

From *The Destruction of Culture*

CHRIS HEDGES

Educated at Colgate University and at the Harvard Divinity School, Chris Hedges (b. 1956) has worked as a foreign correspondent for over two decades, witnessing wars in the Balkans, Central America, and the Middle East. In 2002, he shared the Pulitzer Prize for coverage of global terrorism. His most recent book, *Losing Moses on the Freeway* (2005), is about the importance of the Ten Commandments to our time. The essay included here, "The Destruction of Culture," is taken from a chapter in his book *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (2002). Referring to the book, General Wesley K. Clark — former NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe — says, "War is a culture of its own, [Hedges] warns, and it can undercut and ultimately destroy the civil societies that engage in it."

The first casualty when war comes is truth.

— SENATOR HIRAM JOHNSON, 1917

In wartime the state seeks to destroy its own culture. It is only when this destruction has been completed that the state can begin to exterminate the culture of its opponents. In times of conflict authentic culture is subversive. As the cause championed by the state comes to define national identity, as the myth of war entices a nation to glory and sacrifice, those who question the value of the cause and the veracity of the myths are branded internal enemies.

Art takes on a whole new significance in wartime. War and the nationalist myth that fuels it are the purveyors of low culture — folklore, quasi-historical dramas, kitsch, sentimental doggerel, and theater and film that portray the glory of soldiers in past wars or current wars dying nobly for the homeland. This is why so little of what moves us during wartime has any currency once war is over. The songs, books, poems, and films that arouse us in war are awkward and embarrassing when the conflict ends, useful only to summon up the nostalgia of war's comradeship.

States at war silence their own authentic and humane culture. When this destruction is well advanced they find the lack of critical and moral restraint useful in the campaign to exterminate the culture of their opponents. By destroying authentic culture — that which allows us to question and examine ourselves and our society — the state erodes the moral fabric. It is replaced with a warped version of reality. The enemy is dehumanized; the universe starkly divided between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. The cause is celebrated, often in

overt religious forms, as a manifestation of divine or historical will. All is dedicated to promoting and glorifying the myth, the nation, the cause.

The works of the writers in Serbia, such as Danilo Kis and Milovan Djilas, were mostly unavailable during the war. It remains hard even now to find their books. In Croatia the biting satires of Miroslav Krleža, who wrote one of the most searing portraits of Balkan despots, were forgotten. Writers and artists were inconvenient. They wrote about social undercurrents that were ignored by a new crop of self-appointed nationalist historians, political scientists, and economists.

National symbols — flags, patriotic songs, sentimental dedications — invade and take over cultural space. Art becomes infected with the platitudes of patriotism. More important, the use of a nation's cultural resources to back up the war effort is essential to mask the contradictions and lies that mount over time in the drive to sustain war. Cultural or national symbols that do not support the crusade are often ruthlessly removed.

In Bosnia the ethnic warlords worked hard to wipe out all the records of cohabitation between ethnic groups. The symbols of the old communist regime — one whose slogan was “Brotherhood and Unity” — were defaced or torn down. The monuments to partisan fighters who died fighting the Germans in World War II, the lists of names clearly showing a mix of ethnic groups, were blown up in Croatia. The works of Ivo Andrić, who wrote some of the most lyrical passages about a multiethnic Bosnia, were edited by the Bosnian Serbs and selectively quoted to support ethnic cleansing.

All groups looked at themselves as victims — the Croats, the Muslims, and the Serbs. They ignored the excesses of their own and highlighted the excesses of the other in gross distortions that fueled the war. The cultivation of victimhood is essential fodder for any conflict. It is studiously crafted by the state. All cultural life is directed to broadcast the injustices carried out against us. Cultural life soon becomes little more than the drivel of agitprop. The message that the nation is good, the cause just, and the war noble is pounded into the heads of citizens in everything from late-night talk shows to morning news programs to films and popular novels. The nation is soon thrown into a trance from which it does not awake until the conflict ends. In part of the world where the conflict remains unresolved, this trance can last for generations.

I walked one morning a few years ago down the deserted asphalt tract that slices through the center of the world's last divided capital, Nicosia, on the island of Cyprus. At one spot on the asphalt dividing line was a small painted triangle. For fifteen minutes each hour, Turkish troops, who control the northern part of the island, were allowed to move from their border posts and stand inside the white triangular lines. The arrangement was part of a deal laboriously negotiated by the United Nations to give Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots access to several disputed areas along the 110-mile border that separates the north from the south. The triangle was a potent reminder that once the folly of war is over, folly itself is often all that remains. . . .

