

## Libraries under siege in Croatia 1991-1995.<sup>1</sup>

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**Fig. 1:** Unknown author, “Old town of Dubrovnik after shelling.”

*During the Homeland War in Croatia, 1991-1995, numerous cities were attacked and their cultural institutions were damaged or even destroyed. Even under siege conditions and constant shelling, life in them somehow went on, and libraries were an important community resource and site of resistance. Despite difficult and often dangerous conditions, they remained open to the public and continued to provide services. This study presents an oral history of the work and the use of libraries in towns under siege during the Homeland War. Ten cities under siege throughout the country, involving 14 libraries, were included in the study: Dubrovnik, Šibenik, Zadar, Gospić, Karlovac, Sisak, Slavonski Brod, Osijek, Vinkovci and Vukovar. Fifty librarians and seventeen users from those cities, witnesses of that time, were interviewed and provided eye-witness accounts as well as their reflections about the events*

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<sup>1</sup>This article was also presented in abbreviated form at the Annual Meeting of the Oral History Association in Oklahoma City, USA 9-13 October 2013.

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*and the role of library services under siege. The qualitative methods of grounded theory were used for analysis of collected interviews. The notion of social capital was used in interpreting results and for general valuation of libraries. Results show that libraries were the only cultural institutions that were fully functioning in their communities at the time. Many dramatic instances illustrate the importance of culture and narrative specifically in the lives of ordinary people. Included are examples of soldiers who were carrying library books to battlefields, mothers who read compulsively after the loss of children, and librarians who behaved professionally and courageously under hazardous conditions. The number of users actually increased during the siege, as did the borrowing of books. Civilians took books to shelters and soldiers took books to the front. Libraries also were used for cultural events, such as exhibits, and meetings. This study contributes evidence about the social role and value of libraries, and suggests a larger role for culture and narrative in surviving atrocity. A discussion of the methodology with extensive examples and quotes from results are presented in the paper.*

## **Introduction**

Yugoslavia was established in the aftermath of the First World War, as were a number of other states in Europe and Middle East. After the Second World War Yugoslavia became a communist state. It was a multi-national, multi-religious, multi-linguistic, and even multi-cultural state, factors that contributed to its destructive demise. In 1991 communism collapsed, mostly peacefully, throughout the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Yugoslavia was an exception. The country, a conglomeration of six regional republics, including Croatia, and two autonomous provinces, disintegrated violently in the 1990s into several independent countries. Croatia declared independence in 1991 and a devastating war of succession was waged against the Yugoslav National Army and various Serb paramilitary units until 1995. While Croatia was established as a free, democratic, and independent state, “Homeland war” -as it's known in Croatia- was devastating. Many cities, towns, and villages and many cultural institutions, including libraries, were attacked, damaged and even destroyed. A number of communities were under lengthy siege. Somehow, life went on in these communities under various emergency adjustments and circumstances.

