



Historians Resisting Tyranny: A Preliminary Evaluation

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Since time immemorial, dictators have censored the writing of history and persecuted its practitioners. This policy of history censorship has had many effects, some of which were unintended, such as the development of strategies to counter the distortion of history. This essay therefore opens with a summary overview of the intended and unintended effects of the censorship of the science of history. Against this backdrop, the essay then focuses on one unintended effect of this censorship: resistance to the distortion of history. A tableau is given of the repertoires of available types of resistance under dictatorships and, for comparative purposes, in democracies. The essay uses these repertoires to analyze the resistance of the historians under dictatorships from four perspectives: *actors* (historians and others); *conduct* (acts and omissions), *motives* (ethical, moral, professional, and political), and *impact* (short-term and long-term). The essay is intended as a tribute, both to historians who once resisted tyrannical power and to historians who retell their stories as an inspiration for present and future battles.

Keywords: actors of resistance, conduct of resistance, censorship of history, professional solidarity, repertoires of resistance.

History says, *Don't hope*
on this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
the longed-for tidal wave
of justice can rise up,
and hope and history rhyme.
Seamus Heaney¹

You did not survive in order to live
your time is short you must bear witness
have courage when reason fails have courage
in the last count only that matters.
Zbigniew Herbert²

1 Heaney, *Cure at Troy*, 77.

2 Herbert, "Mr. Cogito's Envoy," 37.

Introduction

Over the course of the ages, dictators have often censored historians, and this policy has had multiple intended and unintended effects. Some of the intended effects of censorship have undermined historical writing directly. Censorship produces a *shredder effect*, when it leads to the destruction of data, a *distortion effect*, when it falsifies or invents data, and an *omission effect*, when it conceals data.³ The cumulative result of these three effects is a *survivorship bias* at the level of sources and their analytical treatment: censorship distorts the overall record of the past.⁴ The intended effects of censorship may also undermine historical writing *indirectly* via the impact on historians and their audiences: censorship produces a *corrupting effect*, when historians are co-opted or seduced into collaborating with the repressive system or into tolerating its propaganda and distortions; a *chilling effect*, when it intimidates and deters the expression of opinions, meanwhile encouraging obedience and self-censorship in censored and third parties; an *elimination effect*, when it removes unwelcome critical actors from the historiographical scene, either temporarily or permanently; and a *sterility effect*, when the caricatural history created by censorship and propaganda discourages openness, diminishes creativity, and creates a credibility gap, provoking a crisis of public trust in historical writing which can last far beyond the abolition of the dictatorship and its censorship apparatus.

Censorship has *unintended* effects as well, that is, unintended by the dictators and their censors. These effects emanate from the targets of censorship and counter the intended effects. The most important *direct* unintended effect is the *backfire effect*, which emerges spontaneously when the weak credibility of official versions of history in nondemocratic regimes directs collective curiosity *toward* the historical taboos created by these regimes. Other direct unintended effects are less spontaneous and are rather a calculated product of individual

3 I am much indebted to colleagues attending my presentations on the resistance of historians in dictatorial contexts in Groningen (1997, 2014), Oslo (2000), Hongkong (2014), Jinan (2015), Denver (2017), Göttingen (2017), Poznań (2022), and Dublin (2023), and to Derek Jones, Sándor Horváth, Balázs Apor, and the anonymous reviewer of the *Hungarian Historical Review* for their critical comments.

4 At a general epistemological level, there exists, in fact, a double survivorship bias: the original creation of historical sources is unequal because whereas dictators and others in power tend to leave behind widespread versions of their official views of the past, disadvantaged social groups, including dissidents, tend to produce less sources (for various reasons); and the former also tend to erase whatever traces the latter have left. See also Taleb, *Fooled by Randomness*, 143–46, and Taleb, *Black Swan*, 100–21 (the survivorship bias is called “silent evidence” here).

and collective decisions to form counterstrategies to stop the assaults launched by power. They include a *resistance effect*, when historians oppose censorship privately or publicly, passively or actively; a *solidarity effect*, when third parties start supporting censored historians openly or covertly, materially or morally; a *substitution effect*, when novelists, poets, and filmmakers take the place of censored historians and become vicarious messengers of history; and a *rescue effect*, when censorship triggers attempts to save manuscripts, books, archives, and heritage at risk of destruction. Some direct unintended effects appear immediately after the collapse of a dictatorship, such as a *restitution effect*, when censored works are republished in their original versions, and a *survival effect*, when censored historians are rehabilitated after the abolition of censorship, leading to at least a partial restoration of the previous situation.

