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Protecting the cultural property of religious communities during war: The Church of Sweden and total defense planning

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Abstract

Even though places of worship are protected by the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, they often become targets. To safeguard the cultural property of religious communities, it is necessary to plan for wartime protection under peaceful conditions, but studies of how this planning was conducted after 1945 are largely missing. This Article compares how the cultural property of the Church of Sweden (Lutheran) has been planned for protection up until 2023. Cultural property protection was first introduced in World War II, but the Church had to plan and carry out most protective measures without state support. During the Cold War, a system for protecting movable property was developed that lasted until it was replaced in the 1980s by cultural protection plans that employed a more holistic approach to risk mitigation in peace as well as in war. Finally, the recent development and future challenges are discussed in relation to the 1954 Hague Convention and the reconstruction of a Swedish total defense due to the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Keywords: Cultural property; contingency; evacuation; religious heritage; protection; Church of Sweden; war

Aim

In armed conflicts, the cultural property of religious institutions is repeatedly targeted and damaged. Many religious institutions around the world are owners of cultural property. Their main aim is not to manage a body of heritage but to support their communities in different ways and uphold religious life; they are rarely included in the wider efforts made by military and civilian authorities to protect cultural property in advance of and during armed conflict. Recent wars have reminded us of the risks the cultural heritage of religious institutions runs during ongoing wars and in post-conflict reconstruction work.¹ Cultural landscapes are sometimes reshaped entirely due to conflicts, including religious sites.

In Ukraine, for instance, religious sites and their contents are being deliberately targeted for destruction.² The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War has shown that religious heritage runs a major risk of being destroyed in a war that is fought not only over territory

¹ Bevan 2006; Blue Shield Georgia 2023.

² Botti and Bianchi 2023; Koscieljew 2023, 3.

but also over opposing cultural and religious identities. When the hybrid war first erupted in 2014, the threat of military actions in the Baltic Sea resurfaced after two decades of peaceful relations. As a result of these increasing tensions, Sweden's defense was reconstructed.³ Since the beginning of the 1990s, civil and military defense organizations have been disassembled due to the lack of military threats to Sweden.⁴ Following the Cold War, its total defense was scrapped in entirety, but the conflicts, first in Georgia and somewhat later in Ukraine, prompted the government to reintroduce the concept, albeit in a new and much slimmer version.⁵ The Russo-Ukrainian War has resulted in a marked increase in interest in preparing for cultural property protection should Sweden become involved in a conflict. These efforts are closely connected to reconstructing a total defense, combining armed forces and civil society to strengthen Sweden's defense and deter an enemy from attacking.⁶

Against this backdrop of increased threat and the reconstruction of total defense, it is interesting to determine how cultural property should be protected in case of a conflict in the twentieth century. Studies of how states have organized the protection of their cultural property, especially in the period following World War II, are largely missing. Previous research has focused on rescue operations carried out in World War II, mainly focusing on the fighting that took place in Italy and France 1944–45, far from the slow-moving and bureaucratic processes taking place in peacetime to safeguard heritage and planning for a future conflict.⁷ This one-sided focus on the war years means that little attention has been paid to later policymaking and planning. Nevertheless, the need to plan for cultural property protection before a conflict has recently been emphasized due to several devastating conflicts.⁸

A historical perspective on national policy development and implementation can contribute to a better understanding of how protection has been planned and organized in relation to changing threats to national security. Few studies have analyzed how state parties worked to identify threats to cultural property in changing security contexts. Understanding the historical development will contribute to understanding why there are deficiencies in cultural property protection today and what lessons can be learned from past experiences when planning for future safeguarding. The importance of such knowledge was recently emphasized (in January 2024) by the Swedish Defense Research Agency.⁹

In a previous Article, I examined plans for protecting movable cultural property in the event of war.¹⁰ There are three main conclusions from that study. First, even if the Swedish government did not adopt the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed (1954H) until 1984, authorities showed an interest much earlier in what could be done to protect collections. Second, experiences from World War II showed the need for shelters to be built specifically for collections outside the major urban areas. Keeping all collections in their ordinary locations, thus protecting them *in situ*, would not suffice. Eventually, a pragmatic solution was suggested in which only the most valuable parts of collections would be selected for evacuation. Just as in World War II, buildings in the countryside, such as manor houses, would be used again. Towards the end of the Cold War,

³ Agrell 2022, 188–190.

⁴ Agrell 2022, 47–53.

⁵ Proposition 2014/15:109.

⁶ Wither 2020. Total defense in Sweden is regulated in SFS 1992:1403.

⁷ Nicholas 1994; Dagnini Brey 2009; Akinsha and Kozlov 1995; Campbell Karlsgodt 2011; Fuhrmeister et al 2012.

⁸ Cunliffe and Fox 2022; Vonnák 2022.

⁹ McWilliams and Olsson 2024.

¹⁰ Legnér 2022b.

this planning was largely abandoned because the threats against Sweden changed, becoming broader and much vaguer than before. The major conclusion from the Article was the importance of coordinating all involved actors to increase the chances of successfully evacuating cultural property.

This Article focuses on the Church of Sweden (*Svenska kyrkan*, hereafter called “the Church”) and its body of historically valuable objects. Due to its particular character and legislation, the cultural property of the Church was omitted from the Article mentioned above (Legnér 2022b). The aim here is to better understand what place the protection of its cultural property was to have in Swedish total defense. The Church became increasingly involved in issues of total defense, but the process was remarkably slow and hesitant.

