

ARTICLE

OPEN LETTERS IN CLOSED SOCIETIES: THE VALUES OF HISTORIANS
UNDER ATTACKANTOON DE BAETS¹ 

ABSTRACT

This article explores a question of practical ethics: To which values do historians appeal when they come under sustained attack from political power? An important instrument of historians living in closed societies to express their values is the open letter, defined as an unauthorized public statement cast in epistolary form and addressed to either political leaders or fellow historians, but always with the general public as a silent reader in the background. Limited to the post-1945 period, a search for such open letters yielded 106 examples from 39 countries in closed and open societies. Four types of open letters were identified: those describing repression effects, those rebutting official historical views, those defending basic principles, and those presenting transitional historiography. Nine telling cases from six closed societies were then reviewed in detail and analyzed from a variety of angles (authorship, rhetoric, audience, impact, criticism, regime stage, and regime type). When these cases were examined in light of the initial question, it was found that most letters contained a great diversity of values but focused on how the human rights of historians were threatened. Invariably, their theme was historical writing in its full breadth, including its documentary infrastructure and its ramifications in education and the public sphere. Respect for historical truth was invoked more than any other value. It was a minimalist truth conception, however, understood as the absence of historical lies and falsification. The reason for this emphasis on an integrity-oriented conception of historical truth may lie in an old and deep-seated professional fear: the fear that the dictator's corrupted and divisive version of history survives and triumphs as the final verdict.

Keywords: authoritarian power, historical truth, integrity, open letters, practical ethics, transitional historiography

“Dieu . . . ne fait que l’avenir, tandis que l’empereur refait le passé!”²

1. I am indebted to Jozef Jablonický and Vilém Prečan for conversations about their work in June 1996 and August 2000, respectively; to audiences in Bucharest and Cluj in April 2024 for their questions and comments; and to Elizabeth Boyle and three anonymous reviewers for their suggestions. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own. All websites linked in this article were last checked on 26 September 2024.

2. Le Marquis de Custine, *La Russie en 1839* (Brussels: Wouters, 1843), 108: “God . . . only makes the future, while the emperor remakes the past!”

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, we have seen a host of publications about the ethics of historians. Usually, these studies single out one topic—historical truth, myths, moral judgments, virtues, objectivity, and so on—and distill principles, theories, or lessons from it. Most pay only scant attention to the political arena in which historians inevitably operate. My purpose is to fill this lacuna and study how historians have invoked values in times of crisis—that is, when they came under sustained attack from political power. Times of crisis increase the risks for historians and pressure them to reflect deeper on the values that guide them. For what are values worth if they are not upheld in trying times? I seek a clearer view of which values counted most to historians when they were rigorously tested in practice.

This test matters. In January 1983, the Slovak philosopher Miroslav Kusý authored an essay, “On the Purity of the Historian’s Craft,” in which he lamented that Marc Bloch’s *Apologie pour l’histoire* and Edward Carr’s *What Is History?*—two highly acclaimed works on the methodology of history—had largely failed to mention the risks incurred by historians living under authoritarian regimes. Kusý described the case of Slovak historian Jozef Jablonický and how the latter was relentlessly persecuted for trying to stick to the principles of the historian’s craft while writing his histories against the grain and attacking official historical taboos. Strangely enough, the fact that Bloch wrote his *Apologie* during World War Two, when he fought the Nazis, and the fact that Carr was well aware of Soviet censorship did not inspire them to pay systematic attention to the political context of historical writing. Tragically, Bloch and Carr became victims of censorship themselves. Bloch’s name disappeared from the cover of the *Annales* during the German occupation of France (although he continued contributing under a pseudonym), and he died at the hands of the Gestapo near Lyons in 1944. He was unable to finish his *Apologie*, but the incomplete manuscript was published in 1949. And for four decades, Carr’s multivolume *History of Soviet Russia* was banned in the USSR. Kusý and Jablonický themselves were dismissed under the “normalization” policy introduced in Czechoslovakia after the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion. Earning a living as an unskilled worker, Kusý was forced to publish his essay on Bloch, Carr, and Jablonický in the underground circuit.³

Whenever their ethical stance is tested, historians can appeal to a variety of values that they deem helpful in their effort to survive the onslaught of violent power. In the present test, I collect material from all types of societies but focus on closed societies in particular—that is, societies that are authoritarian or

3. Miroslav Kusý, “On the Purity of the Historian’s Craft,” *Kosmas* 3, no. 2 and 4, no. 1 (1984–1985), 29–38; Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l’histoire ou métier d’historien*, 6th ed. (1949; Paris: Colin, 1967); Edward Carr, *What Is History?* (1961; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973). On Jablonický, see also Vilém Prečan, “A Slovak Historian Resists Coercion: The Case of Jozef Jablonický,” in *Acta Creationis: Independent Historiography in Czechoslovakia, 1969–1980*, ed. Vilém Prečan (Hannover: Vilém Prečan, 1980), 230–37.

in transition from authoritarianism to democracy, or vice versa.⁴ I mean repressive or politically hybrid societies in which the balance of probabilities makes it more likely than not for historians to *not* express opinions in public because of an imminent risk of attack. An attack on history is defined here as any threat or use of force by state or non-state actors against historians or their work with the intent to silence them. Historians who, despite all risks, have braved such attacks *in real time*⁵ have done so with different instruments—most notably, public speeches, courtroom defenses, and open letters. Public speeches criticizing an authoritarian regime in real time are rare, and courtroom defenses presuppose that authoritarian regimes prefer legal prosecution over other repression tools and allow courtroom defenses to circulate, which is also rare. In contrast, open letters are flexible instruments of which multiple examples exist, making them a good source to examine.

OPEN LETTERS FROM HISTORIANS

Open letters can be defined as unauthorized public statements cast in epistolary form, written by one or more historians or by nonhistorians who take care of history's mission, and addressed to either political leaders or fellow historians, but always with the general public as a silent reader in the background. It is not simple to distinguish open letters from related genres such as declarations, proclamations, manifestos, petitions, and memoranda. All of these genres appeal to basic principles and contain complaints and calls for condemnation, redress, or solidarity. To compound matters, most take the form of press releases or leaflets.⁶ In this diversified genre of written protests, no hard labeling conventions exist, making it imperative to look not only into sources that call themselves “open letters” but also into adjacent genres that bear a resemblance with open letters in all but name. In the end, I found that the “open” character was more decisive than the “letter” character.

Collecting open letters was not easy, because they were sometimes perceived as ephemeral sources unworthy of preservation. Many only survived through hearsay or as summaries in other sources. However, the internet proved a precious resource for tracking them, including specimens from the pre-internet era. Even more difficult was the reconstruction of the histories surrounding the creation, distribution, and reception of these open letters.

Open letters in closed societies are interventions that raise the stakes: their authors say aloud what others merely think or whisper, without the certainty that their action will stand out, persuade, or mobilize. With so much to lose, historians must phrase their letters thoughtfully, which makes them good sources for

4. According to Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 1, *The Spell of Plato* (London: Routledge, 1945), 178, Henri Bergson was the first to use the term “closed society” (*société close*) in his *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1932), ch. 4.

5. I therefore excluded retrospective genres such as memoirs.

6. In turn, these genres can be distinguished from more succinct protest forms such as banners, slogans, posters, graffiti, and tweets.

discovering their values. However, this is also what makes them good sources for idealized renditions of these values. The global scope and comparative perspective of my design as well as the collective authorship of many letters serve as a corrective for this potential aesthetic bias.

In practical terms, I collected a global total of 173 open letters written between 1945 and 2023. I excluded nine open letters written or signed by historians whose subjects were intellectual freedom and democracy in general and fifty-one open letters on current politics and current repression rather than the specific plight of historical writing. I also discarded seven misleading examples that were written in support of, rather than against, official policies by a diversity of individuals who attacked the work of historians.⁷

A collection of 106 open letters from open and closed societies in 39 countries remained. In spite of their complex geographical, authorial, linguistic, and thematic diversity, they could tentatively be divided into four types: those describing repression effects, those rebutting official views, those defending basic principles, and those presenting programs of transitional historiography. This practical four-pronged typology emerged after careful consideration of common traits in the individual cases. While based on real patterns, the four types should be seen not as rigid but rather as flexible demarcations with some overlap. Most of the letters were dedicated to the cases of individual historians or to single issues, but several transcended the anecdotal and reflected on the fate of historical writing under authoritarian regimes on a more abstract level. Among these, nine matched all of my selection criteria (Table 1): they originated from closed societies, were sufficiently documented in terms of content and context, transcended the anecdotal, and were accessible to me. They will form the backbone of the present analysis:

With an earliest case from 1965 and a most recent from 2022, the period covered was fifty-seven years. Cases 3 and 6 shared the same context but developed completely independently; cases 1 and 2 shared the same context *and* coincided in time but developed largely independently. The other cases showed no mutual connections. The mix of cases that were close and distant in time and place is a feature of the sample that potentially enriches the analysis.

