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CURRENT BOOKS

REVIEWS OF NEW AND NOTEWORTHY NONFICTION

Bombing Away the Past

Reviewed by Tom Lewis

THE DESTRUCTION OF MEMORY: Architecture at War.

By Robert Bevan. Reaktion Books. 240 pp. $29.95

In his great poem "lapis lazuli," William Butler Yeats indirectly foretold the events that would soon consume the world: "Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out,/Pitch like King Billy bomb-balls in/Until the town lie beaten flat." Yeats died in 1939, a few months after publishing his poem and shortly before the world began to realize his words to a degree unimagined by earlier ages. The poem evokes the constant destruction throughout history of art and architecture, and the ceaseless human desire to build again in the face of an unending parade of "old civilizations put to the sword." It is this long history of material and cultural destruction, brought to unprecedented intensity in the 20th century, that Robert Bevan documents.

To be sure, armies have been destroying cities since the days of the Old Testament and Homer. But as Bevan demonstrates, science and the increasing mechanization of the last two centuries have given combatants the ability to increase vastly the thoroughness (and the precision) of the devastation. *The Destruction of Memory* presents a dark account of how that devastation is brought about, along with a cogent argument for why it deserves recognition as an atrocity separate from the human carnage it so often accompanies.

Bevan argues that the destruction of buildings, be they historic, symbolic, or merely utilitarian, "is often the result of political imperatives rather than simply military necessity." Architecture, he contends, "is not just maimed in the crossfire; it is targeted for assassination or mass murder." Significant buildings may be destroyed as an adjunct to genocide, as propaganda for a cause, as a way of demoralizing an enemy, or out of simple personal vindictiveness on the part of the attackers or the victors. Bevan offers a veritable taxonomy of heritage destruction. He considers genocide and its attendant "cultural cleansing" in cases from Armenia to Bosnia; symbolic attacks upon buildings by terror groups, including, of course, the attacks of 9/11; the carpet-bombing of densely packed cities such as Hamburg and Dresden in World War II; wholesale cultural annihilation, as in the attempted Germanification of Warsaw by its Nazi occupiers in 1944; religiously motivated destruction, such as the Taliban's obliteration of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan in 2001; and the brutally dividing walls erected in Berlin, Belfast, and Israel's occupied territories, where architecture serves

as an instrument of suppression or exclusion.

Bevan's grim statistics force readers to confront yet another dimension of the savagery of our age. In the fighting that accompanied the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, "more than 1,386 historic buildings in Sarajevo were destroyed or severely damaged. . . . Gazi Husrev Beg, the central mosque dating from 1530, received 85 direct hits from the Serbian big guns." During the 1914–18 world war, the Turks engaged in atrocities against the Armenians, and "Armenian churches, monuments, quarters, and towns were destroyed in the process." The Armenian city of Van "was almost entirely flattened." After the fall of Warsaw in World War II, "of 957 historic monuments . . . , 782 were completely demolished and another 141 were partly destroyed."

Attacks from the air upon cities might have symbolic value, but they have little practical effect.

The historian Max Hastings found that by the end of Operation Gomorrah, the Allied air raids against Hamburg in 1943, "40,385 houses, 275,000 flats, 580 factories, 2,632 shops, 277 schools, 24 hospitals, 58 churches, 83 banks, 12 bridges, 76 public buildings, and a zoo had been obliterated." In Stalin's Russia in the 1930s, where secular iconoclasm ruled, "an estimated 20–30 million painted icons were destroyed—used for fuel, chopping boards, linings for mine workings, and crates for vegetables."

Such numbers do more than just reveal the extent of these cultural atrocities; they point to an essential aspect of their purpose. As Bevan shows, "the link between erasing any physical reminder of a people and its collective memory and the killing of the people themselves is ineluctable." Genocide must be thorough. In Sarajevo, Serbs intended to obliterate the Bosnians' cultural heritage by destroying their national library. The national museum met a similar fate.

Bevan's account of what befell the Polish capital, Warsaw, in World War II makes a similar point. After the Nazi occupation of 1939, which included the mass murder of Polish nobility, clergy, and Jewish intellectuals, among others, Nazi town planners meant to use the city as the site of a German garrison. But the Warsaw Uprising against the Nazis by the Polish underground in 1944 changed German attitudes. Regarding the city as "one of the biggest abscesses on the Eastern Front," Heinrich Himmler set up special forces "to demolish the city street by street" and ordered the death of all inhabitants, declaring that "the brain, the intelligence of this Polish nation, will have been obliterated." In the end, a quarter of a million people died and just a third of Warsaw's buildings remained standing.

Nor did one side hold proprietary rights to wanton destruction in that war. Bevan writes of the British discovery early in 1942 of "burnable towns," densely packed wooden buildings at the heart of the medieval precincts in many German cities. With the consent of Winston Churchill's war cabinet, which after contentious discussion decided that such attacks would demoralize the German people, the Royal Air Force, led by their commander, Arthur "Bomber" Harris, leveled the medieval port city of Lübeck with firebombs. The wooden houses ignited "more like a fire-lighter than a human habitation," the commander recalled. The destruction of Rostock, a city of no strategic value, followed. In just 17 minutes Harris dropped a thousand tons of bombs on Würzburg, a cathedral city without industry or defense. Hitler meanwhile was unleashing violence on Exeter, Bath, Norwich, York, Canterbury, and Coventry, each a three-star Baedeker city with no great industrial capacity. Three years later, in February 1945, when Hitler was near defeat, Harris and the U.S. Army Air Force struck a final and completely unnecessary blow, visiting a firestorm upon Dresden, a cultural center.