This investigation is divided into three distinctive chronological sections that will be compared in order to better understand how the Church attempted to adapt to changes in threats and collaborated with civil and military authorities from World War II until today. Each phase was characterized by specific threats of armed conflict that called for mitigating actions. The first section covers World War II (1939–45), during which the first measures in modern times were taken in Sweden to protect church property, which also had significant repercussions for future cultural property protection. The second section focuses on the period 1950–65, which was characterized by the Cold War with its ultimate threat of nuclear conflict and massive invasion. Policies were developed to at least protect some objects kept in churches. The third section (covering 1977–99) paradoxically involved measures to integrate the Church into Swedish total defense and relaxed the measures prepared for in the previous phase. In the concluding discussion, the timeline will be extended to today’s situation, and some critical remarks will be made on existing policies and what interest they may be to an international readership.

The study of cultural property protection in Sweden

In order to study the protection of church property, it has been necessary to consult a variety of sources. These sources include public records (letters, non-printed reports, inventories, and plans) produced by authorities, published documents (such as reports, public inquiries, and guidelines), and legal texts (acts, regulations, ordinances). It has been necessary to combine different sources to fully understand which measures were taken and to comprehend the underlying arguments in assessing threats and risks in each phase. Several archives were used to cover the historical development of pre-conflict planning. The most important one is *Antikvarisk-topografiska arkivet* (ATA), located in Stockholm. The ATA is the archive of the National Heritage Board (*Riksantikvarieämbetet*, RAÄ), the national agency monitoring the implementation of legislation concerning cultural property. ÅA 3 means *Ämbetsarkiv* 3, and ÅA 4 means *Ämbetsarkiv* 4. They are part of the ATA collections and contain records from the same period. Other archives used include *Krigsarkivet*, the Military Archives kept in Stockholm, and the Committee of Church Preparedness (*Kyrkoberedskapskommittén*), which worked from 1977 to 1983. The records of the committee are found in *Riksarkivet* (RA). Finally, an example of a cultural protection plan, dated 1985, was gathered from a local parish archive in Stockholm. References to archival records are made explicit in the text.

Methodologically speaking, there are difficulties when analyzing threats that can be carried out using archival records, even if the period studied is recent. For instance, threats were rarely spoken of in the archival sources used, whereas risks and how to mitigate them were discussed explicitly. I have used literature on military and civil defense from that time to understand how cultural property could be exposed to different threats in a conflict.

A threat may be described as “the potential cause of an unwanted incident which may result in harm.”¹¹ Well-known threats against cultural heritage in conflicts are shelling and bombing, looting, arson, and vandalism.¹² Threats associated with armed conflict are quite different from those of fire, flooding, and theft because, when assessing threats against cultural property emanating from war, national security policies and even international relations between states need to be considered. Such threats are always related to territorial boundaries.¹³ Threats should not be understood as existing independently of the observer. There are many threats against society at any given moment, but they must be identified and described within political discourse to be securitized.¹⁴ Threats can be understood as existing also outside a discourse, but to become a matter of policies, they must be identified and described.

While working with these definitions, keeping an open mind as to how threats are related to risks is also important. Often, risk management has not meant the elimination of risks caused by threats but did mean that some risks have been redistributed or replaced with others.¹⁵ For instance, evacuating an object may eliminate the risk of it being destroyed in an attack but may lead to the object being exposed to other risks, such as fire, theft, or damaging humidity, in its new location. Finally, distributing objects from one building to several locations decreases the risk that they will all be destroyed but does not eliminate risk entirely.

The Church of Sweden and its cultural property

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the buildings and objects of the Church became highly valued as symbols not just of a religious community but also of a national, secular heritage.¹⁶ The state expressed this newfound interest in church heritage through codifying the construction of public buildings in 1920, including the restoration of churches.¹⁷ In 1942, the protection of the church buildings was extended to include their movable objects, which were also to be listed and safeguarded.¹⁸ Vicar and churchwarden were responsible for the care of objects in the parish. In principle, any loss of value in such property would be regarded as a loss of national heritage. In 1988, a new Act on the historic environment was introduced, with one chapter addressing the Church property, including church buildings, churchyards, cemeteries, and objects.¹⁹ This Act obliges a parish to continue caring for its property during heightened preparedness or war.

The Church is divided into national, regional, and local levels. Until 2000, when the divorce between church and state was partially implemented, a considerable amount of work on the national and regional level was carried out by government authorities. The most basic element of Church organization is the parish that cares for the church building, the cemetery, other premises, objects, and the organization of religious life. In 1980, there were 2575 parishes, most of which had churches and objects protected as heritage.²⁰ Since then, the number of members has dwindled, prompting the Church to merge parishes to cope with increasing strains on the parish economy. Consequently, by 2022, the Church had

¹¹ Sabucco 2022, 139.

¹² Brosché et al 2017.

¹³ Buzan and Hansen 2009, 11.

¹⁴ Jarvis and Holland 2015, 225.

¹⁵ Sabucco 2022, 143.

¹⁶ Legnér 2022a, 59–60.

¹⁷ SFS 1920:744.

¹⁸ SFS 1942:929.

¹⁹ SFS 1988:950. For a summary of the code in English, see Adlercreutz 1998.

²⁰ Ds Kn 1980: 5, 7.

5.6 million members (53 percent of the population) and 1297 parishes, managing 3400 churches. The number of parishes may have decreased, but the number of churches to be maintained remained intact since they are protected by law. Even though the development towards a more secular society started long ago, divorce from the state has put the Church in a more vulnerable position, with citizen participation dropping. The merger of and increased cooperation between parishes allows the Church to become more resilient to demographic changes and financial difficulties.

