

THE DARK SIDE OF HISTORICAL WRITING:
REFLECTIONS ON THE CENSORSHIP OF HISTORY
WORLDWIDE (1945–2012)

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SUMMARY: 1. Definition. – 2. Patterns and trends. – 3. Themes to explore.

Just as societies are well studied at the atypical moments of their deepest crises, so has the history of historical writing its privileged but surprising vantage points. The present reflections aspire to demonstrate that the worldwide study of the censorship of history is such an unexpected panoramic point. If historical writing is a photograph, then the censorship of historical writing is its negative. Censorship is the dark side of historical writing. Research into it yields many insights into the essence of historical writing itself.

The reflections that follow represent the final conclusions drawn from a worldwide study by the author, provisionally entitled *Censorship of History (1945–2012)*. This study, hereinafter called “the Survey,” is due to appear in English and Dutch. The reflections should give the reader an impression of the perspective of a historian who looks at the relationship between law and history, at the field of transitional justice and at the public uses of history. First, however, the concept of censorship as it is defined here must be clarified.

1. Definition

The term censorship, the leading specialist in media law Eric Barendt wrote, is emptied of real meaning if it is applied to any social convention or practice that makes communication for some individuals more difficult¹. Therefore, the emphasis in the Survey lies on the coercive practices of the state or other powers. My definition of censorship is larger than the legal definition, which in a strict sense equals censorship to prior restraint and in a broad sense also calls censorship any restrictions of free expression that engender considerable chilling effects and disproportionate sanctions. The censorship of history is taken here as the systematic control over historical facts or opinions and their exchange – often by suppression – imposed by, or with the connivance of the government or other

¹ E. Barendt, *Freedom of Speech*, Oxford, 2005, [first edition 1985], 151.

powers. This form of censorship can be directed against a historical work in all its stages or against its producers or consumers. Censorship may be either official or unofficial, and either formal or informal. Special attention was given to the multiple guises of censorship and to the varieties of indirect and de facto censorship. The range of persecution of historians includes pressure, harassment, dismissal, imprisonment, torture and death.

Censorship is usually not an isolated phenomenon. It is often difficult to conceptually distinguish it from closely related concepts that may have similar effects, such as selfcensorship or historical propaganda². In addition to these conceptual problems, there are gray zones with a high censorship risk³. Many of these high-risk cases are incorporated in the Survey, even if, on balance, the risk did not materialize. Defamation trials are a good example: they were inserted in the Survey without distinction, but not all of them chilled freedom of expression or were used inappropriately to censor.

Unsuccessful attempts at censorship, where known, are sometimes included in the Survey for two reasons: first, moral and professional blameworthiness does not depend on success, and, second, even unsuccessful attempts can chill the free exchange of historical views and lead to selfcensorship by the historians targeted and by others. *In short, the Survey does not discuss the fine line of censorship and the*

² A list of related yet distinct concepts would include: selfcensorship of historians; historical propaganda; abuse of history; irresponsible history; misconduct by historians; social forgetting (amnesia, oblivion); historical taboos; historical myths; denial of historical facts; charges of invasion of privacy or of defamation and insult; commissioned history; legal forgetting (including prescription, pardon and amnesty); official history; official secrecy of current and archival records; selection of archives; the rejection of historical work by peers; copyright; plagiarism; theft of manuscripts; piracy of manuscripts; omission by historians of own historical opinions; omission by historians of historical facts; confidentiality of historical facts or opinions after conditions imposed by archive holders or interviewees; nondisclosure of information sources by historians; and, finally, constraints flowing from codes of ethics for historians. See A. De Baets, *Taxonomy of Concepts Related to the Censorship of History*, in S. Maret, ed., *Government Secrecy: Research in Social Problems and Public Policy*, no. 19, 2011, 55–67, for definitions of all these concepts.

³ They include the following: generally adverse contexts (war, colonization, poverty); constraints imposed on history by the government in the realms of national security, public order and public morals; restrictions implemented by educational authorities, publishers and the establishment of historians; pressure from individuals and unofficial groups outside academe; the effects of gender, national, ethnic, religious or racial bias leading to the distortion of history; and, finally and again, selfcensorship (as the most efficient, widest-spread, but least visible form of censorship). See A. De Baets, *Censorship and History (Since 1945)*, in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, A. Schneider – D. Woolf, eds., volume 5, *1945 to Present*, Oxford, 2011, 58–59.

multiple phenomena surrounding it in each and every case. Although it focuses on censorship as much as possible, due to the difficulties outlined, it also includes cognate cases.

Not all restrictions on freedom of expression can be called censorship all the time. According to the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, free expression can be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary: for respect of the rights or reputations of others; or for the protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals. The restrictions themselves should thus be prescribed by law, be necessary and limited to the six domains enumerated⁴. If the restrictions conform to these conditions, they cannot be called censorship. If they do not conform, they constitute either censorship or violations of the right to free expression. If it cannot be determined whether they conform to these conditions, they belong to the gray zones with a high censorship risk.

Knowledge of the censorship of history

How do we know when censorship occurred? This is a difficult question as censorship's very nature is to disguise itself. Three epistemological paradoxes are worth mentioning. First, *the less visible the censorship, the more effective it is*. Although some censorship attempts are accompanied by much public controversy, usually censorship is difficult to trace since it preferably takes place in an atmosphere of secrecy. In addition, censorship aims to suspend itself by inducing selfcensorship in those censored and the circles around them. Second, *in repressive societies there is less information about more censorship, in democratic societies there is more information about less censorship*. Under dictatorial regimes, insiders (or outsiders allowed to visit the country) who are aware of censorship, usually do not report it because they fear research, career or financial troubles or backlash effects on themselves or their wider circle. The result is underreporting. Authors who do mention it, typically do so in passing. Sometimes they treat it more extensively, as they write under the vivid impression of a recent famous case. If they systematically research and report it, and become whistleblowers, they may encounter disbelief. Data from the censors themselves are generally lacking Unless the latter flee the censorship system or unless the censorship system itself receives such an unexpected blow that there was no time to destroy

⁴ For more information, see A. De Baets, *The Impact of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on the Study of History, History and Theory*, 48 no. 1, February 2009, 27–28.

the archives of censorship. In more democratic regimes, censorship is certainly not absent, but it is usually less unobserved and less uncriticized. Third, *studying censorship is the beginning of its suspension*. As we shall see, censorship has a backfire effect and the study of censorship is itself one of the manifestations of that effect. Although the censorship of history is a well-known and obvious area of interest, it has also been, until recently, a relatively underestimated and neglected field of systematic historical research. Scarcity and abundance of information about the censorship of history may be determined not only by the extent of the censors' success, but also by very uneven research efforts. This makes it often difficult to distinguish important and typical information about censorship from surrounding data and, hence, to identify patterns and trends in the relationship between history, power and freedom.

2. Patterns and trends

The worldwide Survey supports some conclusions, which are presented in two steps. As a first step, overarching patterns and trends are concisely identified. Although comparisons between countries are often difficult to draw because political regimes have different life spans and documentation about them is unequal, some of these patterns and trends are corroborated by an abundance of facts; others, however, are tentatively constructed by cautious extrapolation. As a second step, some transcendent themes rarely treated elsewhere are outlined here as areas for further reflection and in-depth exploration⁵.

