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Patricia A. Nugent
Loyola University New Orleans

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Available at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol23/iss1/4
Battlefields, Tools, and Targets: Archives and Armed Conflict

Patricia A. Nugent

Kenneth Foote notes in his seminal book on memorials *Shadowed Ground* that, “Every society in every period has borne witness to war, disaster, violence and tragedy.”¹ The universal nature of conflict is, of course, well known, so it is perhaps not surprising that, as with many other institutions of society, archives have been impacted by human violence and destruction. Indeed, the birth of the archival profession is often closely associated with one of the most important wars in history—the French Revolution of 1789. In the aftermath of the revolution, the new French government sought to make the records of the republic open to the people of France for the first time, in the process creating the first National Archives and establishing modern archival principles.² It is perhaps fitting then, that the modern ar-


*PROVENANCE*, vol. XXIII, 2005
chival profession should consider its roots in conflict, since war and archives have consistently interacted throughout history, albeit in many different ways.

Archives are viewed differently by defending forces, occupiers, citizens of a country under siege, and those charged with rebuilding an area ravaged by an armed conflict. Indeed, the interaction between archives and war is so varied and extensive that to try to develop a comprehensive account would be impossible. The nature of the interaction has changed over time. Before the bureaucratic bulk of the modern nation-state, attacks on government archives occurred, but often with different purposes and outcomes than in the past century. For example, when Frederick the Great invaded Saxony in 1756, Europe reportedly reserved its greatest outrage for his forcing the Queen of Saxony to remove her seals from the Dresden archives, an act that, while not greatly damaging in a practical sense, was highly offensive symbolically. Such an attack is representative of the smaller, more symbolic damage done to archives in previous centuries. The wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have targeted archives on a greater scale, in part because of the mass of documentation available to target in the modern age, as well as more efficient methods of capture and destruction. Using examples from various conflicts, this article will examine the interaction between archives and war through four rubrics: protection, destruction, capture, and use and restitution.

**Protection and Destruction**

One of the most basic considerations of archives in war is protection—protection of one’s records from the enemy being the greatest concern. Many efforts have been made through various conflicts to protect records from physical harm. Occasionally, concerned citizens rather than public officials have taken up the responsibility for preservation, such as during the Spanish Civil War of 1936 to 1939 when committees comprised of artists, architects, librarians, and archivists took it upon themselves to save valuable documents by moving them to safer areas. More often, however, preservation efforts are undertaken officially. On the European front during World War II, for ex-

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ample, archives were evacuated from areas that were probable targets of bombing raids, and placed in country estates, castles and salt mines, among other places. Even in the continental United States, where Axis attacks did not occur, the National Archives undertook detailed evacuation planning. Efforts were also made to protect records that could not be removed from the probable line of fire. A 1941 National Archives publication actually provided a chart illustrating the types of bombs that could fall on the institution, describing each bomb’s terminal velocity, penetration (i.e. “good” for a demolition bomb, “poor” for an aerial mine), and common targets, presumably so that archivists could identify bombs as they fell.4

Through the years, the threat of war has inspired the writing of many sets of guidelines advising archivists which records are most valuable and should receive protection. In the United States, the National Archives issued guidelines in various publications including “Records Essential to Continuity of State and Local Government” and “The Care of Records in a National Emergency,” both published in 1941. These documents outlined how archivists should appraise records from federal and city-level government to church and business concerns. The documents with the greatest need for protection were the most crucial records—those describing the populations’ citizenship, and property information.5 The more society has come to rely on the corpus of vital records, the more valuable the destruction of these records has become to those interested in disrupting society-at-large.

