

The Oriental Books and Libraries in Bosnia during the War, 1992-1994

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In the year 1992 a book under the title *World Survey of Islamic Manuscripts* (general editor Geoffrey Roper) was published in London by the Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation. The book presents a list of all collections of Oriental manuscripts that are located in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It came out just before the commencement of the bloody war waged by Serb nationalists against Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats as well as other non-Serb peoples in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Consequently, this book remains as an important document about the state of affairs that led up to the more recent catastrophe experienced by Oriental and other books in this country.

What remains today out of all the materials listed in this report? Today, when conflict continues to plague this country, it is not easy to answer this question. No one has the opportunity to gain any fully reliable information about the fate of many Oriental collections belonging to public institutions. The situation in private collections is even harder to determine. Unfortunately, what we know for sure is enough for us to conclude in the very beginning of this report that the losses are enormous and irreparable.

Allow me to start off by recalling the importance of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a multicultural country, one that has been and, for a long time to come, will be situated in an area of strong interactions between the East and West. The historical fate of this country is to play the difficult role of the middle ground between the Catholic and Orthodox communities as well as between the Muslim and Christian World in general. This fact has always been the cause of religious and political tensions. On the other hand, it is this multicultural and multinational identity that appealed to the modern world as a value that ought to be safeguarded at all costs. This is primarily due to the evolution of the whole world into a multinational and multicultural entity.

Unfortunately, many do not find this process fitting so that religious and ethnic conflicts within countries as well as conflicts between these

countries occur very often instead of disappearing like a relic of a long-surpassed historical era. National mythologies and religious fanaticism ignite, even today, nationalistic passions that carry along heavy consequences.

In the case of the recent war, which continues unsettled conditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, one can not (and quite unfortunately so) merely talk just about nationalistic myths and religious intolerance. These factors only appear to be the causes of this war, while the real cause is the desire of the Serb nationalists to create a Greater Serbia on account of the Bosnian Muslims and Croats living within Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as the Croat populations living in Croatia.

This was not only a desire to conquer lands which have historically never been a component part of any Serb state. The goal was to ethnically cleanse the conquered lands and to destroy all evidence of the existence of non-Serb peoples and cultures. In this context one must look upon the systematic destruction of sacred Catholic monuments, Muslim mosques as well as graveyards, archives, and libraries. In other words, all objects that could prove that on these territories there ever was someone alive who was not a Serb.

I was forced to write these bitter words in the very beginning of this review in order to emphasize what has actually taken place in the regions of the former Yugoslavia as well as to demonstrate what influence the tragic consequences of this situation have had on the cultural heritage collected in Bosnia and Herzegovina for centuries. However, allow me to continue by briefly describing (on the basis of available facts) what has happened to the part of this cultural treasure that is written in Oriental languages.¹

The biggest tragedy has struck the richest Oriental library in Bosnia and Herzegovina—the Oriental Institute in Sarajevo. A flaring grenade deliberately hit and destroyed this institution on 18 May 1992. All the written materials collected for decades inside this location were destroyed. This institution was developed from the so-called Turkish Archives that were earlier located in the well-known Land's Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the year 1950 this institution was created to systematically collect, guard, and scientifically analyze all Oriental manuscripts in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Very quickly it developed into a respected scientific institution. Manuscripts and written materials entered the institute from all over Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also from other Islamic countries. Just preceding this war there were 5,475 Oriental manuscripts, of which 3,475 were inherited from the collection of the Land's Museum, while 1,788 were received upon the foundation of the institute. The oldest manuscript was from the eleventh century, while the most recent were from the twentieth century. They contained texts

in various scientific areas (mathematics, medicine, etc.), literature, lexicography, etc., written in various languages. The institute periodically published its own magazine under the title "Contributions to Oriental Philology." The last volume (the forty-first) came out just before the beginning of the war. Unfortunately, all issues of this last volume were destroyed in the fire. However, with the help of international humanitarian organizations, this edition was saved so that an imprint for republishing was made. This was, nonetheless, only one of the results of the scientific work and research of this institution. Its experts managed to publish, with outside aid, translations of the Kuran, the Arabic dictionary, the monography of Tuzla, the legal protocols (*sidzil*) of Mostar, translations of Turkish statistical inventories, and catalogues of the makeup of the institute's possessions and many other publications. Today written catalogues are of a special importance, because it is from them that we can gain some information about what the institute had as well as what the fire engulfed in its flames. Unfortunately, all the materials were not listed in the published catalogues, and the handwritten accession register, also destroyed in the fire, had not been published either.

