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Captivated Collectors: Analyzing the Private Demand for World War II Artifacts in the United States and the Implications of Personal Ownership of Physical Pieces of War Memory

The American consciousness in the 20th century was dominated by the outbreak and enduring effects of World War II. Exposing new generations to the realities of total war was best accomplished through the examination of soldiers' personal items, including the cultural and trophy-like objects American GIs brought back from their service abroad. As the classic and frequently quoted wartime saying went, “the Germans fight for glory, the British for their homes, and the Americans for souvenirs”.¹ As more veterans pass away each year and the living memory of the second world war grows dimmer in the collective consciousness of contemporary Americans, the search for wartime items, now deemed historical artifacts, serves to personalize and preserve the ever-fading war. In this paper, I will explore the significance of private ownership of wartime artifacts upon American World War II memory by examining the historical development of artifact collecting sparked by the touristic souvenir hunting and looting practices of American troops. I will analyze how modern day collections were influenced by wartime GI souvenir culture and the manners in which other countries remember World War II, and how American collectors utilize the private nature of their collections to educate the new generations and advance a traditionalist perspective of the war. Ultimately, I will contend that the financially privileged and masculine nature of collecting creates spheres of exclusion that ignores the wartime objects and narratives of marginalized groups.

¹ Mark D. Van Ells, “The Souvenir-Hunters,” *America in WWII* 7, no. 2 (August 2011).

The souvenir hunting and looting behavior of American soldiers during World War II established the groundwork for the development of wartime object memory, influencing the demand and artifact makeup of private collections for decades to come. For most American soldiers in the second world war, their deployment abroad in the European and Pacific campaigns was the first time they left the United States. Fighting in distant cities and countries they had only read about in school textbooks, these soldiers collected cultural items and battlefield souvenirs to remember their life-defining travel and military experiences.² When away from the action, American GIs morphed into tourists frequently doing business with locals to purchase an array of cultural items to keep as mementoes or give away as gifts, including beer steins from Germany, kimonos, fans, and jade from the East, and ebony figurines from Africa.³ Motivated by the desire to return home with validating proof of their service abroad, soldiers were enticed to accumulate these exotic items. Historian Seth Givens writes that “...GIs brought back items that proved to their family and friends they had seen the war first-hand, participated in it, and survived to tell the stories”, illustrating how once wartime objects found their way to the United States, they provoked specific emotions and recognition.⁴ It was particularly on the battlefield that proof of service and survival was coveted among the personal belongings of enemy combatants. German rifles, Japanese swords, battle flags, and deactivated land mines were highly desired tokens of survival and victory over the enemy.⁵ Although rules of war stated that personal belongings could not be removed from the enemy dead, these regulations were largely ignored, notably in the Pacific where American soldiers enacted their own forms of revenge by collecting gold teeth, skulls, and other body parts from the corpses of dead Japanese

² Van Ells.

³ Van Ells.

⁴ Seth A. Givens, “Liberating the Germans: The US Army and Looting in Germany During the Second World War,” *War in History* 21, no. 1 (January 2014): 43.

⁵ Van Ells, “The Souvenir-Hunters.”

combattants.⁶ American soldiers returning to the states with cultural souvenirs and war trophies established the foundations of the modern collecting market by defining which wartime objects from the war were worth keeping for future memory.

Souvenir and war trophy collecting by American troops ultimately became a symbol for retaliation against enemy civilians during liberation movements. After Germany surrendered in May of 1945, widespread looting by all Allied armies demonstrated to civilian populations that the Nazis were truly defeated. During liberation movements, soldiers first searched in civilian homes for necessities including clothing and food, however once alcohol was discovered within cupboards or abandoned pubs, looting behavior soared.⁷ Having earned the reputation of being avid trophy hunters, American soldiers were ultimately considered to be less dangerous and disruptive in comparison to the advancing Soviet troops who systematically plundered Germany's landscape.⁸ The American military strived to reduce looting behavior, often with little success, in efforts to prepare Germany for a peaceful occupation. Regulations from US leadership attempting to maintain a moral high ground were widely ignored by American GIs who believed their combination of liberating and looting was a justifiable form of punishment against the civilian populations who supported such destructive regimes.⁹ As the Greatest Generation filled their suitcases with cultural items and war trophies in an effort to remember aspects of their wartime and survival experiences, what they chose to do with their collections varied as they returned to civilian life. Some veterans openly displayed their wartime trophies while others chose to keep their mementos locked away and out of sight in attics and basements,

