Burning Books AND Leveling Libraries

Extremist Violence and Cultural Destruction

Rebecca Knuth

Whether the product of passion or of a cool-headed decision to use ideas to rationalize excess, the decimation of the world's libraries occurred throughout the 20th century, and there is no end in sight. Cultural destruction is, therefore, of increasing concern-

In her previous book *Lit>ricide*, Rebecca Knuth focused on book destruction by authoritarian regimes: Nazis, Serbs in Bosnia, Iraqis in Kuwait, IVlaoists during the Cultural Revolution in China, and the Chinese Communists in Tibet. But authoritarian governments are not the only perpetrators. Extremists of all stripes—through terrorism, war, ethnic cleansing, genocide, and other forms of mass violence—are also responsible for widespread cultural destruction, as she demonstrates in this new book.

Burning Boo*Ac* *and Leveling Libraries,* is structured in three parts. Part I is devoted to struggles by extremists over voice and power at the local level, where destruction of books and libraries is employed as a tactic of political or ethnic protest. Part II discusses the aftermath of power struggles in Germany, Afghanistan, and Cambodia, where the winners were Utopians who purged libraries in efforts to "purify" their societies and maintain power. Part III examines the fate of libraries when there is war and resulting power vacuum.

The book concludes with a discussion
of the events in Iraq in 2OO3. and the
responsibility of American war strategists
for the widespread pillaging that ensued
after the toppling of Saddam Hussein.
This case poignantly demonstrates the
ease with which *an* oppressed people,
given the collapse of civil restraints,
may claim freedom as license for anarchy,
construing it as the right to prevail, while
ignoring its implicit mandate of social
responsibility. Using military might to
enforce ideals (in this case democracy
and freedom) is futile. Knuth argues, if
insufficient consideration is given to human-
itarian, security, and cultural concerns.