

“WHOEVER COMES AFTER US WILL FIND NOTHING”:

Great Britain’s Role in the Allied Fight against Nazi Art Theft and Acquisition

As Adolf Hitler swept across Europe in his military campaign to establish the Third Reich, he dreamed of creating his legacy in large part by amassing the greatest art collection in the history of mankind. Historian Charles de Jaeger relates that Hitler hoped to accomplish this goal through an operation known as Special Mission Linz, through which Hitler planned to refashion his hometown of Linz, Austria into the new art capital of the world with the furnishing of his Führermuseum.¹ The advance of the Allied Armed Forces toward Rome during the Italian Campaign in May 1944 brought to light the full extent of Hitler’s and Nazi Germany’s mindset regarding the acquisition of works of art. As author Robert Edsel describes in *Saving Italy*:

In the ancient town of Terracina, [Monuments Man Deane] Keller discovered a message left by German troops on a blackboard in front of the Civic Museum. “*Chi entra dopo di noi non troverà nulla.*” (“Whoever comes after us will find nothing”). The Roman sculptures, the pride of the museum, had been left in the unlocked building for anyone to steal. But something quite different had been left behind near the Temple of Jove Uxor: telephones, guns, beds, food, and two hundred dead bodies [of German soldiers] stretched out in rows.²

It is striking that the sculptures were the only cultural works left behind—due to transportation logistics involved in a hasty retreat—and that the Germans took with them the bulk of the museum’s collections. The contrast of the items that the Germans *did* leave behind—military necessities, supplies, and even their deceased comrades—truly magnifies the plunder of the stolen art treasures.³ Withdrawing northward in the face of the Allied military assault, the German Army saw a material need for the Allies to

receive and understand the deeper implications in the message left on the chalkboard: that Nazi art theft and acquisition had a two-fold purpose, transcending military operations. In one regard, the hoarded works of art fulfilled Adolf Hitler's desire to establish a legacy for himself and the Third Reich. At the same time, the Nazis considered art theft and acquisition as another manner in which to triumph over their enemies. Though retreating in Italy, the Nazis still managed to deal the Allies a severe blow, secure in the belief that the Allies would "find nothing" and, thus, never rectify the situation.

In the title of his book, *The Monuments Men: Allied Heroes, Nazi Thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History*, author Robert M. Edsel claims to write about the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives (MFAA) sub-commission of the Allied Armed Forces—the military group formed to combat Nazi art theft and acquisition—through the purview of the western Allies.⁴ Though not the first major work on this subject, Edsel's book is certainly the most recent to date and arguably the most well-known, due in large part to its 2014 film adaptation, *The Monuments Men*, starring George Clooney and Matt Damon. Thrust into the spotlight of the general public's attention and scrutiny, a once obscure and esoteric dimension of the World War II narrative has suddenly been interpreted as fact through the lens of Edsel's book, no matter how loosely it served as the basis for the film. However, Edsel falls short of the claim he makes in his title; rather, he focuses exclusively on American efforts made to protect historic and cultural works and to counter Nazi art theft and acquisition during just the latter two years of the war, from 1943 to 1945. Further, he narrates only the frontline military efforts of the MFAA, scarcely mentioning either American or British home front efforts, which were vital to the operations of the MFAA. Edsel's limited chronology and emphasis on mainly American efforts provides readers with an incomplete picture of British contributions toward Allied efforts to counteract Nazi art theft and acquisition. More specifically, by making only brief mentions of British soldiers and officers and allotting only a sentence or two to their individual stories, Edsel's work creates a skewed perception of Allied efforts against Nazi art theft. Redressing this discrepancy within Edsel's book, this article intends to argue that Great Britain, motivated by the desire to

protect artistic and historical treasures as well as the reputation of its troops and government, played a role equal to that of the United States in the active defense of Europe's monuments and works of art before and during the Second World War, through front line and home front efforts.

The reach and magnitude of Nazi art theft and acquisition was extreme, with both its conception and execution deeply rooted in Hitler's personal beliefs. From an early age, Hitler rebelled against the professional ambitions his father held for him: "I wanted to become a painter and no power in the world could make me a civil servant."⁵ Believing that he had held great promise as a painter or an architect, Hitler was devastated upon being rejected from the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. This dismissal spurred Hitler to strive harder than ever to achieve his dream of becoming an architect. His studies placed him in Vienna and later Munich, for many years, where he nurtured his hatred for Marxism, the Jewish people, and even a zealous belief that the purification of the arts was a means by which Germany could become great once more.⁶

In his 1925 autobiographical manifesto, *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler repeatedly discusses art as he ponders the past half-century of German history. In particular, Hitler makes a correlation between what he terms "Art Bolshevism" and the current circumstances of the German state. Hitler prized artwork that portrayed humanity along the same lines as his Aryan ideology—idealized and flawless.⁷ Consequently, he bemoans the deterioration that certain abstract art forms of 'Bolshevism' have had on German culture:

