

## **Eisenhower, Hitler, & the Monuments Men**

### Document-Based Learning for the Classroom

In a war, commanders must balance their directives, the realities on the ground, and the needs of their men in the face of resistance by the enemy. During World War II, the cultural treasures of Europe were under threat as Adolf Hitler wanted to strip the cultural heritage of his enemies away to weaken their spirit. He directed his forces to confiscate Europe's greatest works of art for the benefit of the Nazi Party. Trying to simultaneously liberate and protect Europe, the Allies, under the command of General Dwight D. Eisenhower, sought to safeguard Europe's art and culture within the realities of war. The Monuments Men formed as a special unit with the objective to save as much of Europe's material culture from Nazi destruction as possible. In this lesson, students will use primary sources to compare the objectives of each side and reflect on the significance of a society's cultural heritage.

**OBJECTIVE:** By reading documents from General Dwight D. Eisenhower and Adolf Hitler, students will be able to describe the significance of art and cultural symbols to a society and be able to differentiate the points of view of each leader as to the treatment of art and culture.

**GRADE LEVEL:** 7-12

#### **COMMON CORE STANDARDS:**

##### **ELA Anchor Standards for Reading:**

*CCRA.R.1 Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.*

*CCRA.R.4 Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.*

##### **Literacy in History/Social Studies:**

This lesson is aimed at meeting the Craft & Structure component and is accessible for students in grades 7-12.

**TIME REQUIREMENT:** One class period for document reading and discussion.  
Extra time for the essay and enrichment activities.

#### **DIRECTIONS:**

1. Have your students read the short overview about the Monuments Men for homework the night before or to start off the lesson.
2. Divide the class into 4 small groups.
3. Pass out copies of the primary sources Eisenhower's Historical Monuments Order and Hitler's ERR Decree and direct students to read them in their groups.
4. Give each group one question from Eisenhower's Order and one question from Hitler's Decree to discuss.

5. Each group should share their findings with the class.
6. Answer the full class questions together as a class.

#### DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS:

##### **Eisenhower's Historical Monuments Order**

1. What does Eisenhower mean when he says to respect monuments "as far as war allows?"
2. Eisenhower states that the Allies are fighting in a country with rich cultural history and assets. Why are the Allied Forces "bound" to respect these monuments and artifacts?
3. What does Eisenhower mean when he refers to "military necessity" and "military convenience?"
4. For what reasons would this order be marked confidential? What could happen if it fell into the wrong hands?

##### **Hitler's ERR Decree**

5. According to the decree, where in the occupied territories can the Nazis search and confiscate artifacts and property?
6. *Weltanschauung* refers to a view of the world informed by the ethics of society. Why do you think Hitler refers to the confiscation of property and cultural artifacts as a "spiritual battle?"
7. Why does Hitler decree that Jewish possessions are "ownerless?"
8. Why do you think the Nazis were so interested in looting culturally significant artifacts?

##### **Full Class Discussion**

9. How do these two documents differ in their instructions on the treatment of monuments and artifacts?
10. How do Hitler and Eisenhower differ on the definition of ownership of these cultural treasures?
11. What examples of persuasion can you find in these documents? In other words, how are Hitler and Eisenhower trying to convince others to follow orders?
12. Eisenhower says the historic monuments of Europe are an important link to our civilization today. Why do you think these monuments and cultural treasures mattered to our forces in WWII? Why do they matter to us now?

#### ENRICHMENT:

##### Student In-Class Discussion Scenarios/Take-Home Essays:

**Instructions:** Depending on length of your class period, discuss one or both of these scenarios with your class. If time runs short, they can be assigned as a homework essay.

1. In Eisenhower's memo, he mentions the bombing of Monte Cassino, the first Benedictine Monastery established in 6th century Italy. As the battle raged on for weeks near Cassino, Allied forces believed Germans occupied the monastery. Monte Cassino was bombed by the Allies on February 15, 1944, leaving it in complete ruin. After the bombing, the rubble became perfect cover for the German forces. Monte Cassino was finally captured in May of 1944, after 4 months of brutal fighting. Based on Eisenhower's instructions, do you think the bombing of the monastery was justified by the Allies? Why or why not?
2. Following the US invasion of Iraq in spring 2003, an estimated 15,000 artifacts were looted from the National Museum of Iraq, including many priceless pieces of the world's most ancient civilizations. Many scholars, archaeologists, and cultural officials conveyed the historical importance of the Iraq Museum to the US government in the days and weeks preceding the looting, but little was done to safeguard its treasures. What could the US government learn from the WWII Monuments Men about the protection of artifacts in this and future conflicts?

