# Part 5: Cultural Heritage and Military Perspectives

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Part 5 comprises six chapters with differing interpretations of the pertinence and applicability of “military perspectives” to the topic of cultural heritage protection. In many ways, regular and irregular armed forces alike have been the perpetrators of destruction of cultural heritage through direct targeting and collateral damage during warfare. But the most responsible militaries have also been advocates for better rules to govern the protection of cultural heritage—just as they were among the most enthusiastic supporters of and catalysts for other provisions of the laws of war, or international humanitarian law. In addition, the uses and regulation of military force for human protection purposes have provided the basis for a dominant albeit contested theme in contemporary debates, the responsibility to protect (R2P).

The first three chapters are in-depth explorations of cultural heritage from the vantage point of the US military at key historical junctures. Chapter 27, “Protecting Cultural Heritage on the Battlefield: The Hard Case of Religion,” analyzes decisions about European religious sites during World War II. The author is Ron Hassner, professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley. He begins with General (later President) Dwight D. Eisenhower’s comment that “nothing can stand against the argument of military necessity,” but that too often indifference to cultural heritage or laziness has led to rationalizations “of military convenience or even of personal convenience.” Hassner explores the hard case of religion in relation to the destruction and protection of cultural heritage in the European theater during the war—“hard,” in his view, because the stakes were so high and no one could readily afford to demonstrate restraint in the midst of all-out war. The meaning for local populations of such damage is straightforward: they see a lack of respect and desecration of culture defining entities and practices. Moreover, the difficulties of avoiding destruction from the perspective of military planners are acute because so many of the most important sacred shrines are in strategic urban areas, or are surrounded by civilians who are protected by the laws of war. Stressing the significance of both World War II’s Roberts Commission and the “Monuments Men,” Hassner points to the short-term utilitarian logic of protection and the longer-term concern regarding the Allied legacy for post-conflict reconstruction in Europe. He concludes by pointing to the conditions under which the protection of immovable cultural heritage is likely to produce military restraint—especially the favorable views by opposing military forces and by civilians living near immovable sites. An additional factor in explaining restraint is the extent to which particular sites of religious heritage appeal to a large international audience concerned about the civilians near them. This concern is especially significant when public support for armed conflicts reflects a component of “hearts and minds.”

Chapter 28, “From Kyoto to Baghdad to Tehran: Leadership, Law, and the Protection of Cultural Heritage,” is by the distinguished professor and analyst of military affairs and political science Scott Sagan of Stanford University. The intersection between the logics of morality and strategy are his point of departure for exploring why the laws of war, also called “international humanitarian law,” are not merely pieces of paper when interpreted properly by the right leadership. Sagan begins his account with President Harry Truman’s 1945 decision to replace Kyoto, the ancient Japanese capital, with Nagasaki as the favored target for the second nuclear bomb. He fast-forwards to the more recent cases of the 1991 Gulf War, the 2003 looting of the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, and the 2020 threat by then president Donald Trump against Iranian cultural heritage sites. While appreciating the “difficult balancing act” between the principles of proportionality and precaution, Sagan’s key lesson from these cases is that protecting cultural heritage matters not only when it helps win battles and wars (as a “force multiplier”) but even when it does not. He applies this generalization to all countries and not merely the United States. It also means that the ratification of existing international law is essential even if, or perhaps because, treaties provide standards and guidelines; they do not constitute strict, rigid rules. As a result, his powerful concluding plea resonates loudly: “We should follow the law because it reflects who we are, or at least who we aspire to be.” At the same time, like other scholars and researchers, he recommends gathering more and better data because we “would benefit from more empirical research on the conditions under which protecting cultural heritage helps win conflicts and promotes peace afterward, and under which this strategic logic is compelling.” In short, in the complex process of applying not only legal and ethical but also military reasoning, Sagan believes that people matter, that international humanitarian law matters, and that cultural heritage matters.

The third presentation of military perspectives emanates from two faculty members at the US Military Academy, West Point: Ruth Beitler, professor of comparative politics, and Dexter Dugan, a major and instructor of social sciences. Chapter 29, “Practicing the Art of War While Protecting Cultural Heritage,” brings to bear recent US military practice as well as institutional deliberations, particularly regarding the lengthy and controversial invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. These contemporary cases complement the older historical examples in the preceding two chapters. Both Afghanistan and Iraq illustrate well how “significant twenty-first century challenges have complicated cultural heritage protection during military operations.” Of note are two complications that circumscribe the protection of cultural heritage during military operations; both reflect technological developments and often lead to “increased resentment and frustration when sites are not protected or become collateral damage.” First, social media provide not only real-time viewing but also increase the propaganda impact of any destruction of cultural heritage—especially by non-Muslim (that is, US military) forces in the two cases under discussion. Second, precision munitions reduce the tolerance for collateral damage of any magnitude whether military necessity requires it or not. The US Army’s evolving practices are reflected in formal rules and doctrine that aim to protect, or at least not unduly harm, cultural heritage—a tactic that has an intrinsic as well as consequentialist value in improving relations with civilian populations. Beitler and Dugan conclude with recommendations—training, education, partnerships with experts, and better intelligence gathering and information—to ensure that military forces are viewed by local populations as protecting and respecting, or at least not harming, their cultural heritage. They argue that there has been little to no systematic study of the impact of occupations on the preservation of cultural heritage. They conclude that “future research on the ramifications of long-term occupations on cultural heritage protection will benefit the field.”

