The regulations stipulated in the Lieber Code for the protection of historic architecture and art during war were absorbed into the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 (see especially article 55). With signatory countries from Europe, North and South America, Africa, Australia, and Asia, these were the first truly world-wide attempts to regulate the conduct of war within a framework of secular international law. As Europe plunged the world into WWI in 1914, Paul Clemen (1866-1947) found himself in the difficult position of having to interpret the preservation implications of the Hague Conventions for the first time. He studied medieval art history at the Universities of Strasbourg and Bonn, and in 1898, he became a professor at Bonn, retiring in 1936. When hostilities began, and the German Empire invaded the Belgium, he was also working as Provincial Conservator of the German Empire’s Rhine Province, a mere hour’s drive to the border. German artillery swiftly reduced the entire Belgian town of Ypres and its 13th century Cloth Hall to rubble, and partially decimated Dinant, Vise, Mechelen, Lier and Antwerp. In shock, preservationists in the Allied Powers mounted campaigns in the press to vilify Germans as barbarians who lacked respect for civilian life or cultural treasures. Germans also protested their army’s destruction of the enemy’s heritage. In response, Clemen was appointed as head of the German forces’ art commission in occupied Belgium, where he led a careful catalogue of monuments and created a preservation administration to support rebuilding efforts. In addition, he invented the position of special “art officers” who were attached to military units and helped identify and protect cultural property. His well-meaning efforts met with the passive resistance of Belgian preservationists who refused to collaborate. Meanwhile, the exiled Belgian government initiated provisions for the reconstruction of damaged buildings, in an attempt to undermine German efforts. Fully conscious that preservation had become a powerful weapon in a media war for soft cultural power, Clemen engaged in the production of numerous publications, published in English or French for foreign consumption, that highlighted German reconstruction and preservation efforts and tried to set the historical record. This essay, originally part of a richly illustrated book, was one of the most widely circulated abroad. He skillfully wove praise for the Belgian’s artistic achievements and professional talent, with criticism for their lack of cooperation, and self-congratulation for advancing the professional standards of preservation in the occupied territories. Sadly, Clemen saw many of the major monuments he and his team documented in Belgium and Germany, destroyed during World War II.

Keywords: War, Politics, Activism, Media, Documentation