

The Politics of Cultural Genocide

Uses and Abuses of the Destruction of the National Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a Western Propaganda Tool

The shelling of the National Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina in Sarajevo on August 25, 1992 marked one of the largest wartime ruins of a cultural landmark since the end of the Second World War in 1945. The ensuing fire, which was made worse because the city's water supply had been cut off prior to the shelling, lasted three days until eventually over ninety per cent of the library's collection burned.

Founded in 1945 as the central library of Bosnia-Herzegovina (before this, the library had been city of Sarajevo's city hall), the library housed materials written in various scripts. These items included irreplaceable rare books, original manuscripts, and archival materials. The bombing occurred towards the beginning of the three-year civil war (1992-1995) in Bosnia-Herzegovina fought between Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims in which Western powers such as the United States and members of the European Union supported the Bosnian Muslims. Bosnian Serbian forces led by Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic supervised the shelling of the building. Serbian forces would later claim that the building was being used as a military shelter, although these claims are unsubstantiated.

On the surface, the bombing of any cultural institution, especially one containing priceless cultural artifacts is by any measure a reprehensible act, and this sentiment is certainly portrayed on the plaque later placed on the outside of the ruined shell of the building. It states (in rather stilted English translation):

■ Blair Kuntz is the Near and Middle Eastern Studies Librarian at the University of Toronto Libraries, Toronto, Canada. He has also worked as a librarian for the Canadian federal government in the departments of the Environment and Canadian Heritage. He has an abiding interest in issues of human rights, academic freedom, and censorship.

On this place Serbian criminals on the night of 25th-26th of August 1992 set on fire National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Over two millions of books, periodicals, and documents vanished in the flame. Do not forget. Remember and warn [most likely this should read “beware”]!

Some years later, on March 31, 2001 former Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic was abducted and arrested by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), a United Nations (UN) Security-Council committee promoted by the United States and heavily dependent on Western, especially American, money for its establishment and operation, on charges of genocide, crimes against humanity, and violations of the customs of war. The bombing of the library and other alleged destruction of Bosnian cultural heritage was used in a campaign to prove Milosevic’s further complicity in “cultural genocide” or “the deliberate destruction of the cultural heritage of a people for any number of ideological reasons (Edwards 2008; 79).”

The charge in this area was helped along by a Harvard librarian, Andras Riedlmayer, who appeared before the ICTY on July 8, 2003 testifying against Milosevic for the crime of cultural genocide. In his testimony, Riedlmayer used the shelling of the National Library, and also that of the Sarajevo Institute on May 17, 1992, as prime evidence of this genocide (Riedlmayer 2007: pp. 107-132). In both his testimony and his research regarding Serbian destruction of cultural heritage in both Bosnia, and later Kosovo, his narrative almost totally and crudely adheres to the narrative established by Western governments and Western corporate and publicly-owned media, namely: Although other nationalities committed violence, it was the Serbs who carried the greatest responsibility for instigating it and who attempted through their demented and despotic leader, Slobodan Milosevic, to create a Greater Serbia by carrying out the ethnic cleansing of other nationalities. In Bosnia, the official story continues, Bosnian Serbs attempted to cleanse the area of Bosnian Muslims who were seeking to create an exemplary model multi-ethnic society. In the end, only American bombing forced the end of hostilities in Bosnia because it compelled Milosevic to come to the negotiating table.

Later on, in Kosovo, the narrative resumes, once again brutal Serbian actions against defenseless Albanian Kosovans forced the “international” community, i.e. the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), to come to the aid of the beleaguered Kosovans who were being viciously massacred by the stubbornly intransigent Serbs.

In Riedlmayer’s hands, the narrative extends to the cultural sphere where it was only Serbs who carried on a violent campaign of cultural genocide to cleanse areas based on ethnicity. While the other nationalities —the Bosnian Muslims, the Croats, the Albanian Kosovans— may have carried out acts of

cultural violence against Serbs, in his narrative there was no coordinated plan to destroy their cultural heritage in order to decimate their identification as a people.

As the author and journalist Diana Johnstone notes, “almost everything about this tale is false. Unfortunately, disproving falsehoods, especially established falsehoods, is a hard task. What has been repeated over and over becomes obviously true (Johnstone 2002: 5).” In the interim, she and other writers have forcefully challenged these falsehoods and asked pointed questions such as: Instead of Western involvement in the region being motivated by “humanitarian” concerns was the Western interest in fact more concerned with economics and the wish to eliminate the former Yugoslavia as a last socialist bulwark standing in the way of economic globalization? If Milosevic was indeed an evil tyrant, why was he lauded for the role he played in negotiating the Dayton accords which ended the conflict in 1995? If the Kosovans were indeed the objects of ethnic cleansing why did the refugee flow not begin until *after* NATO’s relentless bombing of Serbia began (Parenti 2000: 125)? Furthermore, why have no Americans or participants from NATO countries such as Bill Clinton, Madeleine Albright, Tony Blair, American General Wesley Clark, or NATO spokesperson Jamie Shea been charged for the gross violations of international law that resulted from their illegal invasion of Serbia in 1999? If the United States and NATO were allowed to rescue Kosovo through a self-described “humanitarian intervention” in 1999, why did the same actors condemn Russia for conducting its own humanitarian intervention in 2008 on behalf of South Ossetian and Abkhazian minorities fighting against persecution in Georgia (BBC News 2009)?

In the spirit of such inquiry, this paper questions Western allegations of “cultural genocide” perpetrated by Serbs by asking the following questions: If the West was really so concerned about cultural genocide, why at approximately the same time did it raise no protests when Western allies Turkey, Israel, and the Afghan Taliban carried out gross acts of cultural destruction? Why has no American or British instigator ever been charged for the cultural destruction that has occurred in Iraq since the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003? If the United States is so concerned about genocide and the application of international law, why has it refused to join the International Criminal Court established in 2002?

