

Commentary

In preparing my exhibition, I took my little packet of burned books (which I'd brought back from Kosovo inside a Zip-lock bag wrapped in paper towels and stuffed into the cut-off bottom half of a large empty plastic Coke bottle) up to the paper conservators at the Straus Center for Conservation, on the top floor of Harvard's Fogg Art Museum.

They helped me to unpack them and to arrange a sample for display. As we watched a conservator and an intern gently picking through the remains with tweezers, we all learned something new about the way books burn. They don't turn into wispy paper ash, like the crumpled newspapers one uses to start a fire in the grate. When scores of books packed into shelves or in piles are set ablaze, the pages fuse and carbonize, turning into clinkers in the intense heat due to the lack of oxygen.

We watched as the conservator picked out these small bits of charcoal -- the carbonized fragments of manuscripts and old books. They were hard and black, some had shiny surfaces that reflected the afternoon sunlight. Looking closely, one could distinguish: smooth, blackened fragments of leather bindings; loose fibers or carbonized pieces of woven cloth from the inside of the spines of books; chunks of charcoal in which one could still see the fused layers of pages; still smaller fragments of burned paper; black charcoal dust. One larger piece, softer and grayish in color, not completely turned to carbon, was still recognizable as a book: the remains of a spine, or perhaps the fore-edge of a volume, less than an inch wide and perhaps 2-3 inches long, with the curled edges of charred pages still visible on the narrow ends. It had come from the burned-out interior of a 15th-century mosque in Pec, torched by Serbian policemen on June 11, 1999, the day before the first NATO peacekeepers arrived.

It was an odd feeling to take the glass laboratory dishes with these burned remains of books down to the Fine Arts Library to put them in the display cases. Sad, almost reverential ... and also furious at those who have burned both books and human beings in Bosnia, in Kosovo, and in too many other places in recent years.

In my office, I keep a copy of a poem, an elegy for the burned Sarajevo library by a Bosnian poet, which talks about the removal of tons of such clinkers from the ruins of Bosnia's burned out National Library. In Prishtina the National Library still stands, but an estimated half of all the books in public libraries in Kosovo -- nearly a million books -- were destroyed by the "ethnic cleansers" in 1998-99.

It brings home the vulnerability of the human knowledge that institutions such as universities and libraries are established to cultivate and preserve. We like to believe that we can be keepers of the records of civilization and we do our best to preserve them from fires and floods and other natural calamities. But what can one do to keep books and human beings safe from the barbarians?

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Sample images from the Kosovo Cultural Heritage Survey:



BEFORE

View of the 500-year-old Carshi Mosque in Vushtrri (Vucitrn), taken before its destruction. (Visible in the background just to the Left of the mosque is a modern apartment building, which can also be seen in the second photo, taken from the same vantage point after the war.) Photo taken in 1998 by Raif Virmica, Prizren (Kosovo), in the collection of the Kosovo Cultural Heritage Survey (Fine Arts Library, Harvard University)



AFTER

Site of the 500-year-old Carshi Mosque and the adjacent old bazaar in Vushtrri (Vucitrn), burned down with gasoline on March 26, 1999, and the remains completely bulldozed on March 28th by Serb paramilitaries. More than 200 mosques -- 1/3 of all Islamic houses of worship in Kosovo -- were destroyed or seriously damaged in "ethnic cleansing" operations in 1998-99. Photo taken in October 1999 for the Kosovo Cultural Heritage Survey by Andras Riedlmayer (Fine Arts Library, Harvard University).



THE LIBRARY

View of the burned-out Library of Hadum Suleiman Efendi in Gjakova (Djakovica). The library -- founded 1595; the building dates from 1733, held a collection of ca. 200 manuscript codices and 1,300 rare books in Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, Persian, and Aljamiado (Albanian in Arabic script), as well as the regional archives of the Islamic Community dating back to the 17th century. The library was burned by Serbian police and paramilitaries on March 27-28, 1999. Photo taken July 1999 by Prof. Sabri Bajgora, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Prishtina (Kosovo), in the collection of the Kosovo Cultural Heritage Survey (Fine Arts Library, Harvard University).



BEFORE

Serbian Orthodox monastery chapel of the Presentation of the Holy Virgin (founded in the 14th century, restored in the 17th century under Ottoman rule), near Dolac in northwestern Kosovo. View of the monastery before the war. Photo: Serbian Orthodox Eparchy of Raska and Prizren, in the collection of the Kosovo Cultural Heritage Survey, Fine Arts Library, Harvard University).



AFTER

View of the ruins of the monastery chapel, which was destroyed in July 1999 by Kosovar Albanian villagers returning from exile. Photo taken in October 1999 by Andrew Herscher for the Kosovo Cultural Heritage Survey (Harvard University).