

# **Rebuilding Aleppo: Public Engagement in Post-Conflict Reconstruction**

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## **Introduction**

Who owns the past? This question frequently features cultural heritage discourse particularly in relation to the archaeology of indigenous peoples and the repatriation of cultural property or human remains. The question may also be asked, however, in relation to cultural heritage in conflict zones. This paper explores the issues that arise from the destruction of archaeological sites in the ongoing war in Syria. The asymmetric conflict in Syria is not limited to the destruction of the tangible heritage properties, as it has also resulted in one of the biggest humanitarian catastrophes since the Second World War. Millions of local people have been forced to flee their homelands. Thousands have made their way through the Mediterranean Sea and sought refuge in Europe. The destruction of internationally renowned sites such as Palmyra and the ancient city of Aleppo has prompted a massive political and academic reaction in the West and numerous schemes have been devised to assist with the post-conflict reconstruction of heritage sites. In this paper I take a different approach and explore how archaeology and heritage can help those Syrians who have fled the conflict and are now living in exile. Is it possible, for example, to re-purpose archaeological remains that were appropriated to serve nationalist causes in the European past, i.e. can the collections held within European museums be used to foster a sense of cultural identity and pride among the victims of warfare in Syria? Can these collections - which were assembled by former colonial powers - change the attitudes of contemporary Europeans toward displaced peoples and incoming refugees? I will go on to investigate how displaced people approach the legacy of their ancestors and consider whether they value the negative memories caused by the destruction of Palmyra's temples, the minaret of the Great Umayyad mosque of Aleppo (Fig. 1), and other heritage sites.

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Figure No.1. The Great Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo, photo by Rami Alafandi 2010.

This paper examines enduring efforts to implement a top-down approach to the reconstruction of archaeological and heritage sites in Syria after the end of the war. This approach has been supported by the replica project of Palmyra's Arch of Triumph which was erected in London in April 2016 (Fig. 2) (Brown 2016; see also Munawar 2017). I argue that such an approach must be opposed and concurrently replaced by the bottom-up approach wherein decisions and action can be generated from the wider society. This, for example, can be attempted through the application of public archaeology and consultation with displaced populations to decide whether or not to reconstruct their heritage. This paper weighs on the possibility of applying this bottom-up approach in post-conflict recovery plans. To conclude, this paper discusses how the inclusion of the individual and collective memories of local people in the reconstruction processes can re-imagine archaeology as an inclusive and healing discourse.



Figure No.2. Boris Johnson, the Mayor of London, looks on as the scale replica of Palmyra's Triumphal Arch is unveiled in Trafalgar Square - Frank Augstein AP - The Telegraph-20 april 2016

### **Heritage, (Post-)Colonialism and the Middle East**

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, archaeology as a discourse in the Middle East has been characterized as being a specialty of the elite class. This has been stimulated by the attitude of people that tend to encourage their young generations to opt for the more practical and lucrative scientific professions such as medicine and law. This tendency has created a huge gap between society and the discipline of archaeology which ultimately resulted in neglecting any field that studies the material culture of the past. Post-colonial regimes, which have been ruling the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region for much of living memory, have also reinforced this gap. Archaeology is one of the fields that is controlled and regulated solely by the governments. This approach finds support in, for instance, the Syrian Antiquities Law (1963), wherein the property of archaeology only belongs to the government. This has generated a top-down approach which eventually caused archaeology to become a topic dominated by society's elite.

Bahrani (1998) stated that many scholars consider the discourse of archeology a “stepchild” of imperialism although efforts to decolonize archaeology are still ongoing. During the colonial period, Gillot (2010) indicated that archaeology in Syria during the French mandate (1918-1945) was portrayed as a colonial discipline which aimed at investigating the Western civilization to justify the French existence in Syria. This colonial frame of archaeology was employed to examine

and divide the different identity groups in an attempt to get to know the ‘other’ and facilitate controlling him (Gillot 2010).

Archaeology has deep roots in colonialism and the Western interests in the biblical and classical pasts - as the cradle of [Western, Judeo-Christian] civilization (de Cesari 2015) - which explains why some scholars consider archaeology more relevant to outsiders than to local populations who were born and lived among the its sites and objects (Silberman 1991; de Cesari 2010). Additionally, since colonial times, archaeology has been influenced by contemporary political, social and intellectual agendas to serve the aims of its practitioners of (Gillot 2010) and in particular those in power.