The censorship of history is an enduring phenomenon. It did not start in 1945 nor does it stop today. In the course of time, it was dressed in century-old attire and yet it continually takes on new habits. It would be a serious mistake to believe, as some do, that it disappeared after the fall of the Wall. Exactly the contrary was the case: in a different international climate, it gained new oxygen. Throughout the decades investigated here, censorship was applied to all *modes, genres, fields, categories* and *periods* of history.

In the first place, censorship ranges over all *modes* of the historiographical operation. Precensorship, often invisible to the

⁵ With some exceptions, I do not include here themes about which I published already elsewhere, such as a taxonomy of the censorship of history; censorship and the abuse of history; historical writing and censorship; archaeology and censorship; archives and censorship; history textbooks and censorship; defamation and censorship; refugee historians; censorship and colonialism; and censorship and holocaust denial. Some of these studies are mentioned in the notes.

public, attempts to regulate research at the prepublication stage. Archives are cleansed or kept secret, manuscripts are rewritten without authorial consent. Precensorship is a structural feature of dictatorships, but not of other regimes. Postcensorship means that publications are banned, that lectures are boycotted or the content of teaching courses is improperly interfered with. All historical *genres* are affected, although many believe that some of them are more amenable to censorship than others. Source editions, biographical genres, maps, photographs, works of historical reference, history textbooks and all sorts of time lists can be identified as especially vulnerable genres. But no genre is really safe, not even the most system-independent. All *fields* come into the ambit of censorship: political history, particularly the risky subfields of military and colonial history, and religious, economic, social and cultural history. The list of topics that generate red alert is long; it includes, without any pretense of exhaustiveness, coups, uprisings and revolutions, colonialism and territorial conflicts, civil and international war, and all types of major crimes. Censors also pay attention to all potentially dangerous historical facts and opinions, regardless of their *category*. Popular history, whether written, spoken, or visual, is as much a target of censorship as academic history, and probably even more so. It is communicated through multiple media that attempt to feed or reflect collective memory. The reach of popular history, therefore, is usually wider than that of academic history. Depending on the censor's need, all *periods* of history can be targeted. Archaeology, for example, usually involves the sensitive problem of the origins of the ethnic group, and epics play a comparable role for the origins of the nation; both are often closely watched. In most countries, contemporary history is certainly the most dangerous period of study, not only because the protagonists of important current events are still alive, but also because silent witnesses of these events can start talking anytime and produce embarrassing stories.

This is a rough sketch. It is feasible to make finer frameworks of analysis, incorporating such aspects as the motives of the censors, the justifications they invoke, and their methods and targets on the one hand and typologies of those directly censored, those indirectly intimidated and those resisting censorship on the other hand. Within these frameworks, certain censorship-prone themes rarely feature in mainstream overviews of historical writing although they would merit a fuller treatment. History-related problems engendered by the relentless assimilation campaigns of dictatorial regimes is one example. The unauthorized pressure exerted on histories commissioned by

democratic governments, enterprises or semi-official agencies, another. From the role of religion in censors to the role of ethnicity in the censored, from the censorship at the time of coups to safe areas of research under dictatorships, from the abuse of legal charges of defamation, enemy propaganda terrorism or incitement to violence and discrimination to the physical curtailment or elimination of adversaries, the list is long.

3. Themes to explore

Historians killed for political reasons

Let us start with the worst phenomenon, the physical elimination of historians. The most radical way to censor history is to kill its producers. Intended killing should be distinguished from unintended killing. The direct and intended type encompasses political murder, enforced disappearance and judicial execution. Killings can also be the indirect (though not always unintended) result of persecution, such as in cases of sudden deaths in prisons and camps, or in cases of historians who died immediately after their release as a demonstrable result of their ill-treatment, or in cases of historians who committed suicide due to severe political pressure. This field of study is barely mapped, but the impressions that follow are nevertheless based on a systematic though very incomplete database of cases. It is important to note that any figures given below include the deaths of historians both for history-related reasons *and* for broader political reasons. They exclude deaths which are entirely due to nonpolitical motives and historians who were sentenced to death or to life imprisonment but survived, or those who were abducted but who reappeared alive. The following overview gives a chronology of regimes or coherent series of regimes that were responsible for the deaths of at least five historians and cognate professions. Sometimes the deaths were spread over the entire duration of the regime's life, sometimes they were concentrated during one particular time span in which repression was usually at its peak.

Historians killed for political reasons (1945–2012)				
<i>Years</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Leader</i>	<i>Victims</i>	<i>Details</i>
1945	Germany (1)	Hitler	15	Nazi regime; 1 in Belgium, 3 in Czechoslovakia, 3 in France, 5 in Germany, 2 in Netherlands, 1 in Poland. Estimate for 1933–1945: 41.
1945– 1953	USSR (2)	Stalin	9	Communist regime; 8 historians, 1 art historian; 7 pertaining to non-Russian nationalities; 1 executed, 1 committed suicide, 5 died in prison camps, 2 died in internal exile. Estimate for 1930–1953: 69.
1950– 1962	Romania	Gheorghiu-Dej	5	Communist regime; 5 historians including 4 who were also politicians; 4 died in prison, 1 of them committed suicide.
1966– 1975	China (3)	Mao	14	Communist regime; 10 senior historians, 2 archaeologists, 2 writers of historical plays. Even when victims occupied other functions, deaths were mostly history-related, in at least 6 cases the result of suicide after severe persecution.
1971– 1974	Brazil	Medici	5	Military regime; 3 history teachers, 2 history students; all active in political or military resistance.
1972– 1985	USSR	From Brezhnev to Chernenko	5	Communist regime; 1 dissident history student, 1 history teacher, 3 dissident Ukrainian historians; 2 committed suicide, 3 died in prison camp.
1973– 1976	Chile	Pinochet	6	Military regime; 2 history professors, 4 history students; all politically active.
1976– 1977	Argentina	Videla	13	Military regime; 11 disappeared (1 director of historical films, 1 art history professor, 3 history teachers, 6 history students; most of them active in left-wing or human rights organizations), 1 former history student and 1 art historian turned guerrillas were assassinated. Also 2 political murders of historians in preceding period (1974).
1977– 1992	Guatemala	From Laugerud to Serrano Elías	7	Military regime; civil war; 3 history professors, 4 history students; all politically active; 3 assassinated, 3 disappeared, 1 died as result of torture. Later, also assassination of truth commission chairman evaluating civil war crimes in transition period (1998).

Historians killed for political reasons (1945–2012)				
Years	Country	Leader	Victims	Details
1981–2001	Israel	From Begin to Sharon	5	Israeli-Palestinian conflict; all shot; 1 Palestinian historian, 1 Palestinian history student, 1 American archaeologist, 1 Jewish historian, 1 Jewish historian-politician.
1998–2008	Colombia	From Samper to Uribe	5	Regimes with death squad activity; 3 politically active historians, 1 lawyer, 1 member of National Movement of Victims of State Crimes; became victims of the political violence of which they analyzed causes and for which they sought solutions.
2003–2007	Iraq	From the Coalition Provisional Authority to Talabani	16	Post-Saddam regime in occupied Iraq after the 2003 invasion; 13 historians and 3 archivists; killings mostly by death squads of extremist militia groups that took over many of the universities and targeted academics who were “suspect” for religious or political reasons.

Criteria:

* *Regimes*: regimes responsible for the deaths of at least five historians and cognate professions.

