Censorship

A World Encyclopedia

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[Archives]

Destroying records and restricting access are regular features of any official information policy. Selective destruction of current records is inevitable since preservation of everything is physically impossible. In addition, the release of noncurrent records - those transferred to archival custody - is subject to varying terms of embargo (generally 25 to 50 years). Access to certain classes of documents deemed sensitive - chiefly for reasons of privacy or state security - may be restricted for longer. When, however, political rather than archival or historical criteria prevail and lead to wholesale destruction, neglect, or excessive secrecy of records, censorship creeps in.

Two examples, concerning the United States and the Soviet Union after 1945, illustrate some of the main risks. In the United States, a system of restrictive executive orders, issued by presidents Roosevelt (1940), Truman (1950, 1951), and Eisenhower (1953), regulated access to the archives. According to Steven Mitchel, "Heavy overclassification and neglect of declassification in the 1950s and 1960s could not be considered abuses of the security classification system, because the regulations, by their vagueness, were so permissive." Only a 1959 executive order by Eisenhower provided for non-official historical research into classified materials. Executive orders issued by Nixon (1972) and Carter (1978) brought substantial relaxation.

The 1980s and early 1990s were a critical period. In 1982, an executive order on national security information issued by president Reagan reversed almost completely the government's overall attitude towards access to its records. The order advised that, when there was doubt about whether or not to classify, documents should be classified, and for "as long as required". Two new provisions permitted reclassification of previously released information, and classification of unclassified documents after they

had been requested under the 1966 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). The order eliminated a 1978 requirement to balance the government's interest in secrecy against the public's interest in disclosure.

As early as 1985, a commirtee of historians and archivists chaired by Ernest May of Harvard University called upon the president to issue an order safeguarding government records, especially drafts of policy statements or memoranda that were often erased from computer disks. In 1995, president Clinton signed an executive order requiring that all top secret, secret, and confidential documents 25 years old or more be automatically declassified, thus reversing the system of intense classification.

In the Soviet Union, a permanent post-World War II complaint concerned the severely restricted and unequal access to the archives, with huge quantities of classified records. The Chief Archival Administration (*Glavarkhiv*) was under the control of the KGB (*Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti* Committee of State Security) and its predecessors from 1938 to 1960. Most Western historical works were either banned or available only in special sections *(spetskkran)* of libraries. After a period of liberalization from 1953 to 1964 (the Khrushchev era), control was again tightened. From 1986 to 1987, however, the continuing calls for *glasnost* (openness) eased or lifted restrictions from many formerly proscribed subjects. Access to archives improved during the last years of the Soviet Union and the first of the successor state, Russia, especially in 1986-93, but the KGB Archives and the Presidential Archive (*APRF*, containing, *inter alia*, documents of the Communist Party *Politburo* and General Secretaries) Ig particular retained a privileged status.

Settled Regimes

Embarrassing documentary evidence

Censorship of archives is frequently part of a larger strategy by a regime to enhance the legitimacy of its authority by embellishing its own historical record and disguising those of others. Potentially embarrassing documentary evidence is particularly vulnerable: such evidence covers past crimes; security operations; portrayal of segments of society supposedly inferior or dissident; and foreign relations.

Past crimes include the treatment of colonized peoples. In 1895 and in 1906-07, when the possible transfer to Belgium of sovereignty over Congo was discussed, the Belgian king Leopold II gave instructions for the destruction or transfer to the royal palace of the archives of his Congo Free State (1885-1908). *"Je leur donnerai mon Congo, mais ils n'ont pas le droit de savoir ce que j'y ai fait"* ("I shall give them my Congo, but they have no right to know what I have done there"), he said. In 1985, Jan Vansina wrote that violence was the rule in Leopold's Congo and that between 1880 and 1920 probably half of its population died. The massive destructions of 1906-07 led to a parliamentary question and in 19x0 (after Leopold's death) to protests by the Association of Belgian Archivists and Librarians.

Another category of crimes is those against minorities. In line with Turkey's denial of the 1915 Armenian genocide perpetrated by its Ottoman predecessor, post-1914 Ottoman archives were inaccessible for decades. When, in 1989, parts of them were opened, some historians feared that documents detrimental to the official view had been removed.

