

Address by Antoon De Baets at the occasion of the Forschungsfreiheitspreis (Freedom of Research Prize – Lapis Animosus) ceremony in Luzern on 10 July 2025

Dear friends and colleagues,

You probably all agree that history is a beautiful profession. But because history can and often does reveal unwelcome truths about the past, it is also a dangerous and therefore fragile profession. History is not for beginners. Over the last five years, for example, seventeen historians, history educators, and others involved in the study of history in one way or another were killed for political reasons. For many of the victims, the reasons for their assassination were also related, partly or entirely, to their work as historians. Among them, Samuel Paty from France is probably the most well-known, but many are forgotten and, indeed, invisible. The Network of Concerned Historians has reported on all of them.

How exactly did this Network emerge? While working for Amnesty International in the early 1980s, I noticed that human rights organizations sometimes campaigned for persecuted historians and that, at the same time, the community of historians was only faintly aware of such campaigns. These were separate planets in need of a bridge. The idea lingered in my mind for many years until I finally found a format to act, with a website and a mailer. Thus the Network was founded exactly thirty years ago. It reaches 3,500 historians today. It has two purposes: first, to participate in human rights campaigns on behalf of persecuted historians, and second, to serve as a small observatory on human rights issues of interest to historians through the publication of a global annual report.

Along the way, there were three main challenges. In the beginning, some colleagues thought that the Network was an initiative that politicized history and averted it from its “true” nature. Remarkably, this objection has disappeared over the years: nowadays, most historians are convinced that advocacy of the type undertaken by the Network, has a valuable place among the tools used by historians to defend their profession. Another challenge was that over the years access to information about the troubles of historians has staggeringly multiplied. To read and analyze all this remains a daunting task. A last challenge consisted in the fact that I ran the Network as a voluntary operation almost alone until a young colleague joined me five years ago. If I overcame periods of doubt, it was mainly due to the force of a concise mandate with clear principles from which I never deviated. This mandate was based on the Constitution of the International Committee of Historical Sciences, which speaks about the duty of historians to defend their freedom of expression and oppose abuses of history.

Dear friends and colleagues, the persecution of historians and the censorship of history are not things of the remote past or of distant countries only. They are rife under many guises today, as our thirty annual reports amply testify. If we take our profession seriously, we should find ways to defend its principles and practitioners. The Network of Concerned Historians is probably the longest serving initiative in the field of human rights advocacy for historians. As a tool of awareness, it joins and amplifies initiatives taken by others. And it discreetly helps to keep the ethical principles of historians alive.

But like the profession of history itself, the Network of Concerned Historians is vulnerable. Moral support is most welcome for it to survive. For this reason, I am very grateful to the Swiss Historical Society for bestowing the honor of the Forschungsfreiheitspreis, the Lapis animosus, on me. It is a great honor and a deeply appreciated token of recognition. And it rekindles the fire to continue. Danke. Merci. Grazie. Grazia fich.