DESCRIBING THE EFFECTS OF REPRESSION

With thirty-three examples in nineteen countries, a substantial number of the open letters were written in defense of historians who experienced serious personal difficulties: they describe the effects of attacks, censorship, unfair dismissals, spurious charges, and detention. In twenty-seven cases, the letters originated from colleagues of the victims, while, in six cases, the victims organized their own defense. I will discuss two Czechoslovak cases that largely developed independently within the same context.

7. I found seven such open letters: they defended a former dictator (Russia) or controversial history textbooks (Croatia, India), denied historical crimes (Japan, Switzerland), or attacked *bona fide* historians (India, Thailand).

Table 1. Open Letters Written by Historians (1945–2023): Overview and Sample

Open letters describing the effects of repression (thirty-three cases in nineteen countries)

Case 1. Czechoslovakia, 1975: Pamphlet to historians and the public by four anonymous historians.

Case 2. Czechoslovakia, 1975: Open letter to historians by historian Vilém Prečan.

Open letters rebutting official views (twenty-one cases in fourteen countries)

Case 3. USSR, 1969: Open letter to an official journal by historian Pyotr Yakir.

Case 4. USSR, 1979: Open letters to the Party leadership and to historians by literary historian Yuri Badzio.

Case 5. Chile, 1999: Manifesto to the public by eleven historians.

Open letters defending basic principles (fifty cases in twenty-five countries)

Case 6. USSR, 1965: Open letter to the government newspaper by an anonymous group of historians.

Case 7. China, 2006: Open letters to the president by thirteen writers, including historians.

Open letters presenting transitional historiography (two cases in two countries)

Case 8. Romania, 1989: Declaration to historians and the public by fourteen historians.

Case 9. Philippines, 2022: Manifesto to the public by nine academics, including historians.

The story of *Acta Persecutionis* (case 1) began in February 1973, when the German weekly *Deutsche Zeitung Christ und Welt* published an article with a list of forty-nine historians who were persecuted under the policy of “normalization” after the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968.⁸ The article spoke of a “genocide of science and culture” and, following the French writer Louis Aragon’s phrase, of a “Biafra of the spirit.”⁹ One year later, one of the historians mentioned on that list, Bedřich Loewenstein, was invited to author an article about the purge for the Dutch journal *Internationale Spectator*. Published in April 1974 under the pseudonym K. Andreas, Loewenstein’s piece was remarkable in three respects. First, he criticized the official historians who behaved as prosecutors of their persecuted colleagues. Second, he brought to mind how medievalist František Graus had called for greater autonomy in historical science as early as 1956, how contemporary historian Jan Křen had appealed to renounce dogma and propaganda in 1963, and how historians Milan Hübl and Vilém Prečan had previously raised the question of the moral responsibility of

8. The untraceable original article was reproduced as “Zum Schicksal der Historiker in der Tschechoslowakei,” *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 24, no. 10 (1973), 581–85. The fate of persecuted Czechoslovak historians had been highlighted since 1970 by Eberhard Jäckel. See Karl Dietrich Erdmann, *Toward a Global Community of Historians: The International Historical Congresses and the International Committee of Historical Sciences, 1898–2000*, ed. Jürgen Kocka and Wolfgang J. Mommsen, with Agnes Blänsdorf, transl. Alan Nothnagle (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 254–55, 265n56, and Eberhard Jäckel, “Acta Liberationis,” in *Grenzüberschreitungen oder der Vermittler Bedřich Loewenstein: Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstag eines europäischen Historikers*, ed. Vilém Prečan, Milena Janišová, and Matthias Roeser (Prague: Institute for Contemporary History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, 1999), 281.

9. “Zum Schicksal der Historiker in der Tschechoslowakei,” 581.

the historian. Finally, he appended the list of dismissed historians of *Deutsche Zeitung* that friends had sent to him.¹⁰

In the same month, Loewenstein, Graus, and two other dissident historians, Bohumil Černý and Josef Macek, joined forces with German historian Eberhard Jäckel and American historian David Schoenbaum to expand the list and prepare a pamphlet for the Fourteenth International Congress of Historical Sciences, to be held in San Francisco in August 1975.¹¹ The thirty-six-page document, entitled *Acta Persecutionis*, contained a directory of 145 Czechoslovak historians, their expertise, and details of their dismissal and later fate (including, in some cases, imprisonment). Its preface stated that “the historians [on the list] had already begun to revise the official version of the past after . . . 1956 and . . . were engaging in objective research,”¹² enumerated the difficulties in compiling the list, and ended ominously:

The Czechoslovak historical profession will be represented at the . . . Congress . . . by . . . delegates from the “normalized” Czechoslovak Historical Association. . . . [T]hey write and profess whatever is asked of them in the interest, and according to the orders, of their employers. They wear the mark of Cain for helping to liquidate their colleagues, or at least for their silence while their colleagues were persecuted. Is it they who represent the Czechoslovak historical profession? Or is it they, the victims of persecution, whose names are listed below?¹³

Six thousand copies of the pamphlet were distributed at the Congress. The list of 145 names appeared in several newspapers and the Congress organizers received many telegrams protesting the dismissals. The campaign was even referred to in the *Congressional Record of the United States* for 1977, where the dismissals were portrayed as a violation of Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (the right to work). The *Record* added that the situation had not improved after the Congress because any historian who dared to sign Charter 77 (the Czechoslovak human rights manifesto published in January 1977) risked dismissal.¹⁴ And Czechoslovak historians *had* massively signed Charter 77: among its original signatories were forty historians, one-sixth of the total.

One of those listed in *Acta Persecutionis* was Vilém Prečan (case 2). When the Warsaw Pact tanks rolled into Prague on 20 August 1968, he belonged to a team within the Historical Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences that immediately started compiling records of resistance against the invasion. In the fall of 1968, 2,900 copies of this compilation, “Seven Days in Prague: August 21–27,” were distributed throughout Czechoslovakia. It was published in English as *The Czech Black Book* in 1969.¹⁵ The Historical Institute itself had

10. K. Andreas, “Historici in Tsjechoslowakije,” *Internationale Spectator* 28, no. 8 (1974), 271–75. Loewenstein’s recollections can be found in Bedřich Loewenstein, “Fragmentarische Erinnerungen eines Vermittlers,” in Prečan, Janišová, and Roeser, *Grenzüberschreitungen*, 324–26.

11. *Acta Persecutionis: A Document from Czechoslovakia—Presented to the XIVth International Congress of Historical Sciences* (San Francisco, August 1975).

12. *Ibid.*, 2.

13. *Ibid.*, 4.

14. 123 Cong. Rec., pt. 14, at E17229 (1977) (statement of Edward J. Derwinski from 1 June 1977).

15. *The Czech Black Book*, ed. Robert Littell (London: Pall Mall Press, 1969).

issued two declarations in the first week of the occupation. Its declaration of 21 August 1968, one day after the invasion, was partly broadcast on radio. It was addressed to “Dear Fellow Citizens!” and read in part: “At stake are freedom of speech and creative scientific work. . . . The history of our state and our nation already knows one Munich. . . . We cannot live on our knees.”¹⁶ In April 1970, Prečan was dismissed on grounds of so-called political unreliability. He and three other members of the Historical Institute were interrogated by the security police for “Seven Days in Prague” and, in April 1971, indicted on charges of sedition (in 1974, this was changed to “subversion”). Soviet authorities banned “Seven Days in Prague,” calling it a “gross falsification of the facts, having nothing in common with historical scholarship.”¹⁷ Several historians in Western Europe and the United States protested against this.

Between September 1969 and August 1975, Prečan wrote several private letters to the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, Gustáv Husák. The two knew each other: in April 1966, Husák had penned a laudatory review of Prečan’s source edition of the 1944 Slovak National Uprising. Letter after letter, Prečan told Husák about his dire personal situation: passport confiscation, telephone tapping, interference in his archival research, cancellation of his research projects, dismissal from the Institute and from his later menial jobs, financial problems, prosecution under spurious sedition charges, police interrogations, police surveillance, a house raid, confiscation of his personal archive, and, finally, his emigration plan.¹⁸ The letters are touching because they give a detailed insight into the daily life of a persecuted historian. But Prečan was never sent an answer.

