

ALEXANDRIA'S ASHES: WAR AND THE LOSS OF LIBRARIES

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At its Midwinter Meeting the following January, the Council of the American Library Association adopted a resolution condemning the destruction of the Bosnian

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Mehmedinoviæ reflected that his friend had been trying to fulfill “that passionate artistic desire of distilling wild beauty from the spectacle of death...” (1998, p. 46).

Some reactions took the form of poetic or artistic gestures. The Bosnian poet Goran Simiæ imagined that the books’ souls, not just their ashes, were carried into the air by the flames:

...Set free from the stacks, characters wandered the streets, mingling with passers-by and the souls of dead soldiers.

I saw Werther sitting on the ruined graveyard fence: I saw Quasimodo swinging one-handed from a minaret.....( Simiæ, 1997, p. 14)

And the English poet Ted Hughes wrote:

A Serbian Prof’s insanity

Commanding guns, to split the heart,  
His and his people's, tore apart  
The Sarajevo library (Hughes, 1997, p. 31).

In July 1994, Zubin Mehta and Jose Carreras joined the Sarajevo Symphony in a performance of Mozart's *Requiem* staged in the atrium of the ruined library building. The concert was broadcast worldwide as part of campaign to raise funds to aid the people of Bosnia (Music in the ruins, 1994, p. 44).

Did the destroyers intend to deprive the city of access to information or did they mean to break its heart?

#### WAR AND THE LOSS OF LIBRARIES: AN EXPLORATION OF THEMES

The destruction of the National Library of Bosnia was not an isolated instance. Periods of military conflict have wreaked devastation on libraries for as long as libraries have existed. For several notorious instances in which libraries were deliberately destroyed, considerable documentation exists in the form of testimony by witnesses and participants, contemporary chronicles, and secondary studies. This investigation of four such instances explores the meaning of these acts from the perspectives of those who lost libraries and those who destroyed them. An analysis of circumstances, statements, and actions is intended to reveal patterns that will help us understand the cultural and personal value of libraries as well as their inherent attraction and vulnerability during periods of war and political conflict. Three questions will be given particular attention: Why were these libraries selected as targets? How did those directly affected, as well as

international observers, characterize their loss? What do the answers to these questions tell us about the way people thought about these libraries?

This is not an investigation of book-burning. In these cases, no specific books but rather entire libraries were targeted. The libraries' fates were determined by who owned them and what uses—real and symbolic—they served. Three of these instances occurred in the twentieth century, one in the seventeenth century. In the earliest case, the library survived, but in different hands. The "*Biblioteca Palatina*," a superb collection gathered under the auspices of German Protestant princes, was removed to the Vatican as a trophy of war in 1623. The instances that occurred in the twentieth century involved massive destruction of library holdings and buildings. The library of the Catholic University of Louvain (Belgium) was burned by German troops in 1914 in reprisal against alleged civilian snipers. Jewish libraries in Vilna (Lithuania) were plundered under Nazi occupation. Their contents were sorted into two groups: books to be destroyed and books to be used for anti-Semitic "research." The National and University Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina, located in Sarajevo, was targeted by Bosnian Serbs then waging war against the independent state of Bosnia. The availability of ample source material—particularly of contemporary commentary—was the primary factor in the selection of these cases over others. This means, unfortunately, that this investigation is limited to a European perspective.

Each case is represented by two forms of evidence. First, there are accounts of the circumstances of the library's destruction based on research using secondary sources. The

second form of evidence is the reaction of contemporaries to the catastrophe—including reports in the press, statements of witnesses and participants, and comments of outside observers. Historical sources were evaluated for internal validity—their documentation, consistency, and reasoning. In addition, all sources were assessed for external validity: their interest in the case, the likelihood of their knowing the truth, and their willingness to tell the truth. In a number of instances, the most telling observations are biased ones, and they are identified as such.

In order to set these examples in context, this chapter will discuss the historical scope of the devastation of libraries in war, legal and ethical arguments for the protection of libraries and other cultural property, and the great ur-myth of the library in flames: the burning of library at Alexandria.

### *THE “COMPLAINT OF BOOKS AGAINST WAR”*

“Endless are the losses inflicted on the race of books by the tumults of war” wrote the English bibliophile Richard de Bury in his *Philobiblon* in 1345 (Bury, 1345/1948, p. 45).

The devastation of books and libraries in twentieth-century wars alone is beyond calculation. While not forgetting the millions of lives lost, World War II also witnessed the worst catastrophe ever to befall libraries and their contents. Thousands of libraries, large and small, were destroyed or damaged. Germany lost an estimated eight million volumes, more than half the holdings of its major libraries (Johnson, 1973, p. 211). The war’s toll on Soviet libraries is estimated at 100 million volumes (van der Hoeven and

Albada, 1996, p. 14). Nowhere was the devastation more complete than in Poland. At the close of the war, a Polish librarian wrote "...on the whole, Poland is a country without archives, libraries, scientific books, textbooks for schools, Polish and foreign literature, fiction and poetry" (Bilinska, 1946, p. 1022).

World War II was unfortunately not a unique occurrence. There have been enormous losses of libraries and library collections in other wars and conflicts of the last hundred years. In Romania, pro-government security forces barricaded themselves in the Central University Library during the "Christmas Revolution" of 1989, eventually setting fire to the building and destroying 500,000 books (Kniffel, 1990, p. 180). In Cambodia, the period of Khmer Rouge ascendancy from 1975-1979 saw the closing of the National Library, the scattering of its collections, and the disappearance of most members of the library staff (Jarvis, 1995, pp. 391-392). Libraries in Nigeria were devastated during the civil war of the late 1960s (Anyakoha, 1979). During China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution launched in 1966, all libraries were closed for periods of time, while millions of rare books were burned or sent to paper mills for recycling (Ting, 1983, p. 147). During Iraq's occupation of Kuwait in 1990, the entire collection of Kuwait's central library was removed to Iraq, although most, but not all items have been recovered (Abdel-Motey & Al Hmood, 1992, p. 443). The library of the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium was burned by German troops in the early days of World War I, rebuilt between the wars with American money, and destroyed a second time by German forces in 1940.

Hammit (1945) concluded that most wartime devastation of libraries has happened not because libraries themselves were targeted, but because war creates conditions that are violent and chaotic:

...the damage seems rather to be due to the indiscriminate use of fire as a weapon of war, to the incidental program of pillage, destruction, and mob license, and to the ravages of disuse and neglect consequent upon an invasion (p. 307).

The great majority of the libraries lost in World War II were victims of aerial bombardment (Shaffer, 1946; van der Hoeven and Albada, 1996). In military terms their destruction represented “collateral damage”; i.e., damage inflicted on unintended targets “caused by the spillover of weapons aimed at a nearby military target” (Luttwak and Koehl, 1991, p. 128).

In many cases, the purely material side of books explains their destruction. Fire is an enemy of documents made of paper or papyrus. When a city burns, whether the fires are set by carpet bombing from the air or by mounted warriors carrying torches, its libraries are doomed. If not burned, libraries might be pillaged for scarce or valuable materials. Mongol invaders who sacked Baghdad in 1258 found a source of shoe leather in the bindings of books from the city’s famous libraries (Lerner, 1998, p. 79). During World War II, paper became so scarce that hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of books plundered from libraries were sent to paper mills for recycling (Borin, 1993; Collins & Rothfelder, 1983).

-75).

In this case, books served as protection against real rather than intellectual broadsides.

Even more than the circumstance of their material makeup, the circumstance of their location has spelled the end for libraries in times of war. The association of libraries with the privileged and the powerful has put them in palaces, temples, monasteries, and political capitals. There they are in harm's way when power changes hands. Great collections suffered or perished when armies sacked Ninevah in 612 BCE (Roux, 1980, p. 347), Baghdad in 1258 (Lerner, 1998, p. 79), and Peking in 1900 (Davis & Huanwen, 1997), to name only a few instances.

In many cases, though, libraries have been destroyed because they were libraries-- because they preserved the memory of a hated past or embodied the culture of a hated group. They have been confiscated or captured by belligerents seeking to gain control over a collection of authoritative or sacred writings. Libraries are highly convenient

targets—the representations of an entire world or culture, conveniently stored in one location:

As repositories of history or sources for the future, as guides or manuals for difficult times, as symbols of authority past or present, the books in a library stand for more than their collective contents and have, since the beginning of the written word, been threatened with destruction (Manguel, 1999, p. 36).

