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AND ARCHIVES: A SILENCED
TRAGEDY FOR STATE SECURITY**

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DESTRUCTION OF DOCUMENTS AND ARCHIVES: A SILENCED TRAGEDY FOR STATE SECURITY

Abstract:

The deliberate destruction of documents and archives is a regular practice in conflicts, but goes unnoticed when compared to the images of the destruction of monuments and buildings.

Despite legal and juridical regulations, the international community should pay more attention to the protection of archives as they are essential guardian centers for human security and for the protection of individual and collective heritage.

Keywords:

Archives, documentary heritage, human security, cultural memory.

THE DESTRUCTION OF DOCUMENTS AND ARCHIVES: A SILENCED TRAGEDY FOR STATE SECURITY

We can usually find news in the media regarding the destruction of cultural heritage. This destruction can be a consequence of a natural disaster, as the recent Nepal earthquake, or of an intentional attack. Recently, the latter, always linked to social and armed conflicts, have had a major impact on the media after the images that depicted the destruction of Iraqi archeological sites by Daesh.

We must condemn these acts and also take into account the deliberate and silenced destruction of the documentary heritage that is safeguarded in archives. These actions are intended and usually go unnoticed by the public eye as there are not images exemplifying their severity. Nonetheless, the destruction of documents and archives is common during wars and has a direct impact not only on a country's memory or on a culture, but also on the individual rights of every citizen and, therefore, on the security of the States.

1. "Arria" formula

In 1992, Sarajevo's library was torn down during the Balkan war. This act changed the perception of cultural heritage destruction as an element of ethnic cleansing¹. During the conflict, 188 Croatian libraries were damaged, 43 of them being totally destroyed. Moreover, 8 of the 13 Croatian archive services were directly hit by projectiles, 4 of them being seriously damaged. Thousands of documents were also destroyed, making the conservation conditions of the protected and preserved materials archives contained other victims of the conflict².

¹ SÁNCHEZ Arsenio y SANTAMARIA, Itziar, "La biblioteca de Sarajevo, siete años después", *Educación y Biblioteca*, nº 110, 2000, available at http://gredos.usal.es/jspui/bitstream/10366/118612/1/EB12_N110_P10-15.pdf

² Cruces Blanco, *La Guerra Civil y los archivos en la provincia de Málaga: la destrucción de los símbolos*, in Junta de Andalucía, April 2006, available at http://www.juntadeandalucia.es/culturaydeporte/archivos_html/sites/default/contenidos/archivos/ahpmalaga/documentos/pdf/TXT - HIST - 20061219 - Axos convulsos. ECB.pdf). Date of access 03.05.2015

Nowadays, though, there are not many news addressing archives. There is hardly any reference regarding the destruction of a country's document heritage, not even when media covers great natural disasters as hurricane Mitch in Honduras³ or the Nepal earthquake.

The broadcasting and publishing of the deliberate destruction of works of art, historical monuments or libraries shock millions of people as these actions have a major symbolic dimension. The destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan, the Winged Bulls of Nineveh or the Timbuktu manuscripts is part of a global strategy that aims to eliminate a culture and a civilization by making their remains disappear.

Last April, the United Nations, concerned about the cultural heritage destruction and looting Daesh is carrying out in Iraq, met with the INTERPOL, UNESCO's managing director and the Security Council representatives of France and Jordan. The meeting was carried out following the Arria formula, that is, as an informal reunion between some members of the UN Security Council and some guests. These kind of reunions were first carried out by Venezuela's ambassador for the United Nations Diego Arria during the Bosnia conflict in 1992, when a Bosnian priest travelled to New York to talk to some members of the Council. Arria was the only one who met him. He was so moved by the priest's testimony that he invited other members of the Council to listen to him. Nowadays, this formula is used during the monthly meetings between members of the Security Council and social bodies, as it involves formality and informality and eases the exchange of information⁴.