Once we pass the development of our cultural life in the last twenty-five years in review from this standpoint, we shall be horrified to see how far we are already engaged in this regression. Everywhere we encounter seeds which represent the beginnings of parasitic growths which must sooner or later be the ruin of our culture. In them, too, we recognize the symptoms of decay of a slowly rotting world. Woe to the peoples who can no longer master this disease!⁸

He argues that Germany had become lax in its determination to achieve greatness not only in culture and the arts, but also in an overall sense of national identity. This Hitler blames on modern

and foreign art; Germany had stumbled, but he argues that it is largely due to degenerative influences. Further, Hitler implies that if Germany were to continue to allow or to even patronize modern and foreign art, it would succumb to what he describes as the disease of decay. Yet *Mein Kampf* suggests that there is still hope for Germany to once more achieve prominence—and this hope lay in Adolf Hitler and his cultural renaissance.

Among the more commonly used Nazi methods of acquiring works of art were confiscation, outright looting, legal negotiations, and legitimate purchase. Indeed, many art dealers, like Karl Haberstock and Maria Dietrich—prominent German art dealers prior to the Second World War—made a considerable amount of money from trading with and selling to Nazi officials.⁹ Most significantly, Hitler created the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg, or the ERR, which acted as the primary agency to acquire art for Germany among its other functions. The ERR systematically combed through Europe, searching for works of art desired for the Führermuseum. Noted for their efficiency, the ERR troops consisted of specialized personnel that planned, executed, and recorded raids on designated targets.¹⁰ The ERR maintained records of the art it acquired and subsequently hid them in repositories at Weesenstein and Neuschwanstein.¹¹ As the Nazis pressed on through Europe and invaded France, the ERR came under the influence of Reichsmarshal Hermann Göring, who, like Hitler, desired a superb art collection of his very own.¹² As a result, art theft and acquisition occurred at multiple levels of operations and on an even grander scale than perhaps originally anticipated by Hitler and the Nazi party. Such ravishment permeated the Nazi occupied countries of Europe, only passing over works of art created by populations the Third Reich labeled as ‘sub-human.’

Hitler sharply divided his interests between the art of Eastern and Western Europe. According to historians David Roxan and Ken Wenstall, “Eastwards there was utter ruthlessness, brutal seizures, looting carried out nakedly without pretence...Westwards there was plundering, particularly of Jewish property, but Hitler and other top-ranking Nazis were also ready to purchase with money.”¹³ Poland, Belgium, Italy, and even Germany fell victim to the Nazi onslaught, but France, perhaps, suffered the worst. Indeed,

France succumbed to the avarice of Hitler and Göring alike, its museums, galleries, and private collections nearly stripped bare by the two men. Hitler held more of a long-term view for obtaining the nation's art, claiming "all France's most valuable treasures would form part of the compensation to be paid to Germany as one of the conditions to be laid down in any peace negotiations."¹⁴ Göring, in contrast, quickly set about obtaining as many works of art as could fit in Karinhall, his residence just outside of Berlin, targeting, in particular, French-Jewish collections and properties, especially those belonging to the Rothschild family.¹⁵ Göring "used the Einsatzstab Rosenberg [ERR] as his personal instrument, employed to outwit his Fuehrer," to ensure that his own art collection could rival even that of Hitler.¹⁶ Competition between Hitler and Göring resulted in the loss of large numbers of works of art from France. Indeed, "the rich field tilled by the Einsatzstab in Paris was such that it [would] become the greatest source of works of art for Linz" as well as Karinhall.¹⁷

The extensive art acquisition resulting from Hitler's dream for Linz and the Führermuseum caused concern and anxiety throughout the art worlds of Western Europe and of the United States of America. In *The Monuments Men*, Robert Edsel posits that the first concerted effort to approach the topic of the danger that the Nazis posed to art occurred during a meeting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, on December 22, 1941. Notably, no mention was made at this December, 1941 meeting of a military venture to protect and retrieve European art stolen by the Nazis. George Stout, a leading art conservator at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum and later an officer in the MFAA, made the first formalized suggestion to come from the United States for such a military venture in a pamphlet published in the summer of 1942—nearly three years after the war had begun.¹⁸

Edsel overlooks that Britain anticipated a German threat to art prior to the official commencement of hostilities in 1939, embracing an active approach with regard to the defense of its borders as well as its cultural heritage. To this end, historian N.J. McCamley relates that the Museums and Galleries Air Raid Precautions [ARP] Committee, established in 1934, was responsible for organizing and supervising the safe removal of

works of art from Britain's most preeminent establishments.¹⁹ Though several country houses were originally chosen as repositories, logistical problems led to the termination of this strategy in early 1941.²⁰ The Committee then adopted the strategy proposed by Sir John Forsdyke, Director of the British Museum, who believed, "One really bomb-proof repository for perishable National Treasures of supreme importance ought to be provided somewhere."²¹ The Westwood Quarry, located in the Avon valley, provided the ideal solution; it proved so successful that several other quarries were consequently developed. McCamley recounts that, after the war, some questioned the necessity of the immense work involved with safeguarding the nation's art: "The answer was unequivocally 'yes'....the Tate Gallery, the British Museum and the National Gallery all suffered considerable damage....Had the contents not been evacuated earlier the loss would have been incalculable."²² Through these preparations, Britain successfully protected its works of art from the threat of devastation posed by Nazi theft and destruction that would later transpire throughout most of Europe.

The Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives (MFAA) sub-commission, officially established during the Italian Campaign in December 1943, was the primary means through which the Allied Armed Forces fought against Nazi art theft and acquisition. Sir Charles Leonard Woolley, a prominent figure in the creation of the MFAA, strongly emphasized the sub-commission "was a joint Anglo-American concern....the two [Great Britain and the United States] had to be in agreement before suggestions could be translated into action, and responsibility was therefore equally shared...let it be repeated once and for all that the United States and Great Britain share alike the credit."²³ On the front lines, the officers and soldiers of the MFAA performed three main duties: to preserve, to conserve, and to record.²⁴ Preservation required that precautions—primarily the distribution of pertinent information—were taken prior to a battle to ensure that unnecessary damage to monuments did not occur. After a battle, conservation comprised the bulk of the responsibilities held by the MFAA. During this stage, MFAA personnel assessed the damage to monuments and historical buildings and performed crucial, urgent repairs.

MFAA officers further emphasized the obligation of the Army to respect the buildings, regularly hanging signs that declared sites to be off-limits.²⁵ James Rorimer, the American Monuments Man in Normandy during August, 1944, recognized that “a monuments officer who objected to the use of a fine château as a military installation, or the use of rubble from a church as road fill, was anathema” to many soldiers and officers.²⁶ Woolley, however, observed that officers and soldiers came to hold more respect for monuments and historical buildings they encountered after the establishment of the MFAA as an official, authoritative sub-commission of the Allied Armed Forces.²⁷ Lastly the final duty of MFAA personnel was to record details of their fieldwork for published reports as well as evidence of Nazi art theft and looting for restitution processes, which were to take place after the war.²⁸ The MFAA performed these duties through the Civil Affairs Division of the Army, ultimately reporting to the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF).

In *The Monuments Men*, Edsel skims over the origin and early stages of the MFAA sub-commission in a brief five-page chapter. Even so, only two paragraphs relate to the circumstances in North Africa that made the MFAA a necessary military organization, and only one paragraph describes Sir Charles Leonard Woolley, the officer responsible for the conception, initial development, and work of the MFAA via his role at the British War Office.²⁹ Edsel specifically mentions that Woolley, “a world-famous archaeologist who...had been a close companion of...Lawrence of Arabia...was serving in the British War Office in a completely unrelated capacity,” in 1943.³⁰ This directly contradicts the memoir Woolley wrote just two years after the close of the Second World War, entitled *The Protection of the Treasures of Art and History in War Areas: A Record of the Work Done by the Military Authorities*, which Edsel lists in his bibliography.³¹ In the opening chapter, Woolley relates that he served, from 1941-42, “as the official adviser to the War Office on the subject [of archaeology] in addition to his other normal duties” and later, from 1943-46, as the Archaeological Adviser to the Director of Civil Affairs.³² Contrary to Edsel’s description, Woolley did indeed serve the British Army and later the Allied Armed Forces in a capacity related to the protection

of monuments.

Well before the entrance of the United States into the war, the British were already fighting the Italian Army in North Africa during the summer of 1941. Fighting primarily occurred throughout the northeastern coast of Africa, particularly around the cities of Cyrene and Leptis Magna in the administrative region of Cyrenaica in eastern Libya. These North African cities, founded in the time of the Roman Empire, held considerable importance to the agenda of Mussolini's Fascist regime. Woolley reports in his memoir,

For the Fascist Government the Italian Colonies in North Africa were the symbol and the promise of the re-birth of the ancient Roman Empire. Everything that could link up Mussolini's Italy with the traditions of an imperial past had its propaganda value, and it was from this point of view that the [Italian] Government exploited to the full the classical remains of Cyrenaica and Tripolitana.³³

Throughout the early months of 1943, both the British Army and the Italian Army each captured and re-captured the city of Cyrene several times over. During this time, the Italian government published a pamphlet, entitled "*Che cosa hanno fatto gli Inglesi in Cirenaica*," translated to "The Thing the English Did in Cyrenaica," with accompanying photographs.³⁴ The pamphlet served as calculated propaganda, intended to discredit and damage the reputation of the British Army, by portraying the behavior of the soldiers and officers as that of "vandals....that...had in the most barbarous manner smashed and defaced the historic monuments which had been brought to light by the Italian excavation of the ancient city."³⁵ Though the British later determined these accusations to be completely false in 1942, the Italians had already dealt a serious blow to the reputation of the British Army. Officers on the frontlines and officials on the homefront shared equal concern over this poor reflection of British behavior; consequently, the troops "were instructed to take immediate steps for the preservation of any archaeological monuments which might come into our [British] possession during the course of the occupation."³⁶ To facilitate the identification of monuments to be protected, Woolley was chosen to advise the War Office, due to

his extensive archaeological experience in North Africa and the Middle East. As a result, “war damage to the Roman remains in Libya was so slight as to be almost negligible,” despite continued conflict in the region for the remainder of the war.³⁷

