# Part 2: Cultural Heritage under Siege: Recent Cases

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Part 2, “Cultural Heritage under Siege: Recent Cases,” explores in-depth several examples of dramatic attacks on cultural heritage in the contemporary era. We have organized the nine essays in this section of the book by geography, moving in general westward from China and ending in Guatemala.

Chapter 7 explores “Uyghur Heritage under China’s ‘Antireligion Extremism’ Campaigns.” The author is Rachel Harris, a distinguished professor at the University of London’s SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), whose research and teaching have long explored the fate of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the minority Turkic Muslim population of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in the far west of China. Not incidentally, similar techniques had successfully (from Beijing’s perspective) been used earlier against Tibetans in the Tibet Autonomous Region. Public attention elsewhere has been drawn to assaults on high-visibility monuments, but in Xinjiang there are no World Heritage Sites designated by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). China’s assaults on Uyghur heritage thus have been directed at more commonplace and community sites. The fundamental value of Uyghur mosques, cemeteries, and shrines resides in their historical meanings and connections to local communities. Although strongly denied by China’s central government, attacks on the Uyghur population are part of an antireligious campaign, which includes burning villages, ethnic cleansing, execution of large numbers of civilians, rape, and forced sterilization. Perhaps a million Muslims have passed through “reeducation” camps, presumably to overcome any excessively religious views.

While there is debate about whether China’s actions qualify as physical genocide, Harris unapologetically labels them “cultural genocide,” the result of Beijing’s political and economic goals allied closely with its Belt and Road Initiative. Unlike the crimes perpetrated by small and middle powers, for which modest policy tools exist and can feasibly be recommended to exert international pressure, those same tools in this case have extremely limited utility because China is a major economic and political force, a recently minted “superpower.” Nonetheless, Harris sees that “hope for the survival of the unique culture surrounding this religious heritage lies in the very transient nature of its architecture” because constant renovation and rebuilding have resulted in its resilience. She also holds out the hope, therefore, “that the current campaigns will not result in their final erasure from the collective memory of the people they have served for so long.”

Chapter 8, “When Peace Is Defeat, Reconstruction Is Damage: ‘Rebuilding’ Heritage in Post-conflict Sri Lanka and Afghanistan,” surveys cultural destruction of minority heritage in two recent armed conflicts in Central and South Asia. Kavita Singh, professor and former dean of Jawaharlal Nehru University’s School of Arts and Aesthetics, pushes the reader to consider what peace looks like after internecine wars: the views about heritage, and perhaps everything, depend on whether they are viewed from the perspective of winners or losers. Singh starts with the civil war in Sri Lanka that ended in 2009 after a quarter-century of bitter armed conflict between the victorious majority Sinhala (Buddhist) government and the losing Tamil Tigers, part of a minority Hindu population from the North. During reconstruction, Singh argues, the majoritarian government systematically used a variety of policy tools at its disposal, especially economic ones, to prioritize rebuilding that disempowers the minority ethnic group and fosters the discrimination that had sparked the war in the first place. Prevalent cultural destruction policies aim to erase the tangible and intangible traces of the Tamil presence and rewrite its past; the purpose is to replace it with Buddhist statues, viharas (monasteries), and stupas (funerary monuments). Ten years after the end of the war, on Easter Sunday in 2019, bombings perpetrated by ISIS on churches and luxury hotels in the capital Colombo demonstrated the remaining publicity value of destruction by a radicalized and still smaller Muslim minority.

Singh’s second case examines the spectacular and performative demolition of the sixth-century, rock-carved Buddhas in the Bamiyan Valley of Central Afghanistan. The ruling Taliban, an Islamist movement, effectively publicized propaganda that international actors, particularly Western powers, cared more about the statues than about desperate Afghans. The Taliban sought to conceal the human catastrophe in its accompanying campaign of atrocities perpetrated against the Hazara ethnic minority. While the Hazara are not Buddhists, they lived in the valley where the Buddhas had dominated for fifteen centuries, and they respected them. As Shi’ite Muslims, the Hazara were considered heretics by the Sunni Taliban; their true crime was not only idolatry but also, and perhaps more crucially, being members of the armed opposition to the Taliban. With their return to power following the US withdrawal, other ancient Buddhist ruins and artifacts may be targeted.

