

Julian Petley

# Censorship

At first [redacted] whenever I got uncommon tired I played [redacted] good [redacted] So the longer I went to school the easier it got to be. I was getting sort of used to the widow's ways, too [redacted] Living in a house and sleeping in a bed pulled on me pretty tight mostly, but before the cold weather [redacted] was a rest to me. I liked the old ways best, [redacted] The widow said I was coming along slow but sure, and doing very satisfactory. [redacted]

[redacted] She says, "Take your hands away, Huckleberry; what a mess you are always making!" The widow put in a good word for me. [redacted] I knowed that well enough. [redacted] wondering where it was going to fall on me, and what it was going to be. There is ways to keep off some kinds [redacted] but this wasn't one of them kind; so I never tried to do anything, but just poked along [redacted]

I went down to the front garden and clumb over the stile where you go through the high board fence. There was an inch of new snow on the ground [redacted] it was funny [redacted] after standing around so. I couldn't make it out. It was very curious, somehow. I was going to follow around, but I stooped down [redacted] I didn't notice anything at first, but next I did. There was a cross in the left boot-heel made with big nails, [redacted]

I was up [redacted] I was at [redacted] as quick as I could get there. He said:

"Why, my boy, you are all out of breath. Did you come for your interest?"

"No, sir," I says; "is there some for me?"

"Oh, yes, [redacted] -- [redacted] Quite a fortune for you. You had better let me invest [redacted] with [redacted]

[redacted] "I don't want to [redacted] I want you to [redacted]

Beginners  
GUIDES

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# **Censorship**

## **A Beginner's Guide**

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Julian Petley



ONE WORLD  
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Truth and understanding are not such wares as to be monopolised and traded in by tickets and statutes and standards. We must not think how to make a staple commodity of all the knowledge in the land, to mark it and license it like our broadcloth and our woolpacks.

John Milton, 1644

Who would overthrow the liberty of a nation must begin by subduing the freedom of speech.

Benjamin Franklin, 1729

If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they don't want to hear.

George Orwell, 1946

Freedom of expression constitutes one of the essential foundations of a democratic society and one of the basic conditions for its progress and for each individual's self-fulfilment. It is applicable not only to information or ideas that are favourably received or regarded as inoffensive or as a matter of indifference, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb. Such are the demands of pluralism, tolerance and broad-mindedness without which there is no democratic society.

European Court of Human Rights, 1979

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*For Mary*

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# Introduction

Think of censorship, and you may well conjure up the image of some grey bureaucrat in a dusty office snipping at away at a roll of film, or laboriously crossing out words and lines on a printed page. You may also imagine this scene playing out in the past – in Nazi Germany or Stalin’s USSR perhaps – or in one of today’s authoritarian societies such as Burma or Saudi Arabia. And indeed this book is partly about censorship in the past, and does partly concern itself with censorship in undemocratic regimes. But it is also very much about the present, about the censorship of the latest forms of communication and about how censorship exists in democracies too. For even in such societies, freedom of expression is never absolute.

In a book of this length, indeed of any length, it would clearly be impossible to give a complete history of censorship in all its forms across the globe and throughout history. Those in search of such an account are advised to turn to Derek Jones’s monumental, four-volume *Censorship: a World Encyclopedia*,<sup>1</sup> which runs to nearly 3,000 densely packed pages. Instead, this book presents an account of the main *forms* of censorship to be found in the modern world, illustrating by means of examples how they actually work and how they developed. It is based on the premise that in order fully to understand how the freedom of the media is circumscribed, we need to define censorship in a broad sense so as to include not only the activities of governments and the effects of laws but also the operations of regulators of one kind or another, the workings of market forces, and indeed more nebulous but nonetheless extremely important factors such as the ideological tenor of the times. Derek Jones usefully defines censorship as ‘a variety of *processes* ... formal and informal, overt and covert, conscious and unconscious, by which restrictions are imposed on the collection, display, dissemination, and exchange of information, opinions, ideas, and imaginative expression’,<sup>2</sup> and this book will explore the operations of forms of censorship from this broad perspective.

The book is organised so that it proceeds from an examination of the most direct forms of censorship to those which operate in more indirect and covert ways. We thus start with the murder and intimidation of journalists, an ever-growing phenomenon and one which is causing growing concern across the world. In war zones, journalists are increasingly excluded unless they choose to be ‘embedded’, and those who do manage to report ‘unofficially’ or independently are increasingly regarded as legitimate targets. In authoritarian countries, journalists who offend against powerful political, corporate or criminal interests are attacked with impunity – Russia furnishing a particularly acute example of this tendency – and even in democratic countries such as the UK, police harassment of journalists covering demonstrations has reached such a pitch that it has been the subject of protest by the National Union of Journalists and debate within the European Parliament. The consequence, and indeed the purpose, of all such forms of intimidation is to prevent or at least discourage the journalistic investigation of certain topics. This is the most direct and dramatic form of censorship at work in the world today, and it is on the increase.

The destruction of works of art and literature performs a similar function. Not only does it constitute a highly symbolic attack on the values and belief systems represented by the works in question, but it also sends out a powerfully intimidatory message to the creators and owners of such works. As the German poet Heinrich Heine so presciently warned in 1823: ‘Wherever they burn books they will end up burning people’, an admonition all too clearly borne out by the Holocaust but which also finds an echo in the events surrounding *The Satanic Verses*, the Danish cartoons and *The Jewel of Medina*. (These are explored both in chapter 1 and the Conclusion.)