Moreover, can a state such as the United States which has been implicated in other acts of cultural genocide in Guatemala, East Timor, Vietnam, or Cambodia be trusted when it raises concerns about the decimation of cultures? After all, Riedlmayer’s testimony before the ICTY attempted to prove that the shelling of the Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as the destruction of other Bosnian Muslim cultural sites, was a deliberate policy of cultural genocide of the Bosnian Muslim community.

1. The Politics of Cultural Genocide

The bombing of the National Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina was obviously traumatic for all three ethnic groups who lived there. Nonetheless, two Bosnian librarians from Sarajevo, Savo Peic and Aisa Telalovic, refuse to assign blame for the destruction of Bosnian cultural heritage solely to the Serbian forces, and acknowledge that all three sides in the Bosnian War (Serbs, Croats, and Muslims) contributed to the devastation. As they note:

The war in former Yugoslavia has been responsible for destroying and demolishing towns, villages, churches (Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim mosques), schools, and other institutions of higher learning, cultural and historic monuments, libraries and archives ... It was as if there was a death wish in all three parties to obliterate their national existence and heritage from the face of the earth. (Peic 1999: 151)

Their interpretation, in fact, is consistent with the traditional multi-cultural outlook of Bosnia-Herzegovina where no nationality held a majority and where many citizens were the offspring of mixed marriages. Many citizens, in fact, identified themselves as Yugoslavs rather than Bosnian Muslim, Serbian or Croat (Parenti 2000: 30).

Furthermore, while the two Bosnian librarians' interpretation fails to take into account the outside Western interference (notably Germany, Austria, the Vatican, and the United States) that led to the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, their analysis is far more nuanced than that promoted by Andras Riedlmayer, the Harvard University librarian who testified against former Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic at the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia for the crime of cultural genocide. Riedlmayer almost completely adheres to the official line promulgated by the American government relating to the Balkan Wars which occurred from 1991-2001. In his view, the wars are primarily the fault of the Serbs, led by a brutal leader, Milosevic, who along with his acolytes bears almost the entire responsibility for the conflict. As he notes in his paper on the destruction of libraries during the Balkan Wars, "while Western leaders' attention was focused on the collapse of the Soviet Union and on the challenges of establishing a common European currency, war broke out in Europe's backyard (Riedlmayer 2007: 108)." Here, Riedlmayer's biases are laid bare: the benign West, which really wanted to concentrate on other more important matters, was caught off guard by the unexpected ethnic hatred erupting in its own backyard, forcing it to engage in a "humanitarian intervention" which was purely altruistic and had nothing to do with its own geo-political interests.

The many alternative explanations that have been posited for Western intervention in the Balkans such as the desire to eliminate Yugoslavia as a last

socialist bastion standing in the way of economic globalization; the wish to establish a secure pipeline of Caspian oil to the Mediterranean; the yearning to establish NATO “credibility”; the desire to overthrow the authority of the UN in favor of Western interests; the German desire to rid itself of its Nazi past and win back the respectability to fight in “legitimate” wars; and the American aspiration to gain standing among Islamic nations, are absent from Reidlmayer’s account. Therefore, there is no mention of the active participation of Germany to foment discord in Slovenia and Croatia (Johnstone 2002: 27; Parenti 2000: 25), for example, and his account of war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, like the Western press reports at the time, describe the conflict as a holocaust perpetrated against Bosnian Muslims, when in fact, according to British negotiator David Owen, a major obstacle to achieving a peace agreement in 1992 was that both the Bush and Clinton administrations encouraged Bosnian Muslims to avoid compromises and promised them NATO support in return (Johnstone 2002: 159).

Consistent with his narrative supporting the American government, Reidlmayer forwards his account to 1999 with descriptions of what he terms Serbian “burning” and repression in Kosovo where he details Serbian destruction of Kosovan Albanian libraries, schools, and archives. Typically, however, he conceals, or probably just isn’t interested in detailing, other crucial facts which contradict his argument. For instance, he says that “after peace talks in early 1999 failed to bring concessions, NATO *intervened* [my emphasis] at the end of March 1999 with air strikes on Kosovo and Serbia proper (Reidlmayer 2007: 124).” In reality, however, the so-called American-led NATO “intervention” was an illegal invasion that bypassed the UN Charter, the UN Security Council and NATO’s own Charter. Reidlmayer’s account of the failed Rambouillet peace talks preceding the NATO attack on Serbia in 1999 also fails to mention that the talks were aborted only because the Americans, after Serbia agreed to most of its stringent provisions, demanded the addition of the onerous condition stipulating NATO forces would have the right to enter and monitor the entire Republic of Yugoslavia, an ultimatum which many saw as ensuring failure as it was a condition that no sovereign country —certainly not the United States— could reasonably accept.

Reidlmayer also simply parrots the figure of eight hundred thousand Kosovans (a figure which has never been verified and which many believe to be grossly exaggerated) being forced to leave Kosovo, but does not mention that this happened *after* the NATO bombing of Serbia and Kosovo caused a counter response from the Serbian Army (Parenti 2000: 125). He makes no mention of the tens of thousands of Albanians who fled Kosovo because of the NATO bombings themselves, or because they wanted to escape ground force fighting between Yugoslavia and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). Between 70,000 to 100,000 Serbian residents of Kosovo also took flight and thousands of Roma

(14,000 of whose homes were burnt as they left) and other non-Albanian groups were forced to leave or were driven out by the KLA (Parenti 2000: 131), but these refugees are totally absent from his account. Nor does he mention that NATO attacked these refugee convoys and actually killed Albanians fleeing the conflict in Kosovo (Mandel: 139). He states that “once again cultural landmarks of the non-Serb population suffered massive destruction (Riedlmayer 2007: 124)” but he —once again— studiously ignores the NATO cultural destruction wreaked upon Serbian cultural landmarks both within Kosovo and within Serbia proper. Albanian militants, for example, *systematically* worked to erase Serbian historical and religious culture in Kosovo and they destroyed around eighty parish churches, monasteries and cathedrals, some of which dated to medieval times and some of which were listed as UNESCO world heritage sites (Parenti 2000: 163).

