

## **Culture Under Attack: What happens when our culture is destroyed. A Symposium at the Imperial War Museum London 7 September 2019**

Save the past and you save the future. Someone said that at the symposium which took place at the Imperial War Museum London, in a space next to the Museum's permanent exhibition on the Holocaust. The exhibition is searing and makes for a difficult, if necessary visit. The horror is unparalleled in human history and it would be demeaning to link it to the symposium and its theme of culture under attack. Yet the connections are there: the wilful destruction of a culture, of identity and in the end the destruction of people.

The symposium was built around a number of themes:

1. **Cultural Destruction:** beyond collateral damage. Destruction of places is an inherent feature of war and conflict.
2. **Saving Culture from Conflict:** Cultural heritage binds a society together, representing a shared knowledge, identity and history.
3. **People and Places:** cultural recovery and reconstruction. In the aftermath of cultural destruction, societies are left with decisions over how to respond. The ethics behind decision-making in cultural reconstruction...

The conference was rounded with the screening of the film *The Destruction of Memory*, directed by Tim Slade, inspired by the book on the same name by Robert Bevan. (*The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War*, second expanded edition, Robert Bevan, Reaktion Books London 2016 )

That title reflects a growing world-wide concern with the destruction of heritage, tangible and intangible, of cities, of buildings, of artefacts and of memory. It can be traced back to the work of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, a little further back maybe to the destruction of those Buddhas in Afghanistan and the blowing up of that bridge in Mostar during the Balkans wars. Of course that concern goes back further, to the Second World War and the destruction of Dresden, cathedrals and monuments across Europe

– and way back in history beyond the sacking ancient Rome to the creation of the first artefacts . Recent events have given that concern added momentum.

The keynote address was given by Elif Shafak, the Turkish born writer. It was remarkable and set the tone for what followed. Robert Bevan's book more or less sums up the debate, but here are some random quotes from the meeting.

What stories are we allowed to tell, what stories are erased? We still cannot talk, in so many countries, about some chapters in our history (Armenia for example in Turkey)

Quoting from Walter Benjamin, we walk on a pile of rubble, which is our history

Endless media coverage can make us numb to horror – it happens to other people, not us – until it happens to us.

Neither anger nor apathy will help us move forward.

Nostalgia about a golden age which never existed is a common human trait.

Going backwards can happen very fast. There is a thin red line between democracy and non-democracy, between civilised society and barbarity.

Memory is a responsibility.

Should we show endless photos of , say, Palmyra? It only encourages and gives publicity to terrorists like ISIS. Equally, describing them as terrorists and their acts as barbaric is what they want. We give them attention. No publicity is bad publicity.

On the other hand, without a photo, without publicity the outside world would not know. What is the answer? It's not simple.

It is easily forgotten that people live in Palmyra. The ruins have captured the world's attention. How do local people react? After all those ruins were a place of public execution when ISIS were in

charge. The people of Palmyra may not see things in the same way. We, in other countries may grieve Palmyra, but people living there may have other more pressing concerns - you care more about the ruins of Palmyra or ancient Nimrud, or the treasures of old Aleppo than about us.

Few know, outside Iraq, that in the cemetery in Palmyra Shia males were forced to smash the headstones to graves. That had an immediate and devastating effect on local people. We mourn the destruction of the temple of Baal, but we are the outsiders. We don't live over there.

What is the destiny of Palmyra? To become a tourist venue?

Why is the destruction of some artefacts more important than others? After the collapse of communism statues of Lenin and Stalin were pulled down across Eastern Europe and, to a lesser extent, the former Soviet Union. Was that the destruction of heritage? Who determines what is a cultural artefact, what building or monument should be saved? It is usually the victorious side. It's the politics of heritage.

There's such a thing as urbicide, the destruction of a whole city and what it represents. "Cities themselves were the goal...their capture was, at once, a material prize...It was also a chance to strike a blow at a cultural or political rival...Carthage...was to be erased from history. Its language, culture and religion did not survive..." ( The Destruction of Memory, Robert Bevan, p 31).

Buildings versus people. Do we fetishise objects, buildings over people? There are enough fragments of the Berlin Wall in circulation to build another three. The Wall as art object, or a curiosity. The artefact matters more than the reason behind its creation, and its destruction.

Cultural heritage can make no distinction between buildings, artefacts and people. One cannot exist without the other. The tangible and intangible are one.

Buildings can outlive people. They can come back from the dead.

How do we re-build, repair the damage left by war and terrorism? How authentic can our reconstruction be? We can use the original materials, stone not plastic, for example. But the same methods?

The old town of Warsaw was re-build painstakingly after the Second World War, thanks in part to postcards and photos the Government of the day asked citizens to send to them to give a clear idea of what it was like pre-war. At first it appeared a pastiche, now it has the patina of age.

The rebuilding of the Frauenkirche in Dresden has had universal approval.

Would the remains, a heap of metal, of the World Trade Centre be a better memorial than what is in place now? What would that do though to the relatives of the dead to see such a stark reminder of what happened? Isn't erasure better? Yet there is a memorial there, which has won praise for its quiet dignity, a war memorial in other words.

The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. Adopted by the UN, but not ratified, by among other countries the USA and the UK.

Raphael Lemkin is credited with introducing the word, and concept, genocide. He drafted the UN 1948 Genocide Convention, but effectively cultural destruction was not considered as a component of genocide. An omission with consequences ever since.

The destruction of cultural heritage is cultural genocide and a form of ethnic cleansing. You are destroying identity, which is the object of the exercise.

Cultural heritage is the mirror of mankind.

