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The Year Zero: Iconoclastic breaks with the past

The notion of “a break with the past” requires closer inspection. Political scientists and historians studying the mechanisms of contemporary armed conflict and dictatorship frequently but inattentively use the term to indicate a more or less profound change in time. But there are different ruptures with the past. Indeed, two contrasting types can be distinguished: transitional and iconoclastic breaks. The former are the hallmark of new or restored democracies, the latter of new or consolidated dictatorships. Transitional breaks have received much attention during the last decades; truth commissions and tribunals were devised as instruments to cope with the painful past before the break. Transitional breaks are organized by regimes which recently acquired power and are backed by large parts of civil society. They constitute an attempt to deal with the injustices of the immediately preceding period but usually leave the legacy of the more remote past intact.

Iconoclastic breaks are different. Some regimes or groups try to force not a partial but a complete break with the past and even to start from the year zero.¹ These *tabula rasa* breaks are meant to cleanse the entire past or as much of it as possible, and either to reach or regain some faraway golden age. They are the hallmark of totalitarian regimes, at least during certain phases in their life span, or of radical groups aspiring to totalitarian power. In order to reach their goal, they organize iconoclastic expeditions to destroy relics and emblems of the past: monuments and statues, books and records, holy places and cemeteries. Typically, such expeditions accompany punitive campaigns against groups perceived as historical enemies. Iconoclastic breaks have thus far enjoyed less systematic attention than transitional breaks although their legacy usually leaves deeper scars.

My goal, then, is to study this iconoclastic type. Iconoclasm in the conventional sense is understood as a form of cultural cleansing;² in contrast to vandalism, which

¹ Not to be confused with *Stunde Null* (zero hour).

² For examples, see “Iconoclasm,” in Derek Jones, ed., *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia* (London / Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), 1140–1145; Robert Bevan, *The Destruction of*

is arbitrary, it is done purposely.³ It includes large-scale destruction of heritage and strategies such as the desecration of the dead and their graves (posthumous punishment) and the alteration or destruction of monuments of dead leaders who were officially condemned (*damnatio memoriae* and “posthumous trials”).⁴ The purposive character of these destructive operations is most clearly seen where monuments of the new power are erected on the same site as their predecessors.⁵

It should be noted from the outset, however, that my use of the term “iconoclastic” is far broader than the conventional one just explained. Here, I want to capture this conventional iconoclasm *in combination with* systematic acts of gross human rights violations with the intent to force a rupture in time and to exorcize the doomed past once and for all. In general, it is difficult to draw a line between regimes under which outbreaks of conventional iconoclasm occur though not as part of any historical plan, and regimes that use iconoclasm as a radical instrument of history politics.

The French Revolution (especially the Terror of 1793–1794), the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and Nazi Germany’s Third Reich of 1933–1945 are widely recognized as classic examples of regimes trying to realize an iconoclastic break.⁶ From this brief list, it can be seen immediately that regimes trying to force such breaks in world history are not easily grasped under a common denominator. Another problem with iconoclastic breaks is that their beginning and end cannot be easily pinned down; they may last from a few months to many decades. The break can be forced in full light or in silence, usually when a regime comes to power but sometimes only after it is consolidated.

My cases come from a database on the censorship of history spanning the period between 1945 and today.⁷ Indeed, the post–1945 era contains some fairly

Memory: Architecture at War (London: Reaktion Books, 2006); Sam Durant, *Defaced Monuments* (http://www.samdurant.com/defaced_monuments); Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997). See also Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2007), 27–29 (the case of cults of antiquity).

³ Gamboni, *Destruction*, 17–24, 170.

⁴ See Antoon De Baets, *Responsible History* (New York / Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009), 61–63 (the case of archival cleansing) and 137–139 (the case of posthumous punishment); “*Damnatio memoriae*,” in Hubert Cancick & Helmut Schneider, eds., *Der Neue Pauly: Enzyklopädie der Antike*, volume 3 (Stuttgart / Weimar: Metzler, 1997), 299–300.

⁵ Gamboni, *Destruction*, 61.

⁶ Earlier famous examples of conventional iconoclasm (some of which turned into iconoclastic breaks) were Qin Shihuangdi’s book burning and attack on tradition in China, vandalism, Byzantine iconoclasm, the iconoclastic fury during the Protestant Reformation, iconoclasm as part of colonialism, the destruction of Hindu temples under the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb in India, and the “literary Holocaust” under the Qianlong emperor in China. For a discussion of some of these cases, see Gamboni, *Destruction*, 25–90.

