‘The sun was obscured by the smoke of books’: libraries and memory institutions in conflict since the end of the Cold War

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Abstract

Why are libraries attacked in war? At first glance, this appears to be a puzzling question as they cannot be considered military targets. The answer to this lies in the role that libraries play in sustaining cultures and collective identities. In the three post Cold War conflicts examined here (Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq), the destruction of libraries and their reconstruction illustrate how vital these institutions are to national identity. Attacks on libraries in this period have tended to be part of a more general extremist or even genocidal campaign to eliminate dissenting cultures indirectly by attacking institutions that symbolize difference and multiculturalism.

Introduction

In 213 BCE, Chinese Emperor Qin Shi Huang ordered the destruction of almost all books in China including works of history, philosophy, poetry. Only works from the Legalism school of
thought remained, along with some works of forestry, medicine, divination and agriculture. This destruction was part of a larger state program to control scholars, suppress alternate methods of thought and strengthen the prestige and position of the Emperor. This early case of what Rebecca Knuth would describe as “libricide” shows that while this phenomenon escalated dramatically in the twentieth century, it has been a tool of statecraft for centuries. (Knuth, 2003, 49)

So begins the long history of destroying books, libraries and archives in pursuit of political ends. Throughout history, books and memory institutions have been a tool of statecraft, sometimes for destructive, brutal goals. While there have certainly been inspiring cases where libraries and related institutions have been created to foster peaceful goals – such as adult education in the 19th century or low cost leisure in the modern era – such cases lie outside the bounds of this discussion. Instead, I will focus on the role of libraries in times of armed conflict whether during foreign invasion, civil war or other violent conflicts. Chronologically, this article focuses on libraries in conflict since the end of the Cold War. This era was selected for two reasons: there has been relatively little scholarly work done on it and this era has witnessed a major increase in violence to libraries, knowledge and information.

Why look at libraries in conflict? Such institutions do not train soldiers, nor do they manufacture weapons. By any reasonable measure, libraries cannot be considered military assets. Nonetheless, analysis of such destruction tells us much about the role of libraries in modern society. When they are explicitly targeted for destruction, this vividly demonstrates the importance of culture and cultural artifacts in war and the goals of combatants. In many cases, such actions are seen as an effective means of undermining the nation - that powerful imagined construct that exists only in symbol, memory and imagination. The recognition of the role of culture in war has long been recognized – whether through the production of propaganda in the World Wars or by the destruction or modification of cultural institutions to serve military ends. Maintaining national community over time and space is a key function of libraries and when this function is interrupted by conflict, the ability of the community to recover its identity and cohesion is compromised.

Since the end of the Cold War, there have been many cases of violent acts against libraries – treating all such incidents comprehensively would be not be feasible. Thus, this article will focus on three cases of libraries in conflict since the end of the Cold War: Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq. In all three cases, the conflicts have led to varying degrees of state failure and much suffering. Reconstituting libraries is a necessary part of rebuilding broken communities and contributing toward long term security and prosperity. Finally, conflict is also a time of crisis that forces people to reveal their priorities – this effect can also be useful in learning more about the social status of libraries.
The place of libraries in post-conflict reconstruction efforts will also be considered.

**Literature Review**

The literature examining the destruction of books, libraries and related cultural goods has a long history. The earliest works in this field tended to politically motivated and lack scholarly depth – such as pamphlets documenting the destruction of libraries in the First World War and arguing for rebuilding (Koch, 1917). These early publications were mainly intended to provoke donor sympathy and encourage readers to support the cause of rebuilding damaged libraries. In addition, there were also war time works that chronicled the destruction in the interest of vilifying an enemy and rallying popular support. In some cases, these politically charged writings often constructed the writer’s intended readership as just protectors of culture and humanism as opposed to the destructive tendencies of their barbarian adversaries (New York Times, 1933). These works address the question of the important of libraries indirectly by showing their importance during conflict.

Investigations into this topic following the Second World War tended to focus on the actions of totalitarian regimes such as Nazi Germany or Soviet Russia. Polarizing the readership by stressing the differences between a free West and oppressive regimes served the function of supporting morale. Unfortunately, these works often failed to investigate the motivations for book destruction in any substantial way – such acts were often treated simply as yet another case of the regime’s evil tendencies (Knuth, 2006). While these regimes can be considered evil by any standard, the application of such labels does little to advance our understanding. Once more, these works tend to reveal as much about the writer and their culture as it does of the subject themselves.