⁶ "WWII Souvenir Skulls," *Newsday*, August 16, 1987, sec. News.

⁷ Givens, "Liberating the Germans: The US Army and Looting in Germany During the Second World War," 37–40.

⁸ Givens, 34, 42.

⁹ Givens, 44–49.

only to be found by family members after their deaths.¹⁰ Yet the looting of civilian belongings in occupied zones proved to have long term effects as staggering amounts of items from Japan and the Third Reich flooded the American landscape.¹¹ The collection of wartime objects by American GIs served to create tangible evidence of their individual military experience, and influenced the war memory of following generations who sought to strengthen their bonds with the past and reestablish the importance of the personal items in World War II discourse.

The abundance of Third Reich and Japanese artifacts brought back as souvenirs by American soldiers influenced modern World War II collections, and reflects the continuing relationship between the construction of war memory by various countries and the availability of international wartime objects for ownership today. Private collections of World War II artifacts are typically curated by middle-aged white men who were inspired to begin collecting through some personal connection to the war. In my interview with Massachusetts-based collector Ken Rendell, he described his youth, growing up in a time when the war “dominated everything in [his] life”, a relationship that spurred his impressive World War II collection as early as the 1960s.¹² Other collectors write about having been inspired to interact with physical pieces from the war after discovering some of their father’s souvenirs and memorabilia tucked away in their personal belongings.¹³ Militaria from the American, German, and Japanese armies are the most prevalent and demanded items in personal collections, a dominance that reflects the geographical trophy collecting and souvenir hunting behaviors of American soldiers during the war particularly during liberation and occupation movements. Weapons, uniforms, and heavy

¹⁰ Van Ells, “The Souvenir-Hunters.”

¹¹ Ken Rendell, Interview with Ken Rendell, Founder of the International Museum of World War II, Phone, October 9, 2020.

¹² Rendell.

¹³ David Koeppl, “Memories of World War II, Still Fresh in Collectibles,” *The New York Times*, November 18, 2007, sec. Your Money, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/18/business/yourmoney/18war.html>.

machinery from these three nations are all available for purchase at a hefty price.¹⁴ For the majority of collectors in the baby boomer generation, their meticulous artifact hunting for items at vintage stores and estate sales demonstrates a desire to better understand the wartime experiences of their parents. Artifact value appears to be derived both from the experiential treasure hunt for objects as well as the accumulation of the intimate stories from the veterans and their belongings. The scarcity of living World War II veterans and the demand for their personal belongings by collectors has transformed ordinary wartime souvenirs into expensive artifacts of historical significance.¹⁵ Frequently traveling abroad to visit battlefields and meet with veterans and dealers, collectors demonstrate continued touristic elements of artifact collecting.¹⁶ This theme of foreign travel and memory building through objects brought back to the United States harkens back to the souvenir hunting origins of World War II soldiers during their deployment abroad. Traveling across the United States and overseas to interact with the veterans and their communities serves to validate the authenticity of the artifacts, and provides collectors with increasingly personal connections to the war. As the years move forward and World War II veterans pass away in greater numbers, collectors fear a loss of history and express, through their vigorous collecting of wartime objects and narratives, a deep desire to connect more intimately with the American wartime past.

