

LIBRARIES BURNING: A DISCUSSION TO BE SHARED

by Sarah Prescott

I was working in a library in Muscat, Oman, when the National and Koranic Libraries of Iraq were looted and burned. “Why?” asked one of my students in a rather plaintive way, like Cindy-Lou Who in *The Grinch* by Dr. Seuss, “Why did they burn it? Why?” And, you know, I could have thought up a lie and I could have thought it up quick – as to why some Iraqis burned their own library and as to why the Americans did nothing to stop it. Instead, I paused for a moment or two and thought of something I hadn’t before. Maybe, just perhaps, I should focus a bit more on the purpose of libraries rather than just talking about how to find the information in them.

So I tossed out the day’s lesson and read instead to my startled class:

The 100 foot flames were bursting out of the windows. Papers, files and handwritten letters flew all around him like wild birds. He reached out, caught one in his hand, and read about a request for protection of a camel convoy. Just a fragment of a 1,000 year history going up in smoke and scattering away on the wind.

*from a description of the burning of the
Koranic Library in Bagdad on April 14, 2003*

The reading of this passage evoked an animated response from my normally lethargic group. This led to some research and discussion and a rather alarming discovery: that libraries are burning, and at a far greater rate than ever before in history.

The burning question is why? Libraries have a long and impressive lineage of being the torch-bearers of culture. They also carry with this heritage an equally long and complicated history of that torch being turned on themselves. While this notion is disturbing, to say the least, it is far more unsettling to learn that this practice is increasing. More books have been destroyed in the past century than in all the previous ones combined. It could be pointed out that this is because more books are being printed than ever before but there is more to it than that mere fact.

The grains of an answer lie in the very mission of a library. If the goal is to collect, organize, preserve, and provide access to knowledge and

information, then it would appear that libraries are targeted for destruction for two reasons:

1. To prevent access to information. Those regimes who want to re-invent society by their definition certainly do not wish for other ideas to be available to the populace they are trying to convert.
2. To erase a peoples' culture. Cultural genocide is practiced when the avenging power wants to erase a group they consider to be beneath them and/or a threat to their supremacy.

Unfortunately, burning libraries has proven to be a crude but effective, as well as highly visible, method for achieving these goals. It began with Ptolemy, who was the first to realize that knowledge is a form of power to be contained and hoarded like treasure. For that reason he created the first great library in Alexandria, Egypt (300 BC) and thus established the precedent that libraries, by their very creation and mission of collecting and centralizing information, serve the needs of rulers as much as scholars.

Gathering all knowledge into one place, however, has proven to be a dangerous practice because, during periods of turmoil, libraries rise from relative obscurity, like ghosts from the graveyard, to haunt the power-seekers and often to become locked in the cross-hairs of their weapons. Thus, almost all of the world's greatest libraries have, at one time or another, faced a sentence of destruction, and most often it is death by fire. The interesting truth here is that because of this historical pattern, most of the material that has managed to be passed down to us through history has actually happened because it was tucked away in small, private libraries and escaped the fiery eye of the would-be conquerors.

Given this grim history, one wonders whether we should give up promoting libraries before they become targets? Well, frankly, this is not likely to happen because many libraries are powerful and entrenched institutions, but also, to do so would be to give up the hope that civilization will advance to a point where knowledge is no longer feared to the point of destruction. And it lies to libraries and the librarians who run them, to continue to believe. As Franklin Roosevelt said, "...when the clock of civilization can be turned back by burning libraries...an added burden is placed on those countries where the courts of free thought and free learning still burn bright."

What follows is presented as a sort of "Combustible Library History 101," a few examples from a long and scorching record.

Pre-19th Century Destruction

The Library of Alexandria was our world's first "great" library. Founded by Ptolemy around 300 BC, it housed over 500,000 scrolls in its glory days and attracted scholars from all over the ancient world. Four stories, all hotly debated for their veracity, circulate regarding this library's ultimate demise. The first to receive the blame is Caesar. In 48 BC, when visiting Alexandria as a guest of Cleopatra, he was attacked by an angry mob. To save himself, he set a fire which is reported to have spread to the library. Another suspected culprit is the Emperor Aurelian. In 270 AD he chose Alexandria as his battleground for supremacy over the Kingdom of Palmyra and destroyed the library in the process. Yet another theory blames the library's destruction on a mob of angry Christians. Whipped up into a zealous frenzy by the Patriarch Theophilus, they stormed the library, carried out the scrolls into the streets where they built them into enormous pyres and burned them. And a final story comes from the Muslim invasion of Egypt in 691 AD. A Caliph Omar is said to have ordered that all the books be destroyed and thus the scrolls became the fuel for the bathhouses of the city. Whatever the real truth, the moral of this tale is that the library certainly did not meet a peaceful end and set the precedent for the burning of libraries during times of upheaval and shifts of power.

The Imperial Library of China began around the same time as the Library of Alexandria, (in the latter half of the Chou Dynasty), mainly to house the collections of the emperors. It did not have a chance to become a rival to Alexandria because, in the very next dynasty (Ch'in, 221-207 BC), the Emperor Shi Huangdi, in an effort to solidify his power, began by ordering the burning of any books that he disagreed with. And thus a pattern was established in China that would last for over 1,000 years, where each invasion and rebellion would be marked by the burning of books painstakingly recreated during times of peace. This practice was so common that the Chinese actually invented a phrase for it: "fengshu kengru" which is interpreted as the "burning of books and burial of scholars."