And then, in July 1975, he decided to send an open letter to the participants in the San Francisco Congress.¹⁹ In it, he emphasized that the solidarity shown by fellow historians abroad had helped him survive the worst period after his dismissal and perhaps had prevented his imprisonment. He explained that his situation of complete lack of security was unbearable and stressed the importance of respect for human rights, adding that “I have always upheld what I consider to be the rights and duties of an historian.”²⁰ He continued: “I wanted to remain an historian, convinced . . . that an historian must remain loyal to his duties and responsibilities under all circumstances. . . . This conviction is based on the justified belief that an historian is irreplaceable and indispensable.”²¹ According to Prečan,

16. *Ibid.*, 62–63.

17. Quoted in Antoon De Baets, *Censorship of Historical Thought: A World Guide, 1945–2000* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 173.

18. The letters to Husák can be found in Vilém Prečan, *Die Sieben Jahre von Prag 1969–1976: Briefe und Dokumente aus der Zeit der “Normalisierung”* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1978), 34–35, 43–45, 45–46, 58–59, 67–70, 198, 213–14. Other historians, such as Milan Hübl and Karel Kaplan, also wrote (open) letters to leading politicians.

19. The German version can be found in Prečan, *Die Sieben Jahre von Prag*, 214–22; for the English version, see Vilém Prečan, “Bound, Gagged and Robbed,” *Index on Censorship* 4, no. 4 (1975), 53–57.

20. Prečan, “Bound, Gagged and Robbed,” 53.

21. *Ibid.*, 54.

They [the dismissed historians] refused contemptible servitude to contemptible politicians and the identification of historical science with politics and ideology that is characteristic of a totalitarian regime. They wanted to end the long-standing struggle for the restoration of historical science, giving it back its true social function. . . . [T]hey stated in the Declaration of the Historical Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences of 25 September 1968: “We insist on the freedom of scientific investigation and on unrestricted contacts with world science. We shall write without ambiguity. No subject will be taboo, and we shall investigate all matters fully and report on them openly.”²²

Prečan concluded by stating, “I declare my determination to realise myself as a human being and as a worker in the field of historical science anywhere in the world, on one condition only: freedom of scientific investigation.”²³ The letter was read out at the Congress by German historian Heinrich August Winkler and distributed in a thousand copies. On 24 August 1975, Prečan sent a copy to Husák—it would be his seventh and last letter to the leader. He was interrogated by the police the day after the Congress, but, at the same time, no press campaign was initiated against him or other Congress participants and the police apparently did not attempt to identify the historians who were behind *Acta Persecutionis*. In July 1976, Prečan became a refugee in West Germany. In 1977, he was stripped of his nationality. Founder of a documentation center for dissident literature and, after his return to Prague in 1990, first director of the new Institute of Contemporary History at the Academy of Sciences and chairman of the Czech National Committee of Historians, he continued to document the persecution of his profession and remained a tireless collector and publisher of unofficial historical documents.²⁴

REBUTTING OFFICIAL HISTORICAL VIEWS

The rebuttal type of open letters numbered twenty-one examples in fourteen countries. Most protested the official misrepresentation of subjects such as past armed conflicts, genocides, war crimes, racism, cultural repression, forced assimilation, dictatorship, and coups (eleven cases), while the remaining letters criticized official denialism of past crimes (four cases), memory laws (four cases), and appointments of official historians (two cases). The cases selected here come from the main category.

Pyotr Yakir’s story (case 3) started in 1937, when Joseph Stalin ordered the execution of his father, Army Commander Iona Yakir, and other generals of the Soviet High Command. Aged fourteen, Pyotr became a “son of an enemy of the people” and spent the next seventeen years in prisons and camps, an experience described in *A Childhood in Prison*.²⁵ Released in 1954, after Stalin’s death, he enrolled as a student at the Historical Institute of the Academy of

22. *Ibid.*, 55.

23. *Ibid.*, 57.

24. Vilém Prečan, “Comment and Controversy,” *American Historical Association Newsletter* 14, no. 6 (1976), 15; Vilém Prečan, “Pogrom of Historians,” *Index on Censorship* 15, no. 4 (1986), 24–28; *Acta Creationis*, ed. Prečan.

25. Pyotr Yakir, *A Childhood in Prison* (London: Macmillan, 1972).

Sciences and became a historian. He was allowed to coedit a memorial volume for his father in 1963, during the thaw of the Khrushchev era. In the Brezhnev years, he became a founder of the Soviet dissident movement and a leading human rights activist. Like many others, he wrote letters to Brezhnev and other leaders denouncing the dreaded rehabilitation of Stalin.

In March 1969, he addressed an open letter, “A Posthumous Indictment of Stalin,” to the editorial board of *Kommunist*, the official journal of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), which was promoting Stalin’s rehabilitation. Yakir put forward legal arguments to rebut this view, using the 1966 Criminal Code (“the mildest in our history”) to show that Stalin deserved death by shooting as well as sixty-eight years’ strict-regime imprisonment.²⁶ Yakir linked the counts against Stalin to specific articles of the Criminal Code about abuse of power, mass repression, torture, forced suicides, extrajudicial executions, terrorist acts, deportation of peoples, mass internment, and so on. The litany of incriminations was interspersed with examples. He further wondered whether Stalin could invoke extenuating circumstances, but he found none. In contrast, he listed the repetition of many of Stalin’s crimes, their particular cruelty, and their serious consequences for the USSR as aggravating circumstances. He concluded his letter with a question: “On what grounds, then, do[es] . . . the editorial staff of the magazine [*Kommunist*] rehabilitate the greatest criminal our country has known in its recent history?”²⁷ He declared that, if *Kommunist* did not reply to his letter, he would assume that it accepted his argument and ask the Procurator General to officially indict Stalin, convinced “that posthumous conviction is as valid as posthumous rehabilitation.”²⁸ Not surprisingly, *Kommunist* refused to publish the letter, which subsequently appeared in the *samizdat* journal *Political Diary*, edited by historian Roy Medvedev. Yakir remained a prolific writer of open letters in defense of dissidence and human rights. In August 1970, for example, he wrote to the secretariat of the 13th International Congress of Historical Sciences to be held in Moscow and proposed several amendments to the program, including a comparative study of Stalin’s and Hitler’s roles in history.

In June 1972, he was arrested and charged with so-called anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda. During the pretrial investigation, he broke down, “confessed,” repented the errors of his previous actions, cooperated with the State Security Service (KGB), and gave information about his own and other people’s activities.²⁹ As a consequence, more than two hundred persons were interrogated. During his trial in August 1973, he pleaded guilty. He was sentenced to three years’

26. Pyotr Yakir, “A Posthumous Indictment of Stalin,” in *An End to Silence: Uncensored Opinion in the Soviet Union—From Roy Medvedev’s Underground Magazine Political Diary*, ed. Stephen F. Cohen, transl. George Saunders (New York: Norton, 1982), 56. This is an abridged translation from the Russian original. The latter can be found in *Politichesky dnevnik* 54 (March 1969), but I was unable to locate it.

27. Yakir, “A Posthumous Indictment of Stalin,” 61.

28. Yakir, quoted in Amnesty International, *Prisoner of Conscience Week 1972* (London: Amnesty International, 1972), 11.

29. R.R.G., “The ‘Recantation’ under Duress of Pyotr Yakir,” *Radio Free Europe Research* (5 December 1972), 1–4.

imprisonment and three years' internal exile. A few days later, he was presented to the Soviet and foreign public at a dramatic press conference, where he showed remorse and admitted that he had plotted against the state. Later in September, the Supreme Court reduced his sentence to the term he had already served and to three years of internal exile in Ryazan. A year later, he was granted pardon by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet. After his release, Yakir was ostracized by dissident circles. He died in Moscow in 1982, completely isolated.

Like Yakir, literary historian Yuri Badzio (case 4) was a dissident. In September 1965, he took part in a public protest against the secret arrests of Ukrainian intellectuals, as a result of which he was expelled from the CPSU and dismissed from the Institute of Literature of the Academy of Sciences of Soviet Ukraine. In response to a second wave of arrests in 1972, he began writing *Pravo zhyty* (The Right to Live), a work on the subjugation of Ukraine within the USSR. His 1,400-page manuscript was mysteriously stolen from a friend's apartment in 1977. The second version was confiscated in February 1979 during a KGB search. While waiting for his inevitable arrest, Badzio decided to write two long open letters with the key ideas of *Pravo zhyty*, one to state and Party leaders³⁰ and one to established Russian and Ukrainian historians.³¹ They were composed under considerable mental strain because Badzio could not predict when exactly the knock on the door would come. Both letters overlapped but were directed at different audiences. Published abroad in 1981 and 1982, they were broadcast to Ukraine in Radio Liberty programs.

