Defeating an enemy, saving a legacy

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In March 1941, Alfred Rosenberg, head of the Nazi's Special Purposes Unit, told Adolf Hitler that “the principal shipment of ownerless Jewish cultural property” had arrived at “the salvage location” — a castle on a rocky outcrop in the Bavarian alps. The inventory consisted of over 4,000 pieces of art, many of them masterpieces, taken from prominent Jewish families in France.

During World War II, in an attempt to create a German Uber-Museum for the Fuhrer, the Nazis seized more than five million works of art, including paintings by da Vinci, Vermeer, and Rembrandt, and sculptures by Michelangelo and Donatello. To stop them, President Roosevelt created an American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in Europe in 1943. It was the first time a nation made a serious and systematic attempt to mitigate cultural damage while fighting a war.

A Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives sub-commission enlisted sixty volunteers, many of them with expertise as museum curators, archeologists, and art scholars, drawn from 13 nations, to track down the Nazi plunder. Robert Edsel tells their story.

Edsel is not a gifted stylist. And the story of "the monuments men" has been told before, in memoirs and a 1965 film ("The Train," starring Burt Lancaster"). Nonetheless, as Edsel observes, although Congress formally commended them in 2007, their extraordinary achievements have, to a great extent, been "lost in the fog of history." Less than a decade after the looting of the museums of Iraq, it's worth our while to remember them.

The hero of Monuments Men is a woman. A volunteer at the Jeu de Paume museum, adjacent to the Louvre, Rose Valland ingratiated herself with the Nazis, and then told "monuments men" the home addresses of looters, the movements of trains carrying stolen art, and the locations of Special Purpose Unit storehouses. With her own ideas about duty and honor, Edsel writes, "She kept to her principles even with a gun at her back." For her efforts, she received the French Legion of Honor, the Medal of Freedom from the United States, and an Officer's Cross of the Order of Merit from the Federal Republic of Germany.

The "monuments men" may also have received an assist from Hitler himself. Just before he committed suicide, Edsel reveals, the Fuhrer apparently decreed that works of art should not be permitted to fall into the enemy's hands, "but shall by no means be finally destroyed."

Some of his followers refused to believe that this order, which was communicated through Albert Speer, had come from Hitler. But uncertainty about his intentions bought the "monuments men" some time. Equally important, Edsel argues, although Congress formally commended them in 2007, their extraordinary achievements have, to a great extent, been "lost in the fog of history." Less than a decade after the looting of the museums of Iraq, it's worth our while to remember them.

The "monuments men," alas, didn't recover everything. Thousands of precious objects, documents, and books, including Raphael's "Portrait of a Young Man," remain missing.

It's not yet time, however, to give up hope. In May, 2007, authorities found paintings by Pissarro, Monet, and Renoir in a safety deposit box in a bank in Switzerland controlled by Bruno Lohse, an aide to Hermann Goring. Records indicated that Lohse had taken 14 other paintings out of the box. Modern day monuments men, it appears, still have work to do.

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