BURNING CANADA’S LIBRARIES AND OTHER MONUMENTAL ERRORS

BRIAN GREENSPAN

As a new Russian community is emerging, libraries are called upon to play a crucial role in the opening of citizens’ free and unlimited access to information and knowledge, the unification of Russia into one informational and cultural whole and its integration into the global community.

— Russian Ministry of Culture Resolution no. 532 (1995)

Original materials will be preserved. Duplicate materials that nobody wants will be disposed of in the usual manner. Information that was available in the libraries continues to remain available in the digital world. Welcome to this century.


According to Plutarch, the first fire to consume the Library of Alexandria was started by Julius Caesar during his civil war with the Roman Senate in 48 BCE. Rather than allow his ships to be stolen as he pursued Pompey’s senators, Caesar set his own fleet on fire, which spread to the celebrated Alexandrine Library. At least 40,000 scrolls were burned, but Caesar escaped and, with his populares, went on to defeat the Senators and win the favour of the people. From the early days of Western civilization, then, the library on fire has symbolized an angry populist’s victory over elite intellectuals, the archons who embody sovereignty over the laws and edicts of the land. Burn the library, defeat the archivists and senators, and win over the people: it’s a formula that survives the test of time.
Accidental fires remain among the greatest threats to libraries and archives today. In January 2015, fire ripped through Moscow’s Institute of Scientific Information on Social Sciences (INION). Over a million documents were destroyed, some dating to the sixteenth century, in an incident the President of the Russian Academy of Sciences described as “reminiscent of Chernobyl” (AFP). While the comparison may be exaggerated, the fire was a blow to Russia’s social sciences and humanities research community. Yet, for many foreign correspondents, the greatest loss was not research data, but much older documents of global democracy, including:

the complete archive of the League of Nations, the United Nations, and UNESCO and documents from the US Congress since 1789, the British parliament from 1803 and the Italian parliament since 1879.

According to the latest indications, the Russian edition of all of the documents from the UN General Assembly, international handbooks and lexicons, documents from the International Court of Justice, and part of the library’s department for world literature in foreign languages, as well as the institute for research into Slavic language and culture were destroyed. In the latter case, the majority of these editions were only to be found at INION. (Weiss)

The presence of these documents, which would have been unknown to scholars for much of the twentieth century, are a vestigial feature of INION’s predecessor, the Library of the Communist Academy. Established in 1918, the Communist Academy boasted expansive collections organized by intellectuals with Marxist and often revolutionary-populist leanings, who were committed to the public library movement (Stuart 420). The Harvard-educated American Henrietta Derman, who directed the Library in the early 1920s, was essential in instituting Anglo-American procedures, including open shelves and Library of Congress classifications (Hamburger 261). As Irina Klim has shown, Derman and other librarians with exposure to American library science exerted a strong influence on early Soviet collections, initially with the support of Vladimir Lenin, who admired the New York Public Library and wrote articles about the importance of circulating library materials among the people (213).

However, Lenin also instituted a policy of Partijnost, the deliberate shaping of collections to reflect the ideology of the Communist Party, and relegating materials that did not do so to closed repositories, or spetskhran (Klim 213; Knutson 718). Stalin further increased controls on any intellectual activity that violated Party orthodoxy, purging books by his political enemies.
along with their authors, and instituting censorship policies that shaped Soviet libraries for over half a century (Knuth 67). Describing his experiences as a young American scholar conducting research in Soviet libraries and archives in the early 1970s, Edward Kasinec recalls that the Lenin Library’s holdings excluded items that did not promote Soviet history or Russian secularism, that photocopying facilities were “strictly controlled,” and that scholarship undertaken there was closely monitored and “carefully proscribed” to reflect orthodox ideology (21). As late as 1987, “limitation on access to information, within a hierarchy of users” was at the time “a basic feature of Soviet research libraries,” stemming from “a policy of controlling the flow of information and channeling it into trusted hands” (Kimmage 571). Apparently, there are greater risks to libraries than accidental fires.

If any good can be salvaged from the repressive Soviet era of librarianship, it may be that those holdings that did survive the imposition of Stalinist epistemology were well-preserved:

Reference work under Soviet rule was oriented more toward promoting state security and political control than facilitating public research access, but, because of the tremendous importance of archives to the regime, considerable funds were devoted to reference systems and a significant quantity of reference publications. (Grimsted 719)

Ellen Knutson likewise notes that, “[u]nder the Soviets, the library was not free to collect and disseminate any information they wished…. Nonetheless, literacy was important to the Soviets, book publishing flourished, and it was an accepted ideal that no person should have to walk more than fifteen minutes to get to a library” (716). Ironically, Knutson continues, “[a]fter perestroika libraries were faced with drastic budget cuts and closures, but at the same time they had a new freedom to open access to information.”

