

Ukraine War Bares U.S. Army Delay in Creating New ‘Monuments Officers’

Civilian specialists are tracking the threat to landmarks in Ukraine as the U.S. Army struggles after more than two years to appoint new cultural heritage preservation specialists modeled after the “Monuments Men.”



By Graham Bowley

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For months before the bombs started falling, Hayden Bassett watched over the cultural riches of Ukraine — the cathedrals of Kyiv, the historic buildings of Lviv, museums across the country and the ancient burial sites that dot its steppes.

Using satellite imagery, Bassett, 32, an archaeologist and director of the Cultural Heritage Monitoring Lab at the Virginia Museum of Natural History, has monitored and mapped much of the country’s national heritage as part of a civilian effort to mark the sites that could be devastated by war.

This is the kind of job envisioned for a cadre of U.S. Army specialists being hired to succeed the storied Monuments Men of World War II, who recovered millions of European treasures looted by the Nazis. But more than two years after the Army, with some fanfare, announced the new effort, styled after the old, of dedicated art experts working in a military capacity to preserve the treasures of the past, the program is still not up and running.

“There are a lot of growing pains,” acknowledged Corine Wegener, director of the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative, a partner in the program.

“There is this capability,” she said, “that the Army ought to have that’s not available to commanders at the moment.”

The Army is hiring expert specialists modeled after the so-called “Monuments Men,” who rescued art that had been stolen by the Nazis during World War II, including Manet’s “In the Conservatory,” pictured here. Pictures from History/Universal Images Group, via Getty Images

The lack of that capability has become pressing as Russia invades, and explosions threaten the golden domes and ancient frescoes of Ukraine’s cities. The pandemic certainly played a part in the hiring delay, but candidates looking to join the unit, and leaders who are forming it, have pointed to a host of other issues as well.

Some candidates describe a torturous process in which applications have been mislaid and Army review boards have been slow to decide on whether to hire the many civilian archaeologists, conservators, museum specialists and archivists who have expressed interest.

One leader of the effort, Col. Scott DeJesse, an Army Reserve officer and painter from Texas, said the military is determined to make this happen, but a large bureaucracy — whose crucial missions include emerging military threats — is being asked for the first time to directly commission civilian cultural heritage specialists into military ranks. During World War II, the Monuments Men were soldiers who had already enlisted and happened to have art historical or other specialized backgrounds.

“Look, I plan on changing the world with these people, and yes, I wish it was done sooner,” said Colonel DeJesse, who does not direct the hiring process but concentrates on the operational side of the new unit. “Are people dragging their feet? No. Is it a major priority? No. It is just the speed of a major organization like the Army.”

The plan reflects a recognition that the military needs a force of scholarly experts to advise U.S. commanders and local authorities on how to protect cultural heritage, a recognition that has intensified after the destruction and looting of ancient objects during and after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The experts will, among other things, delineate sites to avoid in airstrikes and ground fighting, and mark places like museums to be protected against looting.

Beyond the inherent value of such preservation work, officials say that efforts to protect cultural legacies have the power to bind local people and foster peace, once the shooting stops. And as a matter of diplomacy and soft power, the sight of American forces helping to save other countries’ cultural treasures can be a powerful tool in the battle for hearts and minds.

“Monuments Men is one of the best images out of the Second World War,” said Andrew Kless, director of the global studies program at Alfred University in upstate New York, an applicant to the new corps who learned in 2020 that he had been selected for an officer’s position; he is still waiting for news of his final appointment.

“This is taking longer than anything I have experienced,” he said. “That has not changed my mind about joining it. I am taking a long-term view. This is a new program.”

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Col. Marshall Straus Scantlin, director of strategic initiatives, U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command (Airborne), said the pandemic had hindered the ability to convene review panels, which are typically conducted in person. “It just takes time and we want to make sure we get it right,” he said.

Several people who tracked the hiring process said they worried that some qualified candidates had been turned away. And several civilian applicants were assigned one rank and subsequently downgraded, a reflection perhaps of institutional resistance to accepting newcomers at ranks that could upset career military officers. Two candidates have written to their Senators to complain.

