

CONFLICT AND CULTURAL DESTRUCTION: WHY TOTALITARIAN REGIMES SEEK TO DESTROY HISTORICAL MEMORY

EVENT SUMMARY



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On January 28, 2016, the Wilson Center's Global Europe Program hosted a panel of four experts: **Cristina Bejan, Peter Black, Deborah Lehr and Azar Nafisi**. The discussion explored historical examples of cultural destruction in Europe – Germany during World War II and Romania during the Cold War – and drew comparisons between those experiences and what is happening today in the Middle East. Each speaker analyzed the causes and broader consequences of demolishing culture and the challenges it poses today, within the context of his or her particular specialization and background. The discussion and subsequent question and answer session were moderated by the Global Europe Program's Director, **Christian Ostermann**.

Cristina Bejan, Researcher at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, former Wilson Center Scholar and Founding Executive Director of the arts and culture collective Bucharest Inside the Beltway, spoke about the manipulation of cultural institutions, particularly the Romanian National Theatre, under subsequent totalitarian regimes in Romania. Dr. Bejan described how different governments, from the dictatorship of King Carol II to Nicolae Ceausescu's communist regime, used theatre as a tool to promote their ruling ideologies by enforcing censorship and the elimination of historical memory. Under the last communist dictatorship of Ceausescu, she noted, culture and art were used as means of silencing citizens while at the same time promoting extreme nationalism. As opposed to the Soviet Union under Stalin, Dr. Bejan emphasized that Romania's fascist and communist regimes encouraged theatre rather than suppressed it, which promoted Romanian playwrights and, consequently, Romanian nationalism. She also highlighted the collaboration between the Orthodox Church and the communist regime, which came at a high price to the LGBT community, as homosexuality was criminalized. In conclusion, Dr. Bejan argued that although censored by various dictatorships, Romanian theatre still thrived and was loved by the people. The revolution of 1989 that overthrew the last communist regime also marked the end of the censored Romanian National Theatre, making it a site of remembrance for those who were killed, and a national symbol and living testimony to the country's past five dictatorships.

Peter Black, former Senior Historian at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, discussed Kristallnacht (The Night of Broken Glass) as another example of the destruction of culture and historical memory in Europe. During the night between November 9 and 10, 1938, Nazis destroyed Jewish businesses, synagogues and homes, while arresting and incarcerating thousands of Jews living in both Germany and Austria. The pretext for this episode, Dr. Black noted, was the assassination in Paris of German diplomat Ernst vom Rath by a young, German-born Polish Jew, who in turn had been inspired by the roundup and deportation to the Polish border of thousands of Polish-Jewish immigrants (including the family of the gunman) who had resided in Germany since before World War I. Dr. Black emphasized that Kristallnacht was generally regarded with indifference by the German people and with some outrage but general inaction by the international community. Kristallnacht, he argued, brought an end to illusions that German Jews had any future in Nazi Germany, signaling that the country would no longer tolerate the presence of these "undesirable aliens," and ushering in a new era of persecution of Jews as a first step towards a "final solution" – which would eventually be reflected in the Holocaust. Dr. Black concluded by reminding us how something presented as a movement against unwanted immigrants or aliens in a modern and civilized country eventually led to irrevocable consequences for the history of humankind.

Deborah Lehr, Chairman and Founder of the Antiquities Coalition, discussed the current threat ISIS poses to ancient cultural heritage throughout the Middle East. Lehr talked about the group's motives, which include eradicating the past and changing an ancient landscape while targeting historic sites. By participating in such large-scale systematic and organized destruction of cities with significant historical meaning, such as Palmyra and Mosul, ISIS is aiming for a cultural cleansing of the region, which can be viewed as a precursor to the ethnic cleansing that has followed. Lehr added that the cultural and historical targets of ISIS are not only in parts of the region that they control, but also in other countries, including France, Egypt and Tunisia. Attacks in those countries have targeted people but also institutions that represent their cultural values. Another important motive for ISIS, according to Lehr, is the use of antiquities trafficking as a source of revenue for the organization. Governments, businesses and archeologists can coordinate their efforts to prevent such trafficking by raising public awareness and discouraging people from buying antiquities when the source is unknown.

Azar Nafisi, author of the national bestseller *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, began her remarks by asking what is it about these artifacts that people are prepared to kill and die for. Dr. Nafisi argued that totalitarian regimes seek to manipulate history and recreate the world by imposing their own views. She offered the example of the Iranian government and the destruction of temple of Anahita, one of the most ancient sites in Iran. Such destruction, according to Dr. Nafisi, is not only an attack against culture and history, but most importantly an attack against humanity. In response to the initial question she raised, Dr. Nafisi expressed that people are willing to die for their culture and history, because these things are part of their identity – what makes them human. “In order to resist, you have to become more yourself,” she said. She concluded with the claim that art and literature are the guardians of memory and should be protected at any cost, because after we are gone they are all that remains.