



Censorship

A World Encyclopedia

EDITED BY
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CENSORSHIP

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[History: Rewriting History](#)

Censorship of history can be defined as the systematic control of the content or exchange of information and ideas concerning the past, imposed by, or with the connivance of, the authorities. It can be directed against the historical work in all its stages or against the producers or consumers of this work. Censorship of history is widespread and multi-faceted, and occurs in widely diverging political and historiographical contexts. Its natural habitat is a non-democratic climate in which historians are harassed, dismissed, imprisoned, tortured, or killed, but its traces are also recognizable in the grey areas of democracy.

The core obligation of historians is to search historical truth, but the task is difficult, sometimes impossible, to fulfil in conditions where freedom of information and expression are absent. The eagerness of some rulers to censor history has often been proof *a contrario* of their historical awareness. A superficial count of the heads of state and government between 1945 and 2000 who had either a degree in history, wrote a historical work, held important speeches with historical content, or showed their active interest in history in other demonstrable ways, totals 62 leaders in 45 countries. In 1931, Joseph Stalin called disloyal historians "archive rats". His successor Nikita Khrushchev declared in 1956: "Historians too must be directed."

When the aim is to control the past, the censor attaches importance to both professional and non-professional producers of history, and to interpretations of the past in written, spoken, or visual form. Popular history is as much a target as academic history, and probably even more so. A flexible definition

of historians includes, on the one hand, all professionals and trainees in the historical sector in the broad sense, including archivists and archaeologists, but also students of history, and, on the other, authors of popular or academic historical works, regardless of training or profession (i.e. journalists, politicians, etc. provided they have been active in the historical field).

Varieties of control

Restrictions upon the activities of historians emanate first of all from such conditions as war, colonization, poverty, and violence which may cause the loss of manuscripts or lead to dangerous working conditions. The theft of items from the archival and monumental heritage by colonizers and occupiers is closely related to censorship and takes place on an international scale. The removal of indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands - thus destroying their telluric memory - has also to be seen as a form of *de facto* censorship.

Second, every government imposes its constraints. Information acts and archival laws regulating selection of, and access to, records vary from country to country. Whenever official information policies are arbitrary and /or secrecy areas are too broadly formulated, governments are on the brink of practising censorship. At that moment, secrecy is used to conceal sensitive information, avoid criticism, and reduce accountability.

Public libraries may also restrict the acquisition and consultation of information, or monitor a reader's profile on ideological grounds. Of a different order is the official banning of controversial opinions. This includes the suppression of traditions and commemorations or other acts with a historical dimension (e.g. the defamation of former heads of state, flag desecration, removal of statues). The executive branch of government is the main censor, but other branches also engage in the practice. Parliaments may adopt laws mandating the teaching of history in the language of the majority. Judges may check too eagerly whether historians carried out their research honestly and prudently in accordance with the accepted professional methods; they may consequently interpret normal historical practice as defamation of the dead.

Educational authorities may implement a third form of restriction. The general policies governing university entrance, funding of research and teaching, personnel recruitment, and infrastructure management all influence working conditions. As a result, academics in most countries are indirectly dependent on government budgets. History censorship may be further disguised as pressure from the historical establishment, corporatism, political correctness on the campus, or rejection of theses and manuscripts for incompetence. Professional and economic types of repression, such as refusal of promotion, demotion, revocation of academic degrees and responsibilities, restrictions on travel abroad and contacts with foreign scholars, and finally, loss of employment may sometimes be insidious forms of censorship, not always recognizable as such.

Fourth, individuals and unofficial groups may threaten unwelcome manifestations of the past: they loot archives or museums, destroy or desecrate monuments, boycott books, and sue historians for religious, political, or ethnic reasons. In alliance with the government they are sometimes involved in censorship activity. Fifth, every society has its taboos and its amnesia which, when officially enforced through a policy of secrecy and suppression verge on censorship. Sixth, self-censorship is the most

efficient, widest spread, but least visible form of censorship. Other personal conduct too may have a double meaning: the destruction of personal research notes may be more than clearance, a stay abroad may be voluntary exile, a retirement compulsory, a suicide due to political pressure.

