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## The Organization that Fights for Human Rights for Historians

By Antoon De Baets

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*This article is being published on the 10th anniversary of the Network of Concerned Historians.*

On 13 October 1995, the *Network of Concerned Historians* (NCH) was established at the History Department of the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. Its purpose was and still is to provide a bridge between international human-rights organizations campaigning for censored or persecuted historians and others concerned with the past on the one hand and the global community of historians on the other. During the last decade, NCH participated in 28 such campaigns for cases in 18 countries on all continents. NCH also produced 11 *Annual Reports* about the domain where history and human rights intersect. The 2005 *Annual Report* contained entries on 61 countries. NCH will continue its efforts during the next decade. It eagerly hopes that many colleagues from all over the world (550 are currently on the NCH list) will join it. For solidarity with our persecuted colleagues is needed as urgently as ever.

### Origins

The NCH project resulted from three factors. The earliest was my research in the 1980s and 1990s on the postwar censorship of history. Some of the cases I studied were still ongoing and clearly called for more than research: they called for action also. The second cause was the escalating use of electronic mail in academic milieus since the mid-1990s which facilitated communication with colleagues enormously. The final factor was the fact that for the first time the International Congress of Historical Sciences organized a roundtable in 1995 on the crucial subject of "Power, Liberty, and the Work of the Historian." Immediately after that congress in Montreal, I drafted a short mandate for a *Network of Concerned Historians* and encouraged colleagues to join the initiative. On Friday 13 October 1995, historian George Welling, a colleague at Groningen, created a [website](#) . He has continually updated and adapted it since. Historian Ingrid Sennema volunteered to revise the language of the longer *Annual Reports*, a task she has performed unfliningly. NCH

sprang from this informal cooperation with no central office, no personnel, no budget, no board, and virtually no meetings. Its only assets were and are a clear mandate, spare time, email, the Internet, and daily perseverance.

Early in 2000, NCH became involved in a UNESCO initiative to establish a network of networks for academic freedom. Consequently, in June 2001 it became one of the founding members of the *Network of Education and Academic Rights (NEAR)*, a global watchdog for academic freedom based in London. In addition to NCH, historical associations in Belgium, Norway, Spain, and Switzerland are now affiliated with NEAR. Since 2003 NCH has also had fraternal ties with *Academia Solidaria*, the academic-freedom initiative of the Spanish network *Historia a Debate*, established in 2000.

### **Operation**

Perhaps NCH's main characteristic is continuity. The mandate has remained basically the same since NCH's inception and the rhythm of activities has been relatively steady. The operation rests on four principles: universality, impartiality, independence, and distance. While the first three are rather obvious, the last one holds that NCH does not necessarily share the views of historians (and others) mentioned in its circulars.

Three tasks are performed on a daily basis: reading and selecting history-related urgent appeals from international human-rights organizations; reading sources for the compilation of the *Annual Reports*; and, finally, the usual network logistics. When campaigns are launched (in all 53 original and follow-up campaign circulars were distributed for 28 cases), NCH members are always urged to write appeals in their professional capacity.

### **Persecution**

Is there any correspondence, one might ask, between the campaigns in which NCH participated and the *real* level of persecution of historians and others concerned with the past? NCH's information comes from two sources: human-rights organizations and historical associations. Until recently, NCH reported only from the former source but this was not unproblematic. At times, international human-rights organizations did not report about cases of censorship or persecution, either because those fell outside their mandate or because they were simply not noticed. Today, I still come across such cases. At other times, the information from these human-rights organizations was too general to judge its importance for NCH in time for joining the campaign.

Sometimes too, the information was clear enough, but I underestimated its importance. These shortcomings could be repaired partly by reporting about such overlooked cases in a next *Annual Report*. It is my hypothesis, then, that the *accumulated* campaigns and *Annual Reports* of NCH give a fair impression of the real situation of the persecution of the historical profession in the world *as far as the cruder and more visible forms are concerned*. As for the less visible types (from harassment to hidden forms of discrimination), NCH's ignorance is huge. Notably, it is underinformed about cases of dismissal—perhaps the most common sanction against historians around the globe.

### **Topics**

Topics regularly figuring in NCH *Annual Reports* and campaigns can be divided into five groups. The first is, of course, the group of topics directly related to history, i.e., to historians, historical research, archives, archeology, history teaching and textbooks, and to popular history channels such as films, television, theater, novels, the Internet... The second group is memory-related, particularly the disturbance of commemorations. The third grasps freedom of information and expression issues: freedom of information and archive laws, archival access and secrecy, censorship, and defamation. The fourth group refers to questions of impunity: where impunity reigns, past crimes continue into the present and delicate questions of forensic anthropology, truth commissions, reparations for victims, and historical injustices arise. The final category contains cases of political and media activism of historians.

### **Victims**

Among the victims featuring in the campaigns, historians were obviously best represented. Related categories were (in order of importance) forensic anthropologists (who excavate mass graves with evidence of past atrocities), writers (including authors of historical novels), history students, archeologists, archeology students, history teachers, archivists, and truth-commission members. Four victims enjoyed a reputation beyond their country (Guatemalan bishop and truth-commission president Juan Gerardi; Chinese history student Wang Dan, the foremost student leader at Tiananmen Square in 1989; Iranian historian Hashem Aghajari, a close ally of President Khatami; and Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk), but the others were known locally only.

### **Impact**

NCH is light and flexible, but also small, vulnerable, and without power or authority. Only when members start writing appeals in their professional capacity, is some influence exerted. It is, however, impossible to determine the extent to which members participate in campaigns. Although there are encouraging signs of participation from historians worldwide and although some colleagues participate in every campaign, NCH's impact is difficult to measure. It is probably small and NCH is a long way from constituting an effective weapon. Naturally, NCH is not alone: it joins and intensifies existing initiatives. Perhaps its prime importance is that it spreads awareness among historians of the difficulties which those concerned with the past must confront. NCH's work amply demonstrates that the persecution of historians is no thing of the remote past or distant countries only.

### **Solidarity**

Why should we fight for historians' rights? For three good reasons. The first is solidarity: we should use our freedom on behalf of those to whom it is denied. Our professional rights are meant for *bona fide* historians everywhere, regardless of where they live, in democratic or non-democratic countries, and regardless of who they are, mainstream historians or their opponents. The second reason is self-interest. When our colleagues' right to free expression is in danger, then our own right to information is too, because we are deprived of the rich works which they could have produced. In the longer term, our own right to free expression will be damaged as well, for we become obliged to write history on the basis of an impoverished array of information sources. The final reason is that fighting for historians' rights supports the integrity of historiography and opposes organized forms of oblivion. What George Orwell said six decades ago, remains true: "At present we know only that... imagination...will not breed in captivity."

\* More background in the essay: "Fighting Oblivion: The Activities of the Network of Concerned Historians" (2004), on the NCH [website \(click on the left-hand margin button marked "Essay"\)](#).

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*Orwell citation:*

George Orwell, "The Prevention of Literature" [originally 1945], in John McCormick and Mairi MacInnes, eds., *Versions of Censorship* (Chicago: Aldine, 1962), 285–99, here 299.