

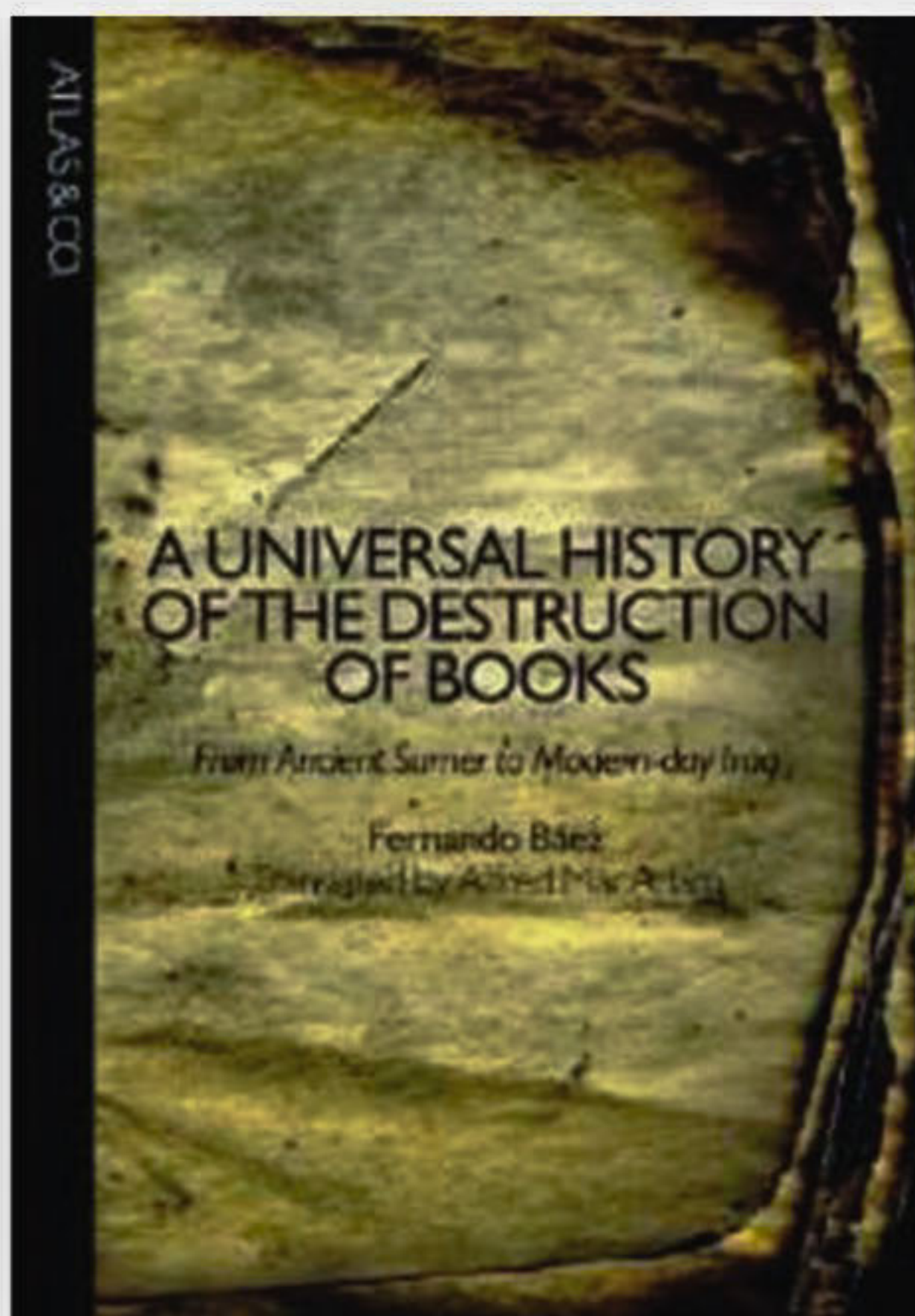
Books, writers and their enemies

Syed Badrul Ahsan reflects on Fernando Baez's work... and more

BOOKS have been burned and writers have been persecuted through the ages. And yet you would expect that in these present times, which are often described in glowing terms as post-modernity, the savagery which in earlier phases of human existence sought to destroy all the good that man could bring forth would have drawn to a close. Not so. Think of the brutality visited upon Baghdad through the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003. In the days immediately following the fall of Baghdad, for yet one more time in history, all the libraries and all the museums in the city were systematically looted. Vandals and thieves simply walked away with the books or put them to the torch. It was but the beginning, for over the next few days and weeks, books all over Iraq would go missing even as American and British soldiers stood by, their job ostensibly to ensure security in a soon to be 'democratic' Iraq.

