



INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DEALERS IN ANCIENT ART

Operation Pandora shows that Europe is NOT a haven for cultural property looted from war zones

‘Operation Pandora was successful, contrary to that what was expected, because it proved that the trafficking of cultural property from the conflict zones in Europe appears to be minimal’. Vincent Geerling, chairman IADAA

Operation Pandora: Report into IADAA findings on further investigation

March 2017

Operation Pandora – a major initiative by 18 countries to clamp down on the illicit trade in cultural property within Europe – took place in October and November 2016, with a joint action week from November 17 to 23 November.

The following EU Member States participated in Operation Pandora: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Italy, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom. Non-EU countries involved: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Switzerland.

Several police officers were deployed on the spot during this week to assist national authorities with inspections and searches.

The media campaign that followed highlighted the seizure of thousands of objects, as well as the arrests of 75 people. However, despite a catalogue of statistics released by Europol, which co-ordinated the effort, there is to show how effective the operation actually was, especially in looking for *“illicit trafficking of cultural goods with a particular emphasis on conflict countries”* its primary focus.

IADAA launched its own investigation to find out the real result.

To start with, we looked at the figures that Europol released. Here is a summary and a weblink to its source:

- 48,588 persons, 29,340 vehicles and 50 ships were checked;
- 75 individuals were arrested
- 92 new investigations were initiated;
- 3,561 works of art and cultural goods were seized, almost half of which were archaeological objects; 500 archaeological objects were found in Murcia, Spain, of which 19 were stolen in 2014 from the Archaeological Museum in Murcia and are mostly Spanish medieval coins.
- Over 400 coins from different periods were seized following investigations into suspicious online advertisements. (<http://goo.gl/On3BvV>)

Figures as released by Europol (See: <http://goo.gl/G5GRHn>)

We also gleaned that of the 3,561 objects, around 1,000 were seized from a man in western Poland who was suspected to have found them while using a metal detector illegally. They include spent bullet cases, the rusted metal frames of old WWII rifles and low-value coins found locally, as illustrated by Polish police photographs of the seizures. The Polish photos do not show any significant finds.



This left us with a number of questions:

- How many of the seized objects came from the current war zones? From the information provided, more than 1,500 of the 3,561 objects recovered definitely did not come from war zones. How much of the remaining material also did not come from war zones, especially taking into consideration the fact that war zone material was the prime focus of this investigation/operation?
- The announcement of the operation's findings came two months after it concluded, yet Europol was able to say only that "several" of the objects seized were "of great cultural importance in the archaeological world". None of those it refers to or pictured appears to originate in war zones and were only seized in Greece.
- The photographs accompanying the official releases almost exclusively show low-value or worthless items, such as fragments, low-grade coins and spent bullet cases. Why have no items of any importance been displayed? Is it, as the Art Loss Register's James Ratcliffe asks in Apollo Magazine, to protect ongoing investigations? (See <http://goo.gl/Y6e5cT>).

Initially, we put these questions to Europol, which was able to supply some information, but added that it did not have access to much of the detail from each participating member state and suggested we contacted them directly.

Europol did tell IADAA that "every participating country had the choice to take up the most suitable measures for its situation and structure involving the respective authorities". It also supplied us with the following information":

- The Italian Police carried out checks on more than 100 art dealer/antique shops and 70 customs checks. As a result, about 30 paintings and drawings were seized.
- Belgium focused on checking export licences.
- Poland concentrated on border and customs checks but also controlled warehouses.
- Romania focused on the control of archaeological sites and reported the seizure of about 380 objects. The authorities there also confiscated several metal detectors.
- Bulgaria carried out hundreds of checks on art galleries and antique shops, as well as harbours and borders, which resulted in a reported seizure of 120 paintings and drawings, as well as about 850 archaeological objects.

Europol also told IADAA: **"At this stage, there is no indication that among the seized artefacts there are objects originating from Iraq or Syria."** But it added that investigations were ongoing.

Further investigations with individual states that took part met with a mixed response, with IADAA still awaiting responses from the UK and Switzerland, for instance. However, we have been able to draw up the following set of statistics:

Searches:

Total: 48,588 persons.

Of these:

- 39,624 (81.6%) took place in Bulgaria
- 1,279 (2.6%) took place in Greece
- 44 (0.09%) took place in Cyprus
- 100 (0.2%) dealers were searched in Italy

Total: 40,947 (84.3%)



The remaining 7,641 searches would have been conducted across the other 14 countries involved, but IADAA has no access to how they were distributed. However, as an average, it would be 546 people per country.