In both northern Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, Singh explores what happens to cultural heritage when wars end or violence diminishes: “the very processes of reconstruction … meant to repair a society become instruments through which one side continues its domination.” In short, the “disturbing shape taken by cultural reconstruction” after the wars in the Jaffna Peninsula and Bamiyan Valley suggest that decision-making intended to repair a community can become instead an effective instrument through which the majority victors continue to subjugate the minority losers.

The destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas is an example of a wider phenomenon, the publicity value for iconoclasts who perceive that they have much to gain and little to lose from such crimes. This sad calculation provides a helpful segue to Chapter 9, “Performative Destruction: Da’esh (ISIS) Ideology and the War on Heritage in Iraq.” While the costs to humanity of cultural destruction are incalculable, the public relations and recruitment benefits perceived by the destroyers are palpable, according to Gil Stein, professor of archaeology and former director of the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute. In a “dangerous new paradigm,” ISIS deployed a carefully orchestrated, public strategy that transmitted globally and in real time through the Internet images of cultural and physical genocide by targeting heritage and people in Iraq. The attacks accompanied the physical destruction targeting all “infidels” from outside Salafist Islam—namely any believer who is not a member of what they define as the purest Muslim group: not only Christians, Yazidis, and Jews but also Sufis and Shias. In fact, the heritage of these “infidel” Muslims has accounted for about two-thirds of the destruction and looting by ISIS. While the pursuit of a geographical caliphate has been defeated, the “model” of transmitting through social media and other Internet-based communications parallel attacks on humans and their heritage has a demonstrated and wider appeal to a broad range of violent and extremist groups that emulate performative destruction and adapt it to local conditions. Indeed, Stein fears that the example could be replicated by malevolent insurgents and governments worldwide. No distinction is made between enemies, on the one hand, and the cultural manifestations of their beliefs, on the other. The atrocities against people and patrimony were not haphazard but carefully planned and executed parts of a coherent and toxic jihadist ideology. The powerful mixture of religion and politics that facilitates recruitment on a global scale through performative destruction will require “innovative new legal and policy strategies to confront and hopefully neutralize this emerging threat.”

The following three chapters probe different aspects of Syria’s decade-long civil war that has resulted not only in widespread attacks on cultural heritage but also the forced displacement of half of the country’s prewar population, the deaths of upward of six hundred thousand of its citizens, and a litany of mass atrocities including the use of chemical weapons against civilians. Francesco Bandarin—a special advisor to the Aga Khan Development Network and former UNESCO assistant director-general for culture—analyzes this tragic case in Chapter 10, “The Destruction of Aleppo: The Impact of the Syrian War on a World Heritage City.” He weaves together attacks on social and physical infrastructure with those on cultural heritage—souks, khans, and mosques. In addition to his concern for substantial damage to individual structures, Bandarin examines the destruction of the entirety of the urban center of Syria’s commercial capital, which resulted from the Battle of Aleppo, “one of the longest and most deadly conflicts since World War II.” Like others working in this field, he argues that the existing hard and soft international law to protect people and their heritage provides an adequate legal framework; he sees no political pay-off from further efforts to refine the international legal regime. Instead, Bandarin recommends “a more systematic integration of cultural protection in humanitarian interventions and a greater involvement of military forces.” He emphasizes the absence of political will and effective means to ensure compliance with the law as the main stumbling blocks. He is encouraged by recent UN Security Council decisions, including the integration of cultural protection measures in the mandate of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and by the European Union’s endorsement of the protection of heritage in its Common Security and Defence Policy.

