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# Crimes of War, Crimes of Peace: Destruction of Libraries during and after the Balkan Wars of the 1990s

ANDRÁS J. RIEDLMAYER

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## ABSTRACT

Just as the Cold War came to an unexpectedly peaceful end in 1991, a series of wars engulfed the former Yugoslavia. The Balkan wars brought about the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people and the forced dislocation of millions more, singled out for persecution because of their ethnic and religious identity. The violence against human beings was accompanied by the systematic destruction of the cultural record—libraries, archives, and other cultural heritage. This article is an attempt to put the destruction of libraries during the wars in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo into a broader theoretical and legal context. It examines patterns and methods of destruction, the track record of legal and practical measures to protect endangered collections in time of armed conflict, the ongoing quest to bring those responsible for attacks on libraries to justice, the responses of the international community and of the library community to this cultural catastrophe during the war and in the post-war period, and the growing recognition of the nexus between cultural heritage and human rights. It also addresses the troubled aftermath of ethnic conflict and the perils of reconstruction in a post-war environment, in which libraries continue to be endangered by nationalist politics.

## EUROPE'S BACKYARD WAR

The fire lasted into the next day. The sun was obscured by the smoke of books, and all over the city sheets of burned paper, fragile pages of grey ashes, floated down like a dirty black snow. Catching a page you could feel its heat, and for a moment read a fragment of text in a

strange kind of black and grey negative, until, as the heat dissipated, the page melted to dust in your hand. (Librarian Kemal Bakaršić [1994], on the burning of the National and University Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sarajevo)

At the beginning of the final decade of the twentieth century, after nearly half a century of a tense confrontation that had threatened all of humankind with nuclear annihilation, the Cold War ended with surprising suddenness and without major bloodshed. But 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.

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), whose prosperity had been due in part to its status as a nonaligned country courted by both sides during the Cold War, disintegrated in a series of bloody armed conflicts that continued for a decade: Slovenia 1991, Croatia 1991–1995, Bosnia-Herzegovina 1992–1995, Kosovo 1998–1999, Macedonia 2001. The wars of the breakup of the former Yugoslavia brought death and destruction to the region on a scale not seen in Europe since the end of World War II. By the time the fighting was over nearly a quarter of a million people were dead or unaccounted for, more than 2.5 million had been turned into refugees, and hundreds of villages and entire cities had been reduced to ruins (Silber & Little, 1997).

From the beginning, the hostilities were characterized by two features that had little to do with legitimate military objectives:

- “Ethnic cleansing”—the mass expulsion of civilians, driven from their homes, robbed, raped, and murdered for being of the “wrong” ethnicity and religion (Cigar, 1995)
- The systematic and deliberate targeting and destruction of cultural, religious, and historic landmarks, including libraries and manuscript collections, archives, and houses of worship.

## DUBROVNIK

Emblematic of the many acts of cultural destruction of the Balkan wars was one of the first such attacks, the siege of the medieval walled city of Dubrovnik, designated for special protection as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1979. The old town center and some eight thousand civilian residents trapped inside the besieged city were subjected to months of heavy bombardment from land and sea by the Serb-led Yugoslav People's Army (JNA), from October 1991 until early 1992. On December 6, 1991, the worst day of the siege, international observers recorded large-caliber shells landing in the old town at a rate of fifteen per minute. Of the 824 buildings located within the historic city walls, two-thirds were damaged or destroyed; more than eighty people were killed during the siege (Nodari, 2000; UN Commission of Experts, 1994).



*Figure 1.* Dubrovnik, Croatia. The Inter-University Center and its library, burned out after bombardment by the Yugoslav People's Army, December 1991. (Photo courtesy of IUC Dubrovnik.)

Dubrovnik's libraries were also among the targets during the siege. The library of the Inter-University Center, an independent research institute established in 1971, was bombarded with incendiary munitions on December 6, 1991, and was burned, its collection of 30,000 volumes a total loss. On the same day, another volley of rockets fired from JNA positions on the heights overlooking the city hit the sixteenth-century Skočibuha palace, home to the Dubrovnik Scientific Library (Naučna biblioteka Dubrovnik) with its 922 medieval manuscript codices, its archive of the correspondence of Dubrovnik scientists and scholars from the Renaissance era, and nearly a quarter of a million printed books, 13,490 of them acquired before 1808, the date when the ancient city-state lost its independence. Although the building suffered such serious damage that it had to remain closed to the public after the war, the Dubrovnik Scientific Library's collection was saved by the efforts of the librarians. Library director Mirjana Urban's twenty-three-year-old son, photographer Pavo Urban, was killed by the JNA shelling on December 6 while trying to document the damage (Aparac-Gazivoda & Katalenac, 1993; Blažina, 1996; *Monografija Pavo*

*Urban*, 1992). As the UN War Crimes Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) later concluded in its judgment, when it convicted the Serbian general in command of the besieging forces of criminal responsibility for the destruction of cultural heritage in Dubrovnik, there had been no legitimate military targets in the old town at the time of the JNA attack (*Prosecutor v. Pavle Strugar*, 2005).