#### LIBRARIES AS CULTURAL PROPERTY

In international law, libraries are considered a form of cultural property, subject to special protections in war. The notion that armies should spare the cultural relics of their enemies emerged during the Enlightenment, notably in Emheric de Vattel's treatise, *The Law of Nations*, which stated:

For whatever cause a country is ravaged, we ought to spare those edifices which do honor to human society.... It is declaring oneself an enemy to mankind, thus wantonly to deprive them of these monuments of art (Kaye, 1997, p. 101).

Conventions signed in the Hague in 1899 and 1907 and in Washington in 1935 committed participating nations to respect cultural property in their conduct of war.

Following World War II, during which these conventions were ignored and flouted to an extreme degree, the need for a new code was recognized. The current operative protection, the Hague Convention of 1954, defines cultural property as

movable or immovable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people, such as monuments of architecture, art or history, whether religious or secular; archaeological sites; groups of buildings which, as a whole, are of historical or artistic interest; works of art; manuscripts, books and other objects of artistic, historical or archaeological interest; as well as scientific collections and important collections of books or archives or of reproductions of the property defined above...

(Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, 1954, cited in Merryman & Elsen, 1987, p. 29).

The Convention's Preamble expresses the view that damage to the cultural heritage is a loss to the human community as a whole:

Being convinced that damage to cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind, since each people makes its contribution to the culture of the world... (cited in Merryman & Elsen, p. 28.)

A later formulation, added to the Geneva Conventions in 1977, laid greater stress on the connection of cultural property to the identity of a particular group. In this view, culture provides a link between a people and their past, the loss of which can be devastating (Detling, 1993, p. 50).

A debate over reparations at the close of World War II reveals changing attitudes about the appropriation of cultural property. It was widely agreed that Germany, Italy and their allies should return cultural treasures looted from occupied countries, as long as those treasures still existed. However, countless irreplaceable items had been lost or destroyed. Some of the victors, including the United States, demanded that, in these cases, the defeated powers should surrender similar objects from their own national collections. Opponents objected that this policy would deprive the defeated nations of the very foundations required for their rehabilitation: "You cannot strip a people of the

best of its cultural heritage and expect it to recover its moral and political balance (Boswell, 1947, as cited in Merryman & Elsen, 1987, p. 42). They also argued that nothing would be more likely to plant the seeds of future conflict: "...in a hundred years the fate of a thousand factories will be forgotten but not the seizure of a single treasured relic (Rigby, 1944, p. 284). Rigby and others proposed a "new Western tradition" based on the belief that forcible transfer of cultural treasure—even as reparations—was morally repugnant.

There appears to be a fatal flaw in these humanitarian efforts to protect cultural property from the depredations of war. If cultural objects deserve protection because they are central to the identity of a people, then the enemies of a people have a strong motivation to steal or destroy their culture. Trevor-Roper (1970) writes that art, to the extent that it serves a social or political purpose, is an inevitable military target.

#### Opponents

will seek to destroy this aesthetic arm of the enemy...or...they will try to neutralize, to sterilize it, by separating it from its living context. Equally, if art gives an aura of prestige to a city or a dynasty, rival cities or dynasties which set out to conquer and humble them, will seek also to destroy their "myth" be depriving them of this aura and appropriating it to themselves... (p. 7).

#### ALEXANDRIA'S ASHES

The image of a library in flames has played a persistent and potent role in the Western imagination. Canfora observed that "The history of ancient libraries often ends in

flames” (1989, p. 191). By this he meant that many historians appear to have “invented” tales of the destruction of libraries by fire. Canfora suggests that these legends may be based on factual instances of the destruction of libraries by fire, as when invaders burned ancient Near-Eastern palace libraries or Christian authorities systematically burned pagan libraries (pp. 191-192). For centuries, the prototypical image of a library in flames is that of the great library at Alexandria. The image is no less powerful for being based on legend and speculation.

Unless new evidence is unearthed, it is unlikely that we will ever know exactly how or when the peerless collection of texts assembled by the Ptolemies was lost. The royal district of Alexandria, with its fabled Museum and library, suffered neglect, earthquake, riots, and war in late antiquity. Any or all of these may have contributed to the destruction and scattering of the library. It is likely, however, that the collection was consumed by fire at some point—quite possibly in 295 CE when Diocletian stormed and sacked the city (Delia, 1992, p. 1453; El-Abbadi, 1990, p. 158).

Stories of the library’s cataclysmic burning have been told for centuries. In some versions, the villain is Julius Caesar, who may have, but probably did not, accidentally set the library ablaze when he burned Pompey’s fleet in the harbor during the Civil War of 48-47 BCE (Canfora, 1989, p. 70; Delia, 1992, pp. 1460-1462). A second tradition sets the catastrophe three centuries later, when Bishop Theophilus incited a Christian mob to cleanse the Serapeum—the location of the “daughter” library--of all pagan works (El-Abbadi, 1990, p. 161).

A third version—originating in the Arab world and later popular in the West—lays responsibility upon Caliph Umar, who is said to have ordered the library’s destruction following his army’s conquest of Alexandria in 642 CE. According to this legend, when Umar was asked to decide the library’s fate, he pronounced that all books conforming with the Holy Qur’ân were unnecessary while all books contradicting it were undesirable. Thus the fabled scrolls were said to be put to the flames—as fuel for Alexandria’s public baths (Delia, 1992, p. 1465). Thiem, who has explored the mythologization of the destruction of the great library, observes that the burning may be blamed on pagan Caesar, Christian Theophilus, or Muslim Umar depending on one’s cultural desires (1979, p. 509).

In Western thought, the loss of the Alexandrian library recurs as a symbol of lost knowledge and of the crime of vandalism. No one envisioned the burning of the great library more vividly than Richard de Bury, who held it a crime even worse than the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter or Iphigenia:

Who would not shudder at so unholy a burnt offering, where ink is offered up in place of blood, where the flowing ashes of crackling parchment were dyed red with blood, where the devouring flame consumed so many thousands of innocents in whose mouths guile was not found, and where the unsparing fire turned into foul ashes so many receptacles of eternal truth! (Bury, 1345/1948, p. 43)

The true horror lay in what was lost. Richard imagined that all the learning and occult knowledge of the ancients had perished in those flames: “what the first Adam taught his

sons... the magic arts of Moses... the oracles of Apollo, ... and endless other secrets of  
-44).

Although not so great as Richard thought, the irrecoverable loss of works from the great library is real enough. The myth of the library's burning has associated a real loss of knowledge with an imagined crime against civilization—perhaps *the* crime against civilization. The persistence of this myth shows no sign of lessening. Throughout the twentieth century, from the destruction of the library of the Catholic University of Louvain in 1914 to the burning of the Bosnian National Library in 1992, the loss of the library at Alexandria has served as the great example of the catastrophes that befall libraries (see, for example, Cunningham, 1992, and Grondys, 1916).

## **The Captured Library: The Plunder of the Biblioteca Palatina of Heidelberg during the Thirty Years War**

*“...the conqueror displays a weakness for libraries which other hands have accumulated and preserved.”*

--Chaim Kaplan, diarist of the Warsaw Ghetto (cited in Shavit, 1997, p. 58)

When armies occupy a city or countryside, desirable things change hands. The collection of booty is a tradition of war that persists despite being outlawed and morally condemned—Greenfield refers to the practice as “ancient, timeless, and pandemic” (1997, p. 34). In the past, capturing the cultural treasures of a defeated enemy had typically been regarded as an accomplishment, not a crime. Sargon II of Assyria boasted of the prizes of war gained when he captured Samaria in 721 BCE:

I clashed with them in the power of the great gods, my lords, and counted as spoil 27,280 people, together with their chariots...and the gods in whom they trusted (Thomas, 1958, p. 60).

Victorious Roman generals displayed their booty in triumphal processions (Greenfield, 1997, pp. 34-35). Hoards of gold vessels and jewelry, statues of gods, masterpieces of painting and sculpture, sacred or precious books—these trophies of war, these cultural objects “have always represented the crowning symbols of victory” (Rigby, 1944, p. 274).

A great many commanders of armies have been collectors. The ancient Romans, Napoleon, and Hitler, to name the most rapacious, combined conquest with treasure-hunting. When the conqueror is a bibliophile, library collections represent treasure stores

perhaps valued for their rarity,  
as well as “rituals”, the possession of which might aid in warding off evil or  
guaranteeing the well-being of the king.

The Thirty Years War (1618-1648) fell at a time when a Renaissance  
culture of collecting had possessed the secular and ecclesiastical princes of  
Europe. A “doctrine of magnificence” expounded by Italian humanists called for  
the collection of rare, costly, and splendid objects: bronzes, paintings, tapestries,  
and books. Indeed, the prestige of the prince depended on the possession of  
magnificent collections (Kauffman, 1994, pp. 139-140).