⁷ For published parts of the database, see Antoon De Baets, *Censorship of Historical Thought: A World Guide 1945–2000* (Westport CT / London: Greenwood Press, 2002) and the

clear-cut cases of iconoclasm. I gathered data from twelve countries (Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, China, Iran, Iraq, Mali, Pakistan, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Yugoslavia), of which I will briefly present a sample of seven in which the iconoclastic break with the past had the greatest and most encompassing impact. I will distribute them over three main types centered around class, nation and religion. By grouping them, however, I do not mean to suggest that the cases are related to each other in any causal way.

Communist iconoclasm

In the past decades, three communist regimes have tried to force an iconoclastic break. The foremost example is China.⁸ In 1966, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was unleashed in Maoist China. Carried out by Red Guards who were manipulated by the Gang of Four, it uprooted millions of Chinese and constituted a fierce attack against the Four Olds—old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits. “Smash the old world” was the guiding principle. The nationwide campaign left deep scars, especially in the years immediately following 1966. Numerous historical films, plays and books were denounced as “poisonous weeds.” Institutionalized historical and archaeological research came to a halt. Excavations were disrupted and sites attacked. Innumerable historic monuments such as temples, shrines, cemeteries and museums were burned, ransacked or closed down. Mao Zedong called the events “without precedent in history.”⁹

One of the targets was Tibetan Buddhism, the attacks on which started earlier than the Cultural Revolution and lasted longer. Annexed in 1950, Tibet was perceived by the regime as a territory that had always been part of China. From 1954–1955, history education in the region became completely sinicized and references to Tibetan culture and history were banned. After the Tibetan uprising of 1959 and the Dalai Lama’s flight into exile, control grew stricter. Tibetans who claimed that Tibet had always been independent and that its 1950 annexation was not a “peaceful liberation,” were ruthlessly persecuted. Many religious and historic manuscripts were destroyed. In addition, over 6,000 monasteries (reportedly 95 to 97 percent of the total) and many other heritage sites and statues were demolished, especially between 1950 and 1976. The Chinese state decided, however, to preserve a few selected monasteries as “ancient relics of culture.” Attempts to restore destroyed heritage started hesitantly in the 1980s but they were often hampered.¹⁰

Annual Reports of the Network of Concerned Historians (<http://www.concernedhistorians.org/content/ar.html>).

⁸ For the place of iconoclasm in Chinese history, see Simon Leys, “L’Attitude des Chinois à l’égard du passé,” in idem, *L’Humeur, l’honneur, l’horreur: essais sur la culture et la politique chinoises* (Paris: Laffont, 1991), 9–48.

⁹ Quoted in Michael Schoenhals, “Unofficial and Official Histories of the Cultural Revolution—A Review Article,” *Journal of Asian Studies* (1989), 571.

¹⁰ For the Chinese case, see, among others, Bevan, *Destruction*, 98–102, 118–120, 208; Gamboni, *Destruction*, 107–108; International Commission of Jurists, *Tibet: Human Rights and the Rule of Law* (Geneva: International Commission of Jurists, 1997).

A second example was Romania. The leader of the Romanian Communist Party, Nicolae Ceaușescu, blended his brand of communism with nationalism. Paradoxically this did not particularly induce him to safeguard the Romanian patrimony. On the contrary, under his leadership, the communist regime initiated an unprecedented demolition of heritage. From 1974, an official policy of systematic destruction of thousands of historical monuments and sites in about 65 towns, including Bucharest, and in between 7,000 and 8,000 of the 13,000 Romanian villages was carried out, thus fundamentally threatening the patrimony. The goal of what was called “systematization” by the government and “urbicide” by the others was to force a complete break with the past in order to create a new industrial society in which diverse traditions had become irrelevant because national unity was based on a sole Dacian-Roman origin. In the 1980s, several prominent intellectuals, including Dinu Giurescu, who was a member of the Central Commission of the National Patrimony, protested against this massive demolition at the risk of reprisal. Only in late 1989, when the National Salvation Front took over power, was the program ended.¹¹

The third country that perhaps came closest of all to the nightmarish situation of a country without history was Cambodia. At the time of its takeover by the communist Khmer Rouge who established Democratic Kampuchea in 1975, the publishing and teaching of history came to a halt. A spokesman proclaimed that “two thousand years of history had ended.”¹² The goal of the regime was to abolish the “remnants of the imperialists, colonialists and all of the other oppressor classes.”¹³ Dissident historical views were suppressed. Historic buildings were pulled down or used as storehouses. Concomitantly, the Khmer Rouge unchained a virulent campaign of genocide and crimes against humanity against many layers of the population, which only came to a halt after the Vietnamese invaded the country in January 1979.

