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From Censorship to Taboos in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Every year, written documents disappear because of natural disasters, accidents, wars, and unilateral decisions. What are the motives behind the destruction of written heritage, a calamity that has inspired harsh neologisms such as “biblioclasm” and “libricide”?¹ A variety of studies on the subject have reached similar conclusions, highlighting the role of intolerance, contempt, hatred, and ignorance, with the fundamental purpose of the destructive actions being the intention to eradicate the memory. This phenomenon is important enough to have warranted the publication of a UNESCO *Memory of the World* report entitled *Lost Memory – Libraries and Archives destroyed in the Twentieth Century*.²

It is easy to imagine how natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, which ravaged New Orleans back in 2005 and destroyed many lives as well as a great number of archive sites, can wipe out large quantities of documents that are valuable not only as part of cultural heritage, but also for commercial reasons.³ Katrina ruined several businesses, which no longer had any record of their activities after they had lost their documents.⁴ A form of amnesia had frozen their operations.

Likewise, it is easy to understand the impact of the 1988 fire at the Library of the USSR Academy of Sciences in Leningrad which destroyed or damaged 3.6 million books, including some rare materials and irreplaceable manuscripts and archival records.⁵ It was one of the worst library disasters of the 20th century and could readily be compared with the destruction of the Library of Alexandria. Despite having stopped or stalled several research projects, this event received very little coverage in library science publications, as the fire that destroyed on 31 January 2015 the library of the Institute of Scientific Information on Social Sciences, which was Russia’s largest human and social sciences library.⁶

I would like to discuss in greater detail the wilful destruction of texts and the reasons behind it. This is not a new phenomenon: it can be traced back to ancient times. Several factors can account for the voluntary destruction of documents, and they fluctuate through time. The first one is war. Then there is destruction for ideological reasons, the erasure of compromising evidence and the losses inherent to politi-

¹ Báez 2008.

² UNESCO 1996.

³ Burton/Hicks 2005.

⁴ Knabb/Rhome/Brown 2009, 149.

⁵ Polastron 2004; UNESCO 1996, 5.

⁶ Vaganov 2015.

cal changes. Finally, there is the administratively planned elimination of documents according to archival procedures that are based on arbitrary judgements.⁷

Whatever is behind it, the wilful destruction of documents is an established fact! Never in the history of mankind have so many books been destroyed as in the 20th century. Warfare, notably the two World Wars, as well as great political upheavals such as the advent of the Third Reich, the rise of fascism in Italy, the Russian Revolution and the Chinese Communist Revolution, saw libraries and documents of all kinds being destroyed on an unprecedented scale.

1 War

In the 20th century, wars are often conducted as total war, which involves not only military operations, but also the eradication of the enemy's culture, values and heritage.⁸ The Jews and the Armenians, as well as the Kurds, were the object of such attacks. These wars of annihilation were carried out for political and ideological reasons. Aside from causing destruction through combat operations and bombings, such as the burning of the library of the University of Leuven in 1914, where 300,000 books, manuscripts and incunabula were reduced to ashes,⁹ or the shelling of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s,¹⁰ war can also be directed at a people's writings.

In China, the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 and the subsequent Communist takeover led to the purging of "reactionary, obscene and absurd" publications,¹¹ a prelude to the mass destruction of books during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s.¹² Similarly, in Cambodia, the seizure of power by the Khmer Rouge in 1975 would pave the way to the liquidation of the near totality of library books.¹³

In the Western world, if ever a conflict wiped out the written memory of a society, it was the Second World War which led to the loss of a considerable number of printed documents and archives in Germany, France, Italy and Poland.

If the Leningrad library fire of 1988 was dramatic, what are we to think of the devastation caused by the war in Germany, which cannot be compared to anything else in history? A third of all the country's publications are thought to have disappeared during the war—an estimate that is difficult to confirm, since many library catalogues and registers were also destroyed. However, known losses include 50,000 books

⁷ Báez 2008.

⁸ Lowe 2013; Bosly/Vandermeersch 2010.

⁹ Le Naour 2014.

¹⁰ Gauthier 1997.

¹¹ UNESCO 1996, 4.

¹² Yongyi 2008.