Types of justification

One of the main characteristics of a tyranny is its practice of systematic censorship. The absolute power in such a society does not receive sufficient legitimacy from elections, laws, and traditions, and has to seek elsewhere, often in the past. That power, embodied in an official ideology, attempts to clarify convincingly two major questions: which historical path did the collectivity follow hitherto? Why is the ruler particularly suited to guide it with a firm hand into the future? Each community needs roots and feelings of continuity with its ancestors. At the same time, no ruler who sets out to give the community that desired background can do without an acceptable biography and a venerable genealogy. The past contains a huge stock of usable examples to satisfy these two demands, but the problem is that the official selection of fitting historical examples to give body to both can be challenged at any given moment. Therefore, the ruler is forced not only to make use of the past, but also to optimize that use. As Bernard Lewis put it:

The problem is to justify a successful revolution without at the same time justifying further revolutions against the first one - or to justify an existing authority without at the same time justifying a restoration of that which it has just overthrown ... probably the only solution to it is ... complete state control of the means of production, distribution, and exchange of historical knowledge and writing.

In short, the official ideology has to make history its instrument

In contrast to democracies that draw legitimacy from the past, tyrannical regimes do not tolerate alternative historical versions, using propaganda and censorship to promote the official vision and to eradicate the rest. Propaganda is a much broader phenomenon than censorship and, while historical propaganda - the systematic manipulation of information concerning the past by, or with the connivance of, the authorities - is not absent from democratic societies, systematic censorship of history generally is. None of the stages of historical scholarship is safe from propaganda and censorship. Ideally, they do not blatantly falsify the historical record, but leave intact as much of the past as possible, only altering key passages. They attempt to distort history gently so as to arouse unanimity, not suspicion and dissent. Reality, however, does not always match the ideal: history is often crudely mutilated and falsified. Propaganda is close to censorship when it denies, omits, forgets. But there is one crucial difference: censorship tries to suppress alternative views through control, and ultimately through violence, whereas propaganda tries to impose one view through manipulation, and ultimately through lies (including lies about violence). Propaganda does not necessarily imply censorship, but censorship is always accompanied by propaganda. The union of propaganda and censorship creates an official historiography with monopolistic pretensions and absolute truths, and discourages challenges. Historical truth, when decreed and absolute, is the companion of oblivion. Excellent topics for propaganda are those that illustrate the official ideology. Cherished antecedents and historical parallels favourable to tyrannical power will be praised, enemies and heresies will be diabolized. To that end, some episodes of history will need re-evaluation or recovery. Topics that will be viewed as controversial and subject to censorship are

those that question the official ideology: crimes and victims of the regime, rivalry among its leaders, discord among the population, allusions to the illegitimate or mystified origins of power, frictions with other countries, military defeat, periods of humiliation and weakness, the history of successful rivals, dominated minorities, and classes.

The dynamics of making historiography servile are dependent on many factors: the traditions of integrity among historians before tyranny, the consistency, elaboration, and degree of monopoly by the tyrannical ideology, the centrality of history in it, the strength of the repressive apparatus. The ideological interpretations of the past may continuously adapt to the needs of the moment; firm and lenient control may alternate. In his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell described the position of history in the model repressive state: "All history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and re-inscribed, exactly as often as was necessary." Whereas the aim of the tyrant is a unanimously obedient people, the result may be a credibility gap

Diversities of context

The following three cases shed some light on the strengths and weaknesses of the argument:

In August 1951 Moses Finley (1912-86), who taught ancient history at Rutgers University, New Jersey, was accused of having run a communist study group while a graduate student at Columbia University during the 1930s. The accusation came from William Canning, a historian, and Karl Wittfogel, a former German Communist who had spent a year in various prisons and concentration camps and, after his exile in 1934, became a historian of China at the University of Seattle. Both were testifying before the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee and had previously arraigned Finley. As early as 1938-41, Finley had been the executive secretary of the American Committee for Democracy and Intellectual Freedom, a group chaired by the anthropologist Franz Boas. Wittfogel labelled this committee an "academic front organization". Canning named Finley a communist during the Rapp-Coudert hearings in March 1941, which may have prevented Finley's appointment as an instructor at the City College of New York. In March 1952, Finley testified before the Senate Subcommittee that he was not a Communist Party member, but invoked the Fifth Amendment (a constitutional privilege against self-recrimination) when asked if he had ever been one, thus avoiding a possible indictment for perjury. Initially Rutgers University supported Finley but, in December 1952, its board of trustees unanimously declared that pleading the Fifth Amendment was sufficient reason for immediate dismissal, thus overruling the conclusions of a special advisory committee and a special faculty committee. Finley was dismissed from his assistant professorship and blacklisted at American universities. He founded the American Committee for the Defense of International Freedom in response to the rise of McCarthyism. From 1954 onwards he pursued his career in Britain at Cambridge University. His nomination to the history department of Cornell University in May 1958 was rejected by the university president; the history department's appeal to the faculty Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure was to no avail.