While the protection of one’s own archives has long been a concern in wartime, the protection of archives and records belonging to the enemy became a priority in the wars of the twentieth century. In World War I, the Germans first began to concern themselves with protecting monuments and art in occupied areas after the destruction of cultural artifacts produced a severe reaction among neutral nations. Indeed, in the early twentieth century, previous acceptance of archival plunder “gave way


5 Ibid., 12-13.
to recognition of the privileged character of a county’s scientific, artistic and other cultural possessions.”6 Expressions to this effect were included in clauses of the Hague Conventions on the Laws and Customs of War in 1899 and 1907, and attained greater significance with the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, ratified at The Hague in 1954. According to the convention, during conflict, parties should “prohibit, prevent, and, if necessary, put a stop to any form of theft, pillage and misappropriation of, and any acts of vandalism against, cultural property.” After the fighting ends, the occupier should continue to support the preservation and safeguarding of cultural property.7

While the destruction of archives outrages many, and conventions indicate that “the protection of archives against military combat action, abuse, and plundering [is] one of the responsibilities of occupying forces,” not all forces see the value in protection, and often such protection is not given. In practice, military occupation often “gives [the occupier] carte blanche as to its government and imposes upon him solely the obligation to restore and maintain, so far as possible, public order and public life.”8 While such power does not always translate into a respect for the heritage of a country, even in the heart of war, efforts are sometimes made to preserve archives and cultural property.

World War II was notable for the recognition of the importance of protecting archives at the highest levels of command. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who had recently established the first presidential library, was concerned with Europe’s cultural heritage and authorized efforts for its protection, through efforts such as the appointment of the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historical Monu-

6 Ibid., 213, 215.


ments in War Areas, known as the “Roberts Commission” in 1943. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Armies, also appreciated the “necessity of obtaining and of keeping unimpaired the records of an occupied territory.” This attention to cultural heritage resulted in the appointment of officers to the Museum, Fine Arts and Archives (MFA&A) Division, a group comprised of British and American service members charged with securing art and archives in newly occupied areas in Europe. The charge of the MFA&A was to prevent Allied troops from damaging monuments and historic buildings, and to prevent “looting of public or private collections” by the troops, mostly as souvenirs or items to be sent home to their families.

In 1945, the MFA&A troops also tracked down major German caches of looted material and works of art that were hidden in mines and castles. While genuine efforts such as these were made to protect cultural heritage, much of the damage had already been done, and many archival collections became casualties of the war. The UNESCO report Archives Destroyed in the Twentieth Century lists thousands of collections damaged or destroyed during World War II, a conflict that resulted in “the greatest loss and displacement of cultural treasures, books, and archives in history.” The end result of damage or destruction

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11 Rothfeld, “Holocaust Records.”

12 Ibid.


is, of course, the same, but motivations for attacks on archives in war can differ greatly.

The value of an archive often guarantees its protection, but occasionally it is this very same recognition of value that leads to its destruction. For example, during World War II, the Dutch resistance destroyed the Bureau of Vital Statistics in Amsterdam in order to deprive the Nazi’s of the use of population registers, from which they would identify citizens to deport to concentration camps.\(^{15}\)

Archival institutions can also become caught in the crossfire of warring factions. In 1922, fire fights among newly independent Irish forces in the heart of the city of Dublin led to the inadvertent destruction of the Public Records Office, resulting in the loss of one of Ireland’s major national archives, which dated back to the thirteenth century. The loss of the office proved devastating, and has “significantly influenced the writing of Irish history of all periods” as well as the development of archival policy in Ireland.\(^{16}\)

More insidious, however, is the destruction of archives as part of a systematic effort to obliterate a people. During World War II, as part of their agenda of destroying cultural property, the Nazis employed at least two looting squads: the Ribbentrop Battalion and the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg.\(^{17}\) Particularly in Poland, the squads set about destroying or capturing archives, manuscripts, and related materials in a concerted effort to destroy the cultural identity of groups of people as well as to assemble and preserve looted materials “for propaganda and re-

\(^{15}\) Posner, “Public Records,” 222.


search purposes” such as the proposed “Centre for Research on the Jewish Question’ in Frankfurt.”

More recently Serbian forces employed similar tactics in the Balkan wars of the 1990s, in which they destroyed libraries, archives and public record offices as a part of the campaign of “ethnic cleansing.” The destruction of cultural heritage by Serbian forces was far reaching. Librarian Andras Reidelmayer, who surveyed the damage and testified at the war crimes trial of Slobodan Milosevic, wrote that in 1999 public records and archives comprising almost the entire documentary base for the orderly functioning of government and society in Kosova (Kosovo) were removed on orders from Belgrade. Registries of births, marriages and deaths, citizenship, probate and property records, as well as judicial and police records were either evacuated to Serbia or burned in situ.

