Censorship

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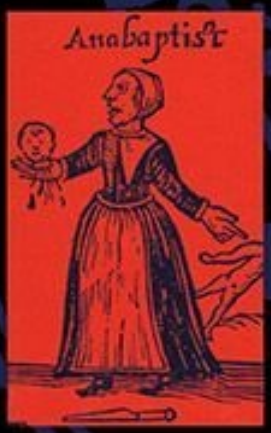
A World Encyclopedia



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"unadulterated" original Leninism, while the names of Trotskii, Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Bukharin remained taboo. For example, Herman Ermolaev has noted that, pressed by his editor, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn removed chapter 20 of his novel V *kruge pervom* (1968, *The First Circle),* with its "unflattering survey of Stalin's life ... It must be kept in mind that criticism of Stalin under Khrushchev centred on the last 20 years of the dictator's rule, while his early revolutionary activities, his struggle against Trotskii and Bukharin, and his socialization of the economy were seen in a positive light."

Despite the regime's attempt to eliminate such former party luminaries, physically as well as linguistically, oral lore ensured them a long life none the less. Thus, Leningrad's second-largest department store bore the acronym LDT (Leningrad House of Trade), which, according to urban folklore, ordinary citizens deciphered as "Lev Davidovich Trotskii" until it was renamed "DLT".

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Truth Commissions

During the last quarter of the 20th century many countries made the transition from dictatorship to democracy; a key element in the process was their determined attempts to deal explicitly with the repressive and traumatic past. In West Germany, the pioneer country, this attempt was called *Vergangenheits-bewaltigung* (mastery of the past), but the objectives of this process were the same everywhere: truth, justice, and reconciliation. The arrival of democracy made people demand to know the facts on the mass atrocities of the toppled regime (truth), for the perpretrators to be properly tried and the victims honoured (justice); both were considered necessary before reconciliation could occur. The most striking feature of many transitions was the institution of truth commissions, complementary or alternative to prosecution or lustration, a practice so successful that the right to know the truth about past abuses is increasingly recognized as a rule of customary international law. As many as 40 such commissions have been instituted, many of them as official bodies.

Most truth commissions were established in a climate of vivid historical awareness and symbolized the intention to draw a line between past and present. They could not investigate the past in a vacuum, but had to operate under multiple constraints of sponsorship, structure, authority, mandate, procedures, resources, and access to evidence that all reflected the political realities of the moment. Restrictions of mandate sometimes led to the exclusion of relevant historical periods or of certain types of crimes from the investigation, and time constraints limited the number of cases that could be investigated. Moreover, the armed forces were generally reluctant to cooperate, despite the fact that, in some cases, testimony could be taken secretly (as in Chile), and in others amnesty was granted in return for full disclosure of the acts committed (as in South Africa).

Threats to the commissioners or the witnesses, obstacles to data collection, and restricted circulation of the final report indicate that truth commissions were frequently subject to forms of censorship. In Chad (1991), the commissioners received threats from former security personnel; some resigned. In addition, due to a shortage of office space, the commission had to hear the former victims in the very detention centre where many of them had been tortured. Before an International Commission of Investigation arrived in Rwanda in 1993, five probable witnesses were attacked, and, the day after the commission left, some 300 to 500 people were killed, although the connection with the commission's work was unclear.

Obstacles to data collection, taking the form of either destruction of evidence or restricted access to it, are slightly better documented. Wide dissemination of the final report is a critical condition of the work of any truth commission. Concealed or confidential truths rapidly become suspect secrets, not cathartic elements in a healing process. In some instances, this condition of publicity was not met. In Uganda, President Idi Amin failed to publish the report of a national commission of inquiry in 1974. The report of a commission of inquiry into human rights violations in Matabeleland addressed to the Zimbabwean Government in 1985 was not published. It remained confidential, unseen by anyone outside the government. The same happened with reports in Sri Lanka and Haiti. In South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) refused to distribute the 1992 report of the Skweyiya Commission about former ANC detention camp abuses because it questioned the report's accuracy. And despite initial wide distribution of the 1990 report in Chile, tens of thousands of copies of the report were later withdrawn from circulation. Only three or four commissions named alleged perpetrators of human rights violations in their reports. This was not without risks. In Rwanda, two perpetrators were killed in the months after