The figures that speak to us of that bibliocaust are staggering. On 14 April 2003, a million books were burned in Baghdad's National Library. If you have some idea of the cultural affluence Baghdad has always epitomised in civilisation, you will have reason to comprehend the invaluable heritage the city and indeed Iraq has consistently upheld. But all of that was destroyed in the blitzkrieg that Tony Blair and George W. Bush launched in April 2003 against Saddam Hussein and his country. It was on the basis of a lie that these men cheerfully went into destroying a country and the culture of sublimity it had systematically maintained for centuries. April 2003 was Iraq's cruellest month. That is the lesson you draw from a remembrance of the trauma the country was put into. It is a lesson which now comes to us from a clearly worried Fernando Baez. The exhaustive efforts he has put into *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books: From Ancient Sumer to Modern Iraq* are a necessary reminder of the gross philistinism men can personify and have personified since the rise of the human species as the ultimate preserver and destroyer, in equal measure, of the earth's bounties. And note the irony here: books were first destroyed in ancient Sumer, which today is part of southern Iraq, and they were destroyed again in Iraq, which has had the history of Sumer coursing through its veins.

In that springtime of calculated havoc in Iraq in 2003, apart from the million books burned in the National Library in Baghdad, as many as 10,000,000 registries dating back to republican and Ottoman times burned to ashes. The carnage was repeated elsewhere in the rapidly collapsing modern state that Saddam Hussein, for all his shortcomings as a political leader, had carefully built over time. In Basra, where British soldiers had taken charge, the Museum of Natural History, the Central Public Library and the Islamic Library were all razed to the ground. It is amazing what mobs can do to divest societies



Baez book

because of the arrival of this age of unmitigated sexuality. Think of the gay politicians in Britain who have cheerfully served in public positions. And to think poor Oscar Wilde was humiliated on charges of homosexuality!

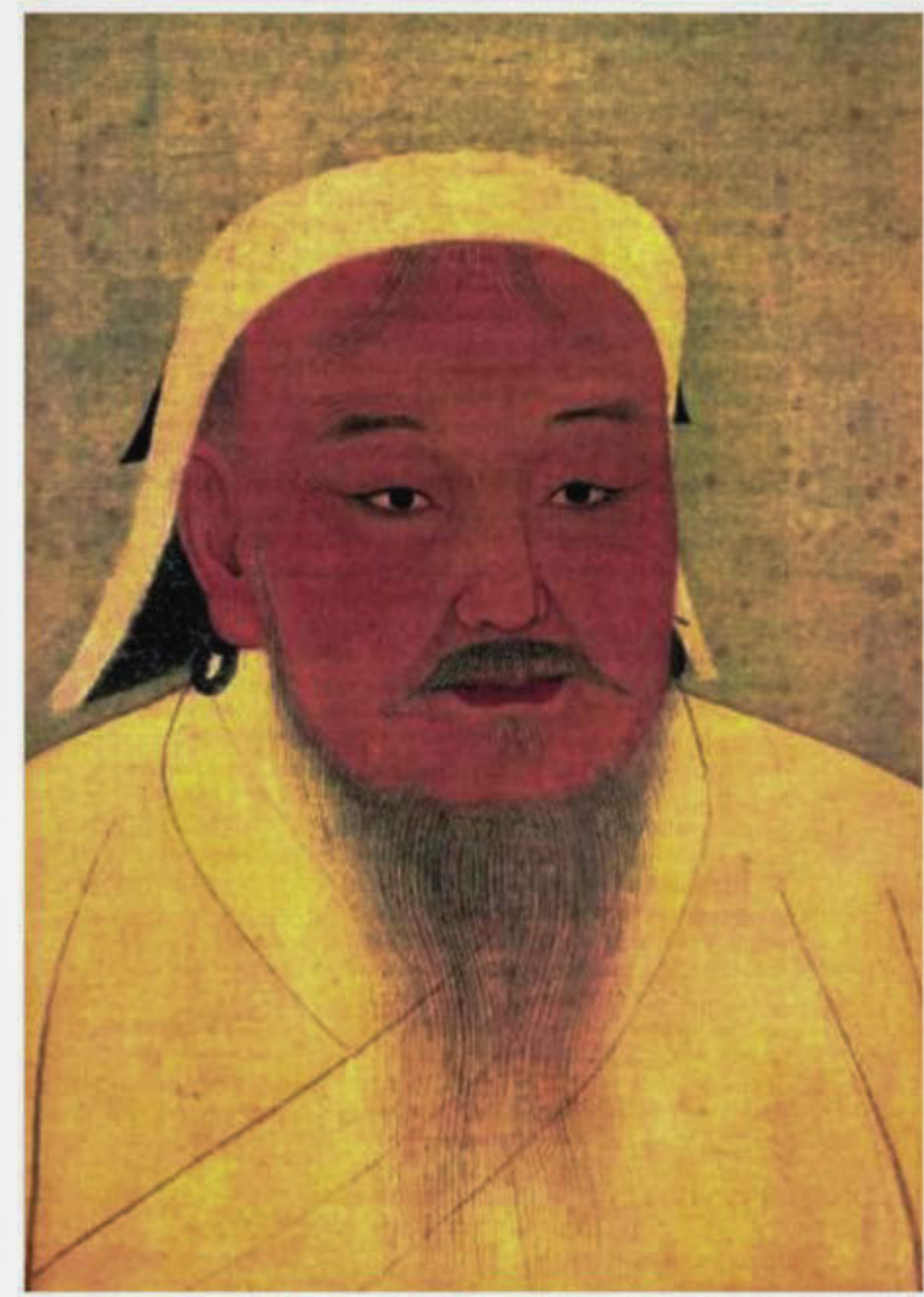
But, yes, despite all the changes we come across in mores and behaviour in our times, the fact remains that for large numbers of people books can sometimes be cause for heart-break and huge indignation. Taslima Nasreen, an especially bold writer (despite all the reservations you may have about the quality of her writing or the way she pushes her view towards you), has been moving from one country to another because her country will not let her back in. That we do not speak up for her, that we pretend she does not exist, is our undying shame. There is too Daud Haider, whom the fanatics