Religious holdings were targeted as well. Reidelmayer noted that next to governmental archives, the most serious loss “in Kosovo was the burning of the [Islamic Community of Kosovo’s] Central Archive in the center of Prishtina,” an institution holding “the written record of 600 years of Islamic culture in the region.” In addition, approximately one-third of all Islamic houses of worship were destroyed or damaged, along with their in-house libraries or archives. Academic and public libraries and archives were also targeted, as were private collections. The attack on the broad range of legal, cultural, and religious materials in Kosovo was a concerted attempt at “historicide” designed to go beyond physical elimination of the population, by eradicating memory of them as well. In part due to the awareness of the destruction of cultural heritage during the Balkan Wars, the War in Iraq has been watched closely.

18 Dean, “Cultural Looting.”


20 Riedlmayer, “Libraries and archives.”

21 Ibid., 6.
The archival community, and the world, greeted the United States’ war with Iraq with profound attention and scrutiny for many reasons, but in part because “Iraq is universally recognized to be especially rich in cultural heritage”—a heritage that would be put at great risk. Prior to the United States invasion, several organizations, including the Society of American Archivists, the American Library Association, and Human Rights Watch issued statements calling for the protection of government archives and cultural heritage from destruction and looting. The statements cited the importance of Iraqi records and cultural materials for the country’s future. The Society of American Archivists’ statement noted that:

Without records, Iraqi officials cannot be held accountable. Without records, citizens cannot exercise their rights. Without records a stable economic environment cannot emerge. And without records, the Iraqi people as well as the citizens of the world lose an important part of our shared cultural heritage.

Despite the attention and calls for protection, Iraq’s archives, libraries, and cultural institutions were largely not protected, and many were ransacked and looted in the chaos attendant upon the invasion. While officials noted that there simply

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was not the manpower to protect all of the archives and cultural institutions in Iraq, the comments of some officials pointed to intentional neglect. British military officials acknowledged that the failure to protect some government archives was a calculated “means of showing the population that the [Saddam Hussein’s Baath] party had lost control.”

The symbolism of the looting was also highlighted in a justification by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld:

>[V]ery often the pictures [shown by the media] are pictures of people going into the symbols of the regime—into the palaces, into the boats, and into the Baath Party headquarters, and into the places that have been part of that repression. And while no one condones looting, on the other hand, one can understand the pent-up feelings that may result from decades of repression.

Whatever the reasoning, the failure to protect Iraq’s cultural heritage met with international condemnation. The International Committee of the Blue Shield met to declare that it “deplore[s] and [is] deeply shocked by the extensive damage to, and looting of, the cultural heritage of Iraq caused by the recent conflict.” Within the Bush administration, three members of the White House Cultural Property Advisory Committee “resigned to protest the U.S. failure to protect the [National] museum from looting.” Indeed, the looting of the National Museum has attracted the most attention due to the antiquities that

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28 Megan K. Stack and Josh Meyer, “They Burned the History of This Country. Vandals have ravaged the national library and cultural institutions. FBI will help seek stolen items.” *Los Angeles Times*, 18 April 2003: A, 3.
have been lost, but the destruction reportedly touched all types of institutions including art museums, film archives, local population registries, and universities.