In the longer term, unintended indirect effects may also emerge: an *integrity effect*, when the distortions of history are exposed, thereby restoring intellectual honesty and protecting the integrity of history; a *memory effect*, when stories of resistance and courage in the face of censorship are told and retold and inspire; a *therapeutic effect*, when these stories suggest remedies to act; and, finally, a *preventive effect*, when the cumulative unintended effects of censorship help safeguard responsible notions of historical truth, reestablish public trust in history and prevent the recurrence of censorship.

In the following reflections, I examine ways in which historians have organized resistance to censorship under dictatorships all over the world since 1945, often at great risk. When battling tyranny, historians have of course been active in other roles, for instance as academics, journalists, politicians, and human rights and peace activists, but these kinds of roles are only relevant here to the extent that they have a clear link with the past. In addition, it is worth keeping in mind that resistance to censorship in the historical profession was usually the affair of a minority. This does not mean that the majority was a homogenous and willing mass. Some actively collaborated with the dictator, while others merely acquiesced to their fates. As we shall see, the historians who remained silent were the hardest to gauge.⁵

Readers who are looking for specific examples of acts of resistance by historians will be disappointed. I have given examples of such acts in abundance

5 I concur with Viola, *Contending with Stalinism*, 42–43, that “Resistance ... was only one part, likely a small part, in a wide continuum of societal responses to the ... state that included accommodation, adaptation, acquiescence, apathy, internal emigration, opportunism, and support. If we neglect this continuum, we risk reducing the regime ... to the demonic and society to an undifferentiated whole.”

elsewhere.⁶ This time, my purpose is different. I reflect on the evidence on a global scale and embark on a preliminary attempt to evaluate the results of the resistance to the distortion of history, discussing in the process whether acts of resistance actually furthered the ultimate goal: saving the integrity of memory and history. First, I give an overview of the *repertoires* of available types of resistance to the distortion of history under dictatorships.⁷ In order to put this into a comparative context, I also review the repertoires of types of resistance used by historians against the distortion of history in democracies. I then discuss the resistance of historians from four perspectives: the *actors* of resistance (historians and others); the *conduct* of resistance (acts and omissions), the *motives* for resistance (ethical, moral, professional, and political), and the *impact* (short-term and long-term) of resistance.

Repertoires of Resistance to the Distortion of History under Dictatorships

In the following overview of the repertoires at the disposal of dissident historians to resist the distortion of history under dictatorships, twenty-five types of resistance are distinguished.⁸ They cover a broad range of activities in four concentric layers: resistance from prison, private resistance outside prison, public resistance outside prison, and, finally, outsider shows of solidarity, usually by actors living in democracies but sometimes also by people living under other dictatorships. The general line is to start with the more invisible and private activities and move gradually to more public and defiant ways of resistance,

6 For dozens of post-1945 examples, selected from among many more, see De Baets, *Crimes*, 119–54 (and see also 91–118, 169–71). This is a completely updated version of De Baets, “Resistance to the Censorship of Historical Thought,” 389–409. It is recommended to read the updated chapter in conjunction with the present article. Analysis of the resistance of historians that transcends individual cases is relatively rare. See recently, e.g., Apor et al., “Collections of Intellectual Dissent”; Berger, *The Engaged Historian*, including the contributions by Stefan Berger (1–31), Martin Wiklund (44–62), Nina Witoszek (163–84), and Nina Schneider (205–20); and Norton and Donnelly, *Liberating Histories*, 113–17, 121–25, 203–7.

7 A democracy index classifies countries on a scale from democracy to dictatorship. Such indices have been constructed annually by the leading democracy watchers Freedom House in Washington (since 1973), the Economist Intelligence Unit in London (since 2006), the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) in Stockholm (since 2017), and the V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) Institute in Gothenburg (since 2017). In the present essay, however, a simple binary distinction (dictatorship / democracy) is used, because the empirical material is subjected to a type of qualitative analysis for which subtler subdivisions add little (except the illusion of more precision). At one point in my analysis, however, societies in transition from dictatorship to democracy are considered as a third group.

8 I borrowed the notion of “repertoire” from Tilly, “Speaking Your Mind without Elections, Surveys or Social Movements,” 461–78 (with comments by James Beniger, 479–84, and Leo Bogart, 484–89).

although it proved difficult to catch the diverse reality of resistance on a simple scale from invisibility to publicity.