This controversial incident in North Africa in the summer of 1941 forced the British to face the reality of the unprecedented role that art—especially its propaganda value—played in military strategy. Through one falsified report and some false but still incriminating photographs, the Italian Fascist government portrayed the British Army as no better than a marauding mob intent on destroying the cultural heritage of other nations. More importantly, this single episode damaged the reputation of the British Army and plagued its officers and soldiers for the remainder of the war. Woolley relates in his memoir:

It must be remembered that in creating a Monuments and Fine Arts Service the Army’s first and most legitimate aim was the preservation of its own good name. As the champions of civilisation, the troops must be guarded against all charges of vandalism.³⁸

A good reputation and the establishment of positive relations with those living under the Nazi and Fascist regimes, respectively, were essential to British strategy for victory in the war. As such, the primary objective of the MFAA and home front initiatives like, the Macmillan Committee (discussed in detail later), was the protection of the Army’s reputation.

However, this is not to say that the British Army completely dismissed the protection of monuments and art for their own sake. Indeed, most of the officers—British and American—involved with the MFAA were well-known figures of the art world in their civilian lives. These officers, like Woolley, cared deeply about the fate of Europe’s art treasures. More so, Britain had considerable experience with the destruction of its own art and monuments, especially during the bombing of the city of Coventry. During the night of November 14, 1940, several hundred German Luftwaffe bombers attacked the city of Coventry, located about one hundred miles northwest of London. The raid took the city by surprise, as most British intelligence reports claimed the Luftwaffe could not fly farther than London.³⁹ The raid left the unprepared city in

shambles, having both destroyed tens of thousands of buildings and claimed the lives of hundreds. A particularly poignant episode occurred at the end of the day on November, 14, illustrating the significance of monuments to the British people: the bells from the city's cathedral rang out, comforting the survivors "with the thought that the Cathedral must still be undamaged...that so long as it stood no real harm could befall the city."⁴⁰ Just a few hours later, only the shell of the Cathedral remained; the majority of the building had been destroyed by fire. The cathedral was more than a building for the people of Coventry: it symbolized their faith as well as their heritage and identity, which the Germans had very nearly eradicated. The bombing of Coventry became a powerful and evocative tragedy in the minds of all British people, impressing upon them a sense of urgency for the protection of historical monuments and works of art. This concern extended to monuments and art not only within Great Britain but throughout the entirety of Europe as well.

However, one must face the reality of the time and circumstances: by the time the MFAA had been created as an official sub-commission, in December, 1943, Britain was only just turning the tide of the war with the help of the United States during the Italian Campaign. A victorious end to the war was the primary objective of all parties involved. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Armed Forces, delivered the following orders on May 26, 1944, just a few days prior to the Normandy Invasion on D-Day:

Shortly we will be fighting our way across the Continent of Europe in battles designed to preserve our civilization. Inevitably, in the path of our advance will be found historical monuments and cultural centers which symbolize to the world all that we are fighting to preserve....In some circumstances the success of the military operation may be prejudiced in our reluctance to destroy these revered objects.... So, where military necessity dictates, commanders may order the required action even though it involves destruction of some honored site. But there are many circumstances in which damage and destruction are

not necessary and cannot be justified.⁴¹

Eisenhower clearly stressed that success in military objectives took precedence, even at the risk and potential destruction of monuments and works of art. However, commanders and soldiers were to use discretion in discerning the necessity of damage. To help in this discernment, Eisenhower emphasized, “Civil Affairs Staffs at higher echelons will advise commanders of the locations of historical monuments.”⁴² These “Civil Affairs Staffs” were more commonly known as the officers of the MFAA.

In *The Monuments Men*, Edsel devotes only two sections (1.6-1.7) to a description of the Italian Campaign, choosing instead to focus primarily on the work of the MFAA in France and Germany. More than likely, Edsel had already begun planning his next work while still writing *The Monuments Men*. In his next book, entitled *Saving Italy*, Edsel describes the work of the MFAA in Sicily and in the Italian mainland during the Second World War. As in his earlier work, in *Saving Italy* Edsel emphasizes the actions and achievements of the American officers of the MFAA, despite the Allied nature of the sub-commission. For example, of the eight Monuments Men listed in the Main Characters section, only two were British: Captain Edward “Teddy” Croft-Murray and Lieutenant Colonel John Bryan Ward-Perkins.⁴³ Croft-Murray served in Sicily and Bologna, later aiding in the recovery efforts at the Altaussee salt mine in Austria; Ward-Perkins served as the Deputy Director of the MFAA in Monte Cassino, Naples, Rome, Pisa, Florence, and Bolzano. Croft-Murray receives his most significant description, in regard to MFAA work in Italy, when Edsel mentions that he accompanied US Captain Deane Keller to Bologna.⁴⁴ Edsel does recognize, however, that Ward-Perkins was the first to conduct specific military efforts aimed at protecting monuments while stationed in North Africa, at Leptis Magna, in 1942. Ward-Perkins, during his service at Leptis Magna, implemented an educational program for soldiers stressing the importance of preserving the monuments. Edsel relates, “in time, Monuments Officers in Italy and Western Europe would repeat the strategies Ward-Perkins pioneered,” acknowledging Ward-Perkins but ultimately understating the truly vital role that man played in furthering the mission of the MFAA.⁴⁵ Indeed, these actions, though