Jian Bozan [Chien Po-tsan] (1898-1968), an ethnic Uighur, a member of the Philosophy and Social Science Division of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and head of the history department and vice-president of Beijing University (Beida) (1952-68), was one of the founders of Marxist historiography in China. In around 1957 he criticized the leading Communist Party cadres for not going far enough with

the liberalizing Hundred Flowers Movement and in 1958-61 rejected the Great Leap Forward policies. Central to his criticism of the extreme leftist ideological trend of the late 1950s were his "historicism" and his "concession theory". The first meant respect for the context and the complexity of historical fact and primacy of the empirical methodology, the second explained that when confronted with peasant rebellion the ruling class, to restore the established order, had to make concessions. In a June 1962 speech to the Nanking Historical Society he attacked the slogan "Lead History with Theory" directly. This became the basis for the charge that he had rejected the class struggle view of history.

In December 1965, at the dawn of the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong personally attacked Jian's concession theory. Between March and December 1966 Jian was subjected to a criticism campaign, including more than 40 attacks in a dozen different newspapers and journals. He was denounced as an antisocialist, anti-Party bourgeois "academic authority" who sought to lay the ideological foundation for the restoration of capitalism, and was brutally persecuted. In late 1967, Nie Yuanzi, leader of the Red Guard rebel faction at Beida and foremost member of the "Big Five" Red Guard leaders of Beijing, and her assistant, Sun Pengyi, reportedly compiled a black list of 30 teachers from the history department whom they regarded as reactionary. Jian was one of five whom they eventually persecuted to death. In December 1968 he committed suicide together with his wife, according to one source, on the same day that he had heard that his name had been publicly and officially cleared. At the end of 1977, and again from April to July 1978, the Red Guard atrocities were denounced on wall posters at Beida. The history department came under the strongest attack. The posters suggested that those responsible for the death of Jian were still in charge of the department and in the reorganization that followed, three departmental leaders were removed from office. In September 1978 Jian Bozan was officially rehabilitated.

During the Czechoslovak "normalization" in September 1973, ^a a book called *From Illegality to the Rising: Chapters from the History of Democratic Resistance*, published in 1969 and honoured with a Socialist Academy prize in 1970, was removed from public libraries and bookshops. Its author was the Slovak historian Jozef Jablonický, staff member (1960-74) and head of the department of modern history at the Slovak Academy of Sciences History Institute. He was accused of having underestimated the communist resistance and overrated the noncommunist resistance during the 1944 Slovak national uprising. The book criticized the 1964 memoir of party secretary Gustáv Husák, who had participated in the uprising. In August 1974 Jablonický was dismissed from the History Institute and moved to the Slovak Institute of Conservation of Monuments and Protection of Nature. His new study on the communist resistance could not be published. The state security police investigated his case and his house was searched 11 times. During four house searches in November 1976 many of his books, periodicals, personal correspondence, research archives, and at least three manuscripts, including his study *The Slovak Communist Party in Antifacist Resistance*, were confiscated and not returned. He was interrogated by the police, demoted, and expelled from the Slovak Communist Party, and in February 1978 his permit for research into historical archives was withdrawn.