## SARAJEVO

In April 1992 it was the Bosnian capital Sarajevo which came under siege by JNA forces firing at the city from emplacements on the surrounding hills. This time the siege lasted for three and a half years. An estimated 12,000 of the city's 350,000 residents were killed by shelling and sniper fire; 50,000 more were wounded. The siege of Sarajevo also resulted in what may be the largest single incident of deliberate book-burning in modern history. The target of the attack was Bosnia's National and University Library, housed in a handsome Moorish Revival building built during the 1890s in the old town center as Sarajevo's city hall. Before it was burned, the National and University Library held an estimated two million items, including special collections, rare books and manuscripts, unique archives, maps, and ephemera, and the national collection of record of books, newspapers and journals published in Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as the main research collections of the University of Sarajevo (Kujundžić, 1996; Zećo, 1996).

In a three-day inferno, August 25–27, 1992, the library was gutted, the greater part (an estimated 90 percent) of its collections reduced to ashes. About half an hour after nightfall on August 25 a barrage of incendiary shells fired by Serb nationalist forces from multiple positions on the heights overlooking the library burst through the roof and the large stained-glass skylight, setting the book stacks ablaze. The library's longtime deputy director, Dr. Fahrudin Kalender, watched horrified from the window of his apartment, across the street from his workplace, as the phosphorus shells landed on the roof of the library, sending out fans of sparks until the building was engulfed in flames. Repeated shelling kept rekindling the blaze, while sniper fire, mortar shells and anti-aircraft guns aimed at sidewalk level shredded fire hoses and targeted firefighters and volunteers attempting to save books from the flames (Riedlmayer, 2002). Two veteran foreign journalists based in besieged Sarajevo filed eyewitness reports from the scene:

[The National Library] was blazing out of control Wednesday after the besieged Bosnian capital came under fierce bombardment overnight. Firefighters struggling with low water pressure managed to extinguish the blaze several times during the night but the building . . . kept coming under renewed attack. . . . By mid-morning, the north and central sections of the crenelated four-storey building were completely



*Figure 2.* Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina. The National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina, ablaze following bombardment by Serb nationalist forces, August 26, 1992. (Photo courtesy of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina.)

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engulfed by flames. Windows were exploding out into the narrow streets and the building's stone north wall was cracking and collapsing under the heat of the raging inferno. . . . The fire started shortly after 10 p.m. on Tuesday night and, despite the efforts of the city's fire department, kept reigniting and growing. The slender Moorish columns of the Library's main reading room exploded from the intense heat and portions of the roof came crashing through the ceiling. (Schork, 1992)

Serb fighters in the hills ringing Sarajevo peppered the area around the library with machine-gun fire, trying to prevent firemen from fighting the blaze along the banks of the Miljačka river in the old city. Machine gun bursts ripped chips from the crenelated building and sent firemen scurrying for cover. Mortar rounds landed around the building with deafening crashes, kicking up bricks and plaster and spraying shrapnel. Asked why he was risking his life, fire brigade chief Kenan Slinić, sweaty, soot-covered and two yards from the blaze, said: "Because I was born here and they are burning a part of me." (Pomfret, 1992)

Braving a hail of sniper fire, librarians and citizen volunteers formed a human chain to pass books out of the burning building to trucks queued outside. Interviewed by a foreign journalist, one of them said: "We managed to save just a few very precious books. Everything else burnt down. And a lot of our heritage, national history lay down there in ashes" (ABC News, 1993).

Among the human casualties was Aida Buturović, a thirty-two-year-old librarian in the National Library's international exchanges section. She was killed by a mortar shell as she tried to make her way home from the library. Amid the carnage caused by the intense Serb nationalist bombardment that day, her death went unnoted except by her family and colleagues. Bosnia's Ministry of Health reported on August 26 that 14 people had been killed and 126 had been wounded in Sarajevo during the preceding 24 hours (Kalender, 1996; Zećo, 1996).

Three months earlier the Serbian gunners' target had been Sarajevo's Oriental Institute, established in 1950 and home to Bosnia's largest collection of Islamic manuscript texts and Ottoman documents. Targeted with incendiary shells on May 17, 1992, the Sarajevo Oriental Institute and all of its contents were consumed by the flames. Losses included 5,263 bound manuscript codices in Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish, and Bosnian Slavic written in Arabic script (*aljamiado*); the Ottoman provincial archive, with more than 200,000 documents, primary source material for five hundred years of the country's history; a collection of over one hundred Ottoman cadastral registers recording the land-ownership and population structure in Bosnia from the sixteenth through the late nineteenth century; and some three hundred reels of microfilm taken of Bosnian manuscripts in private hands or in foreign institutions. The Institute's reference collection of ten thousand printed books and three hundred sets of periodicals, the most comprehensive special library on its



*Figure 3.* Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina. Interior of the Oriental Institute in Sarajevo, carpeted with the burned remains of its research library, of 5,300 ancient manuscripts and some 200,000 archival documents, after the Institute was shelled by Serb nationalist forces during the night of May 17, 1992. (Photo courtesy of the Oriental Institute in Sarajevo.)