Today, private collections in the United States illustrate the lasting influence of GI souvenir and trophy hunting from World War II. However, the relationship between artifact preservation and collection reveals how the various memory building practices of other wartime

¹⁴ Rob Thomas, "TO COLLECT AND PRESERVED: World War II--Era Tanks, Jeeps, and Machine Guns Help Keep Historical Memory Alive," *National Review* 70, no. 16 (August 27, 2018).

¹⁵ "When Does a Memento Become Valuable?," *Canadian Business; Toronto* 76, no. 17 (September 15, 2003).

¹⁶ Vesa-Pekka Herva et al., "I Have Better Stuff at Home': Treasure Hunting and Private Collecting of World War II Artefacts in Finnish Lapland," *World Archaeology* 48, no. 2 (June 2016): 267–81.

countries affects the availability of international objects and narratives for purchase. How individual nations used or disposed of wartime memory objects exposes complicated efforts to remember or forget their particular role in the war. Desires to hide and ignore the shameful parts of a country's collective history led to the destruction of many wartime objects. Countries like Italy, who wanted to forget their perpetration during World War II, and communist China, that wanted to undermine the contributions of Chiang Kai Shek, actively destroyed thousands of military uniforms and wartime objects.¹⁷ Collector Ken Rendell described his difficulty in finding Chinese militaria, recounting he was only able to purchase one Chinese uniform from a Japanese dealer as "almost nothing from World War II was saved under Mao Zedong and his communist party".¹⁸ Additionally, countries that suffered from economic strains in the early postwar period preserved little of their soldiers' personal belongings. Living under a rationing system until the mid-1950s, British citizens used wartime objects until they were falling apart due to the scarcity of postwar resources.¹⁹ The destruction of wartime items in certain countries from overuse or campaigns to forget, exposes the incomplete nature of private World War II collections in the United States that are dominated by American, German, and Japanese, narratives claiming their superior importance in American war memory.

The growth of World War II artifacts in private collections facilitated the development of educational campaigns set to personalize history through wartime reenactments, the establishment of private museums, and the advancement of a traditionalist war narrative. Accumulating wartime artifacts not only connects collectors to individual soldier experiences, but allows collecting communities to pursue their mission of saving objects for the future memory building of new generations. Active participation in World War II reenactments

¹⁷ Rendell, Interview with Ken Rendell, Founder of the International Museum of World War II.

¹⁸ Rendell.

¹⁹ Rendell.

mobilizes collecting networks to flaunt their impressive guns and machinery and engage their local communities with their impressive collections. Collector Rob Thomas describes his role in reenactments driving armored vehicles past schoolchildren in parades and firing weapons with blanks as "...providing the attendees with a sense of what it was like to hear, see, and smell them [the artifacts] in action".²⁰ Despite the battlefields of World War II never truly reaching American soil, collectors actively lead efforts to recreate a wartime atmosphere, utilizing their artifacts and heavy machinery to publicly play pretend. Creating experiential learning environments through reenactments gives new life to old objects by increasing their exposure to new generations while advancing an illusion that hands-on interaction with these memory objects allows them to be owned by everyone.

Developing private museums enables collectors to promote alternative engagement with physical artifacts, depict the narratives of individual soldiers, and effectively critique the operations of institutional museums. Coding themselves as protectors of the past, collectors frequently comment on their actions to save and rescue wartime artifacts from being ignored and excluded by institutional organizations of memory.²¹ Often critiquing established institutional museums as displaying objects in an impersonal fashion and remaining detached from their greater communities, the founders of private museums seek to focus on different aspects of history by promoting alternative exhibit and educational methods.²² Highlighting the individual stories acquired from veterans and their families is a top priority for collectors creating private museums. Ken Rendell, founder of the International Museum of World War II once open in Natick, Massachusetts, reflected on his mission to recreate the atmosphere of battlefields and the

²⁰ Thomas, "TO COLLECT AND PRESERVED: World War II--Era Tanks, Jeeps, and Machine Guns Help Keep Historical Memory Alive."