After 1991, the long-standing emphasis on promoting mass literacy was combined with a new commitment to openness in Russia’s State Archival Service, with the introduction of new or newly declassified fond-level guides for federal and institutional archives, and newly opened sources on Stalin’s Politburo and the Communist Party of the 1930s (Grimsted 720–725). Knutson concludes from her analysis of the Bryansk Region public library system that the centralized and hierarchical structure of Soviet-era public libraries has, “in an ironic twist,” allowed the ready dissemination of “new information and methods among the libraries that are part of the … network,” which has emerged as a “conduit for innovation and change” (727). The state’s long-standing commitment to maintaining its holdings and infrastructure has allowed
Russia’s libraries and archives to transcend ideological entrenchments, positioning them for re-entry into global information networks, renewed intellectual debate, and popular discourse alike. Donald J. Raleigh describes the transformed spirit of open intellectual and historical inquiry that the newly declassified archives inspired in millions of Soviet citizens between 1987 and 1988:

Launched by writers, publicists, politicians, and maverick historians, the national dialogue on the past and future of Soviet society soon forced a reevaluation of the Revolution of 1917, the New Economic Policy (NEP), alternatives to Stalinism, the Soviet regime’s brutal collectivization policies, Stalin and his associates, the command-administrative system, the Great Patriotic War, and Lenin himself. (16)

The maintenance of the archive, in other words, made it possible for future generations to reevaluate the nation’s past and future from new ideological perspectives.

Although one might think that democratic institutions provide some guarantee of archival integrity, the reverse is in fact true. In a 1977 essay, “The Lives of Infamous Men,” Michel Foucault explores the traces left by ordinary individuals on the modern archive (in particular the prison archives of the Bastille and Paris’s Hôpital Général). By “infamous” Foucault means “unfamous” (Osborne 61), those who led utterly unremarkable lives but, due to an unlucky encounter with power, were punished for rather ordinary and monotonous crimes: “Neighborhood disputes, the quarrels of parents and children, misunderstandings between couples, the excesses of wine and sex, public altercations, and many secret passions” were the substance of petitions to bring the offenders before the King for judgment, and which accumulated as written traces in royal “dossiers and archives” (169, 166). In this way, the modern archives came to replace penitential confession as a disciplinary apparatus, “a recording mechanism instead of a pardoning mechanism” that functioned “to bring the quotidian into discourse.” For Foucault, the archive doesn’t merely record the everyday, but produces it in the form of “ongoing mundane facts,” as Thomas Osborne explains (60). Citing Vitaly Shentalinsky’s work on declassified Soviet archives, Osborne points to the
KGB case file of the writer Isaac Babel’s arrest, which records the author’s “toothpaste, shaving cream, a bath sponge and … the thong from an old pair of sandals.” Osborne, like Knutson, sees the irony in archives that come to negate their initial purpose, noting that precisely because the KGB archive was “originally designed for a particular, secret purpose, it can thus be used all the better to provide something like objective evidence for those that follow” (56).

Guided by “the principle of the explanatory relevance of the mundane,” the archive includes the most quotidian objects of history’s famous and infamous individuals alike, as though to demonstrate that “power is ordinary” and the heroic, commonplace (59). The modern archive is in principle a crowded site of everyday statements about ordinary lives, its mundanity the very source of its “archival credibility,” conferring the “expertise of providence, the right to make statements about the past, about history, about change, about fate and, by extension … about the future” (54).

Defined by their utter ordinariness, archives are of little use to Stephen Harper’s attempt to rewrite Canadian history as a myth of exceptionalism and military heroism (Frenette 55–57), which perhaps explains his antipathy toward them. In less time than it took Stalin to impose his restrictions on Soviet intellectuals and librarians, the Harper government has ravaged Canada’s libraries and archives through a series of destructive decisions that are every bit as ideologically motivated, but less likely to leave us any chance of fully recovering our national memory once the dust settles. The Harper government has willingly destroyed the contents of several important research libraries, ignoring the debt to future generations that constitutes archival credibility. Beginning in 2013, the government began the process of closing most of the regional libraries of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. Claiming publicly to be consolidating and digitizing a century of data relating to marine life and the environment, a secret memo revealed that the DFO was in fact “‘culling’ material to make it fit into the two remaining libraries,” burning documents or sending them to landfill (Nikiforuk, “Scientists”). As a DFO Scientist told The Tyee,