If he were really interested in detailing such damage, which he clearly wasn't, Riedlmayer could have consulted the Serbian government's meticulously documented NATO war crimes in Serbia which it released in a two-volume set replete with colored photographs entitled *NATO crimes in Yugoslavia: documentary evidence*, more commonly known as the *White book on NATO aggression against the FR of Yugoslavia*. In two detailed chapters, the report lists NATO bombing of NATO cultural monuments which included damage to Byzantine religious art, mosaics, and frescoes, the flattening of the 13th century city of Pec, the 16th century Hadum mosque in Djakobica, the Byzantine Basilica in Nis and the ninth-century church in Prokulpje, the fifteenth-century rampart in Belgrade and the Banovina palace in Novi Sad (*NATO Crimes in Yugoslavia* 1999: 215-231 v. 1; 295-317 v.2). Although Reidlmayer is quick to condemn the deliberate bombing of the National Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992, he maintains total silence over the deliberate NATO bombing of the Serbian Radio and Television Station on April 23, 1999 which killed sixteen employees, and for all the outrage reserved for the “libricide” of the Bosnian National Library, he ignores the Kosovan Albanian destruction of two million books in the Serbian language, as well as archival material (Parenti 2000: 158). NATO's Kosovo Force did nothing to protect the books in Serbian libraries and other cultural institutions.

Riedlmayer is so unaware of the political machinations of his own government that in one of his articles he quotes Dr. Biljana Plavsic, a Bosnian Serb professor of biology and former dean of the Faculty of Natural Sciences at the University of Sarejevo (and also a right-wing monarchist), as advocating the ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims because of their “genetic deformity” which caused them to embrace Islam (Riedlmayer 2005: 41). While such viewpoints are indeed alarming and certainly racist, what Riedlmayer does not detail is the story of Plasvic's rise to power in the Republic Srpska (RS). When the first president of the Republic Srpska (RS), Radovan Karadzic, who

supervised the shelling of the Bosnian National Library, proposed that the Serb majority of the RS be allowed to remain within Yugoslavia, he took the further step (even though he was not a Communist) of appointing Communist or other leftist officers who shared his viewpoints. In return, Western forces worked to remove him from office, and in turn he was replaced by then vice-president Biljana Plavic (the same person whose hate speech Riedlmayer quotes to justify western actions against Bosnian Serbs) as president (Parenti 2000: 58-59). Soon after, Plavic worked closely with Western authorities to purge the RS army of leftist officers who were unsympathetic to western free-market economic reforms. This action was quickly followed by a purge of the civilian government. Evidently, racist hate-mongers are quite acceptable to Western interests as long as they further the Western agenda of economic liberalization.

Relying only on Riedlmayer's writings, one would think that the other sides in the conflict disseminated no such hate speech against Serbs, although in fact such statements are ubiquitous. Croatian leader Franco Tudjman and Bosnian Muslim leaders Alija Izetbegovic also perpetrated acts of ethnic cleansing based on hate speech (in the Bosnian Muslim case, extremist *mujahedeen* fighters beheaded civilian victims (Herman 2004: 49)), yet none of them found themselves dragged unceremoniously before the ICTY. Moderate Bosnian Muslim leaders, however, such as Fikret Abdic, who urged negotiation and compromise but who didn't please Western authorities, did (Johnstone 2002: 160). Croatian leader Franco Tudjman, for example, declared in his book *Wastelands of Historical Truth*, published in 1989, that "genocide is a natural phenomenon in harmony with the sociological and divine nature. Genocide is not only permitted, it is recommended... whenever it is useful for the survival or the restoration of the kingdom of the chosen nation (Parenti 2000: 42). Taking this notion to its logical conclusion, between 1991 and 1995 Tudjman began his own program of ethnic cleansing targeting Serbian residents of Croatia (Blum 2005: 211). Instead of earning Western censure, however, the West in fact assisted the Croatian campaign. In August 1995, during what was termed the "Operation Storm" campaign, NATO helped the Croats drive out over 200,000 Serbs from the Krajina region (Mandel 2004: 237). Furthermore, Tudjman conducted his own campaign of "libricide" —one which Riedlmayer typically does not detail— which saw Croatian libraries purged of books the regime deemed unworthy (such as, for instance, copies of the Yugoslav encyclopedia which were burned) while high-school textbooks were re-written so they contained no criticism of the Nazi-allied Croatian-regime which existed during the Second World War (Parenti 2000: 44).

