of war in a figurative manner. As an example, in his article on modern Beirut, a city tormented by an 'unending war', Ghalya Saadawi refers to the work of Lebanese artists who turned away from clear and unambiguous portrayals of a war which they saw as being 'extended, unravelled and prolonged'. Later in the book, Yukie Kamiya tells us that the drama of Hiroshima was something that many artists were only able to interpret in a conceptual way. Their work is characterised by the way in which the events in Hiroshima, too horrific to portray, became a symbol for the hope of a rebirth.

If the catalogue begins with a question about the portrayal of the destruction of art in times of conflict, the articles on the protection and preservation of cultural heritage are found mainly at the end of the book. The articles in the middle section are more concerned with the various iconoclastic movements. Five of these articles discuss the ravages of the Great War. They recount the destruction of the Leuven University Library and Rheims Cathedral, but also describe the ideological debates between French and German intellectuals about who was to blame for these dreadful acts of destruction. In another striking article, Dominiek Dendooven demonstrates that the urban ruins left behind after the War quickly lost their value as tourist attractions in favour of the remnants of the battlefields. The populations of the ravaged towns and cities quickly set about restoring them and thus removing the visible war damage from the townscape.



American propaganda poster from the First World War calling on citizens to join the army to fight the German enemy.

The recent past was too painful to allow tangible evidence of it to remain, something that is also highlighted by Mark Jarzombek for Dresden after 1989, with its strong desire to eliminate anything that recalled the Communist period.

The emphasis in the articles on the protection of national monuments is on the French Revolution, the Second World War and the colonial period. The idea of protecting national monuments arose during the Revolutionary Wars. Wessel Krul discusses the first calls by revolutionaries such as Henri Grégoire to protect France's artistic heritage, while Dominique Poulot draws attention to the founding of the first universal museum to stem from this movement: the Louvre. In the same article, Poulot also underlines the imperialistic character of the Louvre, akin to that of the British Museum in London. Throughout the nineteenth century, the discourse on the protection and conservation of national treasures prompted the transfer of works of art from the colonies to the newly founded museums. During the Second World War, the confiscation of Jewish property prompted plans to found a comparable *Führermuseum* which was to overshadow the nineteenth-century imperialistic museums. This megalomaniacal project was nev-

er completed, but nonetheless forms a symbolic breaking point in the approach to artistic and cultural heritage. From the 1950s onwards, accounts of the imperialistic and Nazi plundering raised new questions about the repatriation of the confiscated items and about the need for an amended international jurisdiction – topics which are discussed respectively by Bert Demarsin and by Sigrid Van Der Auwera and Koenraad Van Balen. The catalogue ends with two articles focusing on the propaganda surrounding the destroyed cultural heritage. Annette Becker and Peter Weibel show that destruction of art and culture is regularly employed as a means of dehumanising the enemy.

This exhibition catalogue has been compiled with great care and thought. The two editors have succeeded in shedding light on the immensely complex relationship between art and conflict in a surprising and varied manner. The decision to opt for a *longue durée* approach and a study of the representations proves to be highly effective. The book manages to convince the reader that the ravages of war throughout history have been linked to ideological interests, propaganda strategies and a whole series of questions about the restoration, holding and repatriation of damaged and/or stolen works. This is done in a very subtle way, without being in any way boring or overloading the reader with unnecessary details. The catalogue is also richly illustrated with photographs of wartime destruction, as well as of works of art which sometimes show very clearly how the shock of destruction led to the birth of new forms of artistic expression. In short, this is a very inviting book which holds the reader's interest from start to finish and which continually surprises with new accounts.

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Translated by Julian Ross

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