War, just as it tears down old monuments, demands new ones. These new

monuments glorify the state's uniform and unwavering call for self-sacrifice and ultimately self-annihilation. Those who find meaning in the particular, who embrace affirmation not through the collective of the nation but through the love of another individual regardless of ethnic or national identity, are dangerous to the emotional and physical domination demanded by the state. Only one message is acceptable.

A soldier who is able to see the humanity of the enemy makes a troubled and ineffective killer. To achieve corporate action, self-awareness and especially self-criticism must be obliterated. We must be transformed into agents of a divinely inspired will, as defined by the state, just as those we fight must be transformed into the personification of unmitigated evil. There is little room for individuality in war. 10

The effectiveness of the myths peddled in war is powerful. We often come to doubt our own perceptions. We hide these doubts, like troubled believers, sure that no one else feels them. We feel guilty. The myths have determined not only how we should speak but how we should think. The doubts we carry, the scenes we see that do not conform to the myth are hazy, difficult to express, unsettling. And as the atrocities mount, as civil liberties are stripped away (something, with the "War on Terror," already happening to hundreds of thousands of immigrants in the United States), we struggle uncomfortably with the jargon and clichés. But we have trouble expressing our discomfort because the collective shout has made it hard for us to give words to our thoughts.

This self-doubt is aided by the monstrosity of war. We gape and wonder at the collapsing towers of the World Trade Center. They crumble before us, and yet we cannot quite comprehend it. What, really, did we see? In wartime an attack on a village where women and children are killed, an attack that does not conform to the myth peddled by our side, is hard to fathom and articulate. We live in wartime with a permanent discomfort, for in wartime we see things so grotesque and fantastic that they seem beyond human comprehension. War turns human reality into a bizarre carnival that does not seem part of our experience. It knocks us off balance.

On a chilly, rainy day in March 1998 I was in a small Albanian village in Kosovo, twenty-five miles west of the provincial capital of Pristina. I was waiting with a few thousand Kosovar Albanian mourners for a red Mercedes truck to rumble down the dirt road and unload a cargo of fourteen bodies. A group of distraught women, seated on wooden planks set up on concrete blocks, was in the dirt yard.

When the truck pulled into the yard I climbed into the back. Before each corpse, wrapped in bloodstained blankets and rugs, was lifted out for washing and burial I checked to see if the body was mutilated. I pulled back the cloth to uncover the faces. The gouged-out eyes, the shattered skulls, the gaping rows of broken teeth, and the sinewy strands of flayed flesh greeted me. When I could not see clearly in the fading light I flicked on my Maglite. I jotted each disfigurement in my notebook.

The bodies were passed silently out of the truck. They were laid on crude wooden coffin lids placed on the floor of the shed. The corpses were wound in white shrouds by a Muslim cleric in a red turban. The shed was lit by a lone kerosene lamp. It threw out a ghastly, uneven, yellowish light. In the hasty effort to confer some dignity on the dead, family members, often weeping, tried to wash away the bloodstains from the faces. Most could not do it and had to be helped away.

It was not an uncommon event for me. I have seen many such dead. Several weeks later it would be worse. I would be in a warehouse with fifty-one bodies, including children, even infants, women, and the elderly from the town of Prekaz. I had spent time with many of them. I stared into their lifeless faces. I was again in the twilight zone of war. I could not wholly believe what I saw in front of me.

This sense that we cannot trust what we see in wartime spreads throughout the society. The lies about the past, the eradication of cultural, historical, and religious monuments that have been part of a landscape for centuries, all serve to shift the ground under which we stand. We lose our grip. Whole worlds vanish or change in ways we cannot fully comprehend. A catastrophic terrorist strike will have the same effect.

In Bosnia the Serbs, desperately trying to deny the Muslim character of Bosnia, dynamited or plowed over libraries, museums, universities, historic monuments, and cemeteries, but most of all mosques. The Serbs, like the Croats, also got rid of monuments built to honor their own Serb or Croat heroes during the Communist era. These monuments championed another narrative, a narrative of unity among ethnic groups that ran contrary to the notion of ancient ethnic hatreds. The partisan monuments that honored Serb and Croat fighters against the Nazis honored, in the new narrative, the wrong Serbs and Croats. For this they had to be erased.