* *Deaths*: only cases of political murder, enforced disappearance, judicial execution, sudden death in prison or camp, post-imprisonment death as result of ill-treatment, suicide due to severe political pressure. Figures include deaths both for history-related reasons *or* for broader political reasons, but exclude deaths for nonpolitical motives.

Notes:

1 Nazi Germany: between 1933 and 1945 at least 41 (mostly Jewish) deaths (including some history students). The origin of the historians was Austria (1), Belgium (1), Czechoslovakia (5), France (4), Germany (19), Lithuania (1), Netherlands (2), Poland (8). Excluded were 8 deaths (4 suicides, 2 deaths in prison and 2 executions) in 1945–1948 of Austrian, Czech or German historians who were war criminals, collaborated with Nazism or were accused of collaboration with Nazism.

2 Stalinist USSR: between 1930 and 1944, at least 60 historians died in purges, with a peak in 1937–1938; the real tally is higher.

3 Marxist China: excluded was the information, mentioned in A.F. Thurston, *Enemies of the People* (New York 1987), 133, but not corroborated elsewhere, that the complete senior staff of the history department of Zhongshan University in Guangzhou was hanged in 1966.

Source: Author's data, many of which presented in this survey.

The table confirms a basic observation: it is dictatorships that torture and kill. These dictatorships encompass both left- and right-wing regimes. In the interwar period, the Stalinist and Nazi regimes topped the list (see the data in the table notes). From 1945 to 1970, the communist regimes of Eastern and Central Europe, the USSR and

China were the most active, followed between 1970 and 2000 by the authoritarian regimes of Latin America. In the 2000s, post-Saddam Iraq took the lead. Another, more tentative, conclusion is that the communist regimes tended to attack established historians and archivists, who were well-known inside the country and often abroad, in order to discipline the group of historians perceived as professionals of the past. In contrast, the authoritarian regimes of Latin America targeted historians not in the first place for their professional conduct but rather for their activities in the political, journalistic and human rights fields. Most of these were not well-known beyond their immediate universities and schools; and history students formed an important subgroup there. This may also indicate a cleavage between totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, to be explained later. In post-Saddam Iraq, historians were targeted as academics rather than as professionals of the past: they were seen as representatives of the unruly group of intellectuals. A hypothesis thus emerges: historians were primarily targeted as professionals by communist regimes in the USSR, Eastern and Central Europe, and China between 1945 and 1970, as political activists by authoritarian regimes in Latin America between 1970 and 2000, and as academics in Iraq in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Iconoclastic breaks with the past

In rare cases, regimes force radical future-oriented breaks with the past. Two types can be distinguished: *iconoclastic breaks* organized by the regimes in power (and supported by minorities in their societies) aimed at destroying the entire past, and *transition breaks* organized by the regimes in power (and supported by majorities in their societies) aimed at dealing with injustices of the recent past but usually leaving the remnants of the more remote past intact. We discuss the first type in this section and the second type in the next.

Some regimes tried to force a complete break with the past and to start from year zero. Throughout history, these iconoclastic breaks were the hallmark of selected revolutions or, more precisely, of certain phases in those revolutions⁶. The sweeping violence of the Cultural Revolution in China against the Four Olds – old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits – was such a break. “Smash the old world” was the guiding motif. Not only did it lead to the killing of (more than) a dozen senior historians and archaeologists, it also left deep scars in its

⁶ All ruptures with the past are accompanied by the censorship of history, but not all of them are iconoclastic. The Terror of 1793–1794 during the French Revolution and Nazi Germany’s Third Reich of 1933–1945 are well-known examples (even if the label “*Third Reich*” presupposes precedents).

wake, especially in the years immediately following 1966⁷. A second example is Romania under Ceaușescu. It initiated an unprecedented destruction of heritage from 1974 to 1989. The third country that perhaps came closest of all to the nightmarish situation of a country without history was Cambodia during the genocide and crimes against humanity of 1975-1979: the publishing and teaching of history came to a halt and a spokesman proclaimed that “two thousand years of history had ended.”

In China, the fever of elimination only really subsided after Mao's death in 1976, which marked the beginning of a more moderate phase within the same regime. The latter two campaigns of destruction were only stopped because the regimes themselves were toppled. It is remarkable that all three waves occurred in communist countries. An explanation for this phenomenon will be given later.

Transition breaks with the past

Iconoclastic breaks can be contrasted with post-conflict transition breaks. During transition breaks, new or restored democracies appoint truth commissions to investigate the crimes committed during past dictatorships and conflicts. In doing so, these truth commissions create a “protohistorical” arena. Like journalists, they elaborate a first rough draft of history while the perpetrators of gross crimes and many of their victims are still alive. Our Survey contains ample evidence of the safety risks ran by the members of truth commissions, the obstruction of their work, the intimidation of witnesses appearing before them, the destruction or cleansing of repression archives by military and security services, and, finally, the delays in the publication of the truth commission reports in some countries. Scores of examples of censorship of truth commissions are additional proof for the obvious conclusion that a major motive for censorship is the obfuscation of gross violations of human rights. For the same reason, the work of human rights activists is often jeopardized. And by the same token, peaceful commemorations of the dead bear in them a symbolic indictment against unpunished perpetrators; they were frequently obstructed for that very reason. Usually, when commemoration of a given person or event is suppressed, the first occasion at which it is allowed or at which it is allowed again, heralds a new era and bears a taboo-breaking character.

⁷ For the place of iconoclasm in Chinese history, see S. Leys, *L'Attitude des Chinois à l'égard du passé*, in Id., *L'Humeur, l'honneur, l'horreur: essais sur la culture et la politique chinoises*, Paris, 1991, 9-48.

Moratoria on history education

In some countries that found themselves in such postconflict transitions, moratoria on history textbooks were imposed or even the teaching of history was suspended. This happened in three transition types. First, bans were decreed after regimes with grossly distorting versions of history were defeated after war in 1945 (in Germany, Italy and Japan), imploded around 1989 (in the GDR and the USSR), or disappeared after the downfall of apartheid (in Zimbabwe in 1980-1982 and in South Africa in 1990-1994). Bans also occurred when recent genocide or deep political, ethnic or religious division made a broadly acceptable approach of the recent past impossible: in post-1979 Cambodia and post-1995 Bosnia-Herzegovina it was the case after largescale crimes against humanity (including genocide); in post-1989 Lebanon and post-2003 Iraq, it came as a result of political, ethnic and religious divisions; in post-1973 Afghanistan and post-1994 Rwanda, finally, both causes were at work. Only the case of Moldova does not seem to fit the pattern: here, a moratorium was imposed and prolonged under international pressure after daily demonstrations against the deromanization and resovietization of textbooks in 2002.