The cuts were carried out in great haste apparently in order to meet some unknown agenda. No records have been provided with regard to what material has been dumped or the value of this public property. No formal attempt was made to transfer material to libraries of existing academic institutions…. The Department has claimed that all useful information from the closed libraries is available in digital form. This is simply not true. Much of the material is lost forever. (Nikiforuk, “What’s Driving”)
Nor has Fisheries been the only portfolio affected by Harper’s book burning. On its *Canada’s Past Matters* blog, the Canadian Association of University Teachers has documented numerous budget cuts since 2007 to Health Canada’s Library Services, as well as the closures of the Citizenship and Immigration Library, the National Capital Commission Library, and the Public Service Commission library, among many others. Library and Archives Canada (LAC) alone has suffered budgetary reductions in the tens of millions of dollars, cuts “so devastating that LAC has been nearly dismantled” under the Harper government, throttling its acquisitions and forcing LAC to fire staff, reduce opening hours, cancel their interlibrary loans service, and close online portals (Frenette 63; Groover).

This war on data and knowledge is being carried out not only through the closure of libraries and archives, but also through the enclosure of the remaining data commons by private interests. In 2013, Libraries and Archives Canada entered a secret deal allowing a private corporation to digitize its holdings in exchange for exclusive rights over them. This new agreement would further restrict access to LAC’s holdings by granting Canadiana.org the right to sell back to Canadians digitized versions of heritage documents collected at taxpayers’ expense, and which were previously freely available (Geist). Interestingly, Soviet librarians were forced to make similar private sector deals when state funding dried up after *perestroika* (Knutson 720–721; Raleigh 17), during an era of national financial crisis far worse than any faced by Canada since 2008. Sam Trosow faults the management of LAC for its willingness to adopt the government’s model of privatization, noting “the wall of institutional conservatism and risk-aversion” within the library community that hides beneath the posture of “neutrality”: “It is no surprise when commercial interests external to the library community take strong positions to protect their business models and extend them through new markets. What is more perplexing though is when these positions arise internal to the library community” (n.p.). For Trosow, “it is not enough to try to hold back the process of enclosure and commodification. We have to be thinking of ways to reverse the process once it has begun” (n.p.).

According to the government’s official line, its repeated assault on physical research holdings—especially those that potentially point to the negative long-term environmental costs of the fossil fuel industry—is inconsequential, since it is also transcoding these materials into digital form. Burning a library to disk, in other words, somehow justifies burning its physical volumes. Yet, as Yves Frenette observed in 2014, the “archival digitization program that had been presented as a universal panacea … has yet to yield results” (63), and there is little evidence that the situation has since changed.
Even were the government to carry out its digitization plans, not everyone looks optimistically at the prospect of replacing printed libraries and archives with centralized digital collections. Some humanities scholars even celebrate the benefits that partial and incomplete printed holdings allegedly bestow on the elite operations of hermeneutics. In an article for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Stephen Marche warns that the very attempt to digitize and analyze literary texts in large numbers strips literature and its interpretation of its “brokenness,” along with all its “distinction,” “taste,” “refinement,” “history,” and above all, its “humanness.” In opposition to large, open-access digital corpuses and distant reading—the stuff of digital humanities—Marche celebrates a literary scholarship that is partial, fragmented, and incomplete. If literature is a worthwhile object of study, he claims, that is because it is “haunted by … oblivion, by incipient decay” (¶ 20). According to Marche’s logic, digital archives are simply too large and totalizing to be trusted.

Marche is right about one thing: people seem to prefer the melancholy of ruins to large and perfectly harmonious wholes. Next to artfully arranged fragments, the massive open-access collections of recovered works painstakingly assembled by digital humanists seem obvious and unromantic. Marche echoes those liberal and conservative thinkers since the 1940s for whom any project that presents a glimmer of totality—even in the form of a large archive or database—appears dangerously totalitarian (Jacoby 42–45). Such an anti-utopian fear of the totality might explain the Harper government’s penchant for obliterating the printed record of our science, culture, and way of life, and replacing it with the “incipient decay” of digital records that are piecemeal, fragmentary, and inaccessible to most Canadians. On the other hand, for a government seemingly intent on rewriting Canadian history, digital files are more plastic and mutable than the stubborn and resilient matter of printed records. In a recent exposé of the government’s “war on data” for *Maclean’s* magazine, Anne Kingston (2015) writes that, “where digitization has helped other governments and companies make more information available, it is having the opposite effect here.” Noting the deletion of certain government databases and websites, Kingston observes that LAC lacks sufficient budgets or oversight for the digitization of its holdings, and warns that “claims of ‘digitization’ can be a precursor to brick-and-mortar closures.”