In China, the fever of elimination only really subsided after Mao’s death in 1976; it marked the beginning of a more moderate phase within the same regime. The campaigns of destruction in Romania and Cambodia were stopped only because the regimes themselves were toppled.

¹¹ For the Romanian case, see, among others, Bevan, *Destruction*, 127–131; Dinu C. Giurescu, “An Underground Essay on Urban and Rural Redevelopment,” RFE Research (14 February 1986), I, 9–13; idem, “More Protests against Demolitions in Bucharest,” RFE Research (2 October 1986), IV, 33–36; idem, *The Razing of Romania’s Past* (International Preservation Report; Washington: US / ICOMOS, 1989).

¹² For the Cambodian case, see, among others, Bevan, *Destruction*, 120–121; David Chandler, “Seeing Red: Perceptions of Cambodian History in Democratic Kampuchea,” in idem & Ben Kiernan, eds., *Revolution and Its Aftermath in Kampuchea: Eight Essays* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 36, 48–50; idem, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot’s Secret Prison* (Berkeley / Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 49–51, 104–109; Thomas Clayton, “Building the New Cambodia: Educational Destruction and Construction under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979,” *History of Education Quarterly* (Spring 1998), 1.

¹³ As formulated in the Constitution of Democratic Kampuchea, article 3, quoted in François Ponchaud, *Cambodge, année zéro: document* (Paris: Julliard, 1977), 239. See also Bevan, *Destruction*, 121.

Nationalist iconoclasm

The next two cases of iconoclasm occurred in Iraq and Yugoslavia. The background to much of Saddam Hussein's iconoclasm against the Kurds and the shiites was a long and lethal war against Iran, where Khomeini's regime had just taken power (1980–1988). The Saddam government feared crossborder contacts between Kurds and the same between shiites. In Iraqi Kurdistan hundreds of towns and villages were razed in a policy of genocidal proportions culminating in the Anfal campaign of 1988. After the Gulf War of 1990–1991, the Kurds revolted and they again became the target of heavy genocidal repression. After this cruel episode, however, Iraqi Kurdistan came to enjoy a degree of de facto independence. Following the Gulf War, the Marsh Arabs in the south, who had embraced the shiite variant of Islam, also revolted. By way of retaliation, their 5,000-year-old culture was destroyed in a campaign often typified as ecocide. Elsewhere, the famous shiite festival of Ashura was banned. Iconoclastic violence remained endemic after Saddam's fall in 2003.¹⁴

The second case was unfolding during the war that raged over the territories of Yugoslavia in 1991–1995 and led to its breakup. Many archives, monuments and sites were destroyed or damaged by all sides in the conflict, frequently in a deliberate effort to achieve what was variously called cultural cleansing, crimes against culture and bibliocide. For example, Serbian forces besieging the Bosnian capital Sarajevo ransacked a number of cultural institutions and destroyed two million books and the state archives, containing evidence of a distinct historic Bosnian identity and culture and of the Ottoman foundations of Sarajevo. Many historic buildings were destroyed in all the major towns of the country.¹⁵ This cultural cleansing accompanied campaigns of ethnic cleansing.

¹⁴ For the Iraqi case, see, among others, Bevan, *Destruction*, 72, 90–93; Rebecca Knuth, *Libricide: The Regime-Sponsored Destruction of Books and Libraries in the Twentieth Century* (Westport CT / London: Praeger, 2003), 144–145; “The Threat to World Heritage in Iraq: Heritage Destroyed” (Oxford March–April 2003). Iconoclastic tendencies survived the Saddam regime. In 2006, a bomb attack by al-Qaeda extremists demolished the Golden Mosque in Samarra, one of the four key shiite holy sites. This act sparked retaliatory sectarian violence across Iraq, in which thousands died and dozens of sunni mosques were attacked.