The contrast between iconoclastic breaks and transition breaks is important. Not always did the suspension of history textbooks equal censorship because in postconflict situations social groups can reach a consensus about the ban (and therefore the suspension is sometimes called a moratorium rather than a ban). Such a consensus is indeed possible even if it remains to be seen who has the power to decide that a certain distribution of opinions can be called a consensus. If the suspension did equal “censorship,” it could often be sufficiently justified, at least for a certain lapse of time. Research shows time and again that intense but chauvinistic history education is a form of indoctrination that in the end can help (re-)ignite conflict and violence⁸. Suspension of such history education may then be fully justified. On the other hand, the question remains whether the alternative stories that meanwhile fill the vacuum – told by such diverse groups as politicians, veterans or pseudohistorians – are not a worse alternative. The duration of the moratoria was very unequal. In Zimbabwe, the period of suspension lasted two years, just enough to produce new textbooks. In Cambodia, teaching the genocide began in earnest in 2009—thirty years after the genocide itself had ended. In

⁸ See, e.g., UNESCO, *The Hidden Crisis: Armed Conflict and Education—EFA Global Monitoring Report* (Paris: UNESCO, 2011), 169, 242–244; E. Cole, ed., *Teaching the Violent Past; History Education and Reconciliation*, Lanham, MD, 2007, 325–326; E. H. Dance, *History the Betrayer: A Study in Bias* (originally 1960), London, 1964.

Afghanistan, fifty years have passed since the beginning of the time of troubles and it still has not ended. It is, however, not clear what the ideal natural duration of a justified ban is, even if we accept that it should last as briefly as possible.

History textbook controversies

The suspension of history teaching altogether or the imposition of moratoria on history textbooks is not the average situation on the educational scene. Nor are the shredding of hundreds of thousands of copies of one textbook in Poland (in 1985) and the burning of history textbooks in Turkmenistan (in 2000), Greece (2007) and Indonesia (2007) typical phenomena. Nevertheless, history textbooks are generally watched very closely because of their reach and potential impact on young minds. They are often the subject of controversy and not seldom of censorship.

As the Survey shows, there have been dozens of history textbook controversies since 1945⁹. When we review them, some conclusions spring to mind. The first is that censorship is geographically universal and that it occurred in widely diverging political and historiographical contexts, though distributed very unevenly across continents. The basic rule of thumb – the more democratic a country, the less systematic the censorship – stands. It is no surprise but worth mentioning that history textbook controversies have been steadily prominent after 1945, also in the twenty-first century¹⁰.

A further conclusion is that some history textbook controversies had an international dimension: this is clearest in the Japanese case, where the quasi-permanent history textbook controversies over the portrayal of the Pacific War (1931-1945) regularly captured the attention and ire of neighboring countries such as Korea and China. Thailand and Burma had a textbook row also. In countries living under communism, textbooks were sovietized. Even after the collapse of the USSR, there were attempts to sovietize the textbooks, for example in Belarus and Moldova. The presentation of the Armenian massacres of 1915 as genocide brought ammunition for conflicts over textbooks in countries such as the United States and Germany. And saffronization – that is, the distortion of history textbooks by Hindu

⁹ For an overview of history textbook controversies between 1945 and 2010, see A. De Baets, *Censorship and History (Since 1945)*, 60-66.

¹⁰ There are antecedents. Between 1900 and 1945 there have been several notorious cases of controversy or of irresponsible handling of textbook content. I found evidence for this in China, France, Germany, Japan, Spain, the USSR and the United States.

nationalists in India – spilled over into the United States, where Hindu nationalist groups tried to rewrite American textbooks in 2005-2006.

Most controversies arose in relation to four themes. The first was, of course, the violence generated by genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. The second theme centered on national heroes from the time of independence, especially in Latin America (Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, Peru and Uruguay) and Vietnam, or from a period further in time in which the ethnic or national group was thought to have been established (ethnogenesis). The third theme was seen in countries such as Hungary and Greece, where textbook conflicts pitched a nation-centered approach against one with a universal horizon, thus reflecting the broader debate about the domestic versus the international orientation of these countries. The last theme involved the presentation of economic history, which was often attacked, for two reasons: because its treatment left less space for political history and relativized the impact of historical leaders (“great men”) and because it was often thought to be biased toward Marxism (for example, in Colombia and India).

Without asserting, as some do, that history textbooks faithfully reflect collective memory or collective identity (if this were so, far fewer controversies would exist), it is still possible to argue that controversies over history textbooks always reflect divergent opinions on historical questions to some degree and, therefore, different conceptions of a collective – often a national – identity. In any case, it appears that many, if not most, of the textbook controversies were part of larger political debates that, if regime circumstances permitted, raged also in academia, in political and legal arenas, in the media, in the streets, and, sometimes, as we noted already, in neighboring countries. It is telling, however, that professional historians did not always participate in these controversies because they found the historical issues at stake already solidly settled by research. In such cases, a gulf separating academic history and public debate came to full light.

Dictatorship and censorship

In dictatorships, the best topics for propaganda are those that illustrate the official ideology: antecedents and historical parallels favorable to the dictator in power will be praised, enemies and heresies diabolized. By the same token, topics viewed as controversial and liable to be censored are those that call into question the official ideology: allusions to the illegitimate origins and violent maintenance of power, crimes committed by the regime and its interest in covering them up, rivalry among its leaders, discord among the population,

sensitive information about subjugated minorities and classes, crises (periods of martial law, revolt and civil war), frictions with other countries, military defeat, periods of humiliation and weakness, the history of successful rivals, and, finally, historical parallels to all these areas. History, it seems, needs constant monitoring.

While history is an important source of legitimation for most dictatorships, the more central the ideological role of history, the more devastating the impact of censorship. In principle, totalitarian regimes were more dangerous than authoritarian ones as they not only tried to silence but also to convert their citizens. Among totalitarian regimes, communist ones occupy a special place because of the explicitly historical outlook of their world view. In contrast to most other regimes, they saw history as driven by *laws* to be interpreted with the ruler's logic, they attacked the achievements of the past and the scholarly foundations of the profession more profoundly than most other regimes in order to affect the course of that law-driven history. In right-wing regimes, ideology tended to be more essentialist; hence, their historical outlook was usually less systematic – although this sort of unpredictability generally also had a deeply intimidating impact. Two earlier findings corroborate the conclusion about communist regimes: the tendency to iconoclasm which seems greatest there and the higher frequency of killings of historians in their capacities as historians (as contrasted to killings of historians in their capacities as intellectuals or political activists). Two tragic cases may illustrate the last point. In 1938 the Russian economic historian Nikolai Kondratiev (1892-1938) was executed by a firing squad on orders of Stalin after eight years of imprisonment. In the mid-1920s, Kondratiev had developed a theory of long-wave economic cycles since 1780 which deviated from the orthodox view in that it was critical about the role of collectivized agriculture and skeptical about the inevitable collapse of capitalism. Only fifty years later was he rehabilitated. Thirty years later, during the Cultural Revolution in China, historian Jian Bozan (1898-1968) committed suicide in prison together with his wife. He had been imprisoned because he had defended the concession theory, the theory that there is not always class struggle; when confronted with peasant rebellion in history, the ruling class was often forced to make concessions to restore the established order. This theory had aroused the wrath of Mao, who personally attacked him in late 1965, the first step in his persecution.

Assessing the historiographical output under dictatorial regimes is difficult. Where the output took the form of historical propaganda, it seems less a contribution to the history it pretended to treat than a source for the circumstances in which it was created. Despite all

control, the professionals were seldom a willing tool of some prescribed line; they always retained some bargaining power, embodied in their training and knowledge, because they had to apply the general guidelines to many different historical problems and contexts or translate them into detailed curricula and textbooks. In doing so, they were able to create margins that increased as one moved further from the kernel of ideology. It implies that a purely instrumental theory of historiography is too poor to be true.