Since 2000, the scholarly depth of this field of inquiry has improved substantially with two key works by Rebecca Knuth: *Libricide* (2003) and *Burning Books and Leveling Libraries* (2006). These works articulate a general theory of what this kind of literary destruction means. With the evocative name of libricide, the field of study started to become more systematic. While Knuth’s writings have been critiqued, it remains noteworthy as a theoretical effort to understand this type of cultural destruction. One challenge to the work remains however, and this is whether it can be applied to new conflicts and situations. It will be the argument of this paper that this theory remains valid and can be used to clarify and understand cultural destruction.

**Bosnia**

The wars that led to the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s captured the public imagination of the West due to their genocidal character and the shock that violent conflict might be returning to Europe after nearly fifty years of peace and economic development. In North America and Western Europe, the response eventually included the deployment of military forces under the auspices
of the United Nations, the Dayton peace negotiations, the recognition of new states and the prosecution of war crimes in the Hague under the auspices of a special UN tribunal. These conflicts also served to remind the international community that genocide in Europe was not simply a crime of the past.

The most distinctive aspect of these conflicts was the fierce national and at times genocidal nature of the conflict. Ethnic purity, control of historically significant areas and exclusion appeared to be the general objectives of the war. This cultural war was not limited to libraries alone: thousands of mosques and other examples of Ottoman architecture had been destroyed by the end of 1993 (Riedlmayer, 1995). As Knuth states, “[t]he Serbs were interested in destroying items that, simply by existing, confirmed the history of Muslim residency in Bosnia” (Knuth, 2003, 125). The conflicts were also unusual in the focus paid to attacks on civilians and civilian institutions by those prosecuting the war. Western intervention was of only limited help in preventing this destruction, and occasionally brought civilian casualties and damage to non-military targets such as the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999 (Seybolt, 2007; Myers, 2000). It is in this context of both accidental and deliberate attacks on civilian targets that the attacks on Bosnia’s famous library must be understood.

In 1992, the Serbian military began shelling Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia. As part of this general attack, the city’s University Library was explicitly targeted and reduced to ruins. This deliberate focus can be discerned by the fact that several other buildings in the immediate area were unharmed (Perlez, 1996). In the case of Sarajevo, most attacks were carried out using artillery and similar weapons, rather than aircraft, over a period of years; these circumstances permitted much greater precision (Riedlmayer, 2007). Though some heroic efforts were made to save books – several reports describe librarians running in and out of the burning building – they could not stop the majority of the destruction.

The materials destroyed at the National and University Library (it is a hybrid national-academic institution) include medieval literature in Arabic, Persian and Turkish, along with archives concerning the life of the area’s Croat, Bosnian, Jewish and Serb residents. The sheer variety and historical breadth is significant. It is likely that the cultural diversity symbolized by the library was one of the reasons that it was targeted; it was incompatible with an extreme nationalist political agenda espoused by some powerful parts of the Serbian government and armed forces. The destruction of so many cultural artifacts also serves to show how important these are in the maintenance of identity.

The symbolic assault on memory and identity extended to personal collections and documents as well. There were several documented cases of large private libraries being destroyed such as the library of Alija Sadikovic in Janja which was known to contain a large quantity of
rare manuscripts. Efforts to destroy private collections such as this, which may not have wide circulation and use, reveal the thoroughness of the assault on memory. Privately owned books and manuscripts were not the only documents that were destroyed during the conflict however. In several cases, Muslims were deprived of their passports, other identity documents and property documentation – an act with both cultural and pragmatic effects. Even though the submission of such documents to soldiers sometimes purchased escape, the lack of such documents will likely have long term negative effects. Travel for such refugees becomes much more difficult and any effort to re-establish themselves in their former homes will be fraught with bureaucratic challenges (Knuth, 2003). Making return more difficult was likely a foreseeable goal for those demanding such material.

Given the conflict’s concern with violent, xenophobic nationalism as necessary and right, it is comprehensible to see that evidence of a different society would be threatening. Centuries before the term was coined, Sarajevo had something like a multicultural society – starting in the Ottoman period - with people from several different ethnic groups co-existing peacefully. This coexistence even attained symbolic recognition by the fact that this vibrant culture identity was represented in a single library – rather than a series of small institutions dedicated to serving ethnic or sectarian communities alone. Given that multicultural history and an attitude of tolerance are not amenable to attack, one of the few ways of undermining this history lies in indirect destruction of libraries as symbols of this heritage.