A less dramatic, but still effective, form of censorship is to draw up lists of banned works and to forbid people both from publishing and accessing them. This form of censorship is discussed in chapter 2. The most famous of these lists was the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* of the Roman Catholic Church. This was finally abandoned in 1966, but it is not exactly difficult to find examples of indexes in the modern world – for example the lists of IPs and URLs which help to constitute the Great Firewall of China, the blacklist operated in Britain by the Internet Watch Foundation (both discussed in chapter 5), or the list of ‘video nasties’ drawn up by the Director of Public Prosecutions in Britain in the early 1980s (chapter 4).

Of course, the most effective form of censorship consists in preventing contentious material from ever being produced in the first place. This is a particular specialism of authoritarian societies, where the absence of democratic structures makes such a degree of control possible. For example, in the Third Reich, everybody who worked in the cultural and communications fields had – if they wished to work at all – to belong to the appropriate chamber of the Reich Chamber of Culture, which in turn was attached to the Ministry of Propaganda, and to abide strictly by its numerous rules. Thus, at a stroke, it was possible to exclude Jews, Socialists, Communists and everyone else deemed ‘undesirable’ from the realms of the arts, culture and the media, and to ensure that those remaining obeyed the rules, of which there were many. Hence, except in the first two years of the regime, there was, paradoxically, relatively little censorship (in the sense of cuts and bans of completed works) in one of the most authoritarian regimes of the twentieth century. However, this aspect of Nazi *Gleichschaltung* (co-ordination) is, in the last analysis, a particularly extreme and virulent form of media control practised in democratic countries too, namely, licensing.

Licensing is a system by which the authorities grant permission to certain bodies to operate in the marketplace, and is meant to ensure that only works which are produced and/or approved by these organisations are allowed into circulation. Chapter 2 examines the origins of this idea in the licensing of the press, which began in England in the sixteenth century and lasted until the end of the seventeenth. Of course, this being a democracy, the system of control was far from watertight and was eventually abandoned (albeit in favour of other forms of control), but it still furnishes an instructive example of what we might call the will to censor. Far more effective was the licensing of the English stage, which originated in the fifteenth century and persisted well into the second half of the twentieth and which demonstrates the really quite remarkable extent to which, even in the modern era, the authorities were prepared to go in order to circumscribe the topics with which plays were allowed to deal.

Those who never experienced English theatre censorship at first hand may be surprised that such a degree of moral control could still be exercised even in the ‘Swinging Sixties’, but chapters 4 and 5 show that licensing exists in modern times too by examining in some detail a form with which every reader of this book will be familiar – that of films, whether on video/DVD or in the cinema. The chapters take pains to emphasise the differences between the US and UK licensing systems, in particular the different role which the state plays in each, but also their similarities. In particular they show how, unlike in authoritarian societies, the licensors have been forced to take account, albeit frequently unwillingly, of changing public tastes and standards. But as in the case of theatre

censorship in England, what is particularly notable about each is the role played by overtly moral concerns about cinematic content (see in particular [here](#)) which, in the British case, were also allied to specifically political ones ([here](#)). These in turn were based on more general fears about cinema's alleged ill-effects ([here](#), [here](#)), and such fears still underpin many arguments for the censorship of various media in modern societies, the most recent target being the Internet, which is discussed in chapter 5. 'Media effects' are a highly contentious topic, but those interested in exploring it further are recommended Barker and Petley, Gauntlett, and Millwood Hargrave and Livingstone.<sup>3</sup>

The chapter on the British system of licensing films concludes that it is in fact less independent of the state than is generally supposed, while the chapter on the US system suggests that, in the last analysis, it represents a form of economic censorship. In short, American film-makers do not have to submit themselves to the licensing process (as they do in Britain), but if they refuse to do so, they may find it impossible, or extremely difficult, to get their films shown in mainstream cinemas or sold/rented by the major DVD chains. This then leads, in chapters 5 and 6, to further discussion of various forms of what has come to be known as market censorship. This is admittedly harder to pin down than state censorship (which at least has the virtue of being overt and direct) but, in that it narrows the range of media content on offer, elevates entertainment over information, treats audiences as consumers rather than citizens, puts too much power in the hands of too few media owners, and encourages overly close relationships between governments and media corporations, is coming to be seen by an increasing number of commentators as a peculiarly insidious, systemic form of modern media censorship which denies citizens their full communicative rights (a notion which is discussed in the Conclusion).

Chapter 5 also argues that, contrary to earlier utopian conceptions of the Internet, cyberspace is by no means a censor-free zone, and that coming years are likely to see increasing attempts to control it not simply in authoritarian countries but in democratic ones too. Leading on from this, the Conclusion suggests that we need to think anew about censorship, and how to combat it, in the twenty-first century. At the start of the 1990s, it was possible to imagine that the media, at least in Europe, faced a future of greater freedom. The collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe spelled the end there not only of forms of direct state censorship but also made it much more difficult for Western European governments to invoke the Communist bogeyman and 'national security' as pretexts for their own acts of censorship. However, ensuing events were to confound many of these dreams of freedom. Many of the new governments of countries in which free expression had long been confined did not suddenly embrace it with gratitude. Furthermore, with the overnight arrival of a cut-throat brand of 'booty' capitalism, many of the newly democratised Eastern European states awoke to find that their media had been gobbled up by foreign companies. Equally, many of the new private media companies were run by members of the old Communist elite, whose attitude to media freedom, and in particular to the media's relationship with government, remained largely unreconstructed.

And then, with 9/11 and the subsequent terrorist attacks in various European countries, many of the features of the Cold War returned to haunt the European media, with the spectre of Communism being replaced by the shadowy threat of 'Islamic fundamentalism'. Once again, civil liberties – including freedom of expression – have found themselves sacrificed to 'national security' (particularly in the UK, closely identified as it is with American foreign policy). And as the affairs of the Danish cartoon and *The Jewel of Medina* all too clearly show, many in the media came to practice that most insidious form of censorship – self-censorship – particularly when dealing with Muslims and Islam. In some cases this stemmed from a well-meaning (if misguided) desire not to offend religious feelings (the revival of which has been a particularly striking feature of parts of the post-millennial European landscape), but in others merely out of fear of reprisal. But whichever was the case, freedom of expression was the clear loser.