The building of rich library collections was one aspect of this doctrine. The Popes  
Nicholas V, Sixtus IV and Gregory XV sought to create an impressive Vatican library for

the glory of the Church (Mycue, 1981, p. 122). France's Cardinal Mazarin employed the great librarian Gabriel Naudé to build a great library for the glory of France and of Mazarin (Chartier, 1993, pp. 38-39).

For Protestant princes, the possession of a handsome library was a necessary attribute. At the outbreak of the Thirty Years War, the greatest collection of precious books in Europe was in Heidelberg, the capital of the German state of Palatine (Trevor-Roper, 1970, p. 22). Although it was available to the scholars of the University of Heidelberg and to the public at large, the library was under the protection of the sitting Elector, or ruler of the Palatine. Early bibliophile Electors enriched the collection with donations, including materials that changed hands in times of civil strife. Important acquisitions included rare Hebrew manuscripts confiscated from Jews in the fourteenth century and spoils of monastic libraries broken up during the Reformation (Greenfield, 1995, p. 240; Koch, 1929, p. 33). The library's greatest patron was Ottheinrich, a bibliophile and zealous Protestant who collected theological works for use as anti-Catholic propaganda (Mittler, 1996, p. 338). By the early seventeenth century, this library contained about 3,500 manuscript books and an important collection of incunabula. The collection drew scholars from abroad and brought prestige to Heidelberg (Mittler, 1996, p. 346).

In the early years of the Thirty Years War, this great Protestant library became the object of machinations by three powerful Catholics: the Emperor, the Pope, and Duke Maximilian I of Bavaria. The city of Heidelberg had become vulnerable following the defeat of its former Elector, the Protestant Friedrich V. Friedrich's Catholic opponents began to position themselves to take control of the city's book treasure under the guise of protecting the collection from the depredations of war. Emperor Ferdinand II asked

Field Marshall Johann von Tilly, the commander of the Catholic League army, to secure the Heidelberg library for him. Tilly was unable to oblige the Emperor, for he was loyal to Maximilian of Bavaria, who expected that the library would come to him. In the end, both Maximilian and Ferdinand were disappointed. Pope Gregory XV, who had provided enormous sums to support Catholic armies, asked for the Heidelberg library as repayment. Maximilian graciously yielded, announcing that he would send the library to the Pope as a war trophy and as a “token of my most obedient affection” (Mittler, 1996, p. 351).

Not long after Heidelberg fell to Tilly’s army in September 1622, Pope Gregory sent the Greek scholar Leone Allaci to oversee the transfer of the library to Rome. The Pope, a great lover of books, ordered Allaci to keep the collection as intact as possible. Allaci chose all the manuscript books and the finest of the printed ones. Although most had their bindings removed to lighten the load, unusually fine bindings were spared. Ironically, some of most beautiful bindings bore the portrait of Ottheinrich the arch-Protestant.

On February 14, 1623, when sorting and selection were complete, Allaci’s men began to remove the books from the church where they had been shelved for centuries. The people of Heidelberg attempted to block the removal of their famous library, but they were unsuccessful (Mittler, 1986, p. 352; Trevor-Roper, 1970, p. 26).

The spoils were sent in 50 wagons to Munich, Duke Maximilian’s capital. There, each volume received a bookplate commemorating Maximilian’s gift to the Pope. The book plates bear Maximilian’s arms and a Latin text that reads:

“I am from the library which from captured Heidelberg was made a spoil and sent as a trophy to Pope Gregory XV.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Sum de Bibliotheca, quam Heidelberg capta, Spolium fecit, & P.M. Gregorio XV. trophaem misit. Maximilianus Utriusq; Bauariae Dux &c S.R.I. Archidapifer et Princeps Elector. (Author’s translation.)

In Munich the library was repacked and shipped over the Alps by mule train to Rome. Like any good gift recipient, the Pope sent a thank-you note to Maximilian. He gloated that the most important Protestant library had been wrested from the “sacrilegious heretics” and was now in the hands of the Church. The capture of the library was significant on several levels. Possession of such a collection of rare and beautiful books conferred prestige on its owners. According to the Renaissance “doctrine of magnificence,” the political status of the Vatican would be enhanced by ownership of splendid objects such as the books of the Palatine library (Kauffman, 1994). Moreover, the acquisition of the library was seen as a *coup* for the Counter-Reformation. The library’s theological holdings could serve as the basis for new editions of authoritative writings, such as those of the Church Fathers. These editions could be used in the propaganda war against the Protestants. One of the books possessed an almost totemic value: a copy of the Bible thought to have been owned by Saint Paul (Mittler, 1996, p. 353). To have wrested such a treasure from the hands of “heretics” was a triumph for the Catholic cause.

After a laborious journey over the Alps, the Biblioteca Palatina reached Rome on August 9, 1623. Pope Gregory was not there to take possession of his precious gift, having died two days earlier (Mittler, 1986, p 352). This collection was added to the Vatican library and renamed the “Biblioteca Palatina” in reference to its origins in the Palatine. There is an ironic twist in the story of the Palatina’s fate. In 1689 and 1693, fires heavily damaged the structure in Heidelberg where the great library had been housed. If the books had not been carried off to Rome, it is unlikely that they would have survived (Mittler, 1986, p. 353).

Two centuries later, parts of the Palatina were again seized as war booty. This time the conqueror was Napoleon, who looted the cultural treasures of Italy, including those of the Vatican, in order to enrich French national collections. After Napoleon's defeat, both the Vatican and Heidelberg claimed the plundered books. All told, except for 38 manuscripts determined to be of primarily German interest, the books were returned to Rome, where they remain today (Greenfield, 1995, p. 240).

Protestant rulers and military commanders were no less guilty than their Catholic counterparts of looting libraries during the tremendous upheaval of the Thirty Years War. King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden plundered cultural treasures on a grand scale, including the libraries of Würzburg University and the University of Mainz. Unfortunately, the latter collection was lost at sea while being shipped to Sweden. Gustavus Adolphus's daughter, who succeeded him as Queen Christina, was equally rapacious. In 1648, as the war was ending, she ordered her army to sack Prague and capture the Emperor's art collection and library. She wrote to her commander: "Take good care to send me the library and the works of art that are there: for you know that they are the only things for which I care" (cited in Trevor-Roper, 1970, p. 45). The Imperial library, along with paintings, sculpture, and a lion from the Emperor's menagerie were seized and sent to Stockholm to enrich the royal collections there. Eventually, some of the books looted by Christina's armies joined those from Heidelberg in the Vatican. In 1654, Christina abdicated, converted to Catholicism, and moved to Rome, taking her treasures along. After her death, many of her books eventually joined those of the Palatina on the shelves of the Vatican library (Trevor-Roper, 1970, p. 50).



*under foot, life itself seems to lose all value” (Grondys, 1916, p. 38).*

As German troops pushed their way through Belgium toward France in August 1914, their mistreatment of civilians provoked outrage among Germany’s military opponents and among neutrals. Witnesses reported massacres, the burning and looting of houses, and rapes (Bryce et. al., 1915). These atrocities fueled an enormous anti-German propaganda campaign to the Allies’ advantage, particularly in Britain. The language of this campaign was strongly colored by one particular crime: the burning of the “famous” and “ancient” library of the Catholic University of Louvain. As library-burners, among their other alleged crimes, the Germans were branded “HUNs,” “Vandals,” and enemies of civilization.

Louvain (also known as Leuven) had the image of an “ancient” town. It was graced by fine fifteenth-century architecture. An important medieval university had flourished there--the great humanist Erasmus had been in residence in the early sixteenth century, until the dangerous atmosphere of the Reformation drove him to Basel (Bainton, 1969, pp. 167-168). The old university was closed following the French Revolution, to be succeeded in the nineteenth century by a new institution, the Catholic University of Louvain (Koch, 1917, p. 12). This university’s library, housed in the city’s former Cloth Workers’ Hall, held more than 300,000 volumes, including 1,000 incunabula and

hundreds of manuscript books that had been part of the collection of the previous university (Delsemme, 1969, p. 310; Koch, 1919, p. 26).

Troops of the German Ninth Reserve Corps marched into Louvain on August 19, 1914. According to reports, townspeople felt terrorized by the occupying troops. Witnesses later recounted that the German soldiers seemed jumpy and liable to panic whenever shots were fired by their own men (Horne, 1923, p. 161). By many accounts, German troops were obsessed with the danger of Belgian “*franc-tireurs*” (freeshooters)—irregular marksmen who took aim at Germans from hiding places. The Belgian government denied the existence of *franc-tireurs*, and post-war investigations uncovered little evidence to support the Germans’ claim (Derez, 1996; Horne, 1923).