The institute, however, not only possessed manuscripts but also an enormous archive collection. These consisted of legal protocols from numerous Bosnian "kadiluchs," records with statistical information, archives of several famous Muslim families from Bosnia, legal records from the period of Turkish rule in Bosnia, etc. The archives of the Bosnian and Herzegovinian "vilajet" should be emphasized, with around 200,000 documents dating back to the last three decades of Turkish rule. Besides this, the special library (with around 10,000 books) was fully destroyed, including rich microfilm and movie collections. These contained microfilm materials from many institutions all over the world, all of which referred to the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Many foreign experts from all over the world came to Sarajevo to study these materials, including those from Serbia. The full extent of the damage done to the Oriental Institute is best known by the Islamologists. We should keep in mind that this was, along with the manuscript collection of Gazi Husrev-bey's library in Sarajevo and the Oriental collection in the Archive of the Croatian Academy of Arts and Sciences in Zagreb, the largest Oriental collection in the former Yugoslavia.²

The second biggest tragedy occurred to the most extensive library in Bosnia and Herzegovina—the National and University Library of Sarajevo. Flaring grenades also fell upon the beautiful city council building during the night between 25 and 26 August 1992. The building was completely burned in a fire that followed the shelling. A part of the library collection was removed to a safe location by librarians, but the larger part went up in flames.

This library was established in 1945 as the central library of Bosnia and Herzegovina and as the institution that was to become the National Library for the then Republic of Yugoslavia. It quickly developed into a modern and rich library. Besides this, it was able to collect 478 Oriental manuscripts as well as a rich collection of periodicals from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Before its destruction, the library had a total of around 850,000 monographic publications. Out of this collection, around 33,000 were destroyed. Additionally, 700 journal titles were also destroyed, and 200 newspaper titles from 1850–1992. Today it is not known exactly how much of the Oriental collection of manuscripts and published books was destroyed or how much was saved by the librarians. However, what is known for certain is that the periodicals collection was fully destroyed. It is this very collection that contains many valuable publications for the study of the Turkish period in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The flames also engulfed all the catalogues, including those catalogues written on lists of Oriental manuscripts.

Nonetheless, we have to stress that the real state of this library is not easy to determine. Television shots of the flames which spread through the library building clearly showed that nothing could have been spared. However, we do not know how much the librarians were able to save, and furthermore the librarians themselves are not certain. Today we still do not know exactly what happened with the collection of Oriental manuscripts, but information has been received that at least a part of it was saved. We also do not know what happened to the collection of Oriental manuscripts in the town library of Sarajevo, but we do know that the library suffered heavy damage and that the larger part of the collection was destroyed.

Similarly nobody can, at this moment, give reliable information about the remaining part of the Oriental collections in Bosnia and Herzegovina. From the previously mentioned publication by Geoffrey Roper, we know that almost every larger town in Bosnia and Herzegovina possessed valuable collections of similar manuscripts—their fate is still uncertain. What has taken place, for example, with the Islamic manuscripts and books in Banja Luka is still not known. This is a town in which there have been no battles, but also one in which the Serb nationalists have systematically destroyed Islamic mosques and Catholic churches and monasteries. The same is especially true for the numerous private collections found throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, about which we will be able to find something out only at a later time.

