

Librarianship in times of conflict

The article considers the work of libraries and archives in a broad historical and contemporary context of conflict and war. Destroying libraries has been part of warfare for millennia, and so has the looting of great written treasures. The article looks at the impact of current conflicts on people's access to books and reading, and efforts to protect and restore libraries and create opportunities to read, from Afghanistan to Cameroon, Mali to Serbia and Ukraine to Iraq.

Keywords

libraries; archives; conflict; war; heritage

Introduction

Libraries and archives are the stores and treasure houses of the world's knowledge. Libraries and archives preserve for posterity the learning and creativity of scholars, scribes, recorders, poets, dramatists, novelists, scientists and writers of all kinds: in all the written languages known to humanity, including some that are even now undeciphered. Libraries contain the memory of the world and sustain our identity. They provide food for learning and evidence for understanding. Latent within them is the potential for discovery and debate, fraud and proof, in support of the greatest good and the most transcendent creations of the spirit, and also for misunderstanding, evil, abuse and deception.

In times of conflict, libraries and archives become all too often the targets of partisan attack by those who seek to bring human inheritance to ruin, or simply to abuse and misuse it. There are few, if any, parts of the world where libraries have not been vulnerable at some time in their history; and too many places in the modern world where they are under threat right now. Yet reading is also a source of solace and escape, consolation, discovery and renewal, most especially in times of conflict.

Reading changes lives, and libraries make that possible, for children and students in schools, universities and communities all over the world, from the poorest to the most privileged. The travails that so many nations and cultural groups have endured to rescue and preserve the libraries of the world, against all threats, make up a heroic and often unrecorded history.

I am a historian by training, and have been during my career a museum curator, archivist and administrator of university and national libraries; and as University Librarian at Yale and then head of Somerville College Oxford, answerable to great scholarly organizations. I take a close interest in questions affecting international heritage, and the role of libraries and archives in education and public life.

Representing the British Library and then Yale University Library in the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) I chaired its Rare Books and Manuscripts section in the 1990s, when it included librarians from over 20 different countries, from China to Scandinavia to Africa and Latin America. As Yale University Librarian, 2001–2010, I also joined efforts by North American research libraries to promote the digitization of cultural heritage and to create partnerships between libraries and other heritage organizations, building up digital libraries for access around the world.

Today, I also serve as Chair of the Board of Trustees for Book Aid International, a charity which works for a world where everyone has the chance to read. As part of its work, Book Aid International restores library collections that have been lost to conflict, and where



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2 libraries cannot be restored finds other ways to create the opportunity to read for people living with or fleeing conflict. I include the charity's work here because it reminds us of the importance of access to books during and after conflict.

This article will touch on some of the repeated challenges that libraries and librarians have faced over the centuries and particularly today, from the international sphere to the local. Why does the written inheritance matter so much to people, even and especially in times of hardship and conflict? How can it be used both for good and in malign ways? What do we lose when war and conflict cause the destruction of irreplaceable documentary heritage?

IFLA supports this work all over the world. My own close association with IFLA through the British Library and then Yale came during the 1990s and the early years of this century, a time of wars including those in Kosovo, Serbia and Iraq, and of continuing assaults by radical terrorist groups. I was a member, and then chair, of the Rare Books and Manuscripts section, drawn from some 20 or more nationalities.

I have also had the rare privilege of responsibility for some great international collections, some dating back for millennia. That meant curating materials with disputed ownership, and confronting claims of restitution for past looting. It also entailed a responsibility to care for the heritage of other countries and civilizations, whatever their route into the world's great research libraries might have been, to ensure that the material survived in good condition and was made available to all who wished to see it. For the custodians of international collections, that obligation to ensure the collections' survival and make them accessible for all to see is paramount.