Under cross-examination by Slobodan Milosevic on July 8, 2003 (during which Reidlmayer reveals that he had written to U.S. President Bill Clinton in the summer of 1995 asking him to lift the embargo on the delivery of weapons to Bosnian Muslims), Reidlmayer is consistently questioned concerning

his obvious bias towards the Bosnian Muslims and his failure to investigate thoroughly Bosnian Muslim and Croat destruction of Serbian cultural heritage. Although in his writings Reidlmayer is silent on such destruction, remarkably under questioning he states that “the fact that I have engaged in political discourse does not, to my mind, affect my professional activity in reporting here (*Milosevic Trial Transcript*, 8 July 2003: 94)”. At the same time, however, he also admits that he was hired by the Office of the Prosecutor to investigate only the destruction of the cultural and religious heritage of non-Serb communities. Moreover, this investigation covered only 19 of the 33 municipalities in Bosnia, and these were municipalities which before the war had a majority Bosnian Muslim or Roman Catholic Croat population. In essence, the destruction of the cultural and religious heritage of those municipalities with a Serbian majority was in effect simply glossed over. Despite the fact that Riedlmayer admits that he did not investigate the destruction of Serbian cultural heritage in Bosnia and Herzegovina, his report was entitled “Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Bosnia and Herzegovina” as if it indeed include descriptions of the destruction of Serbian cultural heritage.

Milosevic quite rightly asks Reidlmayer if any Muslim sites had been destroyed in Serbia during the period 1992-1995, a question which deserves scrutiny since if there really had been a campaign to commit cultural genocide against Muslims, why would it have stopped at the Bosnian border with Serbia proper? Despite pursuing what seems a logical train of thought, presiding Judge Richard May prevented Milosevic from following this line of questioning. Furthermore, despite the fact that he never describes the destruction of Serbian cultural heritage, Riedlmayer declares that “I don’t have any animus against describing and condemning such destruction (*Milosevic Trial Transcript*, 8 July 2003: 59).”

Milosevic reminds Riedlmayer that a report entitled “Destruction of Orthodox Religious Structures” lists 68 examples of the destruction of Serbian religious institutions for the year 1992-1993, and reminds him that this is just a partial list as the war continued until 1995. Astonishingly, in response to Milosevic’s query asking why Riedlmayer’s terms of reference in his report concerning Bosnian cultural destruction specifically excluded that of Bosnian Serbs, Judge Richard May responds that obviously examples of destruction of Serbian cultural heritage have been excluded “because they cannot be relevant to the charges [we are] dealing with in this trial (*Milosevic Trial Transcript*, 8 July 2003: 65).” In other words, he may well have said, such examples are of no account since the ICTY was put in place to prosecute and convict those who had dared to defy the American and Western aims; therefore, there no evidence implicating Western powers in cultural destruction could be permitted. Indeed, carefully hidden from Reidlmayer’s entire account is the crucial American role in establishing, financing, staffing, vetting the judges and prosecutors,

supplying the police force, and providing information to the ICTY (Herman 2004: 39-40).

Milosevic reminds Riedlmayer that the Bosnian war was in fact a three-sided war (echoing the two Bosnian librarians' remarks concerning the Bosnian civil war) in which Catholic Croats also fought against the Bosnian Muslims. Had Riedlmayer described, for example, Catholic churches that had been destroyed by Bosnian Muslim forces? Remarkably, Riedlmayer responds that "none of the 19 municipalities that I studied fell into the area where this fighting happened (*Milosevic Trial Transcript*, 8 July 2003: 67)." Milosevic's point here was to prove that any destruction of cultural heritage was reciprocal and that the destruction had occurred on all three sides. In fact, challenging Riedlmayer, he notes that Serbian Orthodox churches in Mostar had been destroyed before the mosques and Catholic churches.

In spite of the massive evidence indicating cultural destruction by NATO of Serbian cultural landmarks, two other American librarians, Stephen P. Edwards and Julie Biando Edwards, looked positively at Riedlmayer's "painstaking research" at the ICTY noting with enthusiasm that now at last destruction of "libraries, archives, and other cultural property were prosecutable crimes against humanity", which can be classed as 'cultural genocide' (Edwards 2008: 79)." Of course, the fact that the ICTY was established primarily by NATO countries and provided most of the finance to set up the tribunal, that NATO aggression against Serbia was never discussed at the ICTY, or that the United States itself has refused to sign on to the provisions of the International Criminal Court in the Hague, passes without comment. Also not mentioned are criticisms of the trial of Slobodan Milosevic himself, a trial which respected Canadian trial lawyer Edward Greenspan—who is no admirer of Malosevic, describing him as a "thug"—viewed as a "lynching" and a "kangaroo court" (Greenspan 2002) which overlooked the basic tenets of Western jurisprudence such as the right to a trial by jury, the right to be tried by an impartial judge, and the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty. Indeed, as we see in Riedlmayer's testimony, Judge Richard May consistently set arbitrary time limits that interfered with Milosevic's cross examination and he clearly seemed to revile Milosevic. Then again, the Edwards are also remarkably nonchalant about the circumstances of Milosevic's arrest, stating that Serbia "handed over" Milosevic.

In fact, Milosevic's arrest and extradition is more plausibly described as an abduction. After threats of economic blackmail from Western powers, the pro-western Serbian Prime Minister, Zoran Djindjic, arrested Milosevic not for war crimes but rather on charges of corruption, allegations of which even if true would not have merited extradition to an international court. Even so, the Yugoslav constitution forbade the extradition of nationals. However, when Serbia's Constitutional Court declared Milosevic's extradition unconstitutional,

Djindjic simply went ahead and extradited him anyway (Mandel 2004: 148-150).

2. Western Double Standards

While American government apologists wax enthusiastically over the future application of international law concerning cultural genocide, prosecution of such a law is clearly one reserved for non-Western players. In the current Middle East, for example, the locus of much Western attention due to its vast oil resources which fuel Western economies and described by the U.S. State Department as “a stupendous source of strategic power and one of the greatest material prizes in history (Chomsky 2003),” censure for cultural genocide when practiced by the West or its allies, in contrast to the opprobrium meted out to the former government of Yugoslavia, is blithely ignored.

