

War : Its effects on archives and libraries and how to mitigate them

Abstract

War is defined as ‘a state of conflict’, ‘a continued struggle against impersonal forces’. The function of libraries and archives is to tackle and overcome those conflicts to preserve the history and culture of a state, for future generations.

In its most devastating form, war is waged by opposing forces using weaponry that is often directed at destroying not only people, but their culture and religion in which they believe. Wars are waged on ideological bases as well as for political or historical reasons.

However, the effect of attacks on libraries, archives and non-secular institutions is similar to the disasters of fire, flood, earthquake etc. All institutions holding valuable collections must assess the risks to those collections and take appropriate defensive and protective measures.

Introduction

On June 28th 1914 Gavrilo Princip, a young Bosnian Serb, assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, in Sarajevo. The murder precipitated events that shortly led to the First World War and all its carnage. However bad the damage to buildings and their contents, the war was not directly aimed at cultural or religious differences, but political ones, and there was little state organised looting. However, the Second World War saw the active promotion of targeting cultural and religious institutions as with the Baedeker raids of 1942. Here the German Luftwaffe, in retaliation to British bombing raids, targeted cities noted in the Baedeker Tourist Guide of Great Britain and bombed cathedrals, museums and historic buildings. The Nazis also organised wholesale theft of collections from occupied countries and the Jewish community. In more recent times I have seen the wholesale looting of the museums in Kuwait by invading Iraqi forces, the burning of the National Library in Sarajevo. All acts of cultural desecration and the destruction of the great Buddhas at Bamiyan.

The Hague Convention

In response to the looting and damage of the Second World War, the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was inaugurated. Since then, there have been two Protocols – in 1954 and more recently in 1999. More than a hundred countries have signed up to the Hague Convention to prepare for the protection and defence of cultural institutions and their contents before a war, and to mitigate loss during one. Many major countries, including the USA and the UK have not yet signed up to the Convention, although the UK is currently programming a draft bill – the Cultural Property (Armed Conflict) Draft Bill, which will enable the UK to ratify the Hague Convention and its Protocols. The US Senate is also moving towards ratification.

Second Protocol

The 1999 Second Protocol to the 1954 Hague Convention came into operation in March 2004 on the accession of Costa Rica as the 20th state to accede.

The Protocol 'strengthens and clarifies cultural protection', establishes an Inter-governmental Position and International Fund for the Protection of Cultural Heritage. It gives the International Committee of the Blue Shield support in a number of activities.

The Internal Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS)

The 1954 Hague Convention was the impetus that led, in 1996, to the formation of the ICBS. It is a coalition of four non-governmental organisations, namely:

- The International Council on Archives
- The International Council of Museums
- The International Council on Monuments and Sites
- The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions

ICBS is charged under the Second Protocol with setting up a register of significant immovable cultural property in association with UNESCO, as an International List of Cultural Property under Enhanced Protection. It also will advise on the marking of important buildings with the Blue Shield motif, and to advise on the setting-up of 'cultural' units within the military.

It is also a body whose objectives are to advise, train and consult all the relevant bodies involved with cultural protection. National Blue Shield committees have already been successful in directing appropriate aid to disaster areas. The Blue Shield Nederland aided the National Committee of the Blue Shield of the Czech Republic after the floods in 2002 to buy equipment, transport it, and train people in its use in conserving water-damaged paper collections. In the United States, although not yet a signatory to the 1954 Hague Convention, a US Committee of the Blue Shield was formed in 2006, in response to the damage and looting of the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad. The USCBC provides training on cultural protection issues to the US military, in particular their Civil Affairs units. This it is hoped, will minimise damaging or insensitive actions by military units operating in other countries. One of the most important actions of the ICBS and related bodies is training in risk assessment, disaster planning and mitigation.

Case Study : The Zemaljski Musej in Sarajevo.

In April 1992, Serbian forces surrounded the city of Sarajevo and shelled with a continual bombardment of mortars, sniper fire and heavy artillery. Previously, in their war with emerging Croatia, churches had been deliberately targeted and destroyed, but in Sarajevo, many of the historic museums and other cultural institutions were damaged. The National Library was burnt to the ground, and the Zemaljski Musej – The National Museum was badly damaged. By January 1995, the British Newspaper, The Daily Telegraph, reported 'heavy rain and driving snow over the past week have completed the work of Serbian shelling in destroying one of the most important museums in Southern Europe; the National Museum of Sarajevo'.

The sequence of events is instructive:

The break-up of communist regimes in the 1980's saw the fall of the Berlin Wall and the fragmentation of Yugoslavia.

The divisions in the Balkans into nationalist, religious and political positions made war inevitable. The only positive side of the situation was that there was time for institutions to plan against the forthcoming disaster. This is an opportunity often denied to those who suffer other disasters such as tsunamis, earthquakes, fire and flood.

The pre-attack preparation period:

- The museum had staff, facilities resources, services (such as electricity)
- Requests for additional government help work unsuccessful.
- Basements were cleared and cleaned and moveable collections stored there.
- Large immovable items such as exhibition cases and large exhibits were protected in-situ, where possible.

During the war:

- Staffing was limited to a few, mostly elderly, people.
- Access to the museum was dangerous.
- Services such as telephones, electricity and water were cut.
- All glazed areas, including windows and rooflights, were smashed by the bombardment and so disaster mitigation was limited to trying to prevent rain and snow getting in. This was mostly done with plastic sheeting.
- Collections vulnerable to mould were naturally ventilated by opening windows when possible, and rotating the collections in front of them.
- Security was carried out by the remaining staff and then by a small army contingent. The Swedish government provided money to install security gates to the basement.

After the war:

- External funding initially provided resources to repair the damage and reinstate the exhibition spaces, library etc. The return of government funding was slow.
- Long term problems such as dry rot, structural damage, staff limitations appeared.

Conclusion

Despite the establishment of the Hague Convention and the admirable and effective aspirations of the ICBS, it must be realised that museums, libraries, archives, historical and religious buildings come low in the list of rescue priorities during a war. These institutions should carry out their own risk assessments and disaster preparedness plans against all disaster scenarios. Training of staff is essential and excellent training programmes are arranged by such international groups as the International Institute for Conservation in Rome (ICCROM), the Getty Conservation Institute and others. Disaster kits of useful materials such as plastic sheeting needs to be stockpiled, and in-house training of all staff on what to do in the case of disaster need to be implemented and repeatedly practised.

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