Colonel DeJesse said that Army staff members told him it was sometimes difficult to equate civilian candidates’ seniority and work experiences with military rank, and that ranks assigned to civilian hires were being reviewed.

But he defended the quality of candidates selected so far. As for those rejected, he said some applicants had not addressed the specific requirements of the job in their résumés. Others had a good bit of experience, but not as outlined in the Army specifications, which require 48 months of work experience in a specialized field after receipt of an advanced degree.

In October, during a virtual meeting that included candidates for the cultural heritage assignments, Colonel DeJesse spoke to the frustration about how long the process was taking.

“We’re right there with you and we appreciate your patience,” he said. “It’s so important that you guys stick with it as best you can.”

The specialists are to be part of the Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command, which has its headquarters at Fort Bragg, N.C. Colonel DeJesse, who did tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, said the unit might number as many as 33 specialists, “the highest number of monuments officers since the late 1940s,” he said.

He said several experts who were already reservists had transferred successfully into the role and some were already at work — for example, training units deploying to Central America, Africa and other regions about how to help countries identify and preserve their cultural heritage.

Hayden Bassett, director of the Cultural Heritage Monitoring Lab, and his team have been mapping endangered sites in Ukraine. He has been selected to be one of the U.S. Army specialists who will undertake cultural preservation efforts when they are finally deployed. Heather Ainsworth for The New York Times

He said another 12 outside candidates had been selected and hoped the first five or so of those could finally get “pinned on” — be formally appointed — at an event scheduled at the Smithsonian in August.

Another twelve would have their applications considered by a review board in May, he said.

As they wait, candidates have been continuing to submit documentation and prepare for the Army physical test, which they will take once commissioned. (It involves six exercises — lifting a 60-pound weight three times; throwing a 10-pound medicine ball; doing consecutive push-ups for two minutes; sprinting and dragging and carrying a weight; leg tucks or planks; and a two-mile run.)

Understand Russia’s Attack on Ukraine

What is at the root of this invasion? Russia considers Ukraine within its natural sphere of influence, and it has grown unnerved at Ukraine’s closeness with the West and the prospect that the country might join NATO or the European Union. While Ukraine is part of neither, it receives financial and military aid from the United States and Europe.



Elizabeth Varner, a specialist in museum administration and cultural property law, who has been selected as a candidate, said she is excited to qualify for a service that is “desperately needed.”

“Cultural property protection is a continuous process,” she said. “It takes a long time to get ready to respond and once events actually happen you are behind if you have not prepared already.”

That sort of specialist preparation for Ukraine is being done on a civilian basis for now by experts like Mr. Bassett, who himself has been selected as a captain in the new reserve unit, for when the Monuments Officers finally begin work.

Seen from afar at right, a kurgan, or ancient Scythian burial mound capped by trees in Ukraine. Mr. Bassett has mapped many burial mounds of this type as part the effort to record cultural heritage sites worthy of protection. Brendan Hoffman for The New York Times

For the past year and a half, the team at his lab in Virginia, part of a broader network of about 10 people, has trained soldiers deploying to East Africa in preserving an area’s cultural heritage and has used satellite imagery to monitor sites affected by natural disasters in Honduras and Haiti, and by armed conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Tigray region of Ethiopia, and Afghanistan.

Before the war in Ukraine, the monitoring by Mr. Bassett’s team had included sites in the east of the country and in Crimea, regions that were then already occupied by Russian forces or Russian-backed separatists. Mr. Bassett said the team had found not only destruction caused by conflict there, but also construction of new monuments. For example, Savur-Mohyla is the site of a Bronze Age burial mound, or kurgan. A World War II memorial the Soviets built on the site was destroyed during fighting in 2014. Now that monument is being reconstructed with Russian aid.

It is among the more than a thousand sites that could be harmed by the broadening conflict, according to the lab’s growing database, the kind of resource that Mr. Bassett hopes could potentially play a part in the work of the Army unit when it becomes active.

“This is going to allow myself and other incoming monuments officers to hit the ground running,” he said, of the lab’s work generally. “I am very much looking forward to that moment. Once we are in uniform, we will be doing this work in the U.S. but also have the opportunity to do some with boots on the ground in a meaningful way.”