¹⁵ For the Yugoslav case, and particularly Bosnia, see, among others, International Court of Justice, *Bosnia-Herzegovina versus Serbia-Montenegro* (<http://www.concernedhistorians.org/le/18.pdf>; 2007), paragraphs 335–344; Joan van Albada, “Memory of the World’: Report on Destroyed and Damaged Archives,” *Archivum* (1996 no. 42), 11, 19, 26, 67–78; Leopold Auer, “Archival Losses and Their Impact on the Work of Archivists and Historians,” *Archivum* (1996 no. 42), 4; Bevan, *Destruction*, 25–26, 38–47, 59, 85–88, 177–180, 204–208; Harbour F. Hodder, “Bibliocide,” *Harvard Magazine* (November–December 1996); Glen Holland, “War Damage to Art Works and Monuments in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia,” *Common Knowledge* (Fall 1995), 9–23; Josip Kolanović “Archives en temps de guerre: l’expérience de la Croatie,” *Archivum* (1996 no. 42), 173–180; Matko Kovačević, “War Damage Suffered by the State Archive of Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *Archivum* (1996 no. 42), 181–186; Azem Kozar, “War Destruction of Archival Materials,” *Janus* (1999 no. 1), 92–95; Andrej Smrekar & Stane Bernik, “The Endangered Monuments of Croatia,” *New York Review of Books* (21 November 1991), 23;

Both these cases are examples of nationalist iconoclasm because the separatist component is prominent in both cases, though in different ways.¹⁶ In the Iraqi case the central dictatorial government waged a struggle against real or perceived separatist tendencies, in the Yugoslav case, the breakup of one country into many was at stake and each successor state designed its own sort of chauvinistic nationalism. Grouping cases in categories is partly arbitrary when we realize that the anti-separatist component is also applicable to the Tibetan case (and even to the three islamist cases presented below). But in China the iconoclastic effect went far beyond a strategy to counter separatism. In Tibet itself, the Maoist campaign was directed against the Tibetans not only as a national but also as a religious group; outside Tibet, it was directed against many groups ("rightists," intellectuals, etc.). Describing Chinese iconoclasm as merely nationalist is therefore not sufficiently adequate. In the same vein, Romania's iconoclasm also had a clearly nationalist watermark (although not a separatist one) but describing it as nationalist alone does not exhaust its meaning.

Another observation is about religion. The Iraqi and Yugoslav cases were not purely nationalist, they contained an important religious component as well. In Iraq, the regime and its bureaucracy, although secular-Baathist, was predominantly recruited from sunni Muslim circles, which put shiite groups in jeopardy. As for the Kurds, the religious element seemed not to have played a significant role. In Bosnia, a 1995 report about the architectural heritage calculated that 3,226 buildings officially listed in the national historic register had been destroyed or severely damaged during the war: between 1,100 and 1,400 were identifiably Islamic, 300 identifiably Catholic, and 35 to 70 identifiably Orthodox. After the war, attempts to rebuild mosques were resisted by hostile crowds and bureaucracies.

Islamist iconoclasm

Two regimes with an iconoclastic approach to the past were islamist: the Taliban in Afghanistan in 1996–2001 and the Ansar Dine in northern Mali in 2012–2013. With no regard for venerated traditions, they destroyed everything that was

Nicholas Wood, "A Multicultural Remnant Closes in Sarajevo," *International Herald Tribune* (16–17 October 2004), 2.

¹⁶ East Pakistan is another example. During a war of liberation, East Pakistan seceded from West Pakistan to become Bangladesh with the help of India in December 1971. Yahya Khan's Pakistani military government initiated a campaign of massive retaliation resulting in a massacre of genocidal proportions and in an iconoclastic frenzy. A survey carried out after the war revealed that at least 2,000 Hindu temples were destroyed or substantially damaged; some 6,000 pieces of sculpture were removed or destroyed as a result of military action or deliberate plunder. See Karl E. Meyer, *The Plundered Past* (London: Arts Book Society / Readers Union Group, 1974), 7–8.

A further example was the destruction of Armenian cultural and religious artifacts during the armed conflict about the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh (an Armenian-populated enclave in Azerbaijan) in 1988–1994. See Bevan, *Destruction*, 57; ICOMOS, *Heritage At Risk: World Report on Monuments and Sites in Danger 2002–2003* (Munich: K. G. Saur, 2003), 44–47.

idolatrous as measured against their hardline religious criteria. In Afghanistan, the Taliban issued an edict in February 2001—in breach of a pledge made in 1999—to destroy pre-Islamic and Buddhist objects, including the world's two largest standing Buddha statues at Bamiyan on the Silk Road. The destruction went ahead the next month. This iconoclasm was part of a broader operation of ethnic cleansing of the shiite Hazara people living in the Bamiyan area who resisted Taliban rule and regarded the statues, though Buddhist, as a symbol of their region.¹⁷ The Taliban operation, however, encompassed more than Bamiyan heritage: they destroyed thousands more statues and painted images across Afghanistan. In 1998, Taliban militia burned the public library of Pol-i-Khomri, which contained 55,000 books and old manuscripts, to the ground. In 2000, the Taliban government destroyed more than 2,750 items at the National Museum.

