

“Inspired by the Past, We Shape the Future”

By: Maureen Duffy

Matter Commented On: Conference on “[Interdisciplinary Approaches to Security in the Changing World](#),” and attacks by extremists on educational institutions, “[Inspired by the Past, We Shape the Future](#)”

Recent terrorist and/or militant incidents have focused on universities and schools, assumed, by some, to be a desirable target for extremists because of their [symbolic value](#). Another motivation for such attacks may be that education itself is viewed as an antidote to the spread of extremism, and suppressing education may be seen as a means of gaining control over the population -- a theory expressed by [Malala Yousafzai](#), from Pakistan, who, at the age of 15, was shot in the face on a school bus for advocating for education for girls. She has famously called on the United Nations to send "books and pens, rather than tanks," to parts of the world struggling with extremist violence. Military intervention and legal enactments may have some impact on extremism, but they can also often escalate the problem, rather than diminishing it, and they can give rise to new human-rights abuses. Education appears to be a much more promising tool in many cases, and that is likely why it is under attack.

A statement by the [Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack](#) explains the societal costs of recent attacks on higher education around the world:

Attacks on higher education affect all levels of education. Students and professors who are silenced, forced to flee, or killed leave behind a weakened education system, reducing the quality of education overall. Primary and secondary schools depend on teachers trained in higher education institutions, and on research that informs pedagogy and teaching methods. Students aspiring to the next stage in their education find their opportunities abruptly curtailed. These attacks crack the basic foundation of a functioning society; a society's loss of academic capital causes disruptions that can take generations to heal.

[They note that](#), in Iraq, 460 professors, scientists, and administrators have been murdered since 2003. Others have been kidnapped, or their families threatened. Continuing to run institutions of higher education has proven difficult and dangerous as violence in the region continues.

Other examples of the onslaught on education are disturbingly easy to find. Boko Haram has been responsible for major attacks on schools in northeast Nigeria, including the high-profile kidnapping of Nigerian schoolgirls in [Chibok](#) and, some believe, an attack on the [College of Agriculture](#). In Kenya, Somali militants killed 147 students and wounded many others at [Garissa University](#).

In India, an [attack on professors](#) has recently been blamed on people associated with the local government in Kolkata. In Mexico, 43 students at the [Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Teachers' College of Ayotzinapa](#) disappeared and are presumed dead. The Dean of Islamic studies at

Pakistan's [University of Karachi](#) was killed, apparently because of a speech he gave, which caused him to be accused of blasphemy. The list of examples could easily continue.

According to an article in the [New York Times](#), academics and students are being forced to seek refugee status at alarming rates. The Syrian Civil War and the rise of ISIS have greatly accelerated this problem in that region, which is where much of the international focus on anti-terrorism is currently directed. A report by the [Scholars at Risk Network](#) characterized attacks on higher education around the world as a crisis.

In response to reports of the burning of thousands of books in law, philosophy, science, and poetry by militants in Mosul, Iraq, a [UNESCO representative](#) said:

This destruction marks a new phase in the cultural cleansing perpetrated in regions controlled by armed extremists in Iraq ... It adds to the systematic destruction of heritage and the persecution of minorities that seeks to wipe out the cultural diversity that is the soul of the Iraqi people ... Burning books is an attack on the culture, knowledge and memory, as we witnessed in Timbuktu recently, with the burning of the manuscripts at the Ahmed Baba Centre. Such violence is evidence of a fanatical project, targeting both human lives and intellectual creation.

Many of these issues were discussed at a security conference I attended in June 2015, in Krakow, Poland, at [Jagiellonian University](#). The conference brought together people from around the world, with the ultimate hope of enhancing understanding of these current, difficult issues on a more international level. I discussed legal enactments that Canada has undertaken to attempt to thwart threats from extremist groups, most notably ISIS. Examples, which I discussed at the conference, include [Bill C-51](#) (now the *Anti-terrorism Act, 2015*), [security certificates](#) and [citizenship stripping](#), and I talked about problems with these initiatives, both in terms of a lack of effectiveness and in terms of the cost incurred for individual human rights.