In the safer areas removed from the axioms of ideology, contributions to historical writing could still be valuable, even lasting. The same goes for work published in exile or underground: some of it was polemical and rancorous, some written with innovative methodology or perspectives. In contrast to received opinion, unpublished work carried out in secret and without some samizdat-style circulation was generally rare: once the dictatorial period was over, when manuscripts prepared secretly could finally emerge, the drawers more than once were shown to be empty. At the very least, the evidence for the frequent existence of secret manuscripts is poor.

Moral judgments about the behavior of historians under dictatorship are hazardous. It is difficult to unequivocally ascribe motives to the positions that historians took in times of repression, or for the shift in their positions at given moments. Retrospective moral judgments on their freedom to act and their collaboration, silence or resistance should be made prudently, especially because it remains to be seen how we would behave in similar circumstances. The details of each case are as important as any general principles. But there is certainly room for praise and blame in clear-cut cases. Few of those who collaborated with the dictators and gave them the support of their scholarship ever explained their choices, made confessions or offered apologies for their behavior.

Once dictatorships fell, the personnel of most history departments showed remarkable continuity. With the exception of a relatively small group of leading historians who had openly collaborated with the ousted regime, in general few were purged. The will to forget usually dominated after periods of repression although in recent decades – from the 1990s – the marked tendency to install truth commissions was reversing this long-term trend. More importantly, the demography of the historical profession usually did not allow largescale purges or reshuffles: some historians were persecuted and had died during the war or under the dictatorship; and the reemployment of survivors was not always feasible. In addition, none of the larger waves of refugee historians returned *en masse*. Most had built something resembling a new life in their host countries that was preferable to a return.

When societies emerged from dictatorship or conflict, and evolved toward democracy, the harm suffered by historical writing during the preceding period gradually came to light. The reputation of history was often damaged because under the dictatorship it had condoned lies and fabrications. These weakened the credibility of the historical profession and grossly affected the quality of the historical discourse. In short, when historiography was placed under the auspices of dictators, it was abused and harmed; when it was eventually set free, the scars remained visible for years.

In sum, it is obvious that the natural habitat of censorship is dictatorship. This does not mean that it is absent in democratic countries. In democracies, censorship as such is less systematic and it adopts different shapes than its sibling in dictatorial contexts. If there is any censorship, it usually occurs in three areas: archives, commissioned histories and genocide denial. When secrecy rules for current and archival records are excessive, illegal, or both, they lead to censorship; intelligence services in particular are often keen to hide their “family jewels.” Furthermore, histories commissioned by governments or others are sometimes subtly adapted to avoid unwelcome messages. In officially commissioned histories, the precarious subjects are mostly tied to the international wars and internal conflicts of the past – frequently (but not always) in combination with imperial or colonial expansion. In the long run, violence generated by war, conflict and colonization came to be seen as adversely affecting the democratic legitimation of power and the construction of a collective identity, in short, as sources of shame. Finally, groups denying solid research findings, especially about grave historical wrongs, may be penalized for their denial. The historical profession is adamant about condemning as products of pseudo-history the aberrant theses of deniers of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, but it is divided as to whether and when the propagation of such views should be prohibited or criminalized.

Laws and censorship

Laws can contribute to the censorship of history. A taxonomy would include at least three classes of such laws. First, there are the laws and decrees, the scope of which is so wide that they obviously affect many areas, including the area of historical writing. In this class, one can distinguish dictatorial and postdictatorial law types. Both types come in two sorts: victim-oriented and perpetrator-oriented. Dictatorial governments decree laws to facilitate the persecution of dissidents or the ban of publications, such as martial law decrees and national security laws. They also issue amnesty laws for the

perpetrators of human rights violations that they authorized or condoned. Postdictatorial laws are also of two sorts. On the one hand, there are amnesty laws declared by successor governments to foster reconciliation; on the other, there are laws the aim of which it is to purge the collaborators of the former dictatorial power and laws devised to rehabilitate citizens fallen into disgrace under that dictatorial regime. All these laws may affect the writing of history greatly and sometimes push a certain version of history in the spotlight. One poignant example is that amnesty laws may prohibit historians (and others) to mention the crimes committed by those amnestied.

The second group is the class of laws that target specific opinions and carry an enhanced risk of history censorship. Among these laws are:

- * Ideology-prescribing laws, such as the Pakistan Ideology law, with repercussions for history education.

- * Laws establishing discrimination in the history education sector (as was the case in Romania and Haiti).

- * Press laws, as in China and Vietnam, prescribing certain interpretations of the past and prohibiting others. Because those in power need flexible instruments to serve their short-term ends, they are often replaced by directives emanating from the ministry responsible for propaganda and public relations.

- * Memory laws that seek to define the collective memory on controversial historical subjects by prescribing how people ought to think about certain historical episodes, as was the case for several laws in France and Rwanda and for attempts to introduce such laws in Russia.

- * Laws that criminalize the public condoning, denying or grossly trivializing of genocides and other gross crimes, as in various Western European countries and in Rwanda.

- * Laws banning symbols or monuments of the totalitarian past (as in Estonia, Romania and Hungary) or imposing controversial historical anniversaries (as in Belarus).

Many of these laws are drawn so broadly that they stifle the opinions of those who criticize dominant views and chill the opinions of others. Their possible benefits generally do not outweigh their high potential for abuse.

Finally, there is a third class of laws: these laws that are necessary for democratic states to function as they regulate vital areas such as freedom of information, data protection and privacy, reputation, copyright, archives and heritage, and hate speech¹¹. Another subgroup

¹¹ Hate speech laws punish “hate speech,” defined in article 20.2 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as “any advocacy of national,

of this class are the laws and decrees most typical for new or restored democracies: laws establishing truth commissions, organizing the search for missing persons, regulating the concerns of war veterans, and creating frameworks to manage the legacy of dictatorship (as in Chile or Spain). Sometimes, these laws can be diverted from their essential functions. Examples in the Survey include archival laws (in Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania) and patrimony laws (in Romania).

In the field of history, by far the most frequent abuses occurred in the case of defamation laws - laws that punish the tarnishing of reputations. In the countries of Western Europe, most defamation cases revolved around the conduct of those supposedly defamed during World War II or in the colonies. In the former communist countries, most were related to the communist past of those who felt defamed. In a country with a strong free expression tradition like the United States, defamation trials about history were relatively rare. Defamation laws also include such subtypes as *lèse majesté* laws (as in Thailand) and laws to protect the memory of deceased leaders (as with Atatürk in Turkey and Khomeini in Iran). Whereas it should not be forgotten that reputation is a human right, the prolific application of defamation laws has had a chilling effect on historical writing and often was but censorship in disguise. It is nevertheless noteworthy that defamation trials against historians and journalists writing about historical issues are rare under hardcore dictatorships: the explanation must be that in these situations, the conflicts between power and history are not solved with the defamation instrument but more radically. This is most clearly seen in Central and Eastern Europe, where defamation trials seem to be almost exclusively a phenomenon of the postcommunist era¹². Despite their high potential for abuse, as a rule defamation laws presuppose a minimal democratic operation. Moreover, as defamation trials produce verdicts, they are open to scrutiny and criticism, however theoretical these options often may be.

International censorship

Regimes that censor avoid interference into their internal affairs at all cost. Their censorship encompasses many fields, including, of course, topics of national security, foreign relations and international history. Charges against historians such as “enemy propaganda” or “treason” imply the accusation of collaborating with persons abroad,

racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.”