Table 1. Repertoires of resistance to the distortion of history under dictatorships⁹

Resistance from prison
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading, writing, and teaching history in prison.
Private resistance outside prison
<i>Insider solidarity</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping individuals.
<i>Historical knowledge</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safeguarding historical textbooks and history education. • Smuggling sources abroad. • Teaching history in secret. • Debating history in secret. • Documenting ongoing repression. • Analyzing records in secret. • Shifting research focus toward historical taboos. • Writing and reading between the lines (using historical analogies). • Self-publishing.
Public resistance outside prison
<i>Ethical and moral action</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposing historical myths legitimizing power. • Rescuing historical principles. • Organizing peaceful public commemorations.
<i>Legal action</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suing incumbent leaders. • Suing deceased leaders.
<i>Political action</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linking historical writing to democracy. • Writing to the head of state. • Lecturing in public. • Resigning from one's job or position. • Refusing to sign loyalty declarations or take loyalty oaths.
<i>Resistance after-the-fact</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resisting with delay.
Outsider solidarity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smuggling sources by exiles. • Resisting as exiles. • Other modalities of assistance.

⁹ Table compiled by author and based on dozens of post-1945 examples collected from all over the world, many of which are mentioned in De Baets, *Crimes*, 89–152, and Network of Concerned Historians.

Resistance from prison. Prison may seem an unlikely place to start an overview of repertoires of forms of resistance, but there are relatively numerous reports about historians who read history in their cells and kept diaries or notebooks in which they penned thoughts of a historical nature. Some inmates who were not historians, when given the opportunity, were able to obtain history degrees through correspondence courses. A few authors drafted historical novels in prison, and others were able to conduct some historical research and work on historical manuscripts. A few also knew of channels with which they could smuggle their writings out of prison. Next to these usually solitary activities, there were also more interactive moments, for instance when detainees taught history to their fellow inmates. However, this happened only rarely.

Private resistance outside prison. One cannot save a profession when its professionals are left in the dark. Many historians living in repressive contexts have demonstrated solidarity with their persecuted colleagues and discreetly supported them. The Czechoslovak philosopher of history Jan Patočka, one of the dissident intellectuals who deeply thought about the phenomenon of resistance, called this the “solidarity of the shaken.”¹⁰ I call it “insider solidarity.”

At the level of historical knowledge, academics, teachers, and students were sometimes able to organize petitions to rescue innovative history textbooks or to protest against biased ones. When circumstances allowed, historians who were internally displaced in times of civil war helped set up refugee campuses in remote areas of their home countries. Occasionally, archival information was smuggled abroad. Undercover teaching and unofficial lectures during secret seminars were options in several countries. This secret teaching and lecturing sometimes spilled over into unofficial discussions held on a small scale in private homes. These informal gatherings were the metaphorical oxygen which sustained underground historical writing in many dictatorships.

Dissident historical research could take different shapes. Some historians witnessed the repression unfolding before their eyes and documented it as eyewitnesses in real time to rescue sources and create a basis for future study. Another mode of resistance was the secret collection and analysis of data, for example by copying documents clandestinely. Not surprisingly, such covert research concentrated on the blank spots of history. In semi-repressive or politically hybrid contexts, it was sometimes even possible to publish reports

10 Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, xv–xvi, 134–35; Tucker, *Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence*, 71–77. Patočka’s commitment cost him his life.

about the repression experienced by the historical profession. A few historians became attracted to the gray zones, blank spots, and black holes of censorship and shifted their research *toward* the historical taboos, or if they had already made these areas the focus of their work, then they stubbornly refused to shift away from them or to withdraw into safer spaces of research. Writing about the past to critically comment on the present was a frequent technique of historical analogy which was intended to call telling precedents to mind to arouse historical consciousness and briefly create a sense of connection over time. Numerous historians preferred to publish their manuscripts in self-made editions and distribute them in small underground circles.

Public resistance outside prison. Some historians opted for public confrontation with tyranny by attacking, if not destroying, the historical myths that buttressed dictatorial power. They openly doubted the authenticity of ancient legends that supported the legitimacy of the authoritarian political system, and they endured much hostility for having done so. Others criticized the official rewriting of history with its blank spots by publicly and directly advocating a right to historical truth and by defending the intrinsic value of the methodical search for such truth. Another powerful public tool was the organization of peaceful public commemorations, for example, at the foot of a well-known monument, on a significant historical anniversary, or during the funeral of a colleague or public figure. If these kinds of commemorations served as rallying points for political opposition, they were frequently perceived as threats to the public order.

