The Conflict Antiquities Trade: 
A Historical Overview

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The public and professionals alike have been sensitized to the problem of conflict antiquities through the Syrian civil war. The history of the trade is sometimes traced as far back as Iraq, Afghanistan or Cambodia. Yet, such plunder forms a piece with far older programmes of State expropriation. Complex structures for antiquities trafficking by armed groups and repressive regimes, and sophisticated markets that consume violently extracted cultural assets, have existed for more than a century.

Category error

The standard definition, established under the United Nations (UN), is that ‘blood diamonds’ or ‘conflict diamonds’ are ‘diamonds that originate from areas controlled by forces or factions opposed to legitimate and internationally recognized governments, and are used to fund military action in opposition to those governments’ (UN 2000). However, that is inadequate even for natural resources. As Global Witness (2012: 20) have pointed out it essentially excludes the illicit trade’s role in financing the activities of other human rights abusers, e.g. it excludes forces and factions aligned with governments and governments themselves.

For example, the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme for conflict-free States and enterprises recognize that, as well as Angola, the DRC and Sierra Leone, the conflict diamond trade has also afflicted Côte d’Ivoire and Liberia (Kimberley Process 2013). Yet it does not recognise the handling of diamonds that finance Robert Mugabe’s regime in Zimbabwe as trading in conflict diamonds, despite the fact that it is a source of off-budget financing for Zimbabwe’s Central Intelligence Organization (CIO), Ministry of Defence (MOD) and State-owned and internationally sanctioned Zimbabwe Defence Industries (ZDI), which ‘subverts civilian and democratic control’ of law enforcement, facilitates undemocratic management of political life and finances human rights abuses by that government or its shadow, ‘parallel government’ (Global Witness 2012: 3; 4).

Furthermore, there are problems specific to the illicit trade in cultural goods as ‘cultural’ instead of ‘natural’ resources. The destruction and deprivation inherent to the looting and trafficking of cultural property mean that human rights violations are inherent to the illicit trade. And cultural assets may be extracted through State or non-State violence as ‘cultural’ instead of ‘economic’ capital. Hence, it may be helpful to use ‘blood antiquities’ and ‘conflict simultaneously but distinctly, wherein ‘blood antiquities’ are pieces of cultural property that are extracted through violence by politically motivated armed groups, and ‘conflict antiquities’ are pieces of cultural property that are handled to finance politically motivated human rights abusers.

Material assets and cultural assets

Consideration of the distinct treatment of plundered cultural property has persisted for practically as long as cultural property has been plundered. While the Neo-Babylonian Empire plundered Jerusalem in 597 BC, and the Achaemenid Empire incentivized its
forces with the spoils of war and plundered the Neo-Babylonian Empire in 539 BC, the Achaemenid Empire returned the plundered religious artefacts in Babylon to Jerusalem (Miles 2011: 29). The Roman Empire generally refrained from expropriating religious artefacts. It also venerated those religious artefacts that it did expropriate, and partially financed itself through the sale of other cultural property to private buyers (Miles 2011: 30).

Likewise, in the medieval period, Hindu conquerors preserved plundered icons for veneration instead of sharing, selling, or recycling them (Davis 1997: 62-66). Muslim conquerors preserved significant icons for desecration (Davis 1997: 104-108). However, ownership was still believed to be transferred by acquisition through State action. Preservation and destruction were matters of religious duty (or its absence) and economic benefit, rather than matters of historical understanding and cultural respect. Restitution was still ultimately performed as an act of realpolitik and strategy, rather than a recognition of property rights or cultural belonging.

Long after the moral and political debates over the acquisition and repatriation of cultural property in the defeated Napoleonic Empire, and not long before the international prohibition of pillage and plunder through the Conventions of the first and second Hague Peace Conferences (HPC 1899; 1907), ‘punitive expeditions’ to vulnerable States by powerful States persisted as standard practices. By then, though, cultural assets were expropriated as cultural assets, which thereby had exceptional value. Since then, the cultural property market's exploitation of such criminal opportunities, and supplier criminals' exploitation of such market opportunities have continued to grow.

When the Second French Empire sacked Korea in 1866, when the British Empire sacked Ethiopia in 1868, Ashanti in 1874 and Benin in 1897, for example, those States extracted blood antiquities – assets that were donated to their own cultural heritage institutions (Forrest 2010: 162). Certainly, when the British Empire sacked Ethiopia, Ashanti and Benin, it also extracted conflict antiquities – assets that were auctioned and sold to cultural property collectors to cover the costs of its invasions (AFROMET 2000; Lindsay 2014: 218; Opoku 2011 and 2012). Indeed, British Museum manuscript assistant Richard Holmes was an appointed member of the punitive expedition to Ethiopia and bought objects from soldiers during the plunder of Maqdala (AFROMET 2000).

