



Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Geschichte  
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## SSH Award for Academic Freedom «lapis animosus» 2025

### Interview with Antoon De Baets



*First of all, congratulations on this award, which recognizes 30 years of commitment to academic freedom. What inspired you to launch NCH at the time?*

**Antoon De Baets:** 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. This became the [Network of Concerned Historians](#) (NCH) in 1995, reaching 3,500 historians today. NCH 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](#). Switzerland was an entry in fourteen of these reports. Later, several unique databases were added to the NCH [website](#), such as a collection of history-related [legal cases](#), a collection of [codes](#) of ethics for historians, a set of human rights [resources](#) for historians, United Nations General Assembly [resolutions](#) of interest to historians, and a [Memorial](#) for historians killed for political reasons.

*How have you managed to combine this voluntary work with your academic position?*

**Antoon De Baets:** I have always tried to combine both and create a win-win situation. I incorporated the work for NCH in my daily schedule. The information landing on my desk was not only the raw material for NCH but also a stepping stone to investigate more

systematically selected themes of censorship and persecution and eventually publish about them in [works](#) such as [Responsible History](#) and [Crimes against History](#). This was not easy because, as every historian knows, it is often difficult to find patterns and trends in a universe of hundreds, if not, thousands of fragmentary cases.

### *What have been the greatest challenges you have faced?*

**Antoon De Baets:** There were three main challenges. In the beginning, some colleagues thought that NCH 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 NCH has a valuable place among the tools used by historians to defend their profession. Another challenge was that, with the advent of the internet, access to information about the troubles of historians staggeringly multiplied. Most of NCH’s sources are public: they are there for the taking, but one has to read, summarize, and analyze them. This remains a daunting task. A last challenge consisted in the fact that I ran NCH as a voluntary operation mostly alone until my young New York-based colleague Ruben [Zeeman](#) joined me in 2020. NCH is a light and flexible but also vulnerable operation. If I overcame periods of doubt and lack of motivation, it was mainly due to the force of a concise [mandate](#) with clear purposes and principles from which I never deviated. From the beginning, this mandate was based on Article 1 of the [Constitution](#) of the International Committee of Historical Sciences (ICHS), which speaks about the duty of historians to defend their freedom of expression and oppose abuses of history.

### *How do you envision the future of your initiative?*

**Antoon De Baets:** One generation has passed now and the initiative is gradually rolling into a transition. Probably this year, Ruben will take over the coordination and I will continue to support him. We seek to institutionalize NCH in order to make it future-proof. We hope that [ICHS](#) and [EuroClio](#) will help us with this transition.

### *Why is such a network particularly important today?*

**Antoon De Baets:** Persecution of historians and censorship of history are not things of the remote past or of distant countries only. They are rife under many guises today, as the thirty NCH [annual reports](#) amply testify. If we take our profession seriously, we should find ways to defend its principles and practitioners. As probably the longest serving initiative in the field of human rights advocacy for historians, NCH is here to stay in some form or another. 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.

### *Further reading*

For an in-depth discussion of the Network of Concerned Historians, see Antoon De Baets, "[Historians and Human Rights Advocacy](#)," in Lutz Raphael and Berber Bevernage, eds., *The Professional Historian in Public: Old and New Roles Revisited* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 299–325, especially 316–321.

### *Biographical note*

Antoon De Baets is [emeritus](#) professor of History, Ethics, and Human Rights at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. He is the author of publications on the censorship of history, the ethics of historians, and the history of human rights, among others. He is [founder](#)–coordinator of the Network of Concerned Historians, [President](#) of the International Commission for the History and Theory of Historiography, [member](#) of the Academia Europaea, and [chair](#) of the Scientific Advisory Committee of the project "The Netherlands and Afghanistan 2001–2021." He is currently editing the *Palgrave [Handbook of Attacks on History](#)* (forthcoming 2027). See also his [CV](#) and [ORCID](#).