In 1974 the Turkish military intervened in Cyprus in response to a Greek-led coup d’etat, capturing and annexing the northern part of the island. Mass displacement immediately followed the invasion, with up to 200,000 Greek Cypriots and over 60,000 Turkish Cypriots fleeing their homes. The partition of Cyprus and the ensuing destruction and systematic looting of valuable icons, frescoes, and mosaics from churches and other important cultural heritage sites stands as one of the most prolific examples of systematic looting of art since the Second World War. Forty years on, Cypriot authorities continue to campaign indefatigably for the return of their stolen cultural heritage.

The Yugoslav Wars, fought between 1991 and 2001, were Europe’s longest running and most destructive conflict since the Second World War. The intentional destruction of the Old Bridge in Mostar by Croat forces and the National Library of Sarajevo by Serb forces exemplify the frenzied and multidimensional destruction of diverse cultural heritage sites. With both tangible and intangible cultural heritage deliberately targeted, the Yugoslav Wars were the first conflict since World War Two to be formally adjudged as genocidal.

Despite numerous European Union member states still dealing with the consequences of the cultural devastation caused by the Second World War – and in some cases subsequent wars - looting and the intentional destruction of cultural heritage have remained deeply entrenched aspects of conflict in Europe. It is no longer possible for the destruction of cultural heritage, particularly when combined with acts of genocide, to be ignored in the European pursuit of improved human rights and the elimination of racism and xenophobia.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR UNLEASHED AN INSTITUTIONALISED AND ORGANISED WAVE OF LOOTING AND PLUNDER UNRIVALLED IN MODERN EUROPEAN HISTORY. DESPITE THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE DAMAGE AND DESTRUCTION, A NUMBER OF MORE RECENT EUROPEAN CONFLICTS HAVE SEEN SIMILAR PATTERNS OF SYSTEMATIC LOOTING AND INTENTIONAL DESTRUCTION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SITES. THESE CONFLICTS STAND AS A DISCONCERTING REMINDER OF A POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS FAILURE - DESPITE NUMEROUS TREATIES AND DECLARATIONS - TO ADDRESS THE SHARED TRAUMA OF GENOCIDAL PLUNDER AND TARGETED DESTRUCTION THAT MADE THE SECOND WORLD WAR ONE OF THE DARKEST PERIODS IN HUMAN HISTORY.