In this not so brave new world, then, we need above all else to reassert the central place which freedom of expression should hold in democratic thought. Without it, democracy itself is in peril. We also need to understand that, even in modern democratic societies, the will to censor is alive and kicking. We also need to recognise that, in some cases it resides within ourselves. This book attempts to show the various forms which this impulse takes, and suggests that although the modern media may be very different from the books which emerged from Gutenberg's printing press, the urge to control them, and indeed some of the means employed to do so, have remained remarkably constant.

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# 1

## Death and destruction

Undoubtedly, the most effective way of censoring someone whose views one does not wish to be heard is to kill them, or, failing that, to frighten them into silence. History is, unfortunately, littered with such figures, one of the most famous being Socrates, who was condemned to death in Athens in 399 BCE for his unorthodox beliefs and habits. A more recent example is provided by Steve Biko, who founded the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa in the late 1960s. His political activities caused him to be banned by the apartheid regime in March 1973, which meant that he was not allowed to speak to more than one person at a time, was restricted to certain areas, could not make speeches in public and could not even be quoted. On 17 August 1977, Biko broke his banning order by visiting Cape Town and was arrested at a police roadblock under the Terrorism Act No. 83 of 1967. Whilst in prison he was repeatedly tortured until, near death, he was transported in a police van 1,500 km to Pretoria, where there was a prison with hospital facilities. He died shortly after arrival on 12 September. In spite of his massive head injuries, the police claimed his death was the result of an extended hunger strike. No prosecutions were ever brought. Biko's story is the subject of Donald Woods' book *Biko* (1978), which formed the basis of Richard Attenborough's film *Cry Freedom* (1987).

Today, however, it is most frequently journalists and those working with them who fall victim to this ultimate form of censorship.

### Killing the messenger

On 16 June 2008, the Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, unveiled a light sculpture on the roof of BBC Broadcasting House in central London. Called 'Breathing', the 10m glass and steel cone projects into the air a beam of light 1km high every night during the BBC's ten o'clock television news bulletin. The memorial's inauguration followed the deaths in Afghanistan of two BBC journalists, Abdul Samad Rohani and Nasteah Dahir Faraah, but is dedicated to all news journalists, and those working with them, who have been killed whilst carrying out their work. As Rodney Pinder, the Director of the International News Safety Institute (INSI), which co-hosted the event with the BBC, put it: 'These men and women are the unsung heroes of democracy, for without a free press there can be no freedom. This shaft of light in the capital of international journalism is a visual reminder of their sacrifice', whilst the BBC Chairman Sir Michael Lyons said: 'We are all reminded of the daily risks taken by journalists in some of the world's most dangerous places. The implicit contract, whereby journalists place their lives at risk to help us understand the world and its events better, needs to be reaffirmed at moments like this'.

Threats to journalists, and not simply to those working in war zones, are now so severe worldwide

that on 23 December 2006 the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 1738 which ‘condemns international attacks against journalists, media professionals and associated personnel’, reminds member states that, under the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their two additional protocols of 1977, such workers ‘engaged in dangerous professional missions in areas of armed conflict shall be considered as civilians and shall be respected and protected as such’, and reaffirms the need to bring to justice those involved in attacking them. Interestingly, the US has signed, but not ratified, the 1977 protocols.

Of course, war zones are extremely dangerous, but most journalists killed in such places, particularly Iraq, are deliberately targeted and not the random victims of battlefield fire. Meanwhile the number of journalists killed indiscriminately steadily rises as those involved in conflicts become increasingly reckless with regard to the safety of journalists – for example, the sixteen Serbian journalists who were killed when NATO forces destroyed by bombing the headquarters of Radio Television of Serbia in Belgrade on 23 April 1999 during the Kosovo War. Furthermore, ‘classical’ war between two or more sovereign powers has now become the exception rather than the rule, and in many contemporary conflicts, particularly those involving militias of one kind or another, it can be extremely difficult to determine who should be held accountable for breaches of the Conventions, let alone to prosecute them for such breaches. In these circumstances it is hardly surprising if some media organisations are unwilling to send journalists to certain war zones, but this inevitably threatens to diminish – and thus to some extent to censor – the global media coverage which these conflicts receive. The alternative – safely to ‘embed’ journalists with friendly forces – has been accused of running the risk of threatening their independence and objectivity, and thus of introducing a form of self-censorship. Furthermore, if journalists are seen to enjoy a close operational relationship with one of the belligerents in a conflict, this can fatally undermine precisely that perception of neutrality which is the basis of the legal protection for media workers in war zones.

However, by no means all journalists killed in the course of their work have been reporting from war zones. Indeed, quite the opposite. According to a report published by the International News Safety Institute, *Killing the Messenger* (<http://www.newssafety.com/stories/insi/globalinquiry.htm>), one thousand journalists and support staff died trying to report the news around the world between 1996 and 2006, an average of two a week. However, only one in four news media staff died covering war and other armed conflicts, and the great majority died in peacetime, working in their own countries. At least 657 men and women were murdered during this period, and only one in eight of their killers was prosecuted. Furthermore, in two-thirds of cases the killers were not even identified, and probably never will be, thus underlining the absence of full and proper investigations when a journalist or other news professional is killed. According to the report: ‘The top ten bloodiest countries over the past 10 years were Iraq, Russia, Colombia, Philippines, Iran, India, Algeria, the former republics of Yugoslavia, Mexico and Pakistan. Shooting was by far the greatest cause of death accounting for almost half the total. Bombing, stabbing, beating, torture, strangulation and decapitation were also used to silence reporting. Some men and women just disappeared, their fate unknown’.