Religious heritage not only represents historical and artistic values but is also associated with the function of the place of worship. For instance, altarpieces, pulpits, baptismal fonts, and other objects, typically found in Christian churches, are key to the rituals performed and are rarely perceived as mere props. This sets this category of cultural property apart from the collections held in, for instance, museums and scientific institutions. Removal or damage of church objects may not just mean a loss of authenticity and integrity of the place, but it may also disrupt religious life and traumatize a community.

Some objects and features of these churches are more vulnerable than others. Stained glass windows, for instance, are fragile and easily broken by vibration, blast waves, or shrapnel. Textiles are vulnerable to smoke and may easily catch fire. Objects made of precious metals are often found in churches and have a monetary value that can attract looters. Furthermore, many wooden objects inside an old church, such as pulpits, altarpieces, and epitaphs, are flammable. In the 1980s, parish archives could be kept in churches or an office building nearby, but they were also vulnerable to fire. Today, these archives are kept at central depots and have been partially digitized.

The responsibility to plan for the protection of cultural property in case of war rested mainly with the Church itself. Since property management has chiefly been a local issue, this responsibility trickled down to the parishes, where knowledge and involvement in the issue have varied considerably. Today, it remains unclear to what extent a parish is supposed to take measures to protect its property in the event of war and at what stage these measures should be applied. However, the law sets a minimum requirement; parishes must continue caring for their property in wartime.²¹

The overall level of protection has improved within the Church in the last 30 years. Methods for documenting objects in churches have developed to include digitization. Today, all objects listed in inventories are protected by law and should be included in the digital database Sacer, which, for security reasons, is only accessible to those permitted access. Church buildings and their values are much better documented today. In the past, some of the state compensation received by the Church for maintaining its cultural property has funded fire safety precautions, theft prevention, and “inventorying.”²² Nevertheless, the Church has doubts whether measures to prevent damages due to war can be financed the same way since the costs today are unknown and may be difficult for parishes to cover.

World War II: The threat of aerial warfare

Following the end of World War I, the fear of aerial warfare grew, making Swedish authorities realize that cities and towns could become the targets of air raids in future wars.²³ The atrocities of the civil war in Spain (1936–1939) concerned the Swedish military authorities; it showed the effects of air raids on undefended cities.²⁴ To win a war quickly, it was anticipated that the enemy would target industrial centers and cities to break the

²¹ SFS 1988:950, Ch. 4, 15 a §.

²² Svenska kyrkan 2019, 16–17.

²³ Kretz 1939.

²⁴ Bratt and Kretz 1938, 80.



Image 1. A protective structure is being built around the tomb of King Erik XIV in Västerås Cathedral, April 1940. Courtesy of Västmanlands Läns Museum, Vlm-A 658. Photographer unknown.

population's resistance and strike directly at the enemy's economy. Even if there had been international negotiations about the possibility of limiting the extent of future aerial warfare, the great powers were unwilling to refrain from using the full potential of bombers.²⁵ Invaded or not, cities and industrial centers could easily be bombed from the air by enemy bases located on the opposite side of the Baltic Sea. Beginning in 1937, an organization for air raid protection was built, which followed the German model.²⁶ Swedish territory was divided into four classes of air protection zones depending on the threats

²⁵ Boylan 2001, 51.

²⁶ Bennesved 2020, 145.

against each area.²⁷ If railway junctions, essential roads, or industrial production existed, the area would be considered more threatened than one missing such features.

Even though Sweden was never invaded or occupied by a foreign power, World War II greatly influenced the organization of civil defense. Preparations made to protect cultural property before the outbreak of World War II were limited to some of the state museums in Stockholm. (Krigsarkivet, Luftskyddskommittén för offentliga samlingar 1939, H6:12/1939) The Scandinavian Organization of Museums first discussed air raid protection in its meeting in Copenhagen in May 1938.²⁸ This did not result in introducing any immediate national policies on the subject. However, after Germany invaded Czechoslovakia the following autumn, the Swedish government instructed the directors of state museums to inquire how their collections could be protected in the event of war. However, this new group's first meeting did not occur until 16 May 1939, when the "Museum Protection" committee was created in Stockholm. Interestingly, the protection of church property was excluded since it was not state property.

Since aerial warfare was the dominating threat against the cultural heritage of European states at the outbreak of World War II, authorities began to plan how to evacuate a selection of collections from Stockholm and take them to safer locations in more remote areas. As will be shown, the time at which the evacuation was to be carried out also turned out to be crucial. Many actions were not made until there was an imminent threat against the property in question. Such late decisions, carried out hastily, would sometimes subject the evacuated objects to higher risks.

The first policy on protecting museums and archives was issued on 15 December 1939, making evacuation of government-owned collections to safe locations possible. Again, the cultural property of the Church was excluded from this planning. Movable property could not be quickly evacuated without the policy's support. Protecting cathedrals and other urban churches was the responsibility of air raid protection committees in the towns. In rural areas, the parish would need to assess the situation and organize protection independently (ÅA 3, vol. F XIV:2, 15 September 1939).