¹³ Gottesman 2004.

in Aachen in 1943; 2 million books at the Berlin State Library and unquantifiable numbers in the capital city's other libraries; 150,000 books, including some ancient manuscripts, and 2,000 prints in Bremen; 760,000 books, 2,217 incunabula and 4,500 manuscripts in Darmstadt; over 500,000 books lost in the bombing of Dresden in 1945; 130,000 volumes in Essen; 550,000 books and 440,000 doctoral theses in Frankfurt; over 700,000 books in Hamburg in 1943; 400,000 books in Karlsruhe in 1942; 900,000 books in Munich, as well as 120,000 books from the city's Benedictine monastery; 600,000 books in Stuttgart in 1944; and the list goes on.¹⁴ Millions of German and European books and archives dating back to the Middle Ages, incunabula, original documents and masterpieces from all areas of writing—sonatas, literary works, scientific research—vanished physically and sometimes even in memory during this time. Furthermore, this destruction took place after the Nazi book burnings of the 1930s that had eliminated about 10 % of German libraries' book holdings.¹⁵

There is a paradox to be noted about war in that considerable steps are taken to protect certain types of documents from destruction. Examples include the medieval documents that were hidden with other pieces of art in bunkers in Nuremberg and elsewhere,¹⁶ as well as the French secret service documents from the first half of the 20th century. In the latter case, the documents' importance did not lie in their heritage significance, obviously, but in their military and strategic value. After the German capture of Paris in 1940, the Nazis seized these archival documents from the French information services and hid them in Berlin. In 1945, during the Battle of Berlin, the documents were found and confiscated by Russian forces. Russia only returned these documents to France in 2001 after having studied them.¹⁷

2 Ideological Destruction – Erasure of Compromising Evidence

Of course, the destruction perpetrated by the Nazi regime of the 1930s was of a different nature than the destruction caused by the Allied bombings. The former was deliberate for ideological reasons: the objective was to eliminate ideas that went against the party doctrine and writings identified as part of a subculture unworthy of existence. This form of censorship aims to shut down divergent views or elements from the past that do not serve the authority's purpose. Destructions represent also a form of psychological warfare.¹⁸ For example, in the Baltic States, history books were destroyed

¹⁴ UNESCO 1996, 10–20.

¹⁵ Báez 2008, 67; UNESCO 1996, 10–12.

¹⁶ Kirkpatrick 2013.

¹⁷ Vuilleumier 2015a, 52–54.

¹⁸ Taber 1977.

and libraries were purged by Russian troops in 1940.¹⁹ In Czechoslovakia, most libraries saw their collections either destroyed or dispersed, and many rare volumes such as the *Slavata Bible* disappeared during the war. The total number of books, manuscripts and incunabula lost by Czechoslovakia is estimated at nearly 2 million.²⁰

Following the invasion of Poland, the Nazis formed burning detachments (*Brennkommandos*) to torch synagogues and Jewish books. The Great Talmudic Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary in Lublin was burned down, and the few thousand books that survived were taken to Berlin, where they were destroyed during the bombings. Aside from these targeted eliminations, nearly all of Poland's libraries, archives, and museums were ravaged. UNESCO estimated that, of the 22.5 million volumes contained in Polish libraries, 15 million were deliberately destroyed.²¹ Interestingly, the surviving books included a collection of freemasonry materials from Krakow that was hidden for years in a castle cellar.²²

These wilful destructions cannot be compared to those that happened during the bombings of Germany. Aside from Dresden, the losses were part of global military operations where the survival of books was not a priority. The two causes were different, but had the same end result. One case was a clear and deliberate attempt at censorship; the other was what we now call “collateral damage”.

Ideological and doctrinal destructions are closely associated with the 20th century. One of the last examples to occur in Europe was in 1984, when a group of extreme-left militants vandalised part of the library of the Dutch South African Society in Amsterdam and threw into the canals books that they considered to be part of an imperialist agenda.²³ There is also the anecdotal, but very real, bonfire of *Harry Potter*-books that was organised in 2001 by a New Mexico pastor who called them “an abomination to God”.²⁴ Elsewhere, Taliban attacks on libraries in Kabul in 1998 led to the elimination of 55,000 rare volumes.²⁵ More recently, in 2013, Islamists destroyed part of the manuscripts of Timbuktu's main library. Finally, thousands of books in Mosul have been cremated by Isis (or Da'esh).²⁶

To be sure, similar destructions happened in earlier times, as is witnessed for example by the burning of the Library of Congress by British troops in 1814, which happened in retaliation for an American attack on the library of York the previous year.²⁷ In the 19th century and before, the reasons for the majority of burnings were

¹⁹ Baechler 2012.