In recent times, the most prominent victim of such attacks was Anna Politkovskaya, the special correspondent for the Russian independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, who was well known for her investigative reports on corruption and human rights abuses, not least in Chechnya, and who was murdered on 7 October 2006. Since Vladimir Putin assumed the Russian presidency in 2000, at least twenty journalists, all of whom had angered powerful vested interests, have died in suspicious circumstances. Other high-profile journalists who have been murdered in the course of their work are Veronica Guerin, a reporter for the *Sunday Independent* newspaper in the Republic of Ireland, who investigated and wrote about Dublin’s drug trade and was murdered on 26 June 1996, and Martin

O'Hagan, who worked for the *Sunday World*, in which he wrote about the criminal activities of the Protestant paramilitary group, the Ulster Volunteer Force. The newspaper's Belfast offices were bombed twice, and O'Hagan himself received numerous death threats. He was murdered by the Loyalist Volunteer Force, a breakaway Loyalist faction, on 28 November 2001. No-one has ever been charged with his murder.

Such instances not only silence their victims for eternity, but they also act, and are intended to act, as a warning to others. Just how commonplace today is this ultimate form of censorship can also be gleaned from the Reporters Without Borders round-up of the state of press freedom worldwide in 2008 ([http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id\\_article=29797](http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=29797)). This showed that in 2008 sixty journalists were killed, 929 were physically attacked or threatened, and twenty-nine were kidnapped. The Asia-Pacific and Maghreb-Middle East regions were the deadliest for the news media. After Iraq (with fifteen journalists killed), the two countries with the highest death tolls were Pakistan (seven) and the Philippines (six). Mexico remained an extremely dangerous place for journalists to work, with four journalists being murdered there. In Africa, the death toll fell from twelve in 2007 to three in 2008, but this was due to the fact that many journalists stopped working there, often going into exile, and to the gradual disappearance of news media in war zones such as Somalia. Nor is violence reserved only for those working in the traditional media; in 2008 a blogger in China was beaten to death by the municipal police whilst filming a demonstration, and around the world forty-five bloggers were physically attacked.

Reporters Without Borders' Worldwide Press Freedom Index 2007 ([http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id\\_article=24025](http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=24025)) showed that Eritrea has the unenviable distinction of coming at the bottom of the league, replacing North Korea. Of the twenty countries at the bottom of the index, seven were Asian (Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Laos, Vietnam, China, Burma and North Korea), five were African (Ethiopia, Equatorial Guinea, Libya, Somalia and Eritrea), four were in the Middle East (Syria, Iraq, Palestinian Territories and Iran), three were former Soviet republics (Belarus, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), and one was in the Americas (Cuba). Russia featured at 144th place out of a total of 169.

Within the European Union, the murder of journalists is still relatively rare; however actual or threatened violence directed at journalists is both common and on the increase. On 3 May 2008, World Press Freedom Day, Reporters Without Borders published a report entitled *European Union: Risks Faced by Journalists* ([http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id\\_article=26769](http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=26769)), which revealed a number of disturbing instances of overt intimidation of journalists in Denmark, Sweden, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Italy, Spain and Northern Ireland. Fittingly, then, on 25 January 2007, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe passed a resolution which reminded member states of their legal obligation under Articles 2 and 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (which safeguard the right to life and the right to freedom of expression respectively) to 'investigate any murders of journalists as well as acts of severe physical violence and death threats against them. This obligation stems from the individual journalist's rights under the Convention as well as from the necessity for any democracy to have functioning media free from intimidation and political threats. Where attacks against journalists can be carried out with impunity, democracy and the rule of law suffer'. It also called upon national parliaments to 'conduct parliamentary investigations into the unresolved murders of journalists as well as attacks and death threats against them, in order to shed light on individual cases and develop as a matter of urgency effective policies for the greater safety of journalists and their right to carry out their work without threats'.

## Graven images

Another extreme form of censorship, although one whose target is not people but objects, is iconoclasm: the destruction or mutilation of visual representations of one kind or another, motivated by religion, politics or moral outrage, and carried out either officially on the orders of the authorities or in a less organised fashion by zealous members of the public. That this is a form of censorship is indubitable, and Margaret Aston's remarks about Christian iconoclasm in sixteenth-century England apply equally well to all other forms of iconoclasm: 'When the iconoclasts went to work they were concerned with attitudes as well as objects. They wanted to erase not simply the idols defiling God's churches, but also the idols infecting people's thoughts. They wanted to *obliterate* – mentally and physically'.<sup>1</sup> Such activity has a long history, one which long predates Christianity and is in fact as old as the process of image-making itself. As Aston puts it:

The defacing (or maiming) of a representation becomes a representative act: the damage to the seen is a way of hurting the unseen. One attacks the physical object in order to destroy the spiritual being that resides in it – or the system of belief to which it belongs. As long as people have believed in gods and fashioned stones in their honour, stone-breaking has held the capacity to effect a spiritual end. Breaking the holy image amounted to breaking a holy power.<sup>2</sup>

In Christian societies, much iconoclastic activity has its roots in the passage in the Book of Exodus which states: 'You shall not make yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath ... You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God'. In spite of this, the first substantial wave of iconoclasm did not take place in the Christian Church until the eighth century in Byzantium when the emperor Leo III and his successor Constantine V decreed that all images and idols were to be destroyed. The policy was reversed in the following century, however, and the issue did not arise again within Christianity in any widespread fashion until the Reformation in the sixteenth century, when it returned with a vengeance especially amongst the followers of Jean Calvin in what are now the Netherlands and Belgium (where the iconoclastic fury was known as the *beeldenstorm*) and in parts of France, as well as in Copenhagen, Wittenberg, Münster, Augsburg, Zürich, Bern, Geneva and Basel. And, all too often, iconoclasm went hand in hand with another form of destruction, as no less than Martin Luther noted in 1525 when he warned that: 'No one who sees the iconoclasts raging thus against wood and stone should doubt that there is a spirit hidden in them which is death-dealing, not life-giving, and which at the very first opportunity will also kill men, just as some of them have begun to teach'.<sup>3</sup>

