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AHA Statement on the Framework Decision of the Council of the European Union on the Fight against Racism and Xenophobia

Editor's Note: The following is the text of the statement issued by the Council of the American Historical Association in response to the concern expressed by several historians in Europe about the adverse consequences for academic freedom stemming from a decision of the European Union's Council.

The Council of the American Historical Association believes that it can never be in the public interest to forbid study of or publication about any historical topic, or to forbid the publication of particular historical theses. Any limitation on freedom of research or expression, however well intentioned, violates a fundamental principle of scholarship: that the researcher must be able to investigate any aspect of the past and to report without fear what the evidence reveals. All historical publications are subject to the judgment and criticism of the scholarly community to which the researcher belongs. If any other body, especially a body with the right to initiate legal proceedings and impose penalties, seeks to influence the course of historical research, the result will inevitably be intimidation of scholars and distortion of their findings. Some historians, inevitably, will wield historical evidence in ways that anger certain groups in their societies. In some cases, regrettably, they will use their skills to expunge terrible events from the historical record, or to make them appear less terrible than they were. But the appropriate way for such errors to be penalized is for other scholars to expose them. The consequences for a historian who is widely judged as distorting historical evidence should take the form of denial of positions in universities, based on the critical opinions of scholars in the field, or, in extreme cases, the denial of access to publication venues, again based on evaluations from informed colleagues: not criminal penalties. Freedom of inquiry enables some writers to put forward untenable or otherwise questionable arguments, but it also enables others to rebut them, and it is in that realm of free public debate that historians can and must work. As the authors of the French petition *Liberté pour l'Histoire* [Freedom for History] rightly argued in 2005, "In a free State, it is not within the power of either Parliament or the judiciary to define historical truth."

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