There were instances of harassment of civilians, particularly Catholic clergy (Grondys, 1916, p. 26). Pre-war propaganda in Germany had a strongly anti-Catholic tone. A popular novel had depicted Belgian priests as militant fanatics and reports in the press gave the false impression that the University of Louvain was a spawning ground of Bolshevism (Derez, 1996, p. 619; Thorold, 1984, p. 128).

Violence erupted on the night of August 25. Following a skirmish outside the town, a German unit had fallen back on Louvain. In the confusion, apparently some of the German troops inside the town exchanged fire with the men of the retreating unit. However, the soldiers blamed the shooting on Belgian *franc-tireurs*. It is still debated whether what came next was essentially a riot by maddened troops or a planned campaign of terror ordered by the German high command. The evidence points to at least some degree of orchestration. Louvain—a center of culture and of clericalism—was to

be a lesson to the Belgians of the price of resistance (Bryce et. al., 1915; Derez, 1996; Whitlock, 1919).

Late that night townspeople, ordered to remain indoors on pain of being shot, saw “the heavens redden with a dreadful light” (Horne, 1923, p. 152). Soldiers had simultaneously set fire to several parts of the town, including the old market district where the university was located. A priest later remembered warning a German officer that the building he was about to set ablaze was the university’s famous library.

According to the witness, the officer replied, “*Es is Befehl*” (it is ordered) (Horne, 1923, p. 163).

Brothers from the monastery at Parc watched the city burn from afar. At 2:00 a.m., an enormous column of fire lit up the sky, throwing off “brilliant sparks.” They believed that they were witnessing the moment when the flames reached the library’s treasure-store: these were “the incunabula, the precious ‘Livres d’heures,’ the rare manuscripts of the early Middle Ages, just discovered, which were burning.” (Grondys, 1923, p. 46).

L.H. Grondys, a citizen of the Netherlands who was independently investigating reports of German atrocities, walked through the central city the following morning. Fire was still spreading as he noted that the “ancient library of the University,” one of the first buildings to burn, was already in ruins. He later reflected:

At such moments, when chaos appears to reign, and when one sees the most precious and rarest objects, the heritage of centuries, trodden under foot, life itself seems to lose all value (Grondys, 1916, p. 38).

For three days, German troops vented their rage, burning and looting hundreds of houses and a number of historic public buildings. All told, 209 civilians were shot or burned to

death; many others were taken away as prisoners of war or fled as refugees (Horne, 1923, p. 157; Derez, 1996, p. 615).

The lost library instantly became the symbol of a civilization threatened by “barbarians” (Derez, 1996, p. 622). In the international outcry that followed the “Sack of Louvain,” the Germans were repeatedly identified with the “Saracens” who “burned” the library at Alexandria and the northern “hordes” who sacked Rome in late antiquity. There are also echoes of Alexandria in references to the “ancient” library and its irreplaceable holdings, especially manuscripts, manuscript books and incunabula (see, for example, *The Burning of Louvain*, 1914; *Louvain in Ashes*, 1914; and *The Sack of Louvain*, 1914).

The story of the execution of the Jesuit Robert Dupierreux was widely retold. According to witnesses, he was one of a group of priests rounded up by a German guard-unit near the village of Tervueren. When the soldiers searched Dupierreux’s baggage they found a diary containing the following comments:

When formerly I read that the Huns under Attila had devastated towns, and that the Arabs had burnt the Library of Alexandria, I smiled. Now that I have seen with my own eyes the hordes of to-day, burning churches and the celebrated Library of Louvain, I smile no longer.

The German lieutenant pronounced this “an incitement to murder,” and had Père Dupierreux executed on the spot (Grondys, 1923, p. 69).

King Albert of Belgium is quoted as telling the French ambassador, “These people are envious, unbalanced and ill-tempered. They burned the library of Louvain simply because it was unique and universally admired” (Thorold, 1984, p. 130). His remarks are reminiscent of what has long been said of the “barbarians” who sacked Rome--that they destroyed great works out of envy and hatred of civilization.

One week after the Louvain catastrophe, the *Times* of London printed Rudyard Kipling's response in verse, a patriotic hymn called "For All We Have and Are." The poet pictures a stark world stripped of all the delights of civilization by the wanton "Huns":

For all we have and are  
For all our children's fate,  
Stand up and meet the war.  
The Hun is at the gate!  
Our world has passed away  
In wantonness o'erthrown.  
There is nothing left to-day  
But steel and fire and stone.  
...  
Comfort, content delight--  
The ages' slow-bought gain  
They shrivelled in a night,  
Only ourselves remain  
To face the naked days  
In silent fortitude  
Through perils and dismays  
Renewed and re-renewed.  
... (Kipling, 1914, p. 9)

Arthur Evans, President of Britain's Society of Antiquaries, called the burning of Louvain a "sin against history and against posterity" and demanded German reparations: "Such a toll should be taken of the German libraries as shall more than make good the losses of Louvain, Liège, or other Belgian homes of learning" (Sack of Louvain, 1914, p. 12). Academic communities in neutral and Allied countries expressed solidarity with the Catholic University of Louvain. The Senate of the National University of Ireland passed a resolution offering "its deep sympathy on the calamity which has befallen it--a calamity without parallel in history since the destruction of the Library of Alexandria (The Burning of Louvain, 1914, p. 9).

Some publicly objected to so much grief and outrage over buildings and books. One A.J. Dawe, an English citizen caught up in the German advance through Belgium, sent the *Times* of London an “eye-witness” account of the atrocities in and around Louvain: “Human decency and pity prevent one from giving a detailed description of the forms of death we saw around us,” he wrote. After witnessing such horrors, Dawe found little time to mourn the loss of cultural treasures: “Let English people who sit safely on their island and talk of the barbaric destruction of works of art think less of the works of art and more of the human life that has been ruthlessly destroyed” (Crime of Louvain, 1914, p. 4).

In Germany the government and the press maintained that the citizens of Louvain had brought retribution on their own heads by harboring “*franc-tireurs*” and by employing other “uncivilized” tactics. Newspaper accounts reported that priests had distributed ammunition to civilians and that the “devilish” Louvain women had poured boiling oil on the invaders. “Lovers of art may grieve,” explained a report in the newspaper *Vossische Zeitung*, “but there was no other way of punishing this population” (German Excuses, 1914, p. 7). A group of 93 German intellectuals, including the physicist Max Planck, signed a manifesto that defended Germany’s soldiers as the protectors, not the destroyers, of culture (Derez, 1996, p. 622).

After the war, Germany was not allowed to forget the burning of the Louvain library. Article 247 of the Treaty of Versailles took the unusual step of dictating that Germany make reparations in kind—including manuscript books and incunabula-- from its own libraries (Simpson, 1997, Appendix 4, p. 201). German reparations, together with donations of cash and books from libraries worldwide, provided for a new library

collection. A new library building, funded by American gifts and designed by the vigorously pro-war architect Whitney Warren, was dedicated with much pomp on July 4, 1928. Warren's design called for an inscription on the library's balustrade reading *Furore Teutonica Diruta, Dono Americano Restituta*" (destroyed by German fury; restored by American generosity). The Rector of the University vetoed the inscription as "barbarous and unworthy" (Stubbings, 1993, p. 429). Warren did not completely give up. During the dedication, an airplane bombarded the crowd with green slips of paper bearing the banned words (Dedication, 1928, p. 664).

The inscription, and the cultural insult that it implied, continued to exist in the minds of Germans if not in the stone of the new library building. On May 16, 1940, as German troops again occupied Louvain, the rebuilt library was gutted by fire. An investigation later concluded that the fire was probably caused by shelling ordered by a German officer in retaliation for the message of the inscription "*Furore Teutonica Diruta.*" A Belgian civilian reported that the officer could not be convinced that the inscription had never been installed on the building (Thone, 1944, pp. 34-35.) Little of the building or its contents survived the second fire (Vanderheijden, 1947, p. 636). Ironically, many of the items lost were those taken from German collections as reparations for the 1914 destruction of the library--volumes from Germany were still arriving in Louvain as war broke out in 1939 (Shaffer, 1946, p. 82).