In England the first wave of iconoclasm took place in the reign of Henry VIII (1509–47), with the first order to parochial clergy to take down certain kinds of images being issued in 1538, in order to avoid 'that most detestable sin of idolatry'. The most spectacular results of this order were the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, and that of Thomas Becket at Canterbury. Iconoclasm was supported by Thomas Cranmer, who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1532, and who, at the coronation of Henry's successor, Edward VI (1547–53), called on the new king to see 'idolatry destroyed, the tyranny of the bishops of Rome banished from your subjects, and images removed'.<sup>4</sup> A series of injunctions issued in 1547 expressed the new king's concern to see 'the suppression of idolatry and superstition throughout all his realms and dominions' and ordered the clergy to 'forthwith take down or cause to be taken down and destroyed' a remarkably wide range of images and objects and indeed to attempt to erase them entirely from popular memory.

This resulted in images in St Paul's and most London churches being smashed. The process continued during the reign of Elizabeth I (1558–1603). Thus in 1559 Archbishop Parker and a number of bishops issued 'A Declaration of Certain Principal Articles of Religion', Article X of which stated 'I do utterly disallow the extolling of images, relics and feigned miracles, and also all kind expressing God invisible in the form of an old man, or the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove, and all other vain

worshipping of God, devised by men's fantasies'.<sup>5</sup> At Bartholomew's Fair in Smithfield, at St Paul's Churchyard and elsewhere in London and across the country, rood screens and other wooden images were publicly burned.

By the end of the sixteenth century, iconoclasm had become an accepted part of English religious orthodoxy, and from here it was not a great leap to the better known iconoclasm which expressed itself with a particular vengeance during the English Civil War (1642–51) and the Commonwealth period (1649–60), which followed the temporary abolition of the monarchy. Thus, for example, a Parliamentary Ordinance of 28 August 1643 stated that 'all Monuments of Superstition and Idolatry should be removed and abolished', specifying among other things altar rails and steps, crucifixes, crosses, images of the Virgin Mary, pictures of saints and 'superstitious inscriptions', and in May 1644 the scope of the Ordinance was widened to include representations of angels, rood screens, holy water stoups, organs, and images in stone, wood and glass and on plate. A clear picture of what this policy involved in practice is provided by the journal kept by William Dowsing, who was Provost-Marshal of the armies of the Eastern Association during the Civil War. In 1643 he was appointed by their Captain-General, the Earl of Manchester, as 'Commissioner for the destruction of monuments of idolatry and superstition'. He described his work thus:

[In] Sudbury ... We brake down a picture of God the Father, 2 crucifix's, and Pictures of Christ, about an hundred in all; and gave order to take down a Cross off the Steeple; and diverse Angels, 20 at least, on the Roof of the Church ... Dunstal ... We brake down 60 Superstitious Pictures; and brake in pieces the Rails; and gave order to pull down the Steps ... [At Clare College chapel, Cambridge] we brake down 1000 pictures superstitious; I brake down 200; 3 of God the Father, and 3 of Christ, and the Holy Lamb, and 3 of the Holy Ghost like a dove with wings.<sup>6</sup>

The practice of iconoclasm is not, however, only the preserve of the religious – revolutionaries, too, have a propensity for it, and, ironically, they likewise tend to employ it against religious symbols. In France during the Revolutionary period (1789–99), iconoclasm in some places went far beyond the destruction of religious images; numerous churches and abbeys were entirely demolished (as at Clun for example, where one the largest churches in Christendom was essentially turned into a stone quarry); the Gregorian calendar (which had been instigated by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582) was replaced in 1793 by the French Republican calendar, which abolished Saints' days and all other days with Christian associations; names of streets and places with Christian connotations were frequently changed (thus St Tropez becoming for a while Héraclée); whilst in Paris, during the period of the Cult of Reason, which flourished from 1792 to 1794, all churches were closed, the holding of Mass was forbidden and several churches were turned into Temples of Reason, including, on 10 November (20 Brumaire) 1793, Notre Dame itself.

When the Russian monarchy was abolished in 1917, its symbols, such as double-headed eagles and statues and paintings of tsars were the object of widespread iconoclastic fury, whilst most churches and cathedrals were either closed or demolished; some, however, were turned into 'museums of atheism', in which religious imagery served exactly the opposite purpose for which it had been created in the first place. Later, Stalinist iconography would quietly disappear from the Soviet Union during the Khrushchev 'thaw' which began in 1956, and later still, with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, red stars, imagery of Lenin and all the other visual paraphernalia of communism would be rather more dramatically swept away.

On 16 May 1966, as a result of a power struggle which had been brewing for some time within the Communist Party of China, Mao Zedong launched a campaign to rid China, and in particular the Party of its 'bourgeois liberal' elements and to speed up and intensify the process of revolutionary change. On 8 August the Party's Central Committee passed its 'Decision Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' (also known as 'The Sixteen Points'), which called for the transformation of

‘education, literature and art, and all other parts of the superstructure that do not correspond to the socialist economic base, so as to facilitate the consolidation and development of the socialist system’ The main agents of this revolution, whose most extreme phase lasted until 1969 but which carried on until 1976, were the students known as the Red Guards, who played a key role in the destruction of the ‘four olds’: old thought, old culture, old customs and old habits. In pursuit of these aims, they destroyed thousands of temples, shrines, tombs and pagodas, ransacking museums and smashing works of art throughout China. Many artefacts were seized from private homes and destroyed on the spot. Books considered to be ‘anti-party’ – in fact, all foreign and most contemporary Chinese literature – were removed from libraries and bookshops. The Cultural Revolution was particularly devastating for minority cultures in China; for example in Tibet many monasteries were destroyed, often with the complicity of local ethnic Tibetan Red Guards, whilst in Xinjiang province, which is home to the Muslim Uyghur people, copies of the *Quran* and other books treasured by the Uyghur were burned.