Sometimes, historians secretly collected sources to indict the leaders of their countries in the hopes of someday even seeing them actually be prosecuted. In some countries, appeals were issued to prosecute *deceased* leaders for the human rights violations that they had ordered or committed during their rule. Though legally impossible (since the dead cannot be indicted or prosecuted), such appeals were nevertheless powerful history lessons. Surprisingly enough, there were several such calls to indict deceased leaders, and some even led to posthumous trials against deceased heads of state.¹¹

On multiple occasions, dissidents emphasized the unbreakable bond between a free and responsible historical profession and democracy, arguing that a democratic society alone respects the human rights necessary to allow the historical profession to thrive. Some even sent dramatic appeals to the head of state with complaints about the deplorable conditions of the historical

11 See De Baets, *Crimes*, 169–71.

profession. If the letters were private, they could be neglected, though they could also spark harassment of and persecution against their authors; if these letters were (or became) public or when they were cast and distributed as public memoranda, they often made retaliation against their authors unavoidable if the regime did not want to lose face, though this was a risky strategy that could backfire.

Some historians defied the repression of their craft by making gestures of disobedience calculated for maximum symbolic impact. They usually proceeded by surprise, and mostly at great personal sacrifice. In this sense, giving public talks with a critical approach to history was often an act of bravery. Resigning from one's job or position or refusing to sign a loyalty declaration or take a loyalty oath to the ruling elite or ideology were other signs of courage.

Sometimes resistance came with a delay, when a single copy of a book believed to be entirely destroyed suddenly emerged after years or decades and led to reprints. Likewise, now and then, manuscripts that had been thought lost were rediscovered. Although often the product of coincidence but not infrequently also of secret rescue plans, such discoveries offer us glimpses of the survival and rescue effects and the subtle satisfaction of delayed revenge. We could call this resistance after the fact.

Outsider solidarity. If historians living under dictatorial regimes dared take advantage of international conferences abroad as platforms to publicize their plight, they faced expulsion or charges of “enemy propaganda” or “treason” upon their return, if they were allowed re-entry at all. When we turn our attention to the historians who lived in exile, we see that many of them smuggled sources and works from abroad back home or stayed discreetly in contact with those left behind via networks of messengers. A significant minority of these exiled historians established publication outlets and historical institutions abroad, including study centers and universities in exile, to make the critical voices about the history of their home countries heard. Much of this work was public and sometimes highly visible. The same could be said about signs of moral or material solidarity by diaspora historians with their persecuted compatriots, such as signing petitions in protest against the dictatorship's history politics or as part of efforts to boost the morale of those left behind.

Many of these types of resistance to dictatorships were strengthened by tokens of professional solidarity in democratic or even in other dictatorial countries. This outsider solidarity was not free of risk. The harshest punishment for historians living in democracies who wished to help repressed colleagues

living under dictatorships was to end up on a visa blacklist, which in many cases forced them to change specialisms or even careers. As a sign of moral solidarity, some waged campaigns for their persecuted colleagues, for instance by signing petitions and statements or writing letters of protest to repressive authorities.¹² National history associations sometimes refused to send their delegates to conferences in problematic countries, and international history associations could block certain countries from acting as hosts for their congresses. Some scholars resigned their membership in foreign academies or returned distinctions. And many historians used their freedom to write or teach uninhibitedly about the controversial aspects, blank spots, and falsified histories of tyrannical regimes. These gestures were signs of moral and symbolic solidarity.

Some went further and organized forms of material solidarity by creating safe havens in democratic countries. Much cultural heritage was safeguarded in this way, including archives. Material solidarity also extended to people. When they were lucky, refugee historians were offered a welcome and sometimes employment upon arrival in their host countries. In short, transnational networks of solidarity played their own role in the history of resistance.

The repertoires of resistance under dictatorships presented above need further refinement and are far from exhaustive. Nevertheless, as they are based on dozens of post-1945 examples collected from all over the world, they should give a reliable picture of the tools available to historians living under repressive regimes. How many historians actually used them depended on many variables, such as the intensity and duration of the dictatorship, the strength of its repression apparatus, the population size and mobilization power of the historical community and institutions, and the connections this community had with the outside world. In the case of the more public activities identified above, we are certainly talking about a small minority of historians in any given dictatorship.

Repertoires of Resistance to the Distortion of History in Democracies

It would be a serious mistake to believe that democracies were immune to assaults on the integrity of history and memory—and that the historians in these democracies were therefore unfamiliar with the phenomenon of resistance. The difference with dictatorships is not that democracies endure fewer attacks on

12 See Network of Concerned Historians for 29 *Annual Reports* covering 1995–2023.

the historical profession but that these attacks are less devastating in their effects and are usually countered at an early stage and with less fear of retaliation. The paramount cause for this difference is, of course, the stronger position of the right to freedom of expression in democracies.

In myriad ways, historians living in democracies could and did actively contribute to the creation of a domestic and global climate in which history is studied responsibly. The following bird eye’s view of seventeen modalities gives an impression of the array of tools at their disposal.

