WAR AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

Starting point: George Clooney's The Monuments Men (2014)

PART I — THE OPENING DOCUMENT

The trailer of The Monuments Men (2014)

Film: The Monuments Men (2014), directed by George Clooney. The film draws on the historical work of the **Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives (MFAA)** programme, established during the Second World War.

Trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SziPDANik18

1. Why begin with this trailer?

The trailer establishes a striking contradiction: while the Second World War is fought through the destruction of cities and the killing of populations, a group of specialists is sent to protect objects that may appear to have little immediate military significance. The protagonists are art historians, museum directors, architects, conservators and specialists. Their weapons are expertise, historical understanding and a conviction that cultural objects matter.

2. A critical reading of the trailer

A. The unlikely soldier: expertise as courage

The film contrasts the conventional soldier with the intellectual. Its protagonists are not primarily trained to kill; they are trained to identify, interpret and preserve cultural objects. The narrative suggests that civilisation requires forms of courage other than military bravery. Yet it risks constructing a reassuring opposition between Nazi barbarism and Allied humanism. The distinction cannot simply be accepted without examining Allied destruction of historic environments, including Monte Cassino, Dresden and parts of Florence.

B. Art as a target: Nazi appropriation

Nazi art looting was not merely opportunistic pillage. It was connected to a systematic project of cultural domination. The regime confiscated Jewish-owned collections, appropriated works for projected museums and collections, suppressed so-called “degenerate art”, removed objects from occupied territories and marginalised cultural expressions incompatible with Nazi ideology.

- The confiscation of Jewish collections and property.
- The seizure of artworks for Hitler’s projected cultural institutions, including the Führermuseum planned for Linz.
- The 1937 Entartete Kunst (Degenerate Art) exhibition and the suppression of modernist and avant-garde art.
- The removal of cultural objects from occupied countries and institutions.

The theft of a painting from a Jewish family cannot be understood simply as the displacement of an artwork. It formed part of a wider process of persecution, dispossession, deportation and extermination. The film’s treasure-hunt structure can make this history resemble an adventure about recovering masterpieces; the historical reality is much darker.

C. The masterpiece and cultural hierarchy

The film concentrates on celebrated works of European art. This provides a useful opening to ask whether cultural heritage must be recognised as aesthetically exceptional in order to deserve protection. Ordinary

houses, village churches, cemeteries, archives, local workshops and places of collective memory may be just as important to the communities connected with them.

Students should distinguish artistic, historical, religious, spiritual, symbolic and social value. These categories overlap but are not identical. Cultural heritage cannot be reduced to the protection of masterpieces.

D. Military necessity and cultural protection

The MFAA specialists worked within a military structure whose priorities were victory, logistics, troop movements and the defeat of the enemy. Their work was often marginal to operational strategy. This tension remains central to international humanitarian law: cultural property may be endangered by military operations, and the law recognises only narrowly defined circumstances in which military necessity may justify an exception to the duty of respect.

The film's emphasis on individual heroism can obscure the institutional dimensions of the historical operation: authorisation, military coordination, inventories, recovery, administration and restitution.

E. Sentimentalising European civilisation

The film presents European masterpieces as a shared human inheritance. This is a powerful idea, but the narrative says relatively little about colonial histories of collecting, imperial expansion and unequal transfers of cultural objects. The question of restitution is therefore not an appendix to the Monuments Men story; it is one of its most important legacies.

Can we defend cultural heritage during war without questioning the historical circumstances through which some museums and collections acquired their objects?

F. An American narrative of liberation

The film is an American production and presents the United States as a defender of European civilisation. American personnel did play a major role in the MFAA, but the historical programme was international and depended on specialists, institutions and local actors from several countries. The film's representation of Soviet forces also reflects the political memory through which the Second World War has often been narrated in the West.

The film is not politically neutral. It offers a particular vision of American leadership, European civilisation and the relationship between military power and cultural authority.