In her book *Wild Swans*, Jung Chang movingly reveals this process in microcosm when she recalls what took place at her school:

Being more than 2000 years old, the school had a lot of antiques and was therefore a prime site for action. The school gateway had an old tiled roof with carved eaves. These were hammered to pieces. The same happened to the sweeping blue-glazed roof of the big temple which had been used as a ping-pong hall. The pair of giant bronze incense burners in front of the temple were toppled, and some boys urinated into them. In the back garden, pupils with big hammers and iron rods went along the sandstone bridges casually breaking the little statues. On one side of the sports field was a pair of towering rectangular tablets made of red sandstone, each twenty feet high. Some lines about Confucius were carved on them in beautiful calligraphy. A huge rope was tied around them, and two gangs pulled ... All the things I loved were disappearing. The saddest thing of all for me was the ransacking of the library: the golden tiled roof, the delicately sculpted windows, the blue painted chairs ... Bookshelves were turned upside down, and some pupils tore books to pieces just for the hell of it. Afterward, X-shaped white paper strips with black characters were stuck on what was left of the doors and windows to signal that the building was sealed.<sup>7</sup>

Iconoclasm is also a feature of more recent political turbulence around the globe. Thus, for example, under the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001, the two massive Buddhas of Bamyan, which were carved into the side of a cliff, were (with considerable difficulty) destroyed by the Taliban on the grounds that they were ‘idols’ and thus forbidden by Sharia law, along with all other forms of imagery, as well as music, sports and television. On 6 March 2001 *The Times* quoted Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar as stating: ‘Muslims should be proud of smashing idols. It has given praise to God that we have destroyed them’. Then, in February 2006, in the wake of the Iraq war, the al-Askari Mosque in the Iraqi city of Samarra, one of the holiest sites in Shi’a Islam, was massively damaged by explosions believed to have been caused by Al-Qaeda in an attempt to foment war between Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims. Although no injuries occurred in the attack itself, at least 165 people are thought to have been killed as a result in the following days, demonstrating the enormous symbolic power which resides in buildings, and thus, equally, in their destruction.

## ‘Pernicious books and damnable doctrines’

This brings us on, finally, to book burning, another symbolic but highly potent expression of the desire to suppress ideas viewed as dissident, to intimidate their progenitors into silence and to whip up the censorious into a self-righteous frenzy of destruction. The best-known examples are probably Girolamo Savonarola’s ‘Bonfires of the Vanities’ and the Nazi conflagrations of May 1933, but unfortunately history is littered with other instances of this practice. Curiously, in the light of the

above, one of the earliest instances took place in China at the instigation of the first emperor of the unified country, Qin Shihuangdi, who ruled from 221 BCE to 210 BCE. Convinced that Confucianism was backward-looking and a barrier to progress and that the only sound philosophy was Legalism, he decreed that all Confucian texts, and indeed all those belonging to the so-called Hundred Schools of Thought, be burned. In the end, the only books spared were on practical matters such as agriculture and medicine. Today Qin Shihuangdi is best known for the famous terracotta army with which he was buried, but he is also alleged to have had 460 Confucian scholars buried alive. Significantly, Mao Zedong compared himself to Qin Shihuangdi and is reputed to have claimed that he destroyed a hundred times as many intellectuals as did the first emperor.

During the Roman Empire's last systematic persecution of Christians, the emperor Diocletian issued an 'edict against the Christians' in 303 which ordered the destruction of Christian scriptures and places of worship across the Empire, and prohibited Christians from assembling for worship. Burning was the usual method for destroying the scriptures. However, by 313, Constantine, the first Christian emperor, had announced the toleration of Christianity in the Edict of Milan, and, ironically it was he who ordered, at the First Council of Nicaea in 325, the burning of the works of the Christian heretic Arius, who questioned traditional notions of the Holy Trinity.

By the seventh century, the Church was carrying out its own burnings of works which it regarded as heretical. A prominent victim was the medieval French theologian Peter Abelard, who also fell out with the authorities over his interpretation of the Trinity, resulting in his being forced to burn his book, the *Theologia 'Summi Boni'*, by a synod held in Soissons in April 1121. Hebrew books were regularly consumed by Christian flames in the medieval period; after strictures announced by Pope Gregory IX, Louis IX burned some 12,000 copies of the *Talmud* (one of the central texts of mainstream Judaism) in Paris in 1243, and subsequent Popes such as Innocent IV (1243–54), Clement IV (1256–68), John XXII (1316–34), Paul IV (1555–59), Pius V (1566–72) and Clement VIII (1592–1605) were considerable fanners of the flames.

In 1494, after the overthrow of the ruling Medici family in the wake of the invasion of Florence by Charles VIII of France, a new spiritual and secular leader emerged in the form of the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola. Disgusted by what he saw as Florence's excesses of materialism and immorality under the Medicis, he condemned these passionately in his sermons, finding an enthusiastic audience in a population which was demoralised by the Franco-Italian wars, alarmed by a raging epidemic of syphilis and in thrall to apocalyptic millennial fears as the dread year 1500 remorselessly approached. In one of his sermons, he envisaged Christ being carried across the world in a chariot, whose wake was strewn with infidels whose books had been burned and their images smashed. Before long he was urging his followers to build real bonfires – the so-called 'Bonfires of the Vanities'. Artists and collectors were requested to consign voluntarily a variety of precious objects to the flames, and among the many works destroyed were pictures by Botticelli and Lorenzo di Credi along with books by Ovid, Propertius, Dante and Boccaccio.

