The deliberate destruction of libraries in wartime: Sarajevo and beyond

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> Twenty-five mortar shells struck the building, along with forty shells that were dropped on nearby streets in order to prevent the fire department from reaching the library…The next day the sky was dark with smoke, while across the city, pages and small bits of burned books sailed through the air…Over 1,200,000 books and 600,000 serials, as well as all the catalogs that had been constructed over the course of years, computer equipment, microfilm and photo labs, and administrative documents, were all burned.[1]

Those words were written by Munevera Zeco, a Bosnian librarian, shortly after escaping the still-besieged city of Sarajevo in 1995. It is unfortunate that the same words could be describing any number of libraries during a wide range of wars over the years, including some conflicts that are still going on.

Why are libraries targets?
There are a number of reasons libraries become targets during times of war, conflict, and regime change. Sometimes they are simply collateral damage, in the wrong place at the wrong time. Often, in the chaos of wartime, they become convenient targets for looters and other opportunists. Worst of all is when they are deliberately targeted as part of a systematic destruction of a community's collective knowledge. This article will look at the destruction of libraries and similar institutions during the recent war in Yugoslavia, the efforts to protect such institutions during war, and various attempts to re-build them afterwards.

The destruction of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina in August of 1992 was just one of a number of tragedies during that particular conflict. On the Bosnian Muslim (or Bosniak) side, the reason for the library's destruction is clear: it was part of a coordinated effort to eradicate their culture and destroy evidence of their history in that region.

By 1992, Croatia and Serbia had made peace with each other, and the conflict shifted to Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was perceived by the Bosniaks that the joint goals of both other countries was to divide their land between them, with nothing left for the Bosnian Muslims.

The siege of Sarajevo began in April of that year, and soon several important Islamic cultural institutions were damaged or leveled. On May 17, 1992, the Oriental Institute in Sarajevo was destroyed by shelling, with the loss of a significant amount of valuable material. The archives of the Institute contained, among other things, a variety of civil

and judicial documents dating back more than 400 years. A large number of deeds were also destroyed, and more than 10,000 published works in the Institute's library were lost.

As a result of these losses, when the shelling of the National Library began on August 25, 1992, it was seen by many as just another step in a deliberate effort to destroy all evidence of Bosniak civilization and culture in the region. Through the valiant efforts of library staff, some documents were rescued from the building. However, for two days the fires burned and the damage was severe, with as much as 90% of the library's books and manuscripts being destroyed.. In addition to the loss of most of their collection, the building itself, an historical pseudo-Moorish building from 1896 and one of the highlights of the city, was severely damaged.

After the destruction of the Library, the war continued for another three years. Library staff in Sarajevo continued to try and offer access to their collection from other locations in the city, but it was difficult. During the whole course of the conflict, four library staff members lost their lives, mostly through sniper fire.

The deliberate destruction of libraries, civic records, and cultural institutions was commonplace during the period of conflict in Yugoslavia, and was not confined to Sarajevo. On December 6, 1991, the University Centre in Dubrovnik, Croatia was severely burned. The library of this 19th-century building was destroyed in the fire. Many other cultural institutions, museums, and similar places were damaged or destroyed across Croatia.

In addition, a significant number of books and collections in private hands were either destroyed or plundered during the war. There are reports that some collections were taken back to Belgrade as part of a deliberate plan to enrich the Serbian National Library.

Of course, it should be noted that as in the case of any conflict, there is some dispute over the facts and motivations when it comes to identifying why a particular place was targeted. For example, some Serbs claimed that the destruction of the Oriental Institute and National Library during the siege of Sarajevo was accidental. However, reports by outside agencies indicate that the Serbs were in possession of highly precise military maps, and the concentration of shelling on these locations seems hardly accidental.[2]

It is libraries role as social instrument, cultural centre, and place of records that makes them such high value targets in wartime. Libraries can be a strong source of social change and a focus of community identity. Nationalistic wars like the ones we saw in the former Yugoslavia require not just the displacement or killing of peoples, but also the destruction of any records that show the history of those peoples on that land.

Pre-emptive solutions
There is only so much that can be done before or during a conflict to alleviate the kind of damage we saw in the former Yugoslavia. International treaties and declarations can help focus attention on the situation, but when the guns start firing they may have little actual

weight. The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, signed by Yugoslavia in 1956 and Croatia in 1992, has specific clauses about the protection of library and archival collections. However, this did not stop the apparent deliberate targeting of these types of materials during the war.

One benefit of the age of digitization is that library materials – particularly rare or unique items – can be preemptively copied and distributed to ensure that at least something remains if the originals are destroyed. This can hardly make up for the physical destruction of collections or buildings, but at least means some sort of documentation can be saved. Currently, there is a project underway supervised by University of Arizona librarian Atifa R. Rawan to digitize records at the Afghanistan Centre in Kabul University.[3] After decades of war, Taliban rule, and general neglect, this is a much needed project to preserve documents in Afghanistan's libraries, some of which were badly damaged in the most recent conflict. Of course, one hopes that the original documents and libraries themselves will not be in any future danger, but at least this kind of digitization project increases the chance that the information will not be lost. There are a few other international digitization efforts out there to disseminate this type of material, including various projects being done through The European Library, of which the national libraries of both Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are involved.

Post-conflict reconstruction
After a conflict, there is nothing that can be done to bring back unique items that were destroyed. As a result, archives, museums, and records centers, with their largely irreplaceable material, are often in a worse situation than libraries. Of course, this does not mean that replacing a library collection from scratch is easy, particularly when the material may have been part of a special collection, and rare or irreplaceable itself.

Aid to rebuild the library in Sarajevo was pledged from Unesco and other organizations even before the conflict ended. However, it has been a slow process. The National Library now operates out of a new location, while the original historical building is still under repair. As of my site visit in September 2007, the windows were still boarded up and scorch marks visible outside, 15 years after the start of the conflict. The roof and atrium have been largely rebuilt, and money is still coming in. In October of 2007 Spain pledged one million euros to the building's repair, adding to the funds already spent and pledged. It is hoped by many in that the National Library that they can soon move back into their historic home.

Other groups have been involved in post-conflict reconstruction across Yugoslavia. The Soros Foundation, through various agencies such as the International Science Foundation and the Open Society Institute, provided books, journal subscriptions, needs assessments, and training in many libraries in the region.

Lessons for the future

Unfortunately, the targeting and destruction libraries in wartime continues. In both Iraq and Afghanistan libraries, museums, and archives have been destroyed or looted over the last six years. People such as Saad Eskander, director of the Iraq National Library and Archive in Baghdad, have brought attention to the plight of libraries in that country. But ultimately, it is only once the fighting has stopped that the reconstruction can begin.

It is up to librarians and library associations to do what they can to protect documents before a conflict, support them during a conflict, and rebuild afterwards. While the loss of any number of books cannot compare with the loss of a human life, it is important to remember that libraries are often targeted in war specifically with the goal of eliminating a people's history, culture, and evidence of civilization.

1. Zeco, M. (1996). The national and university library of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the current war. *Library Quarterly, 66*(3), 294.

2. Council of Europe (1994). Fourth information report on war damage to the cultural heritage in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (Doc. 6999).

3. Librarian Leading UA Effort to Build Afghanistan's Libraries <http://uanews.org/node/19718>

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