

**The Definition, Preserving and Guarding of Cultural Property and Heritage during the Second World War****Niklas Huldén**

Legnér, Mattias. 2022. *Värden Att Värna: Kulturminnesvård som statsintresse i Norden vid tiden för Andra världskriget*. Göteborg, Stockholm: Makadam förlag. urn:nbn:se:uu:di-va-462299

This work concentrates on how the concept of national Cultural property was conceived, constructed, perceived and in the end protected from destruction during the Second World War in four Nordic countries. The author, Mattias Legnér, Professor in Conservation (Kulturvård) and docent in History at Uppsala university (Campus Gotland) in Sweden, has authored and participated in several works on the subject of use, preservation, and re-use of historical buildings and he has also in wider international contexts touched on the main theme in this investigation including cultural heritage questions.

Legnér uses the terms “monuments” and later “cultural property” (defined by UNESCO 1954) as a succession of words meaning the material expression of a certain culture representing a group of people, such as a nation or state. Sometimes this has been called an “exclusive us” by (ethnologists Regina Bendix and Valdimar Hafstein) representing something that cannot be owned by others. Cultural heritage would in its turn then represent “an including us” indicating the existence of a global cultural heritage which has glimpses in UNESCO’s Haag convention. These are not uncomplicated terms and their interpretation has varied through the years. However, “cultural property” seems to have had a strong impact on national laws and the possibilities to trade with these kinds of materials, hence it is used in much of the text.

Starting with some general backgrounds in the writings of the destruction of civil property during the First World War the author then proceeds to the main fear of the ever-expanding airborne warfare that was foreseen to take place in future conflicts. Indeed, the German attack on Poland in 1939 then gave examples of this extensive bombing on both civilians and the destruction of “monuments” perceived as national treasures by the Polish. The German forces showed up an outward facade, which incorporated a program for the handling and preservation of national property during warfare. In practice, they robbed the country with the purpose of breaking down any Polish national “spirit” and morale remaining, thus preparing the country for a complete takeover. This was not completely known – or spoken of – in Sweden by

the time that museum professionals and others in the trade started preparing means of protecting and preserving the “Cultural property” during the war. Nevertheless, it was soon to be known, not least by the London blitz and all the care taken to shelter buildings and evacuate museum collections and archival material.

The study is based on a vast archival material to a large part derived from the Antiquarian–Topographic–Archive (ATA) in Stockholm. Several other state and private archives in Sweden and in other countries are also represented. The main questions for the study are listed as follows: How was the past used in media and in relation to the war and how did sheltering and the preservation of cultural property differ from the peacetime efforts? Which measures were used and why? Who was responsible? When did military or political organizations use cultural heritage as means of engagement and which consequences did it have? How can similarities and differences in this handling of cultural property in different Nordic countries during wartime be explained? Answering these questions and taking them through different locations and political entanglements during a timeline stretching over several years and different interpretation schemes of course results in a dense description comprising fifteen chapters and some 450 pages with numerous fine illustrations.

The work is therefore massive, and it is probably only possible to relate to some aspects of the text through this review. Sometimes the reader struggles with cascading “in–depth” excursions in seemingly quite loosely tied background information regarding for instance different interpretations of what is Swedish in older art and how these relate to the art-conception in Nazi-Germany. However, it has to be noted that the information in these cases always is neatly tied up with the initial questions and analyzed in discussions following the main chapters and in the conclusive chapter.

Many of these measures regarding the cultural property during wartime get mirrored through the actions and writings of a few prominent people belonging to the leading circles in the museum and archival world in Sweden. Mainly the architect and Director-General of the National Heritage Board *Sigurd Curman* (1879–1966) and art historian, professor *Johnny Roosval* (1879–1965) serve as agents of action through the scenario of wartime protecting of the cultural property. As such, they are highly suited as they also had connections to the other Nordic countries in similar or worse predicaments during the war. Indeed, they seem to have had much influence also in helping their Nordic colleagues in different ways during this time. That said one has to mention that the total count of people interacting in the text is close to two hundred.

The chapters mostly addresses the situation in Sweden, where different plans and strategies to protect the cultural property made up before the war,

were still not mature enough to be implemented fully when the war broke out. But we get insight in to how the actors tried to sort out museum collections into different classes, ranging from “elite” groups that would have to be evacuated or otherwise specially protected, to classes of “lesser” value that were dealt with using smaller measures. Some monuments like Bernt Notke’s medieval sculpture of St George and the dragon in Stockholm Cathedral (Storkyrkan) get to serve as an example of how different interpretations could arise regarding the national treasure status of the artefacts. Important observations about using national cultural property for more or less propagandist and sometimes military reasons are discussed thoroughly in several of the chapters.

The situation in the neighboring countries more directly engaged in the war shows some of the same concerns regarding how to handle the protection and use of cultural property. The German invasion of both Norway and Denmark in 1939 shows how the invading forces in some aspects showed a great respect for the countries “Germanic” history, but simultaneously didn’t have problems using monuments for military actions, even destroying some. Regarding Swedish concepts of the Finnish war experience show some differences due to the situations. Finland was attacked by the Soviets in the “Winter war” 1939–1940 during which the support and help of the professional Swedish museum staff involved was wholehearted and stretched even to arranging the evacuation of Finnish children to Swedish families. The support during the Continuation War when Finland was allied with Germany was not announced in the same open manner, but still contained help with the planning and even the evacuation of some museum collections. The evacuating of secret military cryptographic material and expertise in 1944 is not discussed. After the war, the help for the rebuilding of destroyed museum buildings, for instance the Turku castle was strong.

This is an important book with deep insights into situations that are not going to vanish easily. Legnér concludes the text with references to recent instances of destroying cultural property for different reasons, including the simple reason of degrading other peoples’ and nations’ morale and ethnic/national spirit. Sadly, this destructiveness seems to be an aspect of war regardless of time and international treaties.

## **AUTHOR**

Niklas Huldén has PhD in ethnology. Huldén is working as an archivist at Archive of Cultural Science *Cultura*, Åbo Akademi University, Finland. He is interested in material culture, maritime studies and innovation studies.