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subject in the country, was also destroyed, as were its catalogs and all work in progress (Gazić, 1993).

In each case the library alone was targeted; adjacent buildings stand intact to this day. Serb nationalist leader Radovan Karadžić denied that his forces were responsible for the attacks, claiming the National Library had been set ablaze by the Muslims themselves "because they didn't like its . . . architecture" (Firestone, 1992).

The libraries of ten of the sixteen faculties of the University of Sarajevo were also wholly or partly destroyed by Serbian shelling, suffering combined losses of four hundred thousand books and five hundred periodical titles. Of the remaining faculty libraries and specialized research institutes affiliated with the university, all suffered some degree of damage to their buildings, equipment, and collections; all the libraries lost members of their staffs. Eight branches of Sarajevo's municipal public library were also shelled and burned (Myers, 1993; Žuljević, 1996).

The catalog of losses does not stop there. On June 8, 1992, the monastery and library of the Franciscan Theological Seminary in the Sarajevo suburb of Nedžarići were taken over by Serb troops and paramilitaries. The monks were expelled from the premises and the seminary's collection of fifty thousand books, including rare books and manuscripts dating from the seventeenth century, as well as hundreds of works of sacred art were looted. During the war a number of rare books and artworks bearing the ownership marks of the Nedžarići seminary were offered for sale to Father Leopold Rochmes, the head of the Franciscan order in Belgrade, by a Serbian art dealer, who demanded a prohibitive sum for them. After the end of the war some books were returned by local Serb residents, but more than half of the collection, including most valuable items, remains unaccounted for (Karamatić, 1996; Lovrenović, 1994; also, M. Karamatić, personal communication, February-March 2005).<sup>1</sup>

#### ELSEWHERE IN BOSNIA

In the southern city of Mostar, more than sixty thousand volumes were burned in May 1992, when the Episcopal library in the Roman Catholic bishop's palace was set ablaze by the Serb-led Yugoslav People's Army (Kaiser, 1993; Živković, 1997, pp. 186–187). In June 1992, Croat extremists in turn blew up the Serb Orthodox cathedral in Mostar; a month later, they also destroyed the sixteenth-century Serb Orthodox monastery at Žitomisljić south of Mostar (Riedlmayer, 1997). Similar acts of destruction, large and small, took place in hundreds of other communities in Bosnia-Herzegovina selected for "ethnic cleansing" by Serb and Croat nationalist forces between 1991 and 1996 (International Court of Justice, 2006).

The fates in the war of two small towns and their libraries, Janja in the northeastern corner of Bosnia and Stolac in the country's southern region of Herzegovina, are representative of a widespread pattern of destruction.



*Figure 4.* Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina. Shared cultural space, ca. 1980: Muslim minarets and the steeples of Orthodox and Catholic churches reach up from the same skyline. (Photo courtesy of the Documentation Center, Aga Khan Program, Fine Arts Library, Harvard University.)

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Before the 1992–95 war, Janja was a town of ten thousand people, 95 percent of them Bosniaks (Muslim Slavs), located in the fertile Semberija plain near the Drina River, about six miles south of the city of Bijeljina. In 1993–94 Janja was in the news as the scene of a particularly brutal “ethnic cleansing” campaign conducted by Serb nationalist militiamen led by a former soccer player named Vojkan Djurković, members of a paramilitary group controlled by the Serbian warlord Željko Ražnatović, a baby-faced thug who went by the *nom de guerre* Arkan.

According to information provided by the local Islamic community, the Atik džamija (Old Mosque) in the center of Janja was blown up between 3 and 4 a.m. on April 13, 1993, while the town was under curfew and under the control of Serb nationalist forces. The ruins of the mosque were leveled by bulldozer the following day, by order of the Serb authorities. Janja’s second, newer mosque was razed in the same manner at the beginning of May 1993.

Among the town’s other cultural treasures was the private library of the late Alija-efendija Sadiković (1872–1936). The scion of a prominent local Bosnian Muslim family, Mr. Sadiković was a scholar and a notable author whose work represented the last flowering of a four hundred-year-old tradition of Bosnian literature written in Bosnian Slavic in Arabic script (*aljamiado*). In a survey of Islamic manuscript collections in Bosnia, published on the eve of the war, the Sadiković collection is described as having about one hundred manuscript codices as well as hundreds of old printed books in Ottoman, Bosnian, Arabic, and Persian. Mr. Sadiković had bequeathed his library and personal papers to Janja’s Old Mosque, which also housed other valuable collections of rare books and manuscripts deeded to the mosque’s library by two famous local Muslim scholars, Halil-efendija Jelić and Mustafa-efendija Hadžić. Together these three Islamic endowment (*waqf*) libraries consisted of approximately 3,200 old printed books and manuscripts, including handwritten copies of the Qur’an, scriptural commentaries and other works on theology, history, philosophy, and Islamic law. All were destroyed in the spring of 1993, when Janja’s historic Old Mosque was razed. The adjacent mosque graveyard, with the tombs of dozens of Bosnian Muslim scholars and writers from Janja, was also leveled by bulldozer (S. Bačević, personal communication, July 14, 2002; Ždralović, 1992).<sup>2</sup>

In the months that followed, the “ethnic cleansers” also disposed of the town’s Bosnian Muslim population by sending Muslim men and boys considered to be of military age to concentration camps and making women, children and old people pay extortion money for the privilege of being expelled across the confrontation lines. All but a handful of the 30,000 Bosniaks living in the Janja-Bijeljina area were “cleansed” by Djurković and his men, reportedly acting on direct orders from Serb nationalist

leader Radovan Karadžić's headquarters in the ski resort of Pale (Block, 1994; Eagar, 1994; Thurow, 1994).