One of the most obvious examples, and one which is cited by many critics of NATO actions in the Balkans, is the treatment of Kurds in NATO member Turkey where the Kurds who inhabit the south-eastern part of the country have been subjected for over eighty years to a policy of assimilation into the Turkish majority. Referred to as “mountain Turks”, the Kurds’ linguistic rights have been so brutally repressed that until 1992 the mere possession of a Kurdish-language book or music cassette was illegal and subject to imprisonment, torture, even death. In contrast to Albanian Kosovans, who had their own university where it was possible to study in their own language and whose linguistic rights were respected, in Turkey the words “Kurd” and “Kurdish” were erased from maps and books, and Kurdish children who spoke Kurdish in schools were beaten. The Turkish government has had no need to bomb or destroy a Kurdish National Library for the simple reason that, due to the ban on the Kurdish language, Turkish libraries have not stocked Kurdish books, and those that did saw the books meticulously removed (Malmisanij 2006: 39).

Beginning in 1980, and continuing through to 1998, coinciding in part with the same period the West was excoriating Slobodan Milosevic for his brutality, the Turkish government waged a vicious campaign of repression against its Kurdish population known by Kurds as the “dirty war” in which more than 3,000 rural villages were set on fire and partially or completely evacuated (Human Rights Watch 2005: 3), displacing two million inhabitants who were forced to move to urban shantytowns (Kuras 2007). Meanwhile, countless archaeological and cultural treasures, including world-class sites, living historic cities and standing monuments, were submerged underwater due to colonialist hydroelectric projects such as the multi-million dollar GAP Project which by itself has forced an estimated 350,000 Kurds from their land as of 2004 (Chahim 2006: 4). Although it is estimated that some 37,000 Kurds were killed (Kuras

2007), and tens of thousands more wounded, no western power, in contrast to that which occurred in Kosovo, came to their aid. Indeed, the opposite was true. The Turks were armed with modern American weapons, while Israeli military officers and intelligence officers also supplied weaponry and high-tech security supplies. Furthermore, Germany and other NATO countries supplied tanks, firearms and munitions which were used to bombard Kurdish areas. Yet despite the obvious double standard, Turkey was one of the countries that assisted in the bombing of Yugoslavia (Fernandes 1999).

The same concern for “cultural genocide” has been perhaps even more pronounced in Palestine, the place in which in 1948, as the great Palestinian refugee Edward Said notes, ethnic cleansing began and which has continued, with liberal western support, until today (Said 2000: 44).

While a detail of Israeli destruction of Palestinian cultural heritage in the sixty years following Israel’s establishment would be impossible in a paper of this length, especially if it included destruction in the Occupied Territories since 1967 and the numerous Israeli invasions of Lebanon, a review of such destruction since the second Palestinian Intifada of 2000 is useful especially since these events occurred after the Yugoslav war when presumably the concept of “cultural genocide” had become a reason for prosecution for war crimes.

The greatest damage to Palestinian, libraries, and archives occurred during the Israeli incursion into the West Bank in the spring of 2002 during which the Israeli Army damaged Palestinian libraries, archives, records, and files, and also government computers and computer systems. The damage also included vandalism to cultural sites and institutions such as radio and television stations and cultural centers. Damage to libraries and archives included the al-Haqq Human Rights Organization, the Health Professions Library of al-Quds University, the university library of Bethlehem University, the French Cultural Center, the library of the Maan Development Center, and several libraries, archives, and files of Palestinian government departments located in Ramallah (Twiss 2002). A Palestinian NGO Emergency Initiative revealed a consistent pattern of invasion, destruction, and invasion and stated that in the majority of cases the ministries were invaded long after fighting had ceased and that the destruction was purely deliberate. Meanwhile, from April 2002 to March 2003, Israeli destruction of the old city of Nablus was tremendous and many buildings were completely destroyed (Dabbeek 2003: 1). Undoubtedly, if the same destruction had been practiced by the Serbian government during the Balkan wars, it would have been seized upon as evidence of Serbian perpetration of genocide, yet no Israeli has ever been held responsible for these actions.

The recent 22 day Israeli invasion of Gaza in December 2008-January 2009 damaged the Gazan Antiquities Museum as well as archaeological sites, not to mention targeting schools, mosques, the Red Cross, United Nations relief facilities, hospitals, and civilians holding white flags, yet Israeli leaders learned

they could carry out such actions with impunity. While Slobodan Milosevic was forcibly extradited from Belgrade to face prosecution in the Hague, response to the siege of Gaza was very different than the concern Westerners demonstrated for the siege of Sarajevo from 1992-1993. Indeed, after the Israeli massacre in Gaza, the Spanish foreign minister informed Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni that Spain planned to amend legislation that granted a Spanish judge the authority to launch an investigation into Israeli war crimes against Israeli officials (Ravid 2009), while surrealistically the United States Congress voted 390-5 to condemn the democratically-elected government of Hamas for launching ineffective missiles in the face of overwhelming Israeli destructive power (Horowitz 2009). While Western leaders trumpeted the right of Israel to “defend itself,” no such right was granted to Serbia to defend itself against terrorist actions by the KLA.

The American-backed support for the Taliban in Afghanistan also marks another instance of American and Western-backed support for cultural destruction which was not denounced until the former ally was no longer deemed useful. Support for Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan can be traced to the Cold War which pre-dated the Soviet occupation of that country in 1979. The invasion of the country in 2001 marked the United States’ and the West’s second illegal invasion of a country following Kosovo in 1999. Since the invasion, it has become fashionable for former enablers to feign outrage over the Taliban’s brutality. In fact, however, the Taliban’s relation with the United States and the West has long roots. For instance, in the 1970s, the United States under President Jimmy Carter and his national security adviser Zbigniew Brezinski viewed Islamic fundamentalists in both Iran and Afghanistan as a bulwark against Soviet expansionism, and funneled money and arms to them through Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, there were other geopolitical and economic considerations concerning western support for the Afghani *mujahadeen* which predated the Taliban: the military occupation of the Persian Gulf and its oil fields (Dreyfuss 2005: 246). The Afghan *mujahadeen* in the 1980s began acquiring weapons from the Americans, Chinese, Israelis and others to fight the Soviet Red Army and this support continued into the 1990s with the rise of the Taliban. Essentially, the United States along with Saudi Arabia, which financed the movement, and Pakistan, which supplied it with military intelligence, supported the Taliban because they viewed it as anti-Iranian and anti-Shiah but pro-Western (Dreyfus 2005: 326).