In the past few decades, the MENA region has been sinking amidst the chaos of conflicts, civil wars and political upheavals (Armitage 2017). Archaeological heritage has fallen victim to those endless violent actions and has less and less reasonable claims to political neutrality. Moreover, efforts have also been established at national, regional and international levels to encourage and promote the protection and conservation of endangered cultural heritage sites during conflict periods (Cunliffe and Perini 2015). These attempts were primarily directed to preserve the physical constructions of the built heritage to maintain the identity of those sites. These initiatives to safeguard archaeological heritage in conflict zones are seen, by many scholars, as a new form of Western colonialism which deepened imperialist agendas and served the introduction of “neo-colonial interventions” (de Cesari 2015) in the MENA region (Libya, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, etc.). This can be seen in the new tendency of the West to justify the European interest in rebuilding what *Daesh* devastated in the World Heritage Site of Palmyra by claiming that the Greco-Roman patrimony of Palmyra is part of “Europe’s (hi)story” and the material evidence of the origins of European civilization (Munawar 2016; 2017).

### **Aleppo and Syria’s War**

Seven years have passed and Syria has been drowning in a war that affected every single aspect of life there; from houses, mosques and churches to archaeological sites and most importantly the wellbeing of the Syrian people. Syria’s conflict started in March 2011, the roots of which formed with peaceful protests in March 2011 in Dara’a, southern Syria (BBC 2014; Glass 2016; Scurlock 2017). Scholars considered those demonstrations part of the revolutionary movement that has spread in several states in the Middle East and Northern Africa since 2010, known as the Arab Spring. The widely-spread public protests demanded reformations in the current regime, but the regime responded with the shooting and killing of civilians by intelligence forces.



The tension escalated and other citizens in different parts of Syria joined the protests which eventually boiled the situation down to an armed conflict (Glass 2016) or, as the United Nations later declared it, a civil war. Several months later, a new terminology appeared to describe Syria's conflict as a 'proxy war' between the international and regional powers (Brockman-Hawe 2014).

The war in Syria has resulted in the biggest humanitarian catastrophe in modern history; millions of refugees and internally displaced people and hundreds of thousands of victims, in addition to costly damages of Syria's infrastructure (Holmes 2014; Izadi 2014). A third of the Syrian population, (over 6 million out of 22 million Syrians) has been hit devastatingly hard by the ongoing warfare in Aleppo<sup>2</sup> and Homs<sup>3</sup> (the second and third largest cities in Syria) (Qudsi 2017). The old city of Aleppo has been destroyed and most of its historical monuments have either been partially damaged or completely destroyed (Fig. 3) (Cunliffe 2012; Abd-Alkarim 2014; Perini and Cunliffe 2014; Shadi and Bashar 2015; Porter 2016). The city of Aleppo was divided into an eastern part, under rebel control, and a western part, under the regime control, until the end of 2016 (Ruck 2016; UNESCO 2017). In December 2016, Aleppo was reunited after Syrian government forces took control of the whole city after an evacuation agreement with the rebels in eastern Aleppo



(Aljazeera 2016; Stoughton 2017).

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2 “The last public official data on the population of Aleppo dates back to 2005. According to several sources and analyses, the population of Aleppo was 3,200,000 inhabitants. With a demographic increase ratio of around 10% from the 2005 data, the population of Aleppo in 2011 could be estimated to have become between 4,150,000 and 5,000,000.” (Grandin 2015; Qudsi 2017).

3 See also for further reading, Al-Sabouni 2016.

Figure No.3. The Great Mosque of Aleppo in 2013, after destruction of the minaret, taken by Gabriele Fangi, Wissam Wahbeh, Wikimedia, CC

In table 1, the numbers of Aleppo's populations are shown and compared between the government- and opposition-held areas between the beginning of the crisis in 2011 and the present day. The eastern side of Aleppo (opposition held-area) has witnessed higher numbers of people being forced to flee due to the continuous battles and bombing. It is worth noting that the World Heritage Site of the Ancient City of Aleppo is located mostly in the eastern part of the city. Table 1 illustrates that the whole city of Aleppo lost between 2.4 and 2.9 million citizens during the past few years of the war. The table has been included to highlight the significance of including exiled Syrians and locals, who stayed inside Aleppo during the war, in the decision-making process.