By the time the war ended in 1995 most of Janja's surviving inhabitants were refugees, living in temporary housing in the Tuzla area. Only recently have some begun to return to their home town. Vojkan Djurković is alive and well and is a big man in the nearby city of Bijeljina, which remains under control of Serb nationalist hardliners. Since the end of the war, investigators from the International War Crimes Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia have discovered three mass grave sites near Janja, believed to hold the remains of hundreds of massacred Muslim civilians (Berman, 1996; Gutman, 1996; Pomfret, 1996).

The losses in Stolac, a historic small town in southern Bosnia-Herzegovina, also serve to illustrate the link between the destruction of a community through the killing or expulsion of its members and the destruction of its communal memory by the ethnic cleansers. On the eve of the 1992-1995 war, Stolac was inhabited by some 19,000 people, about half of them Bosnian Muslims, one-third Bosnian Croats and one-fifth Bosnian Serbs. Nominated by the Bosnian government for designation as a UNESCO world heritage site on the eve of the war, Stolac was a small jewel of a town known for its well-preserved traditional Bosnian residential architecture, its seventeenth-century market, its four old mosques, a Baroque Serb Orthodox church built in the last years of Ottoman rule, and a modern Catholic church. The town and its houses and monuments were picturesquely arrayed along the banks of the Bregava River, beneath a steep mountain topped by imposing fortifications dating back to the heyday of Ottoman rule.

In the summer of 1993, Stolac was ethnically cleansed by the HVO, the Bosnian Croat nationalist militia. A report by the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) describes what happened:

In early July [1993], hundreds of draft-age men in Stolac, a predominantly Muslim town, were reportedly rounded up [by the Bosnian Croat authorities] and detained, probably in [the concentration camps at] Dretelj and Gabela. The total number of detained civilians from Stolac is believed to be about 1,350. . . . On 1 August, four mosques in Stolac were blown up. That night, witnesses said, military trucks carrying soldiers firing their weapons in the air went through the town terrorizing and rounding up all Muslim women, children and elderly. The cries and screams of women and children could be heard throughout the town as the soldiers looted and destroyed Muslim homes. The soldiers, who wore handkerchiefs, stockings or paint to hide their faces, took the civilians to Blagaj, an area of heavy fighting northwest of Stolac. (UNHCR, 1993)

A memorial book published by the presidency-in-exile of Stolac municipality lists the town's murdered and missing residents. It also catalogs

the cultural losses, the wholesale destruction of mosques and Muslim houses, and of precious books, manuscripts, historic documents, and Islamic community records burned by Croat nationalist militiamen:

- The Library of the Muslim Community Board of Stolac, including forty manuscripts from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, valuable printed books and community records going back to the nineteenth century (burned in mid-July 1993 by HVO militiamen);
- The Library of the Emperor's Mosque in Stolac—tens of manuscripts in Bosnian, Arabic, Turkish, and Persian, from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, along with eight framed *lawḥas* (illuminated single-page compositions of Islamic calligraphy) from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Burned by the HVO in early August 1993, together with the Emperor' Mosque (Careva džamija, Mosque of Sultan Selim I, built in 1519);
- The Library of the Podgradska Mosque (Mosque of Ali Pasha Rizvanbegović) in Stolac—tens of manuscripts and historical documents of the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, and five *lawḥas* (the oeuvre of one local nineteenth-century calligrapher). The mosque library was burned in the fire set by the HVO to destroy the Podgradska Mosque (built in 1732–33) at 11 p.m. on July 28, 1993; the burned-out building was mined on August 8. The rubble remaining after the explosion was trucked away and the site was leveled;
- Several important private collections of documents, manuscript volumes, and rare books belonging to Bosniak (Muslim Slav) families in Stolac were burned by HVO militiamen when the town's Muslims were rounded up and expelled and their houses destroyed in July-August 1993. We have only limited information available on the contents of these collections. There is a published description of fifty bound manuscripts (thirty-nine Arabic, two Persian, nine Ottoman Turkish) of the Habiba Mehmedbašić collection; the manuscripts were burned when the Mehmedbašić family home was looted and set ablaze by Croat extremists. The historic mansions, libraries, and family papers of other old Bosniak families in Stolac—Rizvanbegović, Behmen, and Mahmutćehajić—were also burned and destroyed (Presidency-in-exile of the Municipality of Stolac, 1996, pp. 45–54).