Mali's religious heritage became the object of iconoclastic attacks in 2012. Islamist (Salafist) fighters from Ansar Dine imposed the *sharia* (Islamic law) in most key towns of northern Mali. Half of the centuries-old shrines and tombs of Sufi saints in Timbuktu which they regarded as idolatrous were destroyed. Timbuktu residents were forbidden to visit the graves of their deceased family members. Neither could they listen to or perform local folklore music (which was closely linked to their oral traditions). One Dogon cultural site was also destroyed. Further at risk of destruction were hundreds of thousands of manuscripts dating back to the thirteenth century. Much of this huge collection, however, was saved—hidden or digitized and smuggled out of Timbuktu. Around 2,000 manuscripts stored at the Ahmed Baba Institute, though, were damaged in January 2013. The Timbuktu manuscripts provided evidence of ancient African and Arabic written scholarship—contradicting the idea that Africa's tradition was purely oral. On 1 July 2012, International Criminal Court Chief Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda warned Ansar Dine that the destruction of historical monuments and religious buildings was a war crime.¹⁸

Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar commented upon the destruction of the Buddhas: "Muslims should be proud of smashing idols. It has given praise to God that we have destroyed them." So did a spokesman of Ansar Dine: "The destruction

¹⁷ Under King Mohammed Nadir Shah (who ruled in 1929–1934), the Bamiyan Buddhas had been a target of destruction for similar reasons. For the Afghan case, see, among others, Bevan, *Destruction*, 122–27, 189–90; ICOMOS, *Heritage At Risk*, 16–20; *UNESCO International Petition to Safeguard Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage* (Paris; UNESCO, 2001).

¹⁸ For the Mali case, see, among others, *BBC News* (30 June & 17 July & 23 December 2012, 30 January & 2 February 2013); Denselow, Robin, "Mali Music Ban by Islamists 'Crushing Culture To Impose Rule,'" *Guardian* (15 January 2013); Human Rights Watch, "Mali: Islamist Armed Groups Spread Fear in North" (25 September 2012); Serge Daniel, "Timbuktu Shrine Destruction a 'War Crime': ICC" (AFP; 1 July 2012); Ishaan Tharoor, "Mali's Crisis: Terror Stalks the Historic Treasures of Timbuktu," *Time Magazine* (5 April 2012); idem, "Timbuktu's Destruction: Why Islamists Are Wrecking Mali's Cultural Heritage," *Time Magazine* (2 July 2012); Geoffrey York, "The Secret Race To Save Timbuktu's Manuscripts," *Globe and Mail* (27 December 2012); Naveena Kottoor, "How Timbuktu's Manuscripts Were Smuggled to Safety," *BBC News* (3 June 2013).

is a divine order.”¹⁹ The Taliban campaign was stopped after an intervention by the United States; the Ansar Dine campaign after a French intervention. The Mali case is special in that iconoclasm was practiced by the separatists themselves rather than by the regime that wanted to halt the secession. It is the only example in our sample of an iconoclastic campaign led by a nongovernmental entity exercising state powers in the territory it had occupied.

International protection against conventional iconoclasm

Iconoclastic breaks with the past combine genocide, crimes against humanity or war crimes with conventional iconoclasm, which means that our societies have a twofold duty to prevent and stop them. As the struggle to combat gross human rights violations is well-known, I will survey here only some important measures of international law taken to fight iconoclasm understood as the large-scale destruction of heritage. Provisions against iconoclasm in times of war were first formulated in the Fourth Hague Convention of 1907, and later also in the Treaty on the Protection of Artistic and Scientific Institutions and Historic Monuments, also called the Roerich Pact, of 1935.²⁰ After 1945, the first draft versions of the United Nations definition of genocide—drawn up between December 1946 and May 1948—distinguished physical and biological from cultural genocide. The May 1948 draft text, for example, defined “cultural’ genocide” as any deliberate act committed with the intent to destroy the language, religion, or culture of a national, racial or religious group on grounds of the national or racial origin or the religious belief of its members such as: 1. Prohibiting the use of the language of the group in daily intercourse or in schools, or the printing and circulation of publications in the language of the group; 2. Destroying or preventing the use of libraries, museums, schools, historical monuments, places of worship or other cultural institutions and objects of the group.²¹

Cultural genocide, also designated as ethnocide, expressed the idea that a group could be extinguished not only by physical elimination but also by erasure of its cultural characteristics. The concept, however, was dropped from the final text of the Genocide Convention in December 1948 because it was deemed too vague after all and susceptible of encouraging political interference in the domestic affairs of

¹⁹ Tharoor, “Timbuktu’s Destruction.”

