

War Booty: When cultural treasures become the spoils of war

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Throughout history it has been common practice for victorious armies to strip the land and property of the vanquished of anything valuable and to destroy what they did not steal. Many armies relied on raping, pillaging, and the material spoils of war as the only means of payment to their soldiers.

Newly ascendant empires intentionally focused on bringing home cultural artifacts and putting them on display to humiliate their enemies, for personal enrichment, and to appropriate stolen treasures as legacy contributions to their own national culture. Stolen treasure became bragging rights on the international stage.

Seventeenth-century Sweden was exceptionally thorough as they denuded Poland of its treasures, then packed it all onto ships and barges, sent them down the Vistula River to Gdansk, from where they sailed to Sweden. So heavily laden were the ships, some of them inevitably sank in the river before they made it to the coast.



Elements found in the river in 1906, including the Dolphin—photographed for the local newspaper in 1906.



PHOTOS: HUBERT KOWALSKI

From the early 20th century there have been reports of such sunken treasure ships, and, from 2010 through 2015, there was intense interest by some in Poland to locate these ships. In 2015, during a drought, the water level of the Vistula River was so low that you could wade across much of it. In that

five-year period, over 20 tons of booty was recovered, including fountains, door lintels, parapets, statuary, ornamental cannons and cannonballs, paintings, musical instruments, furniture, porcelain, weapons, books and manuscripts.

Today, such stolen treasures are referred to as war booty and regulations about it are included in often-ignored treaties. In May 2008, the Royal Armoury in Stockholm, one of the primary beneficiaries of the war booty from The Deluge in Poland in the seventeenth century, arranged a three-day symposium on War Booty—a Common European Heritage. The symposium attracted almost 50 scholars from eleven European countries.

The report on this symposium is the conclusion of a long-running project on the administration and accessibility of war booty as a common heritage. War booty is often not returned to its original owners, but the current “owners” have a responsibility to bear the expense of storing and showcasing the treasures.



PHOTO: MARZENA HMIELEWICZ-ADVENTURE PICTURES

The record low water level of the Vistula in recent years unveiled a plethora of objects and artifacts, many of which had remained hidden under the surface for centuries. The most surprising finds point to a sensational story of war booty dating back to seventeenth century.



Seventeenth century treasures retrieved from the Vistula River—a part of the plunder of Warsaw. The barge it was on was overloaded with booty and sank, like so many others.

PHOTOS: MARZENA HMIELEWICZ-ADVENTURE PICTURES

Professor Andrzej Rottermund, art historian, director for 24 years of the Royal Castle in Warsaw, and author of a bi-lingual chapter in the concluding report of the Stockholm project on the subject of War Booty, adds this interesting footnote: “I should also mention that a number of objects were captured twice over. A helmet now in the Royal Armoury, made in 1533 for the future Tsar of Russia, Ivan (IV) the Terrible, was captured by Polish troops in Moscow in 1611-1612, and then

again by Swedish troops in Warsaw in 1655.”

Professor Rottermund says one of the irreplaceable cultural treasures removed by the Swedes from Poland was a book collection that belonged to Copernicus, most of which is now in Uppsala University Library.

It is an irony of human history that among the destruction and bloodshed of all our wars, we sometimes pause to plunder and preserve symbols of learning and wisdom.



PHOTO: YOUTUBE

Professor Andrzej Rottermund

Right: Home to Polish monarchs since the sixteenth century, Warsaw’s Royal Castle was repeatedly plundered and devastated by the invading Swedish, Brandenburgian, Prussian and Tsarist armies.

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PHOTOS: WWW.COMMONS.WIKIPEDIA.ORG

Above: The Royal Armoury Museum, located in Stockholm’s Royal Palace, houses many items removed from Poland as spoils of war. For almost five hundred years, items once belonging to Swedish royal families have been kept here. Each generation has built up an ever-expanding collection of memories, evoking well-known events in Swedish history—including the Deluge of Poland in the mid-seventeenth century.



PHOTO: WWW.COMMONS.WIKIPEDIA.ORG

The Royal Castle in Warsaw, Poland.