Before the war these family compounds and religious institutions had been local landmarks, symbols of the town and centers of the local Bosnian Muslim community's communal life. Even those Bosniak residents who were not themselves religious had seen their parents or grandparents buried from the mosques of Stolac; the continued presence of the mosques and of the slim spires of their minarets were visible signs of their community and of its history in that town, even if they themselves did not attend prayers there. Similarly, the community and family libraries and



*Figure 5.* Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina. Charred books from the library of the Roman Catholic bishop's palace in Mostar, burned down by the Serb-led Yugoslav People's Army in May 1992. (Photo courtesy of the Roman Catholic Ordinariate of Mostar-Duvno.)

documents embodied the personal and collective history and cultural life of Bosniaks in that town. The systematic destruction of their houses of worship and of the written record of their culture was meant to send a message to the local Muslim community: you don't belong here. This is not your place any more (International Court of Justice, 2007, pp. 121–124, para. 335–344).

### SHARED CULTURAL SPACE

For many, it was not the burning of libraries and the razing of mosques but the destruction of the old Ottoman bridge in Mostar that brought home the reality of the cultural and human catastrophe that had overtaken Bosnia-Herzegovina and the region. Built in 1566, the soaring arch of the old bridge at Mostar stood intact for 427 years, spanning the blue-green waters of the Neretva River through peace and war, floods and earthquakes, and the passage of centuries. On November 9, 1993, after half an hour of concentrated bombardment by a Croatian Army tank firing its cannon at point-blank range, Mostar's old bridge finally collapsed into the river. The fall of the bridge was greeted by a long fusillade as Croat nationalist gunmen celebrated their side's victory (Dodds, 1998). One Croat militiaman, interviewed in Mostar a couple of months prior to this, in September 1993, explained to a British reporter why it was necessary to destroy the old bridge: "It is not enough to clean Mostar of the Muslims," he said, "the relics must also be removed" (Block, 1993).

However, the militiaman had it wrong. The old bridge was not the exclusive symbol of a single group, nor was it a symbolic link between East and West, as some observers have tried to interpret it. There were mosques and churches alike on both sides of the Neretva River in Mostar, their steeples and minarets reaching up from the same skyline. The bridge was the symbol of the city of Mostar (whose name means *bridge-keeper*). For countless generations the bridge had been the place where young men of Mostar had dared each other to leap into the rushing waters below, where young couples courted by moonlight, where friendships and deals were made and broken, and where gossip and news was exchanged. Just like the National Library and other Bosnian institutions targeted in the war, and much like the mosques, churches and synagogues that were built facing each other across the main squares of so many Bosnian towns, what the bridge over the Neretva symbolized was the everyday fact of living together, of shared cultural space. To exclusive nationalists, wedded to an elusive ideal of ethnic purity and apartheid, this shared cultural space is anathema. That is why they seek to destroy it.

“Why do I feel more pain looking at the image of the destroyed bridge [in Mostar] than the image of the [massacred] woman?” asked journalist Slavenka Drakulić (1993):

Perhaps it is because I see my own mortality in the collapse of the bridge. . . . We expect people to die. We count on our own lives to end. The destruction of a monument to civilization is something else. The bridge, in all its beauty and grace, was built to outlive us; it was an attempt to grasp eternity. . . . it transcended our individual destiny. (p. 15)

Eleven years after its destruction the Mostar's old bridge was rebuilt in facsimile, in conformity with the original plans and using original materials. The white stone arch of the “new old bridge,” though as yet too bright and new, once again soars over the river, drawing in tourists and hope for Mostar's future.

## LIBRARIES IN THE AFTERMATH OF WAR

Bosnia's libraries have not been as fortunate. As of 2006, nearly a decade and a half after the catastrophic JNA bombardment and the ensuing inferno that destroyed most of its contents, the National and University Library (NUB) had yet to return to its original premises. The building, still fondly known by Sarajevans as the *Vijećnica* (Town Hall), remained an empty shell in the center of the old city, surrounded by hoardings, its walls still pockmarked by bullet holes, its windows boarded up. There were rumors that the *Vijećnica* was about to be restored with European funds, but no certainty that it would serve as a library again.

Meanwhile, settled in its long-term temporary quarters, in a restored

wing of a former Austro-Hungarian-era military barracks on the western edge of the old town, the NUB as an institution is alive, but not altogether well. On the positive side, the renovation of its current premises, donations of books and other materials, and a dedicated staff have managed to keep the institution going and are providing users with a level of collections and services that could hardly have been imagined in the aftermath of the 1992 disaster.

The principal problem is structural. The Dayton Peace Accords of 1995, which finally brought an end to three and a half years of war, also stripped Bosnia-Herzegovina's central government of most of its powers and left it with limited sources of revenue. Since Dayton, the national government has not had a ministerial portfolio for cultural affairs. Nationalist politicians, who have dominated post-war governments in Bosnia, see no political gain in promoting the concept of a common heritage. Public resources that should be supporting the NUB and other national institutions of cultural memory are being diverted to private, ethnically-oriented cultural enterprises (Donia, 2004).

