

Life of libraries under war conditions in Croatia 1991-1995: with special consideration of Dubrovnik

Marica Šapro-Ficović, PhD

Dubrovnik Public Library, Dubrovnik, Croatia

Email: marica.sapro-ficovic1@du.htnet.hr



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Summary

A brief overview:

War and libraries

Followed by

Objectives & methods of the research

Continued with the first main part:

Remembrances: librarians

Then the second main part:

Remembrances: library users

And at the end:

Conclusions & value of libraries

Libraries in war conditions: a brief, general review

- International literature on libraries in war conditions:
 - *majority*: reviews & recordings about numerous destructions & lootings of libraries in history
 - labeled as *libricide & memoricide*
 - *minority*: activities of libraries under war conditions
- A number of international protocols and documents on the preservation of libraries in armed conflicts appeared:
 - with mixed even disputable effects

World War II: London 1941

A library after
bombardment



Context

- In 1990's communism collapsed in Europe
 - mostly peacefully, but **NOT** in Yugoslavia
- Croatia, one of six Yugoslav states, declared independence as a democracy in 1991
 - waged a war for independence (Homeland War) 1991-1995
- Great many devastations
- Some towns, cities under prolonged siege, bombardment
 - but life continued there
 - **in many cities libraries kept functioning in most difficult conditions**

Objectives of the study

- Collect & organize **oral history** recollections & reflections **from librarians** about their work in 10 cities under siege during Homeland War
- Describe **users & use of libraries** in conditions of war
- Contribute evidence about the social role & value of libraries: **libraries as social capital**



Study sample

- Ten cities under siege throughout the country
 - Dubrovnik included
 - sample includes 14 libraries in those cities
 - with oral history interviews of 50 librarians (LB)
 - & 17 library users (LU) from those cities

	Number	Interview hours:minutes	Number of words in transcripts
Librarians (LB)	50	44:57	358,489
Library users (LU)	17	9:02	76,445
Total	67	53:59	434,934

Croatia

Ten cities under siege:



The siege of Dubrovnik

- **1 Oct. 1991:** general attack on Dubrovnik
- **29 Oct. 1991:** Yugoslav army & paramilitary Serbian/Montenegrin forces blocked Dubrovnik from land & sea; shelling
 - water, electricity & food supplies cut off
- **6 Dec. 1991:** heaviest attack
 - many killed, wounded; refugees
 - destroyed many houses & cultural monuments
- **22 Oct. 1992:** siege lifted; although war continued

Dubrovnik 1991



Results

REFLECTIONS FROM LIBRARIANS (LB)

Reasons for staying & work under attacks

A number of reasons are given – e.g. a duty to work, a fear of losing the job, to be defiant, to contribute to defense

Example 8.5 – 34:
LB14, Karlovac

"**I mean work.** We did not think then much about how we could help, because we knew if the men are on the battlefield, if this is a country at war, we can help people in any way. We could **simply help people by talking, we knew that they came to the library, not just to borrow books, but to talk to us, come just to talk.** "

Example 8.5 – 39:
LB50, Zadar

"**Pride** was for sure, we lived here with pride every day, no matter what. As it was, it was difficult for us, we survived. ... **There was a defiance in you, we did not want to give them satisfaction, we will not give up as long as we can.** "

And in Dubrovnik...

- Professional requirements and defiance

Example 8.5
– 29: LB03
Dubrovnik

“Yes, we had a work obligation, but we did not even ask ourselves if that may be okay or not it was normal to do our job ... as they work on the battlefield, so we do in our city. We stayed here to make sure the city remained alive, so that we can all survive and that everything will seem less tragic.”

Example 8.5
– 40: LB09,
Dubrovnik

“All of us were kind of scruffy except for a few people – they looked like they jumped out of the very best fashion journals. Sometimes people knew how to take care of themselves - it was a form of defiance to look nice.”

Work hours & obligation

- Work hours – adjusted to war situations, daylight

Example 8.4 – 1:
LB03 Dubrovnik

“We didn’t work full time as I recall, we worked only during daylight, because we know, that there was no electricity, it was in the morning, I think from 9 to 1. About 4 we were closed, in the afternoon it was winter time,so no long after 3. Depending on weather, if there was a bleak there was less light in the library, if it was sunny, then we could possibly work up to three, to be able to serve the patrons. They were enregistered by hand.
”

They went to work at their own risk

For a large number of librarians there was no dilemma about leaving their city, they decided to stay. Dilemmas were: which way to go to the library? Where are you less exposed in case of emergency?