point. The more important thought is that if you do not like a book, if you disagree with it, you can do either of two things: you stop reading it or you do not read it at all. But to suggest that a writer should not live because he has committed blasphemy, because he is an apostate, is a bit like saying you have not stepped out of the medieval ages.

But let us make our way back to Baez, for he makes us retrace all those sad trails of devastation that bibliocausts once blazed in all their sinister wisdom. Biblioclasy, in case you thought it was merely the work of Hitler's youth gangs, has been part of the tradition philosophers and erudite men have built over the centuries. Constantinople, sometimes known as 'New Rome', was founded by Constantine I in 330. It possessed all the signs of civilised life one could expect in that particular era. As the capital of the Byzantine Empire, it had pride of place in Europe and contained within its spaces the traditions of Greece and Rome. Listen to Baez: 'Without its contribution to the transmission of ancient texts, we would probably not have the works of Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus, Thucydides, or Archimedes --- to name just a few.' Constantinople made it possible for books to be printed and preserved in a format unlike any that had gone before. Sometime between the second and third centuries, the codex and parchment became the norm in a preparation of books. The codex made it possible for writing on both sides of a page and both it and parchment were resistant to wear and tear. In the reign of Constantine II Porphyrogenitus, hundreds of historical, philosophical and juridical texts, as Baez notes, were copied. Indeed, bibliophilia became a passion with the Byzantine Empire and made its presence felt in all fields of life.

But then came danger, when Leo III, in his attempt to bring Christians, Jews and Muslims together, decreed a ban on images. His son continued the practice. In 754, the bishops gathered for the Council of Hieria enthusiastically agreed that images were a repudiation of God and so must be done away with. It was thus that the persecution of writers and artists began and an unprecedented number of images were destroyed or removed. Apocalypse was on the way. It came in 1453, when Turkish troops commanded by Sultan Mahomet entered Constantinople and sacked the city for three days. Thousands were murdered; and churches, icons and manuscripts were destroyed. Edward Gibbon would later note that 120,000 manuscripts unacceptable to the conquering Muslims were tossed into the sea. The Byzantine Empire ceased to be.

There is, if you observe in a mood of detachment, a continuum in time when it comes to the destruction of books. The Nazis remain perhaps the best embodiment of biblioclasy in modern time. Hitler and his men presided over the destruction of books in 1933 and after. But it was well before 1933 that the Fuhrer's goon squads would enter bookshops looking for the



Genghis Khan

on some vacant lots in Buenos Aires, to be doused with gasoline and set on fire.