Although formal support for the Taliban by the United States ended in 1998 with the bombing of two American embassies in Africa, American support of the Taliban could be confirmed as late as 2000 because American multinational energy companies such as Enron and Unocal saw the Taliban as enabling the stability needed to build oil pipelines from Turkmenistan through to Afghanistan and on to Pakistan. From 2000 to late summer 2001, US officials held meetings

with the Taliban in an effort to persuade them to form an alliance with their local rivals, the Northern Alliance, in order to build such a pipeline in exchange for financial aid and international legitimacy (Ahmed 2009). If they failed to comply with this federalization plan, US officials threatened the Taliban with military action. Thus, all through the Taliban reign when its officials were busy destroying and ransacking the country's libraries and museums of precious cultural artifacts, the Americans were giving the movement their tacit support.

The cultural destruction wreaked by the Taliban included the destruction of books and rare manuscripts, especially in the Persian language, and the smashing of artifacts in the country's National Museum, especially statues with a human form such as Greco-Buddhist Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Photographs, films, and paintings of humans and animals were also targeted for destruction (Bopearachchi 2002: 13-14, 148). The campaign culminated in the March 2001 destruction of the two incomparably beautiful ancient statues of the Buddhas of Bamiyan which Buddhist monks had carved out of sandstone statues between the second and fifth centuries A.D. Apparently, the loss of precious cultural artifacts was less important than building an oil pipeline. As a US diplomat commented in 1997: "The Taliban will develop like the Saudis ... there will be Aramco [consortium of oil companies controlling Saudi oil], pipelines, an emir, no parliament and lots of sharia law. We can live with that (Ahmad 2009)." In Afghanistan, the West would see how their support for Islamic fundamentalists would come back to haunt them. Afghan mujahedeen who fought against the Soviets made their way to Bosnia which also attracted several thousand "holy warriors" from throughout the Islamic world. In Bosnia, allies of al-Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden, who later allied himself with the Taliban, were given boxes of blank passports (Johnstone 2002: 62). Only after the events of September 11, 2001 in New York was U.S. attention drawn to the al-Qaeda link in Bosnia.

Overlooking American involvement in the ransacking and looting of the Iraqi National Museum in 2003 was a much more difficult challenge for American apologists since it was the Americans, and only the Americans (and British), who were responsible. In their third illegal invasion after the invasion of Kosovo in 1999, which was also undertaken without the authority of the United Nations Security Council, the Americans lied about non-existent weapons of mass destruction, implied al-Qaeda connections, and professed their desire to bring democracy to a country under the yoke of extreme tyranny in the guise of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein (whom they had previously supported). Shortly after the invasion, on April 3, 2003 the Iraqi National Museum, which was considered one of the best in the entire Middle East, was looted. In a move that makes clear the true purposes of the American invasion, the Americans made certain that the Ministry of Oil was secured and protected but they failed to protect important cultural institutions that were inevitable targets for looting

and pillage. Although a precedent had been set when nine Iraqi museums had been targeted after the 1991 Gulf War, the American military's obvious priority was not the protection of cultural institutions. It must be said that even Saddam Hussein had posted guards in front of the Kuwait National Museum to prevent looting on the first day of the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1990 (Rothfield 2009: 2).

On April 3, 2003, during the American's initial invasion of the country, the Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad was subjected to three successive waves of looting, the latter two of which were targeted lootings by professionals who stole around 15,000 artifacts which included at one point the Mask of Warka, a 5,100-year-old Sumerian artifact believed to be one of the earliest surviving representations of the human face (this mask was found buried on an Iraqi farm five months later) (Glenn 2009: B17). After the fall of Baghdad on April 9, for five days mobs attacked the country's public institutions. In contrast to the expressions of outrage concerning the destruction of Bosnian and Croatian cultural heritage, American officials in charge of the invasion were remarkably nonchalant about their own negligence in the protection of Iraqi national cultural heritage. The day after the looting, for example, Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld commented that "stuff happens", while during a pre-war conference General Tommy Banks of the U.S. Army Central Command responded to a question on securing cultural sites upon invasion by exclaiming: "I don't have time for this fucking bullshit! (Werner 2009: IN6)." Apparently, the Iraqi people would be so eager to meet their American liberators that they would take care of their own domestic security.

3. Concluding note

The rules of engagement for the West are clear. As the self-proclaimed inheritors of democracy and civilization, they are free to set the rules for the rest. If the rest of the world adheres to the precepts, they will be rewarded; if not, they will be punished. If, for example, Bosnian Serbs destroy cultural heritage, their leaders must be dragged before an international tribunal and charged with genocide, while the many fewer Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats who appear before it are charged only with war crimes (Herman 2004: 49). In the service of promoting the war, professors from elite academic institutions such as Harvard University such as Joel Goldhagen and the self-described "human rights expert," Michael Ignatieff (a cheerleader for all three illegal wars waged against Serbia, Afghanistan, and Iraq) will make the case for war. The defiant leader of a losing side, Slobodan Milosevic (who in fact played a leading role in ending the first Bosnian war and was praised for doing so) will be illegally kidnapped from his home and tried before a specially-devised international

tribunal, while war criminals on the other side, such as Croatian leader Franco Tudjman and Bosnian Muslim leader Alija Izetbegovic, will go free. In the process of convicting Milosevic, another Harvard “expert” will appear before the tribunal, give selective evidence concerning the cultural destruction wrought by one side, and one side only, in the conflict, and he will be praised for his courage in confronting war crimes even though his own country refuses to sign onto the terms of the International Criminal Court. In turn, other American commentators will, in the words of American dissident authors Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, continue the process of “manufacturing consent”, retrace his findings, and refuse to ask the difficult questions concerning their own country’s contribution to the conflict.