²⁰ The Fourth *Hague Convention* (1907), articles 27 and 56, refers to times of war; the *Treaty on the Protection of Artistic and Scientific Institutions and Historic Monuments (Roerich Pact)* (1935) refers to times of war and peace.

²¹ For the draft texts, see *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, The Secretariat and ECOSOC Ad Hoc Committee Drafts* (May 1947 [UN Doc. E/447] and May 1948 [UN Doc. E/AC.25/SR.1 to 28]) (<http://www.preventgenocide.org/law/convention/drafts>); for the discussion of these draft texts, see United Nations (Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities), *Revised and Updated Report on the Question of the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (“Whitaker Report”) (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1985/6; <http://www.preventgenocide.org/prevent/UNdocs/whitaker/>; 2 July 1985), paragraphs 32–33.

states. Following the rejection, a certain consensus grew that what were previously called acts of cultural genocide were, in fact, either war crimes or crimes against humanity.²²

The war crime approach has since been accepted rather widely. Most notably, a *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*, agreed upon in 1954, retook the idea.²³ It was also repeated in the two protocols additional to the *Geneva Conventions* in 1977. Two decades later, the statute of the International Criminal Court mentioned “intentionally directing attacks against buildings dedicated to religion, education, art, science... [and] historic monuments... provided they are not military objectives” and categorized such attacks as war crimes.²⁴ The crimes against humanity approach gained credence through the jurisprudence of the Yugoslavia Tribunal, which in 2006 found that the destruction of cultural monuments and sacred sites could be considered a form of persecution, which was a subcategory of crimes against humanity.²⁵ By and large, communist iconoclasm seemed to consist most of crimes against humanity, while nationalist and Islamist iconoclasm seemed to comprise more war crimes.

In 2003 UNESCO drew up a *Declaration concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage*. In its first recital, this declaration recalled “the tragic destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan that affected the international community as a whole.” It was also aware that “cultural heritage is an important component of the cultural identity of communities, groups and individuals, and of social cohesion, so that its intentional destruction may have adverse consequences on human dignity and human rights.”

Thus, the international protection against conventional iconoclasm has created its tools. Stopping iconoclastic regimes was no great success. In the absence of significant opposition, several regimes (like China, and among the examples not

²² See also International Court of Justice, *Bosnia-Herzegovina versus Serbia-Montenegro*, paragraphs 335–344.

²³ *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict* (1954), *passim*. Peacetime provisions were further stipulated in three UNESCO conventions for the safeguarding of tangible, intangible and underwater heritage. Most of these heritage texts can be consulted at UNESCO, *Conventions and Recommendations of UNESCO Concerning the Protection of the Cultural Heritage* (Paris: UNESCO 1985).

²⁴ International Criminal Court, *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court* (1998), articles 8.2(b)(ix) and 8.2(e)(iv), for international and internal wars respectively.

²⁵ International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, *The Prosecutor of the Tribunal against Momčilo Krajišnik and Biljana Plavšić (Case no. IT-00-39 & 40-PT): Amended Consolidated Indictment* (<http://www.icty.org/cases/party/758/4>; The Hague 7 March 2002), Schedule D; *idem, Prosecutor v. Momčilo Krajišnik; Case no. IT-00-39-T: Judgement* (<http://www.icty.org/cases/party/709/4>; 2006), paragraphs 780–783, 836–840; “Law Report: War, Cultural Cleansing and the Courts” [Interview with archivist Andras Riedlmayer on ABC Radio National] (<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lawreport/war-cultural-cleansing-and-the-courts/3352218#transcript>; 17 October 2006). See also Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent Expert in the Field of Cultural Rights, Farida Shaheed [Cultural Heritage]* (A/HRC/17/38; 21 March 2011), paragraphs 18, 80(b).

studied here, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Iran) continued the practice with supreme impunity. In cases of a breakup (Pakistan, Yugoslavia), the situation was not clear: iconoclasm was unleashed to prevent the breakup in one case and to hasten it in another. The best guarantee to stop iconoclastic regimes seemed to topple them—either by an uprising (Romania) or foreign intervention (Cambodia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Mali). In the latter cases, international indignation against the destruction of heritage played a role.