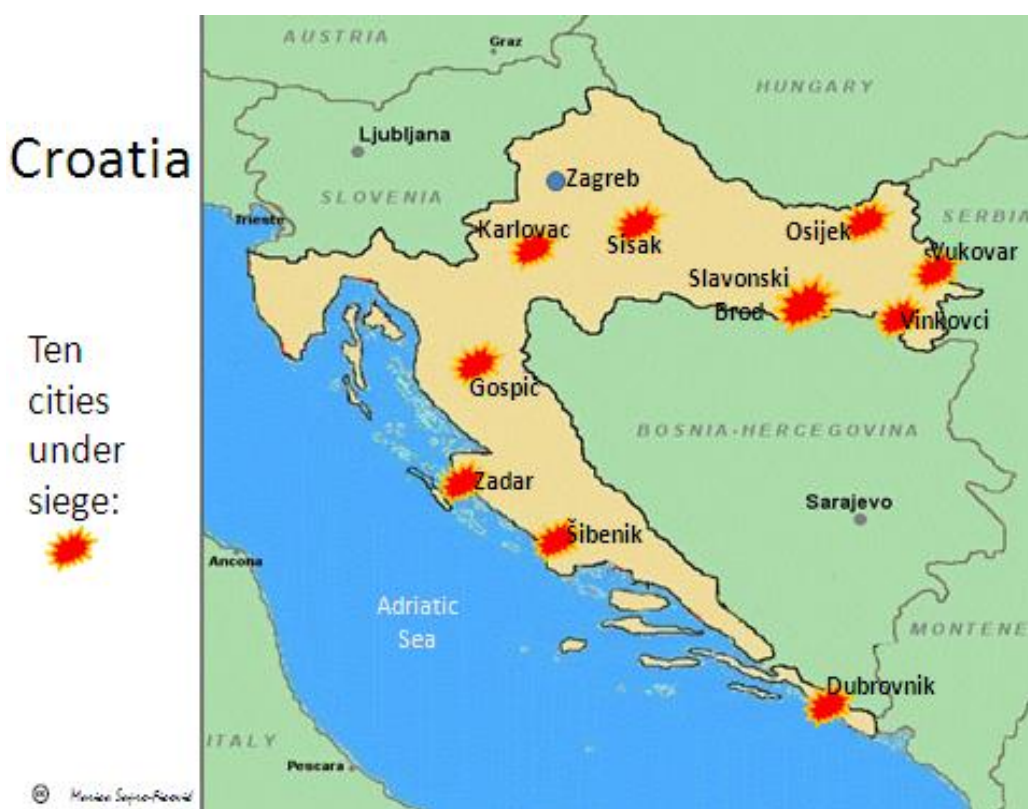
## **Objectives and Methodology**

The specific purpose of this research is to explore the life and work of libraries, librarians, and patrons in cities that were under siege during the

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Homeland war in Croatia.<sup>2</sup> The project collected and organized recollections and reflections from librarians about their work in the cities under siege, described the users and the use of libraries in conditions of war, and contributed evidence about the social role and value of libraries. The broader implications of the research suggest the importance of cultural practices, and specifically narrative practices, as a means of maintaining community and sanity under conditions of war and atrocity.

Ten cities under siege throughout the country, involving 14 libraries, were included in this study. The cities, representing the entire geography of the country, were: Vukovar, Vinkovci and Osijek in the northeast; Slavonski Brod, Sisak and Karlovac, in the center; Gospić toward southwest; and Zadar, Šibenik and Dubrovnik along the Adriatic coast.



**Fig. 2.** Ten cities under siege during the “Homeland war” in Croatia, 1991-1995. Courtesy of author.

<sup>2</sup>The research was conducted from 2006 to 2012 as a part of author's doctoral thesis. Marica Šapro-Ficović: „Activities of libraries under siege in war. Case study Croatia 1991-1995“ doct. diss. (Faculty of Philosophy of University of Zagreb, 2012) p. 1-463

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Some of these cities were under total siege for a long period of time; others were under partial siege but were regularly attacked, shelled and bombarded. One city (Vukovar) was totally leveled, the library included. In all these cities libraries continued functioning during the time of the siege, though some had to close for short periods.

The theoretical and practical framework of this study incorporates a variety of qualitative methods and approaches, discussed in detail below.:

- *Oral history* for the collection and study of historical information about events as recalled by participants. The procedure consisted of several important steps, from informed consent, selection of participants, to the interviews and transcripts.
- *Grounded theory* emerged from the analysis of collected interviews, the coding of transcripts, synthesis of data, selection of representative examples, and finally discussion and generalization.
- The notion of *social capital* was useful in generalizing the results of the research to establish a general validation of libraries as community resources

#### *Oral history: collection of data*

To provide context, public records about the Homeland War and about the siege of those ten cities were synthesized. In addition, all the records that could be found from and about libraries during the time of the siege were analyzed and presented. Unfortunately, because of logistics as well as damage, not many records were available. Given the dearth of archival sources, the investigation therefore concentrated on the collection and analysis of interviews with librarians and library users active during the war. Oral History methods also allowed the collection of more qualitative records that provided psychological insight into the difficult conditions.