Additional searches: Total: 29,340 vehicles. Total: 50 ships

Arrests and seizures:

Total: 75 arrests

- 65 (86.7%) arrests were in Bulgaria, where 984 items were seized, none of which came from war zones
- 3 (4%) arrests were in Greece, where 4 items were seized, none of which came from war zones
- 1 (1.3%) arrest was in Poland, where 1,000 objects were seized, which were mainly spent bullets, rusted gun frames and low-value coins located using a metal detector locally. Much of the material dates back to WWII.

Total: 69 (92%)

The remaining 6 arrests would have been made across the other 14 countries involved, but IADAA has no access to how they were distributed.

Other seizures

No arrests were reported in the following countries where seizures were made. None of the seized items is reported as coming from war zones:

- 1,383 items in Cyprus
- 30 items in Italy
- 380 items in Romania
- 500 items in Spain
- 400 coins on the internet (countries unspecified)

Grand total of items seized: 4,681

This is 1120 more than the total reported by Europol. The discrepancy may be accounted for by the additional seizures not being works of art or cultural goods. For instance the mass of spent bullets seized in Poland. Europol declared that 3,561 works of art and cultural goods were seized.

Conclusions

From the evidence and reports supplied by those authorities that took part, we now know that although this was billed as a Europe-wide initiative, the overwhelming level of activity took place in Bulgaria, which accounted for over 80% of the people searched and all but ten arrests. Bulgaria also accounted for 984 of the items seized, none of which has been shown to be of any importance, and none of which came from a war zone.

The second highest known level of people searched – 1,279 – was in Greece, which accounted for 2.6% of the total. This led to 3 arrests and 4 items seized. These were part of an Ottoman tombstone, a relatively common and low-value 18th century icon depicting Saint George, and two Byzantine artefacts, of which no details are known.

The arrest of one man in Poland yielded 1,000 objects, but many were spent bullet cases and rusted rifle parts from WWII found locally using a metal detector.

Then there are the medieval Spanish coins stolen from a museum in Murcia.



We have not seen any evidence at all of artefacts of great importance and value, nor any evidence of looted or illegally exported artefacts from the Middle East, especially from Iraq or Syria.

If Operation Pandora has been as effective as Europol and its fellow authorities appear to have claimed in media reports, **then what it has shown is the distinct absence of looted material in Europe from Syria and Iraq.**

IADAA chairman Vincent Geerling commented: “This result is entirely in line with IADAA’s observations. In the past four years, not a single object coming from the conflict areas has been offered to any of our members. This operation raises more questions than it answers. From the information released by Europol, we were told that 3,561 cultural objects were seized over a week during a two-month operation that resulted in 75 arrests, nearly 50,000 people, 30,000 vehicles and 50 ships being searched.

“A further two months on from that, we discover that not a single item seized has been shown to have come from a current war zone – which was the focus of this operation.

Actually this is **very good news**; the Europol press release should have led to headlines in the press that reflected this positive result: **Operation Pandora was successful, contrary to what was expected, because it proved that the trafficking of cultural property from the conflict zones in Europe appears to be minimal.”**

The authorities have not named one single really important item recovered; and Europol’s claim that ‘several’ objects ‘are of great cultural importance in the archaeological world’ is not supported by the pictures released.

“Despite this, the European Union is even now conducting an extensive consultation exercise into restricting the movement of cultural objects from all countries further, when what the authorities need to be doing is focusing their efforts and resources on supporting source nations protect sensitive archaeological sites that are under serious threat from looters.”

“Now look at the findings of the War Crime Unit report for the Dutch National Police from September 2016, which concludes, among other things, that ‘Despite the lack of evidence for a large-scale illegal trade network benefitting IS, governments stress the importance of fighting this assumed vital source of income for IS’.

“It even goes as far as issuing a warning against over-reaction by law enforcement bodies, stating: ‘Based on this study it can be concluded that the topic is ‘hyped’. It is a strategic political topic that is presented bigger than it is in reality. Law enforcement agencies should be aware of this.’

“We do not dispute that looted antiquities may have funded ISIS’s operations to some degree. However, the evidence shows that the scale of the problem is minuscule compared to what is being claimed, and the authorities, especially in Europe and the US, are wasting time and vast resources on focusing on the wrong targets.”

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Operation Pandora official photographs



Poland



Greece

Operation Pandora official photographs



Spain



Internet?