

Berlin, 18. August 2021

Extent of damage

On the night from 14th to 15th July, heavy rain resulted in quickly rising water levels of a number of smaller rivers, e.g., the rivers Ahr and Erft, in the federal states of Rheinland-Pfalz and Nordrhein-Westfalen. Many villages and smaller towns situated at these rivers experienced flooding which surpassed the expected extreme high-water events (likelihood of once in 100-200 years). The floods caused massive damages to buildings, streets, but also vegetation alongside these rivers. In addition, many more houses experienced flooding of the basement and ground floor. Only for the Ahr valley alone, it is estimated that 17,000 people have lost their homes; 133 people have died and 766 were hurt (as reported by SWR on 13 August 2021¹). Since the catastrophe response is organised on the municipal and federal level, it will take more time to arrive at general numbers encompassing all the districts in both federal states.

With regard to damages to cultural property, the extent is still unclear as not one organisation or official institution is tasked to gather this information, including Blue Shield. We can say that the full spectrum of cultural property has been hit: archives, museums, libraries and monuments & sites (including churches). The last group is expected to show the worst damage as they could not be evacuated and are more susceptible to the second wave of damage, i.e., through demolitions or simply bad repairs. With this many livelihoods having been lost and insurance companies being more interested in saving costs (building new houses), privately owned monuments face a high risk of disappearing. At the moment, the monument protection agencies are cooperating with the emergency personnel to assess the situation and address these threats. Among the archive, museum or library collections, a few have been lost or were massively damaged. It also has to be noted that the few collections which were saved, all constitute public property. However, in these predominantly small towns, a number of private institutions and individuals owned archives which contained vital information about the regional history, but that were not included in the rescue efforts and are likely lost.

Action taken by the committee

As an introductory note, it has to be mentioned that Blue Shield Germany has tread very lightly around the area of activity related with emergency response for cultural heritage. This is due to the fact that there already are a few established actors, e.g., the emergency networks (*Notfallverbände*) for cultural property.

On this background, we first started out gathering information internally, with the intent to simply be informed about developments. We reviewed the news coverage and social media and listed those sites or institutions that had been hit by the floods. In addition, we checked with our Founding Four whether they had any information they might share with us. Together with ICOM Germany, we issued a call to museums in the affected regions to let us / ICOM know whether they might require help. There was only one direct response to this call, from the small museum "Haus der Schützen" in Bad Neuenahr – Ahrweiler. In

¹ Link to Website: <https://www.swr.de/swraktuell/rheinland-pfalz/flut-in-ahrweiler-so-gross-ist-der-schaden-104.html>

cooperation with the Museum Association Rheinland-Pfalz, we coordinated first aid for the priority objects of the museum's small collection, i.e., a historic book (1655) and several flags. For the latter, Blue Shield Germany provided funding to have it handed over to specialised textile conservators by means of a donation.

Only few days later, the Museum Association received the information that the museum collection of that same city, Bad Neuenahr – Ahrweiler, which was stored in an underground garage, had been entirely flooded. This call led to one of two major salvage operations of cultural property, the second being the city archive of Stolberg near Aachen. Formally, Blue Shield Germany was not involved in the operation; however, the previous contact with the Museums Association Rheinland-Pfalz kept the organisation in the shared e-mails about the situation and eventually resulted in Susann Harder (President of Blue Shield Germany) being brought in as Technical Advisor for Cultural Property on the side of the Federal Agency of Technical Relief. From 30 July to 2 August, the salvage operation was conducted in cooperation with many partners, including firefighters with specialised equipment from the city of Weimar, conservators, and many colleagues from German museums and especially the colleagues from the Historic Archive in Cologne who had also supported the operation in Stolberg.

Current situation

At present, we still continue to monitor the situation, focusing on monuments. In the coming weeks, the Committee will evaluate its involvement and enter into a lessons-learned process to prepare a process for the next disaster.

There seems to be a political will to review opportunities for formal partnerships for cultural heritage through which first aid efforts could be further supported in the event of emergencies. Blue Shield Germany has already signalled its willingness to become a partner in such an endeavour.

Lessons identified for the future

The most crucial issue for cultural property was the lack of consideration within the disaster response structure. The ability of the cultural sector to organise help and local / regional volunteers was key to the success of salvage operations. However, the regions hit the hardest, which were also most difficult to access, received outside help quite late. Having technical advisors be part of the formal disaster response structures would benefit cultural property enormously, as these would have access to restricted areas, could gather information and provide the link to support from outside the disaster zones based on the actual needs.

The experience clearly indicated that Blue Shield Germany should further expand its formal network of partners to a number of organisations and institutions that provided crucial support for relief efforts, particularly if we decide to become more active in this field. The field will remain diverse and "crowded" but this has been essential during this catastrophe because, at this point, the governmental structures provide help for cultural property are still very underdeveloped.

Conservators, conservators, conservators.



Fig. 1 (left):
Bronze bust belonging to the flooded museum collection of Bad Neuenahr-Ahrweiler

Fig. 2 (bottom):
Damaged flag from the museum “Haus der Schützen” in Bad Neuenahr-Ahrweiler which was salvaged with funding provided by Blue Shield Germany