In order to investigate some of the claims and provide assistance, a small team from the Library of Congress visited two institutions, the National Library and the House of Manuscripts, in Baghdad, Iraq in the fall of 2003. The team found that the majority of the National Library’s collection was, although in disarray, largely unharmed. The Iraqi librarians indicated that the main loss at their institution was to the archives, including the intentional destruction by fire of archival documents dating from 1977 to the present, a time period described as the “Republican era,” as well as “all microfilms of newspapers and archival materials” in two separate fires on April 10 and 14, 2003. The degree of damage was reportedly somewhat lessened by the actions of concerned local clergy members who had taken library and archival materials to their mosque for safekeeping between the two fires. In contrast to the destruction at the National Library, the Library of Congress team found that another major repository, the national department of manuscripts, also known as the House of Manuscripts, avoided looting or damage. Housed in a bomb shelter with well-controlled temperature and humidity, the manuscripts were already in a better position to survive the conflict than the above-ground public building housing the National Library. However, the Library of Congress team found that the dedicated House of Manuscripts “staff members did everything they could to protect those manuscripts from harm before, during and after the war. They enrolled the support of the whole

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29 Milbry Polk and Angela M.H. Schuster, eds., The Looting of the Iraq Museum, Baghdad: The Lost Legacy of Ancient Mesopotamia (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005). This recently published book details the loss and recovery of some materials during the looting, but has not yet been reviewed by this author.


neighborhood to provide security twenty-four hours a day and were successful in preventing several attempts at looting the center."  

Despite the ability of the institutions visited by the Library of Congress team to preserve much of their collections from harm, it would seem that the losses to culture and history in Iraq are sizeable. While the United States recovered "700 artifacts and tens of thousands of ancient manuscripts that had been missing from the collection of the National Museum in Baghdad" in May 2003, and recovery efforts are ongoing, cultural property is notoriously difficult to recover, as pieces frequently are sold illegally on the international market. It is likely that much of the materials looted in Iraq may never be recovered. As for recovered archival material, the questionable authenticity of documents that have been removed from their chain of custody, or possibly forged, will limit their usefulness. In addition, valuable documents relating to the rule of Saddam Hussein may also have been lost, making it difficult to build a case against him and may limit understanding of his regime. The losses attracted the attention of several international groups including Interpol, which convened a "Meeting on Cultural Property Looting in Iraq" in May 2003 to discuss efforts to recover lost artifacts. In addition, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has been involved with rebuilding efforts, holding forums on cultural heritage and drafting a plan of action for

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32 Ibid.


34 Bruce P. Montgomery writes in "The Iraqi Secret Police Files: A Documentary Record of the Anfal Genocide," *Archivaria* 52 (Fall 2001): 69-99, that during the Gulf War of 1991, documents were recovered in Northern Iraq in the aftermath of a Kurdish rebellion. The captured documents "contained direct evidence of crimes against humanity and the Anfal genocide that had been perpetrated against the Kurds by the Iraqi regime during the late 1980's." These documents were transferred to the National Archives in Washington, D.C. in 2003 and are now housed at the University of Colorado at Boulder's Human Rights Initiative.
the rehabilitation of libraries and archives in Iraq. After the Interpol meeting, then-United States Attorney General John Ashcroft denounced the looting in strong terms, stating that the "looting of Iraq's cultural heritage is a violation of the law. It is an affront to the dignity of the Iraqi people. It is an assault on the values of civilization—an assault on the values we all share." Such values are clearly demonstrated by the local community in Baghdad which took an active role in the protection of the materials at the National Library and House of Manuscripts.

**CAPTURE AND USE**

In addition to the cultural and historical significance of cultural materials, administrative records and archives are important in wartime for the effective running of territories. At minimum, occupiers often need access to maps and information on the infrastructure of an area in order to provide basic services to occupied populations and their own forces. In many instances, occupiers also use the archives and public records of their new territories to gather evidence about the population or the former regime, what archivist Linda Barnickel calls the "intelligence value" in records.

Such intelligence information can be used by the occupier to conscript labor or seize assets and is also useful after the war to understand and prosecute officials of former regimes. Sometimes obtaining such information is a military objective unto itself. For example, during World War II, in addition to the few trained MFA&A officers who were primarily charged with securing and protecting items of cultural significance, Allied troops made concerted efforts to confiscate German administrative archives, launching operations such as "GOLDCUP" in

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1945, which "specifically search[ed] for ministerial personnel and archival records of the Third Reich." 38

In addition to intelligence information, occupiers seize items of cultural significance, such as archives and works of art, as part of the "spoils of war." In one of the grandest examples of such seizure, Napoleon undertook systemic cultural plunder during his military campaigns in order to enrich the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Louvre to further the "great design of an empire which [he] had planned to survive his personal reign." Indeed, while Napoleon ruled,

[t]he most prestigious record accumulations of the continent, such as the archives of the Holy See in Rome, the German Empire archives in Vienna and the Simancas archives of the Spanish kingdom, as well as the archives of provinces annexed by France (including Piedmont and Belgium) were transferred to Paris [and held] in a gigantic archival institution. 39

This archival dominance of Napoleonic France was short-lived, however. Peace treaties required that the looted archives be returned to their owners, and most were by 1817.