The first measures involving the Church were taken a few weeks after the German assault on Poland on 1 September 1939. This work was improvised *ad hoc* and was not based on any policy. With the support of the armed forces general staff, the art historian Johnny Roosval took the initiative to advise parishes on how to protect some of their most valuable objects and architectural ornamentation (ÅA 3, vol. F XIV:2, 24 Sept. 1940). Together with the director of antiquities, Sigurd Curman, Roosval had been in charge of a project surveying the historic churches of Sweden since the 1910s. To Curman and Roosval, the artistic and architectural features of the churches represented a vital part of national heritage. Roosval made inquiries to the dioceses about the valuable artifacts kept in churches while giving general advice on protecting fragile objects. The bishops distributed advice to the parishes and collected information about the valuable objects kept in parish churches before handing them to the RAÄ.

At the same time, the measures taken in France and Switzerland in the summer of 1939 to protect ecclesiastical art were studied by Roosval. He sought to emulate some of these actions, not least by removing medieval stained glass from churches on the Swedish island of Gotland. They were carefully photographed, packed, and brought to the mainland for conservation and safekeeping (ÅA 3, vol. F XIV:2, 7 Dec. 1939 and vol. F XIV:1, 20 Dec. 1939). The stained glass was returned at the end of the war.²⁹

²⁷ Hemsyddet 1938, 45.

²⁸ Nørlund 1946, 5.

²⁹ Legnér 2021b, 227.

During the autumn of 1939, Roosval received lists from the dioceses of the so-called elite objects that should be selected for protective measures, which included evacuation. Given that a small number of objects (thus forming an elite) should be chosen, no principles were ready for this selection. The work depended on criteria formulated locally by the county preservation officers (ÅA 3, F XIV:2, 23 Oct. 1939, no. U12). The parishes were probably not involved in making the selection. The elite objects were to remain in their present locations until the danger was so great they had to be removed. The issue of where to take objects was difficult to solve, and in many cases, these elite objects seem to have remained in the churches throughout the war years. Some museums even moved parts of their collections to rural churches because they were considered safer than city locations and because there were no bombproof shelters to move them to.³⁰

The first months of the war demonstrated some examples of how historical monuments, archives, and museums were protected against war damage. There were significant differences between the Scandinavian countries. In Finland, a large number of churches were destroyed in the Winter War of 1939–40.³¹ Anticipating the danger, the authorities had the archives of parishes close to the Russian border moved to the city of Vaasa in the west of Finland.³² Some ecclesiastical objects of very high value were shipped from Helsinki to Stockholm, where they remained for the rest of the war.³³ The Soviet assault on Finland made it clear that Sweden could quickly become a target, prompting parishes to take some action by removing stained glass windows. Norway, also a neutral state, did not take any precautions to protect cultural property, thus perceiving the threat of war quite differently.³⁴ Following the German assault on Norway and Denmark on 9 April 1940, the Church of Sweden began to evacuate objects since there was a fear that Sweden would also be attacked. In the following weeks, some extremely precious objects were removed, including the medieval monument of Saint George and the Dragon in Storkyrkan, central Stockholm.³⁵

Roosval argued that parishes should undertake some precautions, such as procuring packing materials, disassembling stained glass windows, and making plans for acting if there was an assault on Sweden. However, parishes were not forced to take any of these measures, and there was some resistance. Archbishop Erling Eidem preferred that all objects stay put rather than risk damage by transporting them to places that would turn out to be less safe because the threat had changed in character (ÅA 3, F XIV:1, 8 Nov. 1939). Eidem did not necessarily underestimate the threat against churches, but he disagreed with Roosval on the way cultural property was becoming securitized. He contemplated the costs and risks that large-scale evacuation of objects in a premature state would result in. Ultimately, Eidem's view won out, and very little was evacuated from Swedish churches. Evacuation was sometimes resisted by parishes wishing to keep their objects where they could easily be monitored and safeguarded, and, probably, also for psychological reasons. Keeping the most valuable objects in the church may have instilled some sense of security for the parishioners in a troubling time.

Despite some reluctance to follow the advice, at least some parishes prepared themselves by procuring materials that would be needed if protective structures were to be built later or if objects or archives were evacuated (ÅA 3, vol. F XIV:1, 17 Oct. 1939). This was the case in Gotland, which had become heavily militarized.³⁶ Many churches and objects were

³⁰ Legnér 2022a, 78.

³¹ *Finland under korsfanan 1942*, 37–38.

³² SOU 1965:59, 101.

³³ Legnér 2023b.

³⁴ Legnér 2023a.

³⁵ Legnér 2021a.

³⁶ Legnér 2021b.

photographed during these years to better document them in case any of them would be lost or damaged (ÅA 3, vol. F XIV:2, 24 Sept. 1940).

The threats to cultural property were manifold in the war and changed over time. Religious buildings were destroyed (willfully or as collateral damage), damaged, looted, or reused for new purposes in many parts of Europe.³⁷ In periods when the front moved, the threat against a given location could change quickly. The immense destruction of religious heritage made the evacuation of objects and archives crucial since the buildings and their contents would have been destroyed had they not been evacuated before. If bombs destroyed much of the building, fires would often engulf everything left.³⁸ The heavy bombing of German cities in 1943–45 made the Swedish authorities aware of the vulnerability of civil society in war.³⁹

To conclude, the protection of the Church property in Sweden was improvised during the war years. Most measures were not carried out until there appeared to be an immediate military threat against Sweden, which occurred on 9 April 1940. All measures had to be carried out voluntarily since no policies were in place to force parishes to comply.

Cultural property protection and the reorganization of civil defense: 1950–65

The international relations between the former allies quickly deteriorated toward the end of the war, resulting in the division of Europe between the Western powers and the Soviet Union. Sweden was geographically positioned between these two blocs but aimed to remain independent of any military alliance. This required the country to build a strong civil and military defense of its own. In 1949, the Soviet Union declared that it had developed nuclear weapons, which meant that a future war between the East and the West could become highly destructive.