Writers have lived in fear of the state. And, surprisingly, they have done so when reputed bibliophiles happened to hold sway. Josef Stalin and Adolf Hitler were both avid readers and possessed libraries they were truly proud of. It is said that Hitler's personal library was stacked with more than 16,000 volumes. And yet Hitler remains infamous for ordering the most comprehensive assault on books not only in Germany but in every country he conquered in Europe. In the Soviet Union, Stalin was fond of quoting eminent writers before his fellow revolutionaries. He read deeply and constantly and yet it was in his era, during the purges of the 1930s, that writers suffered at the hands of his increasingly brutal regime as they had never suffered before. Anna Akhmatova paid a heavy price for her writing. Scores of novelists simply vanished after they were picked up by the secret police. The repression on Soviet writers did not end with the death of Stalin in 1953. In 1958, after Boris Pasternak published *Dr. Zhivago*, the Soviet establishment, now run by Nikita Khrushchev, made life hard for the writer. When two years later Pasternak was awarded the Nobel for literature, the state came down on him so heavily that in the end he was unable to accept the prize.

Which makes you turn to the tragic tale of the brilliant and bold Hypatia of Alexandria. Born around 355, she was the daughter of Theon, a man reputed to have been 'the wisest of philosophers' and living in Alexandria as a member of its museum. Theon prepared theses on astronomy, geometry and music and was hugely respected for his commentaries on Ptolemy's Tables. Hypatia, his collaborator, quickly surpassed him as a scholar. The texts she wrote were dense. A dynamic professor, she disseminated ideas on Neoplatonism and thereby revived public interest in geometry. All of this led to envy among the clergy. In spring 415, a mob of devout monks seized Hypatia while she was busy delivering a lecture on the charge that she was a witch. No one in that classroom or in the neighbourhood came forward to assist her out of her terror. The monks beat her with roof tiles before gouging out her eyes and cutting off her tongue. When they had finally put the life out of her, they carried her body to a place called Cinarus, where they cut it into pieces. The pieces and all that remained of Hypatia were then put into the fire. The aim of the clergy was made brutally clear: they wanted nothing that Hypatia symbolised as a woman to be around.

Long ago, George Washington spoke for all men of intelligence and good sense. 'I conceive', said he, 'that a knowledge of books is the basis on which all other knowledge stands.' It is a lesson hordes of conquerors have ignored or flouted through the ages, from monks to soldiers to fanatics. Vaclav Havel's works were proscribed by the communists in Czechoslovakia. Buddhadev Bose's books were considered obscene by the authorities in India. Genghis Khan's nomad army went on a rampage across Iraq, Iran and part of today's Turkestan. Books were burned in the mosque in Bokhara, in Nisapur and in Merv. The Mongols under Hulagu Khan reached Baghdad in 1257 and, having murdered thousands of people, supervised the destruction of all manuscripts in the library.

Fernando Baez speaks for all of us again. 'Books are burned and libraries bombed because they are symbols,' he asserts plaintively. He goes on: "Biblioclasy, a neologism used to refer to the destruction of books, is an attempt to annihilate a memory considered to be a direct or indirect to another memory thought superior.'

It all makes you wonder.

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Nazi book burning

of their claim on history. And it is unthinkable that foreign occupiers will look the other way when evil does its work without let or hindrance. At the height of the Bosnian crisis in 1999, the National Library in Sarajevo was firebombed. Altogether 1.5 million volumes were burned to cinders. Go back in time. In the 17th century, Sabbatai Zevi, a false messiah whom many happened to regard at the time as a proper Jewish mystic, let it be known that a destruction of Holy Scriptures would bring about a new era of peace and happiness in the world. And this is what he said to those who would listen: 'To burn a book is to bring light to the world.'

Small wonder then that cantankerous men like the American small-town preacher Terry Jones feel little shame and absolutely no fear of God when they ask that people make themselves happy through burning the Quran. Jones has of course taken a step backward and has told the world he will not go ahead with his incendiary programme. But that is not what you reflect on. It is the sheer villainy in this putative man of God that you see, that you do not understand. Ah, but then, there have always been preachers and popes in history who, in the name of God, have gone ahead with destroying the lives of the poor and the helpless across the world. Desmond Tutu, himself a bishop, and a powerful one too, once put it in extremely simple terms: 'When the missionaries first came, they had the Bible and we had the land. Then they asked us to close our eyes and pray. When we opened our eyes, they had the land and we had the Bible.' And there you have it, this bitter tale of how religion has often served as a convenient vehicle for colonial subjugation.