While seized archival material can be used to enrich the culture of a nation, as Napoleon desired, archives are often included among the cultural items seized by a country as recompense for previous cultural plunder or as "trophies" to be kept to compensate for other losses. Perhaps the most extensive plunder of this sort was taken by the Soviet Union during World War II. In addition to administrative archives, the Soviets seized German archival material including manuscripts, early printed books, drawings, and ethnographic materials. 40

Ironically, many

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40 See Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, "Spoils of War Returned: U.S. Restitution of Nazi-Looted Cultural Treasures to the USSR, 1945-1959," Prologue 34: 3 (Fall 2002) for a history of the transfer of Soviet property seized by the Nazis and then returned to the USSR by the United States.
of these “trophies” are never utilized by their new owners. A striking example is the estimated ten million volumes of books the Soviet Union seized. Many of these books have rotted away, since “so many of the plundered books were thereafter either neglected, destroyed in ideological ‘cleansing’ campaigns, or hidden from public view in classified ‘Special Collections’ for half a century.” It is unclear why the Soviets held on to so much material, even when it was reportedly simply rotting away in their care. Certainly, the expense of transporting and housing seized materials can be significant, and after time can lead to a proprietary relationship, even if the materials are no longer of value.

In addition to their use as a tool of war, archives and records can document and aid the war itself. Ernst Posner, a Prussian archivist who fled Nazi Germany after detainment in a concentration camp, attributed German military success “in part at least, to the utilization of a carefully kept record.” Indeed, detailed German files played a large role in the prosecution of German officers at Nuremberg and Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem.

More recently, documentation of crimes against humanity has been seen in the records of the Khmer Rouge. As part of their rule of Cambodia throughout the 1970s, the Khmer Rouge perpetrated the Cambodian genocide that claimed 1.7 million lives. Like the Germans, the Khmer Rouge kept records of their prisoners and methods of execution, often in graphic detail. Documents from the Tuol Sleng prison archives include arrest forms, notes on torture sessions, and photographs of tortured and executed prisoners. The records are notable for their clear documentation of slaughter. A typical document, titled “List of


Names of Prisoners Who Entered from 17 February 1977 to 17 April 1977” gives the names of “1,566 prisoners recording their gender, position, organizational unit, date of entry, and in a final column noting whether the prisoner had been ‘smashed’.”46 The Tuol Sleng archives, along with others, have been instrumental in understanding the Cambodian genocide and bringing former officials to trial.47

The records of the Tuol Sleng archives make the perpetration of slaughter seem as commonplace as any other bureaucratic function. Records such as these offer insight into what Hannah Arendt called “the Banality of Evil,” the form of relative normalcy and structure that mass murder can take.48 The increased bureaucracy of vital documentation noted earlier has allowed for greater control of the citizenry, resulting in a changed dynamic between the public and government.49 This increased documentation can be seen as part of a “logic of mass death” created in the twentieth century that allows for “vast numbers of persons [to be] simply marked for annihilation as part of an impersonal process of destruction.” This is what philosopher Edith Wyschogrod refers to as the “death event.”50 While many factors of industrialization have influenced the “death event,” in many cases archival material has often enabled or accompanied the slaughter.