Church involvement in the Armed Forces was, at this time, more or less identical to the military side of pastoral care. Chaplains were thus used to provide soldiers with pastoral care. In time, an opinion arose within the Church that it should have important functions to perform in civil society during wartime. A conference organized by the Church in 1958, convened under the title “The church and the domicile in war,” emphasized that religious communities in Sweden needed to be better coordinated with total defense.⁴⁰ One conclusion from the meeting was that the Church had an important task during the war years: giving moral support to the population, thereby contributing to civil defense. The Church had done so voluntarily but wished to be better prepared in the future.

The idea of total war was first conceived in the mid-war years, but total defense did not develop until well after the end of World War II. “Total war requires total defense,” said a brochure distributed to all Swedish households in 1961.⁴¹ The threat of total war called for a review of how the life of religious communities was to be sustained under crisis or war.⁴² All parts of society were supposed to contribute to the defense to maintain morale and protect essential functions during the war. The Church could potentially be an ally to the state since almost all citizens had been members of the Church since birth.⁴³ A process involving the securitization of the Church in war thus began after an initiative from actors within the organisation itself Church of Sweden.

³⁷ Bank 2016.

³⁸ Lambourne 2001, Ch. 2.

³⁹ Bengtsson 1943.

⁴⁰ *Tidskrift för Sveriges civilförsvär*.

⁴¹ *Civilförsvärsstyrelsen* 1961.

⁴² Ds 1999:4, 63.

⁴³ Leaving the church was virtually impossible before 1951 when an Act of religious freedom was introduced.



Image 2. Protection of church portals on Gotland in 1940. Courtesy of Antikvarisk-topografiska arkivet, Johnny Roosval's archive, vol. F12:136. Photographer Alfred Edle.

A public inquiry was set up to study the matter of church and total defense. By involving the Church in total defense, the state primarily wished to secure the population's pastoral care and the Church's administrative functions in wartime. The protection of cultural property was, at best, a secondary goal. Protection of church property was included in the inquiry's report, *Kyrklig beredskap* (Ecclesiastical Preparedness), published in 1965, recommending that, among many other changes, the government should issue advice on the duties of parish priests regarding archival care and the protection of churches and their objects.

Kyrklig beredskap (Ecclesiastical Preparedness) identified several possible threats against church property in wartime. The Armed Forces looked at two main scenarios for military

assaults on Sweden at this time. These were described in a report published in 1965.⁴⁴ The first scenario was an enemy attempt to quickly overthrow the government in a massive attack on Stockholm. The second was a major invasion, which meant that coastal areas in several parts of the country would become theatres of war. Attacks primarily aimed at terrorizing the civilian population were deemed unlikely, as were assaults of a hybrid nature.⁴⁵

Contemplating the extensive destruction of Berlin towards the end of World War II, *Kyrklig beredskap* (Ecclesiastical Preparedness) thought it was unlikely that an enemy would respect churches more than any other category of building.⁴⁶ However, a war would not just lead to the risk of church properties being destroyed; they could be requisitioned by the armed forces, which had been the case during the war years. In the 1960s, however, churches would not be used by the Armed Forces other than in exceptions that included lodging refugees or soldiers. Such uses caused grievances in the past. There were two reasons for not acquiring churches for wartime use. One was that many churches contained too many interiors and objects of historical value for them to be used this way; the second was that this use could not be allowed to interfere with the religious character and use of the building.⁴⁷ The rights of the parish to decide how its church could be used were protected since 1963.⁴⁸

The reorganization of civil defense had repercussions for the protection of movable cultural property. A new Act on evacuating property was introduced in 1961, which no longer excluded privately owned cultural objects. From now on, the government could decide that “archives, books, artworks, and historical objects” could be evacuated regardless of ownership.⁴⁹ At least in theory, this opened government-supported evacuation of Church objects and archives. Evacuating Church property without government consent would be difficult since objects were not allowed to be moved out of a building without permission.⁵⁰ The Act led to a guideline (abbreviated *Anv Ark*) being developed to evacuate the Stockholm collections, which included Church objects in the capital. This made it possible for the Church to receive support from the county administration in identifying safe depots and moving objects there.

The evacuation was not mandatory; it merely opened up some protection opportunities. The Church’s only real obligation to protect property in war before 1981 was to cover all windows as an air raid precaution.⁵¹ Measures to protect historically valuable parts of the church had to be done voluntarily by the parish, such as constructing protective walls in front of murals and portals or moving objects to safer locations.⁵² With support from the 1961 Act, the RAÄ issued an instruction encouraging the parishes to make lists of objects to be evacuated if there was a risk of war (ÄA 3, F 14:9, 19 June 1963). Packaging was to be prepared, and the locations where objects were to be moved were identified, even if the protection was *in situ*. In many cases, it was believed that an object could be better protected by moving it to a less exposed spot in the building. Just like in the war years, objects were not to be evacuated until a “late stage,” not least for psychological reasons.⁵³ As in World War II, the local population was not to be disturbed by the unnecessary removal of symbolically

⁴⁴ ÖB 1965, 69.

⁴⁵ ÖB 1965, 54.

⁴⁶ SOU 1965:59, 128.

⁴⁷ SOU 1965:59, 120.

⁴⁸ SFS 1963:501.

⁴⁹ SFS 1961:655.

⁵⁰ SFS 1942:929.

⁵¹ SFS 1960:377.