Example 8.5 – 24:
LB14, Karlovac

"" ... Several times I experienced shelling while on the road. .. **Once I went at night from the library I was half way when shelling began again, I kept falling on the road .. I was frantic, so ... I can not think to describe this, I can not believe I survived, I mean that I was not hit by anything .. roads were destroyed, large craters were already out of shells. "**

Example 8.5 –
26: LB46, Zadar

"Places where I had to go through were very dangerous ... I went on foot because it seemed to me at the time the safest ... I remember a few times fellow LM - he came to work with the car. Several times they were shelling and shooting; he and I would be driving in the car in fear that something can hit us ... the alarm was ongoing, and that was it, so you go at your own risk . "

Users were waiting

... from bomb shelters to the library

Example 8.6 - 25:
LB07, Dubrovnik

"The problem were **people that went from the bomb shelter directly to the library**; [after the end of alarm] **many users waited nervously outside the door where are we?** We couldn't just go to work from the shelter; we had to wash eyes a little, and change into clean clothes ... but we did go immediately to the library ... and **there were the users waiting to return a book and after they went to get some water.** "

Dubrovnik

Waiting in front of
Dubrovnik Public
Library

Homeland War
1992



Photo by:
Ingrid Pavličević

Increase of users and use under difficult circumstances

Example 8.7 - 1:
LB03, Dubrovnik

Yes, literally! [on the number of users and use of library materials during the siege of the city]. ... and then came refugees and increasingly locals, so **that the number of borrowing of books greatly increased. We have never had such a large amount of borrowing and such a large number of users as during the time when the city was threatened in 1991 and 1992. And even when the siege stopped... and also after that for a long time we maintained a large number of users and a huge turnover. "**

Professional education

- Despite war conditions professional exams were continuing

[While under siege Dubrovnik was connected periodically only by ship to Rijeka & then by bus to Zagreb – trip over 25 hrs.]

Example 8.5 – 91:
LB06, Dubrovnik

“The two of us took our daughters, and went for a professional examination [to Zagreb]. Our library director paid us the ship fare, no cabin; we paid additional fare for the cabin. We remember this moment ... our director sent us to seek Mr. Stipanov [Director, National and University Library, Zagreb] in order to provide us with daily living allowance. The two of us dropped like two confused doofuses into the office of his secretary and told her our story Shortly the man appeared and really gave us money. Mentally it was easier for me to learn and work rather than to think “what shall we do with ourselves.” When I saw this book [A. Stipcevic, History of the book] I started reading it with pleasure; when I came to page 250 I realized that I have to learn from it and not just read it. I closed the book and saw that I had no idea about the whole thing - but the book was a pleasure to read. ”

New categories of users: soldiers & refugees

- Soldiers used the library by either coming to the library or by delivery of books to the battlefield

Example 8.6 - 11:
LB50, Zadar

"They [soldiers] also came and we knew [their circumstances] and gave them more books, and they asked us, "because we will not come back in a month or two" ... then we gave them three, four books, they had privileges. "

- Refugees talked a lot with librarians – a place for solace

Example 8.6 - 32:
LB16, Karlovac

"We had interesting older people among these refugees from all over Croatia ... **people were sad about homes they left; many also died in Karlovac, before they could get back.** They were from [all over] ... we heard about many fates; all kinds of stories that were sadder than ours Many were from distant places ... **they fled without anything, without even a single bundle of their possessions out of their home and lost everything ..."**

A few reflections about users

...a story about an old lady

Example 8.6 – 21:
LB50, Zadar

"I remember one old woman, she was our customer for a long time, but she had a lot of years, she was about 90 years old. I know when the war started, she was at the library and was very excited ... we just remember all that. Once she pulled out a necklace with a cross and gave it to one of our soldiers who went to the front and said, 'Son, let it look after you'. The day after that, she went to bed and her niece kept coming to borrow books so she could read. "

“Her two children were killed”

Example 8.7 - 6:
LB07, Dubrovnik

“She was always silent; always selected three, four, five books and took them away. She came every third day. In two days she read them all and came back. If you remember when [ship] Aurora collided with another ship and sank [9 May 1992] ... Her two children were killed, and then she got pregnant and came every three days for books. She read all of them, fiction from English and American writers ... I think she must have read the whole library. But she was always silent ... but obviously books helped her. ”

“We were very much attached to little Sabina...”