**Restitution**

Restitution of archives seized in war has been part of making peace for centuries. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European peace treaties commonly called for the return of archives within four months after a conflict ceased, and while


47 Ibid.


49 Thank you to Patricia Galloway for pointing out this connection.

certainly not all of the looted material was returned, restitution was common in many cases. Indeed, in the early nineteenth century, the Emperor of Austria was so pleased with how his seized archives had been treated by the French that he made a present of a gold snuff box to the French archivist Pierre-Claude-Francois Daunou in gratitude.51

In contrast, the scope of twentieth-century warfare has made restitution more difficult than it was in previous centuries. While many items taken during the world wars were returned to their country of origin after peace was made, a certain amount of material has been used for political gamesmanship and held as part of the spoils of war. Indeed, archives captured by the United States, the former Soviet Union, and Western European countries have been used, and will no doubt continue to be used, by governments and politicians as bargaining chips to reclaim cultural materials or to affect policy. For example, in 1992 the U.S. Congress sidelined a planned return of the Smolensk Communist Party Archives to Russia, when the Congress made repatriation contingent upon the return of Hebrew and Yiddish manuscripts seized during World War II and held in the Russian State Library to the owner’s heirs, who now live in the United States.52 Indeed, despite the passage of time, restitution of World War II plunder remains contentious. As recently as 1995, the Russian Parliament considered a law that would officially make Soviet World War II plunder recompense for German plunder and not subject to return at any time.53

Another factor affecting restitution of cultural property is the post-war society. At the end of World War II, for example, MFA&A officials were involved in the repatriation of cultural material looted from European Jews. To this end the Offenbach Archival Depot operated in the American Zone of Occupation under the direction of archivist Captain Seymour J. Pomrenze, processing over three million objects from 1945 to 1952. While the majority of the objects were returned to their owners, the decimation of European Jewry complicated the restitution process of around five hundred thousand items of questionable own-

51 Kecskeméti, “Displaced European Archives,” 134.


53 Ibid., 61.
ership. Some American Jewish leaders argued that since "Europe is no longer, and is very unlikely that it can become again, a center of Jewish spiritual and cultural activity" the looted materials should not be kept in Europe. Acknowledging the claims that dispersed communities in Europe still had on their items, it was proposed that some items would be returned to the communities "in proportion to the prospective religious and cultural needs of the community and its capacity to retain, to care for, and to use them for the religious and cultural purposes for which they were intended." A proposed centralized repository for looted Jewish material to be located in Copenhagen, Denmark, failed to keep the items on the continent, and the material was instead relocated to institutions in Israel and the United States, including the Library of Congress.  

The decision to remove looted material from Europe, while practical, was also, no doubt, emotional. Given that millions of Jews had just been killed in Europe, the sense that the materials were unsafe may have been pervasive. But, the reality that the main Jewish population centers thereafter would be located outside of Europe also influenced the decision. The situation illustrates complications that can result when the act of restitution changes from simply returning materials to their country of origin to deciding what is best for the material. Even with the best of intentions, the decision to remove culturally significant items from their countries of origin, because the countries are perceived to be unworthy or unable to care for them, are difficult ones that may become subject to the pressure of politics.

CONCLUSION

In war, archives can become battlefields, tools, and targets. Indeed, their integral role in society means that archives reflect the many types of conflict they are involved in or represent, from the barbaric to the heroic. By plundering the archival heritage of a nation or people, warring parties can inflict vicious damage and exact revenge, even many years after a conflict has ended. The administrative use and exploitation of archives during wartime is less emotional and more strategic, but also dam-

aging to the enemy and useful to the occupier. Finally, the bureaucratic records of modern warfare and genocide can not only document a history of war, but also provide a detailed record of mass death and evidence a record that itself can be used to help prosecute perpetrators of war crimes and document the fate of a war’s victims. Notwithstanding international recognition and conventions dictating the importance of protecting archival and cultural heritage during war, combatants in the twenty-first century continue to place heritage at risk. It would seem, like war itself, that destruction and exploitation of archives will continue to take place despite the countless examples of the long-term damage such abuse causes. As one Iraqi librarian was quoted saying after the looting in Baghdad: “We can buy computers. We can make new buildings. But we can’t buy a museum, or these books, or history.”

Patricia A. Nugent is the special collections librarian/archivist at the J. Edgar and Louise S. Monroe Library, Loyola University New Orleans.