Some conclusions

A first conclusion is that while not all communist or nationalist regimes embark on an iconoclastic road, islamist regimes all seem to do. Indeed, islamist iconoclasm is well represented, especially if we look not only at Afghanistan and Mali but at additional examples from Iran, Sudan and Saudi Arabia (not presented here).²⁶ The thesis that each and every islamist regime has iconoclastic tendencies is plausible. Other radical variants of religion, for example Hindu radicalism in India, display a similar tendency if given the opportunity to exercise it.²⁷

Another conclusion concerns the historical views of iconoclasts. From the outset, it is clear that the study of historical views of regimes willing to annihilate the past is bound to be paradoxical, because what can a historical view which includes a justification for the erasure of the remnants of the past possibly mean? A first impression, then, is that nationalist iconoclastic breaks with the past seem to need no elaborate theory of history. For nationalists, iconoclasm may be an instrument of

²⁶ In these three cases, official iconoclasm was directed against one specific sector of society or of heritage; although devastating for those involved, it was less encompassing than the cases studied here. In Iran, the Khomeini regime waged a relentless campaign against the Bahai, their religious institutions and their heritage. See, among others, Jones, ed., *Censorship*, 167–168. In Sudan, after the 1989 coup, pre-Islamic history was officially regarded as an epoch of ignorance, or *jahiliyya*, and pre-Islamic (Nubian) and Christian relics, scriptures, icons and books were dismantled, either through confiscation and physical destruction or through their dispersion as gifts. See John Daniel & others, *Academic Freedom 3: Education and Human Rights* (London: World University Service / Zedbooks, 1995), 81–84. In Saudi Arabia, the regime, operating from a Wahhabi religious perspective, destroyed its own heritage. See Daniel Howden, “The Destruction of Mecca: Saudi Hardliners Are Wiping Out Their Own Heritage,” *Independent* (6 August 2005).

²⁷ In India, radical Hindus regularly organized iconoclastic violence against Muslim heritage, culminating in the destruction in 1992 of a mosque built by Mughal emperor Babar in Ayodhya. See, among others, Bevan, *Destruction*, 134–140; Paul R. Brass, *The New Cambridge History of India*, volume 4–1, *The Politics of India since Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 239–247; Anubha Charan, “Ayodhya: Digging Up India’s Holy Places,” *History Today*, 54 no. 1 (January 2004), 4–6; Jones, ed., *Censorship*, 153–154, 1143; “Mythifying History: A Symposium on the Making of Myths Claiming to Be Historical,” *Seminar* no. 364 (December 1989); Ashis Nandy, “History’s Forgotten Doubles,” *History and Theory*, 34 no. 2 (1995), 44–66; Ram Sharan Sharma, M. Athar Ali, Dwijendra Narayan Jha & Suraj Bhan, *Ramjanmabhumi–Baburi Masjid: A Historians’ Report to the Nation* (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1991). During the partition of 1947, the cultural patrimony of Hindus and Muslims suffered severe damage.

territorial ambition, ethnic cleansing and religious fervor without much historical depth. Primordialist arguments of nationalism (that the Iraqi civilization is the oldest in the world, for example), although present, did not seem to have functioned as major motives for Saddam's iconoclasm. On the other hand, there is a centuries-old persistent anti-Persian strand in Iraqi thought that Saddam used during his anti-shiite campaigns.²⁸ In Yugoslavia, the Serbs did invoke centuries-old historical injustice to justify their territorial ambition. But it is remarkable that although the two states concerned are constructions of a relatively recent date—Iraq was established in 1921 and Yugoslavia in 1918—the iconoclastic campaigns were carried out not at the time of independence but about 60 and 75 years after their foundation respectively. The final impression thus remains that although nationalist iconoclasts used historical arguments to justify their breaks, they did so in a random way. In short, they did not feel forced to turn to them.

This was not the case for communist and islamist regimes that possessed less shallow views of history. Communist iconoclasm, as diversified as it may seem in its Maoist, Khmer Rouge and Romanian-nationalist guises, adheres to the theory of historical materialism, which is a Marxist theory of history central to communism because it identifies the stages through which societies (or modes of production) necessarily go. And islamism constantly refers to the purity of early Islam, as a crucial and unavoidable period preceded by eras—and surrounded by countries—of darkness and ignorance.