In the letter to the state and Party leadership, Badzio argued that czarist Russia had been a "prison of nations" from which only an appreciation of the uniqueness of these nations could offer escape. But Vladimir Lenin did the opposite: he designed the concept of "fusion of nations," erasing the differences between the nations of the USSR even more and serving as a pretext for Russian great-power nationalism and imperialism.³² The end result would not be the creation of a nationless Communist society, as Lenin thought, but rather ethnic assimilation and total domination of Russian nationalism. This policy deprived the Ukrainians of the right to their own past and independence. It destroyed their cultural heritage and annihilated Ukraine as a separate nation. It was a form of ideological ethnocide.³³

Badzio's letter to the official Russian and Ukrainian historians was a summary of the historiographical part of *Pravo zhyty*, entitled "The Past—or the Contemporary Historiographical Neocolonization of Ukraine by Soviet Russia."

30. For the German text, see Jurij Badzio, "Offener Brief an das Präsidium des Obersten Sowjet der UdSSR sowie an das Zentralkomitee der KPdSU," in *Protest aus Kiew gegen Menschenrechtsverletzungen: Ein sowjetischer Wissenschaftler berichtet* (Munich: Gesellschaft zur Förderung der ukrainischen Helsinki-Gruppe, 1981), 15–48; for the English version, see Iurii Badzio, "An Open Letter to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and the Central Committee of the CPSU," *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 9, no. 1 (1984), 74–94, and *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 9, no. 2 (1984), 47–70.

31. For the German text, see Jurij Badzio, *Offener Brief an russische und ukrainische Historiker* (Munich: Ukrainisches Institut für Bildungspolitik, 1982). The text originally appeared in *Suchasnist'* 11 (1980), 128–54.

32. Badzio, "An Open Letter," 76.

33. *Ibid.*, 63, 92.

The opening line read: “I appeal to your scientific conscience, your professional honor, your consciousness. . . . [H]istorical consciousness . . . is a powerful . . . force; an attack on this memory, its violent containment, is a very important factor of national oppression.”³⁴ Here again, Badzio denounced the Soviet ideas of “fusion of nations” and “friendship of peoples” as justifications for Russia’s imperial expansion and the Russification of nationalities. More specifically, he argued that three anti-Ukrainian pseudotheories had emerged in Soviet historiography: the theory of “a single ancient Rus people” as the “common ancestor” of Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians, obliterating the separate paths of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus during the Middle Ages; the theory of the “long-awaited reunification of Ukraine with the great Russian people” in the seventeenth century; and the theory of the “bourgeois nationalism” of the present-day “reactionary” Ukrainian national liberation movement.³⁵ Page after page, Badzio attacked the official Soviet historiography for falsifying Ukrainian history and denying the existence of Ukrainians as an independent people,³⁶ concluding that “the individual self-awareness of people and the historical self-awareness of peoples are the guarantees for a democratic development of society. . . . Science is an influential sphere of life, and the power of history in it is great. So put this power at the service of human justice and freedom.”³⁷ Arrested in April 1979, Badzio was charged with “anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda” and sentenced for *Pravo zhyty*, spending more than nine years in prisons, labor camps, and internal exile before his release in late 1988.³⁸ After a short political career, during which he founded the social-democrat Democratic Party of Ukraine, for which he penned a manifesto in 1990, he started working at the Institute of Philosophy of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. When Ukraine became independent in 1991, the Security Service of Ukraine returned the parts of the second version of *Pravo zhyty* that had survived in the KGB archives. These were eventually published in 1996—almost a quarter of a century after Badzio had started the project.³⁹

The last example (case 5) comes from Chile. In 1998, the Chilean General Augusto Pinochet was arrested in London on the principle of universal jurisdiction at the request of Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón. Garzón wanted to interrogate Pinochet for the alleged deaths of Spanish citizens under his dictatorship (1973–1990). Pinochet remained in British custody from October 1998 until March 2000. With much time to reflect, he authored his “Letter to the Chileans” in London in late December 1998.⁴⁰ In this letter, which is described as his political testament, he wrote that no historian, not even the most biased one, could seriously claim

34. Badzio, *Offener Brief an russische und ukrainische Historiker*, 3–4.

35. *Ibid.*, 4.

36. *Ibid.*; Badzio, “An Open Letter,” 78–79.

37. Badzio, *Offener Brief an russische und ukrainische Historiker*, 32.

38. De Baets, *Censorship of Historical Thought*, 537–38.

39. Iurii Badzio, *Pravo zhyty: Ukraïna v skladi SRSR, liudyna v systemi totalitarnoho sotsializmu* [The right to live: Ukraine in the USSR, the individual within the system of totalitarian socialism] (Kyiv: Takson, 1996). The book was reviewed by Anatolii Rusnachenko in *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 23, no. 1 (1998), 129–33.

40. Augusto Pinochet Ugarte, “Carta a los Chilenos,” December 1998, https://es.wikisource.org/wiki/Carta_a_los_Chilenos,_de_Augusto_Pinochet.

that his conduct as president had been inspired by anything other than the good of Chile. In September 1973, when the government of President Salvador Allende was toppled, he argued, the army had been obliged to intervene with the help of God. It had acted as the moral reserve of a country that was disintegrating and becoming Communist. A country that did not discover its historical mission had no future; a country that forgot or denied its history could not face its challenges. Pinochet concluded that he was persecuted because he had defeated Communism in Chile and saved the country from a potential civil war. This took the lives of three thousand people, but almost a third of these were soldiers and civilians who had been victims of extremist terrorism. At approximately the time of Pinochet's letter, historian Gonzalo Vial Correa—a minister of education in the former's military government in 1978 and 1979 and a member of the first National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation in 1990 and 1991—wrote a series of columns in the daily *La Segunda* in which he defended a view of Chile's recent past that resembled Pinochet's.⁴¹

Eleven left-wing historians led by Sergio Grez Toso and Gabriel Salazar Vergara, who both had lived in exile under the dictatorship, decided to respond publicly to Pinochet's letter and Vial's columns.⁴² In January 1999, they wrote their "Manifiesto of Historians," which was published in *La Segunda* in early February 1999.⁴³ Their goal was to prevent Pinochet's letter from becoming the final verdict of recent history. They summarized his claims as follows: the military dictatorship of 1973 to 1990 was a national heroic act; the political crisis of 1973 was the exclusive work of Allende's Unidad Popular government, whose program proposed hatred, division, and Marxist socialism; and the military acted as the moral conscience of the nation to restore national unity and human dignity. The manifesto's writers rebutted the dictator's theses with two classical instruments from the historians' toolbox: contextualization and historicization. They argued that the expression "national heroic act" could only be used for actions carried out by the entire nation, not for an illegal coup by one faction. In addition, they contended that the 1973 crisis was triggered not only by the reformist Unidad Popular program but also by long-lasting social and economic processes originating in the nineteenth century and by the damage left by no less than eleven structural crises between 1851 and 1969 for which the incompetence of oligarchic elites was to blame. Finally, they argued that the claim that the military fought for national unity was untenable as they had in fact unleashed a dirty war against half the population in the name of a national security doctrine that had brought human rights violations and poverty. Pinochet's views and those of Vial and others, they argued, distorted history and tried to justify private, not public, interests. They concluded

41. Gonzalo Vial Correa's articles were titled "Fascículos de Historia de Chile 1964–1973" and were published in *La Segunda* from 1998 to 1999.

42. The other historians were Mario Garcés Durán, María Eugenia Horvitz, María Angélica Illanes, Leonardo León Solís, Pedro Milos, Julio Pinto Vallejos, Armando de Ramón Folch, Jorge Rojas Flores, and Verónica Valdivia Ortiz de Zárate.

43. "Manifiesto de historiadores," in *Manifiesto de historiadores*, ed. Sergio Grez and Gabriel Salazar (Santiago: LOM Ediciones, 1999), 7–26. The manifesto was originally published in *La Segunda* on 2 February 1999.

that the most important human right was respect for the capacity of citizens to construct their own future and that not recognizing or usurping that right meant imposing historical lies over truth.