Table 2. Repertoires of resistance to the distortion of history in democracies¹³

<p><i>Historical knowledge</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debunking historical myths, historical disinformation and propaganda. • Opposing denial of past genocides and other crimes. • Shifting research focus toward areas shrouded in secrecy.
<p><i>Ethical and moral action</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching professional ethics to raise awareness of responsible historical practice. • Opposing abuses of history through prevention, investigation, disclosure, and sanction.
<p><i>Legal action</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting effective freedom of information and archives laws. • Denouncing laws that excessively limit archival access. • Denouncing laws that produce chilling effects on the free expression of ideas concerning the past. • Combating the judicialization of history.
<p><i>Political action</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denouncing attempts of political interference with officially commissioned histories. • Refusing to sign loyalty declarations or take loyalty oaths. • Participating in transitional-justice mechanisms of emerging democracies. • Evaluating the role of the historical profession in previous episodes of repression.
<p><i>Symbolic reparation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memorializing victims of past human rights violations through measures of satisfaction. • Designing memorial websites for historians.
<p><i>Solidarity</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressing solidarity with historians under dictatorships. • Expressing solidarity with domestic colleagues who are attacked or unjustly penalized or dismissed.

¹³ Table compiled by author and based on dozens of post-1945 examples collected from all over the world, some of which are mentioned in De Baets, *Responsible History*, 182–83; De Baets, *Crimes*, 141 and 151, and Network of Concerned Historians.

The search for historical truth so central to the work of historians harbors several dimensions of resistance. Some overlap, such as, for example, the refutation of historical myths, historical disinformation, and propaganda on the one hand and the fight against the intentional denial of corroborated past genocides and other crimes on the other. The uncontested proliferation of myth, falsity, and denial, especially online, undermines society's trust in the reliable knowledge produced by responsible history practitioners. Another dimension starts from the premise that it is the task of the community of historians to study the past in its entirety, including its dark episodes. If this premise is valid, it follows that it is historians' collective duty to pay due attention to the taboos of history and areas of history shrouded in secrecy.

Explicit and structural attention to the ethical and moral dimensions of historical scholarship is often still lacking in scores of academic history curricula, yet where it is taught, it can contribute powerfully to a climate of responsible history. Part of this dimension lies in developing an awareness of the presence of abuses of history and of the different modes of opposing them: prevention, investigation, disclosure, and sanction.

Campaigning for effective laws that encourage freedom of expression, freedom of information, and archival access is a long-term legal strategy which requires perseverance. Denouncing laws with provisions that unreasonably limit access to records is usually part of this strategy. More generally, any laws that produce chilling effects on the freedom of expression about the past (for example, defamation laws that impose criminal sanctions or disproportional damages) should be denounced. The tendency of states to promulgate memory laws that prescribe the desired content of historical debate and/or proscribe alternative views of the past also inhibits a broad understanding of the past from multiple perspectives. It is a sign of the judicialization of historical content and should be opposed.

Action can shift from the legal to the political level. Attempts of the government to interfere with history works it has itself commissioned should be and have been opposed. The refusal to sign loyalty declarations or take loyalty oaths was another strategy. Historians living in emerging democracies that have to deal with a repressive past of lies and secrecy may fulfill a political duty by participating in initiatives that foster transitional justice (historians' commissions, truth commissions, tribunals, reparation and reconciliation efforts). One poignant part of this effort could be a soul-searching operation into the role

of the historical profession in the previous era of repression and violence accompanied, if need be, by public apologies for its mistakes and distortions.

Recent historical injustice can be tackled with measures that fit the United Nations Reparation Principles. These principles distinguish five types of reparation: restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, prevention, and satisfaction.¹⁴ The last type, satisfaction or symbolic reparation, in particular is relevant to the field of memory and history. It includes measures such as truth-finding, the search for dead bodies, posthumous rehabilitation, official apologies, commemorations, and history education about the violent episodes of the past. The number of websites dedicated to historians who suffered political repression and lost their lives is increasing.¹⁵

Outsider solidarity with those persecuted under dictatorships connects resistance under dictatorships with resistance in democracies. Similarly, solidarity can also be openly shown with domestic colleagues who have been attacked or unjustly penalized or dismissed.

Scores of historians have participated in one or several of these resistance acts in democratic contexts. The democratic repertoire is discussed here mainly for comparative purposes, as the differences between forms of resistance under dictatorships and forms of resistance in democracies are large.

Actors of Resistance

The repertoires of types of resistance available under dictatorships will now be analyzed from four perspectives: agency, conduct, motivation, and impact. The purpose of this analysis is to answer the question whether resistance to the distortion of history under dictatorships, as part of the wider history of resistance and freedom, made any difference. Let us first look again at the actors in the four layers of resistance: resistance from prison, private resistance outside prison, public resistance outside prison, and outsider solidarity.

