

Ante Lešaja. *Knjigocid: Uništavanje knjige u Hrvatskoj 1990-ih*. Zagreb: Profil & SNV, 2012. Cloth. Pp. 600. Bibliography. Index of names. CD-ROM documentary supplement.

The mass destruction of books in Croatia reported in this study forms a new category of libricide, or bibliocide. Those terms have been used to describe highly visible and well publicized acts of destruction of libraries, such as those of Sarajevo (1992), Belgrade (1941), and Leuven (1914), all the way back to Alexandria and Nalanda;<sup>1</sup> or of book burnings in Nazi Germany.<sup>2</sup> What Ante Lešaja documents and analyzes, however, is far more widespread and systematic, and probably more effective precisely for that reason. According to Lešaja, between 1990 and 2010, over two million library books were destroyed as “unsuitable” (*nepodobne*), following Croatian independence from Yugoslavia. Far from being burned in public, most of these books were simply thrown away, unannounced. A symbolic association for these actions would not be Fahrenheit 451, the temperature at which paper burns, but rather Fahrenheit 96.8, since it was so cold-blooded.

The destroyed books included volumes in the Cyrillic alphabet, books by Serbian authors, books published in Serbia and Bosnia even by Croat authors, translations of classics (e.g. Balzac, Erasmus of Rotterdam) published in Serbia, among others. In 1997 the Minister of Finance said in the Croatian Parliament that he would provide funding for libraries to remove books “in Serbian and similar languages,” leading Lešaja to comment that “the explanation of what languages are ‘similar’ to Serbian would be interesting” (p. 15). A newspaper article in the same month carried a more blunt version of the motivation: “to remove books in a language that has polluted our beautiful language;” since the newspaper was *Slobodna Dalmacija* the Dalmatian dialect was used, the question of what languages are “similar” to Serbian or, for that matter, to standardized Croatian, again comes to mind. Political criteria were also applied, leading to the removal of books that praised socialism or the National Liberation War that brought Tito and the Partisans to power. Ironically, some similar if inverted political criteria were used to ban books in socialist Yugoslavia.<sup>3</sup>

Lešaja was able to gather most complete data on the removal and destruction of books from school libraries. This may be the reason why the single most-excised

---

<sup>1</sup> See Fernando Báez, *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books: From Ancient Sumer to Modern Iraq* (New York, 2008); Rebecca Knuth, *Libricide: The Regime-Sponsored Destruction of Books and Libraries in the Twentieth Century* (Westport, CT, 2003); Rebecca Knuth, *Burning Books and Leveling Libraries: Extremist Violence and Cultural Destruction* (Westport, CT, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Matthew Fishburn, *Burning Books* (New York, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> See Želimir Kešetović, *Cenzura u Srbiji* (Beograd, 1998).

author was Branko Ćopić, a Serb from Bosnia known for his writings on the Partisans' war and for his books for children, and whose works were translated into more than 15 other languages; it is not stated whether Ćopić's *The Hedgehog's House* was among the removed.

This book is a labor of revulsion. On his retirement from Zagreb University in 1990, Lešaja had accepted the job of creating a public library in his native Korčula, on the Dalmatian island of the same name. As a self-described book lover who was involved in building a library, Lešaja was concerned to learn that people in Korčula in 1997 were finding library books, in good condition, in trash bins. Upon inquiry, he learned that the discards were the result of a «cleansing of the book collection,» a process nowhere permitted in the rules of library procedures. The «Korčula case» received some publicity in the satirical weekly *Feral Tribune*, which was actually the best political news journal in Croatia at the time; but no official reaction from the Government of Croatia. However, the librarian who discarded the books sued *Feral* and the author of the article, the Praxis philosopher Milan Kangrga, for criminal libel, and won substantial damages, though the award against Kangrga was later overturned by the appeals court. Lešaja includes pdf copies of the various court documents of the legal proceeding in the lower court, in the CD ROM that accompanies the book; it is not a gem of jurisprudence. However, while the destruction of libraries during the 1991-95 war was held by the Croatian Government to be a crime against the heritage of Croatia (see below), nobody was held accountable for the destruction of these books.

Had he only discussed the Korčula case, Lešaja would have been providing greater detail on a scandal already known. However, when he contacted librarians elsewhere in Croatia with whom he had worked, Lešaja was told that the Korčula incident was not unique. Rather, librarians throughout Croatia were under pressure to «cleanse» their libraries of «unsuitable» books, though the pressure was informal. Many of these librarians were themselves opposed to this process but were not willing to be named, for fear of losing their jobs. They were able to give Lešaja information on other, earlier such cases, however. Starting from this information, Lešaja embarked on the research that led to this massive volume.

The research had to be original, as there were no official data on how many books had been «cleansed.» Lešaja therefore drew on various sources: newspaper articles on the destruction of books; official documents in so far as any could be obtained; statistical materials from the State Commission for Statistics; and his own notes on instances of book destruction from 1991 through 2009. These sources inform the major sections of the book.