In 1903-1904, the Sikkim-Tibet Field Force Expedition conducted an operation that combined a diplomatic mission and a punitive expedition (Hopkirk 1983: 162-164). The British Empire's expedition provoked confrontations that legitimized massacre and plunder. Spurred on by news from home that antiquities from Tibet were achieving ‘high prices in the auction houses of London’ (Myatt 2011: 135), the Expedition extracted blood and conflict antiquities (‘legitimate loot’) from monasteries in Gyantse and Tsechen (Myatt 2011: 135; see also 137) – thus abandoning a long-standing principle of not plundering religious property (Davis 1997: 154), and explicitly rejecting the strictures of the Second Hague Convention of 1899.

The colonial Government of India had appointed Tibetologist Lieutenant-Colonel Austine Waddell to the expedition to purchase cultural property for institutions across the British Empire. Yet, during the massacre of Chumik Shenko, Waddell stole antiquities from the Tibetan force’s dead leader’s home; and ‘the man who collects for the British Museum’ was also given antiquities from the monastery of Pelkor Chöde, which soldiers had extracted while torturing a Lama for other commodities (Myatt 2011: 131 and 134). Much more was plundered besides that, which was split between cultural heritage institutions such as the (colonial) India Museum and the British Museum, military
leaders and military officers. Some of it was then sold through Christie's.

**Expropriation**

So, within conflict antiquities trading, there are intertwined strands of cultural property crime, including might-makes-right plunder, which has persisted in the sack of vulnerable States by powerful States. Legalized internal theft can be traced back to acts such as England's confiscation of Christian monasteries' property in 1536-1541, and China's confiscation of Buddhist monasteries' property in 845. This, too, has persisted in the State crimes of the Ottoman Empire, Bolshevik Russia and the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, the People's Republic of China and Khmer Rouge Cambodia, for which the expropriation of vulnerable communities' cultural property was also a constituent element of persecution. And, increasingly, there is outright illicit appropriation of cultural property by State and non-State forces, which may be indiscriminate but which may feed on and feed into persecution.

**The Ottoman Empire**

The coupist Committee of Union and Progress (İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti) seized control of the Ottoman Empire in 1913 and entered the First World War in 1914. Building on the foundations of an existing policy of Ottomanization, it initiated a programme of ‘nationalization’ (or, ‘Turkification’) which went beyond State expropriation of private assets to further the war effort. It comprised the dispossession of non-Turkish, non-Muslim communities’ assets by Turkish Muslim structures, so as to further the homogenization of society.

State expropriation of the cultural property of minority communities was a constituent element of the Armenian Genocide (Akçam and Kurt 2015; Üngör and Polatel 2011). Other Eastern Christians suffered the same fate, i.e. Greek, Assyrian (or Nestorian Orthodox), Chaldean (or Nestorian Catholic), Syriac Orthodox (or Jacobite) and Syriac Catholic communities (Bjørnlund 2009; de Courtois 2004; Gaunt 2006). Occasionally, historic and religious artefacts would be smashed rather than sold (Gaunt 2006: 144). More often, homes, villages, churches, convents, monasteries and missions were looted or plundered and auctioned.

Even before the First World War, a paramilitary Special Organization (Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa) had begun to kill and displace Christian communities. The theft of the dispossessed property was legalized through the Abandoned Properties Laws (Emval-i Metruke Kanunları) of 1915-1930. Amongst other institutions, during the First World War, the CUP regime established Abandoned Properties Commissions (‘Emval-i Metruke Komisyonları’) to realize dispossession behind a legal fiction of abandonment and compensation. And it established Liquidation Commissions (Tasfiye Komisyonları) to prepare documentation for court-ordered confiscation, redistribution and sale via public auction. The liquidated wealth was both redistributed to local and refugee Turkish Muslim communities, which incentivized their participation in the genocide, and sold to private buyers, which financed the genocide. Much portable property, including portable cultural property, was then resold in local bazaars, from where they flowed onto national and international markets through bazaars in Constantinople (Gingeras 2009: 53; Üngör and Polatel 2011: 88).