We do know a little more about the state of the Oriental collections in Mostar. The Archive of Herzegovina experienced heavy damage as its building was attacked twice with cannon and tank grenades. In the very beginning of the war in 1992, it was struck several times, and on that

occasion the roof was destroyed. Despite a high degree of danger, the workers of the archives managed to move the most worthy material to a safer place. Among the saved materials we find the *Acta Turcarum* as well as a collection of Oriental manuscripts. We have been much better informed about the fate of the Franciscan Library in Mostar. In terms of the number of Oriental manuscripts and published books, it is the richest library in Herzegovina. There are 376 manuscripts in the Arabic, Turkish, Persian, and Croatian languages, of which the oldest go back to the fifteenth century. Among these are 40 copies of the Kuran, as well as many books in philosophy, lexicography, history, etc. During the heaviest fighting in Mostar, the Serb militiamen fired from the nearby hill called Hum (which towers over the whole city) onto the monastery complex in 1992, destroying the monastery church. The library, however, which is located inside the monastery, was not seriously damaged. From newspaper articles we know about the dramatic efforts of the Franciscan fathers and local firemen to stop the fire from spreading into the library (they did this despite constant Serb sniper fire). The solid structure of the building and the iron bars on the windows helped their efforts and ultimately led to their success. In the meantime, the Franciscans moved the most valuable library materials to a safe location, among which we find the Oriental collection.³

When we analyze the cases familiar to us from Sarajevo and Mostar, it becomes clear that these libraries were not hit by accident. Rather we are dealing with the planned destruction of cultural institutions, especially those in which the archives and literary heritage are saved. This heritage collection leaves unwanted proof of the presence of other peoples in this area, a presence which was to be destroyed at all costs. The Oriental Institute was not destroyed by mere chance. It was fired upon with flaring grenades with the clear purpose of destroying a cultural institution of such magnitude. Those who fired upon the Oriental Institute knew very well what they were aiming at. This can be said because the Serb aggressors who fired on Sarajevo from the surrounding hills knew the exact location of the institutions and buildings they were supposed to destroy. This should not be surprising considering that these Serbs had lived in this town before they decided to withdraw to the mountains and start a war against their former neighbors. These facts should always be kept in mind when one speaks about the war waged by the Serb nationalists against all non-Serb peoples of Bosnia and its culture.

In much the same manner, the National and University Library of Sarajevo was purposely destroyed with flaring grenades. There are no military sites near this library, just as is the case for the Oriental Institute. The Serb nationalists did not find it any more difficult to fire

upon such cultural sites from close by. Just as they did when firing from the mountains that surround Sarajevo, they simply aimed at and destroyed (without mercy) anything that they thought needed to be destroyed. Because the building of the National and University Library was in a vulnerable position on the banks of the river Miljacka (which runs through the center of Sarajevo), the Serb nationalists did not have a serious problem with striking and setting fire to it.

The conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, unfortunately, has not come to a close, and nobody knows how many more books, including the Oriental collections described in this article, will suffer the wrath of Serb grenades. The fact that many of these Oriental manuscripts were not categorically listed increased the tragic proportions of the current situation, as it would still be very difficult to find out what exactly has been destroyed in this war.⁴

As of today some of the collections of Oriental manuscripts have been spared, and let us hope that it will remain this way. We know that, up to the present, the oldest Muslim library in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ghazi Husrev-bey Library in Sarajevo (established in the sixteenth century), has not suffered damage. It seems that some other libraries have also managed to save some of the most valuable Oriental manuscripts, but the information about this topic is very limited and unreliable, due to the difficulties of systematically collecting information of this sort for the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina in regions that are still under the control of the Serb nationalists.

Notes

1. The term "Oriental books" in Bosnia and Herzegovina signifies books written in the Arabic alphabet, regardless of whether the language in which they were written was Turkish, Arabic, Persian, or Croatian.

2. We still do not have a detailed description of the destruction met by this institute. The most detailed account of this catastrophe was written by Fehim Nametak in his article "Oriental Institute in Sarajevo," which was published in English in the journal *WHY?* 5 (1994): 29–30. Also see the article by Muhamed Ždralović, "The Dances of the Mentally Sick," *Behar* 1 (1993).

3. The information about the fate of this library was sent to me by the head of the library, Father Andrija Nikić, to whom I would like to extend my gratitude once more.

4. Regarding the condition of the cataloguing of Oriental manuscripts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the need to finish this job, see Muhamed Ždralović, "Sources for the Study of Libraries in Arabic Manuscripts," *Vjesnik bibliotekara Hrvatske* 24 (1979–1980): 103–22.