Ten days later, Vial responded in a column in *La Segunda*, calling the manifesto's authors "leftist scientists who wander in the thin air of generalities."⁴⁴ However, *La Segunda* did not grant the historians an opportunity to reply, and Vial did not authorize the reproduction of his response in a book about the manifesto that was published later that year. The book left a blank page to signal that fact, and the blank page was followed by a long rejoinder by the manifesto's authors.⁴⁵ Interestingly, the book also contained other opinions than those of the eleven original signatories. In their preface, Grez and Salazar explained that they had wished to include contributions from "certain colleagues who embraced an approach more distant from ours" to feed a democratic debate.⁴⁶ These colleagues were historians from the political center who, although opponents of the dictatorship, had not agreed to sign the manifesto because their historiographical and political perspectives differed from those of the authors.⁴⁷ Most conservative historians remained silent. The manifesto did indeed fill a void; in the end, it was widely distributed and signed by many historians inside and outside Chile; it was succeeded by three further manifestos between 2004 and 2011.⁴⁸ As for Pinochet, he never reacted to the manifesto in public. He died in a hospital in 2006 without changing his mind: a letter written in 2004 and published posthumously according to his wishes merely repeated his self-defense.⁴⁹

DEFENDING BASIC PRINCIPLES

The principled type of open letter is represented by fifty cases in twenty-five countries. Fourteen cases defended the preservation of, and access to, archives, museums, and archaeological sites. Twelve demanded a reassessment of past crimes, particularly massacres (such as the 1940 Katyn massacres in the USSR, the 1988 prison massacres in Iran, or the Maoist crimes from 1949 to 1976 and the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre in China). Ten cases took up distortions in history textbooks and history education, a controversial issue in many countries,

44. Gonzalo Vial Correa, "Reflexiones sobre un manifiesto," *La Segunda*, 12 February 1999, quoted in Mario Garcés D., "En torno al 'pesado trabajo' del historiador en el Chile," in Grez and Salazar, *Manifiesto de historiadores*, 45.

45. For the blank page attributed to Gonzalo Vial Correa's "Reflexiones sobre un manifiesto," see Grez and Salazar, *Manifiesto de historiadores*, 27–28; the reply to Vial can be found in Sergio Grez and Gabriel Salazar, "Réplica a las 'Reflexiones sobre un Manifiesto,'" in Grez and Salazar, *Manifiesto de historiadores*, 29–37.

46. Sergio Grez and Gabriel Salazar, preface to *Manifiesto de historiadores*, 6.

47. Andrea Bostelmann, "Historiadores presentan manifiesto sobre el juicio a la dictadura militar," interview with Sergio Grez, Universidad de Chile website, 16 April 2007, <https://uchile.cl/noticias/40867/historiadores-presentan-manifiesto-sobre-juicio-a-la-dictadura-militar>.

48. *Manifiesto de historiadores (contra los que torturan a nombre de la patria)* (December 2004); *La dictadura militar y el juicio de la historia: Tercer manifiesto de historiadores* (April 2007); *Manifiesto de historiadores: Revolución anti-neoliberal social/estudiantil en Chile* (August 2011).

49. "Texto íntegro de la carta póstuma de Pinochet," *El Mundo*, 24 December 2006, <https://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2006/12/24/internacional/1166976334.html>.

including Poland (the blank spots in Communist history textbook curricula), India (the glorification of Hindu culture), Japan (the crimes committed during the Pacific War), and Turkey (the Armenian genocide). Eight cases defended a right to commemorate historical events such as independence struggles, occupations, protests, and massacres from the past. Finally, six cases were public defenses of a specific view of history.

The first affair discussed here in some detail is again a case from the USSR (case 6). It revolves around the notion of historical truth. The poet Aleksandr Tvardovsky was the chief editor of the leading literary journal *Novy Mir* (New World) between 1958 and 1970. Educated at the Institute of Philosophy, Literature and History in Moscow, he was an intellectual convinced that an honest reckoning with the Stalinist past was indispensable to making the socialist society thrive.⁵⁰ When *Novy Mir* celebrated its fortieth anniversary in January 1965, he wrote a long jubilee editorial.⁵¹ One of the topics he touched on was the concept of truth. In particular, he denounced the official habit of omitting facts; he maintained that such omissions equaled lies.⁵²

The editorial caused irritation in CPSU circles, and therefore, the official daily of the Supreme Soviet *Izvestia* published an attack on Tvardovsky's editorial in April 1965. It was written by Yevgeny Vuchetich, a sculptor nationally renowned for his heroic monuments.⁵³ In an attempt to rebut Tvardovsky's view that omissions of facts were lies, Vuchetich maintained that there were two types of truth: the "truth of the event and the fact" and the "*truth of the life and struggle of the people*."⁵⁴

Vuchetich's attack in turn elicited an open letter from a group of "prominent historians" in Tvardovsky's defense.⁵⁵ Although no names were mentioned, the group included Aleksandr Guber, Arkady Sidorov, Leonid Ivanov, and Viktor Danilov, among others. If such a thing as "Party truth" existed, they asked, then why did Vuchetich "forget" to mention the most important "Party truth"—namely, the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU in February 1956 when Nikita Khrushchev held his secret speech condemning Stalin? The only conceivable answer was that Vuchetich had deliberately excluded it.⁵⁶ And they continued:

The main thing is: there are not and cannot be two truths, only a complex dialectical path . . . from a limited vision of individual facts to their comprehensive analysis. . . . The facts of the past . . . are divided into two categories: desirable and undesirable facts. It turns out that there are facts that in themselves (!) can distort "the truth of the life and struggle of

50. Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 249.

51. Aleksandr Tvardovskii, "Po sluchayu yubileya" [On the occasion of the anniversary], *Novy Mir* 1 (January 1965), 3–18.

52. *Ibid.*, 12.

53. E. Vuchetich, "[Let's Make Things Clear]," *Izvestia*, 15 April 1965, cited in "Pismo gruppy vidnykh istorikov v gazetu 'Izvestiya'" [Letter from a group of prominent historians to the newspaper *Izvestia*], *Politichesky dnevnik* [Political Diary] 9 (June 1965), in *Politichesky dnevnik 1964–1970* (Amsterdam: Alexander Herzen Foundation, 1972), 83.

54. *Ibid.*, 85.

55. "Pismo gruppy vidnykh istorikov v gazetu 'Izvestiya,'" 83–88.

56. *Ibid.*, 84.

the people.” It turns out that mentioning, let alone analyzing, these objectionable facts can hinder our cause.⁵⁷

Vuchetich deplored that “some narrow-minded writers” emphasized the sacrifices of World War Two, while the latter were “merely the truth of an event, a fact, and not *the truth of the life and struggle of the people*.”⁵⁸ “But,” the historians asked, “are all these unprecedented sacrifices . . . really only facts and events evoked by narrow-minded writers? We have no right to forget these sacrifices as there was almost not a single family in the USSR that has not experienced them.”⁵⁹ “There is also another duty, another obligation,” they continued, “for the sake of the present and the future: to understand historical truth in its entirety.”⁶⁰ All those who accepted the conclusions of the Twentieth Congress could no longer look at these cruel historical facts with such far-reaching consequences as “an appearance of truth” to be consigned to oblivion.⁶¹ Silence about the past was dangerous because unanswered questions did not simply disappear; rather, they left room for enemies and ignorant loudmouths: “As historians, we are fully aware of the . . . difficulty of answering many questions. Our answers . . . should be the result of a serious study that embraces the totality of historical facts. . . . Marxist analysis requires scientific depth and objectivity and at the same time fearlessness in the face of facts.”⁶² “The concept of ‘two truths’ is so harmful,” they concluded, “because . . . it discredits the very idea of the relevance and effectiveness of . . . historical science.”⁶³

In May 1965, the open letter was sent to *Izvestia* only to be suppressed by the Department of Culture. Instead, it was published a month later in Medvedev’s *Political Diary*. In 1966, Viktor Danilov and S. Yakubovskaya planned to publish a separate article in *Novy Mir* about the silences of official historical science, but leading Party ideologist Sergei Trapeznikov reportedly boycotted this attempt.⁶⁴

The other affair (case 7), from China, revolves around the principles of freedom of expression and truth. In January 2006, *Bingdian* (Freezing Point), a weekly supplement of *Zhongguo qingnian bao* (China Youth Daily) with a print run of 400,000, published an essay by reform-minded emeritus historian Yuan Weishi entitled “Modernization and History Textbooks.”⁶⁵ Yuan first recalled the three disasters of the Maoist regime (1949–1976): the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution. In these successive campaigns, he argued, the Chinese had been taught to hate everyone. And upon browsing the middle-school history textbooks, Yuan was disappointed to discover that they

57. *Ibid.*, 85.

58. Vuchetich, “[Let’s Make Things Clear],” 85.

59. “Pismo gruppy vidnykh istorikov v gazetu ‘Izvestiya,’” 86.

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.*, 87.

63. *Ibid.*, 88.