Since the end of the conflict, the Library has not recovered either architecturally or in terms of collections or staff. Reconstruction has been very slow as governments in the region have had to rebuild physical infrastructure like roads and electrical systems not to mention the challenge of resettling refugees (Bollag, 2003). While the Library’s staff continue to make efforts to rebuild and have benefited from assistance from librarians in other countries – especially the United States – their institution remains only a shadow of what it once was. More than a decade following the conclusion of hostilities, the University Library in Sarajevo continues to be little more than a ruin (Bollag, 2003). Reconstruction of libraries and related institutions appears to be a low priority for the post-Yugoslav government. There may yet be some hope that public libraries will receive greater support in the area if they position themselves as being in support of efforts at ethnic reconciliation. Academic and research institutions may find this strategy more difficult to pursue, but without some change, it is likely that they will languish in ruin, or, at best, operated at limited capacity.
Afghanistan

In contrast to Bosnia, Afghanistan’s libraries have suffered in a different way. Rather than being the target of violent actions, these institutions have suffered from a combination of censorship and heavy handed state control. Afghan libraries have suffered from the repression of the Taliban and the weak state that followed. Prior to the US-led invasion in 2001, the Taliban regime (1994-2001) was notorious in its hostility to the country’s multi-cultural heritage – this included the country’s libraries, where for example, Persian materials were ordered destroyed by the regime (Amirkhani, 2002). Rather than focusing on how Afghan libraries have suffered under years of sustained conflict, this section will explore how libraries have fared in the aftermath of a sustained conflict. Afghan libraries have been manipulated and harmed by several conflicts and regions – articles reporting the reopening of the Library of Kabul University date back to 1993 when the country was beginning to rebuild after its long conflict with the Soviet Union and the subsequent civil war (White, 1993). In point of contrast to Bosnia and Iraq, Afghanistan is notable for being the poorest and least developed country of those examined here.

Rebuilding libraries in Afghanistan takes place in a wider context of reconstruction and economic development. Prior to 1979, Afghanistan has six libraries in the capital city of Kabul, and six libraries in the provinces (Afghanistan, 2008). In the thirty years since Soviet forces first entered the country, libraries have suffered from neglect, attack and manipulation. Half of Kabul’s libraries remain in service, with those in provinces barely operating. Further, the country also lacks any professionally trained librarians; the lack of staff restricts the effectiveness of other types of aid such as donated books and equipment (Afghanistan, 2008a).

Reconstruction efforts have largely been dictated by the interests and abilities of donor governments. The challenge is considerable; an Afghan-American librarian described the conditions in Kabul as quite ruinous: “[T]he [m]ajority of library books are rusty, duplicate, outdated and/or mostly burned or with bullet holes. The Library was closed for a total of four years and accumulated abundance of dust because of the broken windows. The existing books are in extremely poor condition,” (Esmont, 2006). Post-conflict Afghanistan has faced great challenges – weak central government, almost non-existent security or police services and little physical infrastructure such as roads. While there have been improvements in education – including an increase in the number of girls in school - libraries have not kept up. Nancy Hatch Dupree, an educator based in Kabul working to rebuild libraries with a US grant, argues that the lack of reading materials makes it difficult to sustain long term improvements in public health or sustain gains from schooling (Dupree, 2008). Literacy, like many other skills, requires ongoing practice – this
lack of practice may ultimately reverse many of the short term gains Afghanistan has enjoyed in education since 2001.

The reconstitution of Afghan libraries has served several roles and interests. There has been much Western interest in supporting Afghan education – preferably liberal and secular education as an alternative to the radical Islamic approach favoured by the Taliban regime in the past, and some conservatives in the present. The support of libraries has been understood as an important part of transforming Afghanistan into the sort of open society it was prior to 1979. Framing the rebuilding of libraries as part of a larger liberal Western vision may serve to address the concerns of donor countries, but it is unclear if this positioning of aid will be politically acceptable in the country itself.

Apart from aid from foreign governments, there have also been considerable aid efforts carried out by librarians and libraries. This assistance has taken a variety of forms including: professional advice, digitization services and preservation (“Librarian Leading University of Arizona Effort…” 2008). As in Bosnia and Iraq, there have been efforts from abroad to assist Afghanistan in rebuilding its collections, institutions and professional staff. The National Library of the Islamic Republic of Iran has “…donated volumes of book to libraries throughout the country, as well as computers, bookcases […] and a refresher course in library science [for] 55 librarians” (Afghan Libraries..., 2003). U.S. assistance has taken several forms including a project at the University of Arizona to digitize rare Afghan books – a service that may benefit the country in the long term as Internet access becomes more common (current estimates suggest only 2% of the population has Internet access, CIA 2009) – and aid for local staff to build library systems (“Librarian Leading University of Arizona Effort…” 2008). Foreign assistance also includes ISBN registration of new books as the country lacks a national library to operate this service (“Afghanistan gets ISBN Membership,” 2008). The lack of such infrastructure to organize national knowledge testifies to the weak state of the library sector. Reporting on these forms of assistance typically emphasizes the charitable nature of foreign contributions and leaves the question of Afghan involvement out of the picture.