A third category is crimes against political adversaries. In the Uganda of Idi Amin, many sectors of the government, including the military police and military intelligence, blocked access of information to a national Commission of Inquiry in 1974. In mid-1987, Soviet historians Sergei Grigoriants and Dmitrii Iurasov reported in the underground publication *Glasnost* that the documentary evidence of the arrests, expulsions, and trials under Joseph Stalin was being systematically destroyed, claiming that only a few hundred thousand files remained in the combined special archive of the Military Collegium and the Supreme Court of the Soviet Union. The rest - millions of investigation files and records of conviction - had been burned in the archives of regional and territorial courts, the Procuracy, the Ministry of Justice, and the KGB in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1985-87, parts of the special archive, referring to the years 1940 and 1948-49, were also destroyed on the pretext that there was insufficient space.

The control of secret police archives is a further contentious area, illustrated by aspects of the recent history of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Around 1975, the FBI began destroying many of its documents, but a January 1980 court order, supported by various historical associations, stopped the destruction and instructed the FBI to provide the court with plans and schedules for file retention. An FBI appeal was rejected in the autumn of 1983. In November 1989 the FBI was involved in another conflict when it agreed to purge its files of thousands of names of persons and organizations collected during its surveillance activities. This was as a result of a lawsuit in which the FBI admitted its programme of surveillance and harassment of opponents of the government's Central America policy. In the Netherlands, a public debate about the intended destruction of files on persons and organizations in the archives of the *Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst* (BVD; Internal Security Service) took place during the 1990s. In May 1998, a parliamentary working group report stated that the BVD had illegally destroyed more than 500 file groups between 1959 and 1990. Similar reports were heard about the External and Military Intelligence Services. Dutch historians warned that the BVD affair was only the most visible aspect of a problem with wider ramifications; the historical interest (as distinguished from the administrative and civil interest) had not been fully considered in the archival selection process; the archival law allowed inadmissable levels of destruction of documents, especially concerning policy preparation and implementation. In Iraq, 18 tons of official state documents, especially from the secret police, were captured by Kurdish parties in the March 1991 uprising (after the Gulf War) and in 1992-93 shipped to the United States for safekeeping and analysis. They contained evidence of gross human rights violations, including the use of chemical weapons against the Kurds in the 1987-89 period, particularly during the 1988 Anfal campaign.

Massive imbalance in documentation in favour of official versions of events is commonplace. Not only does an atmosphere of political censorship discourage documentation of opposition - even of mere criticism - of the government, but official archival intervention may also seriously hamper the portrayal of entire segments of society. A systematic destruction of Slavic manuscripts probably occurred during the Byzantine rule of Bulgaria (1018-1185); it was partly continued under Ottoman rule (1393-1878). In the 15th century, the Aztecs of Mexico destroyed older documents not corresponding to their view of the past - continuation of the revered Toltec civilization. A century later, the Spanish *conquistadores* burned the pagan Aztec archives. In Africa, the eurocentric perception of colonizers helped foster the myth that Africa had no history. In the mid-i^th century, Portuguese colonists set fire to the archive of the kings of Kongo, built up since the 16th century. In what was to become Zimbabwe, much material relating to

African history and to the activities of Africans was removed from the files open to the public at the National Archives after the emergence in 1962 of the Rhodesia Front government, an act glossed over by re-cataloguing. In Saudi Arabia, the destruction of private manuscripts recording Bedouin oral culture has occurred throughout the country. Elsewhere in the Middle East, Israel was condemned by the United Nations General Assembly in 1984 for removing, during its 1982 occupation of Beirut, archives and documents concerning Palestinian history and culture. The Romanian communist government "rationalized" the archives and libraries in Transylvania, homeland of an important Hungarian minority; between 1948 and 1989, all manuscript collections deemed to be of historic value were placed under the jurisdiction of the Interior Ministry General Directorate of State Archives, operating under Securitate (security police) control. Most of these collections, especially private and ecclesiastical archives, suffered disorganization and losses, and became inaccessible. For that reason, valuable manuscripts were frequently hidden from the authorities.

