

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Briefing  
on  
“Cyprus’ Religious Cultural Heritage in Peril”

July 21, 2009

Testimony by Michael Jansen, author *War and Cultural Heritage: Cyprus After the 1974 Turkish Invasion*

I would like to thank you for inviting me to testify before your influential Commission. The looting of Cyprus’ cultural heritage is not only a crime against Cyprus but a crime against humanity. We all are diminished by cultural loss of any kind. As a journalist based in the Eastern Mediterranean, I have seen a great deal of war, the scourge of the world’s cultural heritage.

Indeed, we are just now picking up the pieces of the wanton destruction and plunder of Europe’s heritage during World War II. What has happened since Turkey invaded northern Cyprus 35 years ago has been even more dramatic.

The devastation is comprehensive and has taken place in a small area. Churches, chapels, monasteries, libraries, museums, and private collections of religious art and antiquities were looted. Religious and historical sites have been damaged, ravaged or allowed to disintegrate. While the focus of this meeting is Christian sites and art, mention must also be made of archaeological and historical treasures. The rich cultural heritage of Cyprus embraces pre-Christian as well as Christian sites and art.

The cleansing of religious and historical sites began as soon as Turkish troops set foot in northern Cyprus on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1974, and continues until today. Cultural cleansing proceeded in parallel with the ethnic cleansing of 162,000 Greek Cypriots living in the area occupied by Turkey.

When the first phase of the ethno-cultural cleansing process ended in late 1976, 158,400 Greek Cypriots had been driven into the government-controlled south. Pillage was both random and conducted by professional thieves and smugglers. While gathering material for my book, *War and Cultural Heritage*, I interviewed Dutch dealer Michel Van Rijn who was in the north during early Turkish military operations. As he made his way to Nicosia along roads clogged with refugees, he saw Turkish soldiers throwing icons from looted churches onto burning pyres. My husband, Levant correspondent for *The Economist* of London, visited the area in September 1974. He found that churches were open to both looters and vandals. Nothing had been done to secure Christian sites when I paid my first visit to the north in February 1975. Looters not only stole and ravaged art but also, in the process of plundering, destroyed buildings and archaeological sites.

During the second phase, from 1977 through 1979, the number of Greek Cypriots residing in the north was reduced from 3,600 to 2,000 while specific treasures were targeted by local networks of icon and antiquities smugglers. According to Van Rijn, Turkish journalist Ozgen Acar and British art writer Geraldine Norman – who have written extensively on what happened in northern Cyprus – the pillage was directed by Aydin Dikmen, a major Turkish black market dealer

based in Munich. He had developed close connections with Turkish Cypriot looters and smugglers during hostilities between the Cypriot communities.

The third phase began in 1980 and is ongoing. Today fewer than 500 Greek Cypriots, most of them elderly, are enclaved in the occupied Karpass Peninsula. Theft continues from known and newly discovered archaeological sites and illegal excavations are being conducted by archaeologists from Turkey. Both archaeological sites and church buildings are falling into rack and ruin due to neglect or being exploited or bulldozed by developers.

Since Turkey is directly responsible for whatever takes place in northern Cyprus, cultural cleansing could have been averted or curbed if Ankara had honoured its signature on The Hague Convention of 1954 for the protection of heritage during war and occupation. But Turkey did not meet its commitments and the international community did not make use of opportunities to exert pressure on Ankara to do so.

The first opportunities came in 1974-1975, before looting had become widespread or focused on specific treasures. In mid-September 1974, less than a month after the ceasefire, a Turkish team of experts visited northern Cyprus to investigate reports of looting. This team recommended that an inventory be made of both archaeological and church treasures and that a senior archaeologist should be appointed to protect and preserve cultural property. In early October, two experts from UNESCO toured sites in both north and south and found that war damage was slight. They called for the appointment of a "councillor for cultural heritage" to supervise conservation and restoration. Consequently, Canadian scholar, Jacques Dalibard was sent to Cyprus in February 1975. He concluded that Cyprus should be regarded as "one huge monument" and asked for the establishment of a permanent presence in the north to supervise the protection and restoration of antiquities and church art. Instead of acting on his recommendations, UNESCO suppressed his 120 page report.