Altogether fifty librarians and seventeen library users were interviewed, providing testimony about their recollection of the events and library services and use under siege. The main qualification for inclusion in the study was that informants had to have worked at or used the libraries in the ten cities under consideration during the period of the worst attacks, i.e., the second half of the 1991, 1992 and partially 1993. Given the long time lag (almost twenty years) between that period under consideration and the present research, and the limited availability of the interviewees, the study also included a few employees who had absences from library work for periods of time. However, respondents who worked continuously during the strongest attacks and siege were privileged in the interview process. In preparation for the interviews, informants were either identified and contacted directly or were recommended by fellow librarians. In several cases during the interview, the respondents recommended other potential respondents. Interviews were conducted with at least four to five people in each city. All participants, librarians and library users, were presented with information about the topic of

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the interview and purpose and objectives of the study and signed a statement of informed consent. Interviews were structured, tape recorded, and then transcribed for analysis. Altogether, there were fifty-four hours of interviews, with 435,000 words transcribed. These records will be deposited in the Memorial Documentation Center of the Homeland War in Zagreb, Croatia.

#### *Grounded theory: analyses of data*

Following principles of grounded theory, the analysis consisted of developing content codes and then coding the utterances in each interview. Finally, the codes were collated and results shown with comments and illustrative examples taken directly from interviews. The main categories included:

1. Historical context: Work in libraries before attacks
2. Libraries under siege.
3. Dangers to library staff and users Perspectives of.
4. Perspectives of librarians: reasons to stay and work in dangerous conditions
5. Perspectives of library patrons
6. Social and psychological function of libraries as community resource

Some of the main findings follow – all generalized from the collected oral histories. Selected citations from the interviews with librarians and library users reflect their opinions and attitudes in all of the above-mentioned categories.<sup>3</sup>

## **Results**

### *1. Historical context*

The historical context encompasses the time of the Croatian war for independence (called the “Homeland war” in Croatia) that started with the attacks of former Yugoslav Army and various Serb paramilitary troops on Croatian cities and villages in the summer of 1991 and ended with the Croatian army’s liberation of occupied territories in 1995. Librarians provided testimonies about those dramatic days and the war context as they remember it in response to a series of structured questions. In the first set of questions, the librarians were asked to describe the situation before the attacks on their city through a series of sub-questions: What was going on just before the attacks

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<sup>3</sup> All of the citations are directly excerpted from the M. Šapro-Ficović's dissertation. Abbreviations used in examples are: Librarians = Lb, Library users = Lu

started? Were the citizens informed about the situation in the country? Were you expecting an attack on your city? What was the atmosphere in the city? Was a defense organized in case of attack?