Civil unrest

Civil unrest has been a major cause of archival cleansing. In April 1922 irregular forces opposed to Irish independence from Britain occupied the Public Record Office of Ireland building and used it for the manufacture of munitions. The archives were damaged when, in June 1922, the Provisional Government attacked the building with artillery, and were almost entirely destroyed two days later when heavy mines exploded inside the premises. No attempt was made to extinguish the fire.

The Spanish Civil War (1936-39) resulted in the total or partial destruction of more than 1700 repositories. Access to archives and libraries was very difficult under the regime of general Franco (1939-75), due to slow cataloguing and tight control of source material. Official permission was required to consult sensitive materials, such as those relating to the civil war. In Sukhumi, an estimated 90 per cent of the Abkhaz National Archives were burned in October 1992, during the war between Abkhazians and Georgians. Georgian-controlled militia reportedly impeded volunteers trying to put out the fire. During the war in former Yugoslavia, the majority of archives were damaged. All but one per cent of records of the Ottoman period at the Oriental Institute in Sarajevo - sultans' edicts, governors' reports, and land records going back to the 16th century - were lost in a fire. The library of the Slavonian Orthodox eparchy at Pakrac, which contained many old manuscripts and documents as well as some 5500 books, was destroyed. The National Archives of Kosovo were closed and dossiers documenting Kosovo's zoth-century history, dealing with land reform in the period 1918-41 as well as with criminal and court martial cases, were removed and sent to an unknown destination. During the armed rebellion in Guinea-Bissau in the summer of 1998, the National Archives building was transformed into a military camp. The archives themselves were scattered and damaged. Audio cassettes recording the history of the national liberation struggle and of the different regions disappeared, seriously hampering the writing of a first general history of Guinea-Bissau. Even after the ceasefire, staff were forbidden to save the archives from further destruction.

Other examples include archival losses during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, the Cultural Revolution in China (1966-69), and the conflicts in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Liberia, Burundi, and Rwanda.

Foreign policy

In the area of foreign relations, international war is by far the single most important cause of archive destruction and dispersion. The War of the Triple Alliance (1865-70) virtually destroyed all Paraguayan archives. In World War II major losses were reported in France, Poland, the Soviet Union, Germany, and Italy. When the German armed forces fled before the advancing Red Army in Central Europe in 1944-45, they destroyed a large number of stored documents stolen by the Nazi security service from western European countries. The remaining documents were discovered by the Red Army in 1945-46 and transferred to Moscow. After the downfall of communism, some were returned to the countries of origin. At the end of the Pacific War (1931-45) and shortly thereafter, the Japanese government and military authorities destroyed many materials and documents relating to their wartime crimes. In 1982, during the Falklands/Malvinas War, files concerning Britain's claim to the islands disappeared from the Public Records Office in London, where they had previously been available for public inspection.

In peacetime, foreign policy records, particularly of the great powers, have been subject to irresponsible handling. In 1953, the US State Department Historical Office was accused of hiding evidence that would contradict an official White Paper, *United States Relations with China: With Special Reference to the Period 1944-49.* This itself was a response to criticism of the Far East policies of the Truman administration, especially its refusal to support the Chinese nationalists in 1948-49, containing a history of US policy in China since 1844. The office was also accused of postponing publication of the papers of the wartime summit conferences in order to protect the Democratic administrations. In response, it began to prepare special China volumes of the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series (*FRUS*), the official history of United States foreign policy (published since 1861). In December 1956, the first volume, covering the events of 1942, was issued, but the Chinese Nationalists in Taiwan resented the revival of criticism of Chiang Kai-shek's regime, and the publication of the remaining 14 China volumes was postponed indefinitely, to be resumed only in 1963 with the *FRUS* volume covering the events of 1943, still bearing its 1957 imprint.

As recently as April 1990, the Organization of American Historians (OAH) adopted a resolution condemning excessive secrecy and gaps in *FRUS*. The OAH claimed that recent *FRUS* volumes showed "significant increases in deletions and omissions". In 1967, the historian Julius Epstein sued the secretary of the army for refusing to release the top-secret *Operation Keelhaul* file of 1946-47. Anglo-American documents concerning the forced repatriation of anticommunist Russian prisoners of war after World War II. It was the first case in which the FOIA exemption for foreign policy faced judicial review. The courts refused to review the documents to judge the reasonableness of the claimed exemption and ruled that on the basis of the description of the documents alone classification was not "arbitrary".