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The assault on culture during the Second World War

The overwhelming example of attacks on libraries comes from the period of the Second World War and the years leading up to it: in the Far East, under the assault of the Japanese armies and occupying administrations, and during the Nazi era in Europe. Especially between 1939 and 1945, the bombing, looting, systematic removal and sheer destruction of museums, libraries and archives across many parts of the world reached levels surpassing the worst nightmares of those who cared about books, reading and records, wherever they were.

In Europe the effect of theft, confiscations and forced sales of the property of Jewish families by the Nazi regime in Germany from 1933 onwards, and throughout Europe by their invading armies and occupying administrations between 1939 and 1945, haunts us still. The work of restoring looted works of art, books and artefacts to their rightful owners, wherever they can be found, or 'Holocaust restitution', undertaken by governments and cultural organizations began even as the German armies were retreating at the end of the Second World War and can never be completed. Nor can we grasp adequately the extent of permanent loss. It is estimated that over 100 million books were destroyed during the Holocaust period, and millions of archival and manuscript collections. It has been the life's work of some researchers to compile detailed lists of material that has been lost, but no certain record could ever be made, as Lynn H. Nicholas makes clear in her seminal book, *The Rape of Europa*.¹

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This is not the place to revisit the vast scholarly literature that has grown up over the years on Nazi spoliation and the world's subsequent attempts at rebuilding and restoration. No short account could do justice to it. Attacks on libraries and archives by the Nazis in Europe during the Second World War were paralleled in the East by systematic destruction undertaken by the armies of Japan. In both cases the aggressors' intention was to destroy the indigenous culture of the populations they wished to colonize. This tragic history prefigured subsequent assaults, and an ineradicable awareness of those atrocities and those times lingers when we contemplate the horrors perpetrated in more recent times.

3 It is therefore helpful to remember the work of librarians, archivists and curators, those people charged with the preservation of threatened treasures, in combating the threats. One success story is that of the great collector of documentation on European antisemitism, Alfred Wiener.² With great foresight, he took his personal library to Amsterdam in 1933 and thence to London, where it opened to researchers on 1 September 1939, the day when Nazi Germany invaded Poland: thus saving for posterity one of the world's great treasure troves for the study of the Holocaust.

While the Second World War was raging, the governments of the United States and Britain both set up specialist committees and charged them with tracking down looted material and advising how to protect it. The Manuscripts, Fine Arts and Archives (MFAA) unit of the joint armies commissioned maps showing the targets that Allied bombers must avoid and sent their men ahead of the liberating armies. This was dangerous work, and at least two soldiers of the MFAA, which was not much more than one hundred strong in total, lost their lives.

A British archivist seeking out endangered archives in Italy wrote back to his boss Sir Hilary Jenkinson, the Deputy Keeper of Public Records (i.e. national archivist) about the Italians' dedication to protecting their local communal records. One elderly canon had hidden away his chapter archives, along with the skeleton of the founder, and slept alongside them when the bombing was at its height. When asked how he put up with it, he simply replied 'Why my archives and my people were here'.³

The preservation of materials outside their country of origin

To move away from the destruction and savagery of the Holocaust period, but focusing still on international inheritances, we can take just two cases of material taken in war time and then cared for in centuries of peace.

The British Library along with some other great libraries (e.g. at the Metropolitan Museum in New York) holds collections of beautiful illustrated manuscripts from the Armenian diaspora. They date back close to the time when King Trdat (or Tiridates) III established Christianity as the religion of his kingdom more than 1700 years ago. It was the first nation state to adopt Christianity as its national religion. At the start of the twenty-first century, Armenia had been a state again for just ten years, following centuries of upheaval and persecution, and the dispersal of Armenian people and their inheritances across the world.

In 2000, The British Library mounted a landmark exhibition of Armenian manuscripts and artefacts, which remains a highlight in my personal memories of working at the library. The leading dignitaries representing Armenia in the UK attended the exhibition opening. They included an archbishop and an ambassador and former prime minister. 'Seventeen hundred years ago we were a nation', they said. 'We used to carry our manuscripts into battle before us. Since then Armenia has suffered many reverses, and now we are a nation again. We thank you for preserving our heritage and displaying it to the world'. (Paraphrased from Dr Prochaska's personal recollection.)