²⁰ Marès 2005.

²¹ Baechler 2012, 87.

²² Vuilleumier 2015b.

²³ UNESCO 1996, 19.

²⁴ Yates 2001.

²⁵ International Federation for Human Rights 2012, 41.

²⁶ Le Point. Culture 2015; Le Nouvel Observateur 2015.

²⁷ Latimer 2007.

either political (to cover up morally questionable activities) or strategic (to destroy sources of knowledge). Documents pertaining to the English expeditions to Newfoundland and the decimation of the Beothuk population, a people that was declared extinct in 1829, did not survive this political censorship.²⁸ Neither did a great number of documents about the colonisation of Australia and the treatment of its Aboriginal people. However, despite the fact that the cultural and artistic products of dominated ethnic groups were often pillaged and taken to Europe, they were never subject to a deliberate annihilation as designed and executed by the authoritarian regimes of the 20th century. The purposeful and systematic destruction of entire collections of writings is often accompanied by the extermination of people. While these events are linked to wars, they do not necessarily imply military operations: an example of this is the methodical planning of assassinations by fascist regimes. In former centuries, armed conflicts typically involved only soldiers and therefore had limited consequences on populations and written culture.

The targeted elimination of documents, aimed at protecting specific interests, inevitably leads to a medium-term memory loss of events or periods of time. This collective amnesia goes unnoticed, and when research sheds light upon it, there can be a sense of surprise and unease that creates a taboo.²⁹ Switzerland is a good point in case. Its history during World War II had been very little studied until the end of the 20th century, and the few studies that did exist extended into the 1990s and addressed matters mostly unrelated to sensitive issues such as the policy on refugees, the closure of borders, the unclaimed assets in banks and the development of Aryan ideas during the war. Obviously, these issues put Switzerland in an awkward position, which is why they were deliberately overlooked during the second half of the 20th century. Delicate questions were avoided in textbooks and a certain number of documents were eliminated in both administrative units and archives. A phenomenon highlighted by the Carl Ludwig's 1957 report on the Swiss refugee policy, which was based on first-hand accounts and sources and contained encrypted data, remains hard to find to this day because no reprint was ever allowed by the federal authorities. The "truth" about that period waited until the 1996 Bergier Commission, a five-year inquiry made by university professors.³⁰ Unsurprisingly, one of the report's first observations concerned the number of documents that had been destroyed.³¹ The political and mediatic impact of the *Bergier Report* lead to a variety of publications that either supported its findings or rejected them. The controversy became as great as the taboo that these issues had become for a neutral country.³²

²⁸ Vuilleumier et al. 2016; Todorov 1998.

²⁹ Bédarida 1994; Fassin/Rechtman 2011; Zelis 2005.

³⁰ <https://www.uek.ch/fr/schlussbericht/synthese/SBfzus.pdf> (last accessed: 24.02.2018).

³¹ Commission Indépendante d'Experts: Suisse – Seconde Guerre mondiale 2002.

³² Boschetti 2004; Bridel 2009.

With the same idea, a recent case in 2018 has created a scandal among Swiss historians with the disappearance of archives concerning the swiss secret army created during the Cold War, the P26, revealed in 1990. The investigation conducted then had highlighted the close relationship with the British MI-6 and certainly led to the murder of Herbert Alboth, one of the leaders of the P26.³³ But, a part of the archives of this organization had been forbidden to researchers, the part that has just disappeared. The President of the Swiss Society of History and director of the Diplomatic Documents Research Center (Dodis), Sacha Zala, sounded the alarm in “Der Bund” on 8 February 2018, in an article entitled: “In den Bundesämtern gilt das Prinzip: In dubio pro Zensur”. The historian evoked the disappearance of the archives of the P26 of the Department of Defense.³⁴ A parliamentary inquiry was to be opened and is still ongoing!