⁵² SOU 1965:59, 128

⁵³ SOU 1965: 59, 132.

important objects. A more mundane reason may have been that the evacuation of museum exhibits was prioritized over church objects.

However, the archives of churches was another business. *Anv Ark* instructed the archives of chapters to be packed and evacuated, whereas the protection needs of parish archives were assessed according to scholarly research interests.⁵⁴ In Stockholm, there would be an opportunity to access small parts of the parish archives, but this was hardly the case outside the capital. Unsuccessful in codifying its opinion on the matter, *Kyrklig beredskap* (Ecclesiastical Preparedness) emphasized that the protocols, inventories, and population records of parish archives (not just of the chapter archives) should also be evacuated since these contained vital information about the inhabitants and the cultural property of the parish.⁵⁵

The RAÄ issued instructions regarding the protection of movable cultural property, which was issued to all parishes (ÄA 3, F 14:9, B 5711/64, 18 September 1964). The county conservation officer was responsible for supporting the parishes in selecting objects for listing. Since the 1930s, there was one such officer in every county who acted as the local representative of the RAÄ. Besides being involved in producing evacuation plans for parishes, museums, and archives, their responsibilities would also include safeguarding small valuable objects that parishes could leave in their care in case of war (RAÄ/SHM, E 4:1, 30 June 1951). Ultimately, the extra duties put on the conservation officers were probably not reasonable. This exclusive group of professionals already had a significant workload in peacetime (ÄA 3, F 14:9, 11 August 1966). After 1964, each officer was expected to cooperate with several parishes, which most often had little or no idea of how to prioritize the protection of their objects. The instructions of RAÄ provided little support since they were of a very general character (ÄA 3, F 14:9, 20 July 1964).

A few years later, an administrative procedure for evacuation plans was implemented. Basic information about every object was collected, including a single black-and-white photograph. In most cases, the proposed measures involved moving the object (if it was not too heavy or fragile) to a safer spot inside the building. The number of objects to be evacuated was, in fact, an extremely small share, probably due to the restricted resources available for inventorying, preparing for evacuation, and then carrying it out. Items evacuated were most often brought to a safer building nearby. The case of Saint Nicolai church in Nyköping illustrates this. Textiles and paintings were to be moved to the fireproof archive in the vicar's office close to the church. Wooden sculptures would remain in the church, whereas the silver was locked in a safe built into the wall of the sacristy. Nothing was to be moved away from the vicinity of the church. This decision was made on pragmatic grounds since no air raid shelters had been built to house church objects.

The Act on Church preparedness (1977–99)

Due to criticism and too many unanswered questions, the inquiry of 1965 did not lead to any policymaking in the short term. It turned out that evacuation plans were missing for church objects in large parts of the country.⁵⁶ Protective measures were almost exclusively planned for small, easily moved objects. This was because there was an Act regulating the terms for evacuation of cultural property, meaning that parishes could receive some support in planning it. There was no equivalent regulation regarding the architectural features and other immovable objects of a church, nor any consideration of the ability of the building to withstand damage.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ *Anv Ark*, 7: 1–2.

⁵⁵ SOU 1965:59, 141–42.

⁵⁶ *Kyrklig beredskap*, 34.

⁵⁷ Utbildningsdepartementet 1970(b), s. 22.

The work of investigating how the Church possibly could become part of total defense was laid to rest for some years until it was taken up again by a new committee in 1977. The aim was the same as before, but this committee considered the critique against the previous inquiry. Again, the protection of cultural property was given a secondary role but was treated with some urgency, at least for a brief period. Representatives of the committee made study trips to the Netherlands and Austria to observe how these two states adopted the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954H) and how they planned to protect their heritage in case of war. The impression from the Netherlands was that some work was being done at a national level to increase preparedness and to prevent fires in churches, but that it (much as in Sweden) was given a low priority and was poorly organized at the local level (RA, Kyrkoberedskapskommittén, AI, Harry Lenhammar 1 November 1978). The level of ambition was considerably higher in Austria, where the protection of churches was also connected to a programme for teaching the population about Austrian heritage. Understandably, the Austrian case was seen as a role model in how systematic inventories were made of all cultural property, and maps were produced on which the objects were pointed out and distributed to the military. This information was then edited explicitly for use by fire brigades. It seemed that the intentions and instructions of 1954H were implemented much more methodically in Austria than in the Netherlands (RA, Kyrkoberedskapskommittén, AI, Harry Lenhammar 1 November 1978).

After these trips, the committee recommended that parishes survey their objects to protect them in war and peacetime. If objects were described in photos and text, they could more easily be retrieved if stolen, and if something were destroyed, at least the documentation would be preserved (RA, Kyrkoberedskapskommittén, AI, Harry Lenhammar 16 February 1979). However, when the referral was made, it encountered the harsh reality of the chapters. The Visby chapter on Gotland replied that the island had no less than 92 parishes. Most of the parishes had a population of less than 500, but each cared for a medieval church containing items of great artistic and historical value: it would take a lot of support from the chapter and the authorities if the suggested survey were carried out in all parishes (RA, Kyrkoberedskapskommittén, E4, remark 28 November 1980).

Nevertheless, the Act on church preparedness was introduced in 1981, giving the Church responsibilities within the Swedish total defense.⁵⁸ The example this Act had been modelled on was similar to the Act on municipal preparedness.⁵⁹ The Church now had the duty to plan how to continue carrying out vital functions in war, such as pastoral care, burials, and censuses. The protection of its cultural property was also included to some extent, and as a consequence, the RAÅ asked parishes to create “cultural protection plans” (ÅA 4, F21:1, 26 May 1986). In most urbanized regions that were expected to be affected by a conflict, creating such plans was supposed to become mandatory, whereas in less urbanized regions, it would be voluntary. These plans involved risk mitigation in a way the 1960s did not and were motivated by the new Act and the Swedish ratification of 1954H in 1985.