The international outcry that followed the 1914 burning was not repeated in 1940. The military situation of the Allies was grave in mid-May, 1940. Germany's armies had crushed their opposition in France and the Low Countries and stood poised to push toward the Channel. These events undoubtedly overshadowed the loss of an academic

library. Yet the very gravity of the war news led to the use, once again, of the burned library as a symbol of threatened civilization. An unsigned editorial in the New York Times asked, “Do books matter when civilization itself is at stake

The writer declared that those who burned the library in 1914 “had no more use for liberal culture than their successors have today. The editorial concluded by invoking the age-old story of the fire at Alexandria as an exemplar of the wanton destruction of civilization:

The enemies of books—and of all free and tolerant thought—had their day when the library at Alexandria was burned ages ago. They have had their days since. But we must have faith that they do not finally conquer (Again—Louvain, 1940, p. 22).

The library and its collections were eventually rebuilt a second time, although without the martial overtones or controversy that marked the dedication of the 1928 structure. The rebuilding of the library in the 1920s had served as an occasion for America to assert itself as a patron of culture. The Catholic University of Louvain itself gained cultural status in the aftermath of its ordeal in the two world wars. In 1909 the University celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In 1927 it celebrated its 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary—by associating itself with the medieval University of Louvain, although the latter was in fact a different institution altogether (Derez, 1996, p. 628). The attention focused on the university’s loss of its “ancient” library—burned as ancient Alexandria was burned—appears to have enabled this nineteenth-century institution to recast itself as an ancient and venerable school.



## “We Were Their Last Readers”: The Destruction and Plunder of Jewish Books in the Vilna Ghetto

*The book has kept faith with us, let us keep faith with the book.*

(Slogan of the Vilna ghetto library; Shavit, 1996, p. 103).

In 1946 Kenneth Shaffer, Executive Director of the American Books Center for War Devastated Libraries, published a brief account of the toll taken on libraries by World War II. Shaffer wrote that the war had been “precisely tailored” for the destruction of books and libraries. Its global scale, the size and mobility of its armies, and the extensive use of aerial bombardment all contributed to the loss of books on a scale not seen before or since. Yet Shaffer considered another factor even more significant: that this was a “war to destroy cultures.” Because the conflict was based in ideology, books and libraries represented military targets:

Books are not only the evidence but the very instruments of competing cultures, and as such they became not only weapons to wage war but also the enemy to be tapped for obliteration (1946, p. 83).

During the war, Lemkin (1944) coined the term “genocide” to refer to the policies of Germany’s National Socialist (Nazi) government toward Jews, Slavic peoples, and other targeted ethnic groups. He defined genocide as “a coordinated plan of different actions aimed at the destruction of the essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves” (p. 79). Lemkin documented examples of “cultural techniques of genocide,” which included rigid control of all cultural activities



Jewish libraries were not always targeted for annihilation, though. Nazi ideologists valued some of the materials they contained—as documentation that could be used to further anti-Semitic “research.” In order to exploit Jewish writings for anti-Jewish purposes, those writings had to be saved from the chaos and violence that the Reich itself was causing. Thus, as the *Cristall Nacht pogroms* of November 1938 were being planned, police were ordered to confiscate Jewish archives, so that they would not be destroyed in the impending riots (Friedman, 1957, p. 7).

After the war began, the Reich set up a bureaucracy for dealing with cultural property confiscated in the occupied countries. In France, Belgium, the Netherlands and other Western countries, most of the plundered property had belonged to Jewish or Masonic individuals or organizations. In Eastern Europe, the confiscations were all-encompassing. On September 12, 1939, Reichsmarshall Hermann Göring announced that the Reich was confiscating the entire property of Poland (Shaffer, 1946, p. 85).

The principal agency set up for evaluating and appropriating cultural property was the *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg* (special task force Reichleader Rosenberg), commonly known as the E.R.R. Founded in behalf of anti-Semitic ideologist Alfred Rosenberg, the E.R.R. was initially charged with gathering materials for Rosenberg’s “Institute for Research into the Jewish Question” at Frankfurt-am-Main. An article about the Institute published in the *Illustrierter Beobachter* for April 30, 1942, carried the headline, “For the First Time in History: Research on the Jews without Jews.” The article stated that the work of the Institute would finally reveal the truth about the “special national position” of Germany’s Jews (Starr, 1950, p. 34). According to Starr, the research program “was designed to concentrate staggering facilities for the

investigation of the Jewish past and present. It is...largely to this bizarre program that we owe credit, in the grim sense, for the survival of portions of Jewish cultural property in central Europe (1950, p. 28).

The institute received Jewish books and archives confiscated within Germany before the war (Weinreich, 1946, p. 97-99). After 1939, the E.R.R. seized hundreds of thousands of books and documents from Jewish institutions and private libraries in occupied countries. Eventually, the scope of the E.R.R. expanded to include cultural property of all kinds, notably fine art. It has been called “the most efficient art-looting enterprise of all time” (Flanner, 1947, p. 31). As German forces moved into an area, E.R.R. teams moved quickly to secure desirable cultural property. According to information gathered by the United States, the E.R.R. inspected 957 libraries, 375 archives, 402 museums, and 531 institutes in occupied Eastern Europe in search of loot (Friedman, 1957, p. 8).

With regard to Jewish books and libraries, the E.R.R. saved a significant amount of material that might otherwise have been simply burned or recycled into pulp. Yet it destroyed far more than it saved. The agency employed German academics, including experts in Hebraica, to evaluate and supervise the sorting of confiscated Jewish books. There were specific instructions about what should be preserved. A Bonn official who wrote to ask the E.R.R. if it was interested in a certain collection of Jewish books received the following response:

“Books in Hebrew script of recent date may be turned over for pulping; this applies to prayer books, *memorbücher* [memory books], and other religious works in the German language. On the other hand, please send here all writings which bear on the history of culture and the nature of Judaism, as well as the works of Jewish authors” (Starr, 1950, p. 40).

The Jewish libraries of Vilna were among the finest in Eastern Europe. This Lithuanian city (now called Vilnius) had been successively under Polish, Lithuanian, and then Soviet control before its occupation by Germany in the summer of 1941. It was home to approximately 60,000 Jewish civilians and was a center of traditional as well as modern Jewish scholarship. In Vilna's libraries, rabbinic scholars mingled with young leftists. Vilna's Yiddish Scientific Institute, commonly known as the YIVO, was internationally recognized for its work in Yiddish linguistics and in Jewish history and social science (Dawidowicz, 1989, p. 25). The city's notable Jewish libraries included the Strashun library, with rich holdings in Hebraica and Judaica, and the YIVO library, which held approximately 40,000 books and documents on Jewish history (Shavit, 1997, pp. 25-26).

The plunder of Vilna's Jewish libraries was initiated soon after German troops seized control of the city. Shavit observes, "Never had the murder of Jews been so scrupulously coordinated with their cultural extermination, and nowhere was this two-pronged genocide pursued with greater thoroughness than in Vilna" (1997, p. 94). Two Jewish scholars, arrested by the Gestapo, were forced to list the incunabula in the Strashun library. After their work was completed, they were killed. The library's director, Yitzhak Strashun, hanged himself rather than assist in identifying its treasures for the Nazis (Shavit, 1998, p. 95).

The E.R.R. ordered the systematic confiscation and sorting of the contents of Jewish libraries. The YIVO building became the collection center for materials from hundreds of synagogues, libraries, and private collections—not only from Vilna, but from the surrounding area as well. The local Jewish government was ordered to provide a work

team—including scholars versed in Judaica—to sort the plundered library materials (Friedman, 1950, p. 9).

Several of the scholars and intellectuals assigned to this work kept diaries that survived the war—although the authors did not. Among them was Zelig Kalmanovitch, a scholar and a director of the YIVO. Kalmanovitch perished after being deported to Estonia 1943. His diary, kept hidden, was discovered after the war's end (Kalmanovitch, 1953, Editor's Forward, p. 10). Under the supervision of Nazi officials, Kalmanovitch sorted, catalogued, and translated Jewish books and other printed materials. Valuable items and those deemed suitable for anti-Jewish “research” were prepared for shipment to Germany. The remainder were classified as waste paper and sent by the truckload to be pulped (1953, p. 37). Kalmanovitch recorded his grief at the sight of books dumped like “refuse” in the storeroom. Tens of thousands of books passed through the depot:

The master said that this week he would procure trucks to take the “paper” to the factory, and that it was necessary to make room for a new shipment. The employees save from destruction as much as they can. A blessing upon them, for they risk their lives (1953, p. 22).