In August 1978 Jablonický completed a new text of *Bratislava and the Origins of the Slovak National Rising*, the original manuscript of which had been seized by the police in November 1976. In 1979 he wrote two polemical articles against gaps in official historiography (published in 1994). His study *The Failure of Malár's Army in the Carpathians* circulated in the Padlock Editions *samizdat* series. The first two versions of this study were seized by the police in November 1976 and June 1978, and the third

version was written while the author simultaneously hid away remnants of his own archival collection and every completed page of his manuscript. In the same year he was named a "perpetrator of antisocial activities" by obstinately insisting on his right to pursue his historical research. His writings were labelled "harmful to the interests of the state" and "in conflict with official historical findings". In November 1979 he was arrested while visiting Prague, interrogated by two police officers, briefly detained, and put back on the train for Slovakia. The police alleged that an illegal meeting connected with the human rights organization Charter 77 was to have taken place in his presence the following day. In May 1981 he was detained for four days. In August 1984 he had to appear at the customs administration because a customs official had allegedly found "objectionable printed material" (copies of émigré historical journals) in a parcel from Paris. He was charged with "incitement" and his flat, garage, and place of work were searched. His most recent papers on history, as well as reference documents, were confiscated because they were considered particularly dangerous in the year of the 40th anniversary of the Slovak uprising. He was then interrogated. A week later he was again summoned as a witness. He remained a banned writer until the Velvet Revolution of 1989. In 1990 he was able to resume his work at the Political Science Institute of the Academy of Sciences.

These three examples have been selected from a database covering hundred of cases in more than 130 countries, of historians persecuted and censored since 1945. Finley was persecuted for being too communist, Jian and Jablonický for not being communist enough; in two of the three cases the political leaders of the country were directly involved (Mao and Husak); in all three cases, attempts at rehabilitation took place. It would not be wise, however, to draw sweeping conclusions: the sample is too small and arbitrary. Moreover, these three historians were already famous in their countries at the time of their persecution, and many others were not. On the other hand, the three cases demonstrate the diversity of context (McCarthyism, Cultural Revolution, "normalization") and fate (emigration, suicide, censorship).

Methods and targets

Censorship affects all historical genres. In many countries, contemporary history is certainly the most dangerous period of study. But in some countries, earlier periods of history constitute the focus of official attention. Elsewhere the origins of the nation and, concomitantly, archaeological findings are sensitive topics. Restricted access, neglect, and destruction of archives are sometimes vital expressions of the government's strategy. No genre is really a safe area, not even the most "system-independent" (such as source editions). Three domains come under closest scrutiny: contemporary history (because the witnesses are still alive), popular history with its multiple channels (because of its reach), and all media feeding or reflecting collective memory (such as songs, wall paintings, commemorations, television). Pre-censorship attempts to regulate research: sources are destroyed or made inaccessible, manuscripts and data confiscated, rewritten, or rejected. Publishers and printers can be forced to align with the official policy. Whereas to the public pre-censorship is often invisible, post-censorship, aimed at the consumption of the products of research, is not: lectures may be boycotted, publications blacklisted, banned, pulped, or burned. The **study of censorship**, however, is seriously hampered by the atmosphere of secrecy usually surrounding it: the more **effective** it is, the less visible. Research into it may be

dangerous inside the country and very **difficult** outside, due to the lack of information.

In such a context, historians are forced to take a position, opting either for collaboration, silence or resistance. In the first category, the propaganda historians co-operate with the tyrant. Among them, the court historians write the official history, lead the new history departments and journals, enjoy the privileges and favours of power, are perhaps engaged as censors. The bureaucratic historians carry out the smaller tasks and disseminate the official views. In both groups, some suffer from the moral dilemma engendered by the manipulation of history, others revolt and become dissident and persecuted historians themselves. The silent historians include those who yield to the pressure, tacitly accept propaganda, and employ self-censorship out of fear or for opportunistic or idealistic reasons; others avoid controversy, switch to relatively safe areas of research and teaching, and enjoy the small margins of freedom. Others again opt for inner exile; they tacitly refuse to endorse the regime, leave their manuscripts in the drawers, or discontinue their historical work to preserve their conscience.

There are four basic forms of resistance. Aesopian historians use tricks to evade censorship (historical analogies, an ornate style, omission of the index, original research in-between obedient introduction and conclusion). Opposition historians openly attack falsification, re-orient their field of study towards prohibited eras and topics, organize petitions and manifestos. They usually become the object of scathing attacks. Underground historians continue their research clandestinely, often refuting official views, and publishing their manuscripts in *samizdat*. Theirs is a dangerous and mostly isolated position, cut off from an audience, barely surviving. They take extensive personal security measures and their work is characterized by methodological approaches that compensate for the scarcity of historical sources at their disposal. The refugees, voluntarily or involuntarily in exile, try to adapt to a new environment. As most have written national history, they confront the painful problem of being cut off from their natural environment and sources. Some change careers, while others keep alive the critical traditions of historiography. It is not easy to determine why some historians choose clandestinity and others exile. Clandestinity is unnecessary when the regime allows enough freedom and impossible when it allows none. Occasionally, underground and refugee historians have co-operated or been in conflict; confronting tyranny may unite them; mutually incompatible historiographies may divide them. When their historical work is polemical, its quality may be affected.

