

Libraries in War, Civil Unrest, or Political Upheaval

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“The destruction of libraries in the twentieth century has been an ideological weapon, a tool used against groups” (Valencia 2002:5).

The destruction of libraries and other information repositories, particularly during war, civil unrest or political upheaval, dates back to the naissance of these institutions. The famous Royal Library of Alexandria, Egypt, founded in the 3rd century BC under Ptolemy II, was likely destroyed through intentional human action, though the historical record describing dates and perpetrators remains contentious. According to Prescott, the creation and destruction of the Alexandrian collection exemplified a new recognition of knowledge as, “a form of power to be contained and hoarded like treasure” (2005). Around the same time, books and scholars deemed undesirable by Emperor Shi Huangdi were eliminated. Since then a succession of devastation has plagued libraries and archives throughout the world, including: the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, circa 11th century; Glastonbury Abbey in Britain, 1539; the Library of Congress, 1814 (Prescott 2005); the Hanlin Academic Library in China (Davis & Cheng 1997); the Catholic University of Louvain Library, 1914, 1940 (Prescott 2005); the Commercial Press and the Oriental Library, PRC, 1932; the Angevin Archives in Naples, 1943 (Zgonjanin 2005:131-132); Jaffna Library, Tamil, 1981; the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarejevo, 1992; the Hakim Nasser Khosrow Balkhi Cultural Centre, Afghanistan, 1998; and most recently, the National Library and Archives of Iraq and the Library of the Korans, Baghdad, 2003 (Prescott 2005). The blame for the latter event is under dispute (the Iraqis claim the US army is responsible and vice versa).

A most perceptive and theoretically astute read on this topic is Miriam Valencia’s “Libraries, Nationalism, and Armed Conflict in the Twentieth Century” (2002). In emphasizing the cultural rather than merely informational value of libraries, particularly with regard to collective memory, Valencia explains the historical prevalence of attacks on libraries, and provides a strong argument for their protection. Citing Halbwachs (1997), and Hastings (1997), she argues that group identity and culture are products of communication, and that in cultures founded at least in part on written communication, collections of text come to embody the collective memory of that group, providing an experiential record on which to bind the

community and guide subsequent action (Valencia 2002:2-3). Such canonizations may also be used to differentiate cultural groups and/or prove their self-determination or occupation of a given area of land. Unfortunately, what this means is that libraries themselves, alongside museums, archives, and art galleries, come to be seen as symbols and central organs of a given culture and thus incendiary magnets for genocidal aggressors (Zgonjanin 2005:128). As Boylan reports, “some of the greatest losses in recent armed conflicts have been the result of deliberate damage and destruction of cultural evidence of the existence of enemy, or indeed just different peoples” (1993:9 as cited in Valencia 2002:4). Most often xenophobic assailants deem the destruction of cultural records imperative to an irreversible re-writing of history, free of competing ideas (Prescott 2005:40), though Valencia points out that in some instances, such as the Nazi’s seizing and reordering of Jewish texts, appropriation is the preferred tactic (2002:6). Such instances, where libraries are created for purposes that most would consider malevolent, vividly undermine their popular characterization as neutral providers of information. Throughout her article Valencia acknowledges this political and sometimes sinister quality of information and its provision, yet cautions that this must never excuse the destruction of libraries, no matter the iniquity of their original *raison d’être*.

Some effort has been made to protect cultural property through international laws and agreements. However, according to Zgonjanin (2005), an absence of special provisions for libraries and archives, and a failure to enforce these laws through prosecutions has left libraries little better off. She argues that the comprehensive devastation usually associated with armed conflict submerges the visibility of the injustices suffered by libraries (129). What results are outcomes similar to that in Sarajevo, where the UN decided to reconstruct the Old Bridge in Mostar rather than the National University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which sits in rubble (140). In suggesting in his letter of resignation an inexcusability on the part of the US in defending the aforementioned library in Baghdad, Martin Sullivan, the former Chairman of the President’s Advisory Committee on Cultural Property, raises the possibility that responsibility for the protection of cultural property does not rest exclusively with the perpetrator (Zgonjanin 2005:140-141), but also with those capable of preventing damage.

In light of the relative fragility of international law, Valencia prescribes two ways to thwart attacks on libraries, both of which may be initiated by librarians. One is the creation of union catalogues housed in multiple locations and/or designed to facilitate mobility. This

provides at the very least a record of what was once available; preservation of this record both assists with reconstruction and shields victim cultures from complete erasure. Obviously, advances in information technology since the publication of Valencia's article may facilitate maintenance of more than union catalogues; depending on scanning resources, full text electronic copies are a possibility. The other approach places libraries and librarians in a role as educators of pluralism: "education which encourages respect for cultural property and for different groups and cultures is the clearest way to safeguard both the cultural institutions which are in danger, and the lives of those to whom they belong" (Valencia 2002:12).

In addition to the threat of physical destruction or appropriation of information services, war and unrest sometimes provoke implementation of political and legal sanctions against the free flow of information. In a conference presentation transcription entitled, "Intellectual Freedom: A Casualty of War?", Geoffrey Stone and Floyd Abrams (2005) summarize the historically oscillating presence of US acts and programs which suppressed access to information and eroded civil liberties under the pretext of national security. Generally, Stone and Adams believe that the US administration's temptation to directly censor has diminished since the Sedition Act 1798; however, other means of control are still practiced, as exemplified by Section 215 of the Patriot Act, which grants the government unlimited authority to access or seize records, such as library patron and circulation data (247-252). Of conceptual import here is the way in which the perceived threat of condemnation may mask the actual extent and degree of information suppression; that is, the ostentatious conviction of a handful of examples may induce fear around information seeking such that the absence of subsequent prosecutions is not indicative of an absence of suppression.

On a very different note, libraries may sometimes provide entertainment for troops during wars, as described by Kathy Souers (2004).

Wars, civil unrest, and political upheaval continue to threaten the very existence of libraries and information centres. Although the legal community is making efforts to condemn the destruction of libraries, perpetrators are seldom brought to justice, and even if they were, the library would still be a casualty. Therefore, librarians and information specialists must continue their creative efforts to avoid or mitigate loss, and to improve the efficacy of rebuilding efforts.

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