The British Library also possesses some rare Ethiopic manuscripts, dramatic examples of medieval north African devotional work, with illustrations that bring the stories of the Bible to life. (I use the term Ethiopic to cover the lands that now form the region covered by modern Ethiopia and Eritrea. National borders were more fluid in the nineteenth century.) They had been gathered together (or confiscated) from the monasteries in his domains by the emperor Tewodros II in the mid nineteenth century. In 1868, after the battle of Magdala, the British expeditionary force which had been sent to rescue a group of Protestant missionaries who were being held hostage, looted the emperor's palace and carried away the manuscripts and other treasures. These are the core of the Ethiopic collection now held by the British Library.

For decades they have been the subject of repeated claims for restitution, made with particular force by one of the several distinct Rastafarian communities, who hold sacred the memory of Ethiopia's last emperor, Haile Selassie. But opinions are divided, even within Ethiopia, because national resources to care for these rare treasures are scarce, and the region is subject to repeated bouts of armed conflict. While held in London, the argument goes, these icons of

- 4 Ethiopic culture have been kept safe, carefully conserved and stored in ideal conditions, made available for scholars and anyone else who wishes to see them, with examples displayed in the library's public gallery for visitors from all over the world to see, and now also digitized. The collection forms an international monument to the proud civilization of earlier generations of north African scribes and artists, and a great resource for further study.

No modern librarian or curator would condone looting. Increasingly the contested origin of library and museum collections dominates debates about cultural exchange and the modern representation and display of collections that were acquired in times of conflict. There are countless examples, throughout Europe and North America, of unique treasures created over millennia, which have found their way into museums and libraries outside their regions of origin. They have arrived either legitimately through purchase and gift, or by more dubious means including loot and have been carefully preserved. But some are now subject to fierce contests over their ownership.

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Library destruction as a means of cultural obliteration

Sometimes, as in Nazi Germany, a profoundly sinister motivation accounts for the wilful destruction of libraries. Both Nazi Germany and the Japanese armies in World War II were seeking to destroy the cultural memory and thus the identity of a whole nation or ethnic group. This motive still threatens the libraries where the identity of a people or nation under attack has been preserved, in many cases, for centuries.

Some relatively recent examples, from all too many around the world, illustrate the threats to international libraries and learning that can arise from the will to obliterate another culture. These are the deliberate destruction of the Bosnian national library in Sarajevo by Serbian forces in 1992, and the heroic defence of the ancient Islamic manuscript collections of Timbuktu against the destructive attempts of ideologically motivated terrorists in Mali in central Africa, a story that is still unfolding. We are dealing here with irreplaceable loss and threats of loss on a national and international scale.

The catastrophic loss of national culture and memory in Bosnia is described by Richard Ovenden in his striking historical study of attacks on libraries from ancient times to the present day, *Burning the Books*.⁴ He describes how the Serbian forces deliberately targeted the libraries and archives of Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital, and reduced to ashes the National and University Library's irreplaceable collection of unique manuscripts, archives and works of art as well as the national collection of books on 26 August 1992.

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The attempts to save the books and manuscripts of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina
Photo: © Emil Grebenar. With thanks to SniperAlley

5 The librarians and curators fought heroically alongside the firefighters, and the director of the national museum Dr Rizo Sjaric was killed by a grenade blast. They put their own lives at risk in a vain attempt to rescue this great national and international heritage from the flames. It is a moving episode in a history that is often presented as just a footnote to that of precious artefacts or great monuments in stone that have been destroyed or reduced to rubble.