64. Roger D. Markwick, *Rewriting History in Soviet Russia: The Politics of Revisionist Historiography, 1956–1974* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), 290n25.

65. Yuan Weishi, “Modernization and History Textbooks,” *Bingdian*, 11 January 2006, http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20060126_2.htm (Chinese) and http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20060126_1.htm (English).

were still replete with narrow-minded portrayals of historical events. They laid the blame for events such as the nineteenth-century Opium Wars entirely on foreign nations, without mentioning how the Qing dynasty had violated international treaties by refusing foreign merchants access to Chinese cities. Likewise, they blamed the foreign powers for the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) while omitting the violence committed by the rebels or their xenophobic views. Yuan thought that teaching an incomplete history of the Qing dynasty fostered blind nationalism and anti-foreign sentiment: “We have the duty to tell the true history to our youth so that they will never forget.”⁶⁶ When the Chinese noticed the distortions of the Pacific War (1931–1945) in Japanese textbooks and wondered why it was so difficult for the Japanese to admit their war guilt, they were justifiably angry. But Yuan added that the Chinese textbooks suffered from identical problems. He concluded: “You should not underestimate the consequences of this mis-education. It is against [common sense] and rationality to distort the historical truth in the name of the ‘revolution.’”⁶⁷ He identified three common errors in the textbooks: “1. The current Chinese culture is superior and unmatched. 2. Outside culture is evil and corrodes the purity of the existing culture. 3. We should or could use political power or the dictatorship of the mob to violently erase all the evil in the field of cultural thinking.”⁶⁸ He called these errors “an unforgivable harm” and said that the time had come to correct them.⁶⁹

Yuan’s essay generated considerable response among *Bingdian* readers, spurring chief editor Li Datong to justify its publication on his blog.⁷⁰ *Bingdian*, he wrote, had a tradition of pushing the limits of permissible journalism in China. While there had been disagreement over publishing the piece, Li defended his decision to accept the piece: even if the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was a no-go area, it was surely permitted to talk about late Qing history. Moreover, Yuan’s conclusions were not new for historians: “Of course, this subverted the [content] in the middle school [textbooks], but the television drama *Going Towards the Republic* was even much more subversive and CCTV [China Central Television] let a hundred million people watch it.”⁷¹

A week later, the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) of the Chinese Communist Youth League intervened, saying that *Bingdian* had “seriously distorted historical facts; it seriously contradicted news propaganda discipline; it seriously harmed the national feelings of the Chinese people; . . . and it created bad social influence.”⁷² The CPD dismissed Li and suspended *Bingdian* until it had printed a rectification.⁷³ The next day, Li protested the “illegal” suspension in an open

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.

70. “Li Datong’s Blog,” 17 January 2006, http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20060126_1.htm (Chinese and English).

71. Ibid.

72. “Concerning the Handling Decision with Respect to China Youth Daily Freezing Point Weekly Wrongly Publishing ‘Modernization and History Textbooks,’” 24 January 2006, http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20060126_1.htm (Chinese and English).

73. Ibid.

letter, arguing that Yuan's essay was merely an excuse and that the CPD had intervened in the debate with insults and characterizations reminiscent of those in vogue during the Cultural Revolution.⁷⁴ Yuan responded in similar terms. He had only pointed out a certain xenophobia and narrow nationalism: "I was talking about the thought process that wants to use simplified concepts to describe history in order to harm people."⁷⁵ But now young people called him a "national traitor" on the internet.

In early February 2006, thirteen CCP elders signed an open letter to President and CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao to protest *Bingdian's* suspension. They wrote: "Once freedom of speech is lost, those in power will only be able to hear one voice. . . . [T]o deprive the people of freedom of expression . . . will inevitably sow the seeds of destruction for political transition and social transformation, and will unavoidably trigger collective opposition and lead to unrest."⁷⁶ They urged the CPD to engage in self-criticism and enact a "Media Protection Law" to ensure the rights of the news media.⁷⁷

In mid-February 2006, an open letter was addressed to Hu and other members of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee by thirteen Chinese scholars, lawyers, and editors who had previously written for *Bingdian*—including historians Qin Hui, Zhang Yihe, and Zhu Xueqin.⁷⁸ They argued that the closure of *Bingdian*, not Yuan's essay, violated Article 35 of the 1982 Constitution about freedom of speech. They also referred to a famous discussion held in 1978 at the start of the post-Mao period of reform, when the principle stating that "practice is the sole criterion for measuring truth" was adopted by then CCP leader Deng Xiaoping.⁷⁹ This principle prescribed that, "to determine the truthfulness of speech, it is necessary to make it public and allow it to be subject to the test of practice."⁸⁰ In controlling the range of speech, the CPD had violated both the Constitution and this truth principle.

Two days later, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs defended *Bingdian's* suspension and the CCP Youth League issued a decision detailing the conditions under which it could reappear. When, on 1 March 2006, *Bingdian* resumed publication, its front page carried an article entitled "Anti-Imperialism and Anti-Feudalism Are

74. "The Open Letter from Li Datong," 25 January 2006, http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20060126_3.htm (Chinese and English). See also Li Datong, "Unsubstantiated Accusation," transl. Ben Carrus, *Index on Censorship* 35, no. 4 (2006), 167–74; Li Datong, "Tipping Point," transl. Joel Martinsen, *Index on Censorship* 37, no. 2 (2008), 62–67.

75. Interview with Yuan Weishi, *Ming Pao*, 27 January 2006, http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20060126_1.htm (Chinese and English).

76. "Joint Declaration Concerning the 'Freezing Point' Incident," 1 September 2006, <https://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/joint-declaration-concerning-the-freezing-point-incident-cecc-full> (English).

77. *Ibid.*

78. "Open Letter from Freezing Point Writers to the Political Bureau Standing Committee," 1 September 2006, <https://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/open-letter-from-freezing-point-writers-to-the-political-bureau> (English).

79. *Ibid.* See also Michael Schoenhals, "The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy," *China Quarterly* 126 (June 1991), 243–68.

80. "Open Letter from Freezing Point Writers."

the Themes of Contemporary Chinese History,” which was written by veteran historian Zhang Haipeng.⁸¹ Zhang criticized Yuan’s essay, finding that it “lacked justification in the historical record” and therefore “severely misled the youth.”⁸² Later, the uproar over Yuan’s essay led not to a media protection law but rather to a draft bill criminalizing “seditious” speech.⁸³

The row over *Bingdian* was unprecedented. Li Datong became one of the signatories of the human rights manifesto Charter 08 in December 2008. In 2018, he issued an open letter to the National People’s Congress (parliament) to protest the abolition of term limits for China’s president because it paved the way for Xi Jinping’s unchecked power. And Yuan, too, remained a distinct voice.

PRESENTING TRANSITIONAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

With only two cases, which I will both discuss here, the type of open letter confronting the legacies of dictators is the rarest.⁸⁴ In the first affair (case 8), from Romania, the authors looked forward to a transition that they were determined to support. On 25 December 1989, only days after the overthrow of dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, three leading historians in their eighties—Henri H. Stahl, David Prodan, and Dionisie Pippidi—gathered in Bucharest. Amid the upheaval, they tasked themselves with writing a “Declaration of the Committee of Free Historians of Romania” and collected the signatures of eleven other historians by telephone.⁸⁵ The text was delivered to the press, but television access was refused; it was also inserted in the last issue of the leading *Revista de Istorie* for 1989 and later translated into French.⁸⁶

The declaration began by quoting Romania’s most famous historian, Nicolae Iorga (Prime Minister from 1931 to 1932 and killed by the Iron Guard in 1940): “Victory has never come to lowered foreheads.”⁸⁷ In these extraordinary days, it explained, the first duty of Romanian historians was to condemn unequivocally the historical lies of Ceaușescu’s regime and to propose the outline of a

81. Zhang Haipeng, “Anti-Imperialism and Anti-Feudalism Are the Topics of Contemporary Chinese History,” *Bingdian*, 1 March 2006, https://zqb.cyol.com/content/2006-03/01/content_1324540.htm (Chinese).

82. *Ibid.*

83. Interview with Yuan Weishi, *Southern Metropolis Weekly*, March 2007, The China Story Project website, <https://www.thechinastory.org/key-intellectual/yuan-weishi> (English).

84. In principle, the Chilean manifesto (case 5) also belongs to this type because it was written during a post-dictatorial transition. However, it presents a rebuttal of Pinochet’s theses rather than a program for the future.