Jewish workers conscripted by the E.R.R. managed to smuggle out or hide several thousand of the most precious works, including letters of Tolstoy, manuscripts of Sholem Aleichem, and drawings by Marc Chagall. One of the workers, Rachel Pupko-Krinski, wrote of the sense of urgency that led her to rescue what books she could:

...for all we knew, these might be the last books we would ever read. The books, too, were in great danger; we were their last readers (Shavit, 1998, pp. 96-98).

Kalmanovitch's supervisor told him that the process of classifying Jewish literature would “indicate concretely how to solve the Jewish problem” (p. 23).

The supervisor also gathered statistics about Jewish life in Vilna before the Nazi occupation. In Kalmanovitch's words "They want to know now how high was the mountain they have leveled (p. 26).

The book purges increased in the final days before the ghetto was "liquidated" in the late summer of 1943. In the next-to-last entry in his diary, Kalmanovitch reflected on the common fate of Vilna's Jews and their books:

All week I selected books; several thousands I cast with my own hands on the rubbish pile. A pile of books is scattered on the floor of the reading room of the YIVO—a cemetery of books: a brothers' grave, books that were hit by the war of Gog and Magog just like their owners (1953, p. 75).

For anti-Semitic ideologists, the survival of selected Jewish books and other cultural objects was as necessary as the elimination of the population itself. Appropriated and interpreted according to Nazi doctrine, these works could be made to bear witness against their creators and former owners. The proposed "research" institute in Frankfurt was not the only center where these cultural objects were being gathered. In Prague, there were plans to establish a "Museum of the Extinct Jewish Race" where the Nazis could demonstrate the "perversity" of Jewish culture without fear of contradiction (Mann, 1997, pp. 84-85).

Ideology was not the only motivation behind the plunder of Jewish property, of course. Greed was at work as well. As Jewish residents were deported to the ghettos, their finest and most valuable possessions were appropriated by various agencies of the Reich or by individuals (Mann, 1997). When Nazi officials took control of Jewish libraries such as Vilna's Strashun library, they displayed intense interest in rare books and manuscripts (Shavit, 1998, p. 95). As he sorted books for the E.R.R., Zelig

Kalmanovitch tried to persuade the Germans that certain books had great financial value, so that they would be saved (Dawidowicz, 1989, p. 263).

After the fall of the Reich, surviving books looted from Jewish libraries were sorted once again. Hundreds of thousands of books, scrolls and ceremonial objects were discovered in depots by advancing Allied troops and collected at the Offenbach Archival Depot. Many of the books had been damaged by damp or were covered in dust as a result of their being stored in “ancient castles, caves and tunnels” (Dawidowicz, 1989, p. 315). These items were now among the last vestiges of a culture that had all but disappeared from the earth. Recognizing that few owners had survived to claim their stolen property, organizers formed Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, an agency for the distribution of Jewish cultural items to libraries and museums worldwide (Mann, 1997, p. 87).

Among these thousands of books, workers at Offenbach were able to identify many from Vilna’s YIVO and Strashun libraries. The books from the YIVO were sent to New York, where a branch of the famed Vilna academy had been established on the eve of the war. This New World institution became one of the leading centers of research on the Holocaust.

This was a realization of the hopes of Zelig Kalmanovitch and his fellow workers. At risk to themselves, they tried to ensure that remnants of their culture would survive. The only genuinely hopeful entry in Kalmanovitch’s diary occurred on a day when he learned that a new YIVO was established in New York:

Today was a day of rejoicing. The assistant came in with a smiling face. YIVO lives—overseas. ... Thus, Lord of the Universe, houses of wood are destroyed and you replace them with stone edifices (1953, p. 55).



## Ashes of Memory: The Burning of the National and University Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina

*We won't be able to write the history of Bosnia. The primary materials were wiped out.*  
(Tatjana Lukorvic, quoted in Hurowitz, 1996, paragraph 3]

The 1991-1995 conflict in the former Yugoslavia added a new term to the catalogue of crimes of war: “memoricide.” Devised by Grmek (1991), the term refers to the systematic eradication of cultural monuments associated with a particular ethnic or religious group. Policies of “memoricide” resulted in the destruction or damaging of thousands of cultural institutions, monuments, houses of worship, and historic sites in Bosnia and Croatia. Nationalist forces carrying out these policies did not simply ignore international conventions on the protection of cultural property—they turned those conventions upside down. The most cherished monuments and cultural institutions of their victims were the first be targeted for destruction. Grmek observed that Serb generals in Croatia in 1991 seemed to be “choosing their targets on the basis of a well-written manual of Croatian cultural history” (n.p.).

The “war” in the former Yugoslavia typically took the form of actions by armed groups against unarmed civilians. The belligerents were members of “ethnic groups”—Serbs, Croats and Muslims-- that were in actuality associated with religious and cultural rather than ethnic differences. As the Yugoslav federation disintegrated in 1991 and early 1992, militant members of these groups (particularly Serbs and Croats) sought to create

ethnically homogeneous zones within the borders of the newly established independent republics. Campaigns of “ethnic cleansing” entailed such crimes as the expulsion of members of rival ethnic groups, massacres of members of those groups, and mass rapes. Actions against members of rival ethnic groups were routinely followed by the destruction of the tangible artifacts that embodied their cultural memory. The aggressors dynamited mosques or churches, removed grave markers, and wiped out libraries, archives and museums (Sells, 1994).

Statements and actions by those involved in “ethnic cleansing” reveal that their motivation was to remove all traces of the previous occupants, and to leave nothing standing that would encourage their return.. A Polish mercenary who fought alongside the Bosnian Serbs was reported as saying, “We began to destroy everything which had any tie to Islam, so that the Muslims would not leave any trace behind them (Cigar, 1995, p. 60). In the spring and summer of 1992, the Bosnian town of Zvornik came under Serb control. All Muslim residents were killed or expelled and the city’s mosques dynamited. Afterward, the Serb nationalist mayor allegedly asserted, “...there never were any mosques in Zvornik” (Sells, 1996a, p. 4).

In April 1992, Bosnia seceded from the Yugoslav federation and was established as an independent republic. Although its government was dominated by Muslims, Bosnia was constituted as a multicultural rather than an ethnic state. Immediately, nationalist Serbs seeking to gain territory for an “ethnically pure” Serbian state within Bosnia took up military positions around the capital city, Sarajevo. They fired mortar rounds and sniper fire at civilians in the streets and marketplaces, killing many. They also

systematically shelled and destroyed mosques, museums, libraries, archives, and other cultural institutions (Malcolm, 1994, pp. 234-252).

The Oriental Institute in Sarajevo was an early target. On May 18, 1992, an incendiary grenade reduced the library and its holdings to ashes. Created in 1950 to collect and preserve manuscripts in Turkish, Arabic and other “oriental” languages, the Institute owned more than 5,000 manuscripts dating from the eleventh through the twentieth centuries, a collection of 200,000 documents dating from the final decades of Ottoman rule in Bosnia, legal records, archives of leading Muslim families, and more than 700,000 monographs (Stipèevia; 1998; Vlastic, 1995). Such records attesting to Bosnia’s Ottoman past were anathema to militant Serbs, whose national mythology emphasized their struggle against Turkish hegemony in the fourteenth century (Sells, 1996a).

On August 25, the National Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina, located in an historic  under sustained attack. According to the library’s director, the Bosnian Serb forces “knew that if they wanted to destroy this multi-ethnic society, they would have to destroy this library” (Bollag, 1995, p. 35).

As incendiary grenades ignited fires within the building, firefighters and civilians gathered outside:.

On becoming aware of this new misfortune that befell the city, the inhabitants of Sarajevo, although already weakened by hunger and the personal tragedies that had befallen them, rushed to save the cultural heart of their city—their Vijeànica. (Zeæ, 1996, p. 297).

Volunteers formed a brigade line along which they passed books from the building to trucks waiting outside. They did so at the risk of their lives, for mortar fire was being directed at the crowd (Schork, 1992). As fires were reignited by new shelling, it became clear that the library was past saving. Smoke as the ashes of books darkened the sky. One witness recalled, “It was the most apocalyptic thing I’d ever seen.” (Sells, 1996a, p. 1). Another told a reporter. “Everyone was crying. The shelling only stopped when the building was ablaze.” (Bollag, 1995, p. 22)

For many citizens of Sarajevo, the “library” meant the library building, not necessarily the collections house (in the Bosnian language) had been built as a town hall in the late nineteenth century, when Bosnia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Its flamboyant architecture, usually described as “pseudo-Moorish,” together with its location along the Miljacka River, made it a distinctive feature of the Sarajevo cityscape. In 1951 this building had become home to the National Library.

