



Defending Cultural Heritage – Defending Humanity

Keynote address: **Professor Helena Ranta**

Session:

70 — Opening Session

Imagine I was not here...

How would you describe me?

What would you learn from me?

...how would you remember me?

Remember, remember, remember, remember... How many times do we say it?

But what do you want to remember? ...who? ...where? ...how? ...why?

Excellences, ladies and gentlemen, these thoughts of Stephen Smith are reminiscences of the discussion forum held in Stockholm in January 2004, entitled Preventing Genocide: Threats and Responsibilities. Remembrance is ninety nine percent forgetfulness and one percent of reworked narrative of another's experience. Thus, it is not what we remember, but what we do not forget, that is crucial.

Two years earlier, in Cameroon, I found a small dirty piece of paper hanging on a notice board outside the church entrance with the words

*Il n'y a pas de paix sans justice
Il n'y a pas de justice sans pardon*

*There will be no peace without justice
and no justice without forgiveness*

Genocide is death but it is also the curse of survival, it is a black hole in the spectrum of all reasoned thought, the ultimate loss of humanity.

In 1933, Raphael Lemkin proposed a term cultural genocide as one component to genocide, and this was included in the first drafts of the 1948 Genocide Convention, but unfortunately not in the final version of the Convention. It took nearly 50 years before cultural genocide was considered to be added to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, but again, the final Declaration, adopted in 2007, fails to mention it.

*The deliberate destruction of monuments,
places of worship and works of art is
evidence of the drift towards total war.
It is sometimes the other face of genocide.*

François Bugnion

The term cultural property was introduced in the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and further elaborated in the Second Protocol of the Convention in 2004. According to the Rome Statue of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the Statue of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the deliberate destruction of cultural property in the absence of overriding military necessity is a violation of international law and those responsible for ordering and carrying out such attacks can be prosecuted for war crimes. Such crimes include seizure of, destruction of, or willful damage done to institutions dedicated to religion, charity, education, historic monuments and works of art and science.

The concept of cultural heritage is broader in scope, compared to that of cultural property, expressing forms of inheritance to be kept in safekeeping and handed down to future generations and including non-material cultural elements such as dance and folklore.

In 13-15 February, 1945, near the end of World War II, in Germany, Dresden was fire-bombed by the Allied Forces. 85% of the city was destroyed including *Frauenkirche* and today, most historians view the death toll of 25 000 – 40 000 as the likely range. Kurt Vonnegut, who had been captured during the war and was a prisoner of war (POW) near Dresden, has delivered a treatise of the bombing in his book *Slaughterhouse Five, - - Or the Children's Crusade*.

Four years earlier, in November 14, 1940, large areas of the city of Coventry in Britain were destroyed in a massive German bombing raid. Officially less than 600 people were killed. In Coventry, a new cathedral has been built, in Dresden, the *Frauenkirche* has been rebuilt. As early as 1956, these two cities entered a twinning relationship and their inhabitants joined in demonstrations of post-war reconciliation.

But going back to the memory –
the Nazis did not kill six million Jews,
nor the Interahamwe in Ruanda a million tutsies
they killed one and then another, then another...
Genocide is not an act of murder, it is millions of acts of murder.
The British novelist Margaret Drabble has described the 20th century the beastly century,
but of course it was no more than a human century. More than 200 million people were
killed or allowed to be killed by human decision, including battlefield deaths, civilian
mortality and deaths attributed to structural violence.

On the memorial stone of the concentration camp, two words have been carved *Nie Wieder*
– Never Again. This phrase has proved and sadly proves today to be empty rhetoric and
bankrupt of policy, on which any state was and is prepared to act. No wars or conflicts take
place by accident and there is always time to react. There are two sets of decision-makers:
actors, who decide to make war and the rest, who decide to look on, observe, describe what
is taking place and finally decide to do nothing. Don't forget, silence is a form of word;
inaction is the act of complicity.

In 1938, Neville Chamberlain described Germany's demands of Czechoslovakia as "a quarrel
in a far away country between people of whom we know nothing". German Chancellor
Helmut Schmidt echoed these words in 1980 by saying that Afghanistan was "a small
country, far away" and in 1993, US Secretary of State Warren Christopher characterized the
war in Bosnia "as a humanitarian crisis a long way from home, in the middle of another
continent". Today, we witness extreme human suffering and destruction of cultural heritage
in Syria, Mali.... and again we and the international community fail to respond. Regrettably,
this is reflected in the extreme reluctance to invoke and utilize the Chapter VII provisions of
the United Nations Charter to legitimate the use of force.

Countless places of worship, historic monuments and works of art have been damaged,
demolished or burnt in wars and conflicts. Targeting and destruction of cultural property
have become a deliberate policy to deprive people of their heritage, their history and their
culture. An entire cultural heritage may today be a prime target in armed conflicts, due to
symbolism, identity, aggressiveness, misunderstanding and rejection.

An eventual example of a breach of general international law in peacetime is the
devastation of the great rock sculptures of the Buddhas in Bamiyan, the finest
archaeological site of Afghanistan, despite the fact that it was perpetrated within the
territorial jurisdiction of the State. In March 2001, the giant statues, carved 1500 years ago,
were blown up. The pleas not to destroy them went unanswered and may be the response
of the Taliban to the international community's refusal to recognize them as the
Government of Afghanistan. In addition, the demolition concerned the Afghan Nation's own

heritage with no link to a military objective. It was carefully planned, announced to the whole world and cynically documented, even the ultimate destruction.

Trafficking on cultural objects has occurred over the centuries. Today, there is great concern that notably important ancient manuscripts can be looted and smuggled abroad by dealers in Timbuktu, also known as “City of 333 saints”. Heritage sites in northern Mali have been added to the UNESCO’s List of World Heritage in Danger. Several of Timbuktu’s shrines have already been destroyed. The door of Sidi Yahia leading to the sacred tomb of saints has been smashed. The new Chief Prosecutor of the ICC, Fatou Bensouda, has condemned the destruction as a “war crime”.

*No, not under the vault of alien skies
and not under the shelter of alien wings,
I was with my people then there,
where my people unfortunately were.
In the terrible years of Yezov terror, I spent 17 months in prison lines of Leningrad.
Once, someone recognized me.
Then, a woman with bluish lips, standing behind me, who, of course, had never heard me
called by name before, woke up from the stupor, to which everyone had succumbed and
whispered in my ear (everyone spoke in whispers there):
Can you describe this?
And I answered: Yes, I can.
Then, something that looked like a smile
passed over what once had been her face.*

Anna Ahmatova’s *Requiem* tells us of the desperate days in her home city in 1930s. Her poetry was preserved to future generations by her colleagues and friends, who learnt them by heart. During the twenty years of violence in 1980-2000, the illiterate Peruvians made drawings documenting killings, transportation and humiliation. These drawings are kept today in the central archive in Lima.

The library in Sarajevo was destroyed during the Bosnian war and today it has been rebuilt. But the manuscripts and books, they all went into ashes.

The children and their parents, together with the teachers, in Beslan had gathered to celebrate the very first day of the school term — the day that became a tragedy. These children surrounded me in Srebrenica in March 1996. They were internally displaced people in their own country. Their homes had been destroyed in Sarajevo, house by house and the families had been transported to Srebrenica. It was cold and they had no mittens. They asked me to send the photograph to them. To which address, as if anyone had an address in the middle of the ruins? The future they were looking toward may not have become a reality.

When the killing stops, the genocide is not over.
Don’t forget the survivors, don’t condemn them to a second death, they are our teachers.
And if we must remember anything, let us remember for the future.