Savonarola's targets also included Pope Alexander VI who, on 13 May 1497, excommunicated him. By this time, the inhabitants of Florence were beginning to tire of Savonarola's austere regime, and there was little popular opposition when the Pope issued a warrant for his arrest on the grounds of heresy and sedition. He was tortured, forced to confess, and hanged in chains on 23 May 1498 in the Piazza della Signoria, where one of the 'Bonfires of the Vanities' had taken place. Ironically, his body was then burned, with the ashes being thrown into the River Arno.

Once Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press around 1450, the Church found it virtually impossible to destroy entire printed editions of works of which it disapproved. Gutenberg's invention played an absolutely key role in spreading the ideas of the Reformation, but, on the other hand, it was with the coming of this Protestant challenge to Rome's hegemony that book burning, along with the

iconoclasm noted earlier, became really widespread in Europe. Pope Leo X in 1520 issued the papal bull *Exsurge Domine*, which called for the burning of the works of the ‘heretic’ Martin Luther (who responded in kind by burning the bull); in Spain, the Supreme Council of the Inquisition ordered that those coming into the country were to be searched for the ‘contamination’ of his writings which, when found, were publicly burned at autos-da-fé; and in what are now the Netherlands and Belgium, eighty copies of Luther’s works were burned at Leuven in October 1520, 400 at Antwerp in July 1521, and 300 in Ghent during the same month. Vernacular versions of the Bible also fell victim regularly to book burning: in 1526, William Tyndale’s translation into English of the *New Testament* achieved the dubious distinction of being the first book written by an Englishman to be burned in England, and in Normandy and Provence, pages torn from vernacular Bibles were reportedly stuffed into the wounds and mouths of slaughtered Protestants.

In England, although Luther’s works were publicly burned in St Paul’s Churchyard in 1521, the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were marked as much by the burning of works which questioned the royal succession or the very institution of monarchy itself as by the destruction of works considered heretical. Iconoclasm rather than book burning was the hallmark of the Commonwealth, as noted above, but the Restoration in 1660 saw the burnings of two works by John Milton critical of Charles I – *Eikonoklastes* (1649) and *Defensio Populi Anglicani* (1650). And in the aftermath of the 1683 Rye House Plot to kill Charles II and his brother the Duke of York, the Convocation of the University of Oxford issued a ‘Judgement and Decree’ against ‘certain pernicious books and damnable doctrines, destructive to the sacred persons of princes, their State and Government, and of all Human Society’. This stated that: ‘We find it to be a necessary duty at this time to search into and lay open those impious doctrines, which having been of late studiously disseminated, gave rise and growth to these nefarious attempts, and pass upon them our solemn public censure and decree of condemnation’.<sup>8</sup> Among the books burned by this seat of learning were the aforementioned works by Milton and Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*.

In the twentieth century, the most notorious book burnings took place in the early days of the Third Reich. On 6 May 1933 students from the Berlin School for Physical Education arrived at Dr Magnus Hirschfeld’s Institute for Sexual Science, which was famous for having championed liberal sexual causes such as the legalisation of homosexuality and abortion, running evening classes in sexual education, and building up a comprehensive collection of books, papers and photographs on sexual matters. It was estimated that the collection contained between 12,000 and 20,000 books in 1933. The Nazis poured ink over books and manuscripts, played football with framed photographs and ransacked cupboards and drawers. Four days later, stormtroopers arrived and took an estimated 10,000 books out onto the Opera Square, where they set light to them. Told that the sixty-five-year-old Hirschfeld was abroad recovering from an illness, the stormtroopers replied: ‘Then hopefully he’ll snuff it without us then we won’t need to string him up or beat him to death’.<sup>9</sup>

Nazi newspapers reported this momentous act of cultural vandalism as ‘energetic action against a poison shop’ and ‘German students fumigate the Sexual Science Institute’ run by ‘the Jew Magnus Hirschfeld’.

Since the middle of April, students belonging to the *Deutsche Studentenschaft* had in fact been combing libraries and bookshops in order to draw up lists of ‘un-German’ books to be burned. On 6 May ‘fighting committees’ of the two main Nazi student organisations, branches of the veterans’ organisation *Stahlhelm* (Steel Helmet), SA troopers and police seized the condemned books. The police and the SA also raided private homes. The culmination of this activity took place in Berlin on Unter den Linden, just opposite the University of Berlin, on 10 May 1933, when some 20,000 books were consigned to the flames to the accompaniment of various National Socialist slogans known as the *Feuersprüche* (fire incantations). Thus the works of Marx and Kautsky were burned to the words:

‘Against class struggle and materialism; for the national community and an idealistic outlook’, and books by Heinrich Mann, Ernst Glaeser and Erich Kästner to: ‘Against decadence and moral decay; for discipline and morality in family and state’; Freud’s oeuvre was condemned for its ‘debasement and exaggeration of man’s animal nature’; and Erich Maria Remarque’s novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (a particular Nazi hate-object) was thrown onto the flames ‘against literary betrayal of the soldiers of the World War; for the education of the nation in the spirit of literary preparedness’.<sup>10</sup> Other authors whose works were destroyed included Thomas Mann, Arnold and Stefan Zweig, Arthur Schnitzler, Havelock Ellis, Marcel Proust, Andre Gide, Emile Zola, Henri Barbusse, Maxim Gorky, Albert Einstein, Jack London, Upton Sinclair and H.G. Wells. Observing this shameful and shaming event, the Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels stated:

The age of extreme Jewish intellectualism has now ended, and the success of the German revolution has again given the German spirit the right of way ... You are doing the proper thing in committing the evil spirit of the past to the flames at this late hour of the night. This is a strong, great, symbolic act, an act that is to bear witness before all the world to the fact that the November Republic has disappeared. From these ashes will arise a phoenix of a new spirit.<sup>11</sup>

Similar ‘acts against the un-German spirit’ took place on the same day in nineteen university towns across Germany, and eleven others shortly thereafter. Amongst the German authors whose works were regularly consumed by the flames was Heinrich Heine who, in his 1823 work *Almansor*, had all too presciently observed, echoing Luther some 400 years earlier, that ‘wherever they burn books, they will end up burning people’.