with far-reaching and long-lasting influence, provide Ward-Perkins with his most significant description in Edsel's work. More so, Ward-Perkins' efforts in North Africa occurred at least one year prior to the restricted chronology that Edsel uses in *Saving Italy*. Edsel purports that primarily American officers of the MFAA were involved with the protection and recovery of works of art in Italy.

As Woolley indicates in his memoir, this is not the entire truth. Woolley does recognize that the United States was more aggressive than Britain in filling officer positions within the MFAA: "by early November [1943] ten American officers had arrived as against two British—Captain [F.H.J.] Maxse and Major Baillie Reynolds, with a third, Captain Croft Murray of the British Museum, on the way."⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the British officers mentioned by Woolley contributed significantly to the work and development of the MFAA in Italy. Historian Ilaria Dagnini Brey illustrates the important work and achievements of the above-mentioned British officers. She explains that Maxse served as the Deputy Advisor for MFAA operations in Sicily, aiding in the establishment of positive relations between Sicilian authorities and the Allies.⁴⁷ When the Army moved from Sicily to the Italian mainland, "General Eisenhower... 'appointed Baillie Reynolds as Acting Director of the Fine Arts, Monuments and Archives Subcommittee of the Allied Control Commission in Italy'" until the arrival of Mason Hammond, the actual Director of the MFAA in Italy.⁴⁸ Croft-Murray also played an integral role in the MFAA while serving in Florence, arranging for the recovery and shelter of books and manuscripts from the demolished Colombaria, the Tuscan Academy of Science and Letters.⁴⁹ Ward-Perkins assumed control of the MFAA in Italy toward the end of the war, effectively closing operations in the region.⁵⁰ These are but a few of the significant contributions that the British officers of the MFAA made to the protection of monuments and works of art in Italy; their efforts reached farther than could be adequately described in this article. As indicated by the appointment of Ward-Perkins as Director of the MFAA in Italy toward the end of the Italian Campaign, other theaters of operations required the work of the MFAA.

The D-Day landings at Normandy on June 6, 1944, officially marked the opening of the French Campaign of the Allied Armed

Forces as well as the beginning of the work of the MFAA in France, although it took about two months for serious work to begin due to the slow expansion of Allied territory.⁵¹ A MFAA personnel roster, dated May 23, 1944, listed one of the British officers serving in Normandy with the 21st Army Group as Major the Lord Paul Methuen, a painter and Trustee of the National Gallery.⁵² Edsel describes Methuen briefly and derisively as “errantly wandering” throughout the French countryside, failing to properly follow orders.⁵³ Historian Lynn H. Nicholas, however, presents Methuen as a far more decisive figure. In her work, *The Rape of Europa*, Nicholas emphasizes that Methuen “took French officials around with him so that they too could evaluate damage” in an effort to establish relationships with the native caretakers of the hundreds of monuments within his territory.⁵⁴ Methuen was consequently responsible for the repair and maintenance of these damaged monuments and works of art.

The official establishment of the MFAA as a sub-commission of the Allied Armed Forces, in December, 1943, as well as the advancement of the Allies into France, necessitated military structure and directives, rather than the often-unpredictable arrangements implemented during the Italian Campaign and early French Campaign. Of the utmost importance was the appointment of the sub-commission’s director, “it having already been agreed that the Director [Adviser] should be British owing to the closer connection which Great Britain enjoyed with the countries immediately concerned, i.e., France, Belgium.”⁵⁵ Professor Geoffrey Webb, Slade Professor of Fine Arts at the University of Cambridge, assumed the position of Adviser at Woolley’s insistence.⁵⁶ Edsel mentions Webb only twice after an initial two-sentence description: first as a hindrance to the work of James Rorimer, and later as one of many MFAA officers present during the discovery of the Merker mine in Germany, in April, 1945.⁵⁷ Webb, in his role as the commanding officer of the MFAA, deserves far more substantial credit than that which Edsel provides, due to his direct involvement with the organization of the MFAA branch at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEP).