85. These historians were Petre Alexandrescu, Ștefan Andreescu, Gheorghe Brătescu, Ștefan Gorovei, Octavian Iliescu, Sigismund Jakó, Viorica Moiscu, Șerban Papacostea, Andrei Pippidi, Pompiliu Teodor, and Alexandru Zub. Other historians, such as Livia Dandara, signed it later; see her diary entry for 27 December 1989: <https://www.procesulcomunismului.com/marturii/fonduri/cdandara/agende/agenda1/jurnal1.htm>.

86. “Declarație a Comitetului istoricilor liberi din Romania,” *Revista de Istorie* 42, no. 12 (1989), 1167–68; Andrei Pippidi, “Une histoire en reconstruction: La culture historique roumaine de 1989 à 1992,” in *Histoire et pouvoir en Europe médiane*, ed. Antoine Marès (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1996), 245–46.

87. Dionisie Pippidi was Iorga’s son-in-law; Andrei Pippidi is his grandson.

new program for Romanian historiography. The falsification and lies of totalitarian nationalism had poisoned society and brought division and isolation. The true national values had been falsified and destroyed. It was up to the Romanian historians to restore their great historiographical tradition and create an authentic image of the past. The program to achieve this consisted of seven points: abandoning empty rhetoric; rebuilding truthful historical education; restoring teaching and research and rejecting plagiarism; reequipping libraries; protecting and accessing archives and museums; renovating historical monuments that had been subjected to a criminal policy of iconoclasm; and reconnecting with historians abroad, including Romanians in exile. Furthermore, the historians were clearly impressed by the ongoing upheaval: they demanded the creation of a special commission to study the events of December 1989 and appealed to all to collect evidence for its work. They concluded that it was the duty of Romanian historians to reestablish the truth about the history of the totalitarian regime in Romania and urged all historians to join them. On the day the declaration was drafted, Ceaușescu was executed.

In contrast to the Romanian declaration, a manifesto written in the Philippines (case 9) expressed fears for an imminent period of transition that it was determined to counter. The presidential elections of May 2022 were won by Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., son of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr., and his running mate Sara Duterte, daughter of former President Rodrigo Duterte, with an overwhelming majority (almost 59 percent of the votes). During the electoral campaign, the Marcos–Duterte alliance had embellished the achievements of the Marcos Sr. dictatorship (1965–1986) and minimized the suffering of its victims. And earlier, in January 2020, Marcos Jr. had already declared that it was time to revise the history textbooks because they contained “lies.”⁸⁸

Nine academics from the Philippines and overseas, coordinated by Oscar Campomanes, a professor of English in Quezon City, and Ramon Guillermo, a specialist in Southeast Asian studies in Manila, drafted the “Manifesto in Defense of Historical Truth and Academic Freedom.”⁸⁹ Published on 19 May 2022 in four languages and reprinted by several news sites, it attracted 1,700 signatures in one week.⁹⁰ The manifesto’s writers worried that Marcos Jr. would distort the history of his father’s dictatorship and feared that his victory would erase the traumatic memories of plunder and human rights violations under Martial Law (1972–1986) and encourage myths of a “Golden Age” under Marcos Sr. They pledged to combat all attempts at historical disinformation and protect the integrity and independence of educational, historical, and cultural institutions. They claimed they

88. Glee Jalea, “Marcos Pushes for Revision of History Textbooks: ‘You’re Teaching the Children Lies,’” *CNN Philippines*, 10 January 2020; Anthony Esguerra, “Preserve the Truth: Historical Books, Documents in Danger as Marcos Family Returns to Power,” *Voice of America*, 11 June 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/preserve-the-truth-historical-books-documents-in-danger-as-marcos-family-returns-to-power-/6613037.html>.

89. The other academics were Nicole CuUnjieng Aboitiz, Francis Gealogo, Caroline Hau, Jayson Lamchek, Vina Lanzona, Carlos Piosos III, and Lulu Torres Reyes. Four of them worked abroad.

90. “Manifesto in Defense of Historical Truth and Academic Freedom,” 19 May 2022, https://docs.google.com/document/d/11OR-HoMG_DOmSXV3mJqzrc4jZaWnkzhPz4yDKH6O4fw/edit.

would staunchly defend the freedoms of thought, inquiry, expression, and academic freedom and oppose attempts at censoring, book-banning, and red-tagging (blacklisting as Communist or terrorist). Furthermore, they vowed to promote academic initiatives to protect the memories of the traumatic dictatorial period against official attempts to eradicate them, to preserve all historical sources pertaining to the era, and to intervene in the vetting, writing, and teaching of history textbooks.

In June 2022, the new Vice President and Secretary of Education, Sara Duterte, assuaged fears that she would change the historical narrative.⁹¹ One month later, more than two hundred educators and scholars attended the launch of the Network in Defense of Historical Truth and Academic Freedom at the Ateneo de Manila University to implement the manifesto and organize a series of webinars.⁹² Some of the Network's initiators became active voices in the press, particularly to defend the manifesto against attacks that it was a product of the "incompetence, indolence, and unethical behavior of anti-Marcos scholars."⁹³ In this way, the Network became the principal instrument to implement the manifesto.

ANALYSIS

Before we return to our initial question about values, let us look at the nine open letters from different angles.

Authorship. The nine letters were written mainly by historians who were either victimized or marginalized by the authoritarian regimes they discussed in their letters. They spoke from personal experience and were more than advocates of the cause of history in the abstract (except, it seems, case 9). Three letters were written by single authors (cases 2, 3, and 4), two of them with details of their personal fate as victims (cases 2 and 4). Usually, historians were the sole authors; only in two cases did the authors also come from outside the profession (cases 7 and 9). The nine letters were written by sixty-one authors in total: six of them were the result of collective authorship (cases 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9), a fact that enhanced the representativeness of the values defended in these letters. In one case (case 8), the initiative was taken by three octogenarian historians who were part of the generation who had known the historiographical landscape firsthand before it became frozen by repression. Almost all authors wrote under their own names, which often required much courage (cases 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 9). Only

91. Edilberto C. de Jesus, "Critical Thinking on Historical Revisionism," *Inquirer.net*, 2 June 2022, <https://opinion.inquirer.net/153545/critical-thinking-on-historical-revisionism>.

92. See, among others, Pola Lem, "Academics Warn against Historical Revisionism in Philippines," *Times Higher Education*, 6 June 2022, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/academics-warn-against-historical-revisionism-philippines>, and Jan Cuyco, "'Academia in Peril': Filipino Scholars Push Back against Disinformation, Red-Tagging," *Interaksyon*, 7 July 2022, <https://interaksyon.philstar.com/politics-issues/2022/07/07/221637/academia-in-peril-filipino-scholars-push-back-against-disinformation-red-tagging/>.

93. Caroline Hau, "Response to Rigoberto Tiglao's 'Incompetence, Indolence, and Unethical Behavior of Anti-Marcos Scholars,'" *ikangablog*, 27 May 2022, <https://ikangablog.wordpress.com/2022/05/27/response-to-rigoberto-tiglaos-incompetence-indolence-and-unethical-behavior-of-anti-marcos-scholars/>. Tiglao was a former presidential spokesperson and controversial columnist.

two groups of authors preferred anonymity for fear of reprisals (cases 1 and 6). In one of these cases (case 1), the anonymous authors subtly showed their historical awareness by recalling precedents for their open letter from twelve and twenty-one years earlier.

Rhetoric. Most open letters adopted the form of traditional appeals with rational arguments cast in a tone of restrained emotions mixing respect for the addressee with fear, anger, and threats. Many had an original and incisive format: the list of victims, a technique also used in memorial books and truth commission reports (case 1); the personal case (case 2); the posthumous indictment (case 3); the direct response to a former dictator's letter (case 5); and the program for a transitional historiography (cases 8 and 9). Strikingly, the two open letters with a particularizing angle somehow managed to give the anecdotal a universalizing touch (cases 1 and 2).

Audience. The letters reached their audiences as a congress event (cases 1 and 2), an underground magazine article (cases 3, 4, and 6), an official journal article (case 8),⁹⁴ an online publication (cases 5, 7, and 9),⁹⁵ or a radio program (case 4). Three were prepared by historians living under a totalitarian regime but distributed by historians abroad (cases 1, 2, and 4). Two were rejected by their intended publication outlet but immediately "adopted" by a *samizdat* journal (cases 3 and 6). All letters except one (that is, case 6) were published abroad in the original and/or other languages, either immediately or with delays. Although the letters criticized the present or past leadership directly or indirectly, two were reactions to specific public remarks made by (former) heads of state (cases 5 and 9), while two others were addressed directly to them (cases 4 and 7). Many were also directed to historians who officially represented the regime, while some saw the broader national community of historians as their readership. Per definition, all authors intended their open letters to be read by the wider public, national as well as international. While they unambiguously condemned the distorted history politics of dictators, their attitude toward official historians—their colleagues—was less predictable. If visible at all, it was always critical (if not biting), but at the same time, it seemed to vary with the extent to which the latter had "betrayed" their predictatorial views and reputations and with the ruthlessness they used to execute the dictator's history politics (cases 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 9).