Resistance on the historical front is often part of broader resistance movements. Consequently, historians may be persecuted ostensibly for their historical work but in reality for their political views, and non-historians ostensibly for political reasons, but in reality for their interpretations of the past. It is difficult to ascribe unequivocal motives to the position that historians take in times of repression, or for the shift in their position at given moments. Therefore, moral judgements from outsiders concerning their freedom to act and their collaboration, silence, or resistance are seldom relevant. All historians living under tyranny can become the victims of persecution and censorship. Professional repression, individual or collective, ranges from the loss of privilege and promotion, over covert or overt damaging operations, to demotion, dismissal, and unemployment. When the historian becomes *non grata* and suspicion is all-pervasive, the terror will transform from professional to physical repression. Mail control, telephone tapping, intimidation, blackmail, smear campaigns, threats - even to those living abroad, house search, purge, interrogation, house arrest, trial, and detention are part of its panoply. The ultimate shape of censorship is torture, death penalty, political murder, disappearance. Even in the darkest hours, the

distorted past may be challenged by the versions whispered at home or written down by those who replace the silenced historian. The alternative versions may be equally distorting, but they are alternative and, through them, the flame of plurality continues to burn.

Aftermaths

Whether general historical consciousness increases or diminishes in times of censorship is hard to say. The erasure of history may well lead to decreasing historical consciousness, to amnesia, and to the loss of the vital source of identification that is the past. It may also lead to an upsurge of historical awareness as a source of consolation and power to counterbalance contemporary terror. Paradoxically censorship may have unintended positive effects. Taboos always attract curiosity. When history is silenced and compromised, and has lost its credibility, every utterance - graffiti, literature, theatre, film - becomes its potential vehicle. Thus, censorship may not suppress alternative views but rather generate them, and, by doing so, undermine its own aims.

When tyrants are toppled, the windows of the past are thrown open. People soon want to know history "as it actually happened". The transition to democracy and the abolition of systematic censorship go hand in hand and enable the development of an independent historiography. It is an epoch of uncertainty and disorientation, as intimidation and suspicion feverishly change into hope, but, at the same time, old habits may suddenly return and prevent the new tradition of freedom from rooting. The past plays a key role in the process, for the exposure of historical falsifications, the rehabilitation of political adversaries formerly fallen in disgrace, the predilection for new historical symbols all contribute to the delegitimation of the *ancien regime*. Two or more warring pasts may co-exist. The task is difficult and includes the replacement (avoiding both purges and impunity) of compromised historians, the rehabilitation and re-employment (if still feasible) of persecuted historians, and the training of a new generation of responsible history students. Archives need a new policy of openness. Some historical genres - those most abused (chronicles, biographies, genealogies) - can be discredited for a long time to come. However, also in the new era, official history will exist and be at the service of ideology and power. But the difference between tyranny and democracy is crucial: the new historiography, aspiring to be free and independent, will tirelessly open archives, fill in blank spots, demystify propagandist versions of the past, and further develop its critical methods at all stages of scholarship, so as to be less amenable to abuse. Perhaps the hardest task of all is to keep alive a decent memory of historical atrocities. For historians, the most troubling part of their vocation is to be chroniclers of painful memory. When Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian novelist, tried to be such a chronicler in the face of persecutors who did not want the past to be dug up, he cited an old proverb: "Dwell on the past and you'll lose an eye; forget the past and you'll lose both."

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History: School Curricula and Textbooks

History textbooks for primary and secondary schools have a wide reach and a potentially big impact. Censors therefore see them as vital channels for disseminating either approved and official or dissident and dangerous views of history. Authorities worldwide interfere in their production and distribution and monitor them closely. On the one hand, textbook authors are relatively free to express opinions, as they seldom depend on their authorship as a source of income; on the other hand, they lack the professional historian's academic freedom, as they must work under permanent pressure from political and educational authorities (and from publishers and textbook users).