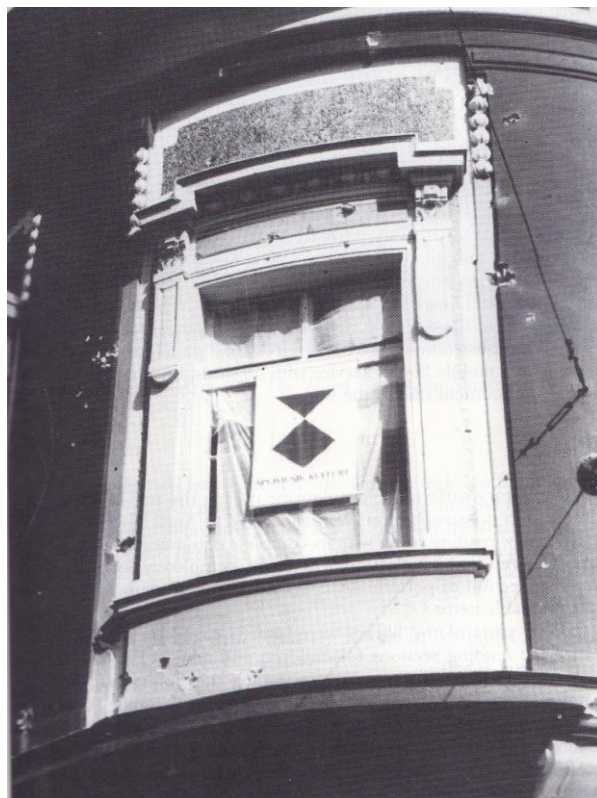
The views and opinions of the respondents differed in all ten cities, depending on the geographic position and the timing of the attacks. In most cases, though aware of the situation in the country, they did not believe that their city would be attacked. When this happened, they were stunned and surprised, coming out curiously at the windows and streets as if some unusual art performance was happening out there. They were even oblivious to the dangers. Nobody seriously thought that there was a war, that their city was attacked, and that from now on everything would be different. This was particularly the case in Dubrovnik, a historical city on UNESCO's list of protected world heritage sites. Many were shocked that such a recognized and protected site could be attacked. Here is the testimony of a librarian from Dubrovnik City Library:

The first attack, which I clearly saw, was the attack on Srdj (a mountain at the top of the city of Dubrovnik). All the tenants in the building went out on the balcony and watched the firing, completely unaware that grenades may strike them. So that awareness of death, war, was completely absent in these people ... We watched as it was a football game, not a reality. (Lb03, Dubrovnik)

Respondents' recollections of the situation prior the attacks reveal two key sources of information: the media, and the testimonies of refugees from places that were already under siege. The responses of librarians from Osijek and Vukovar provide examples of the significant influence of the media on the citizens' behaviour and attitudes. It is evident in the testimony of the librarian of the City and University library of Osijek that citizens were aware of the situation, but didn't want to believe that it was a real war. Moreover, a UNESCO flag identifying the building as a protected cultural monument was displayed on the most visible place of the library (Fig. 3). So, witnesses were surprised by the bombs, which hit the library too.

I must say that we were aware of what was going on, but obviously we did not want to believe it, so when it started to happen... when the first grenades, rifles and so on appeared, we looked at it in disbelief. Only few fellows were directly involved in politics or knew the stakes, so they were more aware of the situation. Most of us normal citizens could not believe that there was shelling and that there really was a real war. (Lb18, Osijek)

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**Fig. 3.** Cultural heritage sign in the window of the City and University library, Osijek. Dubrovnik library archives.

## *2. Libraries under siege*

By the summer of 1991 battles were already underway in some parts of the territory like Slavonia and Lika. Public libraries, however, were not given any instructions for emergency measures in case of attack. Some public libraries decided to implement protection measures on their own in order to safeguard valuable material. Thus, for example, libraries in Slavonski Brod and Šibenik were aware of the possible dangers and were able to evacuate valuable cultural artefacts in time. Unfortunately the City Library at Vinkovci was hit by incendiary projectiles and burned in an attack on the 16th of September 1991. The fire destroyed the entire collection including a valuable manuscript legacy (see Fig. 4). The only thing that remained intact after the fire was discarded books in the basement of the library. The library director was then charged for negligence and fired, even though all of the librarians interviewed agreed that it was unavoidable. Here is the testimony of one librarian, who witnessed the incident:

We discarded outdated and damaged materials, things that were no longer current. Then we ordered boxes and wooden crates from our

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Spacva timber industry, in which we thought, some important material could be stored. But what happened ... at first the crates were used for carrying discarded books down to the basement temporarily. Unfortunately, they remained in the basement, but in the state they were in, and were intended for the boiler. Then we had a terrible attack ... and because of individual politicians and historians... our director had to quit just because it turned out that we preserved Serbian books... but see how it happened so spontaneously. (Lb19, Vinkovci)



