

Wiped Away: The destruction of cultural artifacts-and identity

by David Pryce-Jones

Soon after Chairman Mao died, I went to China. That monstrous man had leveled without a trace the ancient and magnificent walls of the Forbidden City in Peking, now virtually a shantytown. I took a boat down the Yangtze. (Today, they are damming and diverting the river, so such a trip is impossible.) An old guidebook listed pagodas and other monuments along the banks. These had been pulled down in the Cultural Revolution-all there is to see now are industrial plants. Bang goes the Chinese past.

In the cause of Chinese imperialism, Mao's successors are busy eradicating the age-old and unique monasteries and lamaseries of Tibet. Bang goes the Tibetan past, too.

The killing of human beings goes to the moral core of our existence, whereas the destruction of artifacts primarily raises aesthetic concerns. True: except that killers devise ethnic, religious, or ideological justifications for themselves, and so make sure to attack the monuments and places of worship defining the identity of their victims. Cultural cleansing is part and parcel of the obliteration of a people.

Wasn't it ever so? Vandals, Goths, Huns, Mongols, made themselves bywords for ravaging everybody and everything within reach. Law-and-order Romans burnt Carthage and Jerusalem to the ground. Napoleon systematically looted the countries he conquered. A civilization builds slowly, and along comes some brute to stamp it out. "Everything that exists deserves to perish," says the devil in Goethe's Faust. That is the creed of nihilism.

Nihilism in the modern age gained the upper hand over civilization through Communism and Nazism. These totalitarian systems dispensed with everything that did not fit their project for the future. Thousands of historic churches and villages in the Soviet Union were deliberately eradicated. Then came the Germans, and by the time they had finished, Russia was virtually bare of its living past, as it is today. Marcus Hindus, reporting for the New York Herald Tribune, could describe the country elegiacally in 1945 as "a desert strewn with wreckages" from which had been blown away "some of the most exquisite and most joyful art man has created." The wastage is being repeated at Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, once a charming garrison town familiar to Lermontov and Tolstoy, today shelled by the Russians themselves to uninhabitable rubble.

The Rape of Europa (1994), by the cultural historian Lynn H. Nicholas, amounts to an inventory of artistic losses during the last war. Great cities like Warsaw, Danzig, Dresden, Hamburg, and Königsberg were devastated, and so were palaces, country houses, and monuments everywhere. As in a hurricane, libraries and scientific collections, altarpieces, the famous Amber Room from the czars' palace at Tsarskoye Selo, innumerable paintings and drawings by old masters, were blown away forever. Special attention was given by the Germans, Nicholas writes, to "the trashing of the houses and museums of great cultural figures" such as Pushkin, Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Tchaikovsky.

Victorious Russians then repaid the Germans with interest. "Trophy art" was the euphemism they gave to everything they stole. Two Russian specialists, Konstantin Akinsha and Grigorii Kozlov, describe in their book *Stolen Treasure* (1995) the wholesale robbery of more millions of works of art, many of them to be lost in transit or damaged beyond restoration. Like Russia, postwar Germany remains permanently damaged.

Communist ideology has wrecked Cambodia, where the deranged Khmer Rouge installed military bases in Angkor Wat, a complex of Buddhist temples and one of the world's wonders. They closed down foreign scholarly institutes, and emptied the Phnom Penh museum. Today, dilapidation and pilfering are uncontrolled, with looted statues and carved door frames turning up on the black market. Bang goes the Cambodian past.

In Communist Romania under its dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, there was a Soviet-style plan to halve the country's 13,000 villages. In Bucharest, 40,000 people were evacuated from the old quarters of the city, known as Little Paris, most of which was then razed, including over thirty churches and monasteries, some dating back to the 17th century. When finally Ceausescu was overthrown in 1989, diehard Communists started shooting on the streets, and in so doing they set fire to the National Library. Irreplaceable incunabula, manuscripts, and books went up in flames. Bang goes the Romanian past.

The different peoples of former Yugoslavia have pulverized their country. Croats destroyed the famous 16th-century bridge at Mostar. Among much else, Serbs in Sarajevo alone destroyed the Begova Mosque, often described as one of the most important monuments in the Balkans; the National Library, in probably the largest book-burning in history; and the Oriental Institute. In Kosovo, they destroyed the Central Archives of the

Islamic Community, and over a third of the 600 mosques in the province, many of them hundreds of years old. Throughout Bosnia, they dynamited mosques and Catholic churches. Vukovar, once an unspoiled Habsburg gem of a town, is now a ruin. Andreas Riedlmayer, sponsored by Harvard to write a report on these damages, stresses how little of the traditional Ottoman-era architecture has survived in Albanian areas. Serb Orthodox dignitaries have compiled a list of 79 of their churches wholly or partly destroyed. Bang go huge chunks of the history of all those involved in the fighting.

The Americas seem to have escaped. The Sandinistas in Nicaragua did not have power long enough to eliminate local culture, and the Guatemalan guerrillas failed to acquire enough of it to do so. In African countries like Sudan, the two Congos, Angola, Mozambique, and Sierra Leone, the colonial past has been devastated. In his book about Liberia, *Monrovia Mon Amour* (1992), Anthony Daniels has described how one among the competing tribal gangs entered the capital's Centennial Hall and cut the legs off the only grand piano in the country. For him, this symbolizes nothing less than the repudiation of civilization.

Cultural cleansing is a Middle Eastern specialty. During the civil war in Lebanon, Muslims and Christians destroyed Beirut and its historic center, the Place des Canons, where they had lived together, but more significantly innumerable towns and villages where they had lived separately. Fanaticized by the impulse to protect their own ethnic or religious kind, President Hafez Assad of Syria, an Alawi, flattened the Sunni city of Hama, and Saddam Hussein, a Sunni, turned artillery on the holy Shia sites of Karbala and Najaf in Iraq. Saddam's troops stole the contents of the Kuwaiti National Museum, which until then had been probably the finest Islamic museum in the world. Egyptian Muslim fundamentalists now and then demolish the villages and churches of the Christian Coptic minority. The Saudi regime forbids every religion except Islam, and has surreptitiously wiped from the kingdom archaeological vestiges of early Christianity. Palestinians have recently burnt out Jewish holy places, such as Joseph's Tomb outside Nablus and the Jericho synagogue dating back to the 7th century a.d.

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The Afghan Muslim militia known as the Taliban (ironically meaning students) have reduced the National Museum of Kabul to a roofless ruin, smashed its exhibits, and also closed foreign scholarly institutes. In an act of barbarism, the Taliban have as well blown up the gigantic Buddhist statues cut out of the living rock some 15 centuries ago at Bamiyan. Bang

goes the Afghan past. In the same spirit, Hindu extremists in central India recently destroyed the Ayodhya Mosque built by the emperor Baber in the 16th century.

We are running out of countries, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn protested at the height of Soviet expansion. Now we are running out of cultures, in a global desert strewn with wreckages. We multiply the number of organizations whose aim is to protect mankind's heritage, but they are mere tokens, hand-wringing and ineffective in a world where advanced technologies of destruction are available to all. War, civil war, and ethnic and religious strife are destroying mankind's heritage in all its diversity at a faster pace and on a larger and more nihilistic scale than ever before. Contrary to the devil's dictum, what is perishing deserves to exist.

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