Resistance from prison constitutes a special category. Doing historical research and writing history from prison, if tolerated at all, were survival strategies first of all, devised as a means of somehow giving long and tedious prison years a purpose. Resistance to the system was usually a secondary effect here. Teaching history in prison, because of its direct effect upon other inmates,

14 United Nations General Assembly, *Basic Principles*, § 22.

15 See, for example, the *Provisional Memorial*.

served resistance purposes most. If works written in prison had any resistance effect after their publication outside prison, it was usually unintended at the moment of their creation, and the effect always came later. This did not prevent some historical works from causing a stir upon publication, not the least because of the special appeal that works written in prison have. Some became bestsellers.

Outside prison, modalities for resistance were greater, although in repressive societies the margins of freedom remained narrow and fragile. It is difficult to tell whether resistance to censorship performed outside prison generally made a difference. Private resistance was often invisible except among the smallest of circles. This makes any evaluation of its frequency and importance impossible. Public resistance regularly produced a rescue effect: the mission to safeguard sources, works, and monuments could be fulfilled in a variety of ways. When publicly protesting historians were silenced, often the substitution effect came into play. Novelists, playwrights, journalists, storytellers, and singers then took care of suppressed historical interpretations, sheltering them and keeping them alive when collective memory was in danger of extinction because the silenced and silent historians were not able to refute the heralded truths of official historical propaganda.

In addition, historians sometimes acted without intending to be part of any form of resistance, although their conduct could be or was interpreted as such. Many historians who were in prison or who remained in the privacy of their homes did not particularly identify themselves as opponents of the system. In a dictatorial context, however, merely performing the role of a professional scholar (methodically and responsibly collecting and analyzing past data, no matter where this led) was already a very political act. This is so because the scholar's findings, when disclosed, are received in a nervous political atmosphere in which they risk rejection, regardless of the scholar's intentions. All historians, including the most apolitical, *knew* that they were putting themselves in danger merely by practicing their profession in an uncompromisingly responsible manner.

If we leave the repressive context and look at outsider solidarity (i.e. gestures of moral and material solidarity made in other countries), we can speculate with a little more certainty. The success of outsider solidarity was heavily influenced by factors such as the strength of the historical craft in the country before it succumbed to tyranny; the continuity, once the dictatorship was installed, of pre-existing networks with the outside world; and the historical ties between assisting and receiving countries. But displays of solidarity always had something unpredictable: depending on political or other fashions, some countries, some

historiographical traditions, some individuals, and some works aroused more sympathy than others.

If we look at the four groups of resisters more generally as intellectuals, they can enrich typologies and theories about intellectuals,¹⁶ whether or not the latter are construed according to criteria such as independence from authorities, visibility in public forums, intentionality and intensity of activity, or levels of professional, political, and social engagement. This is so because the repertoires do not show that resistance is necessarily the opposite of the ruling power. Rather, it can pervade all segments of society, including government itself. Leading intellectuals, court historians, and official historians often had small margins of freedom and criticism, and some skillfully exploited these margins, tweaked too much rigidity, or tolerated niches of resistance in and outside the official historiographical bureaucracy. Purely instrumental views of these historians as willing tools of the regime fail. Even intellectuals close to the centers of power could operate in a resistance mode now and then.

Conduct of Resistance

Any analysis of the conduct of resistance should begin with some caveats about the role of silences, the selectivity of data, and the low comparability of resistance types. To begin with, the notion of “conduct of resistance” should not be interpreted too narrowly. Resistance is usually expressed as an act. However, precisely in situations of repression, disagreement and resistance can also be expressed as an omission rather than an act, for example, when historians refuse to comply with an order or when they meet dictatorial orders with indifference, if not passive resistance. Now and then, silences are telling.¹⁷

In the same way, not *all* conduct of resistance is analyzed here. Many stories were not included in the database that constitutes the basis for this evaluation because they were unknown (either generally or by me). The low-profile character of private, anonymous, or pseudonymous resistance is the primary reason why much relevant conduct remains invisible. In addition, many historians very likely

16 I mean theories about the roles of intellectuals using concepts such as “intelligentsia,” “revolutionary intellectuals,” “engaged intellectuals,” “activist intellectuals,” “organic intellectuals,” “public intellectuals,” “ivory-tower intellectuals,” “fellow travelers,” or “enemies of the people.” For example, Foucault, “Truth and Power,” 126–33, contrasts the “universal intellectual” (speaking as the conscience of humanity) with the “specific intellectual” (the savant or expert).