The great truth about books is that they are generally written by brave people. The bravery, of course, consists in the unconventional points of view they put across, points of view which are also embedded in the secret recesses of millions of hearts. If you have read Frank Harris' *My Life and Loves*, you will know that his graphic descriptions of his sexuality, of his affairs with an uncountable number of women are in various ways a holding forth of the fantasies all of us, except for the prudish and the unpoetic, feel burning inside us. In *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, D.H. Lawrence does the bold thing of presenting unadulterated physical lust as the reality in life. It is raw seduction, a full-blown satisfaction of desires he gives vent to in the novel. The self-righteous of course thought it was all so vulgar. That vulgarity, by the way, is not there any more. Perceptions have changed. John Kennedy and Bill Clinton, occupying the most powerful office in the world, saw little difficulty in maintaining liaisons with a phalanx of women and at the same time providing leadership to their people. Lawrence must be smiling up there somewhere and not only

forced into abandoning Bangladesh back in the 1970s only because they did not particularly appreciate a poem he had written in radical form. The trouble with fanaticism, all fanaticism, is that it has no arguments to present in a debate with its detractors. It only resorts to intimidation, to threats of blue murder, when it thinks it has been humiliated by a writer. Salman Rushdie wrote a bad book he called *The Satanic Verses*. It was bad in language, bad in taste, bad in the choice of subject matter. The ayatollahs in Tehran only made things worse when they decided, in this day and age, that Rushdie's head needed to be sliced away from the rest of him. Well, he was not beheaded, as we can see. He has been knighted and is feasted everywhere he goes in the western world. But that is beside the



Dr. Zhivago

works of Erich Maria Remarque, to consign them to the flames. In 1930, they interrupted a speech by Thomas Mann. Within days of Hitler's taking over as chancellor, his young supporters, armed with a new law proscribing writing considered unsuitable for the new dispensation, fanned out all across Germany picking out and burning books they believed militated against Germany's Aryan character. Attacks on Jewish books and other documents were particularly harsh. In 1935, the Nazis, with Goebbels in charge of ensuring aesthetic purification, prepared a list of 524 authors whose works were not to be read in Germany. The Nazis would not stop there, prompting Sigmund Freud into telling a journalist: 'In the Middle Ages, they would have burned me. Now they're happy burning my books.'

German forces captured one country after another. In each country the Nazis occupied, libraries and books were destroyed with a frenzy that defied logic. In Belgium, in France, in Poland, in Austria, it was havoc reminiscent of medieval times. Fifteen million books were lost in Poland as a consequence of Nazi aggression. German aerial bombardment did not spare even Britain between 1940 and 1942. As many as 100,000 books were lost when the Coventry library came under attack. The library of the Inner Temple, which had been restored in 1668, came under bombardment. The British Museum lost a quarter of a million books along with 30,000 volumes of newspapers. As the end of the war approached and Germany appeared close to defeat, it was now allied bombing of German cities that led to a fresh spate in the loss of books and libraries. The Staatsbibliothek (national library) lost two million books. In Dresden, 300,000 books turned to ashes. Frankfurt lost 550,000 books and 440,000 doctoral theses. In distant Japan, the rare collection of classical books in the library in Nagasaki was gone when the United States dropped an atomic bomb on the city.

Books have always drawn the ire of religious fanatics as well as dictatorships. You have to go back to Spain and remember the tragic end to the life of Federico Garcia Lorca at the hands of Francoist forces in 1936. Under the Franco regime, libraries were confiscated and writers like Marx, Engels, Mao, Henry Miller and D.H. Lawrence were turned into non-persons. In Chile, following the military coup of 11 September 1973, it was books and progressive ideas that came under sustained assault. On the day the armed forces launched the coup, the air force bombed the La Moneda presidential palace. In the attack, it was a valuable document that was destroyed: Chile's original declaration of independence. Five million books about to be shipped to Cuba by the Quimantu Publishing Company were sliced into pieces when soldiers attacked the firm looking for 'subversive' material. The works of Pablo Neruda, Gonzalo Drago and Leonardo Espinoza were ruined. In Argentina, 1.5 million books were dumped in August 1980



Baghdad library



DH Lawrence