This physical eradication, coupled with intolerance toward any artistic endeavor that does not champion the myth, formed a new identity. The Serbs, standing in flattened mud fields, were able to deny that there were ever churches or mosques on the spot because they had been removed. The town of Zvornik in Serb-held Bosnia once had a dozen mosques. The 1991 census listed 60 percent of its residents as Muslim Slavs. By the end of the war the town was 100 percent Serb. Branko Grujic, the Serb-appointed mayor, informed us: "There never were any mosques in Zvornik."

No doubt he did not believe it. He knew that there had been mosques in Zvornik. But his children and grandchildren would come to be taught the lie. Serbs leaders would turn it into accepted historical fact. There are no shortage of villages in Russia or Germany or Poland where all memory of the Jewish community is gone because the physical culture has been destroyed. And, when mixed with the strange nightmarish quality of war, it is hard to be completely sure of your own memories.

The destruction of culture sees the state or the group prosecuting the war take control of the two most important mediums that transmit information to the nation — the media and the schools. The alleged "war crimes" of the enemy,

real and imagined, are played and replayed night after night, rousing a nation to fury. In the Middle East and the Balkans, along with many other parts of the world, children are taught to hate. In Egypt pupils are told Jews are interlopers on Arab land. Israel does not appear on schoolroom maps. In Jordan, children learn that Christians are “infidels” who “must be forced into submission,” that the Jewish Torah is “perverted,” and that Jews have only “their own evil practices” to blame for the Holocaust. Syrian schoolbooks exhort students to “holy war” and paint pictures of Israelis “perpetrating beastly crimes and horrendous massacres,” burying people alive in battle and dancing drunk in Islamic holy places in Jerusalem. And Israel, despite efforts in secular state schools to present a more balanced view of Arab history, allows state-funded religious schools to preach that Jewish rule should extend from the Nile in Egypt to the Euphrates in Iraq and that the kingdom of Jordan is occupied Jewish land.

The reinterpretation of history and culture is dizzying and dangerous. But it is the bedrock of the hatred and intolerance that leads to war.

On June 28, 1914, Gavrilo Princip shot and killed Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in a Sarajevo street, an act that set off World War I. But what that makes him in Bosnia depends on which lesson plan you pick up.

“A hero and a poet,” says a textbook handed to high school students in the Serb-controlled region of this divided country. An “assassin trained and instructed by the Serbs to commit this act of terrorism,” says a text written for Croatian students. “A nationalist whose deed sparked anti-Serbian rioting that was only stopped by the police from all three ethnic groups,” reads the Muslim version of the event.

In communist Yugoslavia, Princip was a hero. But with the partition of Bosnia along ethnic lines, huge swathes of history are reinterpreted. The Muslim books, for example, portray the Ottoman Empire’s rule over Bosnia, which lasted 500 years, as a golden age of enlightenment; the Serbs and Croats condemn it as an age of “brutal occupation.” 25

These texts have at least one thing in common: a distaste for [Marshal] Tito, the Communist leader who ruled the country from 1945 to 1980 and was a staunch opponent of the nationalist movements that now hold power. And Tito’s state pioneered the replacement of history with myth, forcing schoolchildren to memorize mythical stories about Tito’s life and aphorisms.

By the time today’s books in the Balkans reach recent history, the divergence takes on ludicrous proportions; each side blames the others for the Bosnian war and makes no reference to crimes or mistakes committed by its own leaders or fighters.

The Muslims are taught that the Serbs “attacked our country” and started the war. The Serbs are told that “Muslims, with the help of mujahadeen fighters from Pakistan, Iraq and Iran, launched a campaign of genocide against the Serbs that almost succeeded.”

The Croatian students learn that Croatian forces in “the homeland war” fought off “Serbian and Muslim aggressors.”

Even the classics get twisted into a political diatribe. I saw a pro-Milošević production of *Hamlet* in Belgrade that was scripted to convey the message that usurping authority, even illegitimate authority, only brings chaos and ruin. Hamlet was portrayed as a bold and decisive man, constantly training for battle. He was not consumed by questions about the meaning of existence or a desire to withdraw from society, but the steely drive to seize power, even if it plunged the kingdom into chaos. Horatio, usually portrayed as a thoughtful and humane scholar, was the incarnation of evil.