¹² This is confirmed for China, where defamation cases take a start after the rupture of 1989 only. See Bo Zhao, *Posthumous Reputation and Privacy in China: the Dead, the Law, and Social Transition* to appear in *Brooklyn Jour. Int. Law*, March 2013.

for instance, talking to foreign journalists, delivering papers at conferences abroad, or publishing on foreign websites – exactly the kind of activities for which historians in democratic countries are usually praised. Another strategy is to exile dissident historians. Whatever success censoring regimes have in handling these issues in their own countries, it stops at the border. A slippery problem, therefore, is how to keep unwelcome alternative voices from abroad from infiltrating into the country. The major instrument is visa policy, of which the Survey contains several examples. Sometimes, it is backed up by two other devices: the permanent ban of exiled or foreign historians by declaring them non grata, and the harassment or even prosecution of critical foreign historians who did enter the country legally. In rare cases, a radical strategy is pursued: the persecution of exile and refugee historians across the border leading to disappearance or assassination (attempts originating in Romania, South Africa, Taiwan and Vietnam were reported).

If countries try to intervene in the versions of their history produced beyond the border, we enter the field of international censorship. Such interventions concentrate on influencing the perception of citizens in foreign countries in sensitive history matters. A common strategy consisted in lodging diplomatic protest against books, films, documentaries and historical exhibitions which would be banned at home but are freely accessible abroad. This legitimate form of protest was frequently invoked and it often betrayed which topics possess a taboo character in the country that issues the protest.

A few countries invested much energy in organizing pressure to get acceptable representations of their history abroad. The most visible case was the interference of the superpowers. On the one hand, the USSR and China amply tried to equalize historical writing in the countries within their zone of influence. On the other hand, the allied countries introduced a set of history-related measures when they occupied the defeated powers in Europe and the Far East in 1945.

Another tool is the lobby, high-profile or low-profile depending on the effect sought. Foreign governments lobbied universities to have exile historians stopped from broaching certain subjects, approached parliaments not to adopt resolutions about certain historical episodes, attempted to influence the publication of official series of foreign policy sources in other countries (see the pressure of Taiwan regarding the publication of the *Foreign Relations of the United States*), or complained about the historical views of other countries at international forums. Alternatively, they established chairs, research centers and cultural institutes abroad, or funded congresses and travel to disseminate their historical propaganda under the cloak of

responsible scholarship. Many of these programs were run discreetly. Two examples were especially noteworthy: the lobby of Turkey to further its views of the 1915 massacre of Armenians in European countries, Israel, the United States and the United Nations, especially since the mid-1970s; and the interference of Hindu nationalist associations into United States history textbooks to adapt them to their views – coinciding with attacks to historians of India living or working in the United States since the 2000s.

Apart from the reality of borders, two other factors complicate the operation of international censorship. The first is the fact that the more successful the repression is at home, the stronger the likelihood that alternative views still pop up elsewhere. From abroad, several historians wrote or taught on the controversial aspects, the blank spots and the falsified history of dictatorial countries. The second factor is the internet. Given the rapid spread of internet traffic, cases of international pressure, including internet censorship, which were infrequent in the past, are clearly on the rise since 1995. The conflict between Estonia and Russia over a Soviet monument even spilled over into a cyber attack in 2007. The mechanism also works in reverse. Attempts at international censorship are often quickly spotted by internet users and criticized on blogs the world over.

The refutation of censorship

An important part of the struggle against history censorship is to evaluate the justifications given for acts of censorship and to find the arguments to refute it. This is demonstrated here with a recent affair in India, which details the various steps to counter censorship. Let us first repeat the facts of the case. In May 2012, India's Human Resource Development Minister Kapil Sibal asked the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) to withdraw a secondary school political science textbook published in 2006 after it created an uproar in both houses of parliament. Members of parliament found that a cartoon in the textbook, drawn in 1949 by the cartoonist Shankar, denigrated the Dalits (traditionally the "untouchables") and their leader Bhimrao Ambedkar. The cartoon shows then-prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru with a whip chasing Ambedkar who is seated on a snail named "Constitution," an allusion to the slow speed with which the constitution was being drafted after India's independence. When criticism of the cartoon gained cross-party support and the textbook was pulled, two chief advisers of the NCERT textbook committee, sociologists Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar, resigned from their posts in protest. Palshikar's university office was ransacked the following day. The Republican Panthers

Party of India, Dalit activists based in Pune, Maharashtra, claimed responsibility for the attack. Sibal welcomed the resignation of Yadav and Palshikar and apologized for the textbook in parliament. He told reporters: "We believe textbooks are not the place where these issues [cartoons] should be influencing impressionable minds ... I found many of the cartoons in textbooks offensive." The entire textbook series was effectively (but temporarily) withdrawn from distribution.

How should we evaluate this affair? Cartoons are a form of free expression. Any proposal to limit such expression should be balanced against a restricted and internationally recognized set of interests. Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights says that free expression can be trumped by the "respect of the rights or reputations of others; the protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals." Of this set, "the reputations of others," "the rights of others" and "public morals" seem, in principle, relevant grounds to potentially consider limiting this cartoon as a form of free expression.

Take, first, the "reputations of others." Is it possible that Dalit leader Ambedkar's reputation has been tarnished by the cartoon's republication? Ambedkar was well aware of the public figure doctrine, which holds that politicians as public figures should tolerate more criticism than average citizens. He did not sue Shankar for defamation after the cartoon's original publication in 1949 nor before he died in 1956.

Then there are "the rights of others." "Others" in the expression "rights of others" can bear three different meanings in this case: Ambedkar's close relatives, citizens in general and children who see the cartoon. There are no reports that Ambedkar's relatives ever protested against the cartoon after its publication or sued for defamation on his behalf. The second group, citizens in general, have no (legal) standing in this affair. Even if they did, their interest should not justify censorship in this case because political cartoons, which tend to stimulate public debate, deserve protection.

The interest of children and youngsters, the third group of rights holders, is another matter. Because their rights arguably coincide with the third interest "public morals" I will examine them together. Could it be said that the cartoon might legitimately be published in newspapers and general history books but not in history textbooks for secondary school children on the grounds that exposure to such cartoons violates children's rights and endangers "public morals"? Minister Sibal seemed to believe so. It is true that textbook authors do not enjoy the degree of intellectual freedom academic historians do, as the former are subjected to educational guidelines. Educational

authorities give the framework for these guidelines, but their application is guaranteed by experts. In order to perform their duty responsibly, textbook authors and advisers should enjoy a certain degree of autonomy.

Cartoons, by their very nature, require interpretation. This is particularly true for cartoons that are (or may be perceived as) sensitive in the national context. Experts should therefore see to it that their presentation in textbooks is supplemented with information that enables pupils to understand a specific historical context. This was the case for the Ambedkar cartoon, which was used alongside other visual material and extracts from original sources accompanied by critical questions. The textbook itself discussed the problems of Dalits frankly and emphasized Ambedkar's political achievements, including his contributions to the constitution. Cartoons are a part of grown-up life. It is important that pupils learn how to interpret them critically.