G. Historical simplification

The MFAA was a large administrative and professional effort, not simply a small band of heroes searching for treasures. Its personnel identified monuments, advised commanders, located looted objects, secured repositories and contributed to years of restitution work. The film dramatises events and alters aspects of the historical record. It should therefore be approached as historical fiction that reveals contemporary attitudes towards cultural heritage as well as aspects of the 1940s.

A useful distinction for students: the recovery of an object is not the same as its restitution. Recovery means locating and securing it; restitution means identifying its rightful owner and returning it.

1. Can the defence of cultural heritage be considered a military objective?
2. Why do authoritarian regimes seek to appropriate or destroy the cultural heritage of conquered populations?

3. Is the protection of a painting morally comparable to the protection of a human life?
4. What does the film mean by civilisation?
5. Does the trailer present cultural heritage as universal, European or Western?
6. Is the film an accurate historical account or a romanticised representation of the Second World War?
7. How does the film construct the moral opposition between the Allies and Nazi Germany?
8. Does it sufficiently acknowledge damage caused by Allied military operations?
9. Why does the recovery of stolen art become a matter of national and international prestige?
10. What is the difference between saving an artwork and restoring its rightful ownership?
11. Can cultural heritage belong to humanity when its ownership is disputed?

PART II — HISTORICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

4. What do we mean by cultural heritage?

Category	Examples
Movable heritage	Paintings, sculptures, manuscripts, archives, archaeological objects
Immovable heritage	Monuments, historic buildings, archaeological sites, urban landscapes
Religious heritage	Churches, mosques, synagogues, shrines, cemeteries
Intangible heritage	Languages, rituals, oral traditions, music, craftsmanship
Documentary heritage	Libraries, archives, historical records, photographs

Cultural destruction does not necessarily involve the physical destruction of a museum or monument. Suppressing a language, prohibiting religious practices, destroying archives, displacing communities and rewriting historical narratives may also constitute forms of cultural erasure.

5. Why destroy cultural heritage?

Military strategy. A site may be attacked because it is used for military purposes, occupies a strategic position or is caught in an attack against a military objective.

Ideological warfare. A regime or armed movement may destroy objects that contradict its religious, political or historical worldview.

Ethnic and cultural erasure. Attacks on monuments, places of worship, archives and landmarks may attempt to eliminate the visible presence of a population from a territory.

Economic exploitation. Looting and trafficking may finance armed groups, enrich individuals and feed illicit markets.

Political domination and historical revisionism. Destroying or appropriating heritage can impose a new account of history and legitimise territorial or political claims.

PART III —HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

THE SECOND WORLD WAR (1939–1945)

The destruction and appropriation of European cultural heritage

The war against objects and memory

The Second World War was a turning point in cultural heritage protection. Historic cities, religious buildings, museums, libraries, archives and archaeological sites suffered unprecedented destruction. Two processes must be distinguished: damage resulting from military operations, and deliberate appropriation or destruction as an ideological and political objective.

Nazi Germany and systematic looting

The Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR) organised the confiscation of cultural property, particularly from Jewish families and institutions. In occupied Paris, the Jeu de Paume became a central location for the registration and processing of looted artworks. Collections belonging to Jewish collectors, including the Rothschild family and the David-Weill family, were seized.

Nazi cultural policy also imposed an ideological hierarchy on artistic production. The 1937 Entartete Kunst exhibition denounced modernist and avant-garde art. Works by Jewish artists, expressionists, surrealists and others were labelled degenerate; some were sold abroad and others destroyed.

Hitler's projected Führermuseum in Linz reveals that looting was an attempt to appropriate Europe's cultural achievements and incorporate them into a new ideological order.

The destruction of cities

Warsaw. The systematic destruction of the Polish capital, especially after the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, demonstrates the relationship between military violence and the erasure of national identity.

Dresden. The Allied bombing of February 1945 destroyed much of the historic urban environment and raises difficult questions about military necessity, civilian harm and cultural loss.

Monte Cassino. The destruction of the abbey in February 1944 during the Allied campaign in Italy exposes the tension between a historic monument and military calculations.