the report's publication: one out of revenge, the other to cover up evidence. Sometimes, the submission of the report led to intimidation. In Uganda in 1974, the four commissioners were persecuted in apparent retaliation for their work.

Seen from the perspective of censorship, truth commissions are a reaction to past censorship, as well as being subject to censorship themselves. Inevitably, their reports have a delegitimizing effect. The above examples show that most problems for truth commissions arose when the regime that committed the abuses was still in power or when its representatives were in control of the transitory government.

The primary justification for *Vergangenbeitsbewdltigung,* hence for truth commissions, is the obligation and the right to know, acknowledge, and remember the past abuses, especially those kept secret or denied at the time. Justifications of a more instrumental nature have often been added to this primary goal: truth is often supposed to entail justice, healing, prevention, and reconciliation. This relationship between truth and the two other objectives of the transition process, justice and reconciliation, is not unproblematic. Truth, although frequently providing a primary form of justice for the victims and a collective stigma for the perpetrators, is no substitute for judicial action. Some critics find the device of truth commissions too superficial and too weak. Conversely, trials, although frequently a reliable source of information, by their very nature focus on individual guilt and innocence, and cannot (and should not) depict the global or historical pattern of abuses, although important lawsuits may possess powerful symbolic value. Similar problems arise with reconciliation. In principle, truth is a necessary but not sufficient condition for reconciliation with the past and for the prevention of future abuses. Indeed, most truth commissions seem to have had beneficial effects, especially when the last crucial stage - the official acknowledgement of, and public apology for, the past abuses - was not skipped. However, there is an inevitable tension between truth activating memory, and reconciliation stimulating oblivion, and with justice capable of both (depending on whether the outcome is retribution or amnesty). Results other than reconciliation are possible: truth may very well lead to the exacerbation of old wounds and conflicts. Or the opposite may occur: truth may lead to uneasy silence among those directly involved, and oversaturation in the rest of society.

The connection among truth and peace and democracy - the ultimate goals of reconciliation - is even more fragile. Clearly, truth is morally, legally, and psychologically desirable, but is in itself no guarantee for peace and democracy. Meeting the needs for stability, unity, and security may jeopardize truth-finding but foster peace. However, absence of truth and the triumph of oblivion and impunity is like having a dragon on the patio (as Tina Rosenberg puts it). In countries without *Vergangenheitsbewältigung,* the haunting past may become an officially endorsed taboo. The nature of painful and bloody memories is such that, no matter how long they are repressed, they may suddenly erupt again. Such volatile memories include those that continuously recall Japan's imperialistic past, the 1915 Armenian genocide, the Indonesian killings of 1965-*66,* and the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Not to deal with a traumatic past is a strategy that involves a serious and uncalculated risk.

Non-governmental organizations with truth commission-like projects were not always welcomed. In the Soviet Union, local authorities detained signature gatherers for a petition that led to the establishment in 1987 of Memorial: The Ail-Union Historical-Enlightenment Society. In the early years, its work to investigate the history of Stalinist repression met with official disapproval. Its collaborators, who established chapters everywhere in the country, were obstructed and sometimes detained when they