The manuscripts of Timbuktu in the central African country of Mali present another famous but fragile case of survival. Timbuktu was an ancient seat of learning, the hub for a group of scholarly families dating back to the Middle Ages. They carried their manuscripts with them, but returned regularly to Timbuktu, forming a predominantly nomadic community that lasted for centuries. To the eyes of a western librarian, it seems almost miraculous that these precious documents survived their travels, and the dry climate, termites and other hazards of Mali. The manuscripts collected together in Timbuktu represent a culture of science and learning, based on a local form of the Arabic language. They embody important information about ancient and long-lasting Islamic customs and knowledge in Africa which are still not well known in other parts of the world.



Manuscripts from the Mamma Haidara Library, Timbuktu
Photo: © The Robert Goldwater Library, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

In the 1990s a new library was erected in Timbuktu with UNESCO funding and support from western scholars, to hold the collection in one place and create a new institute. This, alas, was not a happy ending to the story of this extraordinary trove of unique materials. Islamic jihadists fighting for control of Mali in 2012 and 2013 set fire to the library, perhaps because they saw it as a manifestation of western patronage.

The manuscripts had previously been hidden beneath the desert sands in the 1990s, before being restored to public view when the jihadists who sought to destroy them withdrew. Now they had to be hidden again, and this time the librarian Abdel Kader Haidara and a small group of supporters spirited them out of Timbuktu in a variety of vehicles – donkey carts, vans, jeeps, and even bicycles – to relative safety in the Malian capital Bamako, several hundred miles away. There they remain to this day, a monument not only to the learning of the scholars who created them centuries ago but also to the bravery and dedication of the librarians who have rescued them, repeatedly, from the assaults of modern jihadists. Part of this story of rescue is also due to modern digital technology, and the fact that a large part of the collection has now been digitized.⁵ That is increasingly the way in which the knowledge contained in vulnerable collections can be preserved, even though the virtual copies are no substitute for the original.

Similar stories proliferate as time goes on. During the turmoil that followed the Iraq war, the great library in Mosul was torched by fighters of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) in

- 6 2015. Tens of thousands of books were burned along with the library building, as were irreplaceable texts dating back to the Ottoman era. UNESCO called it 'one of the most devastating acts of destruction of library collections in human history'. But today, the library is open and – while the historical texts cannot be replaced – an international effort has restocked its shelves.⁶ Included in that effort is Book Aid International which supplied tens of thousands of brand-new higher education books to replace those destroyed in the fire. In the words of Dr Alaa Hamdon, founder of the Mosul Book Bridge project, 'Libraries are lighthouses of knowledge – providing a beacon for those who value learning. ISIS extinguished that light for a time, but now our lighthouse is once again burning bright.'⁷



The remains of the University Mosul Library
Photo: © UNDP Iraq Claire Thomas

The right to read during war

Active threats to libraries, archives, the right to read and collective identity continue around the world. In the Ukraine, more than 570 libraries have been destroyed by Russian bombardments, with evidence suggesting the deliberate targeting of public and university libraries.⁸

In response, PEN Ukraine has launched a campaign to restock Ukrainian libraries, particularly in frontline and liberated territories. These libraries have become far more than places to read – they are social hubs and pockets of normality in the face of war. Now Book Aid International is joining international efforts to restock these libraries with a donation of 25,000 brand-new English language books. Their value is practical and symbolic, with access to books – particularly English language books – providing a sense of international solidarity and a much-needed link to the outside world.

In Syria, students are bravely pursuing their university level studies, despite the huge dangers they face on each journey to their classrooms. Access to well-stocked higher education libraries is vital to them, as online resources are too often behind paywalls which they cannot afford. In Idlib, Book Aid International is once again stepping in to support these students, providing thousands of brand-new higher education texts to the University of Idlib.