Later criticism of FOIA requests included long delays, large deletions, and lack of generosity concerning fee waivers for research "in the public interest". In 1984, Congress exempted Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operational files from the FOIA; this law is considered a serious obstacle to historical research. In 1997, George Herring, a historian at the University of Kentucky and a former member of the official CIA Historical Review Panel (1990-96), accused the CIA of not releasing records on its covert operations (including the 1953 Iranian coup, the 1954 Guatemalan coup, and the 1961 invasion of Cuba), despite the policy of openness promised in 1984. CIA officials replied that various files

concerning the operations in the 1950s had been destroyed in the early 1960s, including, among others, nearly 100 percent of the files concerning the Iranian coup. At the same time, they released 1400 pages of documents about the Guatemalan coup (less than one percent of the CIA files on the incident). When, in August 1996, the CIA removed Herring (and two other historians) from the panel, he suggested that their criticism of the low levels of declassification of CIA materials had played a role in their removal.

Suppression of archives

Destruction or suppression of archives is the cruder form that settled regimes adopt in their legitimation strategies. Less visible techniques are also common. Unequal access to archives is one such technique: either favoured researchers receive privileged or monopolistic access to certain archives, or all researchers are granted access to them, except for some discriminated groups such as dissidents, minorities, or foreign researchers. In addition, inventories may themselves be censored and sensitive documents temporarily removed or reclassified. Records sealed in one country may be freely accessible elsewhere. Consultation may be subject to certain conditions such as expensive permits or prepublication approval. Bureaucratic red tape may hamper the progress of research. Privacy concerns (balanced against the public's right to know) may be abused in order to cut off certain sources from scrutiny. Police searches may lead to the confiscation or destruction of the archives of banned individuals and institutions. In developing the strategies described here, settled regimes easily cross the boundaries of censorship. The question underlying many such examples - why do regimes so often preserve records that have the potential to undermine them? deserves a separate study.

Censorship and harassment of archivists themselves deserve special attention. Among the known cases are Veit Valentin, Sergius Yakobson, and Ernst Posner (Nazi Germany), Erzsebet Muckenhaupt, Pal Janos, and Karoly Borbath (Transylvania, Romania), V.V. Tsaplin (USSR), and Annica van Gylswyk (South Africa).

New Regimes

A threatened regime may during its last hours eliminate embarrassing documents or hide those that might be used in the future to blackmail the new regime. Both strategies are reflected in the opposing options available to the new regime: to destroy damaging information (about its own past or about the takeover itself) or to open the archives on the *ancien régime* in an effort to discredit it. Those leading to destruction, the final form of censorship, are of concern here.

In 1945, at the end of Brazilian president Getulio Vargas's authoritarian Estado Novo (1937-45), a fire destroyed the archives of the political police. When in 1962 Algeria became independent, the French government exported all the official documents they could to France. In 1979-80, the Rhodesian government destroyed documents produced by its Central Intelligence Organisation, the Police Special Branch, the Special Courts, and the Selous Scouts army unit. When the Vietnamese were entering the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh in January 1979, part of the Tuol Sleng prison archives were destroyed by the Khmer Rouge security service Santebal. The Honduran armed forces burned all their files on the

disappearances of 184 civil leaders in the 1980s. In Chile, the whereabouts of the documents of the primary repressive institutions of the military dictatorship (1973-90), DINA and CNI, are unknown.

In the German Democratic Republic, some parts of the *Stasi* (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit; State Security) archives, especially the names of collaborators, files on high-ranking party and state officials, files on *Stasi* support of terrorist groups, and files on foreign espionage, were shredded immediately after Erich Honecker's downfall in October 1989, although some may have been saved by secret microfilming. A few months later, in December 1989 and January 1990, when members of the civil movements occupied the *Stasi* archives, many files were lost. In November 1989, immediately after the Velvet Revolution, the Czechoslovak state security police burned a large quantity of its archives. In Bulgaria too, some of the state security files were believed to be destroyed. Moreover, in May 1991, the Bulgarian Socialist Party refused to hand over documents covering the 1944-48 purges from its archives. In Poland, destruction of military archive documents dealing with the period of martial law (1981-83) has been virtually total since 1989. At the end of 1990, large quantities of operational files and files on informants and agents in the Soviet KGB archives were ordered to be destroyed. This was partially prevented, however, and after the August 1991 coup attempt, some KGB archives were sealed. In South Africa, tens of thousands of classified documents have possibly been systematically destroyed since the legalizing of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1990.