Last April's meeting addressed the role of illicit trade of art work as a financial resource for terrorist groups. The INTERPOL has created a database that helps stop art looting taking place in Syria and Iraq. During the meeting a point was raised concerning the need for cooperation among police forces and private entities in order to stop this illegal trade. Nevertheless, there was no specific mention about the protection archives need, which

³ *Inventario de la destrucción cultural del Mitch*, 2008, available at [http://www.ipsnoticias.net\(2008/11/honduras-inventario-de-la-destruccion-cultural-del-mitch/](http://www.ipsnoticias.net(2008/11/honduras-inventario-de-la-destruccion-cultural-del-mitch/)

⁴ PAUL, James, *The Arria formula*, Global Policy, October 2003, available at <https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/componene/article/185-general/40088-the-arria-formula/> Date of access 05.05.2014.

contain the cultural heritage of the countries. Moreover, Irina Bukova announced that there was going to be another meeting that would gather archeologists, historians and writers to find solutions to stop the “heritage destruction surge taking place in Iraq, Syria and other countries in conflict”. She said that this surge “deepens the disintegration of societies and quickly expands to other countries as Mali, Libya and Yemen⁵.”

2. Archive and document security

National and personal documents stored in archives are also in danger of being destroyed, seized or looted. Therefore, their security and protection cannot be left outside these actions and recommendations. The destruction of documents contained in archives does not only constitute a simple attack against cultural memory, but also against the institutional and personal one. The condemnation of documentary memory (*damnatio memoriae*⁶ in Latin) follows the objective of slowly extinguishing what used to be a documentary testimony, which is something that usually happens in every conflict and war. These actions have had consequences legally and on the protection of rights. They imply the annihilating will to eliminate the proof value that documents, records, deeds or letters may have. This is because archives contain and safeguard the administrative, judicial, economic, private and personal activities⁷ of a society and a country.

Usually seized or destroyed during conflicts, they are considered to be spoils of war and military objectives. There is a huge number of current social conflicts in which archives are coveted⁸. Moreover, wars were and are considered to be large document producers

⁵ http://www.unesco.org/new/es/unesco/about-us/who-we-are/director-general/singleview-dg/news/unite4heritage_united_nations_university_joins_unesco_campaign_to_protect_heritage_in_danger/#.VU4kfM47EzY. Date of access 05.05.2014

⁶ This Latin expression refers to the action a State carried out in order to erase its enemies' memories. It was enacted by the senate of ancient Rome.

⁷ NAVARRO, Diego, “Tiempos de memoria, contextos de archivo”, *BID*, 28, 2012 available at <http://bid.ub.edu/28/navarro2.htm>

⁸ The XXIV FADOC Conference primarily focused on the analysis of armed conflicts as producers and destroyers of documentary heritage. The conference was held in April 2015 in Madrid and was organized by the Faculty of Documentation of the Complutense University.

(campaign documents, sanitary instructions, plans, cartography, personal documents and photographs) and destroyers.

3. Actions and international regulation for archives protection

The 1954 Hague Convention⁹ is in charge of the protection of archives and states the need to protect cultural property during wars. Apart from identifying cultural sites with a blue shield symbol, Article 7 of the Convention encourages signing countries to *“instill, on the members of their armed forces, a spirit of respect for the culture and cultural property of all peoples.”*

Nevertheless, it was not until 1966 that the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS) was created. The Committee consists of four international organizations related to preservation and conservation of cultural heritage that have the aim of being advisors for cultural property protection during conflicts¹⁰. Those four organizations are the International Council of Archives, International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, International Council of Museums and International Council on Monuments and Sites¹¹.

In 1993, UNESCO created the program *Memory of the World*, which was the first time the organization took part in the protection of documentary heritage. At the same time, it launched a series of reports about countries that had lost most part of their archives during violent actions. These reports show data regarding looting, dispersion, illicit trade and destruction, as well as inappropriate financing and storage. All these actions have contributed to the complete disappearance of a great amount of documentary heritage and to the endangerment of the one that remains.

