

Israel's destruction and theft of cultural property in Gaza

Guest contribution by Jean Scharf
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Imperialism can look back on a long history of the destruction and theft of cultural property, which has played an important role in the realisation of genocidal intentions for imperialist purposes.

Take the period of German colonialism, for example, in regard to which it is still unclear how many artefacts were brought to Europe—largely by the German military. There are over 40,000 artefacts in German museums from the territory of Cameroon alone, more than from anywhere else in the world, including Cameroon's capital Yaoundé, from which 6,000 objects were taken. Or the book burnings by the Nazis in 1933, who deliberately destroyed literature that ran counter to National Socialist ideology.

The history of the occupation of Palestine by the Zionist state of Israel is also characterised by the targeted eradication of cultural knowledge. For example, in the form of book looting during the *Nakba* in 1948 or in the 1970s and 1980s, when Israeli archaeologists plundered an archaeological site in Deir el-Balah in the centre of the Gaza Strip under the protection of the army. More than 3,000-year-old Canaanite artefacts were then brought to Israel and are still on display in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem today, thereby serving the Zionist agenda.

According to the Israeli NGO Emek Shaveh, at least 60 percent of all culturally significant sites in Gaza have been destroyed or severely damaged since October 7, 2023—with the help of US and German weapons. These include religious sites, monuments, museums and archaeological excavation sites. In addition, numerous educational institutions, archives, libraries and contemporary art venues have been affected.

In its report on Israeli damage to archives, libraries and museums in Gaza, the group Librarians and

Archivists with Palestine emphasises that due to the ongoing, brutal bombardment of the Gaza Strip, it can be assumed that the number of unreported cases of destroyed cultural items is high.

At the end of November, for example, the Gaza City Archive was completely destroyed by Israeli shelling—and with it thousands of papers dating back over 150 years, which document historically significant buildings in Gaza City, among other things. On November 25, 2023, the Tamari Sabbagh Library was destroyed. In addition to hundreds of Palestinians who had sought shelter in the library building, tens of thousands of books also fell victim to the Israeli bombardment. Also, at the end of November, Israeli air strikes levelled Gaza's municipal library to the ground.

Gaza is rich in archaeological sites, which are important sources of historical knowledge about the region and provide global contexts. The oldest sites date back to antiquity. According to Palestinian archaeologist Fadel al-Otol, all that remains of the Greek city of Anthedon, for example, about two kilometres north of the Port of Gaza, is a hole in the ground. It is just one of at least 200 archaeological sites completely destroyed by Israeli air strikes.

Gaza's oldest mosque, the seventh-century Omari Mosque, was also almost entirely destroyed on December 8, 2023, along with a collection of manuscripts dating back to the 14th century. An Israeli strike on the early fifth century Church of St Porphyrius killed at least 16 people and injured many more who had sought shelter in the building.

The Shababeek Centre for Contemporary Art, the last centre for contemporary art in the Gaza Strip, was razed to the ground in April as part of the Israeli offensive on Al-Shifa Hospital, taking with it over 20,000 works, mostly by contemporary Palestinian artists, for whom

the centre was one of the most important meeting points and exhibition venues in the region.

Art therapy programmes for dealing psychologically with war and occupation have always been part of the centre. One of the co-founders of the centre, the artist Basel El Maquousi, currently lives in a tent in Rafah, where he provides art workshops for women and children.

On January 18 of this year, the Israeli military deliberately blew up Al-Israa University and the National Museum, which housed over 3,000 archaeological artefacts. Eli Eskozido, director of the Israeli Antiquities Authority, posted a photo on Instagram in January of some of the looted artefacts, which were subsequently exhibited in the Knesset, following a video of the Israeli army's looting of archaeological pieces.

This represents a deep humiliation of the Palestinian population and is reminiscent of a colonial practice in which stolen artefacts were and are proudly displayed as trophies in the government buildings, national museums and private rooms of the imperial power. A look at history and the current figures show that the destruction of cultural property is by no means collateral damage, but a targeted, historically proven and well-established tactic. The purpose of the removal and destruction of culturally significant material is the destruction of historical knowledge and the application of psychological torture and humiliation, as well as an attempt at the sustained erasure of cultural memory.

In addition to the tens of thousands of victims of the Israeli genocide against the Palestinians, and the extensive destruction of infrastructure, the massive, irretrievable destruction of their cultural heritage also shows that appeals to the ruling class achieve nothing. As an effective weapon of war, the destruction or deprivation of historical material allows the occupying power to triumph, not only militarily but also culturally, over the victims of the war of annihilation by depriving them of their history and thus of the sustained possibility of reconstruction.

The aim of the imperialist powers and the Israeli government is the eradication or expulsion of the population of the Gaza Strip for geopolitical purposes. Only the building of an international mass movement of workers and students against war and fascism guided by a socialist perspective can put a halt to the ongoing

genocide and the accompanying destruction of cultural heritage.



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