The devolution of power and financial clout to regional and local levels of government has left national institutions such as the NUB effectively orphaned, bereft of political backing and in a state of recurrent fiscal crisis. As a result, the NUB has had to rely on emergency subventions offered by various local authorities in Sarajevo on an ad-hoc basis, has often found itself unable to meet its payroll obligations and at times unable to pay its utility bills. In late 1994 the NUB even closed its doors to the public for a time, pleading lack of funds. Another emergency transfusion of cash allowed it to reopen but its problems remain unresolved. Promises of international assistance for post-war reconstruction of the National and University Library's collections, infrastructure and services have materialized only on a modest scale (Spurr, 2005). Nevertheless, Bosnian and American librarians have been cooperating in a number of innovative projects aimed at reconstructing virtual collections of Bosnia-related material (*Bosniaca*), using new technology to help recover at least some of the written heritage that was lost in the flames in 1992 (Bakaršić, 2004; Kalaš, 2003; Riedlmayer, 2004).

## LIBRARY CLEANSING

Croatia's long war of independence came to a dramatic end in the summer of 1995, when Serbia's ruler Slobodan Milošević withdrew support from his Serb nationalist protégés in the neighboring country. Rebel Serbs in Croatia, whose forces had occupied nearly a quarter of the country and had driven out most non-Serb residents from territory under their control, now found the tables turned. In two swift military operations, code-named "Bljesak" (Flash) and "Oluja" (Storm), the Croatian army took most of the rebel-held territory, from which most of the ethnic Serb

population now fled in panic, in fear of attacks by soldiers or by returning Croat civilians seeking loot or revenge amidst the chaos.

With triumphal nationalist sentiment running high some zealous Croatian patriots, with encouragement from above, took it upon themselves to seize the moment and apply the principle of ethnic purity to library collections. Korčula, on the Dalmatian island of the same name, a sleepy resort town that had escaped the ravages of the war, was one of the places caught up in this unreason. In 1997, Ms. Izabel Skokandić, acting administrator of Korčula's small municipal library decided to do some deaccessioning. She was observed removing some seven hundred books from the library and dispatching them to the dump. Among the discarded books were titles published in Belgrade or elsewhere outside of Croatia, also books by Serbian authors and books in the Cyrillic alphabet, and works of foreign authors generally. Local people were upset and notified the media. The satirical weekly the *Feral Tribune* eventually ran an exposé on the incident under the headline "Girl with matches," Ms. Skokandić sued the paper, claiming she had been defamed as a book-burner. On February 13, 2002, a municipal judge in Zagreb found in her favor, because while she had dumped books, she had not actually set fire to them. She was awarded damages of \$3,500, a tidy sum in Croatia, plus court costs. And she remained in charge of the Korčula library.

A series of investigative articles in the *Feral Tribune* and other papers has since turned up more than half a dozen additional incidents of "library cleansing" elsewhere in Croatia, carried out in the mid-1990s at the incentive of a Croat nationalist minister of culture (Lasić, 2002; Lešaja, 2003). Similar charges have recently surfaced in Bosnia, where the Bosniak director of the municipal library in Bugojno was accused in 2005 of having dumped over 1,000 books by Croatian authors, a charge he has denied, pointing out that some 80 percent of the library's collection consists of works by Serb and Croatian authors. True, some 3,200 books are missing from the library's inventory, but the director insists those books went missing during the war, or were never returned by readers (Antić, 2005).

In comparison to the massive library purges on the South African (Dick, 2004) or Soviet model (Beacon for Freedom of Expression, n.d.), these may seem like minor, localized incidents. But the fact that they occur at all gives cause for concern and for renewed vigilance.

## KOSOVO BURNING

While librarians in Bosnia and Croatia, with help from colleagues abroad, struggled with the daunting task of rebuilding, elsewhere in the Balkans conflict was brewing again. In 1998 and 1999 ethnic Albanians, who form the majority in the southern province of Kosovo, rose in armed revolt against the Belgrade government of Serbian strongman Slobodan Milošević. Belgrade's forces reacted with brutal repression and engaged



*Figure 6.* Priština (Kosovo). The Central Historical Archive of the Islamic community of Kosovo (KBI) in flames, after it was set ablaze by Serbian police June 13, 1999, hours before the arrival of the first NATO peacekeeping troops. (Photo copyrighted by Archive Photos—Reuters/Oleg Popov.)

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in massive ethnic cleansing of Kosovo Albanians in a bid to ensure continued Serbian dominance in the province. After peace talks in early 1999 failed to bring concessions, NATO intervened at the end of March 1999 with air strikes on Kosovo and Serbia proper. The Kosovo war of 1999 lasted less than three months but resulted in massive displacements of population as Serbian police, troops, and paramilitaries drove some eight hundred thousand Kosovo Albanians—a third of the population—out of their homes and out of Kosovo. Once again, cultural landmarks of the non-Serb population suffered massive destruction. Within a matter of weeks some 220 mosques, more than a third of the 607 mosques registered in Kosovo before the war, had been damaged or destroyed (Herscher & Riedlmayer, 2001).