The picture emerging from the last-minute interventions of disappearing regimes is straightforward. Much less so is the diversity of motives that push new regimes to archival malpractice, as the following examples will demonstrate. In Nasserist Egypt, pre-revolutionary archives were sometimes neglected for nationalistic reasons in the 1950s and early 1960s. Some archive custodians regarded pre-1952. history as a long period of foreign domination, the sources of which should be allowed to perish. The archives were reportedly purged of controversial or embarrassing records. The state's archives section housing documents in Turkish was closed down completely following the death of its last surviving official. Documents pertaining to the history of revolutions and national movements were kept under lock and key in the presidential palace archives. In Pakistan, the archives of the All-India Muslim League and its heirs were either destroyed or removed under field marshal Muhammad Ayub Khan's rule (1958-69). In the Dominican Republic, many valuable documents covering the Trujillo era (1930-61) were destroyed, stolen, or sold. After the assassination of Trujillo in 1961, records were burned either to "cleanse the country of all traces of the hated tyrant" or, in the case of the voluminous secret police files, to prevent any future blackmail or leaking of information concerning the *trujillista* repression that had taken place. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the archives of the Iranian Radio and Television were destroyed, with the exception of certain revolutionary marches. In communist Romania, prewar historical texts were either destroyed or carefully controlled and placed in reserved archives. As this official control was seen as an embodiment of Ceauşescu's rule, the University of Bucharest central library, where many of these archives happened to be preserved, was set on fire during the December 1989 revolt. Over half a million volumes were lost, including extremely valuable manuscripts and archives.

Declassification of the archives of former communist institutions - particularly the secret police, but also, for example, censorship offices - was a major claim in all countries in eastern and central Europe, from Albania to the Soviet Union, after 1989. The degree of completeness, the reliability, and the destiny

of secret police files were the subject of lively debate, with every option - complete access, restricted and conditional access, complete sealing, or destruction - having its advocates. In many cases access, though increased, remained selective and was used mainly as a tool for informing and rehabilitating former victims of the surveillance, for screening and disqualifying former collaborators occupying or seeking public office, and for carrying out historical research. The release of documents was also used, however, to discredit or criminalize individuals, although courts did not always welcome the illegally seized evidence of former security services. In Poland, interior minister Antoni Macierewicz, a historian and former dissident, sent a list with 64 names of politicians and officials suspected of having been former security police agents during the period 1945-90 to the Sejm in June 1992. The list was drawn up on the basis of secret police files. In the controversy that followed (called *noc teczec,* the night of the long files), he was expelled from his political party, and a Sejm committee that investigated the list accused him of actions that could have led to the destabilization of the state. As a result, the government was dismissed.

In international diplomacy, the return of key archives (after a war, a decolonization, a regime change) was carefully planned and perceived as a special gesture of goodwill. In other geographical areas archival discoveries shed light on toppled dictatorships, such as the *Archwo del Terror* (Archive of Terror) in Paraguay. In countries such as Grenada and Haiti, the United States removed archives during their intervention there only to return them later with sensitive information deleted. In 1997, the Guatemalan Historical Clarification Commission called upon the United States government to declassify records concerning human rights abuses committed during the armed conflict in Guatemala (1960-96). Earlier, in 1993, the United States had withheld a significant amount of information from El Salvador's truth commission. In El Salvador itself, the commission denounced the destruction or concealment of documents. In most of Latin America, new democratic governments did not have access to secret police files. In Greece, documents of repressive bodies were used as evidence for administrative purposes immediately after the dictatorial years (1967-74). Some 3000 files amassed by the military police were destroyed in 1975. On 29 August 1989, the 40th anniversary of the civil war's official end was celebrated by burning all the police files from the post-war period. Greek historians denounced this as an act of historical vandalism.