Impact. The impact of the letters is difficult to calculate as it differs for their authors, recipients, and broader readership and for the shorter and longer term. None of the letters resulted in improved conditions for their authors. If the intended recipient of the letter was the country's leadership, no direct response was ever received—although some indirect response was noted in three cases (cases 5, 7, and 9). In two cases (cases 1 and 2), international attention for the letters in all likelihood prevented the situation of the authors from becoming worse. In contrast, in two other cases (cases 3 and 4), the open letters constituted (additional) evidence for their authors' current or future indictment. The two appeals spurring to transitional historiography may have had divergent effects:

94. The text was also distributed as a leaflet.

95. In case 5, the text was also distributed as a book.

the optimistic manifesto awakened hopes, but the subsequent opinions of two signatories about its quality and impact were divided (case 8),⁹⁶ while the pessimistic manifesto fueled energies into a network that is still active at the time of writing (case 9). Finally, the fact that the nine letters are discussed in this article is a sign of their long-term impact.

Criticism. Open letters are not free from criticism simply because they come from historians defying authoritarian power. For example, some authors claimed that their alternative to the dictatorial version of history was “objective” (cases 1 and 6). Indeed, while open letters cannot render all the nuances of a full-fledged scholarly argument, the claim of complete objectivity is obviously problematic. One open letter (case 8) confessed a strange nostalgia for “the great tradition” of historiography as it had existed previously, as if four decades of dictatorship had not left their mark.⁹⁷ Yet another open letter (case 5) had a left-wing stamp and deterred not only conservative historians but also historians from the political center from signing it; evidently, authors cannot rewrite their open letters endlessly to cater to everyone’s tastes, but in this particular case, one of the initiators expressed something like regret in a later interview.⁹⁸

Regime stage. When we observe the stages through which each regime passes, we can typically identify three such stages: repression, thaw, and transition. Repression is defined as a stage in which arbitrary dismissals of historians (or worse) are rife; five of the nine open letters were written in such times (cases 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6). Hence, Rolf-Bernhard Essig’s claim that open letters barely exist in totalitarian societies fails.⁹⁹ In the other stages (political thaw [case 7] and transition [cases 5, 8, and 9]), writing open letters remained a gamble: while authors had a slightly larger maneuvering space, they still incurred high risks, not only at the moment of writing but also later, because if this space were to close abruptly, the letters could be held as evidence against them.¹⁰⁰

Regime type. Of a total of 106 open letters, 26 came from five Communist countries; in the sample, no fewer than seven of the nine letters came from four Communist countries (cases 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8). I do not attribute the high frequency of Communist cases to any ideological bias or selection error on my part (I tried to avoid them to the maximum) or to any specific letter-writing traditions in these countries. Aside from the fact that these cases were relatively better documented than many others, the high frequency is above all a consequence of the centrality of history in Communist ideology. The inner core of that ideology consisted of a law-driven theory of history—the theory of historical materialism—and whoever attacked that core endangered the regime. In other totalitarian and

96. See Pippidi, “Une histoire en reconstruction,” 248–54, and Alexandru Zub, “‘Postcommunism’ și discurs istoric în România,” *Xenopoliana* 2, no. 1–2 (1994), 97–98.

97. “Declarație a Comitetului istoricilor liberi din România,” 1167.

98. See Bostelmann, “Historiadores presentan manifiesto sobre el juicio a la dictadura militar.”

99. Rolf-Bernhard Essig, *Der Offene Brief: Geschichte und Funktion einer publizistischen Form von Isokrates bis Günter Grass* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2000), 18 (but his note 19 seems to contradict the claim).

100. In case 7, the authors only published their open letter after learning of the letter of the Party elders.

authoritarian regimes, history was often crucially important, but nowhere so existentially linked to the regime's survival.¹⁰¹ In short, Communist regimes reveal with great clarity what is discernible in other totalitarian and authoritarian contexts as well. As I will now demonstrate, the values invoked by historians under attack transcend specific regime types.

Let us therefore turn to our initial question: To which values do historians appeal when they come under sustained attack from political power? Three conclusions seem to impose themselves. The first is that the normative framework within which most historians under attack expressed their claims was formulated in human rights language. Indeed, almost all letters focused on how the human rights of historians were threatened (that is, except case 6). In the USSR in particular (represented by three cases), open letters protesting the crimes of the past and Stalin's rehabilitation have even been strongly associated with the emergence of the human rights movement after 1965.¹⁰² Predictably, the most frequently cited of these human rights was freedom of expression. The authors of one letter had called their group the Committee of Free Historians (case 8). Tellingly, the names of many of the historians who signed open letters also appeared on human rights petitions circulating in their countries around the same time (especially in cases 1, 2, 3, and 7).

The second conclusion is that, invariably, the open letters understood the conception of historiography in its full breadth, including not only research and teaching but also its documentary infrastructure and its ramifications in education and in the public sphere. They frequently wrote about citizenship, either by emphasizing their own roles as citizens (cases 1, 2, 4, and 5), proposing comprehensive programs for the future (cases 8 and 9), discussing the social functions of historiography such as its part in history education (cases 7, 8, and 9), or demanding truth commissions or court trials as avenues for society to cope with its past (cases 3 and 8).

The final and most important conclusion is that, by and large, the letters clearly presented respect for historical truth as the ultimate purpose and anchor for the historian's work. In one case (case 9), the concept of historical truth was incorporated into the name of the manifesto and the network that came out of it. In another case (case 6), the historians precisely made the impossibility of dual truth conceptions their *leitmotiv*. In still a third case (case 7), the authors referred to a famous nationwide truth criterion controversy from the recent past. This preference for truth cherished by dozens of historians under attack was predictably not eccentric. In doing so, they joined an age-old tradition of persecuted historians who insisted on respect for historical truth in their defenses. And yet there is a deeper truth behind this preference for truth. The conception of historical truth at stake in the open letters is *minimalist* and therefore largely independent of regime type and epoch: truth should be understood here as the absence of historical lies

101. I explored this theory more at length in Antoon De Baets, *Crimes against History* (London: Routledge, 2019), 19–23.

102. Barbara Martin, "Roy Medvedev's *Political Diary*: An Experiment in Free Socialist Press," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 67, no. 4 (2019), 612, 614.

and falsifications. In other words, behind the emphasis on truth as the most important value lies an emphasis on integrity.

The concept of scientific integrity in the historical field has a dual anatomy. The *historical* anatomy emphasizes that in itself integrity only guarantees a minimalist conception of historical truth, characterized by the absence of lies and falsification. The *legal* anatomy of integrity focuses on the act (the search for truth, including selection and omission) with a material element that is epistemic (a search characterized by accuracy) and a mental element that is moral (a search characterized by honesty and incorruptibility). The reason for the ubiquity of this minimalist integrity conception of historical truth may lie in a deep-seated professional fear: the fear that the dictator's corrupt and divisive version of history would survive and triumph as the final verdict.

POSTSCRIPT

A strong concern for historical truth and for the integrity of history, present and future, is the overarching rationale for many of the letter writers. A case that poignantly illustrates this is Badzio's rebuttal of the falsified Soviet historiography on Ukraine (case 4). Written in 1979, it can be read in 2024 as a stunningly accurate refutation of Russian President Vladimir Putin's distorted historical view of Ukraine in a July 2021 essay that effectively repeated many of the Soviet historical tropes about Ukraine.¹⁰³ This distorted historical view was the harbinger of future violence. The world saw its consequences barely seven months later.

Overall, the open letters testify to the fact that merely performing the role of a historian—understood as responsibly and methodically working with data from the past and following it wherever it leads—is already a political act in any society, and a dangerous one in closed societies, especially when the leadership depends on a particular view of the past for its ideological survival and the work of historians is seen as undermining it.¹⁰⁴ The emphasis on historical truth and integrity is for good reason. History in the hands of irresponsible rulers can be as fatal as bullets. History written in ink, if distorted by power, all too often turns into history written in blood.

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103. Historians Vladyslav Starodubtsev and Alyona Yakubets independently made the same point. For Vladimir Putin's essay, see "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," website of the President of Russia, 13 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>. See also International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH), *Russia: Crimes against History* (Paris: FIDH, 2021).

104. See also the afterword in De Baets, *Crimes against History*, 22–23.