Part 5 continues with Chapter 30, “Peace Operations and the Protection of Cultural Heritage.” Richard Gowan, the UN director of the International Crisis Group in New York, is a recognized authority on the United Nations and especially its practices of traditional peacekeeping as well as more robust peace operations. While peacekeeping was not in the UN Charter, it is generally viewed as a legitimate invention of the world organization, of deploying outside military forces under UN command and control with authorization from the UN Security Council. Continual adaptation has characterized the evolution of peace operations since the 1950s, which includes the emphasis in Gowan’s essay on the inclusion of the protection of Mali’s cultural heritage as part of the “people-centered approach” in the mandate of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).

In addition, he examines the impact of NATO’s Kosovo Force that had, and continues to have, heritage-protection activities. While outside forces can view these actions as distractions, especially with resources so limited and demands so overwhelming, Gowan argues that they should be reframed as integral to protecting people, fostering political settlements, and reknitting the fabric of societies. The protection of cultural heritage as a more routine part of mandates for international peace forces would include removing hazards, suppressing looting, and deterring politically motivated attacks. If such actions improve relations with the local community, how can such protection be considered a distraction for peacekeepers? Yet as Gowan points out, this first-time experiment in a UN peace operation has been on “an unfortunate hiatus since 2017.” The following year the UN Secretary-General criticized the proliferation of mandates with many additional tasks, viewing the latter as distractions or “baubles weighing down a Christmas tree.” A better question is, could heritage protection produce a virtuous circle, a different kind of “force multiplier”? The key to protecting cultural heritage during and after armed conflicts is political—indeed, it is impossible to disentangle heritage protection from the broader reasons that justify the deployment of peacekeepers. Thus, negotiators should find incentives and prioritize persuading local and national leaders of the essential need for protection because the most decisive factor in success is local buy-in. Gowan concludes with the appeal of cultural heritage protection: “A UN official with absolutely no cultural sensitives should be able to see that heritage sites are significant factors in her or his political and security work. An architectural historian or archaeologist with no interest in mediation or military patrols should, conversely, see the potential utility of working with the UN or NATO.”

Chapter 31 also moves beyond mere military forces to examine “the necessity for dialogue and action integrating the heritage, military, and humanitarian sectors,” which is the subtitle for “Protecting Cultural Heritage in Armed Conflict.” As human beings are the focus for all normative, legal, and military interpretations of events, a distinctive additional civilian perspective is that of “humanitarians.” The author, Peter Stone, is the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) chair in cultural property protection and peace at Newcastle University’s School of Arts and Cultures. His perspective reflects the training courses he has organized in Europe and his practical applied policy experience as the former vice-president and current president of the Blue Shield, a nongovernmental organization that fosters awareness of and respect for cultural property protection. The history of efforts to safeguard heritage is, perhaps unexpectedly for newcomers to the field, a lengthy one. They include the founding fathers of international law (Hugo Grotius) and of military strategy (Claus von Clausewitz); but the post–Cold War era has witnessed a growing visibility of the issue and efforts to formulate more specific policies and undertake more concrete protective actions. Stone’s point of departure is “the indivisible link between the protection of people and their cultural property.” He analyzes numerous threats—lack of planning and awareness, collateral damage, direct targeting, looting, reuse of sites, neglect, and development—during times of war and peace. He argues that successful protection must move beyond the confines of the heritage community and become integral to political, humanitarian, and military thinking. Stone recognizes the long-run horizon for his work, “an extremely ambitious project that will not be delivered in my lifetime.” He also acknowledges that effective “cultural property protection in armed conflict will never be achieved by the heritage sector simply shouting that it must be taken seriously,” but rather when all relevant parties recognize the pertinence and traction of cultural heritage protection for the realization of their values and objectives.

Part 5 concludes with Chapter 32 by independent journalist and author Hugh Eakin, who explores a stage in conflict management and resolution that most mediators and activists pursue indefatigably, namely “When Peace Breaks Out.” Even if safeguarding cultural heritage is successful in the midst of our focus on wars and terrorism, it will be of little value without appropriate strategies once armed combat or violence eases. Eakin argues that this subsequent period has attracted far too little analytical and policy attention. As such, it presents an opportunity but also exposes new threats, which are captured in his subtitle “The Peril and Promise of ‘Afterwar.’” If a central objective is successful heritage preservation, care must be taken because international and civil wars can be followed by a brutal and destructive peace. While the impulse to destroy the cultural heritage of an enemy is seemingly a universal and ancient tactic, “equally old may be the impulse to preserve, an impulse that has often transcended confessional and ethnic boundaries.” The challenge is to ensure that peace accords foster the latter impulse. Eakin points to numerous contemporary cases which have resulted in global outrage against the wanton destruction of cultural heritage. That, in turn, has led to a growing awareness of this challenge along with the exploration of measures to protect it from combatants and interveners alike. The steepest challenge, according to Eakin, is to convert the opportunities for short-term protection into longer-term preservation. His fieldwork across numerous crises leads to some optimism: “Such destructive acts might be prevented with the right kind of international pressure.” Yet over the longer term, heritage survival (either protection or reconstruction) depends on local governments and local populations—especially for sites that do not reflect their own ethnic or religious identities. In cases ranging from Cyprus and Syria to Kosovo, Mali, and Azerbaijan, Eakin concludes that monuments were spared “because they speak to the people that live around them.”