However, one documented and corroborated case reveals that the entire process of
trafficking antiquities could be distinctly organized. Abdul Kadir Pasha Gueuze, Khudr Chelebi Komerli, Abdur Rahman Kavas and Razzuk Chelebi organized a ‘Moslem Committee’ to conduct massacres in Diyarbakir and Mardin, then extracted millions of dollars’ worth of ‘jewelry, carpets and antiquities… as well as gold’ from those territories alone (British Captain Evan MacRury, 12 December 1918, cited in Dadrian 1996: 78).

Diyarbakir Governor Mehmet Reshid, who offered some jewelry and furniture to more senior regime figures, transported ‘48 boxes of jewelry and two cases full of precious stones’ in one go (British General Staff Intelligence Egyptian Expeditionary Force, 12 February 1919, cited in Dadrian 1996: 78). Much of Abdul Kadir Pasha’s gang’s plunder was sold to Diyarbakir Deputy Aziz Feyzi or Aleppo-based German entrepreneur Martha Koch, thence to genocide-facilitating foreign officials such as the German Minister Resident for the Orient, Baron Max von Oppenheim, who fed disinformation to his own authorities.

After the First World War, when the Constantinople Government fell under the occupation of Western powers, the Turkish National Movement and its parallel Ankara Government imposed National Tax Obligations (Tekâlif-i Mîlliye) to fund the 1919-1922 War of Independence, which encompassed further efforts at genocide that persisted until 1923. Significant sources of funding for those obligations were the expropriated assets of exiled and exterminated minority communities, which were legally ring-fenced for military expenditure (Akçam and Kurt 2015).

Bolshevik Russia and the Soviet Union

Following the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks through the Russian Revolution in 1917, the communist regime began ‘looting the looters’ as it expropriated the assets of its internal political targets. In 1918-1919, parallel with the civil war, Soviet Russia established the Commission for the Storage and Registration of Artistic and Historic Monuments to facilitate the confiscation of individuals’ and institutions’ cultural property. It seized more than a billion dollars’ worth of exactly-catalogued assets from one city in one year alone, which included icons, ‘silver and bronze artifacts [and] “archaeological curiosities”’ (McMeekin 2009: 60).

With the lifting of the international blockade in 1920, that Commission became a State Treasury for the Storage of Valuables (Gosudarstvennoe khranilishche tsennostei, or Gokhran) in order to register, expropriate, evaluate and export cultural property from its territory. And with the end of the civil war and the famine-induced collapse of worker and peasant uprisings in 1922, the regime withdrew its strategic exemption of religious property and plundered the Russian Orthodox Church, the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Anglican Church of Moscow and the Jewish community’s synagogues.

That year, thousands of icons looted were sold on the local market to foreign collectors. At least 277 were bought by banker Olof Aschberg in 1923-1924 and around 250 of those 277 were then donated to the National Museum of Sweden in 1933 (McMeekin 2009: 88-89). Much of the total value consisted of precious metals, precious stones and pearls. Many of those raw materials had been extracted from recycled cultural artefacts. Still, just in the 1920s, the Bolshevik administration sold billions of dollars’ worth of assets direct to buyers in Russia. It sold tens of billions of dollars’ worth of looted art and antiquities from Russia into the international market.

It sold through Rudolf Lepke’s high-end, ‘museum-quality’ Berlin Kunst-Auction-
Haus; Stepan Mikhailovich Mussuri’s low-end dealership in ‘antiquities religious artifacts, artifacts made of bronze, manuscripts and other cultural goods (McMeekin 2009: 217); and Aschberg’s international enterprises. It also sold through Christie’s and Sotheby’s auction houses and other brokers in Austria, Germany, Sweden, the UK and the US. In 1931, the British State bought an ancient Bible and gave it to the British Museum (McMeekin 2009: 219). The collateral and income were primarily used to raise funds for tens of billions of dollars’ worth of arms purchases from Germany. And such practices persisted. Between 1979 and 1989, occupying Soviet forces plundered the cultural assets of Afghanistan (Richardson 2012).

The Nazi Empire

Having long persecuted its Jewish subjects, in 1938, Nazi Germany issued an Order for the Disclosure of Jewish Assets and then a Decree on the Confiscation of Jewish Property, which established a system for registering and expropriating assets. From 1939, the Nazi Empire began expropriating the cultural assets of occupied States and vulnerable communities and divided them amongst public administrations, cultural heritage institutions, civilian victims of Allied bombing, the Nazi Welfare Organization (Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt or NSV) and local buyers (Dean 2010: 187 and 224). The expropriation of the cultural property of vulnerable communities – such as Jews, Roma and Sinti, sexual minorities and people with disabilities – has not been consistently documented. However, it has been documented that, for example, Roma property was systematically expropriated (Freund 2013: 60 and 66; Holler 2013: 167; Korb 2013: 85 and 86). There was a wrangle within the Nazi State over the fate of cultural property. Various, ‘arson squads’ (Brenn-Kommandos) burned ideologically unacceptable material; race-focused institutions saved it for study; empire-focused institutions preserved ideologically acceptable material for the glory of the Reich; and finance-focused institutions cashed in its cultural capital for economic capital.