Harris himself contended that indiscriminate bombing was essential to winning the war. After all, he wrote later, "a Hun was a Hun." But his bombing had little effect upon Germany's war effort, as the commander chose to avoid oil depots that were heavily defended. The scale of destruction produced qualms on the Allied side. "The moment has come," Churchill wrote after Dresden, to review the policy of bombing German cities

In Afghanistan, Taliban soldiers labored with explosives for 20 days to blast the ancient Bamiyan Buddhas from their cliff-side niches.

"simply for the sake of increasing terror."

From their own fierce reaction to the bombing of London, the British should have understood that while such attacks from the air upon cities might have symbolic value, they have little practical effect. In what is surely the most famous photograph of wartime London, the unyielding dome of St. Paul's Cathedral rises in stark relief above the smoking ruins of the razed city. Taken during the Blitz of 1940, it appeared in *The Daily Mail* above a caption that read in part, "It symbolises the steadiness of London's stand against the enemy: the firmness of Right against Wrong." It served to inspire Londoners' determination in their darkest days. Just last summer, Bevan notes, a British tabloid published the picture "once again . . . following terrorist bombings on the London Underground."

Contemporary terrorists who use the destruction of architecture as a powerful weapon of propaganda do not always travel with Baedeker guidebooks. As Osama Bin Laden and his like-minded followers have shown, modern buildings with little or no significant architectural merit can make attractive targets because of their symbolic value. The Twin Towers, the critic Paul Goldberger wrote after their destruction, "were gargantuan and banal, blandness blown up to a gigantic size." Striking at the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, Bevan writes, was intended to send a message to Islamic militants across the world that the time to act had come. Americans and others in the Western world received a different message: Banal as the towers might have been, they had now become "unintentional monuments."

Such unintentional monuments become intentional ones in their rebuilding, for reconstruction must take into account destruction. Memory must have a place in the new. "History moves forward," Bevan observes, "while looking over its shoulder." But how much to commemorate? And how? Such questions become the focus of the final chapters of *The Destruction of Memory*. Amid the rubble, we sometimes see lost opportunities to make buildings an affirmative statement of the human spirit, while at other times we see their power to restore that spirit. Gazi Husrev Beg, the great mosque in Sarajevo, survived the Serbian onslaught only to have its interior

suffer a 1996 whitewashing that obliterated its spectacular decorations; the "restoration" funds came from Saudi sources that demanded that an austere Wahhabi interior replace the richly decorated walls characteristic of Balkan Islamic architecture. As early as 1945, Poles began to reconstruct Warsaw. In producing an exact replica of what had been razed, the builders rescued their old city, but they also created an amnesia about their recent history. In the great crater that was the World Trade Center, those who consider rebuilding an act of resistance are in conflict with those who want to make the site a permanent memorial to the thousands who died on September 11. The tension between creation and memorial is all the greater because we are so near to the horror of the event.

"All things fall and are built again," Yeats wrote in "Lapis Lazuli," "And those that build them again are gay." The poem suggests that people will go forward and rebuild with undiminished hope despite the ever-growing weight of cultural destruction. But we cannot shrug off the terrible devastation that is so much a part of our contemporary condition. Better to follow the words inscribed on a plaque attached to the ruined wall of Sarajevo's national library: "Remember and Warn."

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In the Shadow of His Sadness

Reviewed by Ann J. Loftin

MY FATHER IS A BOOK: A Memoir of Bernard Malamud.
By Janna Malamud Smith. Houghton Mifflin. 304 pp. $24

I never studied with Bernard Malamud (1914–86) at Bennington College, but I remember seeing him at a party on campus in the mid-1970s. He'd brought along a pedometer and was telling everyone within earshot that it didn't measure what they thought it measured. I remember thinking his clowning unseemly for the renowned author of *The Fixer* and other dark tales of the Jewish and immigrant experience. Reading this memoir by his daughter, I realized that it was also the sort of behavior he rarely displayed at home. Once, she writes, Malamud began telling her a story from his childhood, about stealing some movie tickets: "Quickly embarrassed, he stopped himself midway through the recollection. I was in my thirties."

Now a therapist practicing in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Janna Malamud Smith remembers a father who guarded a tender nature behind a reserved and formal persona. She describes a psychologically probing mind that drew the line at self-revelation. The survivalist humor that lofted otherwise dark stories such as "The Jewbird" and "The Magic Barrel" appeared in life only episodically. No doubt her father's own reticence colored the essay she wrote for *The New York Times* in 1989, three years after his death, "Where Does a Writer's Family Draw the Line?," in which she considered the competing claims of posterity and privacy and came down on the side of privacy.

The book that followed, *Private Matters: In Defense of the Personal Life* (1997), began with Smith's childhood memories of a family "organized to protect" her father's need for privacy—tiptoeing past her father's study, diving for the phone lest it disturb him, keeping voices down so he could work. In life, all bowed to the magnitude of his absence, and for many years after her father's death it seemed only right to keep him out of sight still. However, as Smith observes in *My Father Is a Book*, "One day I realized that my father's life had shifted from something overshadowing into something disappearing from view." And suddenly she felt it urgent to bring him back into the foreground for her consideration—as a father, writer, and fellow human—before letting the biographers and historians take their turn.