In a certain sense, it is easier to understand why islamist regimes become iconoclastic than why communist regimes do. Islamist regimes taking the path of iconoclasm and waging a holy war (*jihad*) want to erase everything considered idolatrous because it can give rise to polytheism or to rival cults deviating from an orthodoxy which springs from early Islam. To see the erasure of the past as an exorcism of pollution and a restoration of original purity is a natural consequence of this view. Communist regimes have a similar attitude toward deviation of orthodoxy but it is cast in a secular, anti-religious language. Their history-driven and largely anti-traditionalist ideology prescribes that communism is the *necessary* goal toward which all societies evolve. If they refer to periods of the past, it is preferably to those that seem to foreshadow the victory of communism. Seen in this light, iconoclasm is problematic: why destroy the past if the communist society will be reached with law-based absolute certainty? Communist iconoclasm reveals itself as a burdensome and risky strategy which is not even indispensable. When communist rulers, then, choose that path and come to think that iconoclasm is beneficial to their goals, they must be somehow convinced that it vastly accelerates an already inevitable historical development.

A third conclusion concerns time orientation. When the central concept is "homogenization," as in the nationalist type, the break is best characterized as "present-oriented." The time dimension seems to be either shallow or decorative.

²⁸ Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley, etc.: University of California Press, 2005), 131–137.

Nationalist iconoclasm rarely convinces as an iconoclastic break with the past as its primary target. When the central concept is “purity,” as in the islamist type, the iconoclastic break is oriented toward a sacred origin. The regime practicing it is radically restorative—it wants to reinstall the purity of that era. When the central concept is “historical law,” as in the communist type, the iconoclastic break with the past is future-oriented, that is directed toward some golden new age in the future. The regime practicing it heralds itself as revolutionary. It is also striking but far from surprising that the central concepts of the victims of iconoclasm are diametrically opposed to those of the perpetrators: they speak not of historical laws but of cultural genocide, not of purity but of cultural cleansing, not of homogenization but of crimes against culture.

A last conclusion is that ironically even the most iconoclastic of regimes never succeeded in “liberating” themselves entirely from the remnants of the past: this is indeed a historical impossibility. Reference to the past was often accentuated, even where it could have been avoided: the label “*Third Reich*,” for example, presupposed a first and a second empire: the first was the Holy Roman Empire (962–1806), the second the German Empire (1871–1918). In our sample, the Khmer Rouge was an extremely iconoclastic regime, but even they built on history by referring to the culture of Angkor Wat. At certain moments, Mao did not look unfavorably on some emperors of the past (and particularly on Qin Shihuangdi, the unifier of China and an iconoclast himself). And islamist regimes all refer to the age of early Islam as the standard.

A corollary to this unavoidability of the past is perhaps that some of the leaders responsible for unleashing the iconoclastic expeditions were demonstrably interested in history (while others were not). Among those demonstrably known for their genuine interest in history were Mao, Ceaușescu and Saddam, that is, leaders of the communist and nationalist type. This interest in history did not deter their iconoclastic plans, on the contrary, it may have encouraged it. Many iconoclastic leaders, whether interested in history or not, saw themselves charged with a historic mission and as the vehicles of history. Further study is needed here.

Afterword

It is tempting to believe that the harder regimes try to abolish the past, the quicker they will be relegated to the past themselves. And although iconoclastic regimes are transient phenomena, some take a long time to disappear. Meanwhile, they can destroy the entire texture of society. In any case, they are not easily forgotten. In their relentless efforts to destroy the past, they achieve some of the ahistorical immortality and posthumous fame they yearned for. But they survive not in recollections of pride but in collective memories of horror that may last for generations.

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Note: all websites mentioned were last visited on 6 March 2014.

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The Year Zero: Iconoclastic breaks with the past

Abstract

Some regimes try to force a complete break with the past and even to start from the year zero. Throughout history, such iconoclastic breaks were meant to erase, once and for all, the entire past or to destroy as many of its relics and symbols as possible, and either to reach or

regain some faraway golden age. Iconoclastic breaks have thus far enjoyed less systematic attention than the breaks commonly indicated by the phrase “transitional justice,” although their legacy usually leaves deeper scars. My goal, then, is to explore these iconoclastic breaks with the past. I conclude that there are three main types: communist, nationalist and Islamic. The central iconoclastic idea is “historical law” for the first type, “homogenization” for the second and “purity” for the last. Each has its own vision of history: the first is predominantly future-oriented, the second present-oriented, and the third past-oriented.

Key words: breaks with the past, iconoclasm, communism, nationalism, Islam