The Second Protocol to the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property during armed conflict¹² was signed in 1993 and was developed together with UNESCO. The

⁹ http://portal.unesco.org/es/ev.php-URL_ID=13637&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

¹⁰ <http://www.ancbs.org/cms/en/about-us/about-icbs>

¹¹ ICA, IFLA, ICOM y ICOMOS respectively.

¹² http://portal.unesco.org/es/ev.php-URL_ID=15207&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

document shows the increasing importance the international community gives to cultural property. It also adds a direct reference to the responsibility States have, gives a new definition to the “imperative military necessity” exception, and details and strengthens the concept of “enhanced protection” for some elements¹³.

Yet, in spite of this regulation, the destruction of cultural heritage has worsened. Due to religious and ethnic reasons, asymmetrical conflicts have introduced a new denationalized model that has led to an ethnic genocide¹⁴.

UNESCO has taken note of the tools and guidelines for military personnel developed by different countries. Moreover, the 2001 MINUSMA personnel basic leaflet (military, police and civilians) is also particularly important. Its training began in 2013 and there is still no completion date¹⁵.

4. Conclusions

Ethnic cleansing, terrorist attacks and wars are still the main causes of archives’ destruction. The conflicts that have taken place in Liberia, Burundi, Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali or Syria during the last decades have worsened the situation of the States’ historical and cultural heritage. During the Iraqi war, the Iraqi National Archive was destroyed and with it a million of documents that dated back as far as the Ottoman Period. In addition, the country has also lost part of its historical heritage due to the National Museum destruction in the absence of action of the US troops, as Robert Fisk described in

¹³ MAINETTI, Vittorio, “Nuevas perspectivas para la protección de los bienes culturales en caso de conflicto armado: entrada en vigor del segundo Protocolo de la Convención de La Haya de 1954”, *Revista internacional de la Cruz Roja*, 2004, available at <https://www.icrc.org/spa/resources/documents/misc/64ch3v.htm>

¹⁴ Rodríguez Temiño y González Acuña, *La protección del patrimonio cultural en conflictos armados. De las lecciones aprendidas al diseño estratégico*, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, 7th August 2013, available at http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_marco/2013/DIEEEM15-2013_ProteccionPatrimonioCulturasConflictosArmados_IRguez.pdf

¹⁵ available at <http://www.unesco.org/new/es/culture/themes/armed-conflict-and-heritage/training-for-the-military/>

his chronicles¹⁶. Nowadays, the Afghan Taliban and Daesh are the ones responsible for the destruction of the people's memories, which remind us that archives and human rights cannot be set apart. The original, authentic and reliable documents that remain constitute a basis that can ensure the exercise of citizen rights and also *"give meaning to the overused concept of historical memory, understood as a return to the past through scientific studies with an exemplary will"*¹⁷. Countries and their people are strongly influenced by archives and the conservation of the documents they preserve. This can be shown through the division of archives in three groups: those that enabled the creation of an "unprecedented historiographic harvest"¹⁸, as the ones of the former communist countries of Central and East Europe; those that serve social groups; and finally, those that constitute the only mean by which rights can be recognized and victims can be compensated.

Archives safeguard decisions, actions and memories. They preserve a unique and irreplaceable heritage passed from generation to generation and play an essential role in the development of a society by contributing to the constitution, human safety and to the protection of individual and collective memory¹⁹. Therefore, they deserve to be correctly preserved and its neglect, destruction or looting should be denounced.

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¹⁶ Cruces, op. cit, 58

¹⁷ GONZÁLEZ QUINTANA, Antonio , *Actualización y ampliación del informe elaborado para Unesco y Consejo Internacional de Archivos sobre gestión de los archivos de los servicios de seguridad de los desaparecidos regímenes represivos*, Paris, International Council on Archives, 2008. Available at www.ica.org.

¹⁸ GONZÁLEZ QUINTANA, op.cit., 36

¹⁹ Universal Declaration Archives, in <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002134/213423s.pdf>