Unauthorized Disclosure

Government secrecy, when perceived as excessive, may be challenged by insiders who then organize leaks of confidential information. In mid-June 1971, *The New York Times* began publishing a series of articles based on the so-called "Pentagon Papers", commissioned by secretary of defense Robert McNamara in June 1967 as a top-secret history of United States involvement in Indo-China from 1945 to May 1968, to be used in further policy decisions. Among the revelations were the American involvement in the 1963 ousting of prime minister Ngo Dinh Diem and the drafts of the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution. The documents were given to newspaper reporter Neil Sheehan by Daniel Ellsberg, a Defense Department expert who had participated in the Vietnam History Task Force that carried out the study. Two days after the series began, the Justice Department obtained a temporary restraining order against further publication from a district court. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post,* which had also started the series, appealed, and at the end of June the United States Supreme Court decided that prior

restraint on publication violated the First Amendment. The *Pentagon Papers,* discussed in a separate entry, are considered an indispensable source for research into subjects ranging from the political history of Southeast Asia to the internal workings of the executive branch. Along with a number of other foreign policy leaks at that time, the affair inspired president Nixon's executive order of 1972, a liberalizing directive concerning security classification (see above).

In Britain in July 1984, Clive Ponting, a civil servant at the Ministry of Defence, sent to a Labour member of parliament two documents that gave a version of the sinking of the Argentinian cruiser *General Belgrano* in May 1982, in the Falklands/Malvinas war, that was different from the one given by the defence secretary. In August 1984 Ponting was charged with unauthorized disclosure under the 1911 Official Secrets Act. In early 1985 he was tried and acquitted. In many countries the subjection of (former) government officials, who have access to classified information, to a duty of confidentiality constitutes a thorny problem. In 1983 alone, US government censors reviewed 28,364 books, articles, speeches, and other writings by government employees for clearance.

What is true of current secret records is even more so of those transferred to archives. There, too, inaccessibility was occasionally circumvented by illegal access and smuggling. In August 1981 Arsenii Roginskii, a historian, was arrested in Leningrad and accused of forgery and the production and sale of forged documents. The documents were letters that he needed to obtain permission to use the Leningrad archives for research into his father's imprisonment and execution in a labour camp. His previous efforts to research his father's history had led the KGB to block his acceptance as a history student at Leningrad University. Subsequently, as a Jew and son of a political prisoner, he was barred from work in any Soviet research institution. From 1977 onwards, his apartment was regularly searched. In the spring of 1979 the KGB confiscated some books and, as a result, Roginskii lost his job as a teacher. In his final defence speech he pleaded not guilty, maintained that he had only wished to consult material that should normally be available, and spoke of the difficulties placed in the way of Soviet historians because of the restrictions on access to archival materials. In December 1981 he was sentenced to four years in a labour camp. A decade later he became secretary of a nongovernmental historical society, and was able to examine the KGB archives concerning the Stalinist past.

At the moment of Roginskii's conviction, another extraordinary story was already developing. Since 1976 Dmitrii Iurasov, then aged iz, had been compiling a file of victims of Stalinist repression from archival and published sources (containing, by November 1990, a quarter of a million index cards). Between July 1981 and November 1982, and again between January 1985 and November 1986, while he was an evening history student at the State Institute of History and Archives, he worked in several archives, secretly recording information and smuggling it out. In November 1986 his activities were discovered and he was dismissed. In April 1987 he was summoned for questioning by the KGB after his first public appearance, a speech about his work at a Moscow Writers' Union meeting. In September 1987, 150 notebooks and 15,000 to zo,ooo index cards were confiscated from his apartment. Although frequently harassed, and at one time (September 1988) detained and interrogated for three days, he started lecturing on Stalinism all over the country.

In Brazil, a team of 35 lawyers working with the Catholic Church secretly photocopied and microfilmed the complete records of the archives of the Supreme Military Court covering the 1964-79 dictatorship years. Duplicates were stored outside Brazil. The copying and analysis of the materials in

1:979-85 was done in complete secrecy, because the 1979 amnesty law deterred investigation, and because, if caught, the lawyers would have been subject to reprisals, and the archives would have been in danger of destruction. The team maintained its anonymity even after the 1985 publication of their analysis, *Brasil: nunca mais* (Brazil: Never Again), which became a bestseller.