**Fig. 4.** Burned books in the City Library at Vinkovci. Dubrovnik library archives.

Like other infrastructure and public institutions across Croatia, libraries were subjected to shelling and other attacks in the course of the war. The Vukovar city library was destroyed and non-functional as early as September, 1991. The research library in Dubrovnik was also destroyed. The Vinkovci city library was burned to the ground and Slavonski Brod city library destroyed, but these continued to work after relocation. Public libraries in

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Karlovac, Sibenik, Dubrovnik and Osijek were significantly damaged, and those in Gospić and Zadar badly damaged. Nevertheless, all libraries involved in the research remained open to the public throughout the siege, providing services and a reflective public space and forum. Moreover, in some cities, libraries were the only cultural institutions that remained open and functional for the residents. In Dubrovnik, Osijek, and Slavonski Brod, for example, other cultural institutions (museums, galleries, archives, theaters, cinemas, etc.) were mainly non-functional, either closed to the public or operating with such restrictions that their public mission was compromised.

As I recall, nothing worked except the library ... and it was the only institution that provided direct services daily. So we have to take into account, that due to the nature of their (other cultural institutions) work, there was no need to be open... schools were closed ... the theater didn't work... who would come to the show? In an art gallery nobody in this situation would lose an hour or two to look at an exhibition... therefore the library was the only place where it was possible to come for a while to use its collections or check out materials. (Lb 03, Dubrovnik)

Whenever circumstances allowed, libraries organized activities and other public services: programs for children in the Sisak children's library; publishing and exhibitions in Sibenik City library; humanitarian aid to refugees in Slavonski Brod and Sisak; co-operation and help other libraries at risk in Zadar and Dubrovnik; etc. Librarians worked under fire to rescue library materials found in the abandoned barracks of the Yugoslav Army in Zadar. In Dubrovnik, librarians helped to evacuate the valuable books of the Franciscan Monastery library immediately after the shelling. In some cities under siege, outreach services were provided by libraries. Library cells for refugees were opened in hotels in Dubrovnik. The bookmobile of the Karlovac city library drove throughout the war, except during emergencies, visiting the area within a radius of 30 kilometers up to the front lines. The librarian from the Karlovac City Library reported that the time spent in bookmobile during the war was the most dramatic of her career.

My time spent in the bookmobile at the end... it was just that time of war ... it included regional schools, far away from the city of Karlovac that do not have their own library, so we had to go on the front line so to speak, ... in Šišljavić. These are our schools on this side of the Kupa River and enemy troops were across the Kupa, so that these schools were actually exposed to constant danger. But we went, not under emergency, but under "normal" conditions so- to-speak, we went regularly to work on the ground. (Lb16, Karlovac)

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**Fig. 5.** The bookmobile at the Karlovac city library. Dubrovnik library archives.

### *3. Dangers to library staff and users*

Most libraries were located in completely unprotected and vulnerable buildings. Libraries in Dubrovnik, Zadar, Gospić, for example did not have any basement and the nearest shelter was situated a few hundred meters away. So when the attacks started, librarians and users had to flee either to the basement of the library or to the nearest shelter. In the following example, a librarian from the Zadar Scientific Library describes the behaviour of her colleagues from the Zadar Public Library.

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[They] did not have a specific place where they could hide, because it's an old building that has no basement. They were quite exposed and when the alarm began they had to go through some 50 meters to get to one shelter, which is within the walls surrounding Zadar, but also a lot of uncertainty until you made it. By the time you did that, you never knew when an attack would start, so that finally some of us were leaving, and some not. The funny thing was that when the attack started, the guys fled first, before the women and so... so, we had to laugh at them. (Lb47, Zadar )

#### *4. Librarians' perspectives: reasons to stay and work in dangerous conditions*

Thousands of residents fled the cities before the beginning of attacks or even during the siege, among them some librarians too. However, the majority of other librarians decided to stay at home and work. Many of them did so for professional reasons, in particular a commitment to work, though some confessed that they were afraid of losing their jobs if they left. Some of them mentioned personal reasons for staying, such as family and home. Other common reasons for librarians deciding to stay and work under siege included feelings of patriotism, defiance and resistance to aggression; a sense of duty towards library patrons; and love for their libraries. For a librarian from the Karlovac City library, work in war time was a contribution to the national defense. Librarians knew that by working in the library, they could provide some kind of help to people who came not only to borrow books but also to seek company and solidarity.