Chapter 11 considers another ravaged Syrian city in “The Lost Heritage of Homs: From the Destruction of Monuments to the Destruction of Meaning.” A practicing architect, Marwa al-Sabouni wrote this chapter while living with her family in the city of Homs under siege. She brings to bear the same passion that she did in [The Battle for Home: The Vision of a Young Architect in Syria](https://www.thamesandhudsonusa.com/books/the-battle-for-home-the-vision-of-a-young-architect-in-syria-hardcover), a book based on her personal experience of surviving and continuing to work in the rubble of her hometown. While suffering the ongoing hardships in war-torn Syria, her participation in this book project was challenged by the lack of Internet access resulting from US sanctions against Syria and Syrians. She argues persuasively that architecture plays a substantial role in whether and how a community crumbles or comes together amid communal violence and mass atrocities. In addition to the physical damage to and destruction of immovable heritage, her preoccupations concern the invisible and underlying meanings behind visible structures, which had led to their existence in the first place. She argues that losing connections with one’s heritage, and recovering and rediscovering its meanings, will be the primary challenge during future rebuilding. It will be “hindered by the same old arbitrariness and ignorance” because invisible meanings tend to be forgotten or overlooked in too many processes of restoration and preservation. In lamenting that Homs has been “transformed from a dull city into a dead city,” al-Sabouni is intent on exploring the meanings of architecture, before and after destruction by targeting or collateral damage. She thus stresses the critical importance for Syria’s future of decisions about what to reconstruct and how, a theme that animates her 2021 book *Building for Hope.*

A comparable preoccupation motivates Frederick Deknatel, the executive editor of *Democracy in Exile* and former managing editor of *World Politics Review*, whose Chapter 12 uses the ongoing tragedy in Syria to ask, “Reconstruction, Who Decides?” The primary goal of mediators and negotiators is to move beyond armed conflict. Yet, the day-to-day reality of “peace” looks different when judged by winners or losers—although it would be hard to deny that virtually everyone loses from internecine war and cultural heritage destruction. In addition to such destruction during war, another significant danger lurks afterward. In general, the term “post-conflict” peacebuilding is often a euphemism, more an aspiration than a reality. In Syria, in particular, so-called post-conflict rebuilding reflects the dominant political, economic, and cultural priorities of the authorities who exercise influence and power over decisions by both outside donors and investors. In this case, the government of Bashar al-Assad is sustained by Russian and Chechen assistance; it can decide what to rebuild, and what not to. It may appear perplexing to question the importance of reconstructing the symbolically important sites covered by the international media. But at the same time, it is crucial to question the priority afforded such reconstruction when neighborhoods in both Aleppo and Homs remain wastelands. Deknatel argues that the most relevant background information to understanding “victors’ justice” in this context is that these cities were once strongholds of the armed opposition that battled the al-Assad government. Decisions about selective reconstruction by the “pariah state” foster its propaganda goals in two ways: to project an image of the government’s effective control, and to reward loyalists. Meanwhile, help from the West and international organizations is held hostage to a political settlement in Syria, which is nowhere in sight.

Deknatel notes that Syria is hardly unusual and compares decisions taken to the history of reconstruction next door, or the “echoes” in neighboring Lebanon. Rebuilding there also did not meet the everyday needs of the population but rather those of the elite and of former warlords turned politicians. If inclusive decision-making is crucial, Deknatel’s grim narrative provides a cautionary note for those who clamor for rapid reconstruction without answering several questions: Who is allowed to be visible? Whose presence is kept hidden and suppressed? What is remembered and what is forgotten? What is permitted to occupy space, and what is buried or swept away? The implications are dire for future reconstruction for other countries emerging from armed conflict because the government “retains all power and authority, despite ruling over a country shattered by a war of Assad’s own making.”

The focus of Chapter 13 is on Yemen’s movable tangible heritage, which in part reflects the effects of the destruction of a substantial part of Yemen’s immovable cultural heritage during the ongoing civil war that has resulted in the world’s largest humanitarian crisis in the poorest country in the Arab world. In addition to bombing the World Heritage City of Sana’a, founded two and a half millennia ago, the coalition of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates has used numerous indiscriminate and disproportionate airstrikes to kill and injure thousands of civilians. Saudi jets have destroyed not only mud-brick tower houses, which date back thousands of years, but libraries. In addition to damage to these physical structures, it has also resulted in further losses of heritage, which is the focus in Sabine Schmidtke’s second contribution to this volume, “Yemen’s Manuscript Culture under Attack.” Here, she probes the long history of book preservation in the face of confiscation, censorship, and destruction as well as the ongoing, contemporary threats from the civil war and the indiscriminate sale of archives to collectors. She also mentions the “curse,” and simultaneously the ironic “blessing,” that some of the most important collections of manuscripts have not been destroyed because they are currently housed and thus protected in research libraries outside of Yemen.