When cultural property was deemed suitable for acquisition, it entered the personal collections of regime figures, the public collections of museums and galleries or the antiquities market. Even there, there was a wrangle between different arms of acquisition, such as between the Wehrmacht-backed Reichsleiter Rosenberg Taskforce (Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg or ERR) and the Central Security Department of the Reich (Reichssicherheitshauptamt or RSHA) in France and between the ERR, the Administration of Enemy Property (Feindvermögensverwaltung) and the Gestapo-backed Mühlmann Section (Dienststelle Mühlmann or DM) in the Netherlands (Aalders 2004: 52-58).

Each structure was an internally complex operation. The DM ran separate bank accounts for separate financial flows – one that disbursed public money for regime collectors, one that accrued public money from regime sale and one that transferred private money for private collectors. The ERR oversaw parallel teams of experts who specialized in particular classes of assets, such as those from churches (Aalders 2004: 48). Perceived ‘degenerate’ art was sold as well as destroyed, which demonstrates the flexibility of other self-proclaimed iconoclasts (Nicholas 1995: 10). The politically-disbarred former museum director and art association director Hildebrand Gurlitt, gallery-owning art dealer Karl Buchholz, art broker Ferdinand Möller and art broker Bernhard Böhmer were appointed the trade representatives of the Commission for the Exploitation of Confiscated Works of Degenerate Art (Kommission zur Verwertung der
When Gurlitt, Buchholz, Möller and Böhmer failed to sell nearly 16,000 pieces of cultural property through the Haus der Kunst, they publicly burned 4,829 of them in one day (on 20 March 1939), whereupon Kunstmuseum Basel and private buyers flocked to ‘rescue’ the remaining pieces (Barker 2013; Chech 2014: 203-14). Buyers were from as far away as the United States (cf. Hucal 2015). This also demonstrates the financial value of asset destruction. Saleable expropriated cultural assets were handled by occupied financial institutions such as Nederland and front companies such as Lippmann, Rosenthal and Co. (Aalders 2004: 36 and 127). They were valued by antiquities brokers and sold to dealers such as Gurlitt (Chechi 2014: 200), or through auction houses such as Kunsthalle Mathias Lempertz (Dean 2010: 374). They were also bought by public museums and private collectors. The State’s price caps limited its own profiteering from confiscation, but maximized the benefits for those private profiteers who bought the stolen goods. Nonetheless, a significant amount directly funded the programme of extermination.

**Communist East Germany**

Documentation from the West Berlin Office for the Protection of the Constitution has revealed that, between 1961 and 1966, the Federal Republic of Germany maintained a hidden fund of tens of millions of dollars ‘to secretly buy cultural assets from East German museums via middlemen in Denmark, Holland and Belgium’ (Detlev Gudat, cited in Erices, Kuhrt and Wensierski 2014). When that flow of funds was cut off, Stasi Commander Erich Mielke authorized Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski to plunder private collections under the guise of ‘Commercial Coordination’ (Kommernzielle Koordinierung or KoKo). This was operated more and more intensively through the 1970s and 1980s. As it implemented Communist East Germany’s Fortune Law, KoKo evaluated – and massively inflated – subjects’ assets who were then imposed duly inflated taxes. When subjects could not pay, the Stasi detained them and KoKo confiscated their assets.

KoKo ‘completely emptied’ some properties, and sometimes gained thousands of antiquities from individual collectors such as Helmuth Meissner and Werner Schwarz (Erices, Kuhrt and Wensierski 2014). It plundered at least 220,000 objects between 1973 and 1989 (Mashberg 2015). Occasionally, the Stasi pressed those ‘guilty’ of ‘tax evasion’ into donating antiquities to Berlin State Museums (Sandler 2008). Eventually, the secret police’s ‘art squads’ were reduced to pillaging portable antiquities and ancient architecture from churches, libraries and public infrastructure (Mashberg 2015).

