

Cultural Property in Times of Conflict

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At the end of WWII, in March 1946, the Allied Military occupation government of Germany established the Offenbach Archival Depot which was tasked with recovering, identifying, and restoring stolen cultural property to its country of origin, including library and manuscript collections, and Judaic related materials (Rothfield 2005). The Depot closed in 1949 and by that time had handled more than 3.2 million items in over thirty-five languages. (Ibid) To this day, there are still questions of "heirless" and "unidentifiable" Nazi loot being housed in American library collections (Ibid).

The massive problems of identification and returning property after WWII made it necessary to create a set of rules to safeguard cultural treasure during wartime. This first set of interventions with international cooperation was created in 1954 in The Hague. There have since been many more conflicts and these have severely tested the initial agreement. In this paper I will look at these recent conflicts and how the international community has responded to them.

Umberto Eco (2003) spoke at the newly opened Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Cairo, Egypt and said:

Libraries, over the centuries, have been the most important way of keeping our collective wisdom. They were and still are a sort of universal brain where we can retrieve what we have forgotten and what we still do not know. If you will allow me to use such a metaphor, a library is the best possible imitation, by human beings, of a divine mind, where the whole universe is viewed and understood at the same time. A person able to store in his or her mind the information provided by a great library would emulate in some way the mind of God. In other words, we have invented libraries because we try to do our best to imitate them (p.1).

The worst enemy of Libraries is the fanaticism of either or both of the warring parties, especially if one of the goals of the conflict is to rid a country of objectionable religious or cultural material or thinking. Another is a lack of vision of individuals or a government. Added to this is the general feeling that Libraries are not a high priority in times of war, despite the 1954 UNESCO convention for the protection of cultural property. The final blow to Libraries occurs during "The fog of war" when niceties are put aside and all hell breaks loose.

A review of the current literature in the field does not paint a pretty picture of what happens to people and cultural heritage in times of war. Furthermore the safeguards in existence do not guarantee protection for either people or books. These agreements are better suited for preparing a country for war and re-building it afterwards. During the actual conflict there seems to be no guarantee that animosities will be kept in check and that libraries, books and monuments will be spared. For example, a CNN driver currently in Lebanon surveying the mass exodus of civilians towards the north remarks, "Should we put CNN on top of the car? Does that make us less of a target, or more of one" (CNN Online).

One of the protections that countries have in the event of war is the 1954 Hague convention which was drafted as a result of the destruction of cultural property in WWII. Basically countries read the rules and sign on and agree to the terms. The agreement covers the totality of a country's cultural heritage. It is worth noting that of the 100 signers listed, Afghanistan and Palestine are absent as of July 16, 2006 while Iraq, Romania and Bosnia and Herzegovina have signed.

Some of the key provisions are that countries can register cultural property such as buildings into an international list of protected items. Buildings and monuments can also be marked with special emblems, such as a blue shield. There are also provisions to prevent the export of property from occupied territory and violators of any of the rules can face penalties.

Despite the Hague convention, destruction of cultural property continued in the 1980's and 90's. The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina broke out in April 1992 because "Bosnian Serbs [who] refused to acknowledge the sovereignty of the multiethnic Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and who wished to create a separate, all Serb republic within the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina" (Zeco 1996, p. 296).

The Bosnian Serb forces set out to destroy all Islamic cultural institutions in Bosnia-Herzegovina. They succeeded in bringing down the Oriental Institute, which according to the author was "one of the major research centers for the study of the Balkans, [and] represents an irreplaceable loss (Zeco 1996, p. 297).

The National and University library was fondly called "Vijecnica" a pseudo-Moorish structure built during the Austro-Hungarian rule. It had been the home of generations of students and scholars and was a symbol of the city of Sarajevo and attracted tourists from all over the world. This did not save it from regular shelling and sniper fire. Librarian Ms. Prastalo recounts how one night, the library was ransacked and although piles of periodicals were left untouched, her computer, typewriter, phone and drawers were removed. The author remarks that "It was obvious what kind of thieves were "cleansing" the library" (Prastalo 1997, p. 96). Eventually the library was destroyed and its treasures burned. The author laments that "great treasures of human knowledge were gone for good" (Ibid, p. 97).

During this time The National and University library remained open despite an increasingly chaotic situation. While many fled the city, others stayed behind despite the danger and lack of transportation. Library employees were under the "obligatory" work rule which meant that after three days absence, an employee could be dismissed (Prastalo 1997). The library was hit several times by shelling and sniper fire while the employees were in the building, including the author.

It is worth noting that "during these years, the National Library had established international contacts with its peer libraries around the world, playing its full part as a member of IFLA" (Prastalo 1997, p. 99).

The ethnic cleansing carried out by Bosnian Serb forces was also the agenda of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 1992 when they destroyed the Hakim Nasser Khosrow Balkhi Cultural Center and adjoining library in Kabul. According to Library Director Latif Pedram, "It's my impression that they knew what they were doing and that there was a plan" (Loving 2002, p.69). This institution represented everything that the Taliban disdained. It was a truly democratic place open to all regardless of race or religion and also contained a rich collection of Persian artifacts. "Written into the founding charter were strict rules forbidding proselytizing or bringing exterior conflicts into this sanctuary of culture and learning" (Ibid, p.70). The library also admitted both men and women.

