

SECTION 3. THEORY AND HISTORY OF POLITICS

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INFLUENCE OF CONFLICTS ON CULTURAL HERITAGE AND THE ROLE OF UNESCO

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Cultural heritage is also means of self-expression of a society. Its destruction leads to the weakening of national or ethnic identity, and sometimes increases the risk of cultural homogenization.

Addressing the impact of conflict on the destruction of cultural heritage is not limited to the capabilities of individual states. International organizations also play a crucial role, as this process requires international coordination, legal mechanisms and financial support. Their activities cover a wide range of activities, from preventive measures to post-conflict rehabilitation.

As we know the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict is the first international treaty dedicated to safeguarding cultural heritage during war. Adopted by UNESCO in response to the widespread destruction of World War II, it establishes legal protections for cultural property, including monuments, museums, and archives. The Convention introduces measures like the Blue Shield emblem to mark protected sites and obligates nations to prevent damage, theft, and illicit trade of cultural objects. Two additional Protocols (1954 & 1999) strengthen enforcement, including rules against the seizure of cultural property and measures for post-conflict restitution [1].

Conflicts have a number of serious and multifaceted impacts on cultural heritage. These impacts encompass both tangible and intangible heritage elements and can have long-term consequences. The impact of conflicts on cultural heritage is not only material, but also social, psychological and political.

Physical destruction. During armed conflicts, historic cities, religious buildings, and archaeological sites are destroyed by bombing or deliberate vandalism. Even if such losses are repaired over time, they cannot be completely restored to their original state.

Illegal trade and looting. Weak control in conflict zones increases the smuggling of ancient artifacts. This leads to the loss of important information and also to the entry of the global cultural heritage market into the hands of criminal networks.

Humanitarian consequences. The destruction of cultural heritage often goes hand in hand with population displacement, social fragmentation, and the loss of cultural traditions.

The destruction of national identity. National identity is a collective form of self-awareness formed on the basis of the historical memory, language, religious, cultural values, traditions and symbols of a particular people. This identity is defined not only by political borders, but also by cultural and spiritual elements. The destruction of national identity during conflicts can be more widespread and systematic than direct physical violence [3].

I would like to present several examples illustrating the impact of conflicts on cultural heritage.

As a result of the large-scale war against Ukraine in 2022, the country's cultural heritage has faced serious threats. Historic cities, religious monuments, museums, and cultural infrastructure facilities have been damaged. In these circumstances, UNESCO has played an active role in protecting cultural heritage in Ukraine. Together with the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Ukraine, UNESCO representative in Ukraine visited the Saint-Sophia Cathedral to assess the situation and discuss potential support for an in-depth structural analysis and emergency conservation measures [5].

During the Syrian conflict in 2015, the city came under the control of an armed extremist group, and a number of important monuments were deliberately blown up. The Palmyra incident demonstrated that the protection of cultural heritage during conflicts is not only a cultural issue, but also a matter of international security and identity. This fact reaffirmed the need for international organizations, especially UNESCO, to strengthen their preventive and operational intervention mechanisms in conflict zones [4].

As a result of the long-standing conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, tangible and intangible cultural heritage has been seriously damaged. During the occupation, historical monuments were destroyed, religious objects were desecrated, museum collections were looted, and architectural complexes were rendered unusable. The issue of carrying out restoration and conservation work in the liberated areas in accordance with international standards was discussed in cooperation with UNESCO. The organization's role is mainly related to technical expertise, objective assessment, and recommendations on the protection of cultural heritage [2].

UNESCO's work requires the consent of the parties. In active conflict zones: security risks; political tensions; and distrust between the parties can slow down or limit the organization's missions. This situation makes it even more sensitive for UNESCO to maintain a neutral and balanced position.

Conflicts both intensify and complicate UNESCO's work. The organization seeks to strike a balance between emergency intervention, diplomatic balance, and the application of legal mechanisms. Thus, while conflicts make UNESCO's role more relevant, they also make its work more sensitive and difficult from a political and practical perspective.

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