We did not think then much about how we could help, because we knew if the men are on the battlefield, if this is a country at war, we could help people in any way. We could simply help people by talking, we knew that they came to the library, not just to borrow books, but to talk to us, they came just to talk. (Lb14, Karlovac)

Here, a librarian from Zadar emphasizes the feelings of pride and defiance as important reasons to withstand.

Pride was part of it for sure, we held on to our pride every day, no matter what. As it was, it was difficult for us, we survived. ... There was a defiance in us, we did not want to give them satisfaction, we would not give up as long as we could. (Lb50, Zadar)

#### *5. Perspectives of library patrons*

Membership and the use of libraries actually increased in these difficult circumstances. This important finding is based on library documents of the time and on interviews with librarians. Asked about the number of users during the siege of the city, the librarian from Dubrovnik City library

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answered that at first the number of ordinary members declined due to the escape of the population of the city but they were soon replaced by new categories of members: refugees and soldiers.

Yes, literally!... and then came refugees and increasingly locals, so that the number of borrowing of books greatly increased. We have never had such a large amount of borrowing and such a large number of users as during the time when the city was threatened in 1991 and 1992. And even when the siege stopped... and also after that for a long time we maintained a large number of users and a huge turnover.  
(Lb03, Dubrovnik)

The users were of all ages. The registry of members enrolled in the Dubrovnik City Library from September to December 1991 shows a surprisingly large number of the younger members. There were older users as well. An example from the Zadar City Library describes a touching encounter in the library between an old lady and Croatian soldier.

I remember one old woman, she was our customer for a long time, but she had a lot of years, she was about 90 years old. I know when the war started, she was at the library and was very excited ... we just remember all that. Once she pulled out a necklace with a cross and gave it to one of our soldiers who went to the front and said, 'Son, let it look after you'. The day after that, she went to bed and her niece kept coming to borrow books so she could read. (Lb50, Zadar)

The behavior of library users was also investigated. A librarian from Dubrovnik provides one interesting example about library users and librarians in unusual conditions.

The problem were people that went from the bomb shelter directly to the library; [after the end of alarm] many users waited nervously outside the door wondering where we were. We couldn't just go to work from the shelter; we had to wash eyes a little, and change into clean clothes ... but we did go immediately to the library ... and there were the users waiting to return a book and after they went to get some water. (Lb25, Dubrovnik)

In a time of increased tension and fear of attacks, librarians were expected to show a special sensitivity and empathy towards users. In addition to desperate people, such as refugees who had lost everything, there were users whose relatives, neighbours or friends had been killed or injured in the attacks. Patience and sensitivity of librarians towards users is demonstrated in many examples. If users wanted to talk to them, they listened carefully, trying

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to understand their problems. But if they noticed a patron behaving strangely, or apparently not wanting to talk, they respected his or her privacy. A librarian from Dubrovnik City Library remembers a woman who had lost two children when two boats collided in 1992. No-one dared ask her any questions, but they knew that books helped her in some way.

She was always silent; always selected three, four, five books and took them away. She came every third day. In two days she read them all and came back. If you remember when [ship] Aurora collided with another ship and sank [9 May 1992] ... Her two children were killed, and then she got pregnant and came every three days for books. She read all of them, fiction from English and American writers ... I think she must have read the whole library. But she was always silent ... but obviously books helped her. (Lb07, Dubrovnik)

Connections between librarians and users during the war were close and intimate, particularly in relation to refugees, and especially children. One of those touching stories is of a seven year old girl named Sabina, a refugee from Bosnia who used to come to the Caprag branch of the Sisak City Library every morning even before the library was open. She was dressed in Red Cross clothes and oversized boots. The librarian was very fond of Sabina, and became quite emotional when talking about her in the interview. She recalled how the librarians cried for those children.