²¹ Herva et al., "I Have Better Stuff at Home': Treasure Hunting and Private Collecting of World War II Artefacts in Finnish Lapland."

²² Rendell, Interview with Ken Rendell, Founder of the International Museum of World War II.

homefront by encouraging visitors to physically touch the artifacts from his collection.²³ The lack of experiential education within official memory institutions that formalizes and abstracts World War II by keeping objects locked away behind walls of glass, is a prominent frustration and critique among collectors. The common desire of World War II collectors to demystify wartime artifacts and present personal information transforms the ordinary belongings of American, German, or Japanese soldiers into artifacts of extraordinary value. Collectors seek to reveal the realities of war, which most believe can only be understood through intimate contact with the weapons and personal belongings of soldiers.²⁴ The establishment of private museums by World War II collectors raises critiques against the perceived detachment of institutional museums, by utilizing alternative learning techniques to engage a younger audience. These avenues for repurposing and expanding the private ownership of wartime artifacts adds to collectors' widespread advancement of a traditionalist perspective of the second world war. Glorifying the US military and honoring the Greatest Generation are common themes in the educational outreach work of collectors. In surrounding themselves with familiar items from the past, collectors from the baby boomer generation accumulate objects that remind them of the comfort of their youth when World War II greatly impacted everyday life.²⁵ In applying a traditional view of the United States during wartime, collections present similar stories of a selfless soldier generation that represents heroism and a united homefront, and should be consulted to provide the solutions to the domestic divisions of the present day. The idea that the wartime generation was comprised of men who took the honor to serve their country without question is reflected in the beliefs of collectors like Rob Thomas who writes that his collecting community "all share a bond -- a love of World War II history and a profound respect for those

²³ Rendell.

²⁴ Dabbs, "The Dead Speak: Collecting Bygone Ordnance From WWII."

²⁵ "When Does a Memento Become Valuable?"

who served in the fight against tyranny”.²⁶ Seeking to demonstrate how the private ownerships of wartime objects serves a greater purpose in preserving of American history, collectors adopt unconventional educational strategies through their participation in reenactments and the establishment of their private museums. Their emphasis on promoting experiential learning through interactive demonstrations and museum spaces where visitors can physically touch wartime artifacts, serves to critique the formal operations of institutional museums and enables collectors to control and advance traditional narratives of World War II.

The financial investment required for the private ownership of World War II artifacts reveals spheres of exclusion within differing socioeconomic groups, illustrating divisions between collecting networks and a wider public that lacks access to aspects of physical wartime history. The expensive nature of World War II artifact collecting demonstrates the development of a historical record for the privileged by excluding the participation of a wider public that faces economic barriers when it comes to purchasing and owning wartime artifacts. In recent years, World War II artifact prices have skyrocketed, driven up by the emergence of replicas that skew the market.²⁷ Big ticket items, including tanks and aircrafts, can cost an average of 2 million dollars, and immense amounts of time and money are required to search, restore, and maintain these objects once purchased.²⁸ Spending absorbent amounts of time on gaining membership into networks of like-minded individuals, applying and paying for state permits, and finding rare parts to restore and maintain artifacts is an investment of time and money that most individuals without a personal fortune cannot afford to pay. Some veterans and their families, recognizing the value in their wartime heritage objects, choose to sell these personal items when faced with

²⁶ Thomas, “TO COLLECT AND PRESERVED: World War II--Era Tanks, Jeeps, and Machine Guns Help Keep Historical Memory Alive.”

²⁷ Koeppel, “Memories of World War II, Still Fresh in Collectibles.”