The House of Wisdom was founded in Baghdad in 1004. Its creator, Caliph Al-Mamun, modeled it after the library in Alexandria and strove to gather together the most renowned books on every subject, and scholars traveled great distances to study there. This enlightened center of learning was wiped out when the Mongols swept down from Central Asia. Within one week they completely destroyed the House of Wisdom (and thirty-six public libraries as well). Rare illuminated manuscripts burned, finely tooled leather bindings became shoes, and knowledge the property of the conqueror.

Glastonbury Abbey was the most ancient of medieval Britain's monasteries and contained many priceless religious treasures as well as a magnificent library that contained some of the earliest examples of Anglo-Saxon literature. Due to its prominence, Henry VIII, in his famous dissolution of the monasteries made a special example of Glastonbury. In 1539, the Abbot was tortured and executed, the treasures seized, and the building so thoroughly demolished that no evidence remains of the foundation. As for the library, the contents were looted and burned. A few books were saved and have turned up in other libraries, but with one deed England lost one the most important of its early libraries – all due to the greed of a king.

The Library of Congress was set on fire in 1814 and, although it was British troops who destroyed the 3,000 books and maps, U.S. aggression was in part responsible. The British conflagration was in retaliation for an American raid in 1813 in which we burned a British library and archives in York (now Toronto). After reading about the conflagration in the newspaper, Thomas Jefferson declared the loss a “triumph of vandalism over knowledge itself” and sold his private library to Congress to help them begin anew.

Post-19th Century Destruction

The Catholic University of Louvain Library fell victim to the World Wars. Yes both. It was first destroyed by the Germans when they invaded Belgium in 1914 as revenge for the shooting of some German soldiers. According to an eyewitness, the fire burned for days, consuming over 230,000 books, among them priceless editions of some of the west's earliest books and manuscripts. The world was outraged and, after the end of the war, the Germans were compelled to give 10 million francs as well as 1,750 rare books and manuscripts from their libraries in compensation. The library was rebuilt and opened again in 1928. But a mere twelve years later, when the Germans once more marched into Belgium, they immediately burned the library again. This time they claimed the fire had been set by fleeing Belgians but eyewitnesses had clearly seen a German artillery unit lob shells at the library until it went up in flames.

The Angevin Archives in Naples contained priceless manuscripts and documents from the Middle Ages. During World War II, the documents that were deemed most valuable were removed to a villa outside of Naples. When the documents were discovered, the Germans decided to destroy them. In vain, the director pleaded with them to check with their superior officer, but the German in charge of the destruction squad merely shouted, “Commander know everything, order burn!” A three-man crew then set

the fire with gunpowder and left. Courageous peasants managed to drag away eleven cases and 97 cartons but the rest was reduced to ashes and thus southern Italy lost priceless records of their heritage one morning in September 1943.

Jaffna Library served as the center for Tamil culture for centuries. It contained ancient books, manuscripts and ola (dried palm leaf documents). The library was popular not only with scholars, but with students and the public as well, and was celebrated as containing one of the finest collections of literature in South Asia. All this ended one night in 1981 when the library was set on fire by a group of thugs brought in from the south of the Island. The pretext for the destruction of the library was the killing of two policemen, but in truth it was an attempt to intimidate and crush the Tamil minority. The destruction of the library, however, marked a turning point in the broiling fight between the Sinhalese and the Tamils and resulted in the eruption of civil war two years later.

The Bosnian National and University Library in Sarejevo was also the victim of an attempt of cultural genocide. The library contained over 1.5 million volumes, a collection which represented generations of the area's culture and literature. As the library's director pointed out, "if they wanted to destroy this multiethnic society, they would have to destroy the library." By they, he meant the Bosnian Serbs, and that is just what they did. On the night of August 25, 1992, they opened fire on the library from across a river bank. Sarajevan citizens desperately fought to rescue the books, but were shot down by machine-gun fire. The Bosnian poet, Goran Simic, solemnly gathered the flying bits of burned paper and later wrote, "characters wandered the streets / mingling with passers-by and the souls of dead soldiers."

Hakim Nasser Khosrow Balkhi Cultural Center in Afghanistan contained 55,000 books representing Afghani culture. Afghanistan has been the victim of several burnings – first by the famed Genghis Kahn, who burned chests and chests of sacred manuscripts, then by the Communists who eliminated all 'non-conformist' literature, and finally by the Taliban who, after their rise to power, decided to eliminate all cultural items not in alignment with their idea of Islam. On August 18, 1998, Taliban soldiers arrived and dragged the books out into the main square, and set them alight. The director, Latif Pedram, saw the scene from a little window in his hideout and watched in disbelief as history repeated itself. "It was as if Genghis Khan, disguised as Mollah Omar [the Taliban leader] had entered the city with his army," he sadly stated and then added, "Through this repetition of a tragedy...Afghanistan shamefully entered the twenty-first century."

The National Library and Archives of Iraq & Library of Korans are the latest cultural war victims. In this case, however, it is not entirely clear who the culprit was. Though the Iraqis have branded the Americans as the “modern Mongols,” sweeping in and wreaking destruction, there is clear evidence that the looting and burning was done by Iraqis. Whoever is to be held responsible, the results are still the same: on April 14, 2003 over one million books and documents went up in flames.

Conclusion

And now a final word of hope amid this tale of wanton destruction. Somehow, many libraries do manage to survive cycles of social violence. Six of the libraries whose destruction is described above are in the process of being re-built and their shelves re-stocked with materials shared from other libraries. Librarians are doing a stupendous job sharing resources. Let’s make it worth the effort and, in the hope of lessening the risk, also begin sharing our long, hot history with our patrons.

At the end of our round of research on the destruction of libraries, one of my students concluded, “I did not realize that libraries were important. I only thought about me and the fact that I don’t like to read. Now when I enter a library I think about others.” Perhaps there is a future ruler who might, in some far off conflict, protect rather than destroy libraries.

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