At the scene of the fire, residents stressed their connection to the Vijećnica. “I loved this building very much...Sarajevo will not be the same without the library. Even on fire the building is very beautiful.” (Schork, 1992, paragraph 1). Sarajevo fire brigade chief Kenan Slinic, who braved shrapnel and bullets during the futile struggle to save the library, was asked why he risked his life. Slinic replied, “Because I was born here and they are burning a part of me” (Pomfret, 1992). Another of Slinic’s comments quoted by the same reporter suggests that the fire chief was not motivated by concern for the library’s collection. The reporter described Slinic as a “hard-drinking roisterer” who was “no lover of books,” and quoted him as shouting to a friend who was weeping: “Because

it's a library, you're crying. Hey, if it was a café, I'd be crying, too" (Pomfret, 1996, p. A12).

The ruined library building became symbol of Sarajevo's plight. Bosnian writer Semezdin Medmedinoviæ observed, "The destroyed Library appeared on thousands of photographs.... It became, among other things, part of the professional pathos: the Library in the foreground as a standard postcard of Sarajevo..." (1998, p. 58). In July

*Requiem* was staged in the building's burned out atrium; this was eventually broadcast worldwide to raise money to aid war victims (Music in the ruins, 1994, p. 44). Britain's Prince Charles made a highly publicized offer of aid to help restore the ruined building (Barry, 1999, paragraph 3).

Approximately 90 percent of the library's holdings, and almost its entire catalog, were lost in the fire. All told, the library had housed more than two million items, including rare books and incunabula, manuscripts and papers of important literary figures, special collections documenting the cultural history of Bosnia, complete sets of 600 Bosnian periodicals, and scientific and technical research collections (Kuzundes, 1994). The destruction of these materials eliminated what had been by far the world's most complete collection of Bosniaca (documents about Bosnia or published in Bosnia). The curator of the Slavic Reading Room at Yale University's Sterling Memorial Library lamented, "We won't be able to write the history of Bosnia. The primary materials were wiped out (Hurowitz, 1996, paragraph 2). Federico Mayor, Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, called the burning of the library an "act of barbarism perpetrated in the context of a whole series of assaults on

the national heritage.” He observed that the library had served vital roles during the Serb blockade of Sarajevo:

A place of teaching and research, of culture, of information and of intellectual exchange, the library furthers access to knowledge and helps to preserve cultural identity while consecrating the local community's participation in universal civilization (Mayor, 1994, paragraph 2).

Initially, international relief organizations were unable to provide much aid to the library. First there were logistical problems in getting materials to Sarajevo as long as the war continued. (The Dayton Peace Accords were signed in December 1995.) Second, and understandably, greatest efforts were given to relief physical human suffering. In the end, plans to help the library originated with a small network of scholars and librarians concerned about human rights—many of whom had personal or intellectual links to the Slavic or Islamic world. András Riedlmayer, a bibliographer of Islamic Architecture at Harvard University, and two colleagues established the Bosnian Manuscript Ingathering Project. This is an effort to locate copies of unique documents lost during the war so that reproductions may replace the originals in Bosnian collections (Buturovic, Riedlmayer and Schick, 1993). Riedlmayer hopes that these recovery efforts may deny ultimate victory to those who burned these libraries:

In a way, the people who targeted the National Library and sought to burn the books have failed. As a librarian it is my job to make sure that those perpetrating attacks like this do not succeed in their aims (US Helps Bosnian Libraries, 1996, p. 14).

Teams at Harvard and Yale Universities and at the Online Computer Library Corporation took on the enormous task of compiling a master list of Bosniaca available in library collections worldwide. This list was to serve as a basis for rebuilding the NLB catalogue

and eventually its lost Bosnian collections through donations of duplicate copies or reproductions. A third effort focused on organizing donations of scholarly and technical materials. A number of university presses agreed to donate copies of all new publications to devastated libraries in the former Yugoslavia. While these scholarly publications were welcome, other well-meaning book donation efforts resulted in a deluge of inappropriate materials. The librarian who coordinated receipt of these donations in Sarajevo observed:

Filling library collections with donations is not a standard library procedure. Very soon you will realize that your library is filled up with junk.... The best example ...is the following item: Annual Reports of the Hawaii Agricultural Institute 1906-1941. Believe it or not a full set in perfect shape (Kemal Bakaršić personal communication, May 1, 1998).

While the restoration of the library's collections and catalogues proceeds, however slowly, the library building remains a ghostly ruin at this writing. There has been a debate about whether to restore the Vijećnica as a government building or library, or to preserve it in its current state as a memorial to those who suffered and died during the siege of Sarajevo (Pomfret, 1996, p. A12).

It remains to be seen how thoroughly the destroyers of the Bosnian National Library accomplished their purpose. Documents in the lost collections attested to Bosnia's multicultural past, in which the Ottoman world, Orthodox Eastern Europe, and Catholic Western Europe had intersected (Malcolm, 1994). Their elimination has removed tangible evidence of a reality at odds with the vision of the militant nationalists. As Riedlmayer (1994) observes, "A people's identity is inextricably linked with the visible

symbols of their culture. Once those anchors are gone the past, like the future, can be recreated by the victors.”



## Discussion

*Books and libraries are the only secure and lasting memory of the human race.*  
(Schopenhauer, *Parerga und Paralipomena*, 2:254)

What motivations lay behind the crimes recounted in the preceding chapters? The principal factor in the loss of these libraries was their identification with a particular religious or ethnic group. The destruction or appropriation of their libraries was intended to disarm the group culturally or intellectually, control its culture, crush its spirit, or to destroy the cultural identity of the group altogether.

The Protestant protectors of the Biblioteca Palatina had used the collection to promote their religious cause. For this reason, its capture on behalf of the Pope represented much more than the seizure of a great book-treasure. In his “thank-you” letter to Maximilian, Pope Gregory XV wrote that the collection’s “many opulent volumes” had been wrested from the hands of the “sacrilegious heretics” (Mittler, 1996, p. 352). Possession of this collection entailed control of the theological texts that it contained. Protestant scholars had formerly prepared new editions of the writings of early Church fathers based on texts found in Heidelberg. Now these same writings could be interpreted and edited from the Roman Catholic point of view. The capture of the library was seen as a symbol of the triumph of Catholic arms and a sign of God’s will that the Church would prevail.

The treatment of Jewish book collections by the *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg*. in some ways parallels the capture of the Palatina. Like Pope Gregory XV, the anti-Semitic ideologists of the E.R.R. hoped to place selected Jewish works in a context where they would bear witness against their authors and former readers. The proposed institute that would conduct “research on the Jews without Jews” and the planned “Museum of the Extinct Jewish Race” were projects intended to control and redefine Jewish culture from the Nazi perspective. The appropriation of selected works for these projects was accompanied in occupied Eastern Europe by the systematic destruction of the remainder of Jewish cultural property as a prelude to the destruction of the Jewish people themselves.

The National and University Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina belonged to the people of that republic, including, at least theoretically, some of those who destroyed it. Yet the nationalist Serbs who surrounded and beleaguered the city of Sarajevo refused to recognize the ethnically heterogeneous Bosnian state and undertook to destroy its multicultural fabric. The National Library, although not the property of one ethnic group, was associated with the Muslim-majority government. It also preserved the recorded history of Bosnia’s multicultural past, including its Ottoman period. The destruction of this library, then, eliminated a symbol of multiethnic Bosnia as well as documentary evidence that Bosnia had been inhabited for centuries by non-Serbs.

The burning of the library of the Catholic University of Louvain differs from the other cases in that the conflict itself was not driven by ethnic, religious or ideological differences. Whether spontaneous or planned, the rampage by German troops was a reprisal against Belgian resistance. There is evidence, however, that Louvain was singled

out for punishment because of its cultural prominence and its Catholic institutions. The destruction of the university's library and other cultural treasures might have served the dual purpose of punishing perceived agitators—that is, Catholic priests—as well as demoralizing the population at large. In the storm of condemnation that followed these atrocities, the destruction of the library at times almost overshadowed the taking of human lives—proving that the occupiers had chosen their target well, although they had miscalculated the propaganda cost of their actions

Responses to the loss of libraries in war seem to vary depending on whether those libraries are seen as collections of objects or as embodiments of an ideal. After the University of Louvain library was burned a second time, a *New York Times* editorial asked rhetorically, “Do books matter when civilization itself is at stake?” Some observers have written about the loss of libraries as if a living soul had perished. For the bibliophile Richard de Bury, the burning of the library at Alexandria was equivalent to the slaughter of innocents, where “ink is offered up in place of blood...” (Bury, 1345/1948, p. 43). The use of the terms “bibliocide” and “memoricide” to characterize the destruction of the Bosnian National Library suggests that an act of murder had been committed. In existence, libraries are often thought of as dry, dead places. After they are gone, lost in some catastrophe, they may come alive in the poetic imagination:

They [destroyed libraries] may no longer be available for consultation, they may only exist in the vague memory of a reader or in the vaguer still memory of tradition and legend, but they will have acquired a kind of immortality through censors hip intentional or not, *sub specie aeternitatis* (Manguel, 1999, p. 36).