Shamefully, there was little or no resistance to this campaign. The official organisation of German booksellers swiftly supported the new regime, and across Germany teachers played a key role in ‘cleansing’ school libraries of unacceptable books. Thus in the sphere of education, as in so many other areas of German life, the process of Nazi *Gleichschaltung* (co-ordination) was accomplished less by force and terror than by willing and even enthusiastic acquiescence.

Sadly, this barbaric form of censorship did not end with the Third Reich. In the aftermath of the US-backed military coup in Chile in September 1983, troops raided publishing houses and bookshops and burned in the streets of Santiago any books which they found there which they considered dangerous. These included Ariel Dorfmann’s anti-imperialist classic *Para leer al Pato Donald (How to Read Donald Duck)*. They also destroyed the films and equipment of Chile Films, the national film centre, and burned all the books in Quimantù, the Popular Unity government’s publishing house. In 1986, at a time of heightened tension, 16,000 copies of Gabriel García Márquez’s book *Clandestine in Chile: the Adventures of Miguel Littin*, were publicly burned.

In September 1988, Penguin published Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses*. By the end of November it had been banned in several countries, including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, South Africa, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. On 2 December it was publicly burned by Muslims in Bolton, and then again in Bradford on 14 January 1989. Malise Ruthven described the latter scene thus: ‘Abdul Quddus did the honours: the brown Yorkshireman, tweed overcoated and hatted, the picture of outraged respectability or fascist bigotry, depending on one’s point of view, put a match to the book after it had been duly doused in lighter fluid the better to conflagrate. It made a beautiful image, an icon of iconoclastic rage, the perfect emblem for the Rage of Islam, on film, on video, in colour stills in black and white’.<sup>12</sup> And then on 14 February 1989 the Ayatollah Khomeini issued his famous *fatwa* proclaiming: ‘I inform all zealous Muslims of the world that the author of the book entitled *The Satanic Verses* – which has been compiled, printed and published in opposition to Islam, the prophet and the *Qur’an* – and all those involved in its publication who were aware of its contents are sentenced to death’.

In April two large bookshops in the centre of London, Collets and a branch of Dillons, were firebombed, apparently because they stocked the book, echoing similar attacks on two bookstores in Berkeley, California, the previous February. Not altogether surprisingly, numerous bookshops on both sides of the Atlantic decided not to stock the book. Rushdie was forced into hiding for a decade, the Japanese translator of the book was murdered, the Italian translator beaten up and stabbed, and its Norwegian publisher shot and left for dead. None of the perpetrators of these acts has ever been caught.

Since the *Satanic Verses* affair, fear of giving offence, especially to the religious, has become a major source of the most insidious form of censorship, self-censorship, and we shall return to this topic in the Conclusion.

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# 2

## Indexes and licences

Chapter 1 explored the more drastic means of censoring words and images which have already been made publicly available in one form or another. A less violent, but nonetheless extremely effective, form of censorship is simply to forbid certain words and images being made publicly available in the first place. In its most systematic form, such prohibitions take the form of an official list, known as an Index. At best (from the censors' point of view, that is), such strictures can encourage the most effective of all forms of censorship – self censorship – since writers and artists may well be unwilling to spend their time producing works which will never be seen, or which, if somehow seen, will land them in dire, and indeed possibly fatal, trouble with the authorities.

### The imprimatur of the Church

The most famous, systematic and comprehensive index of banned works is undoubtedly the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* established by Pope Paul IV in 1559. However, this was actually preceded by a number of local indexes drawn up in reaction to the fundamental challenges to Catholic doctrine posed by the Reformation, allied with the rapid growth of printing mentioned in the preceding chapter. So, for example, an index was compiled in Lucca in 1545 to prevent distribution of the works of John Wycliff and Jan Hus, and in Venice in 1549 to suppress editions of the Bible 'containing notes and comments opposed to the faith'. In France and the Netherlands it was the universities which took the lead, beginning with the Sorbonne in Paris in 1544 and continuing in Louvain in 1546. The Louvain index was reprinted in 1551 on the orders of the inquisitor-general for Spain, who had a number of Spanish texts added, and local indexes were also drawn up at this time in Toledo, Valladolid, Valencia, Granada and Seville.

The 1559 *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* listed some 550 authors including Boccaccio, Rabelais, Erasmus and Machiavelli in an attempt to 'expunge from human memory the names of heretics'. Sixty-one printers considered as heretics were also listed, and nothing published by them was allowed to be read. In 1564, after the Council of Trent, which was intended to bolster the reform of the Church, Pope Pius IV published the *Tridentine Index*. This drew up ten general rules of censorship which effectively forbade the publication, distribution and reading of all books published by heretics since 1515, unauthorised editions of the Bible, obscene works and books of superstition. In 1571 Pius V established the Congregation of the Index, which was composed of a number of cardinals, and this took on responsibility for the administration of the *Index*, whose proscriptions remained in effect, with modifications, for three centuries. In 1596 Pope Clement VIII issued a new edition of the *Index*. This required printers to send a copy of every new book to the Congregation so that it could receive their seal of approval, the *testamur* (later *imprimatur*). From now on, this index was the only authorised

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