tried to investigate archives, interview survivors, or collect funds. In January 1991, the Romanian writer and former political prisoner Banu Radulescu was knocked to the ground in the centre of Bucharest, following a series of unofficial threats in connection with the launch of *Memoria,* a magazine that set out to reconstruct the history of political detention and persecution during the Communist era. In China, Ding Zilin, a supervisor of graduate students at the People's University in Beijing, was frequently harassed by the police because she campaigned for an independent investigation into the June 1989 Tiananmen massacre and was compiling a list of its victims (which included her son). In early December 1995, the historian Chen Xiaoya was dismissed from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences as a result of the publication in Taiwan of her manuscript, *The History of the* 1989 *Democracy Movement* (in Chinese), the product of research started in 1993. Since then she has been unemployed. Late in 1993, the Salvadoran writer and lawyer Jose Maria Mendez received several death threats, believed to have originated from death squads, after he had criticized the government for failure to act on the official truth commission's recommendation that death squad activities be fully investigated. In April 1998, the Guatemalan bishop Juan Gerardi was murdered two days after he had presented a voluminous episcopal report, *Guatemala: Nunca Más*, which was based on thousands of testimonies and identified the army as responsible for at least 80 per cent of the human rights violations counted in the 36-year civil war. It remained uncertain, however, whether the murder was politically inspired. In October 1996, Brazilian lawyer Francisco Gilson Nogueira de Carvalho of the Centre for Human Rights and Popular Memory was shot dead because he had looked into the connections between death squads and local authorities. An official investigation into his killing was closed in September 1997 on the grounds of lack of evidence.

Another high-risk activity was the exhumation of clandestine burial sites. In June and August 1996, Carlos Reyes Lopez, coordinator of a Guatemalan forensic anthropology team that exhumed clandestine cemeteries, received death threats. In early April 1998, forensic experts in the Congo looking for mass graves, left by the rebels led by Laurent-Desire Kabila in 1996-97, were forced to leave the northwestern town of Mbandaka after facing hostility from the local population for allegedly disturbing traditional burial sites. Other targets were commemorations. "Dead men meet on the lips of the living", said Samuel Butler, but, despite their crucial function in the process of healing, these solemn rituals to mourn were disturbed, especially in countries with an apparently weak commitment to *Vergangenbeitsbewältigung.* On 16 June 1988, the 30th anniversary of the execution of Hungarian revolutionary leader Imre Nagy, several members of the Committee for Historical Justice, formed some months earlier, were arrested when police used force to break up a large demonstration in the centre of Budapest. Gathering at the anonymous grave of Nagy, they demanded a reassessment of the 1956 Revolution and the rehabilitation of its leaders. In 1992 and 1993, at least five Chinese activists, who attempted to commemorate the June 1989 Tiananmen massacre, were imprisoned for several years. When, in 1994, paper money, a traditional means of commemorating the dead, was burned at People's University in Beijing, all evening students were detained until the culprits could be interrogated and taken away. In Guatemala, former military commissioners threatened to commit mass murder on 15 September 1996, the day that a group of widows planned to commemorate the massacres of their men by the army and civil patrols in the Rabinal area in the early 1980s. In various other places, the picture seems less grim: in places as diverse as Cambodia, Chad, Chile, Eritrea, Northern Ireland, Poland, Romania, Russia, and Uganda, museums of the past repression were opened and honour the victims.