17 See also Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, xi–xiii, 4–5.

took care to erase all or most traces of their resistance out of safety concerns. Were these unnoticed gestures of resistance done in vain and doomed to oblivion? Do acts of resistance have to be witnessed in order to be meaningful? The answer is that every act of resistance *is* witnessed by at least one person, namely the actor. Any act, however small and difficult to trace, could linger on, sometimes for a fleeting moment, sometimes for years, in the mind of its creator at least, who may have felt heartened by it. Or it may have been noticed by a few others and inspired them instantly or long after the fact. Therefore, even hidden or quasi-invisible acts or gestures of resistance are meaningful. Despite this, it remains true that a regime paradox is at work: given the unequal tolerance of criticism in different regimes, there is less information about more resistance in dictatorial societies and more information about less resistance in democratic societies.

Finally, types of resistance are difficult to compare, as they span a multifaceted spectrum of private and public activities, from silent support for clandestine acts to symbolic gestures and occasional contributions to acts of open defiance. Some acts consisted of small offstage acts done without fanfare and often hidden behind a screen of ambiguity or silence, while others required public bravery or quixotry. Some were spontaneous, occurring in a flash, while others were carefully planned or deliberately provocative and continued for years.

With these caveats in mind, it is possible to draw three cautious conclusions about the conduct of resistance. The first regards the specificity of history as compared to other scientific disciplines. Although the types of anti-dictatorial resistance presented here were deployed in the realms of history and memory, most could serve *mutatis mutandis* as resistance formats for other scientific disciplines as well. Helping someone flee a country, for example, basically involved a range of acts regardless of whether the refugee was a historian, a sociologist, or another type of scholar. Very few types of resistance seem unique to the historical profession, though these types include the subversive use of historical analogies to convey covert criticism of present-day politics, the brave exposure of historical taboos and myths, the courageous plea in defense of the basic principle of historical truth, and the somewhat odd practice of bringing accusations or charges against deceased leaders. These types of resistance are difficult to replicate in other disciplines.

A second conclusion is that inspiration for resistance can circulate among countries and across eras. An excellent example illustrating both is the organization of clandestine history classes or underground history seminars.

This was a typically Polish medium of resistance under Russian rule before World War I, under German rule during World War II, and under Soviet rule between 1977 and 1989. In neighboring countries of the post-1945 Eastern European bloc, similar initiatives popped up. Likewise, the *samizdat* version of resistance, while not absent in the rest of the world, is typically associated with anti-communist resistance in the USSR and its satellite states.

Finally, the question arises as to what extent the modes of resistance under dictatorships and democracies were comparable. Undoubtedly, a similar spirit of courage and perseverance pervades the acts in both regime types, although the risks were evidently extremely unequal. Under dictatorships, the main problem for resisters is to invent ways to circumvent the repressive apparatus. The suppression of history not only engenders infertility (referred to as the sterility effect in the introduction) but also stimulates its opposite, the creativity to escape control, although sometimes only at the cost of a huge investment of effort. The preferred environment to perform acts of resistance seems to be a small community or network, either clandestine or not, with a minimum of interaction with the outside world.

In democracies, the threat of repressive power is generally low (but certainly not non-existent) and the challenges are comparatively less exacting. The spheres of action the study of which is complicated under dictatorships (prison and private activities) are less important in democracies, because there are fewer historians in prison and people have fewer reasons not to speak in public. Paradoxically, however, the larger freedom in democracies seems to generate a greater variety of forces that can impose restraints upon historians. Under dictatorships, the pattern is clear, at least in principle: the powers that restrict the historians' work are the dictator and his apparatus of formal institutions (including the parliament, the courts, the leading political party, the police, military, and security, and the censorship bureau) and informal means (thugs and death squads operating in the shadows). In democracies, states can impede historians directly or indirectly (although in less violent ways and less unchecked than their counterparts under dictatorships), but the censorial role of semi-public and private lobbies, groups, and individuals is potentially larger. The paramount difference between the two regime types for the successful organization of resistance in the fields of memory and history, then, is the degree of freedom of expression, including the ability to conduct open, adversarial debates about the past.

Another thought worth pondering is the plight of historians in societies that are in transition from dictatorship to democracy. A counterintuitive observation

is that the life of a historian in a time of transition may be riskier than in a time of dictatorship. Entrenched dictatorships, because they wield ruthless power, firmly deter and block incriminating historical research. In contrast, freer conditions in emergent democracies prompt or encourage bold historical research into the crimes of previous dictatorships or into past instances of systemic violence. However, in these transitional times, the safety conditions are usually weak, transforming historians into targets of the military and allies of the military who seek to install or restore authoritarian rule. Consequently, strategies of resistance are precarious even under circumstances in which expectations and perspectives for better professional lives rapidly increase.

