VANDALS
By Nicholas Roerich

Things are beginning to be chaotic and unsettled on this earth. The planet has never been very stable, but at the present moment, there would seem to be, according to the reports, a sort of whirlwind of destruction.

From Europe one of our friends writes: "To-day we saw a film, taken in Spain which showed the destruction caused by air raids over Barcelona. The effect was very depressing. Immense buildings were cut in two, as if by a knife; one of these was pulverised, the other still stood with all its rooms open to view and occupied, and one could see the corpses lying everywhere. There was a school which showed how scores of children had been slain, and, on the half-demolished platform, the dead body of the teacher. The Spanish Government has arranged an exhibition to show how artistic and historic treasures were destroyed, together with the measures adopted for their preservation. These consist of the exportation of transportable art treasures and the protection of the historic monuments by means of sand bags. No doubt you have also read the plan of 'Geneva Refuges' for children and aged people, all of which however is only a palliative. Not long ago, at a banquet of the Institute of Higher International Studies, it was agreed that our Pact would be preferable to such measures, because of its moral and cultural value. At the same time, everyone agreed that its eventual adversaries, whom we know by their actions in Spain, China and Ethiopia will not hesitate to violate the Pact or the general Convention of the Red Cross."

In Red Cross circles they are quite convinced of this. Thus humanity has, so far, deviated from the principles of culture and civilization that even the Red Cross is beginning to lose its significance.

And here is another letter. "All the strange discussions in matters of defence, which are going on to-day, having nothing in common with our Pact. We are speaking of an international cultural agreement on humanitarian lines while they speak of sand bags."

The idea of burying lofty cathedrals under sand bags is as absurd as to speak of abolishing the Red Cross and wrapping every soldier up in sand bags. The idea of burying national treasures, moreover, has a prehistoric flavour about it. Recently, one of the English ministers, Mr. Eden, foresaw that, in the future, terrified city folk might be obliged to flee to the caves and cellars like the troglodytes of old. Let the worldly-minded, then, adopt such primitive methods and bury their treasures.
All this, however, is so far from the spirit of our Pact that it would be a very easy matter to show our priority and the little value such measures have, when compared with a cult for the art treasures of all mankind.

Caricaturists could find matter in these methods, for they might depict a cathedral smothered up to the spires in sand bags, so as to illustrate the biblical warning: "Build not upon the sand."

If humanity is to abandon all its highest principles and stake all its hope on sand bags, then it has come to a very sorry pass.

Everything to-day justifies us and our friends in issuing a call to defend all national treasures. It is said that when the ostrich gets wind of danger it thrusts its head beneath its wing or in the sand. Natural history is full of such examples, and we might do worse than study the life of ants and bees who possess superb organization.

In every periodical we look at to-day we come across illustrations of barbarous destructions. Such documents will continue to live as a shameful witness of what has been done by the humanity of our times, although the whole of mankind is, of course, not necessarily engrossed in such destruction. But such acts are being perpetrated before the eyes of all and when we figure the percentage of those who raise their voices to protest, it is not overwhelming. In any street accident you will find four classes of people around you. Those who make a genuine effort to help; those who congregate from mere curiosity; others who draw off in fear and, finally, those who take a pleasure in the misfortune of others. And with vandalism it is all the same. Whether active or passive, they are the same uncultured destroyers. Toleration towards evil differs little from evils itself, and it is high time for humanity to give attention to the passive type of vandal. Before our eyes all kinds of destruction is going on, either from the bombs of totalitarian warfare or from human poisoning of one sort or another. It is a question which sort of poison is the more ruinous—that of poison gas, or that which aims at the destruction of culture. In the so-called peaceful communiies anti-cultural processes are now taking place, on a large scale, while people remain silent or crowds are divided as in the case of street accidents. At such times alas, the number of those who exert themselves on behalf of culture is extremely small, while the crowd of those who are curious or malignant takes on huge proportions.

All these curious or evil-minded people try to excuse their conduct, but they are unwilling to reflect that, in so doing, they range themselves alongside the vandals. All who evade joining in the defence of culture
enlist in the ranks of passive vandals. In passivity there is always a kind of activity, which can be very dreadful and repulsive with consequences that may bring about the disintegration of an entire nation. The passive vandal ought not to imagine that his silence has no effect. On the contrary history exposes not only the active vandal but also those who stood by idly and looked on while torture and destruction was being committed. How heartless, how cruel are all those who feign deafness and remain silent when they ought to cry out!

We have spoken of defending everything which helps on the evolution of the human race. Defence is one thing, but aggression is quite another. We have issued a call not to bury ourselves under sand bags but to counteract destruction through the power of thought, of culture. Traces of culture are being destroyed, obliterated and scattered abroad and, in allowing this, mankind has composed a page of history which will look very black in the future. The doings of such brutal destroyers and torturers will be recorded together with the fact that a vast portion of humanity connived and assisted in such vandalism.

There are many ways of participating in such crimes. One need not launch a bomb oneself from the airplane; there are also those who manufacture bombs and invent arms and engines of destruction. One can stand opposed to cultural undertakings and, destruction and distortion of constructive thoughts, bring on a condition of savagery.

From such premeditated schemes, the dispersal, dismemberment and annihilation of whole groups of accumulated treasures can arise. Everyone who by deed or thought contributes to such destruction must be included with the vandals and plays havoc with the human spirit.

Terrible deeds are going on in the world. Devastating wars are no longer known as wars. The most dire destruction goes by the name of 'change of policy' while the vandals strut round in new uniforms and trappings and look upon themselves as the arbiters of destiny. Does it matter which way man rushes to fratricide and self-destruction? Perhaps we shall have a new march composed some day for those who proceed towards criminal vandalism.

Yet there is this enormous majority of curious and malicious onlookers, this odious tertius gaudens, who fail to understand that they themselves are furthering all sorts of vandalism.

Toleration in participation is crime. Man must raise his voice against vandalism. It is horrible to witness that the heirs of Goethe and Schiller have become cruel vandals.