According to former Library Director Pedram, the Taliban wished to rid Afghanistan of all Persian roots because they are Pashtun and "they also had a religious argument against Persian based on their definition of Islam" (Loving 2002, p.71).

A different kind of destruction befell Romania's libraries in the form of 45 years of Communism and cold war. A once rich library tradition fell to neglect by uncaring rulers, a stagnant economy, low literary output, censorship, and a general disdain for librarianship.

Angela Popescu-Bradicieni (cited in Angheliescu, 2001), the director of the central state library explains that under communism all professional associations were outlawed in Romania because of the government's paranoia, therefore the Romanian library association ceased to exist. Angheliescu (2001) also reveals that "Romania's presence at IFLA conferences was only sporadic due to spending cuts" (p. 237).

Angheliescu (2001) also says that "the low prestige of the library as an institution stemmed from the fact that "Romania's party and government leaders had not made use of the libraries themselves, their education being limited to a thorough knowledge of the text of Marxism and Leninism" (p. 238). The final blow to Romanian Libraries under communism was that they did not produce revenue so they were not shown favored status.

McMahon and Withers (2003) write of Bucharest that "the national library has become a symbol of the political infighting and personal interests that permeate nearly every aspect of Romanian life." (p. 30). There hasn't been enough money to complete the library and it has variously been earmarked to be administrative offices or the library. The latest decision is that it will be a library. Unfortunately, the 1,124 acre plot over which these disputes take place will never again be the reason Bucharest was once called the "Paris of the East". The 7000 historic buildings which used to be there were bulldozed by Ceausescu.

The continued destruction of cultural treasure worldwide, especially in those countries aforementioned, necessitated a review of the original Hague convention in 1991 and in 1999 a second protocol was adopted. The Second Protocol is better written and clearer and includes a new category of cultural property under Enhanced Protection. "It also establishes an Intergovernmental Committee responsible mainly for supervising the implementation of the Convention and the Second Protocol, and an International Fund for the Protection of Cultural Heritage" (ICBS Homepage).

Another organization which serves to protect cultural property is The Blue Shield which came into existence in 1996 and is the cultural equivalent of the Red Cross. Their work is to protect the world's cultural heritage threatened by wars and natural disasters. This is accomplished by co-coordinating preparations to meet and respond to emergency situations (ICBS Homepage). The organization is also recognized by the Second Protocol to the Hague Convention, and advises the inter-governmental Committee for Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.

The Blue Shield relies on cooperation internationally and on the local level. Committees are being formed in a number of countries and consist of people of different professions, local and national government, the emergency services and the armed forces. They provide a forum for them to improve emergency preparedness by sharing experiences and exchanging information. They provide a focus for raising national awareness of the threats to cultural heritage. They promote the ratification and implementation by national governments of the Hague Convention (ICBS Homepage).

ICBS is formed by four non-governmental organizations: ICA (ica@ica.org) which is the International Council on Archives, ICOM (<http://icom.museum/>) International Council of Museums, ICOMOS (<http://www.international.icomos.org/>) International Council on Monuments and Sites and IFLA (<http://www.ifla.org/>) International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (ICBS Homepage).

UNESCO launched its "Memory of the World" project in 1997 as an offshoot of UNESCO's World Heritage Program and is based on the same principles, though it does not have a signed convention. An international advisory committee meets every two years to choose documents of universal

interest and put them on a register, which now contains 47 documents from 26 countries, including China's historical archives, Copernicus' manuscript in which he described his theory that the Earth revolved round the Sun, as well as the manuscripts of the composer Chopin (L'Homme 1999, p.14).

"IFLA (The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) is the leading international body representing the interests of library and information services and their users. It is the global voice of the library and information profession" (IFLA Homepage).

The IFLA homepage at <http://www.ifla.org/VI/4/admin/icbs-iraq.htm> has a link listing how they have been helping different countries re-build their information infrastructure. There is help for Iraq and Romania currently listed and what the help consists of and who is doing the donating.

When libraries are damaged and destroyed during war, there are many consequences. Old and rare works are destroyed and can never be replaced. Library buildings and monuments that lend a certain charm to a city or town are lost. Buildings also contain many memories of those who have visited. This oral history, waiting to be written down might never be due to death and hopelessness. Scores of workers in these buildings have no protection from the shelling and continue to work.

It is for this reason countries must take preventive measures. This includes a written disaster plan together with "strong cooperation between the different actors of the response and recovery team (including the Army and the Civil Defense)" (ICBS Homepage). The important work being done by these organizations must continue and they must be supported. I was surprised to learn that many people have never heard of these organizations and would suggest that all libraries request posters from these groups to post in their libraries as a way to inform the public of their existence.

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