

# Libricide: The Regime-Sponsored Destruction of Books and Libraries in the Twentieth Century

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'Libricide'. One would be forgiven for harbouring a suspicion that the said word was entirely a figment of the author's imagination. Rather, 'libricide', according to the Oxford English Dictionary, atypically denotes 'the killing of a book'. In the same way that 'homicide' refers to the murder of a person, or that 'genocide' denotes the systematic and politically motivated programme of mass murder, 'libricide' refers to the all-encompassing, regime-sanctioned annihilation of books and libraries. Emerging in the twentieth-century as an adjunct to the socio-cultural defilement exported by authoritarian regimes via genocide and/or 'ethnocide' (the latter seeking the organised expunction of culture), libricide as a political phenomenon has never, until now, been subject to significant scholarly analysis. The enduring, popular and seductive explanation that such acts of violence or barbarism permeate from a latent 'specialised evil' is counterproductive and, as the author reveals, simply trivialises the intensely politicised nature of written records in their various permutations, as well as deriding unambiguous evidence that such violence follows a pervasive model. *Libricide* exists to challenge such commonly held precepts.

Beginning with a reaffirmation of libraries' importance to the social fabric of society, *Libricide* establishes a functional and insightful theoretical framework, contextualising the libricide phenomenon within those insidious socio-political apparatuses that stimulate and foster ethnocide and genocide. Therein the author deploys the use of specially selected libricide case studies, including those committed by the Nazis, the Serbs in Bosnia, Iraqis in Kuwait, Maoists during the Cultural Revolution and the Chinese Communists in Tibet. Whilst each case study ultimately informs the conclusion that it is humanity and the common cultural heritage of the world that suffers from libricide, and not necessarily the ethnic group against which it is targeted *per se*, each case study impresses upon the reader the rationale underpinning why certain individuals - even those not subject to authoritarian rule - consider the destruction of books and libraries to be a rational, positive and healthy process. Indeed even in China, a nation with a seemingly habitual tradition for literacy and written documentation dating from as far back as *circa* 1766BC under the Shang dynasty, a vehement and depraved manifestation of libricide was cultivated by Mao, which not only extinguished the literary heritage of neighbours like Tibet, but sought the utter annihilation of domestic Chinese libraries also. Says the author; "The Chinese Communists went far beyond purging, because to them the past served as a reactionary force, tethering the revolution and the new world it promised. To Party radicals in the first two decades of Communist China, the written record was at best, of little importance, at worst, an enemy of the people" (p.195).

These insights simultaneously shock and fascinate, as do the statistics with which the book is liberally punctuated. To learn that Nazi occupation of Poland resulted in the destruction of over 15 million volumes is exceedingly shocking, but conjointly discovering that a series of courageous Polish librarians were able to save approximately 125,000 books by means of some inventive concealment is utterly compelling. Still, it is with some tragedy that Nazism has, with the passing of time, undergone extensive research and discourse, thus rendering the majority of readers completely desensitised to the gross violence expounded by the said doctrine. As such, the reader will likely be moved by more recent instances of libricide, especially since some of the most pernicious forms of the phenomenon have occurred within the last 15 years.

Nevertheless, the breadth of research and analysis poured into *Libricide* is manifest in such insights, and is patently manifest in the multitude of page space devoted to consulted resources (the corollary of confronting a hitherto infantile area of scholarly research). As an Associate Professor at the University of Hawaii's Library and Information Science Program, Knuth's argument is effectively drawn and clearly merits a wider audience than that of the LIS readership for which it seems intended. Knuth expertly straddles the disciplines of political history, political philosophy, sociology and of course, library and information science, to deliver a piece of work that would be of interest to students and scholars rooted in any of these aforementioned disciplines. If one tiny criticism could be levelled, it would be that the Chinese Communist case study discusses the pretext in which libricide evolved almost as an end in itself, perhaps to the detriment of the topic itself. However, mild censure falls short of detracting from what is a truly indispensable resource. Not only is *Libricide* indispensable, it is altogether seminal.