Motives for Resistance

When we ask why some historians feel the need to express criticism under circumstances of persecution and censorship, many motives play a role or act together, but the most important ones are ethical, moral, professional, and political.¹⁸ Each motive serves different purposes, but the boundaries between them are fluid.

Ethical motives reflect the question of how to live a good life. Resisters have ethical motives if they follow their conscience and act regardless of how others behave. At a certain moment, they have decided that the situation is unbearable, and they want to express their protest (cautiously or recklessly) even if they are the only ones and regardless of examples, followers, and consequences. Some perform small gestures to illustrate principles, while others risk their jobs or lives.

Moral motives reflect the question of how to behave toward others. Resisters have moral motives if they aim to inspire and mobilize others to support them silently (passive resistance) or to follow their example openly (active resistance) and together form an expanding pool of protest.

If historians act for what they call *professional motives*, these motives are usually a combination of ethical and moral reasons applied to the historian's craft. Resisters have professional motives if they think that professional duties (such as sincerity and accuracy), professional standards of methodology (such as following the rules of logic), and professional procedures (such as peer review and debate) have to be respected and protected at all costs and/or to set an example for present and future generations. Convinced of the professional

18 For the difference between morality and ethics, see, among others, Dworkin, *Justice for Hedgehogs*, 13–15.

and social importance of a responsibly produced history or judging that the attack on the integrity of memory and history or the injustice done to historians has become unbearable, they act out of principle and/or with the intention of inspiring others.

Sometimes, *political motives* come on top of the other reasons. They reflect the determination to influence and change the political system. Resisters have political motives if they aim to criticize the political system with a view to change it radically. Whereas in a democratic context change means perfecting the system, in a dictatorial context, change means replacing it.

Impact of Resistance

Given the heterogeneity in terms of agency, conduct, and motivation, how can we evaluate the impact of resistance to the distortion of history under dictatorships? A necessary step is to distinguish immediate and remote impact. It is too simple to evaluate resistance only in the short term, that is, when the dictatorship is nascent or unfolding or at the moment of its downfall. We should also measure the less visible long-term impact on the psychological condition of all those involved, including contemporaries and future observers.

Turning to the short term, one can take the pessimistic or the optimistic view. One must admit that, from a pessimistic perspective, resistance did not (and simply could not) counterbalance systemic violence and organized attacks on the historical profession. Dictatorships ruined much of the historical profession with ruthless power. We will never know which historical sources and facts, and which innovative interpretations and arguments about the past, were lost forever when and because historians were persecuted.¹⁹ In many cases, it took years, if not generations, to rebuild only partly what was torn asunder. And often losses and disappearances were irreparable.

From an optimistic perspective, the harvest of resistance is rich: in the end, much was also saved at the material level of archives, manuscripts, works, monuments, and education, as well as at the symbolic level of principles and values. Attacks were countered, secrets uncovered, distortions denounced, indifference neutralized, sterility fertilized, distrust disarmed, and principles affirmed, with timidity or with confidence.

¹⁹ See also Smeeth, “The Silent Minority,” 80.

Looking at the long term, a surprising number of acts of resistance inspired and became examples or precedents of moral courage. Two types in particular, it seems to me, have this special potential. The first is when the resisters proceeded as they thought they should in order to exercise their craft responsibly with reckless disregard of warnings and consequences and without chasing any effects. The second special type of resistance which gets easily etched in memory occurs when the act was performed with a certain bravado, for example, when daring historical analogies were used or when historians began reorienting their work *toward* the eras and topics considered taboo. Something extraordinary happens when a given conduct transforms into example and precedent: the epistemological status of that conduct alters under the gaze of those watching it because more information on how to live can be extracted from it.

Once instances of moral courage are perceived as examples or precedents, they comfort those who otherwise feel alone and powerless in the same or in similar repressive contexts. Likewise, they can enlighten future generations as precedents long after the events to which they refer have disappeared. As long as stories of commitment and integrity are told and retold or even only fleetingly referred to, they inspire hope and pride, not only in the spur of the moment but also over time. In short, they create a *memory effect*. One then feels part of a proud tradition of holding the standards of scholarly integrity aloft in the face of likely censorship. This is a tradition to be aware of, to care for, and to strengthen. The memory effect of resistance, either in its immediate or remote form, is an underestimated force. This article aspires to be part of that memory effect: it is a tribute both to those historians who once resisted tyrannical power and to those who retell their stories as an inspiration for present and future battles.

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