Part One is introductory, and includes summaries of the rest of the book. Part Two is concerned with «verification» of the phenomenon of book destruction in Croatia in the 1990s. This part contains chapters on the official positions of the

Ministry of Culture, the Library Association and the Association of Librarians; a long chapter on public reaction to instances of book destruction; available statistics on the “cleansing” of libraries; and examples of the destruction of library materials. Part Three of the book is on the judiciary and the phenomenon of the destruction of books, with a short chapter on the non-sanctioning of this, and a longer one on “Judicial sanctioning for criticism of Discrimination/ Destruction of Books.”

This simple listing of topics does not convey the thoroughness and originality of the work. Lešaja discovered that the technique used to get rid of books was to write them off or de-list them (*otpisati*). While de-listing is part of regular library practice, for damaged books, for example, Lešaja provides a detailed (38 page) history of the development of the use of this term as a mask to cover the destruction of books, citing changes in official policy positions and regulations issued by government ministries and other agencies. This is a fascinating case study of the development of techniques of discrimination using neutral-sounding bureaucratic rules and procedures, and well worthy of being a chapter in its own right.

At the same time, Lešaja’s book is also a case study in resistance to state-encouraged destruction of books. His work depended largely on information gathered from librarians who opposed destroying books, many of whom went to great lengths to ensure that such destruction would not happen. Lešaja cites cases of librarians sending books to colleagues in order to save them, of libraries where the *otpisane* books were simply kept in storage, or even still on the shelves, using the de-listing list as an alternative catalogue. Public opposition to book destruction was also important, and not limited to minor political actors, or those from minority communities.

What makes this book especially noteworthy, however, is its connection to wider issues. Within Croatia, these issues concern the massive destruction of cultural monuments connected to the Partisans and the National Liberation War, covered here in a substantial chapter. While others have written on this specific topic, Lešaja links the destruction of monuments to the destruction of books by focusing on “Exclusionism [*isključivost*] as an important characteristic of Croatian society in the 1990s,” the title of Part Four of the volume. Others have written on this topic,<sup>4</sup> but not so thoroughly documenting the bureaucratic and judicial practices that support exclusionary discrimination in Croatia.

A more general issue can be found in the ways in which the Croatian authorities were able to use well-propagandized assertions of library destruction during the war to gain world sympathy while themselves engaging in far more widespread

---

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Jovan Mirić, *Demokracija i Ekskomunikacija* (Zagreb 1999); see also Mirić's more formal study *Demokracija u Postkomunističkim Društvima: Primjer Hrvatske* (Zagreb, 1996).

destruction of books, without notice, much less condemnation.<sup>5</sup> In a tour de force of research, Lešaja exposes the falsity in some of the allegations of library destruction made by Croatian authorities during the war (see pp. 76-85), some of which were later cited in studies of “bibliocide.”<sup>6</sup> Granting that one’s cynicism quota is tested heavily by close attention to the differences between the public posturings of the various political actors involved in the Yugoslav wars and the actual courses of action that they sponsored, there is still a high level of hypocrisy in the Croatian government’s claims that Serbs were destroying the cultural heritage of the country in attacking libraries, while the same government encouraged destruction of far more books in the cause of cultural renewal.

Viktor Ivančić, a founding editor of *Feral Tribune* (copies of which had been burned in public in the main square in Split), in a newspaper article timed to appear with the publication of this book, writes of the book destruction chronicled by Lešaja as an early stage in establishing a blockade on the exchange of books between Croatia and both Serbia and Bosnia, and thus obstructing the exchange of ideas in the region, noting that no bookstores in Zagreb now carry such imported goods.<sup>7</sup> Ivančić predicted that Lešaja’s book would be applauded by the “democratic” and “freethinking” segments of the Croatian cultural public (his scare quotes), but warned that “silence would be better than the applause of cleansed hands.” He need not have worried. A quick review of press reactions to the publisher’s public launch of the book in Zagreb on July 17, 2012 found more coverage in Serbian newspapers than in those in Croatia. Book destruction, it would seem, is unremarkable so long as it is done bureaucratically rather than in public, at Fahrenheit 96.8 rather than Fahrenheit 451.

ROBERT M. HAYDEN  
*University of Pittsburgh*

---

<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Knuth (*Libricide*, p. 120) notes that Croat forces destroyed an important Serbian library in Croatia in 1991 but then asserts that the Croatian government began to “display an awareness of the reprehensibility of such actions.” Since the actions analyzed by Lešaja mainly took place well after the end of the war, it seems that the Croatian government learned, rather, about the dangers of destroying books in public.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Báez, *Universal History of the Destruction of Books*, pp. 254-255; Knuth, *Libricide*, pp. 120-122.

<sup>7</sup> Viktor Ivančić, »Mržnja prema knjizi,« *Novosti* [Zagreb], July 13 2012, p. 5.