The importance of protecting cultural property, which includes many places of worship, in armed conflict is expressed in 1954H and its First Protocol. Even though Sweden had participated in the conference leading to 1954H, the government did not accede until 1985. Adoption was considered too costly for the government in the 1950s (ÅA 3, vol. F14:8, 10 September 1956). The Armed Forces were skeptical of ratification, arguing that Sweden was already committed to the Hague Regulations of 1899 and 1907 concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land, which provided some protection for historic monuments and

⁵⁸ SFS 1981: 1216.

⁵⁹ SFS 1964: 63.

scientific centers.⁶⁰ For these reasons, the adoption of the convention was delayed. In the mid-1970s, however, the Swedish parliament (*Riksdagen*) decided it was time to reconsider the issue. The RAÄ was given the task of inquiring into the consequences of adoption.⁶¹ In 1983, the RAÄ finally reported on the issue, supporting Swedish ratification of the Hague Convention (RAÄ, Kulturminnesbyrå, Byggnadssektionen, “Utredning rörande konsekvenserna”, 10 October 1983). UNESCO confirmed the accession on 22 January 1985, and shortly after that, it received legal status in Sweden.⁶²

The new plans would not just improve the chances of historic values surviving a war but could also be used after a fire or if there had been a break-in in peacetime. A cultural protection plan consists of four parts: documentation of the church and its objects, space usage, monitoring, and fire protection. These peacetime functions were probably thought to be incentives for the parish to actually proceed with making a cultural protection plan, and, as noted earlier, this was how such plans were already being used in Austria. The county administration and museum were to be involved when preparing such plans, which the parishes would fund entirely. This last fact should have been discouraging for parishes that did not have to comply since creating a plan required financial resources and knowledge in several fields, such as fire safety, security, and assessment of historical values. In the end, these plans were only made in parts of the country, much like the evacuation plans of the 1960s.

The inventorying continued, and gradually, more objects were documented. By the mid-1980s, around 70 percent of church objects had been described and photographed (ÅA 4, F21:1, “Planering av verksamheten under krig,” 29 November 1985, p. 16). There had been a campaign for several years to inventory church objects, and even if this work was not identical to the making of cultural protection plans, there was still a connection between them. The same report stated that c. 10 percent of all objects had been listed for evacuation in case of war, and the rest would be protected *in situ*.

By the mid-1980s, the plans made two decades earlier were perceived as outdated by the RAÄ (RAÄ/SHM, E 4:1, 26 May 1986). Since it was impossible to establish precisely which threat to prepare for or pinpoint locations where an enemy would likely strike, it was not deemed feasible for authorities to identify safe refuges for artifacts. Furthermore, the cultural protection plans were never assessed by the chapter or any authority; consequently, assessing their quality or feasibility was difficult. Regarding the sixteenth-century church “Tyska kyrkan” in the Old City of Stockholm, a 34-page cultural protection plan was drafted in 1985. The church contains many historic and precious objects, such as the altarpiece, pulpit, silver items, and historic textiles. None would be evacuated in case of war; all were to be protected *in situ* (Tyska S:ta Gertruds kyrkoarkiv, OI:10, kulturskyddsplan 1985).

Agrell has previously shown how the civil part of the total defense hardened in its organization in the 1970s and 1980s, failing to adapt to the changing security environment.⁶³ Operations had been underfunded for a long time and were hampered by discrepancies between the tasks and the resources allocated to resolve them. By the mid-1980s, funding was again cut severely, despite the conflict between the West and the Eastern Bloc becoming more serious in the early 1980s.

Even though the total defense was gradually disassembled after the end of the Cold War, planning for the protection of cultural property continued to some extent at a centralized level. In this respect, the Church was yet again treated differently than museums and

⁶⁰ Hague 1907. About the Hague conferences, see O’Keefe 2006, 22.

⁶¹ Utrikesutskottet 1974.

⁶² The RAÄ 1996, 6.

⁶³ Agrell 1989, 21.

archives, for which there were no valid instructions for evacuation (Föreskrifter av Överstyrelsen för civil beredskap om undanförsel och förstöring, Doc. 1995:6). The first guideline on preparedness was issued by the Church in 1996, including several aspects of contingency.⁶⁴ The main focus was no longer armed conflict but peacetime crises such as major accidents and disasters (flooding, fire, terrorist acts, etc.). These were qualitatively different threats to the risk of war that had been planned for earlier. Cultural protection plans were mentioned again, but a handbook and a public inquiry carried out in 1999 on church preparedness and total defense failed to concretize what level of ambition a parish should choose: updated instructions on how to design a plan were never issued.⁶⁵ The inquiry led to an amendment of the Cultural Heritage Code when the divorce between state and church occurred, which stated that the Church was expected to care for and maintain its cultural property during periods of alert (including war).⁶⁶ An alert issued by the government cannot be decided by the Church.⁶⁷

Once the Church left the sphere of government in 1999, its duties within total defense were limited to pastoral care, communication, burials, and managing population records. The question of how to protect cultural property in the war was given such a low priority that it vanished from the agenda of the Church for many years.