Rebuilding the country’s knowledge infrastructure is not limited to books: Internet access is also recognized as an important goal. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) began funding the Virtual Silk Highway project in November 2001 to bring Internet access to Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and other countries in the region (Silk Project, 2001). The $2.5 Million (US) project is intended to provide “increase information exchange between academic and educational institutions in the Caucasus and Central Asia” (Internet Center, 2009). While Internet access is valuable, it is unclear how beneficial this will be given the country’s very poor electrical infra-
Recalling Knuth’s model of Libricide, Afghanistan only partly meets these criteria. While the Taliban regime carried out an overt program to exterminate those parts of the country’s heritage that were incompatible with its extreme vision of Islam. This program is in agreement with Knuth’s model where the destruction of libraries is part of a general extremist vision. There is only limited evidence that the regime specifically targeted libraries as institutions, but cultural artifacts more generally were certainly under suspicion. Imported goods from Western countries, such as music and videos, were perceived to be immoral by the regime (Wroe, 2001). If libricide is defined more broadly to include cultural artifacts beyond books and libraries – such as films and music – then it becomes clear that the former regime’s action could be characterized as libricide, though genocide per se does not appear to be an aim of the Taliban.

Iraq

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 by Coalition forces has had a wide range of negative effects including many civilian deaths, the formation of numerous terrorist and militia groups and regional instability. For those with an interest in culture, the invasion was significant in another way: the Iraq National Library and Archives were badly damaged by looting, as was the Iraq National Museum. The latter case is particularly tragic since the Museum had possessed some of the earliest known records of human civilization dating back approximately five thousand years. The cultural losses became so devastating that the U.S. military launched an effort to retrieve looted artifacts and rebuild the museum (Bogdanos and Patrick, 2005). This is one of the few cases of military forces explicitly seeking to assist with the rebuilding of a cultural institution in the post Cold War era.

Unlike the Bosnian case, explaining exactly what happened in Baghdad in 2003 is more difficult – the destruction was more due to chaos and inadequate protection than direct attacks. At least one Western journalist has argued that the looting of the Museum can be explained by the fact that it was closely associated with the regime of Saddam Hussein, who consciously conscripted all public institutions to serve the party (Edwards and Edwards, 2008). One could also conjecture that the city’s residents were attempting to achieve economic gain after suffering under UN sections for many years. One thing that is known is that Coalition forces, local police and the Iraqi military failed to secure the institution where many unique items were held. This loss will be partly permanent and may impair efforts at rebuilding a sense of Iraqi nationhood and one much more difficult to recover from than broken roads and power plants.

The most important source for understanding cultural institutions and libraries in Iraq has to be the online diary kept by the director of the Iraq National Archive and Library (INLA), Saad Eskander, during 2006 and 2007 (Eskander,
This diary has been widely published and circulated in other media, including both the general press and library publications (Landgraf, 2007). In addition to describing the daily life and working concerns of a contemporary Iraqi professional, the document also reveals the challenges facing INLA. In January 2007, the author described how INLA was suffering from a combination of physical damage and demoralized, frightened staff:

I visited the Restoration Laboratory [of INLA]. It was hit by 5 bullets. Two windows were broken as a result. One of the restorers told me that her brother was murdered ten days ago for sectarian reasons. Another restorer told me that his cousin, who lived in Mosul, in northern Iraq, was also murdered for sectarian reasons. I did not know about these two incidents. I discovered that a number of my staff do not inform the administration about their ordeals for fear of reprisals (Eskander, 2007)

This illustrates how precarious the situation in Baghdad remained almost four years after the Coalition invasion. The lack of security for civilians significantly affects the Library's ability to function, as staff are often unable to come to work. This discussion also underscores the importance of staff to the institution, a point that is sometimes lost in foreign aid discourse. This neglect may be due to donors serving their own goals rather than those of the people of Iraq; donors in wealthy, stable countries often prefer to donate funds for new buildings (which can then bear their name permanently or house recognition walls), regardless of whether is this most urgent need. Improving library service in a context where foreign donors control many of the resources is a problem in Iraq, and other contexts.