The parallel destruction of immovable and movable cultural heritage is the focus of Chapter 14, “Cultural Heritage at Risk in Mali:The Destruction of Timbuktu’s Mausoleums of Saints.” The attacks on the northern Malian World Heritage Site during attacks on civilians in 2012 resulted in the leveling of several treasured monuments in the capital of the medieval trading and cultural kingdom. Lazare Eloundou Assomo, director of UNESCO’s Culture and Emergencies activities, led the reconstruction effort in Mali after the widespread attacks on the civilian population by the Islamist rebels of Ansar Dine (or al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, AQIM). The “reign of terror” that followed the imposition of Sharia law included torture, sexual slavery, and murder; in addition to these atrocities, the militants demolished completely fourteen of sixteen Sufi mausoleums, severely damaged three mosques, and burned over four thousand manuscripts.

International efforts have received attention, including by the International Criminal Court, where Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi pled guilty and was convicted as a coperpetrator of the war crime of intentionally directing attacks against Timbuktu’s religious and historical buildings. Assomo stresses another lesson closer to the scene of the suffering: the crucial importance of relying on local skills, materials, and artisans. This approach not only injected much needed funds into the local economy but also fostered authentic reconstruction, ownership, and peacebuilding. Assomo points to the lessons for other crises because international inputs “facilitated the harmonious combination of traditional practices and international standards.” In addition, “incorporating the masons in decision-making ensured that the mausoleums would be reconstructed with ancestral, traditional techniques, in order to preserve the city’s integrity” and the involvement of religious authorities and families responsible for the mausoleums made it possible to develop an agreed reconstruction strategy, document the reconstruction process, and allow the local community to retake ownership. The Mali case thus provides thoughtful lessons for other “post-conflict” reconstruction—although Islamist militants remain a threat throughout the north of the country. Expert studies and the mobilization of external resources helped to overcome the psychological trauma from the wanton cultural desecration, which in turn facilitated the rebirth of a stable society in Timbuktu as part of the country’s recovery from mass atrocities.

The final case study in Part 2 is Chapter 15, “Indigenous Threatened Heritage in Guatemala,” by Victor Montejo, who is professor emeritus in the Department of Native American Studies at the University of California, Davis. His scholarly and practical orientations reflect both his academic training and indigenous roots in Guatemala. This chapter, as well as his career as a teacher and researcher, address the Maya culture of Central America, which was under siege long before several national administrations more recently committed mass atrocities against indigenous people and attacked their ancient culture. Montejo’s short summary is telling: “the Guatemalan military government unleashed a scorched earth policy which destroyed entire villages and massacred thousands of indigenous people.” The recent crimes began in the 1960s as an integral part of the central government’s strategy to win the civil war and crush the resistance by armed indigenous belligerents. That war ended in the mid-1990s, but Montejo contextualizes those three decades of repression and destruction of Maya cultural heritage as a continuation of the physical and cultural assaults that had persisted for centuries, and from which the resilient Maya have been unable to escape even after more than half a millennium of atrocities. The intimate relationship between protecting people and their heritage is clear, and Montejo laments that nearly every aspect of the Maya cultural tradition remains unprotected. In looking toward a better future and as an antidote to continuing “Mayacide,” he calls for more vigorous efforts to ensure essential inputs from local scholars and citizens in decisions about the protection of Maya movable and immovable cultural heritage; similar consultations should also characterize archaeological excavations. He makes clear the reason to recognize the links to their heritage: “we must not think of them just as victims of the circumstances around them, but as creators and actors in the protection of their cultural heritage in the twenty-first century.” Like other contributors, Montejo pleads with the international community of states to apply pressure on all countries and individuals to comply with the international laws on the books, whose provisions aim to protect people from atrocities and their cultural heritage from destruction but lack enforcement.