#### Human Casualties in Aleppo from the beginning of 2011 to the present

	% of total population	Estimated inhabitants in early 2011	Estimated remaining inhabitants	Estimated % Population remaining	Estimated % of emigration
In zones controlled by the regime	40	1,660,000 to 2,000,000	996,000 to 1,200,000%	55% to 65%	35% to 45%
In zones controlled by the rebels	60	2,490,000 to 3,000,000	747,000 to 900,000	20% to 40%	60% to 80%
Aleppo	100	4,150,000 to 5,000,000	1,743,000 to 2,100,000	36% to 42%	58% to 64%

**Table 1. Human Casualties in Aleppo. From: Rebuilding Old Aleppo: Postwar Sustainable Recovery and Urban Refugee Resettlement (Qudsi 2017)**

Based on the damage assessment map of the draft UNESCO report titled “*Proposed Materials and Considerations for the Reconstruction of the Ancient City of Aleppo*” by Thierry Grandin, almost 90% of the surface area of Aleppo's old city has been damaged (see Qudsi 2017). UNESCO published a preliminary damage assessment of the old city of Aleppo and estimated that roughly 60% has been severely damaged, with 30% totally destroyed (UNESCO 2017).

#### **(Post-) Conflict Reconstruction and the Public**

Heritage is one of the first weapons drawn in a conflict often for fighting propaganda battles. This can be seen clearly in the case of the Syrian conflict; when Russia used Palmyra's Roman amphitheater to broadcast an online speech of Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, and to celebrate the 'Liberation of Palmyra' by holding a concert on the same amphitheater (Fig. 4) that *Daesh* used to behead a group of prisoners (Dearden 2016; Munawar 2017).



Figure No.4. Russian Orchestra and Putin's Speech - Vasily Maximov AFP, Getty Images - 06 May 2016

Critical heritage studies have included several theoretical discussions on how heritage is a future-making process and how it may be necessary to think ahead to deal with unknown times and unspecified futures (Holtorf and Högberg 2015). Rodney Harrison, the Australian heritage theorist, in his book *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, has acknowledged that the life-cycle of heritage has three dimensions: the past, the present, and the future. He adds: "Heritage is not a passive process of simply preserving things from the past that remains, but an active process of assembling a series of objects, places and practices...associated with a particular set of values that we wish to take with us into the future" (Harrison 2013). Harrison's definition of heritage could help archaeologists and heritage professionals to comprehend the variations in how heritage is valued. It may also serve to illustrate how individual elements of society experience the past as part of a set of engaging and inclusive processes. These heritage processes show the significance of studying the past in a broad sense and include the mechanisms through which heritage values and materials may be politicized,

and also how the values and materials of heritage which are based on unobserved decision-making processes may lead to certain forms of material heritage being retained, while others are lost or abandoned.

Scholars regularly elaborate on the significance of combining cultural heritage with identity, memory, history and the appreciation of space to help people facing the 'problem' of future nation-building and the continuous development plans (Ashworth et al. 2007; Wedgwood 2009; Harrison 2013).

Conflict is a key player that stimulates the changing of urban, social and power structures. Consequently, meanings are in a constant process of transformation (Viejo-Rose 2011) and the implications of conflict are part of the lifecycle and (hi)story of any heritage site. At the same time wars, conflicts, social and political disorder, and the increasingly violent world have been influencing heritage, its meanings and values. Conflict has also helped the emergence of new research and approaches to reconstructing heritage sites in the aftermath of wars, such as the reconstructions of Mostar Bridge, Beirut city center and the old city of Warsaw.

