

# Two Decades of Mapping History Under Threat

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*The Network for Concerned Historians celebrated its twenty-third anniversary on October 13, 2018. With more than two decades of monitoring cases of prosecuted and censored historians around the world, this network has put a neglected issue on the agenda, raising awareness about the multiple threats that history producers are receiving on a daily basis. Here you can find the story of the origins of the NCH, in the voice of its founder, Antoon De Baets, Honorary Board Member of EuroClio and holder of the EuroClio Chair for History, Ethics, and Human Rights at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands.*

Maina wa Kinyatti, a Kenyan writer and historian, joined the history department of Kenyatta University in Nairobi in 1975. His research was mainly focused on the Mau Mau rebellion against British colonial rule, and he wrote several papers and books addressing Kenyan history. In June 1982, five police officers came to search his house, without a warrant, confiscating 23 books, 29 personal files, and Maina's typewriter. On the basis of this "evidence", Maina was arrested for allegedly possessing seditious literature. His Marxist approach to history and his critical stance towards the authoritarian regime of then President Daniel Arap Moi brought Maina 6 years of imprisonment, after which he fled to Tanzania to then apply for asylum in the U.S.

Sadly, the story of Maina's prosecution and imprisonment is not an isolated case. The censorship and prosecution of historians is a global phenomenon: historical research and education are targeted by both state and non-state agents in scores of countries around the world. To a certain extent, it resembles the worrying trend of prosecuting and murdering journalists. Antoon De Baets, a historian at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands, first observed this disturbing phenomenon in the early 1980s. "While working at Amnesty International's former publication office in San José, Costa Rica, from 1980 to 1982 (...), I noticed that in every corner of the globe historians were among those who suffered from political persecution".

But not only that. De Baets also noticed that most of these cases were probably overlooked by other historians and that this could be the principal reason why many preventive or remedial measures were not contemplated by the victims' colleagues. With this bleak scenario in my mind, "I began collecting material that caught my eye", De Baets said. A few years later, the data of these cases gave shape to comparative research into the relationships between history, freedom, and power, thus enabling academic analysis and scholarly inquiry. "I began lecturing on the topic before an audience of history students at the University of Groningen. In 1991, this resulted in the first publication in Dutch, entitled *Palimpsest*".

Perhaps unexpectedly, this attempt for raising awareness into a widely overlooked issue resulted in a network that could be called a "Historians without Borders". In its turn, this led to more systematic attention for persecuted historians in several academic circles. In 1995, the 18th edition of the International Congress of Historical Sciences in Montréal organized a

special roundtable on “Power, Liberty, and the Work of the Historian”. “This provided a new and lasting impetus to the idea. At the roundtable, I presented a paper, *The Organization of Oblivion: Censorship and Persecution of Historians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America*”, De Baets said.

### **Facts-based advocacy**

So, for over a decade, De Baets had gathered information about ongoing cases. Nevertheless, early on he realized that the urgent character of many of these cases required more than data collection: it required an immediate response. “This situation appealed to me, not only as a researcher but also as a member of the community of historians. The ongoing cases clearly called for more than research: they called for action also”. This call for action could not be made from scratch, though. The international human rights organizations, which had already been campaigning from time to time against such abuses seemed like a good ally. “After the Congress, the time for action seemed to have arrived. I attempted to unite colleagues I had met in Montréal who were willing to campaign for their persecuted colleagues in this Network of Concerned Historians (NCH). On Friday 13 October 1995, a website was created. That is how it started”.

From that day until now, the NCH has been monitoring the state of the situation globally, publishing 24 Annual Reports to this date with an assessment of cases in countries worldwide. In its mandate, the NC

H states that it serves as a link between concerned historians and human rights organizations, such as the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Amnesty International, Article 19, Human Rights Watch, Index on Censorship, International PEN’s Writers in Prison Committee, and Scholars at Risk.

In addition, Antoon De Baets has continued conducting research, systematizing databases and looking for worldwide patterns and trends. The results of these efforts will be presented in his next book, *Crimes against History*, which will be published in January 2019. This material includes, among others, 428 cases of history producers who were killed for political reasons from ancient times until today. One of De Baets’s conclusions about the repression of the historical profession is the following: “The present age is no exception; it even has the worst record. In myriad ways, the outcome of the historian’s work can damage those happening to hold power, and, therefore, critical history with its unwelcome truths is always potentially threatening”. In this regard, history producers are described as fragile, yet their work is not. “With some luck, their views may survive the regimes that killed or censored them”.

Check [here](#) the latest NCH Annual Report, and visit the NCH website at <http://www.concernedhistorians.org>

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