I remember little Sabina, we were very attached to her; she used to come before the library was open in the morning, (we worked from 8 am), she came already at 7:30. This girl Sabina brought me a green card on which was written with a red marker: father, mother and brother were murdered She told me all about it, in fact she saw all ... her parents and brother. She escaped through a window with brother's wife. With a convoy they ended in Germany. Her uncle who lives in our town, Sisak, found her through Red Cross, so she ended up here. There were other children for whom we cried, we were very attached to them and they to us. (Lb29, Sisak)

Refugees and soldiers represented new categories of users in the libraries. Many of them came to library not just to borrow books but for the company, to talk to someone, and share thoughts. Refugees confided in librarians about their problems, life in exile and longing for home. The librarian from Karlovac City Library recalls how they always talked about going back home, even if their houses were burned or destroyed.

We had interesting older people among these refugees from all over Croatia ... people were sad about the homes they left; many also died in

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Karlovac, before they could get back. They were from [all over] ... we heard about many fates; all kinds of stories that were sadder than ours... Many were from distant places ... they fled without anything, without even a single bundle of their possessions out of their home and lost everything (Lb16, Karlovac)

Librarians from Dubrovnik, Sisak, Gospić, and Zadar, also remember the soldiers who read a lot and used libraries by either coming to the library or by delivery of books to the battlefield. They were of all ages. Many of them had been regular members before the war, and among them there were plenty of educated young men, both local and also soldiers from other parts of the country. A librarian from the Zadar City Library says that even though the books might not be returned, they knew what the books meant to soldiers as well, so they gave them more books.

They [soldiers] also came and we knew [their circumstances] and gave them more books, and they asked us, "Because we will not come back in a month or two" ... then we gave them three, four books, they had privileges. (Lb50, Zadar)

#### *6. Social and psychological function of libraries as community resource*

As suggested by the accounts above, libraries performed important social and even psychological functions in these extraordinary circumstances. For users, the library had an outstanding importance: along with access to materials, it provided solace and therapy, place for reading and socializing. A refugee from the village near Dubrovnik witnesses about the huge importance of libraries for the refugees. Libraries were open, accessible to everyone who wanted to use them especially those who needed books "to ease a soul."

Especially, those fans who lacked support for the soul ... they could find that by reading a book, by choosing just topics that they needed to make the plight of war in Dubrovnik a little easier. There was no problem to borrow books for children, and especially to borrow books for a man who wanted something to read at that time in order to ease those pains, those thoughts, far from home and all together. (Lu07, Dubrovnik)

A patron of the Dubrovnik City Library emphasizes the role of librarians, saying they were friendly and kind to users, helping them looking for titles, and making recommendations,. Admitting that he was demanding, like many others who asked for new books without even knowing the title or the author, he maintained librarians ministered to the deeper needs of the patrons.

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I can tell you, I've made friends there. In the library ... you could find, I would call that as some sort of confessional ... Do you have such and such a book? I'm interested in this or that genre, I do not know who was the author, I do not know what the title was, but about how and what it says... You'd be running around in there like you've come for a crust of bread, that's the truth ... a crust of bread for the soul to give to these people. I've lived it and I can tell you that firsthand... simply, cohesion was never higher in this fantastic city. (Lu06, Dubrovnik)

Users, as well as librarians, confirmed that most of reading was light literature, fiction and classics. No-one could read anything difficult in those circumstances. War topics were mostly avoided, but there were others who wanted to read just such books. Generally, the war increased interest in the classics. One soldier, a member of the Dubrovnik City Library who visited during the breaks in the fighting, said he enjoyed classics.