While Kosovo's National and University Library in Priština escaped major damage, public libraries in other Kosovo municipalities, especially in the rural areas, suffered terrible devastation. By the end of the eleven-week war, 65 of Kosovo's 183 public libraries, a third of the total, had been completely destroyed. The Kosovo public library network's combined losses were assessed at 900,588 volumes. More than a third of school libraries in Kosovo were also destroyed in the war (Fredericksen & Bakken, 2000). A number of religious libraries and archives of Kosovo's Islamic community were also burned. Among them was the Islamic endowment (*waqf*) library of Hadum Suleiman Aga in the western Kosovo town of Gjakova/Djakovica, founded in 1595 and burned by Serb troops at the end of March 1999 with the complete loss of its collection of 200 ancient manuscripts and 1,300 old printed books. Another irretrievable loss was that of the central historical archive of the Islamic Community of Kosovo, in Priština, with community records going back more than five hundred years, which was burned by Serbian police on June 13, 1999, after the armistice and just hours before the arrival of the first NATO peacekeeping troops in the city (Riedlmayer, 2000).

Reports by journalists and refugees during the Kosovo war, indicating that the destruction of cultural heritage that had accompanied ethnic cleansing in Croatia and Bosnia during the wars of the early 1990s was now happening again in Kosovo, suggested the need for a systematic post-war field survey to examine allegations and to document the damage. As the United Nations was taking over civil administration of the territory, it seemed logical that UNESCO would conduct such a survey. But inquiries with UNESCO headquarters in Paris revealed that the international body had no such plans. In the end, it seemed like the only way to make such a survey happen was to do it on one's own. After raising the requisite funds and doing a considerable amount of library research, I went to Kosovo in October 1999, three months after the end of the war, in the company of architect Andrew Herscher, to document damage to cultural heritage



*Figure 7.* Gjakova/Djakovica (Kosovo). Library of the Mosque of Hadum Suleiman Aga, founded in 1595. The library was burned by Serb troops at the end of March 1999. Its rear wall was smashed in May 1999, when the top of the minaret of the adjacent mosque was shot off and toppled onto the library building. (Photo courtesy of Prof. Sabri Bajgora, Faculty of Islamic Studies in Prishtina.)

buildings and institutions (Herscher & Riedlmayer, 2001). After completing our field survey, we consolidated our findings and documentation into a database and wrote up a final report, copies of which were presented to the Department of Culture of the UN Mission in Kosovo and to the Office of the Prosecutor of the UN war crimes tribunal in The Hague.

## INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE

And that is how, three years after the Kosovo war, I found myself a witness in the courtroom at The Hague, confronting a former head of state, Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević, with evidence about the destruction of cultural heritage during the wars in Kosovo and in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Armatta, 2003; Klarin, 2002). Part of the evidence entered into the record as a result of my testimony was the documentation that I had gathered on the destruction of libraries in the Balkans. Unfortunately, the Milošević case never came to judgment. In March 2006 Milošević died of heart failure, shortly before the scheduled end of his trial. His case is closed.

Nevertheless, the evidence presented in the Milošević trial is being re-used at the ICTY in cases brought against other defendants. At the end of October 2006 I testified in the trial of Milan Milutinović, who was president of Serbia, one of the two remaining federated republics of Milošević's Yugoslavia, at the time of the Kosovo war. Ironically, some years before assuming the presidency, Mr. Milutinović had served (1983–1987) as head of Serbia's National Library. Now he may have to take responsibility for the forces under his formal command that, among other misdeeds, are alleged to have destroyed cultural and religious monuments and burned libraries in Kosovo during the 1999 war.

It is a hopeful sign that the UN War Crimes Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) is treating attacks on cultural property, including the destruction of libraries, as a serious war crime and by doing so it is breaking new legal ground. The war crimes trials at Nuremberg had included attacks on and appropriation of cultural property in the list of charges brought against the defendants, a legal first. However, at Nuremberg the allegations involving crimes against culture had been classed with property crimes in general, as further items listed along with the charges concerning the dismantling of factories and damage to the soybean crop. There was no sense that attacks on cultural property represented anything different. It is only in the latest round of trials at The Hague that such a recognition has started to emerge (Maass, 1999; Meron, 2005).

From the first, ICTY was mandated by its statute to prosecute as war crimes the "seizure of, destruction or willful damage done to institutions dedicated to religion, charity and education, the arts and sciences, historic monuments and works of art and science" (International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, 1993, Article 3(d)). This article of the statute qualifies such attacks on cultural property as violations of the laws or customs of war.

The war crimes cases brought against the two senior Yugoslav army officers who commanded the JNA forces in the 1991 siege of Dubrovnik were the first such cases tried before an international court in which the major focus was on cultural property charges. Admiral Miodrag Jokić



*Figure 8.* Belgrade, Serbia. Library and archive of the Islamic community of Belgrade, sacked and burned by a mob, March 18, 2004. (Photo courtesy of the Islamic community of Belgrade.)

pled guilty to the charges against him and agreed to testify against his colleague, General Pavle Strugar, who stood trial and was convicted. The admiral and the general have been sentenced to seven and eight years in prison, respectively; their convictions set a legal precedent (*Prosecutor v. Pavle Strugar*, 2005).