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A Syrian student of Idlib University reading a donated book
 Photo: © Book Aid International, Syria Relief, Action for Humanity

Just as vital as the efforts described above, in another part of the world where conflict is raging, is the work of the small Afghan charity Charmagzh, founded by a young woman in Kabul, (and now living in exile) to provide mobile libraries in buses. As they announced themselves on their web site,⁹ 'We are Charmagzh! A Kabul-based registered non-profit organization. We are a group of young Afghans who have witnessed war and its direct impact on our childhood first hand. Our childhood, like millions of other Afghan children, was lost before we could even live it. The pain brings us together to make a difference in other children's lives. We provide mobile library services within Kabul, Afghanistan.'

'somehow the libraries have survived'

After the Taliban took over in 2021, this work was threatened because women, who ran the service, were no longer permitted to work outside their homes; but somehow the libraries have survived. As they described their mission, 'we are dedicated to creating a space for critical thinking for children ages 18 and under. We encourage children to wonder, read, question, have fun, and be themselves. By providing a supportive and creative environment, children will grow and become open-minded individuals who have the compassion to change the world.' Charmagzh is unusual in that its founder has attracted international attention and addressed the Security Council of the United Nations, but it is just one of numerous small voluntary organizations around the world that support libraries and the work of librarians.

Stories of defiance and defence of books and archives during war sometimes hit the headlines, but more often than not, the rescue work of local librarians, teachers and community leaders will go unsung, particularly in the world's unreported conflicts. Take, for example, the ongoing conflict in Cameroon.

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In the Anglophone parts of Cameroon, English-speaking separatists are fighting to create their own state separate from the Francophone majority. For five years this conflict has raged. In total, more than 700,000 people have fled their homes – with many sheltering in forests – and thousands have died. A boycott on schools is being violently enforced, with reports of teachers being murdered and students assaulted on their way to school, and both libraries and schools have been closed because of safety concerns, or deliberately destroyed.¹⁰

Any attempts to support education carry risk, yet librarians, religious and community leaders and NGOs are quietly working to restore access to books. These heroic teachers, volunteers and NGO staff transport English language books donated by Book Aid International to families and refugee communities wherever they are sheltering, using bicycles, backpacks

or any mode of transport that comes to hand. Where it is possible to deliver the books in the first place, reading can be a transformative experience as well as being sometimes the only reliable source of information and education. Ten-year-old Fortune recounts: 'When we were running away from the war, we spent months in the forest. I could not go to school. We lived in fear. When they brought the book box library, I was so happy because I could read again. The books have given us hope.'¹¹

An irreplaceable force for good in times of conflict

Why do libraries matter so much, then, that they call forth heroism, ingenuity and sacrifice in their defence in so many ways? Why do they matter so much that the enemies of their parent nations and communities are determined to destroy them?

At the level of nations and distinct ethnic groups, they are a crucial part of identity. At the level of the small community and the individual, the great truth is that reading brings strength. It supports the interior life of each reader and provides solace and escape. Reading is the route to information and knowledge, which are two related but separate things.

If modern public discourse has set up debatable versions called 'my truth', and 'alternative facts', nevertheless real factual evidence delivered through reading can be a powerful truth to set against the received and partisan wisdom imposed from outside. Each individual reader, from the school child who is just learning to read, to the experienced scholar, constructs their own knowledge from the information they find in books; and along with this knowledge come values, curiosity, judgment and wisdom. Those are the fundamental building blocks of power.

The victims of Nazism and its imitators knew that so long as libraries survived, their own national and ethnic culture and history could not be obliterated. The heirs to the traditional writings of Timbuktu's historic scholars know that this priceless legacy contains the evidence of a learned culture and values that they can make better known and respected in the world. The children of Cameroon, Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine and all too many other countries are learning against the odds, the priceless gifts that reading can give them. Libraries matter in a way that those of us who are fortunate enough to take them for granted need to understand. People everywhere who value democracy wish to hear the voices of their fellow citizens, and to know the truths of their own society. They know that libraries matter to them. In times of conflict, the determination of librarians, archivists and curators to preserve the power of reading is an irreplaceable force for good.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>.

Competing interests

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