- Connection between librarians & users during the war was close and intimate, particularly in relation to refugees, especially children

Example 8.6 - 29: LB29, Sisak

„I remember little Sabina, we were very attached to her; she used to come before the library was open in the morning, (we worked from 8 am), she came already at 7:30. <...> This girl Sabina brought me a green card on which was written with a red marker: **father, mother and brother were murdered** <...> She told me all about it, in fact she saw all ... her parents and brother. She escaped through a window with brother's wife. With a convoy they ended in Germany. Her uncle who lives in our town, Sisak, found her through Red Cross, so she ended up here. **There were other children for whom we cried, we were very attached to them and they to us.**”

Results

REFLECTIONS FROM LIBRARY USERS (LU)

Reflections from library users (LU)

Using the library during the war

- Therapy, socializing, reading – “a crust of bread for the soul”

Example 9.6. – 6:
LU06, Dubrovnik

"I can tell you, I've made friends there. In the library ... you could find, I **would call that as some sort of confessional** ... Do you have such and such a book? I'm interested in this or that genre, I do not know who was the author, I do not know what the title was, but about how and what it says **You'd be running around in there like you've come for a crust of bread, it is the de facto ... a crust of bread for the soul to give to these people.** I've lived it and I can tell you that firsthand simply, cohesion was never higher in this fantastic city "

Example 9.5-27:
LU07, Dubrovnik

"Especially, those fans lacked support for the soul ... they could find that by reading a book, by choosing just topics that they needed to make the plight of war in Dubrovnik a little easier. **There was no problem to borrow books for children, and especially to borrow books for a man who wanted something to read at that time in order to ease those pains, those thoughts, far from home and all together. "**

- to human tragedy

- after a son got killed

Example 9.5 – 27:
LU07, Dubrovnik

"I know that then, at the time, I was attracted to the very theme of a psychological profile that would reassure me somehow, to calm my thoughts ... **When my son was killed, when we got home ...** I was isolated from people, for a number of days, or even months, two months, I avoided contact with people **Sure, I would then pick from the library a theme that appealed to me to ease a little my soul, so that I could feel a little easier, everything that explained a prolongation of human life, that is not limited to this earth, I needed that to be easier for me to handle his death. I still love this philosophical stuff and everything that is turned toward human beings.** Somehow that stayed with me, and when I was a girl I loved science fiction, and I liked to read all that, reading attracts me. "

Conclusions

- **About librarians**

- Majority remained in their communities & continued to work in libraries for many reasons:
 - job security - not to lose their job, professional commitment, a sense of duty, pride and resistance

- **About libraries**

- In all cities, libraries operated under siege
 - often under most difficult conditions
- many libraries were damaged in attacks; in two cities (Vinkovci, Slavonski Brod) they were completely destroyed

Libraries were only cultural institutions in their cities that were continuously open & provided services

Conclusions (cont.)

- **About users and use**

- number of users increased during the siege, as did borrowing of books
- users took books to shelters, soldiers carried them to the battlefield
- most borrowed books were light reading, thrillers, action novels, although with a number of users there was a renewed interest in classics
- books meant a lot more to users than before or after the siege

Value of libraries

- Based on testimony of librarians and users, and on examples of continuous service delivery under difficult conditions
 - **libraries have proven their value in the community**
- During those difficult times, libraries functioned not only as a library
 - **but as a support to people seeking a normal life**
 - **to sustain them & withstand tough times**

At the end:

Thoughts of a user about value of libraries

Example 9.7 – 14: LU10, Dubrovnik

"The library was then a temple. It was a hope. The existence of libraries at that time was also an expression of defiance, keeping it open was a spiritual defiance. You can try to destroy us but we still read and we still live in a cultural environment, we live and that is that. I would compare the library being open to events such as holding concerts while they may bomb you ... and so on ... the need for culture in the maintenance of a cultural identity in some sense ... held through literature and music. "

Life of libraries continued despite ...



**Dubrovnik
June 1992**



Photograph by Ingrid Pavličević,
http://www.matica.hr/Vijenac/vijenac487.nsf/AllWebDocs/Zivot_knjiznica_pod_granatama_