In a famous passage from Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables*, the archdeacon Frollo looks up from a printed book to a stone cathedral and utters, “Ceci tuera cela.” The arrival of the printed book, Frollo feared, would soon come to replace architectural monuments as sites of memory, culture, and community. Hugo implied that the space-biased medium of stone could not coexist alongside time-biased media like print, to use Harold Innis’s distinction (33).
course, paper books did not halt the construction of cathedrals; but the fact that older media and newer media regularly coexist in complex ecologies hasn’t stopped critics from repeatedly evoking Hugo’s vignette to describe the fears that attend contemporary digitization practices (Gunkel 279), which some interpret as a threat to the stability and permanence of our libraries and the printed record as a whole.

Frollo might approve of the Harper government, which, in a reversal of the precession of media empires, has been systematically destroying libraries and archives even as it builds new sacred sites from stone and concrete. From *Triumph Through Diversity*, the bronze and granite monument erected on Parliament Hill as part of the bicentenary celebrations of the War of 1812, to the colossal and controversial “Mother Canada” war memorial proposed for a protected area of Cape Breton, Stephen Harper has a mania for stone monuments. This investment in colossal memorials complements the Harper government’s general turn away from progressive Canadian history in favour of retrograde modes of historiography that foreground the nation’s military and colonial entanglements and connections to the British monarchy, in what Frenette calls an “effort to reconstruct collective memory” in Canada (53–57).

One of the Harper government’s most blatantly ideological retrogressions involves its proposed National Memorial to Victims of Communism. Designed with the blatant aim of courting votes of Canadians from formerly communist Eastern European nations, the memorial has been allocated a plot of National Capital Commission land in Ottawa’s Judicial Precinct long designated for a new Federal Court building. The monument will be erected literally in place of justice, a physical reminder of the Prime Minister’s vendetta against the judiciary and the Supreme Court in particular. The proposed site also rests beside Library and Archives Canada, the stone cold memorial marking the place of our once living archival memory, now firewallled off from Canadian citizens. According to Ludwik Klimkowski, chair of the Tribute to Liberty foundation dedicated to raising funds for the National Memorial to Victims of Communism, “True inspiration [for the memorial] comes directly from the PM” (Peesker). In other words, the proposed memorial edifies the structure of memory of a “heroic” leader, which must stand in for our collective, negotiated memory.

Many have publicly questioned the wisdom of such a memorial, arguing that it revives Cold War caricatures and ideologies, while effacing the responsibility of Western nations for contributing to the deaths of citizens from communist countries in the name of capitalism. In a recent opinion piece, Scott Taylor delineates the millions of victims of capitalism’s military interventions
against communist states, asking, “Where is the monument to their suffering?” (Taylor). To the extent that the proposed memorial would efface the memory of other victims while stealing federal funding from research libraries, it contributes directly to the government’s “war against data.” Numerous commentators have connected this “national amnesia” (Samek qtd. in Kingston) to the government’s desire to protect oil companies from inconvenient environmental data, and its need to protect itself from statistics indicating poor employment rates and the lacklustre performance of the economy. In short, our national amnesia is the direct result of the Harper government’s commitment to a certain version of capitalism, one that wraps the destructive tendencies of twenty-first century neoliberalism in a timeless stone façade. The Marxist scholar Marshall Berman once decried capitalism’s “innovative self-destruction,” its need to constantly revolutionize production by destroying old zones of development in order to create new sites for the absorption of capital. Citing The Communist Manifesto, Berman lamented the “pathos of all bourgeois monuments,” stating that, “[e]ven the most beautiful and impressive bourgeois buildings and public works are disposable, capitalized for fast depreciation and planned to be obsolete, closer in their social functions to tents and encampments than to Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, Gothic cathedrals’” (99). Canada seems to have returned to an earlier phase of state capitalism in which finances are sunk into massive stone works, mute monuments to a perpetual forgetting, even as our libraries melt into air along with our history and heritage.

Of course, no monument is really permanent, no more than any government, corporation, ideology, or economic system. Tzvetan Todorov observed that the opening of the Moscow Archives in 1991 altered our understanding of the history of communism, producing conflicting understandings of the Communist International and its leaders:

A nation’s past can be the object of two apparently similar but in fact opposite processes, remembrance and commemoration. The goal of the former is to apprehend the past in its truth; that of the latter is to produce images that are deemed useful for the present. The first complicates our knowledge of the past; the second simplifies it, since its most frequent objective is to provide us with idols to venerate and enemies to abhor…. Commemoration is always the adaptation of memory to the needs of today. (10–11)

Pragmatists may challenge this stark opposition between the useful and the true. But it’s at least useful to understand the Harper government’s shift in priority from archiving the past to memorializing it as the repression of complicating
remembrances in favour of simplifying commemorations. It could even be said that Canadians are today confronted with another kind of memory, one that occurs in the wake of digital media, almost as a parody of its processes. Cast in the oldest media, this new form of destructive memory commemorates even as it obliterates the foundations of remembrance, threatening the possibility of any future dialogue.
References