Eskander's diary also explores one aspect of rebuilding libraries that is often difficult for outsiders to understand: how reconstruction fits into more general political concerns. Eskander reports on meeting with representatives of the Ministry of Culture, in efforts to improve everything from the security situation to obtaining a reliable electrical service. The diary gives the impression that this is a difficult task. This discussion also illustrates that cultural services such as libraries require other conditions – such as physical infrastructure and basic security – in order to function properly. Reconstruction of a building alone will not be very effective if broader supports are not present.

If the day-to-day administration of the INLA is disconcerting and dangerous, Eskander compensates for this by expressing his vision for the future. In his view, Iraqi libraries have an important role to play in building a liberal and democratic Iraqi nation (Edwards and Edwards, 2008). His argument made not be immediately clear: while libraries have long been positioned as institutions enforcing democracy in Anglophone countries, especially the United States, this is not obviously true in countries that are teetering on the edge of failed state status such as Iraq. Edwards and Edwards (2008) have made the argument that libraries play a crucial role in supporting the “imagined community” that constitutes the modern nation.
The relevance of this national identity approach is especially salient – the Iraqi nation only dates back to the 1920s. In the aftermath of the First World War, Iraq was created out of three provinces of the Ottoman Empire that had little more than geography in common. Creating a national identity to keep this new entity coherent is a difficult task that has required a variety of approaches. One such method employed by the British administration in 1920-1921 was the creation of a national library and archive to collect and make available materials that would, out of whole cloth ex post, provide evidence of Iraq’s long history as a nation (Edwards and Edwards, 2008). The colonial origins of the INLA make Eskander’s task of mobilizing to create a new Iraq even more difficult. The original British project of dramatically expanding the Iraqi school system and related institutions such as libraries – in order to obtain skilled administrators – had the unintended consequence of creating a large, literate populace that soon protested the British presence as oppressive. Independence came to Iraq in 1932, marked a long period of political turmoil until the rise of the Ba’ath Party to power in 1968. It is unclear whether Eskander can succeed in recasting the INLA as a democratic institution that stresses access, literacy and freedom, rather than one that perpetuates oppression and control.

The success or failure of liberal democratic role for libraries in post-2003 Iraq is likely to rest on several factors. In order to engage citizens in any meaningful way, the institutions and staff must be able to operate in security so that people can visit without being afraid. The library sector also requires extensive partnerships with educators as that sector tends to be larger and has greater penetration across the country. In order to pursue this option, Iraqi libraries may have to rethink their role as educators – which is well supported – rather than culture which is comparatively weakly supported. (Edwards and Edwards, 2008). Finally, Iraqi libraries may need to undertake a major advocacy campaign where they share their vision with voters and government officials in a calculated fashion rather than simply demanding the country’s leaders for failing to pay attention to the role of the library (Edwards and Edwards, 2008).

Conclusion

In considering these three case studies, it is has been shown that the destruction of libraries is not simply another form of collateral damage during conflict. To varying degrees, the targeting or neglect of libraries in conflict has had important consequences. In Bosnia, destroying libraries in Sarajevo was part of a more general campaign of extreme genocidal nationalism where any traces or symbols of a peaceful, multi-ethnic society were viewed as threatening. In Afghanistan, the Taliban regime was likewise concerned with pursuing a vision of purity that involved manipulation of cultural institutions and the imposition of strict censorship. The situation in Iraq shows that libraries have long played a role in defining the nation and how their collapse contributes to a much
weaker sense of national identity. Although libraries can be thought of as repositories of cultural artifacts such as books, their fate in times of war ultimately shows that they are even more important as symbols of community, culture and history.

Whether libricide is reversible, and the conditions under which this can be accomplished are questions for further research. While rare books cannot be recovered, the institutions themselves can be rebuilt and put into service again. This process is not simply a matter of funding or will; rather the role of these institutions in post-conflict societies is a political question requiring negotiation and compromise. The case of Bosnia shows how libraries play a role in supporting a peaceful multi-ethnic society. Afghanistan – and to a lesser extent Iraq – provide a window to understanding the other side of libraries in conflict: how and why are they rebuilt? In both cases, libraries are serving multiple goals simultaneously – rebuilding a sense of broken national community, aiding in educational efforts, providing access to modern information and communications technologies and more. Some of these goals are imposed in a less than thoughtful manner by well meaning but poorly informed donors while locals struggle to rebuild, despite poor security, inconsistent training and few resources. These three cases of libricide shows the vital social role libraries play in society and how their destruction can rapidly destroy the intangible ideas that hold states together.
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