Conclusion

The cases described here merely point out the traces of censorship and the nebulous areas surrounding it. Secrecy is the main factor hampering the study of censorship. It is the reason why an exhaustive coverage of cases is beyond reach, why it is often impossible to label alarming or suspect examples of archival destruction as censorship, why data on private archives are even more scarce than those on public ones.

While it is often difficult to identify wilful unauthorized destruction, it is certain that the risk of neglect and destruction is greater for inaccessible archives. In 1993 Michel Duchein, reflecting on the different reasons for restricted access to public archives in many countries nevertheless saw "an evident (but not universal) trend toward liberalization". Perhaps this trend is indirect proof of a growing awareness of human rights. Ironically, even the best information and archival laws leave some of the risks intact: they may lead to reluctance to keep records, to secret destruction, or to more astute control over less information. Archival emergency plans identifying the most important record groups to be rescued may turn into an instrument of archival cleansing in the hands of the enemy during an armed conflict.

In general, two principles are crucial to historians and citizens alike. First, as the right to freedom of information is the vital complement of the right to freedom of expression, archival selection criteria giving due weight to historical considerations, and public and equal access to archives should be the rule; politically inspired selection, privileged access, or secrecy the exception. Second, the corresponding obligation should be to take care of the accumulated sources and evidence and to oppose the many guises of archive censorship. Oscillating between Jorge Luis Borges's Funes, who could not forget anything, and Chingiz Aitmatov's Mankurt, who could not remember anything, archival awareness should impede us from drifting fatally towards either catastrophe.

ANTOON DE BAETS

Further Reading

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Reinaldo Arenas
Cuban writer, 1943–1990

Rarely has a contemporary writer suffered so varied, profound, and dramatic an experience of censorship as Reinaldo Arenas, who was stigmatized in his country for his rebelliousness, his political ideas, and his promiscuous homosexual attitudes, and consequently was excluded from all the circles of cultural and editorial activity until his exile in 1980.

However, Arenas then suffered a fresh period of banishment when he was rejected both by the international left wing of artists and writers and by the Cuban emigres of Miami, who, like the Cuban authorities, regarded him as incapable of complying with standards or discipline. He became "the most exiled of the Cuban exiles". More dramatic even than persistent censorship and ostracism was his desperate fight against AIDS: over the course of three years he hurriedly wrote several books, including a revealing and brutal autobiography, *Antes que anochezca* (1992, *Before Night Falls,* 1993), which is both his political and literary testament. Three months after completing it, Arenas committed suicide in his New York apartment, worn out by his illness.

Arenas was born in deep poverty in a hamlet in the area of Holguin in eastern Cuba and migrated to Havana, along with other followers of Fidel Castro, after Castro's defeat of the dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959. The young Arenas, who was full of enthusiasm for the triumphant revolution, did various jobs until he moved towards his true vocation of literature. He was taken up rapidly by important figures in Cuban literature - Eliseo Diego, Cintio Vitier, Virgilio Piñera, José Lezama Lima, and Camila Henríquez Ureña - who saw in him an extraordinary talent for storytelling. He obtained a modest post at the National Library of Cuba. His first novel, *Celestino antes del alba* (1967, Celestino Before Dawn; translated as *Singing from the Well,* 1987), obtained a commendation in a competition run by the Union of Writers and Artists. Arenas was immediately recognized as one of the most promising figures in Cuban literature, continuing the tradition of baroque and densely constructed novels that joined Cuban and universal concerns through a highly artistic treatment of popular culture and imagination.

However, *Celestino* was to be the only one of the Arenas's books to be published in Cuba. From roughly 1967 onwards, the Cuban government's attitude towards intellectuals changed for the worse, as demonstrated in the Padilla case, when the internationally recognized poet Heberto Padilla was forced^ after arrest land imprisonment, to make a public statement renouncing his former beliefs. The move away from toleration was confirmed at the Congress of Education and Culture in 1971, and was expressed primarily in the persecution of homosexual writers. Arenas was one of the first writers to experience marginalization. His second novel, *El mtindo alucinante* (The Hallucinating World), was rejected by the