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Hamlet's treachery was illustrated at the conclusion of the play when Prince Fortinbras of Norway entered Elsinore to view the carnage. Fortinbras, dressed to look like the chief European representative at the time in Bosnia, Carl Bildt, walked onstage with a Nazi marching song as his entrance music. He unfolded maps showing how, with the collapse of authority, he had now carved up Serbian territory among foreign powers.

"Here is a *Hamlet* for our time," the director, Dejan Krstović, told me. "We want to show audiences what happens when individuals tamper with power and refuse to sublimate their own ambitions for the benefit of the community."

"Because of Hamlet, the bodies pile up on the altar of authority and the system collapses. Because of Hamlet, the foreign prince, Fortinbras, who for us represents the new world order, comes in from the outside and seizes control, as has happened to the Serbs throughout their history."

Every reporter struggles with how malleable and inaccurate memory can be when faced with trauma or stress. Witnesses to war, even moments after a killing or an atrocity, often cannot remember what took place in front of them. They struggle to connect disparate images. And those who see events with some coherency find there is an irreversible pull to twist the facts to conform to the myth. Truth, in such moments, is too nuanced and contradictory for most to swallow. It is best left untouched.

I went one rainy afternoon to the Imperial War Museum in Vienna, mostly to see the rooms dedicated to the 1878 Bosnian rebellion and the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. His car, peppered with bullet holes, and the blood-stained couch on which he died are on display. But I also wandered through the other rooms designed to honor the bloodlust and forgotten skirmishes of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. When I finished with the World War I exhibit I looked for the room dedicated to World War II. There wasn't one. And when I inquired at the desk, I was told there was no such exhibit in the city. World War II, at least in terms of the collective memory of the Austrian nation, unlike in Germany, might as well have not existed. Indeed, in one of the great European perversions of memory, many Austrians had come to think of themselves as victims of that war.

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The destruction of culture plays a crucial role in the solidification of a wartime narrative. When the visible and tangible symbols of one's past are destroyed or denied, the past can be recreated to fit the myth. It is left only to those on the margins to keep the flame of introspection alive, although the destruction of culture is often so great that full recovery is impossible. Yugoslavia, a country

that had a vibrant theater and cinema, has seen its cultural life wither, with many of its best talents living in exile or drinking themselves to death in bars in Belgrade or Vienna.

Most societies never recover from the self-inflicted wounds made to their own culture during wartime. War leaves behind not memory but amnesia. Once wars end, people reach back to the time before the catastrophe. The books, plays, cinema take up the established cultural topics; authors and themes are often based on issues and ideas that predated the war. In post-war Germany it was as if Weimar had never ended, as if the war was just some bad, horrible dream from which everyone had just awoken and no one wanted to discuss.

This is why the wall of names that is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is so important. It was not a project funded or organized by the state but by those who survived and insisted we not forget. It was part of America's battle back to truth, part of our desire for forgiveness. It ultimately held out to us as a nation the opportunity for redemption, although the state has prodded us back towards the triumphalism that led us into Vietnam.

But just as the oppressors engage in selective memory and myth, so do the victims, building unassailable monuments to their own suffering. It becomes impossible to examine, to dispute, or to criticize the myths that have grown up around past suffering of nearly all in war. The oppressors are painted by the survivors as monsters, the victims paint themselves as holy innocents. The oppressors work hard to bury inconvenient facts and brand all in wartime with the pitch of atrocity. They strive to reduce victims to their moral level. Each side creates its own narrative. Neither is fully true.

Until there is a common vocabulary and a shared historical memory there is no peace in any society, only an absence of war. The fighting may have stopped in Bosnia or Cyprus but this does not mean the war is over. The search for a common narrative must, at times, be forced upon a society. Few societies seem able to do this willingly. The temptation, as with the Turks and the Armenian genocide, is to forget or ignore, to wallow in the lie. But reconciliation, self-awareness, and finally the humility that makes peace possible come only when culture no longer serves a cause or a myth but the most precious and elusive of all human narratives — truth.

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Exploring the Text

1. Why does Chris Hedges open his essay with both exposition and argument? Where in the text does he shift between exposition, narration, and argument? What is the effect of shifting modes of discourse in this way?
2. Note how Hedges effects transitions. For example, what is the relationship between paragraphs 12 and 13? between 15 and 16?
3. What is the effect of the highly descriptive details in paragraphs 14 and 15? Does it detract from his argument or strengthen it?