An ally such as Turkey can bomb and burn Kurdish villages, drown them under hydroelectric projects, ban and restrict the Kurdish language, and no consequences will accrue. However, a country such as Serbia, which has earned the West’s wrath, will be scrutinized for every infringement, real or imagined, against its Albanian minority, even though this minority enjoys the right to publish, broadcast and be educated in its own language.

Meanwhile, when friends such as the Taliban rampage libraries and museums and destroy priceless manuscripts, museum artifacts, and rare books, there will be no repercussions until they no longer serve a useful purpose or refuse to cooperate with Western economic plans. At this point, they will be vilified for their horrific human rights abuses, their barbaric practices, their religious fundamentalism, and they will be targeted as a candidate for another western “humanitarian intervention.”

Likewise, when an ally such as Israel, which is an occupying power in the West Bank and Gaza Strip —and thus under international law has no rights but only responsibilities towards those it occupies— rampages and wreaks destruction against the occupied population’s cultural monuments, artifacts, and institutions, the rampage is overlooked and is accepted as the right of a sovereign nation to “defend itself (AlJazeera 2009).” When the same country invades and attacks a defenseless civilian population in the Gaza Strip in 2008-2009 and bombs and destroys a university, kills civilians waving white flags, employs horrific weapons such as white phosphorous, and targets UN schools, the West will rush to defend this country’s “right to defend itself.” When a jurist such as Richard Goldstone serves as a judge before the ICTY to judge Slobodan Milosevic, his service is regarded as distinguished and fair-minded but when he takes on the task of United Nations investigator into the events in Gaza in 2008-2009, and his report implicates Israel in possible war crimes which could be tried at the International Criminal Court, his findings are decried as biased and not beneficial (for a non-existent peace process in the region, in any case), especially since his conclusions might mean that Western war criminals could be held accountable for their crimes (Chomsky 2009). Likewise, when Israel

declares its “right to exist” as a nation, it is seen by the West as sacrosanct, although for countries such as the former Yugoslavia no such right exists. When Kosovan citizens of the former Yugoslavia declare their right to secede from that country, their right to do so is guaranteed by Western powers who work to scuffle a negotiated agreement between the Serbs and the Kosovans; however, when Palestinians recently threatened to ask the United National Security Council to recognize Palestine as an independent state in response to Israeli recalcitrance, the US State Department issued a statement opposing the Palestinian proposal stating: “It is our strong belief and conviction that the best means to achieve the common goal of a contiguous and viable Palestine is through negotiations between the parties (Mozgovaya 2009).”

Finally, while the United States and the United Kingdom illegally invade Iraq using evidence based on gross fabrications, leading to the deaths of an estimated one million Iraqis (Stanton 2010) and the flight of four million refugees (statistics which could surely be used to describe the perpetration of a genocide), none of its leaders will be tried before the world for perpetrating the crimes. Meanwhile, the inability of the occupying powers to prepare for the safeguarding or protection of that country’s cultural institutions, while assuring the protection of the Oil Ministry, lay bare the real reason for the country’s invasion.

In the interim, the western charade continues as NATO was once again called upon to bomb civilians in another country perceived as a Western enemy—Libya under Muammar Gaddafi in 2011—while at the same time another Western ally, Bahrain, with an equally appalling human rights record against its own citizens, was invaded by its authoritarian Gulf country neighbors such as Saudi Arabia, to prevent the will of the Bahraini people from running its course. As the West demonized Libya’s Gaddafi, Bahrain’s minority Sunni Muslim rulers destroyed Shiite mosques, including the 400 year old Amir Mohammed Braighi mosque, saying they are “illegal buildings” and American and Western European governments remained silent (Gutman 2011). Gaddafi’s over-throw led in turn to further cultural destruction in other places. The Libyan intervention, for example, which empowered Islamic fundamentalists supported by undemocratic Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, spread across the border to neighboring Mali, resulting in an attack on July 2, 2012 on the door to the World Heritage Site Sidi Yahya Mosque in Timbuktu by axe-wielding militants belonging to an al-Qaeda-linked group who had already defaced mausoleums and tombs of local Sufi saints (Mark 2012).