A contentious issue for truth commissions has been the extent to which their reports should analyse and interpret the historical context that led to the human rights abuses. Most critics argued that it was feasible and necessary to describe the facts about the abuses plus their immediate context to give them some coherence, while at the same time avoiding inevitably controversial analyses and interpretations of the broader context. Remarkably, the goals expected to be within reach with this cautious analytical approach were ambitious themselves. Most critics wanted the officially endorsed version of the truth commissions not only to discredit the version disseminated by the former perpetrators of the abuses but also to offer (to adapt Philip Graham's famous phrase about journalism) a first draft of history. Prosecutor Richard Goldstone of the Former Yugoslavia Tribunal maintained that this explanatory function is particulary important because revisionists denying the awkward facts may appear within 24 hours after the events occur. Truth differs from justice and reconciliation in that it is able to transcend its roots and context. When the authorities fail to take charge of it, groups of citizens may pursue it. The efforts of many are accumulative, and unofficial truth may, as it often did, stubbornly supplement or refute official truth. When authorities and citizens fail, historians may reopen the case. After the death of the protagonists, it may be too late for justice and reconciliation, but for the truth it is never too late. Even when sources of information are disappearing, research into past crimes may always begin. With a legacy of truth commissions that made too many concessions, that left no archives, or that granted quick amnesties, it may prove hard to correct the falsified views of history. There are other dangers as well. Without the passion of the survivors, historians may "normalize" the cruel abuses of the past by inserting them into the stream of history, or they may omit crucial findings for fear of breathing new divisive fever into the collective memory. Like their predecessors the truth commissions, they have serious responsibilities. As Chilean truth commission member Jose Zalaquett wrote: "The truth does not bring the dead back to life, but it brings them out from silence". It is the obligation of both the pioneering truth commissions and the succeeding historians to see that the dead do not die twice.

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Stefan Tsanev
Bulgarian dramatist and poet, 1936-

Tsanev has written 23 plays, eight of which could not be staged, and 14 poetry collections, which, for nine years in the 1960s and 1970s, he was not allowed to publish. He is notable in the history of Bulgarian censorship for the sheer volume of his work that was subject to bans and cancellation. Since the early 1980s, his plays have enjoyed international success.

Tsanev studied dramaturgy at the Moscow Cinema Institute from 1960 to 1965, and immediately came face to face with censorship, not only in his own country, but in the Soviet Union itself. His screenplays *Zeleni zvezdi* (1963, Green Stars) and *Odinadtsataia zapoved* (1963, Eleventh Commandment) were both "cancelled" by the authorities in Bulgaria and the Soviet Union. Faced with the rejection of his own creative output, he turned, as often in that period, to the classics, translating and adapting. He was on fairly safe ground with the Russian writers Sukhovo-Kobylin, Vladimir Maiakovskii and Ivan Turgenev, with the great Spanish novelist Miguel de Cervantes, and with the Bulgarians Stefan Kostov and Ivan Vazov, but his adaptation of Aleko Konstantinov's *Vesela Bulgariia* (Cheerful Bulgaria) in 1968 again brought him into trouble with the censors. Tsanev's adaptation showed that the political atmosphere of corruption and self-interest had not changed since Konstantinov's time - the end of the 19th century.

Things got worse. He was not allowed to produce two of his own plays, and, in 1970, was dismissed from his position as dramaturgist at the State Theatre of Satire, accused of "building ideologically damaging repertory". He wrote the farce *Dnevnikut Hi devet zasedaniia za spasiavaneto na Bulgariia* (The Diary; or, Nine Meetings for the Salvation of Bulgaria) in 1969 in collaboration with Georgi Markov, who was already in trouble with Todor Zhivkov, general secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party, for *Ubiitsite* (The Assassins), and about to defect to the west (and even there not safe, as future events, described in the entry devoted to him, were to show). The text of Tsanev's and Markov's play was confiscated from Tsanev's house, and was never recovered. Like *The Assassins,* Tsanev's *Protsesut protiv bogomilite* (1978, The Trial against the Bogomils) was a thinly disguised comment on contemporary Bulgaria: political authorities in the 12th century confront the Bogomil heresy. It was far too close for comfort.

His experience forced him to be more careful, and for a time he concentrated on writing for children - *Anini prikazki* (1976, Anna's Tales), and an adaptation of *Don Quixote.* Some of his stage writing in the 1970s was acceptable to the authorities. *Subota* 23 (Saturday 23), based on the Bulgarian uprising of 1923, was staged in 1971. But this was not the end of his experience of censorship. His play of 1982 *Liubovni bulevardi* (Boulevards of Love), was produced in the Sofia Theatre for Youth, but was banned by decree after a few performances. Evidently, the offence caused to the party was serious, because he suffered a