



Working to protect Australia's cultural heritage in crisis due to disaster and war

The *1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict* and its two *Protocols of 1954 and 1999* comprise the primary international humanitarian law regarding the protection of cultural property during armed conflict.

Australia has not yet ratified the two Protocols of the Convention, unlike the USA (in 2009) and the UK (in 2017).

The only impediment appears to be lack of a government decision to do so.

Cultural property (not only buildings, cultural landscapes and archaeological sites but archives, library and museum collections, and art) is often damaged and destroyed during conflict – it is what happens, and there is nothing that can be done about it. However, a proportion of damage and destruction is frequently avoidable and such damage has been regarded as bad practice by military theorists for over 2,000 years.

During both the First and Second World Wars military units were created to try to protect cultural property. These were largely broken up at the end of the Second World War and, despite the 1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its two Protocols of 1954 and 1999, the military - and heritage community - essentially forgot the importance of trying to protect cultural property during conflict. It was only following the disastrous destruction and looting that followed the war in the former Yugoslavia and the 2003 invasion of Iraq that the issue returned to the agenda.

The Blue Shield organisation was created in 1996 in an attempt to raise the profile of cultural property protection. Since then it has worked with the military and other relevant organisations to flag the importance of this work. Recently significant steps have been taken, with more countries, particularly both the USA and the UK, ratifying the convention and protocols, and establishing units, procedures and training within their Defence forces.

In 2018, Blue Shield Australia and the Australian Red Cross co-convened two roundtables with relevant Australian government departments – where it was agreed that there were no major barriers to implementing the convention. Direction by Australian Government Ministers was the required action and agreed priority.

Contacts:

- Blue Shield Australia (BSA) – national president, Dr Tanya Park bsaofficialsecret@gmail.com
- Committee member: Ms Alex Marsden, national director, AMaGA director@amaga.org.au
- Blue Shield international – Professor Peter Stone, the UNESCO Chair in Cultural Property Protection and Peace at Newcastle University in the UK; Chair of the UK Committee of the Blue Shield; and Vice President of Blue Shield International. <http://ukblueshield.org.uk/>