In post-conflict contexts, national and international efforts to reconstruct cultural heritage focus primarily on those representations of collective identities of the concerned societies which are embodied in religious and historic monuments. That was the case of Stari Most bridge in the Balkans, when international interest generated funds to rebuild this World Heritage Site (Armahly, et al. 2004, 7). The importance of cultural heritage for local people lies in it being a crucial element linking their past with the ambiguous future, but now threatened by an ongoing conflict. Similarly, in post-conflict contexts, cultural heritage represents a "thread of continuity" (Stanley-Price 2007, 1; Ascherson 2007; De Jong & Rowlands 2008) by which the identity of the wounded society is reconstructed as an essential part of the national reconciliation and the peace-building process (UNESCO, UNPF & UNDP 2015).

Stig Sørensen and Viejo-Rose (2015) consider that social disorder and conflict in particular cause damage and the loss of unique and irreplaceable things, and most importantly affect populations connected to those sites on a psychological level. Therefore, the significance of heritage for societies in the aftermath of war is part of the value that any heritage site holds, specifically, in establishing a connection with their ancestors and memories. Holtorf (2015) believes that Palmyra, for instance, is a place that enhances the pride of Syrians and the remembrance of such heritage site increases their sense of cultural identity and pride.



UNESCO has conducted numerous reconstructions of heritage in the post-war period, such as the rehabilitation of the Bethlehem area (UNESCO 1998) and the rebuilding of Mostar Bridge (Walasek et al. 2016). Intense discussions took place on whether or not to reconstruct the niches of the Bamiyan Buddhas. Some specialists proposed using 3D laser techniques for a complete reconstruction or reconstruction by hologram, while others suggested leaving the niches empty and maintaining them as a permanent exhibition or even a memorial (Grün et al. 2004; Hegarty 2012; Bobin 2015).

Another post-war reconstruction took place in Ethiopia. The founder of Italian fascism, Benito Mussolini, looted the 24-metre Obelisk of Axum from its archaeological site in 1937 and placed it in Rome at the entrance of his Ministry of Italian Colonies (Bhalla 2001; Scovazzi 2009). The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed the return of the Obelisk of Axum to its original location and its reinstallation within the Axum archaeological site after nearly 80 years in exile (Johnson 2005).

In the wake of the deliberate ruination of Timbuktu's mausoleums and mosques by the *Ansar Dine* radical militants in 2012 (Diarra 2012; Fletcher 2012), UNESCO - with funds from the European Union - is working on reconstructing the destroyed monumental buildings as they were before the conflict (UNESCO 2015a). The crucial point in this case of post-war reconstruction is the involvement of local people to recover their historic mausoleums (UNESCO 2015b). The rebuilding of the mosques and mausoleums of Timbuktu is considered a major contribution to peace-building (Kennedy 2015) and reconciliation process among communities and most importantly as a final episode in the collective trauma that Mali underwent.

While the war in Syria is still ongoing, UNESCO and its partners have exerted massive efforts to protect cultural heritage in the conflict zones. The recovery phase has already started - even though the conflict has not yet ended - with gathering the expertise and databases of documentation of most of the sites, ancient city centers, and historic buildings (for further readings, see also UNESCO's Observatory of Syrian Cultural Heritage). Nevertheless, the unprecedented level of destruction of the urban city centers in Aleppo in street combat, targeted explosions and tank shells (Grandin 2015; Qudsi 2017), the targeted demolition of religious constructions such as the Minaret of the Great Umayyad mosque of Aleppo (Aljazeera 2013; Fangi and Wahbeh 2014), the collateral damage by various weapons which partially or completely destroyed historic buildings such as Crac des Chevaliers (Cunliffe 2012), or the sweeping of archaeological sites that have a unique value by explosions such as Palmyra (de Cesari 2015; Harrowell 2016), raise up significant issues related to

destruction such as collective memory and identity of the places that need to be incorporated and addressed when the time of reconstruction comes.

Reconstructing heritage in the aftermath of war is an extremely complicated process, and is deeply connected to politics, economy, culture and ideology in addition to social, symbolic, technical and aesthetic considerations. At the same time, the reconstruction and the physiological and social reconstruction of wounded communities are largely inseparable (Harrowell 2016).