**ASSESSMENT:**

Group discussion, essays (if assigned); students can also be assigned to write a short reflection that addresses the central question: *What is the value to society in protecting art and other cultural treasures?*

This lesson was prepared by the Education Department of the The National WWII Museum.  
[www.nationalww2museum.org/education](http://www.nationalww2museum.org/education)



## Brief Overview of the Monuments Men

At the outbreak of WWII in Europe, museum curators and scholars on both sides of the Atlantic began to take steps to safeguard their most prized collections. In addition to potential danger from air raids and ground combat, these significant cultural landmarks and artworks were also threatened by Adolf Hitler's aggressive looting policy. Hitler coveted many of Europe's greatest masterpieces for his future Führermuseum in Linz, Austria. It was to be the largest and most magnificent art museum in the world, filled with what Hitler believed to be the finest art of Europe. Hermann Goering, the pompous and ostentatious military leader who was Hitler's second-in-command for most of the war, was also on the

hunt to amass treasures for his private art collection.

Through the duration of the war, Rembrandts, Raphaels, Vermeers, Da Vincis and millions of other valuable pieces were plundered and hidden, as they awaited their eventual arrival at the Führermuseum. Other stolen pieces were on display at Goering's residences, and in holdings earmarked for his massive personal cache.



**U.S. GIs recover stolen art hidden in Neuschwanstein Castle in Schwangau, Germany. Monuments Man Captain James Rorimer supervises. In addition to art, furniture, and other valuable objects, the Monuments Men also found Nazi card catalogues and documents detailing the items they seized from prominent French Jewish collectors such as the Rothschild family. Nazi records helped the MFAA officers in their efforts to return stolen works to their rightful owners. Source: NARA: RG 239-RC-14-5 .**

Responding to this impending crisis, the American Council of Learned Societies drew up lists and prepared maps displaying the most culturally significant and important monuments and artifacts across Europe. These pieces were priorities to be protected from destruction, if military necessity allowed, and safeguarded from looters.

The Council, along with a group of Harvard professors and faculty, began to devise protection plans as the United States military planned an invasion of Europe. The proposal received approval from President Roosevelt in June of 1943, and the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas (aka the Roberts Commission) was officially established in August.

The commission was charged to work as closely as possible with the US military, and special Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives (MFAA) officers – a new kind of military personnel -- began training for the front lines. Well over the age of most military men and women, these primarily American and British art experts were eager to begin their work, keenly aware that each passing day brought further destruction to the world's cultural heritage.

As the Monuments Men arrived in Italy and France, understaffed and with minimal budgets, they began to survey the damage to monuments and historic buildings. Their goal, as MFAA officer Frederick Hartt outlined, was "to reach all important artistic objects as rapidly as the progress of military options permitted, make a complete survey of the condition of the monuments and collections...and report at once on their findings."<sup>1</sup> Monuments Men needed to be resourceful and quick-thinking. Upon arriving at their various destinations, Monuments Men officers coordinated initial repairs to ensure no further damage would occur to these culturally important structures and to prevent complete destruction.

MFAA officers also embarked upon an extraordinary treasure hunt to recover countless stolen works of art. The Nazi plunder of art was a meticulous and organized endeavor. The Monuments Men were set with the task of retracing Nazi footsteps in order to recover prized and priceless collections. In Paris, the Nazis used the Jeu de Paume, a small museum adjacent to the Louvre as the primary clearinghouse for art stolen from French private collections owned by Jewish families. Rose Valland, a quiet Jeu de Paume employee, was allowed to stay at her post after the museum was taken over. Throughout the French occupation, she secretly documented stolen works of art as they were processed and shipped out to the Reich. She later supplied these lists and her intimate knowledge of Nazi looting to MFAA officers after they arrived in Paris.