²⁸ Thomas, “TO COLLECT AND PRESERVED: World War II--Era Tanks, Jeeps, and Machine Guns Help Keep Historical Memory Alive.”

financial burdens. Collectors predominantly purchasing their objects from estate sales and veterans themselves in small town, rural America, expose the potential for predatory economic activity. Recognizing the financial stresses of veterans and their families, artifact hunters use emotionally charged techniques to make deals for objects, promising to cherish a veteran's wartime belongings before leaving with their personal items that can never be replaced.²⁹ While some collectors choose to participate in occasional reenactments and historical community events, the majority of artifacts from their personal collections remain in private view. Accessible only by family, friends, and selected small groups, a collector's collection is as archaeologist Vesa-Pekka Herva writes in a co-authored paper, "...curiously known and unknown at the same time...".³⁰ In picking and choosing who has the privilege to view their collections, collectors create a space of history for only a select few, excluding members of a wider community who may not fit into their socioeconomic circles.

The importance of network building within collecting communities creates additional spheres of exclusion among women and minority groups. The lack of organized collector-dealer connections in less represented wartime countries, like the nations of North Africa, has left significant international perspectives out of private collections in the United States. Due to wartime and colonial legacies, to many of the white middle-aged collectors in the United States there appears to be no system in place in North Africa to create a network of dealers that can effectively be tapped into.³¹ The absence of such secure connections leaves out important narratives surrounding the North African campaign, a rarely studied aspect of World War II education and memory building in the United States. The lack of background context and

²⁹ Shufeldt Esch, "Picking through History: 'Mantiques' and Masculinity in Artifactual Entertainment."

³⁰ Herva et al., "I Have Better Stuff at Home': Treasure Hunting and Private Collecting of World War II Artefacts in Finnish Lapland."

³¹ Rendell, Interview with Ken Rendell, Founder of the International Museum of World War II.

personal connection between American collectors and the colonial forces of World War II effectively dismisses the contributions of the North African countries that fought alongside the Allies and facilitated victory. The dependence on personal networks for artifact collection creates insular communities dominated by men that largely exclude women's wartime objects and women as participants in contemporary collecting. Most artifact trading transactions take place away from public view in private meetings or secured online chat rooms.³² Without membership into these regulated boys clubs, it can be difficult for outsiders like women and minorities to scout and acquire unique pieces. The masculine nature of collecting is solidified by collectors' claims that curating World War II collections requires physical strength, to handle such manly military objects, and important deal making techniques, such as utilizing aggression, that are stereotyped as lacking from the demeanors of women.³³ Historically men and women collected different objects, although the preferences of men dominate World War II artifact markets. Ignoring the collecting behaviors of women that tend to focus on acquiring items such as jewelry, figurines, and housewares, World War II collections highlight the male soldier's possessions, leaving women's wartime belongings and narratives within the military and in the homefront to be forgotten.³⁴ The resulting consequence advances private museum and reenactment narratives of a glorified male American military without the balance of the female military presence, and the homefront contributions of everyday women. While it appears that any World War II artifact is available for a price, that price may incorporate the exclusion of

³² Suzie Thomas, Oula Seitsonen, and Vesa-Pekka Herva, "Nazi Memorabilia, Dark Heritage and Treasure Hunting as 'Alternative' Tourism: Understanding the Fascination with the Material Remains of World War II in Northern Finland," *Journal of Field Archaeology* 41, no. 3 (2016): 331–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00934690.2016.1168769>.

³³ Shufeldt Esch, "Picking through History: 'Mantiques' and Masculinity in Artifactual Entertainment."

³⁴ Madeleine Shufeldt Esch, "Picking through History: 'Mantiques' and Masculinity in Artifactual Entertainment," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 5 (May 2, 2017): 509–24.

marginalized groups whose wartime belongings are not demanded within the highly masculinized collecting field.

What soldiers brought back from their wartime service as souvenirs and how other countries preserved, used, or discarded physical objects from the second world war influences the demand for military coded objects and the artifact composition of modern collections in the United States. Exploring the implications of the private ownership of World War II artifacts reveals spheres of exclusion among socioeconomic and gender groups. However, the educational goals of many American collectors raises unique critiques against the detachment of institutional museums, and provides valuable insights on the power of physical engagement with wartime artifacts to continue engaging new generations in fading historical events.

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