In its silence over cultural destruction in Bahrain, the West did not mention Bahrain’s strategic position as home to the American Naval Fifth Fleet which protects America’s interests in a resource-rich region, nor did it cite Libya’s fields of petroleum; Western greed for natural resources not being a subject worthy of mention as the West launches its wars of humanitarian intervention.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahmed, Nafeez Mosaddeq (2009). Our terrorists. *New Internationalist*, 426, October. <http://www.newint.org/features/2009/10/01/blowback-extended-version/>
- AlJazeera English (2009). *US Rejects Goldstone Report*. November 4. <http://www.aljazeera.com/NEWS/AMERICAS/2009/11/200911320434191455.html>
- BBC News (2009). *S Ossetia War Crimes Condemned*. January 23. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7847285.stm>
- Blum, William (2005). *Rogue State: a Guide to the World's Only Superpower*. Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press.
- Bopearachchi, Osmund (2002). The Destruction of Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage. *IIAS Newsletter*, 27, March, pp. 13-14, 148.
- Chahim, Dean (2006). *Damning Peace and Developing Dissent: the Southeast Anatolia Project and the Kurdish Resistance in Turkey*. December 6. http://deanchahimbgi.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/sis-490-final-paper-displacing-dissent_5.pdf
- Chomsky, Noam (2003). Dominance and its Dilemmas: the Bush Administration's Imperial Grand Strategy. *Boston Review*, October/November. <http://bostonreview.net/BR28.5/chomsky.html>
- Chomsky, Noam (2009). *Exterminate All the Brutes: Gaza 2009*. January 19, revised June 6. <http://www.chomsky.info/articles/20090119.htm>
- Dabeek, J.N. (2003). *Post-Disaster Damage Assessment for the City of Nablus*. <http://www.najah.edu/file/centers/ESSEC/POST%20DISASTER%20DAMAGE%20ASSESSMENT.pdf>
- Dreyfuss, Robert (2005). *Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Edwards, Stephen P. and Julie Biando Edwards (2008). Libraries, Cultural Life, and Community Identity. *International Conference on Libraries from a Human Rights Perspective, 31 March-2 April 2008, Ramallah, Palestine*. Ramallah: Center for Human Rights Studies, pp. 72-83.
- Fernandes, Desmond (1999). The Kurdish Genocide in Turkey, 1924-1998. *Armenian Forum*, 1, 4, pp. 57-107.
- Glenn, David (2009). A Fragile History, Besieged: a Post-Mortem Examination of the Cultural Disaster in Iraq. *The Chronicle Review*, 52, 32, April 17, p. B17.
- Greenspan, Edward (2002). This is a Lynching. *National Post*, March 13. <http://www.balkanpeace.org/index.php?index=article&articleid=13867>
- Gutman, Roy (2011). Bahrain's Sunni Rulers Target Shiite Mosques. *Christian Science Monitor*, May 11. <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2011/0511/Bahrain-s-Sunni-rulers-target-Shiite-mosques>
- Herman, Edward and David Peterson (2004). A Study in Propaganda: Marlise Simons on the Yugoslavia Tribunal. In *The Trial of Slobodan Milosevic*. Nottingham, England: Spokesman for Socialist Renewal.
- Horowitz, Adam (2009). Shocker! Congress Does Not Reflect People's Opposition to Gaza Assault. *Mondoweiss*, January 10. <http://mondoweiss.net/2009/01/adam->

horowitz-writes-the-rasmussen-poll-said-that-democrats-by-55-to-31-were-opposed-to-israels-assault-on-gaza-the-followi.html

- Human Rights Watch (2005). *Still Critical*. March 7. <http://www.hrw.org/node/11822/section/4>
- Johnstone, Diana (2002). *Yugoslavia, NATO and Western Delusions*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Kuras, Eva (2007). Kurds in Turkey – Still Fighting for Freedom. *ZNet*, January. http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Middle_East/KurdsFreedom_Turkey.html
- Malmisanij, M. (2006). *The Past and Present of Book Publishing in Kurdish Language in Turkey*. Next Page Foundation. <http://www.npage.org/IMG/pdf/Turkey.pdf>
- Mandel, Michael (2004). *How America Gets away with Murder: Illegal Wars, Collateral Damage and Crimes Against Humanity*. London: Pluto Press.
- Mark, Monica (2012). Malian Islamists attack world heritage sites in Timbuktu. *The Guardian*, July 2. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jul/02/mali-islamists-attack-world-heritage-mosques-timbuktu>
- Milosevic Trial Manuscripts* (2003). 8 July. <http://icr.icty.org>
- Mozgovaya, Natasha (2009). Palestinians Under World Pressure Not to Declare State Unilaterally. *Haaretz*, November 16. <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/business/palestinians-under-world-pressure-not-to-declare-state-unilaterally-1.4075>
- NATO Crimes in Yugoslavia: documentary evidence* (1999). Belgrade: Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- Parenti, Michael (2000). *To Kill a Nation: the Attack on Yugoslavia*. London: Verso.
- Peic, Sava and Alsa Telalovic (1999). Sarajevo: coping with disaster. *Disaster and After: The Practicalities of Information Service in Times of War and Other Catastrophes*. Taylor Graham, pp. 135-160.
- Ravid, Barak (2009). Spanish FM: We'll act to prevent war crimes against Israel. *Haaretz*, July 30. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1059964.html>
- Riedlmayer, Andras (2005). Convivenca under Fire: Genocide and Book Burning in Bosnia. *ICSL*, 1, 1, December, pp. 28-53.
- Riedlmayer, Andras (2007). Crimes of War, Crimes of Peace: Destruction of Libraries during and after the Balkan Wars of the 1990s. *Library Trends*, 56, 1, Summer, pp. 107-132.
- Rothfield, Lawrence (2009). *The Rape of Mesopotamia: behind the looting of the Iraq Museum*. Chicago: University Press.
- Said, Edward (2000). The Treason of the Intellectuals. *Masters of the Universe: NATO's Balkan Crusade*. New York: Verso, pp. 341-344.
- Stanton, Danielle; Tim LeDonne; Kat Pat Crespan (2010). One Million Deaths Caused By U.S. Occupation. *Project Censored*, April 30. <http://www.projectcensored.org/top-stories/articles/1-over-one-million-iraqi-deaths-caused-by-us-occupation/>
- Twiss, Tom (2003). *Damage to Palestinian Libraries and Archives during the Spring of 2002*. International Responsibilities Task Force of the American Library Association's Social Responsibilities Round Table. <http://www.pitt.edu/~ttwiss/irtf/palestinlibsdmg.html>