Recent developments and conclusions

To summarize, before 1961, the Church was not included in legislation on the evacuation of cultural property in wartime. Swedish thinking about protecting cultural property was built on historical experiences going back to World War II, having been somewhat modified during the Cold War. Evacuation and other protective efforts had to be planned and carried out voluntarily and organized by the parishes themselves. The fact that protective measures were voluntary and supposed to have been developed at the grassroots level led to a low prioritization of the issue. Most parishes were small, understaffed, and were busy with everyday choirs, giving little time or resources to plan for the unexpected. In the 1960s, plans for evacuation or in situ protection of objects were made in the country's most exposed (read: most urbanized) areas, but an equivalent was not carried out to protect architecture and immovable art. An evident difference between museums and parishes' plans was that the latter could hardly expect to receive support from the government for the evacuation of objects. Parts of the chapter archives were to be evacuated, but parish-level initiatives had to be taken locally. This meant that almost all cultural property belonging to parish churches was to be protected *in situ*.

The protection of church buildings (not movable objects) remained voluntary until 1981, when the new Act on church preparedness required that movable and immovable property be cared for during periods of alert or war. However, the term "care for" meant that the Church should continue doing what it was already doing in peacetime and did not include active measures to protect property from destruction in war.

It is a paradox that the Swedish government did more to plan for the protection of cultural property before the government adopted 1954H than it has done since. The most important reason was that the military threat against Sweden was perceived as much more serious in the 1960s. Protocol II of 1954H was signed by Sweden in 1999 but was not ratified until 2017 since legislation needed to be revised first.⁶⁸ Little was done to adjust legislation in

⁶⁴ Church of Sweden 1996, 3.

⁶⁵ Church of Sweden 1996, 37.

⁶⁶ SFS 1988:950, Ch. 4. The revision is covered in SFS 1999:942.

⁶⁷ SFS 1992:1403.

⁶⁸ 1954HII.



Image 3. Example of a medieval Swedish church (Åhus). Photographer Mattias Legnér.

Sweden later, the biggest change taking place in 2017 when domestic law was adapted to Protocol II of 1954H.⁶⁹ Article 15 of Protocol II demands that military use or targeting of cultural property under enhanced protection is criminalized, meaning that a new chapter was added to the Cultural Heritage Code forbidding military use of property covered by Protocol II (“militär användning av kulturegendom med förstärkt skydd”). The second change was that the Code on Punishment of Certain International Crimes was revised, adding that destruction or looting of property protected under 1954H and Protocol II in

⁶⁹ The revision is described in Proposition 2016/17:109, 5–7.



Image 4. Example of the interiors of a Swedish church: the choir and 17th century altarpiece of Åhus church. Photographer Mattias Legnér.

times of war was criminal.⁷⁰ However, to date, no site in Sweden falls under enhanced protection, and there have not been (as of February 2024) any systematic actions taken addressing the precautions in Protocol II of “the preparation for the removal of movable cultural property or the provision for adequate in situ protection of such property.”⁷¹

⁷⁰ SFS 2014:406, 6 §.

⁷¹ 1954H, Art. 5.

However, this may change over the course of a few years, most likely depending on the development of the security situation in the Baltic Sea.

It was not until the Russo-Ukrainian War escalated in 2022 that the work to build contingency within the Church began anew, reflecting a general development of total defense in Sweden. Soon, the work to list sites to be protected by 1954H started at the county level without centralized coordination. The county administration is responsible for identifying and selecting what to include.⁷² The selection of sites is restrictive and includes only a few medieval churches. For instance, in the county of Gotland, 22 out of 92 medieval churches and two vicarages were listed (historically, there has been one vicarage for each parish church).⁷³ The general protection covers only a few but includes medieval churches with extremely high cultural values. Under the Cultural Heritage Code, however, all churches built before 1940 must be preserved, meaning that Swedish legislation does not grade churches. The selection does not exclusively rest on the code but on negotiations between the county administration, the chapter, and the Armed Forces.

The creation of lists of monuments to be protected by 1954H has, so far, been a top-down project in Sweden; it has not involved the parishes, and it is premature to say whether the listing of properties will lead to any safeguarding measures in the event of war. To protect churches and their objects, parishes should take an active part in planning, and ideally, there should be cooperation between the Church and civilians as well as the military authorities in this matter. How far the intentions of 1954H and Protocol II will be implemented regarding the Church is unclear, nor how protective measures suggested in Article 5 of Protocol II may be funded.

In many locations, churches are still considered to be among the safest buildings available for protecting cultural property since no bombproof shelters have been constructed for church property. The question of how to efficiently protect churches in case of war remains largely unanswered in Sweden and most other countries. However, there is a foundation based on inventorying, the creation of rescue plans, and measures to prevent burglary.

The historical pattern of the state treating Church cultural property differently from museum or archive collections became clear in this study. In state-led planning, there is a wish to include the Church, most recently stressed by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency in Autumn 2022 and by the RAÄ in August 2023, following my report.⁷⁴ In Spring 2023, I initiated a one-year project to examine current policies and legislation and design some guidelines for parishes that wished to develop a cultural protection plan. However, many parishes are small, their membership numbers are dropping, and most work in the parish is carried out by a few individuals who take care of the choirs. In the face of significant economic and structural challenges within the Church, cultural property protection risks becoming down-prioritized. That has happened before, and it is likely to happen again. To prevent this, issues of how this extra work can be funded and how a structure for giving advice and practical support to the parishes can be built need to be solved.

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⁷² SFS 1990:12, 25 §.

⁷³ Länsstyrelsen 2019.

⁷⁴ MSB 2022; RAÄ 2023; Legnér 2022c.

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