The post-war recovery plan can and should include the participation of the local communities otherwise the conflict can protract on a social level and consequently last for further generations, particularly when decision-makers will or will not opt to restore symbolic sites (Viejo-Rose 2011). After the war ended in the Balkans, several studies observed that there was no connection between the reconstructed heritage and the local people, since local communities were not often consulted on the rebuilding plans. This can be noticeably spotted in the Stari Most case<sup>4</sup> (Lostal and Cunliffe 2016). Furthermore, when the physical rebuilding of heritage is conducted in an open and inclusive way, it can be a significant step towards reconstructing and healing societies traumatized by war (Campanella 2006; Charlesworth 2006; Clarke et al. 2010; Harrowell 2016).

Educating displaced people and raising their cultural awareness are crucial components in involving the public in making the decision and participating in the reconstruction. Moreover, heritage facilities, such as museums, can be utilized to raise public awareness. The Pergamon Museum of Berlin, for instance, has started working on introducing Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Germany to the archaeological collections they brought from the Near East, and specifically from Syria and Iraq (Oltermann 2016). Such an initiative revives the sense of cultural pride of the displaced people and simultaneously restores a sense of self-esteem through connecting refugees to the legacy of their ancestors. The Pergamon museum initiative could be the first step towards raising the awareness of the community which would ultimately help to include them in the post-war decision-making process. The collections held within European museums, therefore, can be used to foster a sense of cultural identity and pride among the victims of warfare in Syria, in a way that would prepare them psychologically and socially to participate in rebuilding their heritage. This can also enhance the work of transnational networks to accelerate the recovery phase and to create

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For further discussion about destruction and reconstruction of heritage in Bosnia and Herzegovina, see Walasek et al. 2016.

virtual communities through the deployment of social media, considering almost half of the population of Syria is now in diaspora.

Reconstructing places in the aftermath of war cannot be separated from physiological and social reconstruction. The case of rebuilding Timbuktu's mausoleums and mosques showed how the inclusion of Timbuktu's people in rebuilding the destroyed heritage could help in building and sustaining peace among the population of Mali (Kennedy 2015). The post-war recovery of Syria should, therefore, include all the different stakeholders in making the decision to ensure that culture is able to connect people and heal the trauma of war. The perception of heritage has to expand its category beyond the limits of traditional understanding to see heritage as a therapeutic tool for post-conflict communities. Understanding heritage as a therapy requires deploying the past - and the present in post-war contexts - to serve for a better future. Heritage-as-therapy can become a productive and progressive benefit for everyone and in particular for the disempowered, displaced and traumatized societies (Meskell and Scheermeyer 2008).

The inclusion of all Syrians, regardless of their political and/or ethno-religious stances or if they are inside or outside Syria, in the reconstruction process will accelerate the reconciliation and will ensure that the wounded community is connected to the reconstructed heritage and will enhance the social cohesion in the aftermath of war. Consequently, cross-cultural tolerance and understanding can be developed alongside re-imagining the reconstruction of heritage as an inclusive and healing process. Post-war reconstruction should be perceived as a tool for reconciliation to help ensure that past experiences of heritage reconstruction after wars, which served to support a particular side of the conflict, are not repeated, such as post-Saddam reconstruction of Iraq (Isakhan 2011), after the US-led invasion in 2003, when the reconstruction was directed to eliminate any representation of the Baath identity, or in the post-civil-war reconstruction of Spain (Viejo-Rose 2011).

The post-conflict reconstruction of Aleppo will raise several challenges, including national, regional, and international coordination, the new archaeological discoveries, the displacement of Syrian expertise, the reintegration of returnees to their homes, raising funds on international and regional levels, the 'brain drain' of specialists, the issue of acceptable and unacceptable reconstructions, the stabilization of the security situation to ensure the safety of the reconstructed buildings, and perhaps the revival of the neo-colonial agenda in the Middle East. It is worth noting that most of these challenges are related to the future geo-political situation and how the political map of the Middle East will be drawn when the war ends.

