

Professor Antoon de Baets founded the Network of Concerned Historians in 1995.

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The historian and anthropologist Ayşe Gül Altınay was sentenced to 25 months imprisonment for signing the "Academics for Peace" petition.

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Ayşe Zarakolu was sent to prison for having translated books on the Armenian genocide.

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THE CONCERNS OF HISTORIANS

In 1995 Antoon de Baets, professor of History, Ethics and Human Rights at the University of Groningen, published the first report of the Network of Concerned Historians, which he had just founded. The mission of the network is to create general awareness of the issues caused by the friction between historical research and human rights issues. The twenty-fifth annual report was published online this year. Over time, the emphasis in the reports has shifted markedly from abstract human rights issues to cases of the imprisonment of professional academics. The annual reports also reflect the loss of the international optimism of the 1990s that has turned into the gloom of the populist/nationalistic 2010s. Up until the year 2000 there were usually less than 50 countries chastised by the network, but since 2009 the annual number of countries where violations of historians' human rights were recorded has been about 100. The network registers bans on books, official denial of historical atrocities, trials against individual historians for researching about the conditions of minorities, falsifications in school books and manifold other abuses of history and memory.

Taken as a whole, the annual reports become dismal registers of the tribula-

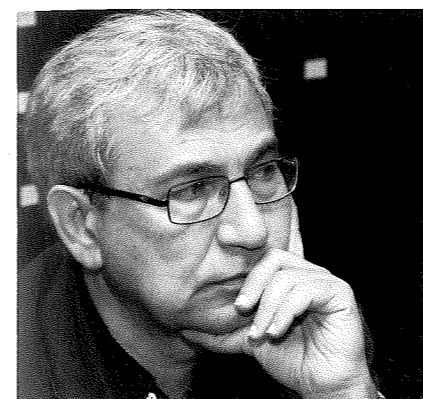
tions of historians culled from the accounts of organizations like Human Rights Watch, Pen International, Scholars at Risk, and other sources around the world. The 2019 report alone gives the impression that professional historians are harassed by governments almost to the same extent and manner as journalists.

BUT THIS WAS not always the case. The first reports from the 1990s dealt mostly with the need to document crimes against humanity committed by the many dictatorial and military regimes that plagued the 1980s, particularly in South America, Africa and South-Eastern Europe. The basic concern was that the criminals would never come to trial due to laws granting immunity or the lack of interest in prosecuting the war criminals, not just in Argentina, Chile and former Yugoslavia, but even for older crimes committed against Jews by collaborators during World War II in France and in the Dutch colonial war in Indonesia. Treatment of concerns in Western countries mostly focused on confronting denial of the Holocaust, with the trial of David Irving and the antics of other anti-Semitic denialists. In German speaking countries, an exhibition about "The Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941-1944" which revealed the deep involve-

ment of the regular German army in the killing of Jews created great controversy years after it opened in 1997.

OFFICIAL GOVERNMENTAL denialism of atrocities was rare in Europe at that time. But Japan was and still is struggling with the reality of the women seized from Korea and other Japanese occupied territories to slave in military brothels. Turkey, always hysterical about minority claims, featured from the very beginning for its heavy-handed repression of historical works on Armenians, Kurds, Greeks and Assyrians. The 1995 report already included an account of Ayşe Zarakolu who had been imprisoned simply for having translated books on the Armenian genocide by Vahagn Dadrian and Yves Ternon. Her crime was said to be "separatist propaganda". For many years her various trials connected to publishing books the government found uncomfortable – they numbered 34 – filled the pages of the annual reports. Disturbingly, she died in prison. Her husband, Ragip Zarakolu, continued publishing and translating books on minority subjects and had to endure the same judicial harassment. He now lives in exile in Sweden.

The 2005 report takes up the case of Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk who was



Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk was put on trial when he stated in an interview that hundreds of thousands of Armenians and Kurds had suffered genocide.

PHOTO: ALEXEY BALAKIN/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

put on trial for "anti-Turkish" sentiments when he stated in a newspaper interview that hundreds of thousands of Armenians and Kurds had suffered genocide, but no one was talking about it. A conference of Turkish historians that intended to discuss the Armenian genocide was attacked by government ministers as a "stab in the back" and had difficulty in finding a venue.

IF WE JUMP TO THE MOST recent annual reports, the reader can see a new phenomenon, namely arrests and imprisonment of historians for researching breaches of human rights and history of minorities or making public statements in defense of minority claims. This is particularly the case in China where there is a crack-down on historians dealing with Tibetan or Uigur peoples. Turkey is no longer alone in its harassment of historians, although it remains the most extreme among the countries considered democracies. The sentencing in May 2019 of internationally respected historian/anthropologist Ayşe Gül Altınay (Sabancı University, Istanbul) to 25 months imprisonment for signing the "Academics for Peace" petition is arguably the most despicable instance of state abuse. All signatories of that declaration risk being accused of "propaganda

for a terrorist organization". However, Altınay is devoted to non-violence and her research studies the link between everyday domestic violence as a long-term consequence of war and anti-guerrilla campaigns on society, particularly in South-eastern Turkey. She trained as an anthropologist, but her book *The Myth of the Military State* is historical and deals with the Turkish republic's persistent and debilitating glorification of its armed forces. Candan Badem, who has written the most comprehensive bibliography of Armenian-Turkish research, has been fired from Munzur University and his passport has been revoked so he cannot accept offers from foreign universities. Although an outspoken Marxist, he is accused of being a follower of the Gülenist religious movement, and thus stamped as a terrorist. His latest book is *The Ottoman Crimean War (1853-1856)* which gives unique insights into that conflict.

A very sad development in the Baltic region is the official Holocaust denialism taking root in Poland. That country has been in a conflict with Israel about the extent of involvement of Poles in the killing of Jews during World War II, for which there is ample evidence, but which the Polish government considers a defamation of the nation. A recent attempt to strike an accord between the Polish and Israeli governments was considered by historian Yehuda Bauer as "a betrayal of the memory of the Holocaust and the interest of the Jewish people". In the same vein, Jan Grabowski had to sue the Polish League Against Defamation for that organization's attacks on book he wrote dealing with Poles who killed Jews fleeing from ghettos. In a different context, Polish "patriots" disrupted a conference in Paris dealing with the Polish history of the Holocaust and a Polish TV station labeled the conference a "festival

of anti-Polish lies". Accused of slandering the nation, Dariusz Stola was not reappointed director of the Museum of Polish Jews in Warsaw which he had led since 2014. Although the situation in Germany is not so dire, there is an increasing politicization of Holocaust denial by the right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland whose members have interrupted guides at concentration-camp memorials. In response, the Association of German Historians has taken a resolution on "current threats to democracy" through persistent politically inspired misuse of history.

ANOTHER PROBLEMATIC development in the Baltic region that causes concern among historians is the Belarusian government's refusal to allow a memorial at a killing field outside Minsk known as Kurapaty. Here an estimated 30,000 to 100,000 persons were shot by the Soviet secret police during the Stalinist terror and excavations in the late 1980s proved that bodies buried there belonged to

the period before World War II. In Hungary the statue of the hero of the anti-Soviet uprising of 1956, Imre Nagy, has been removed from its place in front of the parliament building. It has been replaced by a monument to the victims of the short-lived communist regime of Bela Kun in 1919.

De Baets and his Network of Concerned Historians do an admirable job of raising awareness of the risks that professional historians face, and the political misuse of history. As the annual reports reveal, these dangers to academics are increasing and spreading in lockstep with the growth of authoritarian and populist politics. ❧

David Gaunt

Professor Emeritus in History at CBEEES, Södertörn University

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