**MFAA officers discuss how to remove the large Ghent Altarpiece from the mine at Altaussee. Image courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.**

These lists aided the Monuments Men in tracking down the stolen art. As they moved with the advancing Allied forces across Germany, the Monuments Men discovered much of this cultural material carefully hidden in remote repositories, such as castles, countryside villas, and salt mines. One of the largest caches was discovered deep underground in a mine in Altaussee, Austria, where over 6,000 works were concealed until the end of the war. Upon their arrival, Monuments Men officers discovered the entrances to the mine had been blasted, and they feared the works secreted there might have been destroyed. They later found that only the entryways were damaged. Artwork and other objects stored deep below the ground were unharmed, but destruction from the blasts greatly hindered the process of removing objects from the mine. Maneuvering these rescued pieces through narrow passageways and out the mine shaft without sustaining additional damage proved to be one of the most daunting and challenging tasks faced by the MFAA.

Under the supervision of the MFAA officers, many of these artworks were returned to their rightful homes in the years following the war's end, both to museums and still-living private collectors. Damaged cultural landmarks, including Monte Cassino, the Campo Santo, and the Aachen Cathedral, were rebuilt. Thousands of artifacts were never claimed, however, and thousands of pieces could not be traced back to their original owners. Many Jewish art patrons and other collectors perished in the Holocaust, and the task of locating rightful heirs became – and remains – a complicated challenge.

Today, nearly seventy years later, many pieces with unclear provenance due to the events of WWII are in museum collections around the world. Although some museums and other organizations are taking steps to investigate rightful ownership and provide an open-access database of these materials to the public, more work needs to be done. And there are still missing artworks. Some great artistic treasures remain unaccounted for, and are perhaps still hidden in secret locations. The story of art during World War II is not yet over.

The heroic role the Monuments Men played during WWII also has great value for understanding the importance of taking protective actions during present and future armed conflicts around the world. For more information about the Monuments Men and their efforts to safeguard cultural heritage, visit [www.monumentsmen.org](http://www.monumentsmen.org).

1 Hartt, Frederick. *Florentine Art Under Fire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949, page 6.

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C O P Y  
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ALLIED FORCE HEADQUARTERS

Office of The Commander-in-Chief

AG 000.4-1

29 December 1943

SUBJECT: Historical Monuments

TO : All Commanders

Today we are fighting in a country which has contributed a great deal to our cultural inheritance, a country rich in monuments which by their creation helped and now in their old age illustrate the growth of the civilization which is ours. We are bound to respect those monuments so far as war allows.

If we have to choose between destroying a famous building and sacrificing our own men, then our men's lives count infinitely more and the buildings must go. But the choice is not always so clear-cut as that. In many cases the monuments can be spared without any detriment to operational needs. Nothing can stand against the argument of military necessity. That is an accepted principle. But the phrase "military necessity" is sometimes used where it would be more truthful to speak of military convenience or even of personal convenience. I do not want it to cloak slackness or indifference.

It is a responsibility of higher commanders to determine through A.M.G. Officers the locations of historical monuments whether they be immediately ahead of our front lines or in areas occupied by us. This information passed to lower echelons through normal channels places the responsibility on all Commanders of complying with the spirit of this letter.

/s/ Dwight D. Eisenhower

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER,  
General, U. S. Army,  
Commander-in-Chief.

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DECREE OF THE FUHRER

Jews, Free Masons and those opponents of National Socialism who are affiliated with them on the basis of "Weltanschauung", are the authors of the present war against the Reich. The systematic spiritual battle against these forces is a task made necessary by the war effort.

I have therefore directed Reichsleiter Alfred Rosenberg to carry out this task in agreement with the Chief of the Wehrmacht High Command. His staff for the occupied territories is authorized to search libraries, archives, lodges and other "Weltanschauung" and cultural establishments for relevant material and to have this material requisitioned for the "Weltanschauung" tasks of the NSDAP, and for future scientific research by the higher educational institutions. The same regulation applies to cultural treasures which are the property or in the possession of Jews, which are ownerless, or the origin of which cannot be clearly established. Directions for carrying out this order in cooperation with the Wehrmacht will be issued by the Chief of the Wehrmacht High Command in agreement with Reichsleiter Rosenberg.

The necessary measures within the Eastern Territories under German administration will be taken by Reichsleiter Rosenberg in his capacity of Reichsminister for Occupied Eastern Territories.

/s/ HITLER

Headquarters of the Fuhrer, 1 March 1942.

To all Offices of  
the Wehrmacht,  
the Party and  
the State.