Among his primary duties, Webb supervised and compiled reports on the work of the MFAA officers in the field and also

established relationships with art experts in recently liberated areas. One figure that Webb met with, during his September 1944 visit to Paris, was Jacques Jaujard, Director of the French National Museums and later a key player in locating works of art that the Nazis had stolen from France.⁵⁸ Webb, most importantly, understood that the MFAA was an *Allied* initiative and that the selection of personnel had to consider experts from both Britain and the United States, at the very least. In a report to SHAEF, dated June 27, 1944, Webb “decided at the outset that as the whole activity was a joint US/BR enterprise the principle should be established that US and BR Specialist Officers should be employed interchangeably irrespective of the nationality of the forces to which they were attached.”⁵⁹ Later in the same report, Webb expressed concern that some of the American officers felt perturbed that their British counterparts held higher rank; Webb was adamant that the situation be addressed and resolved immediately.⁶⁰ Webb recognized the nature of the work of the MFAA had implications beyond the nationality of his officers.

Edsel neglects to acknowledge Webb’s insight. In his discussion of the work of the MFAA in France, Edsel emphasizes the service of American Monuments Man Second Lieutenant James Rorimer exclusively. Rorimer, curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, arrived in France toward the end of the invasion of Normandy, in early August, 1944.⁶¹ The most significant portion of Rorimer’s work, however, occurred during and after the liberation of Paris thanks to the relationships he formed with Jacques Jaujard and Rose Valland, Temporary Custodian of the National Gallery of the Jeu de Paume. Here, it is understandable why Edsel deems it necessary to focus so extensively on Rorimer’s work. Valland was privy to valuable information on the ERR as the Jeu de Paume served as the final checkpoint for French works of art awaiting shipment to Germany.⁶² Rorimer certainly protected monuments throughout France, especially at Normandy and Paris, consistently posting “Off Limits” signs to warn the Allied troops against the possibility of damage.⁶³ Yet Rorimer’s relationship with Valland proved to be more significant than any of his previous work, as she eventually provided him, in March, 1945, with “documents on the Nazi art repositories at Heilbronn, Buxheim, Hohenschwangau....

[and] Neuschwanstein.”⁶⁴ This portion of Rorimer’s work signaled a major turning point in the mission of the MFAA, as the primary focus now shifted to the search for and eventually the inventory of repositories, located in German and Austrian mines and castles, in which the Nazis had hidden works of art that they had acquired across the European continent.

The MFAA could only commence this search for repositories with the advance of the Allied Armed Forces into Germany at the start of 1945. Though Rorimer did transfer to the front lines after his time in France, Edsel more heavily emphasizes the respective service of Americans Lieutenant Commander George Stout, of the U.S. Twelfth Army Group, and Captain Robert Posey, of the U.S. Third Army, to the MFAA in Germany.⁶⁵ Stout had spent the majority of his service in Germany, protecting monuments from Allied vandalism. According to Edsel, however, Stout’s most significant work was his discovery of the repository at Siegen, Germany, in early April, 1945, of which “every nook was filled with art....works by Rembrandt, Van Dyck, Van Gogh,...Renoir, and especially Peter Paul Reubens.”⁶⁶ Edsel posits the discovery and inventory of the repositories at Merkers, Germany, in early April 1945, and at Altaussee, Austria, in early May, 1945, as Posey’s most substantial contributions to the MFAA. The repository located in the salt mine of Altaussee proved to be the crown jewel of the work of the MFAA: located just a few hours from Linz, the Altaussee salt mine stored the premier works destined to fill Hitler’s Führermuseum, including the Ghent Altarpiece painted by the Van Eyck brothers, Michelangelo’s *Bruges Madonna*, and Vermeer’s *The Astronomer*.⁶⁷ These discoveries defined the purpose and importance of the MFAA toward the end of the war, as they marked the beginning of the restoration of Europe’s cultural heritage.

The discovery of these repositories would have been impossible if not for the work of British Squadron Leader Wing Commander Douglas Cooper, Royal Air Force, who later became the Assistant Director of the MFAA Branch at SHAEF under Webb.⁶⁸ Edsel makes no mention of Cooper in *The Monuments Men*. Though he had served in a variety of capacities since 1940, Cooper played his most significant role in founding and supervising the London-based German Country Unit of the

MFAA. The German Country Unit consolidated and transmuted intelligence on German art figures operating under the aegis of the Nazi regime, together with reports provided by MFAA officers in the field, especially the information gathered by Rorimer, via Valland, on the work of the ERR at the Jeu de Paume.⁶⁹ According to historians Harclerode and Pittaway, "Cooper's efforts resulted in the assembly of a formidable database comprising a number of card indices containing an extensive amount of information which would later play its part in the identification and tracing of the principals involved in the looting of Europe's treasures."⁷⁰ One element of Cooper's database was the Target List of German Personnel Implicated in Looting of European Art Treasures, submitted to the American Roberts Commission on May 15, 1945.⁷¹ The list, also known as the "Black List," later served as a key factor in the restitution process that commenced following the close of the war.⁷²

Cooper's report to the Roberts Commission demonstrates that the MFAA, though the most directly involved on the front lines, was not the sole organization through which the Allies fought against Nazi art acquisition. Indeed, the Allies relied heavily on organizations operating primarily on the home front to gather and process information on monuments and works of art in the path of the Army's advance. During his brief description of homefront organizations, Edsel solely focuses on the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas, informally known as the Roberts Commission and established by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in August 1943.⁷³ The principal objective of the Roberts Commission was to advise the War Department in a three-fold manner: "recommending the proper personnel when requested....the consideration and the fulfillment of requests that may come from MFA&A officers for materials of use to them in the field....[and] the proper consideration and treatment of the field reports prepared by these officers."⁷⁴ There is no doubt that the Roberts Commission served an essential role in the Allied efforts to protect and save the treasures of Europe; however, it was not the only institution to do so.