For some observers, though, concern over libraries is misplaced when humans are suffering and dying. Following the burning of the University of Louvain library in 1914,

a letter published in the *Times* exhorted the public to “think less of the works of art and more of the human life that has been ruthlessly destroyed” (Crime of Louvain, 1914, p. 4). In October 1992, the *Times Higher Education Supplement* published a letter taking the British academic community to task for its failure to cry out in horror at the destruction of the Bosnian National Library. The writer, Professor Adrian Hastings of the University of Leeds, wondered if it “would be too much to ask” that every university in Britain open the academic year with a minute of silent witness to this “crime against learning. ...Only a Vandal could say ‘No.’” (Hastings, 1992, p. 15). Hastings’ letter drew this response from a fellow academic:

I must confess myself a Vandal. At a time of “ethnic cleansing” and reports of mass rape, concern over the destruction of a library shows a perverse sense of priorities, even if one is an academic. (Cunningham, 1992, p. 13).

Yet the loss of a cultural monument may have a deeper effect than the deaths of humans--at least the deaths of strangers. The destruction of the fifteenth century Old Bridge at Mostar in Herzegovina was more painful to many residents of the former Yugoslavia than the sufferings of human victims. The Croatian journalist Slavenka Drakulic reflected on this:

We expect people to die; we count on our own lives to end. The destruction of a monument to civilization is something else. The bridge, in all its beauty and grace, was built to outlive us; it was an attempt to grasp eternity. It transcended our individual destiny (Schwartz, 1994, A19).

In Louvain in 1914, L.H. Grondys had similar feelings as he walked past the ruined university library: “...when one sees the most precious and rarest of objects, the heritage of centuries, trodden under foot, life itself seems to lose all value” (Grondys, 1916, p. 38). Occupants of the Jewish ghetto in Vilna risked their lives to save a few precious

books—pieces of their culture that they hoped would outlive them. Greenfield has observed that even though culture may not be of primary concern to the most people, yet it has “symbolic and inspirational value” (1995, p. 300). The cases under investigation seem to demonstrate that the cultural value of libraries is intensified at the moment of their loss. Residents of Heidelberg confronted enemy soldiers in an attempt to prevent the removal of their famous library to Rome, just as residents of Sarajevo braved mortar fire as they joined firefighters in their struggle to save the burning National Library of Bosnia.

How did observers characterize what was lost in the destruction of these libraries? The notoriety of these cases to some extent arises from the loss of irreplaceable items, especially manuscripts, manuscript books, and incunabula. Even so, it is striking to note how strongly these libraries were identified with the function of preservation of precious items. Although most of the collections of the Library of the Catholic University of Louvain consisted of scholarly and technical works, comments about its destruction referred to it as an “ancient” library and focused on its collection of medieval texts. The monks who watched the library burn from afar remembered seeing a tremendous column of fire blaze up at a particular moment: they felt certain that this represented the immolation of “the incunabula, the precious “Livres d’heures,” the rare manuscripts of the early Middle Ages...” (Grondys, 1923, p. 46). One might speculate that this account of the fire represents an imaginative link between legends of ancient texts in flames--derived from the Alexandria prototype--and the city of Louvain’s associations with the medieval past.

For the destroyers as well as for their victims, the loss of these libraries represented the severing of a link to the past. Indeed, the National Library of Bosnia and the Jewish libraries of Vilna were targeted *because* they preserved the documents of a past that the destroyers sought to deny. The intellectual content of their collections was a critical factor in their destruction. Yet the material value of some of these library collections should not be overlooked. As repositories for precious books, these libraries assumed a function similar to that associated with museums: the preservation of valued artifacts.

In Louvain and Sarajevo, the loss of architecturally significant library buildings contributed to international expressions of outrage. Sarajevo's ruined Vijećnica became a symbol of the city's suffering, and great attention was focused on plans to restore the building. Library director Enes Kujundžić was moved to remind observers that replacement of lost research collections was perhaps a more urgent need:

People forget that this country can't be rebuilt without resources of science and technology. People say you are a cultural institution. I say we're also an educational and scientific institution that has to help this country compete. (Perlez, 1996, paragraph 7).

To the extent that library collections are valued for material or aesthetic reasons, sheer love of books may take precedence over ideology. Following the capture of the Heidelberg library by Catholic forces, the sumptuous bindings of the arch-Protestant Ottheinrich were left intact, despite their ideologically distasteful associations. In the Vilna ghetto, Nazi officials overseeing the plunder of Jewish cultural treasures mounted an exhibition of some of the confiscated objects. Despite the anti-Semitic motivation of the project, the objects chosen were a credit to the people who created them:

“The young man selected objects, books and manuscripts that delight the eye. Was it his intention to make a good impression? Or was this a case where even the evil angel says “Amen” against his will? (Kalmanovitch, 1953, p. 22).

Aesthetic considerations do not always prevail, of course. In the prosecution of war, aggressors might not discriminate among the targets of their actions. In burning the National Library of Bosnia, Serb fighters destroyed a manuscript collection of works by one of their own leading literary figures, the poet Aleksa Santic (Lokorvic, 1991, p. 736) . The German troops who burned the Louvain library a second time in 1940 destroyed, among others, many books that had been taken from German collections as reparations for the 1914 attack on the library.

It is clear that, in the minds of many observers, the destroyers of these libraries were not simply the enemies of the libraries’ owners but also were enemies of civilization itself. In part, condemnation of library-burners as Vandals and barbarians is associated with the irrecoverable loss of specific documents or collections—the records of Bosnia’s past, the unique medieval manuscripts books of Louvain. Yet the specter of Alexandria appears to play a role as well. The great library of the Ptolemies was assembled for the purpose of preserving all the writings of the known world. As Thiem has observed, this claim to universality may have contributed to the library’s destruction. The library represented a microcosm, an entire world assembled in one location, and therefore a convenient target (1979). Thiem cites a passage from Shaw’s *Caesar and Cleopatra* as an example of this mythical dimension of the Alexandrian library:

Theodotus. What is burning is the memory of mankind.  
Caesar. A shameful memory. Let it burn.  
Theodotus. (wildly) Will you destroy the past?  
Caesar. Ay, and build the future with its ruins (p. 521).

Libraries that fall victim to war appear to participate in this mythical quality of universality. Sharing, as they do, the legendary fate of the great library at Alexandria, they also share in that library's role as a symbol of civilization itself.

There is irony in Schopenhauer's maxim so frequently quoted by librarians—that "libraries are the only secure and lasting memory of the human race." Libraries are not secure and lasting—very old libraries are rare indeed. The documents that they preserve may survive through duplication, but library collections themselves are only too vulnerable to accidental and intentional disasters. Because they are such convenient targets, because they have material, intellectual and symbolic value that may inspire covetousness or hostility, library collections will no doubt in the future continue to suffer the legendary fate of the library of Alexandria. The image of books in flames may yield to that of bytes of data erased by computer viruses, but the losses will be no less real.



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Penelope Hamblin. *Alexandria's Ashes: War and the Loss of Libraries*. A Master's paper for the M.S. in Library Science degree. December, 1999. 63 pages. Advisor: Jerry D. Saye

For as long as libraries have existed, they have been vulnerable to plunder, damage, and destruction during periods of war and political conflict. This study explores four notorious instances in which libraries were deliberately targeted. Historical and journalistic accounts, official statements, eyewitness testimony, and gestures are analyzed for what they may reveal about the personal and culture value of these libraries at the moment of their loss. Belligerents may destroy or appropriate library collections in order to deprive their opponents of material treasure, to disarm them intellectually, or to control or destroy cherished cultural relics. At the moment of their catastrophic loss, libraries also appear to assume symbolic value as the embodiment of a civilization or a culture. For these reasons, it is likely that libraries will continue to be targeted during ideological conflicts despite international legal conventions guaranteeing their protection.

Headings:

Libraries—Bosnia and Herzegovina—History—20th century

Libraries—Germany—17th century

Libraries—History—20th century

Libraries--Louvain (Belgium)—History—20th century

Jewish libraries—Lithuania—History—20th century