It is easy to find fault with governmental responses to terrorism/extremism. What is less easy, though, is to find solutions. While no one thing will solve the growing threat of extremism, one thing that could make a significant difference is education, and the history of Jagiellonian University vividly illustrates that point.

“Inspired By the Past”

It was fascinating to be discussing such forward-looking issues in a place so steeped in history. Jagiellonian University just celebrated its 650th anniversary, with the slogan “[inspired by the past, we shape the future](#).” Aside from the ideas that came forward regarding security, the setting of this conference also served as a reminder of the very important role that universities have traditionally played, and continue to play, in overcoming extremism.

A blog post could not possibly include a comprehensive history of this remarkable university, but some of the highlights are impressive. It is the oldest university in Poland and one of the oldest in the world. [Jagiellonian University](#) was founded in 1364 by King Casimir III the Great. The [Collegium Maius](#), the site where much of the conference was held, was established in the early 15th Century, after [Queen \(Saint\) Jadwiga](#) left a portion of her estate to the University.

I have posted a couple of pictures I took of the *Collegium Maius*.



Collegium Maius



The courtyard inside of Collegium Maius

Jagiellonian University has seen significant changes in its fortunes over the years. It [flourished during the Renaissance](#) and counts [Nicolaus Copernicus](#) among its esteemed graduates from that era. It then [struggled to continue](#) during the partitions of Poland, as the occupation forces threatened to close it down entirely, but it survived that period and flourished again.

In [November 1939](#), the Nazis, who had invaded Poland two months earlier, arrested 184 professors from Jagiellonian University and other Krakow universities and sent them to a concentration camp. Called [Sonderaktion Krakau](#), the incident began after the Gestapo called the unsuspecting professors to a meeting at [Collegium Novum](#) at Jagiellonian University, as a way of gathering people in one place, and then [arrested and deported them](#). Some of the professors died in the camps, and the university was officially closed for the duration of the Occupation.

[Public pressure](#) from various places, including Nazi allies, led to some of the professors ultimately being released, basically those who were not Jewish and were over the age of 40. Some of those who were released participated in a [secret re-opening](#) of Jagiellonian University in 1942. This secret education continued through the Occupation, and approximately 800 students studied there during that time, including Karol Wojtyla, who later became Pope John Paul II.

The story of Jagiellonian University staying open in secret and at great risk was made especially poignant when I visited the [Krakow Ghetto](#) – famously portrayed in [Schindler's List](#) – and the nearby [Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camps](#), where conservative estimates suggest that two million people were murdered, often after being kept in barbaric conditions. It was against that backdrop, and after spending time in concentration camps themselves, that many of those professors risked their lives to continue the University's educational mission. That resistance to an extremist attack on education took amazing courage and was truly heroic.

[The University reopened](#) after World War II, but the Communist Government was initially hostile to it, and much of the faculty research activity was suppressed. There were numerous student protests during the following years against the Government, again a courageous action on the part of the students in defense of higher education.

[Jagiellonian University](#) again survived that period of repression and is now home to approximately 50,000 students, describing its “timelessness and unwavering symbolism” as defining features. The University now sprawls across a significant portion of the city.

“We Shape the Future”

Although the notion of the “Ivory Tower” is often used in a pejorative way, the importance of universities as places where human knowledge is stored, created, advanced and disseminated cannot be overstated. Some threats to universities can be overt, such as the Nazi closing of Jagiellonian University, or recent, violent attacks on scholars around the world. Others may be more insidious, such as incursions on [academic freedom](#), which can take [many forms](#). The [Scholars at Risk Network](#), in a report called “Free to Think,” identified a range of threats, not just including violent extremism, but incidents like firing of professors for views expressed or denying entry or exit visas to professors who have stated unpopular views.

One message that I took from this security conference was that, as the world faces an increasingly grim fight against extremists, the first, and potentially most effective, line of attack must be found in recognizing the critical importance of education in any free society. Education at all levels has value in its own right, aside from any practical impact it may have outside of the so-called “Ivory Tower.”

As extremists try to advance by [attacking education](#), the world must attack extremism by advancing and protecting education. Extremists know this already, which is why so many educational institutions are under attack. Education is a critical tool if any inroads are to be made against current extremist threats around the world.

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