

The Hydra library: destroy it and you will get two of them ...

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The burning of the Louvain library was certainly not the first destruction of a library, it was probably not the most momentous one and definitely alas not the last one. But 100 years after the sack of Louvain, it is still a trauma of both of the Louvain universities and we felt the need to commemorate it in expositions and a conference about “what do we lose if we lose a library”.

As we have been directly affected in the past we certainly can bear witness to what it means to lose a library. More than this: it is our duty. The Louvain library burned twice, set on fire more or less intentionally. But burning a library means not just the destruction of a collection of books, which in most cases can be replaced. Burning a library and destroying material heritage are aimed at obliterating the culture and the memory of the opponent and touch the heart of the society. The methodical way this was organized—and still is, all over the world—is chilling. How defenceless is paper, and even hard stone, and how blind is the hate of the men who light the pyres and hold the hammers?

The destruction of libraries is a never-ending story. Lucien Polastron wrote a 400 page book on the topic managing just to enumerate the most important losses, starting with the Egyptian library of Thebes in 1358 BC and ending in 2003 with the destruction of almost all Iraqi libraries and museums. His book dates from 2004. We know since then that the Iraqi cultural heritage was far from being the last one lost for mankind and when starting to prepare the conference, we could not imagine the topicality the theme would have again in September 2015 in this endless chain of burning and destruction with the loss of irreplaceable cultural heritage in Palmyra and elsewhere in Syria.

The destructions of cultural heritage during WW I, for which Leuven and its university library became a symbol, awoke the consciousness of many. Not only Louvain University benefitted from a vast manifestation of solidarity from all over the globe, but people also started to reflect on how to better protect cultural heritage and avoid similar disasters caused by armed conflicts or natural phenomena. But it was only after WW II that those reflexions could be concretized by The Hague convention in 1954 and the creation of Blue Shield in 1966. History teaches us however that important as those initiatives are, they couldn't preclude new losses and destruction.

The conference aimed to discuss the traumas of the past and the lessons learned, the methods and strategies on how threatened cultural heritage can be better protected. But it was not only directed to the past, it addressed also digital cultural heritage, a topic of increasing importance with the growing number of born digital objects which cannot be “just digitized again”. What do we need to do to avoid that our times end as electronic Middle Ages from which only sparse surviving—and sometimes manipulated—sources will remain for future generations?

The conference took place in Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve and, besides the main organizer, the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, it was co-organized by the Université catholique de Louvain. This means more than just the usual collaboration between

neighbouring universities. We have to remember that after the burning in WW I and WW II, the Louvain library had to suffer what some called the third destruction of the Louvain library. The rise of consciousness of the Flemish language community resulted in the splitting of the former unitary university in 1962 into two autonomous establishments, a Dutch speaking and a French speaking one, both located in Leuven. But in 1968, out of political reasons and to avoid major conflicts, it became necessary to move the French speaking university. This was the date of birth of the new town of Louvain-la-Neuve, a project that many considered utopian but turned out rather successful and which now stimulates the economy of the whole region.

Moving the university meant also splitting the library, which had remained a shared service until then. How do you split a library? An impossible task. And however it was accomplished, as was the move of the university itself: not without problems and anger, but without any violence and without too much bitterness.

The fact that this conference was organised together (and it's far from being the only or first collaboration between the two sister universities) proves again, if still necessary, that it always is possible to find peaceful solutions and that after difficult periods it is possible to live together again if there is a will. To work for this is the duty of the academic world, and for this also Louvain can be a symbol. Was it not rector Monseigneur Ladeuze who in the early 20's already fostered again the collaboration with German scientists? Chancellor Konrad Adenauer was given an honorary doctoral degree by the Louvain University in 1958, together with Robert Schuman. And quite naturally, the Goethe Institute joined the British Council and the French and American embassies in sponsoring the conference. So, if it is possible to reach good friendly partnerships after disastrous struggles, how much better and easier should it not be to avoid armed conflicts in the first place? This is what both of the Louvain universities have to stand for and fight for.



This installation by Eric Van Hove (Brussels, 2010), entitled *Exonymie*, consists of the reconstruction of a shelf from the original Louvain library. This shelf was re-stocked by reuniting 1000 books from each library, bringing together the previously separated even and odd labelled volumes.