Florence. The destruction of bridges and buildings during the German retreat in August 1944 illustrates the vulnerability of historic urban environments.

These cases should not be used to establish a false equivalence between Nazi cultural plunder and Allied military operations. Their contexts, intentions and responsibilities differed. They should, however, encourage careful examination of the consequences of military action.

The Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives programme

Established in 1943, the MFAA programme identified endangered monuments, advised military authorities, located looted artworks, secured recovered collections and helped organise restitution. Its personnel worked at repositories including Neuschwanstein and the Altaussee salt mine. The programme was international and depended on professional expertise and military coordination.

The central distinction is between recovery and restitution. Recovery locates and secures an object; restitution identifies its rightful owner and returns it. Restitution could be difficult when owners had been murdered, records destroyed and property transferred repeatedly.

The post-war problem of ownership

The end of the war did not resolve ownership. Millions of objects had been displaced; some were recovered, while others disappeared into private collections or crossed borders. Restitution became a major issue in the reconstruction of European cultural institutions.

1945–1954

From the ruins of war to international protection

The failure of pre-war protection

The 1907 Hague Regulations already protected certain institutions dedicated to religion, education, the arts and sciences and prohibited forms of pillage. The Second World War exposed the inadequacy of the existing framework.

The 1954 Hague Convention

The Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was adopted on 14 May 1954. It established a comprehensive treaty framework for safeguarding cultural property in peacetime and respecting it during armed conflict. It also addresses theft, pillage, misappropriation and vandalism.

Article 4 prohibits acts of hostility against cultural property, subject to a narrowly framed exception where military necessity imperatively requires it. This exception raises questions about interpretation, evidence and accountability.

The Blue Shield emblem

The Convention introduced the Blue Shield emblem to identify protected cultural property. Its practical effectiveness depends on recognition, proper marking, training and the willingness of belligerents to respect the law.

The 1999 Second Protocol

The Second Protocol strengthened the Convention, introduced enhanced protection for cultural property of the greatest importance for humanity, clarified individual criminal responsibility and strengthened sanctions for serious violations. It entered into force in 2004.

THE COLD WAR (1945–1989)

Cultural heritage, ideology and political identity

Berlin: the divided city

Berlin’s architecture and urban landscape embodied the division of Europe. The Brandenburg Gate, the Berlin Wall and changing approaches to central Berlin show how buildings and urban spaces become

ideological statements. The question is not only what was destroyed, but what was rebuilt, preserved or deliberately removed.

Reconstruction and authenticity

The reconstruction of Warsaw's Old Town raises questions about historical authenticity. Should destroyed buildings be reconstructed exactly, or should ruins be preserved as evidence of trauma? Can a reconstruction become authentic when original material has disappeared?

CENTRAL QUESTIONS

Is cultural heritage universal?

The 1954 Convention expresses the idea that damage to cultural property belonging to any people is damage to the cultural heritage of humanity. Yet a monument may mean different things to different communities. How can universal protection acknowledge contested meanings?

Can cultural destruction constitute cultural genocide?

The expression is often used analytically, but it must be distinguished from the legal definition of genocide under the 1948 Genocide Convention. Destruction of heritage alone does not automatically constitute genocide; it may form part of a wider campaign against a protected group.

Can cultural destruction be a form of warfare?

Destroying a cemetery, mosque, church, library or national monument can communicate that a community has no legitimate historical presence in a territory. Cultural destruction may therefore function as psychological and political warfare.

Who decides what should be preserved?

UNESCO, states, museums, international organisations and local communities may have different priorities. Restitution also raises questions about objects acquired through colonial expansion, conquest or occupation.

Can reconstruction erase the memory of destruction?

Reconstruction may conceal the violence that destroyed a monument. Should ruins be preserved? Should a reconstruction reproduce the original or acknowledge the historical rupture?

Is cultural protection a moral obligation or a political choice?

International condemnation does not itself protect heritage. Enforcement depends on political will, military cooperation, resources and accountability.