Furthermore, evidence about the destruction of cultural and religious sites can also be an important element of proof in cases where the accused is charged with persecution on political, racial, and religious grounds as a crime against humanity. In such cases, testimony about the destruction of cultural and religious sites can provide powerful evidence of intention and motive. The judgment in a recently concluded case states this connection quite clearly (*Prosecutor v. Momčilo Krajišnik*, 2006).

As for “cultural genocide,” a concept much used in public forums and academic debates, there is no such category in international law. At the insistence of some national delegations, in particular the United States, the references to culture as a protected category were deleted from the final draft of the 1948 Genocide Convention that was eventually adopted. Nevertheless, there is clearly a connection between the targeting of a given group for persecution or destruction (the group having been singled out



*Figure 9.* Belgrade, Serbia. Library and archive of the Islamic community of Belgrade. Burned books. (Photo courtesy of the Islamic community of Belgrade.)

on the basis of its cultural and religious characteristics) and the systematic destruction of its heritage (based on the association of that heritage with the targeted group). Judges at the Tribunal have begun to recognize this link and have taken such evidence into consideration in their rulings on the gravest of charges (Morsink, 1999; Riedlmayer, 2005).

Whether the stately course of justice unfolding at The Hague and at the local war crimes courts that are now beginning to take over the case load will really deter war crimes, including attacks on cultural property, is another matter. Much of the international law governing the conduct of war seems to assume basic good intentions on the part of combatants. If combatants go wrong, the presumption seems to be that they do it out of ignorance or carelessness. This is why there is such confidence in the efficacy of the Blue Shield, also known as the Hague emblem, designed to identify buildings and institutions protected by the Hague Convention. But in the Balkan wars of the 1990s, where so much of the targeting of cultural sites was deliberate, the blue rhombus of the Hague emblem did not seem to do much good. If anything, it served to attract attention to buildings it was hung on, and would often result in more damage, not less.

It may be well not to underestimate the capacity of people to engage in deliberate acts of destruction. Consider the ethnic riots that broke out in Kosovo on March 18, 2004. The drowning of three young Kosovar Al-

banian boys in a stream in northern Kosovo led to rumors that the children had been chased to their deaths by Kosovo Serbs who allegedly set a dog on them. Riots ensued, stoked by inflammatory reporting. Before the riots were over eleven Albanians and eight Serbs were killed in Kosovo, some thirty Serb Orthodox churches were damaged or destroyed, and scores of Serb homes were torched in the mob violence.

The riots in Kosovo prompted public outrage in Serbia, where mass demonstrations were called the same day by political leaders. The protests turned violent by nightfall and ended with the burning of mosques in the cities of Belgrade and Niš and violent incidents in several other towns. In the southern city of Niš, a mob of young Serb radicals set fire to the city's only mosque; members of the crowd lay down in the street to prevent the fire brigade from reaching the scene. The two-hundred-year-old mosque burned all night and was a smoking ruin by morning, its walls covered with Serbian nationalist graffiti. In Belgrade, a mob marched on the seventeenth-century Bajrakli Mosque, the only remaining Islamic house of worship in the capital. They set fires that charred the outside of the mosque and they smashed up the interior. Then they broke into the Islamic school and cultural center adjacent to the mosque and set fire to the library. The Islamic library with its fifty thousand books and ancient manuscripts, and the historical archive of the Islamic community of Belgrade, were completely burned. It later came out that the chief of police in Belgrade had issued orders to his officers not to intervene.

"Our library is destroyed, all our records are destroyed, our seals are missing, our safe has been emptied, our computers are destroyed or stolen. As the Islamic community of Belgrade we no longer exist," Imam Mustafa Jusufspahić, the Belgrade Mufti's thirty-four-year-old son, told a reporter (Mracevich, 2004). Photographs of the destroyed library and archive posted on the Web showed charred Qur'ans and bookshelves covered with ashes. A librarian friend at IFLA wrote to his contact, a professor of library science in Belgrade, asking for an update on the fate of the Islamic library. On April 9 his Serbian colleague wrote back indignantly: "Believe me, nothing happened with any library in Belgrade."

## NOTES

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1. E-mail interview conducted by the author with Father Marko Karamatić, professor at the Franciscan Theological Seminary and *custos* of its library until the takeover of the monastery by Serb troops in June 1992.
2. Interview conducted by the author with Salko Baćevac, president of the Medžlis (council) of the Islamic Community of Janja.

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András J. Riedlmayer directs the Documentation Center of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard University's Fine Arts Library. A specialist in the history and culture of the Balkans, he has spent much of the past decade and a half documenting the destruction of archives, libraries, and other cultural heritage during the wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992–1995) and Kosovo (1998–1999). He has testified about his findings as an expert witness before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague, in the war crimes trial of Slobodan Milošević, and before the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The author of more than forty articles published in scholarly and professional journals and edited volumes, in five languages, he currently serves as president of the Turkish Studies Association. In 1994, he helped found the Bosnian Manuscript Ingathering Project, an effort to trace and recover still extant microfilms and photocopies, "shadows of lost originals" representing some of the thousands of archival documents and manuscripts that were destroyed when archives and libraries in Bosnia were burned by nationalist extremists during the 1990s.