## Discussion

In light of the massive wave of cultural heritage destruction in Aleppo, which has been uncovered after Aleppo was reunited by the end of 2016, casualty numbers vary as much as the level of damage. The tangible losses of Aleppo's heritage and population undermine the morale of the Aleppians who are currently on the verge of being deprived of the (in)tangible values of their heritage (Fig. 5). Bevan writes of the destruction of heritage thus; "the intentional collapse of buildings is intimately related to social collapse and upheavals" (2006). The destruction of cultural heritage in Aleppo has caused a fragmentation of Syrian society and the expansion of religious sectarianism (Albahri 2014). Reports indicate that some religious buildings - mosques, churches, and synagogues - in Aleppo were intentionally vandalized or damaged (Erickson 2013). Director-General of UNESCO Irina Bokova agrees with the Syrian archaeologist Amr al-Azm that cultural heritage destruction endangers any future reconciliation and national unity efforts, since Syria's



heritage is the "pride of Syrians of every sect" (de Cesari 2015).

Figure No.5. The Great Umayyad Mosque of Aleppo, taken by Fathi Nezam, December 2016

The real challenge for Aleppo's heritage is in the recovery plans which are now being prepared. The main concern is to use similar reconstruction approaches to the one which has already been used to reconstruct Palmyra's Arch of Triumph. In 2016, a replica of Palmyra's Arch of



Triumph was reconstructed in Trafalgar Square in London under the supervision of the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums in Syria (DGAM), the highest national authority of archaeological sites in Syria, in collaboration with the Institute for Digital Archaeology (IDA) (Turner 2016; Brown 2016). This was one of the reconstruction plans that continued applying a 'top-down' approach to archaeology in Syria. The replica project has been widely criticized for numerous reasons, one of which being the use of this top-down approach which neglected the viewpoints of local stakeholders. Director of the Council for British Research in the Levant (CBRL), Bill Finlayson, commented on the replica project: "The dangerous precedent suggests that if you destroy something, you can rebuild it and it has the same authenticity as the original." (BBC 2016). Therefore, I argue that such an approach to heritage reconstruction must be opposed and replaced by the bottom-up approach wherein the progression and decision can be generated from across society as a whole. The bottom-up approach can help to re-imagine archaeology as an inclusive and healing discourse and not keep it as a tool to serve political and propaganda agendas.

The displaced people of Aleppo have largely suffered the intense armed conflict and its consequences, hence they should be directly involved in the post-war recovery plan. The participation of those inhabitants might face many challenges, such as the focus of media and donors on the measurable outputs that has immediate and visible results and quick impacts on the short term (Zetter 2010). There will be, therefore, no place for social recovery which could ultimately result in neglecting the people and considering them a liability by the participating actors in the reconstruction (Barakat 2010).

Post-war reconstruction should not prioritize and focus solely on the physical rebuilding and become a short-term or salvage process but should instead emphasise a long-term commitment to plans in which the awareness of Aleppeans can be raised, the capacity of the displaced population and institutions can grow, and the society will recover on the political, economic, institutional, and social levels (Barakat & Chard 2010; Barakat 2010). During the reconstruction of Timbuktu's heritage, local people and international experts worked together and participated in rebuilding the city's landmarks. As a result, Timbuktu's people learnt more about the importance of their heritage and how it was built, in addition to the traditional building techniques which ultimately resulted in reviving a unique historical knowledge (Kondratyeva 2017). Thus, the people's value of heritage could become the vehicle that gathers and unifies the multi-ethnic (displaced) population of Aleppo to revive and rebuild their nation when the war comes to an end.

## **Conclusion**

The hardest challenge for Syrian heritage is yet to come. Several years have passed and the systematic and deliberate destruction of Syrian cultural heritage is still ongoing. Peace talks to end Syria's conflict are being held while this paper is being written, but as yet no explicit mention of the fate of Syria's cultural heritage has been made.

This chapter has described how the reconstruction of cultural heritage in the aftermath of war could play a major role in rebuilding a healthy post-conflict society. It has been my aim to clarify why it is crucially important that displaced people and returnees are fully included in post-war reconstruction. The need to establish a consensus among different groups of stakeholders and to identify, acknowledge and establish how and why cultural sites are held in high social esteem is an extremely difficult challenge. Nevertheless, I believe that the bottom-up approach which I have advocated could strengthen social inclusiveness and find new ways to deconstruct the conflict based on shared cultural values.

My theoretical framework aims primarily to construct a useful connection between the material culture of the past, contemporary conflict, and society. I promote this consensual and collaborative approach in an attempt to ensure that any eventual victors - be they regime or opposition forces, are prevented from (re-)writing cultural history for their own political agendas.

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