Edsel makes just one reference to the Macmillan

Committee, the organization on the British home front formed to advise primarily on the process of restitution, describing it as the British counterpart to the American Roberts Commission.⁷⁵ This is true to a certain degree: the Macmillan Committee did function in much the same capacity as the Roberts Commission. However, the Macmillan Committee did assume additional tasks distinctly absent in the latter's operation: "Until the end of the war it nonetheless *de facto* acted as intermediary between Woolley's [Archaeology Adviser] bureau at the War Office, British and American MFA&A officers and other Allied bodies concerned with both the protection and the restitution of works of art."⁷⁶ The Macmillan Committee simultaneously corresponded with and made arrangements between Woolley, officers of the MFAA, members of Parliament, and, later, the Inter-Allied Commission for the Protection and Restitution of Cultural Material, informally known as the Vaucher Commission. Overall, Edsel's lack of any real detail on the Macmillan Committee fails to provide readers with the reality of the situation on the British home front, which engaged numerous individuals and groups in a contentious debate that began as early as 1941.

Sir James G. Mann, Director of The Wallace Collection, demonstrated the first significant concern over the fate of monuments and historic buildings within the city of London during the war.⁷⁷ Mann wrote to Edward Herbert "E.H." Keeling, of the House of Commons, on January 4, 1941, to express his growing alarm that "irreparable harm may be done within the next few days" to London monuments on account of vandalism, following a German raid during the Blitz.⁷⁸ Mann was one of very few articulating apprehension regarding the destruction of monuments during this early stage of the war. Early British strategy focused on fighting the Luftwaffe (the German Air Force) and preventing a potential German invasion; protection of monuments and works of art was not a top priority. Yet Mann grew ever more concerned as the war progressed, especially after the controversial events of the summer of 1941 at Cyrenaica. Mann, with these events in mind and the backing of the directors of the British National Museums, pushed for the establishment of a British organization analogous to the American Roberts Commission.⁷⁹ Similar to Woolley's

remarks on the foundation of the MFAA, Mann recognized “the serious consequences which may accrue to the reputation of this country in the future if we do not take every precaution to avoid unnecessary destruction of cultural monuments and works of art.”⁸⁰ Mann valued the mission of the Roberts Commission, recognizing that immediate action for the protection of monuments and works of art was “really a matter of grand strategy,” requiring the involvement and cooperation of organizations and agencies on both the front lines and the home front if Britain was to impart itself in good standing to posterity.⁸¹

The British government remained indecisive in this regard, due to fears that endeavors to protect the cultural heritage of Europe would hinder the overarching war effort.⁸² The British government made tentative steps toward this aim when it joined with several other nations in signing the Inter-Allied Declaration against Acts of Dispossession committed in Territories under Enemy Occupation and Control, on January 5, 1943. The Declaration addressed the reality of Nazi art theft and destruction and issued this resolution:

The Governments....Hereby issue a formal warning to all concerned...that they intend to do their utmost to defeat the methods of dispossession practised by the Governments with which they are at war against the countries and peoples who have been so wantonly assaulted and despoiled. Accordingly, the Governments...reserve all their rights to declare invalid any transfers of, or dealings with, property, rights and interests of any description whatsoever which are, or have been, situated in the territories which have come under the occupation or control, direct or indirect of the Governments with which they are at war, or which belong, or have belonged to persons...resident in such territories.⁸³

The nations involved consequently debated how to translate the aims of the Declaration into action; efforts made for the protection of monuments and works of art were still largely hypothetical at this stage of the war. The British government, though still not fully committed to safeguarding the fate of Europe’s artistic

heritage, took further steps in this direction with the creation of the Register of War Damage and Loss of British Property outside the United Kingdom, in September, 1943. The Register recorded “debts or other monies due from enemies to any persons in the United Kingdom irrespective of nationality....[as well as] losses or damage arising from the war to property outside the United Kingdom to British persons.”⁸⁴ The focus of the Register was provincial, choosing to protect the property of British subjects alone. Nevertheless, both the Inter-Allied Declaration and the Register ultimately contributed to the formation of the Macmillan Committee, though to a small degree.

The true catalyst resulting in the creation of the Macmillan Committee was a debate in the House of Lords on February 16, 1944, during which the question of British responsibility for the protection of monuments and works of art across the European continent became the topic of discussion. Lord Lang of Lambeth, the archbishop of Canterbury, argued against a singular concentration on military operations, insisting upon the formation of a British committee focused not only on the preservation of art, but also on “constant vigilance” over the behavior of British troops in this regard.⁸⁵ Viscount Herbert Samuel echoed Mann’s earlier concerns in his support of Lambeth’s position: “We want to take pride in the victory...without having to make any apology for disasters that may have fallen upon our human heritage through carelessness or neglect in the course of the campaign.”⁸⁶ Though the debate continued for several hours, Lambeth eventually emerged victorious.