In summary, none of the three legitimate grounds for limiting free expression apply in the cartoon case. The withdrawal of the textbook series containing the controversial cartoon was therefore a violation of the authors' and, by extension, the textbooks' chief advisers' rights to free expression. This violation constitutes a form of politically inspired censorship.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this analysis. The ransacking of Palshikar's office was an outrage. Yadav's and Palshikar's resignation from their posts as chief advisers of the NCERT textbook committee was a justified form of protest against their treatment. From an international human rights point of view, the vociferous condemnation of the cartoon by members of parliament was a questionable form of interference. The cartoon should remain in the textbook, carefully and critically presented, as should any comparable cartoons. Yadav and Palshikar should be given the opportunity to resume their work as soon as possible¹³.

This example from India demonstrates how international human rights law – in this case article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – offers a format acceptable by all to investigate censorship allegations. Its standards can be used to determine whether interventions in history are legitimate.

Resistance to the censorship of history

When confronted with censorship and repression, historians,

¹³ This section first appeared as A. De Baets, *India's Textbook Cartoon Affair, Free Speech Debate* (<http://freespeechdebate.com/en/discuss/indias-textbook-cartoon-affair>; 20 August 2012).

schematically, opted for one of three choices: collaboration, silence or resistance. As a rule, the majority chose active or passive conformity. However, there is also a history of opposition to be written. Even if they never constituted the majority, many historians resisted the censorship of history, either inside or outside tyrannical regimes. In a unique professional reflex, they proved able to supplement contemporary resistance with retroactive resistance, as historians possess the power to reopen old cases and challenge the rulers' amnesia and falsification of history.

Typically, activities of discreet or open resistance took place in three concentric circles. The inner circle was formed by historians directly affected by repression. Historians in prison taught history to their fellow inmates or were able to carry out some historical research there. Outside prison, historians engaged in clandestine activities such as publishing their work in the samizdat circuit, teaching at flying universities or illegally gaining access to closed archives. Others defied likely censorship by refuting the cherished historical myths that supported the powers that be, or by uttering the unmentionable in historical parallels. A minority adopted methods of open resistance. Some bravely refused to take loyalty oaths – and were dismissed. A stubborn few reoriented their work *toward* the eras and topics under embargo.

A layer around this first group was formed by historians living under repression but without being its primary target. Much of that resistance against censorship was not heroic but consisted of small gestures, of writing between the lines or of opposition in silence. Sometimes, such gestures were transformed into insider solidarity. Some organized petitions and letters of protest. Others actively supported their colleagues fallen into disgrace at great personal risk or resigned in protest against the latter's dismissal. As deans and rectors, some challenged violations of university autonomy. A wider circle of resistance was constituted by the struggle that historians waged in their capacities as peace and human rights activists, again at the risk of dismissal and prosecution.

Historians living in countries and times without threats to their freedom or life formed the outer layer. They tried to apply the difficult principle of universality of human rights to the core rights of the historical profession, that is the freedoms of information and expression. This universality principle had to be translated into international solidarity because it included the logic that, wherever a colleague's freedom was threatened, so was one's own, and, conversely, that historians enjoying freedom had a duty to use it to support those from whom it was taken. Petition and letter writing

campaigns were launched against the detention of colleagues. The tragic plight of historians in exile was sometimes alleviated by the welcome prepared for them by their colleagues in the host countries. Such is the bare outline of a history of resistance against the censorship of history.

The power of historical parallels

One strong tool to resist the censorship of history is the use of historical parallels – and the Survey contains scores of examples of them. The mere chronological dimension of history begs for comparison over time and this makes the use of historical parallels a spontaneous professional technique for historians. Parallels have the further advantage that they can often be drawn in the wink of an eye. Some forms of the technique enable historians to express veiled criticism while at the same time circumventing direct censorship. There are three basic types:

* General parallels, positive or negative, between present and past regimes and societies.

* Parallels between present and past rulers that are unfavorable to present rulers (e.g., parallels between dictators and previous tyrants) or favorable to their adversaries (e.g., parallels between opposition leaders and heroes of the past).

* Parallels between present and past events that unfavorably portray events ascribed to present rulers (e.g., parallels with perpetrators of past crimes) or favorably portray events ascribed to their adversaries (e.g., parallels with leaders of successful revolts).

A parallel can adopt two forms. It can explicitly mention both legs of the parallel, the historical and the contemporary, or more prudently and implicitly, describe the historical part only, often by making subtle use of figurative language. The former type hides nothing and is defiant to the extent that the comparison is well understood. The latter type is generally used in the calculated hope that the like-minded understand the message while the other-minded do not. It happens indeed that the censors do not notice the parallel or, if they do, that they do not understand its critical message. Often, however, they understand the parallel all too well. In countries such as China, where the use of coded critique is common and understood by many, however, the censors may fear and anticipate it, expressly prohibit and firmly repress it. Sometimes, however, they tolerate it because the indirect character of the parallel neutralizes, they think, its immediate impact or even makes it suitable for a *modus vivendi* between the regime and its critics. Needless to say, the censoring regime itself may also use historical parallels to its benefit, by favorably comparing itself with selected past regimes and contrasting itself to others. In

democratic countries, historical parallels are also used, often with a defamatory result, if not intent. The arch-prototype of the historical parallel in democracies is the comparison of a leader or regime to Hitler and Nazism in order to condemn it.

Chilling effects and backfiring effects of censorship

The main effect of censorship is a *chilling effect*: censorship hampers the expression and exchange of historical facts and opinions, not only of those censored but also of those collaterally intimidated. It encourages self-censorship. The overall effect of sustained censorship on the profession is not the death of history, but the illusion that it is still alive. In short, the main effect is sterility.

The results of censorship, however, are often ambiguous. In 213 BCE, the Chinese emperor Qin Shihuangdi ordered a largescale book burning of historical works and had possibly hundreds of intellectuals executed in an attempt to eliminate tradition and its guardians. This major censorship operation hampered the development of historical writing, not only because much information was destroyed, but also because it provided an excuse to future scholars to falsify ancient texts. At the same time, however, it caused an immense arousal of historical consciousness: Han scholars tried to recover and edit whatever texts remained and a cult of books developed. Thus the aim of censorship defeated itself¹⁴.

This secondary effect of censorship can be called the *backfiring effect*.¹⁵ Alberto Manguel recognized it when he spoke of “the paradoxical ability of censorship that, in its efforts to suppress, it highlights that which it wishes to condemn¹⁶.” Hermann Weber saw

¹⁴ D. Bodde, *China's First Unifier: A Study of the Ch'in Dynasty as Seen in the Life of Li Ssü (280?–208 BC)*, Leiden, 1938, 80–84, 162–166.

¹⁵ The backfiring effect of censorship is different from the so-called Streisand effect. The latter effect, named after singer Barbra Streisand, is “an online phenomenon in which an attempt to hide or remove information ... results in the greater spread of the information in question.” (“The Streisand Effect: When Censorship Backfires,” *BBC News* [15 June 2012]). The backfiring effect of censorship is not exclusively an online phenomenon, and – in contrast to the Streisand effect – it is not undesired (save by the censors, of course).