I mostly read the classics, so let's say fiction, sometimes historical things, very little war stuff. Kosinski struck me, I read it again but I thought this was a little too black. I've read two of his three books, but I wanted to stop, simply because it is so black ... It is a true situation, but again, when you stay in such matters you try to get out of it. So I took some other books, like Clavell ... just to distract myself, to distract my thoughts and reflections, because if you're in such bad conditions 200 percent and then you go through such thinking even more.... I tell you, to me it meant a lot... there we had a lot of free time ... It was a pure getaway. (Lu05, Dubrovnik)

For many users, reading meant an escape from reality. It was something that could facilitate the difficult war situation that soothed and relieved stress. In short, it was a kind of mild therapy. In some tragic situations, when a person is isolated from other people and does not want to communicate with anyone, the book can throw a lifeline. It was such a case with one of the users of the Dubrovnik City Library, whose eight-year-old son had been killed in the yard when a grenade suddenly fell nearby. She and her two children had just returned home to a village near Dubrovnik before the tragedy happened. After this, she avoided contact with people for months, but after a period of isolation she began to read books. She describes how the books helped her to withstand a serious mental crisis after the loss of her son.

I know that then, at the time, I was attracted to the very theme of a psychological profile that would reassure me somehow, to calm my thoughts ... When my son was killed, when we got home ... I was isolated from people, for a number of days, or even months, two months, I avoided contact with people .... Sure, I would then pick from

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the library a theme that appealed to me to ease my soul a little, so that I could feel a little easier, everything that explained a prolongation of human life that is not limited to this earth. I still love this philosophical stuff and everything that is turned toward human beings. Somehow that stayed with me, and when I was a girl, I loved science fiction, and I liked to read all that, reading attracts me. I needed that to be easier for me to handle his death. (Lu07, Dubrovnik)

The important role of libraries played in their communities during the siege conditions of the Homeland war in Croatia is compared to performing of music and art in war conditions. A patron of the Dubrovnik City Library describes the value of libraries in terms of social capital:

The library was then a temple. It was a hope. The existence of libraries at that time was also an expression of defiance, keeping it open was a spiritual defiance. You can try to destroy us but we still read and we still live in a cultural environment, we live and that is that. I would compare the library being open to events such as holding concerts while they may bomb you ... and so on ... the need for culture in the maintenance of a cultural identity in some sense ... held through literature and music. (Lu10, Dubrovnik)

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this research is to explore the life and work of libraries, librarians and users in cities that were under siege during the Homeland war in Croatia (1991-1995). First, some of the main findings from oral history interviews are summarized followed by general conclusions about value of libraries as social capital.

Neither librarians nor users expected the fury of war that unfolded and libraries were not well prepared to preserve valuable and unique parts of collections. Nonetheless, libraries continued to provide user services throughout the siege. Most librarians stayed in their communities and worked in libraries for a variety of reasons: job security, professional obligation, feelings of duty, pride, and sense of patriotic resistance. The number of users increased during the siege, as did the borrowing of books. Most of the books borrowed were light fiction, thrillers and action books, although a number of users returned to the classics. There were examples of soldiers who carried library books into battle, mothers who read compulsively after the loss of their children, and librarians' courteous and professional behavior under hazardous conditions.

*Marica Šapro-Ficović, "Libraries under siege in Croatia, 1991-1995."*  
*Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 34 (2014), Special Issue on Human Rights  
and Oral History

Social capital is generally defined as the value of social networks that connect people and create bridges between people, with the rules of reciprocity. The social value of libraries was reflected in the Homeland War. Libraries, librarians and users were connected in a social network in which they found not only social but also personal values. The results illustrate how libraries continued to operate on a number of fronts throughout the war and that they were often the only cultural institutions that were fully functioning in their communities at the time. The testimony of librarians and library patrons demonstrate how, by continuing to provide services under dire circumstances, libraries proved their value to their community. These oral histories reveal a hidden story of courage, decency, and civility in the face of brutality.