KoKo chauffeured bus loads of buyers – primarily from the Federal Republic of Germany, but from Japan as well – to shop amongst daily truckloads of art and antiquities at the warehouse of its primary front company, Kunst und Antiquitäten GmbH, where they could purchase stock ‘by the container’ according to lawyer Nicolai Kemle, the Chairman of the Institut für Kunst und Recht (cited in Sherwin 2014). It arranged personalized, nationwide shopping sprees for its most valued customers (Erices, Kuhrt and Wensierski 2014). Some of the plunder was sold through Christie’s (Mashberg 2015). By the sale of this ‘robbed gold’ (Raubgold), KoKo extracted tens of millions of dollars a year (Yackley 2000).
China

In 1949, when the Communist Party had effectively defeated the Nationalist Party in the Chinese Civil War, it converted the Republic of China into the People's Republic of China under a supposed dictatorship of the proletariat. Then, it tried to foster popular class war. In 1950, it annexed Tibet. When the Communist Party tried to industrialize China through the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961), its industrialization and ‘civilization’ of Tibet provoked exceptional resistance, against which China launched a campaign of ‘anti-feudalism’. The regime established the Cultural Articles Preservation Commission, which had the same function in Tibet as its euphemistically named predecessors elsewhere – to destroy cultural life and political resistance and to generate a revenue stream to finance that persecution and other repression. Thousands of monasteries were dissolved. China trafficked so much cultural property from Tibet that it ‘flooded’ the antiquities markets of Hong Kong and Tokyo (Knuth 2003: 213). If cultural goods were not valuable enough to be looted, they were destroyed.

Due to the induction of a famine through the Great Leap Forward, and the persistence of internal party struggle, there was another civil war, in the form of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The destruction of the Four Old Things – old ideology, old culture, old habits and old customs – involved another campaign of ethnocide in Tibet, which was led by thousands of radical student Red Guards. The loss to Tibetan society was incalculable both in terms of culture and in terms of sheer quantity. During a post-revolutionary period of doctrinal relaxation and reconstruction, one mission to Beijing found 13,000 statues and statuettes (Knuth 2003: 218).

There has not been another such systematic programme of ethnocide since. However, in reaction to an uprising in 2008, in which Tibetan autonomists looted and destroyed Chinese settlers’ private assets, Chinese police punitively plundered Tibetan communities’ cultural assets (Smith, 2010: 18; 20; 57). It was evidenced by a ‘marked flow’ of cultural material ‘onto the [antiquities] market’ (Alder, Chappell and Polk 2009: 127).

Cambodia

Cambodia embodies the historical shift from State plunder to non-State looting. It encompasses violent organizations that acted outside the State to advance political interests and violent organizations that perverted State institutions to advance financial interests. As soon as conflict erupted in 1970, industrial looting was instituted by the Vietnam People’s Army (an ally of the communist Khmer Rouge) as well as the young Khmer Republic (Davis and Mackenzie 2014: 297-298).

Collectors have excused the purchase of antiquities during the civil war in Cambodia as rescue from the threat of destruction by the Khmer Rouge (Mashberg and Blumenthal 2013: 41). Yet the Khmer Rouge launched a programme of destruction, within a broader politicide campaign against religious people or ‘intellectuals’ who were presumed to be counter-revolutionary, when it established nationwide control in 1975 (Thomas 2006). It only launched a programme of looting after it had lost nationwide control in 1979 (Davis and Mackenzie 2014: 298-299).

The various armed forces compelled civilians to loot sites, and used industrial machines to extract entire features from buildings, then smuggled the antiquities to dealers in Thailand or buyers at the market end (Mackenzie and Davis 2014: 729-731). Not only did they cooperate with armed forces or corrupt elements within armed forces
outside Cambodia in order to smuggle their loot, but sometimes they also cooperated with each other in Cambodia across lines of conflict (Davis and Mackenzie 2014: 299). While it may now technically be a matter of State corruption instead of State conduct, since the end of the conflict, trafficking has remained ‘concentrated in the hands of the military’ and its shadow State (Lafont 2004: 39; 54-56).

Conclusion

A victim of Communist East Germany’s expropriation, collector Friedhelm Beuker observed that conflict antiquities remained ‘smeared with blood, everyone knows that, including the dealers here in the West’ (Erices, Kuhrt and Wensierski 2014). Such bloodstained assets have been, and continue to be, consumed by markets around the world. This century-long history demonstrates that situation-to-situation regulation does not work and that the market will not regulate itself. It needs to be strictly regulated to reduce the flow of finances to human rights abusers.

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