Libraries on Fire

People tend to think of libraries as places of safety, peace and openness. Because of this, the effect of burning libraries is deeply emotional. Books are a code for a society's culture and history. They tell us who we are and what we know. Destroying books is the same as destroying a culture, ripping away a culture's shared memory. And still, for as long as people have been building libraries, they have been burning them.

One of the most famous libraries to be burned down was the Library of Alexandria. Everything about this ancient library was **enigmatic**. There is no record of where the building was situated or what it looked like. There are many stories describing its destruction, but no one is sure which of the stories are true. It is commonly believed that the library burned several times. The first time was probably an accident. Julius Caesar attacked Alexandria in 48 BC and the fire he started in the port spread and eventually engulfed the library.

The library was rebuilt and restocked. It burned several more times, the last and most famous of which happened in 640 AD. By this point the library was enormous, rumored to have contained half a million documents. People had begun to believe the library was a living thing. When Caliph Omar invaded Egypt he told his generals to burn down the building, as the books housed in it must either contradict the Quran, in which case they needed to be destroyed, or they supported it, in which case they were unnecessary. The library burned for six months until there was nothing left to burn.

As illustrated by the above example, books are most commonly burned to destroy ideas. In the middle ages the Spanish Inquisition started the tradition of book-burning festivals, where communities would gather around bonfires of burning heretical books. Spain continued burning books abroad. After Spain colonized the Aztec and Mayan people, Spanish priests ordered all their books and images burned, believing they contained dark magic. Very few artifacts survived — they are the only clues to the mysteries of Mayan and Aztec culture.

War is the biggest destroyer of books. And even though it often happens by accident, sometimes they are intentionally targeted. World War II destroyed more books and libraries than any other event in human history. During the twelve years the Nazis were in power they burned over one hundred million books. When Hitler became chancellor, he made a list of banned books, authors and publications. On May 10, 1933, thousands of books from this list were collected in a square in Berlin for an event called "Fire Incantations". The books were burned by German students who, forming a human chain, passed the books from hand to hand and threw them into the bonfires. As each new book was added to the fire a student would state for which crime the book was being "sentenced to death". Such festivals happened in over thirty other German cities. Each event was a true celebration with dancing, singing and live music.

Throughout history more libraries were lost around the world than you could fit into a book. So many libraries have been destroyed, in fact, that the term *Libricide* has been coined. In 1949 and 1996 UNESCO released studies counting the number of books destroyed throughout history. The number is enormous — in the billions. In the past, when fewer books existed and making copies was very expensive, the loss of a library was a devastating one. Today, when printing books is a lot cheaper, a loss of a library is still tragic.

According to the article, the biggest number of books were destroyed...

1. ...in Alexandria.
2. ...in medieval Spain.
3. ...in Mexico.
4. ...in 20^{th} century Europe.