The months following the debate involved the assembly of personnel to serve on the British Committee on the Preservation and Restitution of Works of Art, Archives and Other Materials in Enemy Hands, better known as the Macmillan Committee, officially established in May, 1944.⁸⁷ Mann served as Honorary Secretary; other notable members included Lambeth as well as Sir John Forsdyke of the British Museum, the man responsible for the removal of British works of art to underground quarries, in early 1942.⁸⁸ Mann, in his role as Honorary Secretary, facilitated cooperation between the Macmillan Committee and other Allied institutions devoted to the protection of monuments

and works of art. For example, he instructed MFAA officers on preservation methods, at the request of Webb, and even secured the assistance of Woolley, despite his wariness over a British organization modeled after the Roberts Commission.⁸⁹ Woolley's assistance proved vital in November 1944 when he informed the Macmillan Committee on what later became part of Hitler's Nero Decree: "in the last resort, all historic buildings and works of art in Germany...should be destroyed rather than allowed to fall into the hands of Germany's enemies....Literal obedience to Hitler's order will result not only in the destruction of the artistic treasures of Germany itself, but of a great deal of the artistic heritage of many of our Allies."⁹⁰ The Macmillan Committee disseminated this communication to MFAA officers, both at SHAEF and in the field, thereby helping to prevent irreparable destruction. The Macmillan Committee turned its attention and efforts to the process of restitution upon the discovery and safe removal of works of art from repositories in Germany and Austria, assisting in this task until the Committee's dissolution in August, 1946.

The Second World War in Europe came to an effective close on V-E Day, May 8, 1945. With this victory also came the Allied discovery of several Nazi art repositories in Austria and Germany, commencing the extensive and complex process of restitution, which officially ended, in 1951, with the consignment of the Central Collecting Point in Munich from American operations to German authorities.⁹¹ Secondary literature on this topic parallels research on Nazi art theft and acquisition during the war years. Historian Michael J. Kurtz relates, "By March, 1946, the informal Anglo-American proposal had turned into an agreement. Religious, historical, and educational materials from museums, collections, archives, or libraries in one zone that belonged in the other zone were returned for comparable objects."⁹² Here, Kurtz points to the fact that Britain and the United States shared the same view on the process of restitution, yet immediately launches into a discussion of American leadership in this regard, hardly mentioning Britain in favor of focusing on U.S.-Soviet relations. Despite the emphasis in historical accounts on American involvement, Britain was still very much involved with restitution during this time, indicated by the extensive correspondence between Geoffrey Webb and the

Macmillan Committee, providing one another with information and practical advice.⁹³ Nevertheless, the subject of British contributions to the process of restitution is still largely underdeveloped, echoing the lack of information on Britain's role in protecting works of art from the Nazis in the war years prior to restitution.

Nearly seven decades later, further research on this topic is as relevant today as it was in the immediate post-war years, and perhaps even more so. In early November, 2013, the BBC released a story on Nazi art dealings before and during the Second World War: "A collection of 1,500 artworks confiscated by the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s has been found in the German city of Munich. The trove is believed to include works by Matisse, Picasso, and Chagall."⁹⁴ Cornelius Gurlit, the alleged owner of the trove, claims to have legally inherited the works from his father, Hildebrand, one of Hitler's primary art dealers; nevertheless, investigations are underway to process claims for restitution.⁹⁵

The unfolding events and details of this Munich case, coupled with the 2014 film adaptation of Edsel's book, will undoubtedly spark interest in the subject of Nazi art theft and acquisition. In response, historians must provide the fullest and most accurate account possible of the Allied efforts made in this regard, rather than adopt a stance of Americanization on scholarship of this era. Victory in the Second World War and against Nazi art theft and acquisition was not achieved singlehandedly by the United States or even Great Britain, for that matter, but was the result of several nations and organizations—indeed, more than this article could effectively address—working together to perpetuate culture and civilization. Addressing British contributions, as Edsel fails to do in *The Monuments Men* in favor of portraying the American story, is a good starting point in rectifying a glaring historical inaccuracy. Britain protected works of art prior to and throughout the entirety of the war, both on the home front and the front lines, through mines and quarries, the conception and work of the MFAA, and the efforts of the Macmillan Committee. In the immediate circumstances of the war, these collective efforts aimed to protect Britain's reputation from potential and realized defamation. After several decades, however, it is clear that Britain also aimed to impart to posterity the artistic, the *human*

heritage of Europe. Ultimately, history has discredited the German soldiers retreating from Terracina, in 1943, who were so certain in their belief, “whoever comes after us, will find nothing.”⁹⁶ As a main constituent of the Western Allies, Britain came after the Nazis and played a significant and successful role in protecting and finding what had been taken.

NOTES

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