¹⁶ A. Manguel, *Daring to Speak One's Name, Index on Censorship*, 24, no. 1 (1995), 16–29. Two quotes in which the phenomenon is described: (1) “La moindre trace de passé non falsifié prend un pouvoir subversif et extraordinaire” [C. Devroey-Zoller and J.P. Devroey, *Historiographie et droits de l'homme*, in R. Bruyer, ed., *Les Sciences humaines et les droits de l'homme*, Brussels, 1984, 41]. (2) “But authoritarian systems may contain a selfdefeating element in their attempts to monopolize power: by controlling the means of communication, they provoke counterreactions and foster a critical turn of mind; they inadvertently teach scepticism and thereby undermine their

the effect at work after the dictatorship, in his case the GDR, withered away: “For decades the exclusion of ‘blank spots’ had been ordered ... only to provoke a stronger and almost obsessive interest in these issues nowadays¹⁷.” Censorship may have unintended positive consequences. In a dictatorial context, historical awareness may increase, not diminish, when the official falsifications as a side-effect engender an unofficial past eagerly consulted as a source of consolation and countervailing power. In a democratic context, suspicion of traces of censorship increases the drive for openness¹⁸.

If it is not all-pervading, censorship can provide an indirect incentive for creativity and criticism. Taboos always attract curiosity. When history as a classical vehicle of the past is silenced and compromised, every utterance – graffiti, literature, theater, film – becomes its potential vehicle. In this way, the censorship of history generates the emergence of substitutes: whenever the silenced and silent historians are not able to refute the heralded truths of official historical propaganda, philosophers, poets, novelists, playwrights, filmmakers, journalists, storytellers and singers may appear on the stage and convey alternative historical messages in an attempt not to let the historical truth disappear. Paradoxically, the ostensible vulnerability of many of these substitutes is their very power. Writing, for example, is a solitary act requiring little institutional support. Sometimes, fictional genres are not taken seriously by the authorities and hence escape their attention. Thus, censorship may not suppress alternative views but rather generate them, and, by doing so, become counterproductive¹⁹. Although there is no guarantee that these alternative voices are not biased, their mere presence restores the pluralism of views.

own legitimacy.” [R. Darnton, *Censorship, a Comparative View: France, 1789—East Germany, 1989*, *Representations*, no. 49, Winter 1995, 58.]

¹⁷ H. Weber, ‘Weisse Flecken’ in der DDR-Geschichtsschreibung, in *Krise-Umbruch-Neubeginn: Eine kritische und selbstkritische Dokumentation der DDR-Geschichtswissenschaft 1989/90*, R. Eckert et al., eds., Stuttgart, 1992, 369–391.

¹⁸ In the Survey we noted backfiring effects in passing in the cases of Umar (Bangladesh), Galíndez (Dominican Republic), Guillebaud (France), Heym (Germany), Sierra Campuzano (Mexico), Sinclair (New Zealand), Jasienica (Poland), Dündar (Turkey) and Esenov (Turkmenistan), and in all those cases that received largescale media attention in general (such as the Ienaga trials in Japan).

¹⁹ See L. Kołakowski, *Totalitarianism and the Virtue of the Lie*, in I. Howe, ed., *1984 Revisited: Totalitarianism in Our Century*, New York, 1983, 135; and Y. Afanasev, *Return History to the People*, *Index on Censorship*, 24, no. 3 (1995), 56–58. Also see Marc Bloch’s remarks on the wary reception of propaganda and censorship in the trenches of World War I, which resulted in a revival of oral tradition: M. Bloch, *Apologie pour l’histoire ou métier d’historien* (originally 1949), Paris, 1967, 50–51.

Censorship and historical truth

The history of the censorship of history contributes two convincing tests to the thesis that the search for historical truth carried out with as much objectivity as possible is and always has been the central mission of historical scholarship – however provisional, conjectural and perspectival the knowledge that results from such a search may be.

A superficial count of the heads of state and government between 1945 and 2012 who had either a degree in history, wrote a historical work, held important speeches with historical contents, or showed their active interest in history in other demonstrable ways, totalled 123 leaders in 70 countries²⁰. Many of them attacked historians directly and publicly²¹. From time immemorial, the eagerness of rulers to censor history has been proof a contrario of their historical awareness and hence, of the existence and importance of historical truth. Why, indeed, would these leaders bother to censor certain versions of history if the notion of historical truth was not important?

At the other side of the spectrum, some historians living in dictatorships stubbornly refuted historical myths even at the risk and cost of irreparable career damage. This can only be plausibly explained by their belief in the value of historical truth. The cases of Aleksandr Zimin (USSR), Gu Jiegang (China), Tsuda Sōkichi and Ienaga Saburō (Japan), Romila Thapar (India) and Fuat Köprülü (Turkey) come to mind²². There have also been various courageous historians living in dictatorial contexts who criticized the official rewriting of history with its blank spots by *publicly and directly* claiming “a right to historical truth.” This is illustrated by the actions of Sun Changjiang in China, of Aleksandr Tvardovsky in the USSR, of Adolf Juzweńko in Poland, of František Graus, Jan Křen and Jozef Jablonický in Czechoslovakia, and the samizdat debate about “the right to history” by historians linked to Charta 77 in the same country.

²⁰ I discussed these leaders in *The Historical Awareness of Wise Leaders* [in Dutch], in D. Bosscher and Y. van Hoef, eds., *Koning Nobel: Opstellen over goede en kwade leiders, en wat het verschil maakt* (King Noble: Essays on Good and Bad Leaders and the Difference between Them), Groningen, 2011, 19–26.

²¹ For a partial overview, see A. De Baets, *Responsible History*, New York, 2009, 100–107.

²² Others who gained a reputation for refuting historical myths include the Japanese historians Shigeno Yasutsugu (1827–1910), Kume Kunitake (1839–1931), Shiratori Kurakichi (1865–1942), the Czechoslovak philosopher Tomáš Masaryk (1850–1937) and the Swedish historian Lauritz Weibull (1873–1960).

Were these actions futile? Although for a large part these authors wrote under pressure and took considerable risk, they kept burning the flame to search for truth under very unfavorable circumstances. Many examples of similar courage have been forgotten, but these historians managed to leave traces of their actions. Their struggle for “a right to history” can and should be remembered here.

Censorship and the ethics of historians

Lastly, the problem of the censorship of history possesses an ethical dimension, at least to the extent that the regime in power allows historians the oxygen to act as responsible agents at all. Censorship is a violation of the historians’ two core rights which are high on the list of human rights: freedom of expression (for teaching and publishing) and freedom of information (for conducting research). Given these rights, it is the historians’ professional duty to apply standards of accuracy and sincerity, in particular to search honestly and methodically for the historical truth. Whereas the responsible use of history – including many forms of responsible selection and omission of facts – is protected by intellectual and academic freedom, censorship, as a form of abuse of history, is not. And if the restrictions imposed by censorship are not prescribed by law or not necessary in a democratic society (and this is always the case for prior restraint, for demonstrable chilling effects and for disproportionate sanctions), they are not even covered by the right to free expression. Like all abuse, censorship undermines the trust placed by society in scholarship and teaching. Therefore, historians should always oppose it. The activities of censors should be condemned, with the aggravating qualification that censorship of history committed by professional historians is worse than the same conduct by nonprofessionals.

A final basic ethical principle is this: the universal freedoms of thought and expression ineluctably include the right to write and teach history and the right to remember the past, in short the rights to history and memory²³. Mapping the history of the censorship of history and remembering those suffering from it and opposing it, are vital avenues for keeping the rights to history and to memory alive.

²³ See De Baets, *Responsible History*, 144–172.