Subsequent European initiatives provided fresh opportunities to halt depredation and destruction. In October 1982 the Sub-Committee on the Architectural and Artistic Heritage of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe met in Nicosia. The Subcommittee "expressed concern at reports of damage, loss and dispersal of cultural objects in the Turkish occupied part of Cyprus and decided to seek means, within the Council of Europe, of associating all member states in moves to prevent such activities." Nothing was done. In 1987 Europa Nostra called upon Turkey to halt pillage and destruction and asked the Council of Europe to take up the matter with the Turkish authorities. Nothing was done. In June 1989, the Sub-Committee on Architectural and Artistic Heritage dispatched a mission which carried out a week long survey, following in Dalibard's footsteps. The mission's report, written by Robin Cormack of the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, stated: "Most of the damage has occurred in the north and is the result of looting...evidently linked with the highly professional international market in illegally exported art." Nothing was done.

An opportunity also presented itself in 1989. This was a landmark trial in Indianapolis. The Cypriot government and church raised a case against local art dealer Peg Goldberg, who had purchased four segments of an early 6<sup>th</sup> century mosaic composition. This had been stripped by Dikmen's operatives from the apse of the church of the Virgin of Kanakaria in occupied Cyprus. The mosaic had survived the iconoclasm of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries and was said to be finer than the mosaics at Ravenna in Italy and at St. Catherine's monastery in Sinai. Restoration work was

completed on the mosaic composition and church by the Dumbarton Oaks Institute in 1974. The judge awarded the mosaics to Cyprus on the ground that a “thief obtains no title or right of possession of stolen items.” Therefore, a “thief cannot pass any right of ownership...to subsequent purchasers.” The mosaic segments were returned to Cyprus but nothing was done about Dikmen or continuing pillage and destruction.

An opportunity to put Dikmen out of business was presented to the German authorities in 1997 when the Munich police helped Van Rijn, poacher turned game keeper, mount a sting operation designed to return stolen icons and antiquities to Cyprus. Dikmen’s hoard of 8,000 items was seized, hundreds of Cypriot artefacts were identified, and Dikmen was put in prison. He was released after a year although the German police had hard evidence that he headed a network of looters, smugglers and dealers in stolen art and antiquities. He is contesting Cyprus’ claim to the artefacts. They remain in Munich while the courts decide who owns them.

An estimated 16,000 icons, wall paintings and mosaics and 60,000 archaeological items have been looted and exported from northern Cyprus. While the Turkish authorities have done little or nothing to halt cultural cleansing and have even contributed to it, individual Turkish Cypriots, who regard the heritage of the island as their own, have castigated the authorities and publicised the pillage. Turkish Cypriot poet Mehmet Yasin was among the first to survey the situation and mainland Turkish Journalist Ozgen Acar of *Cumhurriet* exposed Dikmen’s depredations in the Turkish and international press. But their efforts have come to naught.

Turkey may not have set out to pillage and destroy Christian religious art and property or to loot important archaeological sites in the occupied north. But Ankara did adopt a policy of erasing the Hellenic character of the area by replacing Greek place names with Turkish names. And Turkey collaborated in the destruction of the north’s dominant Christian culture by allowing churches to be looted, used as cinemas, restaurants, store houses, and goat pens and to collapse due to neglect. Hundreds of churches and chapels, frescoes and icons had survived in the north until the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and provided spiritual uplift to local Christian communities.

While looting usually accompanies warfare and unrest in countries with rich heritages, the case of Cyprus is particularly dramatic because extensive pillage and destruction took place in a well defined geographic area. Scholarly investigation has also been disrupted. By contrast, in the government-controlled south, sites have been largely preserved and scholars have been at work uncovering the distant past and pushing back the history of the island by 5000 years. In 1974, archaeologists spoke of Cyprus as having 9,000 years of history, scholars now say Cyprus has 14,000 years of history. Today there are two very distinct cultural heritage zones on this small island: a wasteland in the north and a land of plenty in the south.

Finally, I would like to suggest that the OSCE has some responsibility for the division and ethnic and cultural cleansing of Cyprus. As the Helsinki accord was being negotiated, the Greek military junta mounted a coup against the legitimate government of Cyprus, Turkey occupied more than 36 per cent of island, and Britain did nothing. These three countries were guarantors of the island’s independence and sovereignty. The least the OSCE can do today is press Ankara to halt the destruction of Christian sites, illegal archaeological excavations, traffic in icons and antiquities and allow for the preservation of religious sites. The OSCE could also ensure that member states do not receive stolen Cypriot art and antiquities.