A similar phenomenon is to be expected in relation to another particularly sensitive issue that is equally taboo: administrative detention, especially the internment of children. For a hundred years, Switzerland used administrative detention in parallel with the judicial system. Alcoholics were targeted for sanitary and moral reasons in the beginning of the 20th century, later on, the same method was applied in the case of handicapped people, allegedly for their own protection, as well as orphans, children whose fathers were alcoholic, and “promiscuous” girls.³⁵ Some of these internments were, according to the official jargon, made for “medical reasons”, while these practices reflect the attitudes of their own times, it sometimes seems that they have not been perceived as scandalising until the 21st century. However, the internment of minors, which included the forced separation of Yenish children from their families, but also the forcible sterilisation of them, has recently created a great sense of unease that finally ended up bringing these matters before the courts, where financial compensations are now awarded for moral prejudice by the people, once victims of these arbitrary decisions.³⁶

The burden of proof, however, still rests with the victims. This highlights the effect of the destruction of documents that constitute fundamental evidence to determine responsibility. Both in Switzerland and abroad, these written sources are part of the arguments presented in court. Their absence always creates doubts and grey areas.

³³ Vuilleumier 2018.

³⁴ Lenz/Häfliger 2018.

³⁵ Collaud 2013.

³⁶ Vuilleumier (forthcoming).

3 Losses Inherent to Political Changes

Another kind of deliberate destruction can happen during a radical political change: the elimination of documents relating to the rights and laws under an overthrown regime results from a passion that can easily be qualified as revolutionary, but also from the need to make certain that the old order is abolished.³⁷ In other words, the goal is to ensure that the previous political organisation is never revived. Examples of this include the 1794 decree on the French National Archives, which called for the sorting and destruction of feudal deeds (it was only repealed in 1979),³⁸ and the 1802 *Bourla-papey* Revolt in French-speaking Switzerland, where groups of peasants rose against the restoration of feudal rights and destroyed a large number of seigneurial archives.³⁹ These actions obviously led to the loss of a great amount of historical information and created a gap that was later on filled by the reconstructions of historians, which are in turn influenced by the ideals and the political and philosophical currents of their time.⁴⁰ In the 19th century, Romanticism strongly inspired the architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, whose restorations of French castles forever altered the public's perception of medieval architecture.⁴¹ Similarly, socialist leanings made their way into the writings of a leading historian such as Maurice Agulhon.⁴² The absence of documents bearing testimony to the past unavoidably leads to reconstructions and rewritings of history, which are subject to an inevitable partiality that generates fantasies and taboo alike, as has been demonstrated by the Jesuit historian Michel de Certeau.⁴³

4 Administrative Eliminations

The widespread form of archival destruction occurs through administrative procedures that are based on the very principles of recordkeeping. These principles not only set out conservation measures and research tools, but also retention policies that decide the retention time for certain documents, based on legal, heritage and usage criteria.⁴⁴ The destruction of a large number of selected documents, which are scheduled to be destroyed in a standardised and ongoing administrative process, has been made necessary by the storage problems that are in turn caused by the ever-growing

³⁷ Bercé 1987, 154.

³⁸ Favier 2004.

³⁹ Vautier 2006.

⁴⁰ Berger/Lorenz 2010.

⁴¹ Baridon 1996.

⁴² Agulhon 2005.

⁴³ De Certeau 1987.

⁴⁴ Giovannini 1995.

number of paper records, prints, and publications. In a quite paradoxical manner, the very profusion of writing thus creates a new source of danger for the conservation of documents and writing in our computerised 21st century, since the sheer quantity is becoming a reason for systematic elimination. This mass of documents is a danger in itself: if collections are not well managed, documents can get lost in an unfathomable sea of paper. Turning back to the French secret archives from the first half of the 20th century that have been mentioned previously, one can assert that these documents that survived war and repeated thefts now face a new danger: poor management without folders or references according to arbitrary eliminations, and dispersal across several storage sites, making searches difficult.

These administrative eliminations are inherent necessities that result not only from physical constraints, but also from legal constraints related to the protection of personal data and even the right to be forgotten.⁴⁵ However, the choices made by the archivists who receive documents are inevitably largely subjective, hence the same holds true for the proposed eliminations of materials that are perceived to possess a low amount of significance as cultural heritage. In the end, however, the evaluation of a document and of its historical value remains highly problematic, since the criteria and thus the outcome of the evaluation are likely to change with time. Who better than archaeologists to judge the value of ostraca found among ancient debris? Who today would think to store in their bookcase something that is widely considered trash?

Moreover, administrative elimination procedures are by no means immune to political manoeuvres. In Switzerland, for example, police archives are kept by police departments until they are stored in state depositories. The same applies to federal police archives which, for all intents and purposes, have been entrusted to cantonal police departments. Federal police archives are regularly and extensively cleaned up, despite some protests from heritage conservation professionals.

Administrative elimination is supported by a right that has recently been established in many countries: the right to be forgotten.⁴⁶ Even though this notion is true for individuals, barring certain exceptions, it does not apply to institutions, corporations, military organisations, political parties, or governments. One needs only to look back at the destruction of Nazi archives by former party members in the public service who were intent on covering their tracks. These destructions of documents made it possible for them to escape possible future accusations.

Actions taken by countries such as France, which enacted an amnesty law following the Algerian War in 1968,⁴⁷ run counter to any historical ethics and are based on dubious political motives. These measures favour silence and endorse the destruction of written testimonies without ensuring that everything is forgotten. This is confirmed

⁴⁵ Ferenczi 2002.

⁴⁶ European Parliament 2017.

⁴⁷ Wahnich 2007.

by the growing number of books that are published on the Algerian War as the main actors of these events disappear, as well as by the efforts made by researchers to find any documents that may have escaped destruction by the authorities. This war also highlights the issue of writing and the book: on 7 June 1962, one month before Algeria's proclamation of independence, three phosphorus bombs gutted the library of the University of Algiers which contained 600,000 books, manuscripts and incunabula. This "memorycide"⁴⁸ was welcomed in France, with some colonial supporters going as far as saying: "On n'allait quand même pas leur laisser notre culture et notre science."⁴⁹ With the reestablishment of historical facts and the renewal of memory, the war is becoming less and less of a taboo in France.

5 Conclusion

It can be imagined that every country, every city, every era has its taboos and secrets that are obscured by the destruction of writings. One may wonder, for example, which sanitary measures Switzerland had taken during the immigration of Italian workers to its territory?⁵⁰ What happened to the German prisoners used to rebuild France after the war?⁵¹ Or what assistance was given in Switzerland to German prisoners who had escaped from French prison camps? The stories of those interned in prison camps on American soil also remain largely unknown.⁵² What exactly was the role of the International Committee of the Red Cross in this affair, or in the more delicate matter of the French post-liberation "collaborator" camps? After all—and for all that we know from past experience—there can also be little doubt about the fate of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp archives: classified or destroyed!

The steps that have been taken 60 years ago at The Hague by a certain number of governments have done little to change the situation. After having reviewed the successes and failures of cultural protection in World War II, they resolved to create a new world system for the protection of the physical heritage of humanity in times of war (*Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*). Unfortunately, 40 years later, less than half the United Nations member states had ratified this fundamental international humanitarian law instrument and integrated it into their national legislation. Furthermore, only a small number of those countries that actually had signed the convention have taken effective measures to enforce it. In addition, the provisions only applied to protection during wartime, logi-

⁴⁸ A neologism created by Sécher 2011, 267.

⁴⁹ Courrière 1990; Vuilleumier 2015b.

⁵⁰ Hirt 2010.

⁵¹ Vuilleumier 2014.

⁵² Costelle 2012.

cally—and unfortunately—leaving out the politically motivated elimination of documents!⁵³

At the beginning of this contribution, I have mentioned the widespread consensus that wilful destruction of writing and written texts often resulted from intolerance, contempt, hatred, and ignorance. It seems that we should add political manipulations, shame and fear of sanctions as motives that come into play later to this list. To quote Fernando Báez “[...] books are not destroyed as physical objects but as links to memory, that is, as one of the axes of identity of a person or a community.”⁵⁴

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53 UNESCO 1996, 41.

54 Báez 2008, 233.

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