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Around the World, Censorship of Historians is Tied to Attacks on Democracy

News

Abroad

tags: [Vladimir Putin](#), [censorship](#), [academic freedom](#), [teaching history](#), [Narendra Modi](#), [Jair Bolsonaro](#)

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Russia's Vladimir Putin and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro are two world leaders who have linked their own rule to revisionist histories of their nations' past dictatorships.

On 17 August 2022, the Network of Concerned Historians (NCH) published its [twenty-eighth annual report](#). Set up in 1995, NCH documents news on the intersection of history and human rights, in particular the censorship of history and the persecution of its producers. Its focus ranges from issues related to the freedom of historical research and teaching to the right to remember. This year's report covered 100 countries and documented, among others, the political murder of five history producers.

Of these history producers who were killed for political reasons, three were murdered during the unfolding of a military coup. In Myanmar, after the military deposed democratically elected

State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, large-scale protests erupted across the country. In one of such protests, in February 2021, high school history and math teacher Tin Nwe Yee was hit by a tear gas cannister fired by security officials; she suffocated and died of a heart attack. Two months later, amidst violent resistance against the junta in Chin State, first-year history student Felix Than Muan Lian was shot dead by soldiers of the Tatmadaw (armed forces) on his way to work.

In Afghanistan, in August 2021, eleven days before the Taliban took control of Kabul, historian and poet Abdullah Atefi was taken out of his house in the Chora district, Uruzgan, allegedly by Taliban forces, tortured and shot on the street. Atefi was known for his writings on the history of Pashto literature and culture, and was a member of the Afghan branch of PEN International.

The other history producers' deaths were caused by negligence of the regime. In Iran, in January 2022, film director and member of the Iranian Writer's Association (IWA) Baktash Abtin died from complications relating to COVID-19, which could have been avoided had he received medical care earlier. He had contracted the disease in Evin Prison in Tehran, where he had been sent in 2019 on a five year prison sentence in relation to a book he had co-authored on the history of the IWA.

In China, also in January, the Uyghur writer and former editor at Kashgar Uyghur Press, Haji Mirzahid Kerim reportedly died in the hospital after he had "jumped and fell." Despite a serious health condition, he had been sentenced to eleven years in prison for writing about Uyghur history and historians.

The political murder of history producers is only one, albeit the worst, type of history-related censorship. Throughout 2021 and 2022, examples of censorship and persecution ranged from political or politically-supported interference in the production of history textbooks and curricula—notably in India, Hungary, Hong Kong and currently unfolding in the Philippines—to restrictions on archival access, for example in France and Romania. The multi-headed monster that is history-related censorship reared its head in debates about racial justice initiatives in the United States; in politically motivated appointments in Brazil; in the liquidation of a historical organization in Russia; and in the persecution of individual history producers in India. Let us look a little closer at these four cases.

The number of so-called anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT) laws restricting the teaching of race and racism in United States history increased exponentially throughout 2021 and 2022. Research by PEN America found that 183 educational gag orders had been introduced between January 2021 and April 2022, with nineteen of them having become law in fifteen states. It further observed that the state level bills—almost exclusively brought forward by Republican party politicians—were vaguely drafted, leaving room for arbitrary interpretation, while often enabling direct punishment of teachers' speech, including through a "private right of action" allowing parents and citizens to levy their own punishment. All this together made the laws likely to also cause self-censorship and thus lead to the effective banning of a wide swath of historical materials.

While in the US politicians attempted to censor historical teaching, and by extension future historical research, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro intervened personally. Known for his admiration of the military dictatorship that ruled the country between 1964 and 1985, he reportedly asked his Minister of Education Milton Ribeiro to interfere with the November 2021 *Exame Nacional de Ensino Médio* (a standardized examination given to more than 8 million

secondary students), requesting the term “1964 military coup” to be changed into “Revolution.” On November 15, six days before the exam would take place, he announced that the exam would now start “looking more like the government” so that nobody would have to worry about “those absurd issues from the past.” Four days later, he nominated Ricardo Braga, the owner of a private security company, as the Director of the National Archive, despite him lacking expertise. The nomination provoked fears among many, including the National Forum of Associations of Archivists of Brazil, of a rewriting of the history of the dictatorship, and possibly a destruction of archival documents.

In Russia, matters were even worse. In November 2021, the Prosecutor General’s Office filed a lawsuit with the Supreme Court seeking to liquidate Memorial and all of its regional and structural units. Memorial worked as an international human rights organization in Russia since its founding in 1988, uncovering crimes against humanity, especially those committed during Stalin’s reign (1928–1953). A thorn in the eye of President Vladimir Putin’s history policy of valorizing the Soviet Union and Stalin’s rule, Memorial had been forced to register as “foreign agent” in 2014 for receiving foreign funding, and had since been fined at least 21 times for a sum of more than 4.2 million rubles. On December 28, Memorial was liquidated by the Supreme Court. Its archives, including a database of three million victims and 42,000 collaborators of the Soviet secret police between 1935 and 1939, a library and a museum, were all under threat after the ruling.

In India, political persecution was mostly aimed at individual history producers. In May 2021, Gilbert Sebastian, an assistant professor in international relations at the Central University of Kerala, was suspended for describing the militant political organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), connected to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, as a “proto-Fascist organization” during a course on “Fascism and Nazism.” One year later, in May 2022, Waqas Farooq Kuttay, an assistant professor at Sharda University, was similarly suspended after students had complained about an “objectionable” question for a mid-term undergraduate paper, which asked students to discuss whether there were “any similarities between Fascism/Nazism and... Hindutva.” Following the suspension, the university said the question had “distorted the great national identity.” The links between the BJP, the RSS and an aggressive policy of Hinduization are clear, and so is the link with the 2002 mob violence targeting Muslims in Gujarat. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, then Chief Minister of Gujarat, was deemed responsible for the violence by human rights activist Teesta Setalvad. Whereas the National Human Rights Commission and the Supreme Court had strongly condemned the Gujarat government for its failure to deliver justice in the 2002 mob violence case, the Gujarat authorities repeatedly prosecuted Setalvad on false charges. In June 2022, for example, she was arrested in Mumbai on charges of criminal conspiracy and forgery. She was released on interim bail this September.

What these four cases, in their great diversity, show, is an attempt by those in power to limit historical research and teaching to those subjects and perspectives that in some capacity function as a foundational element of their legitimacy: be it Putin presenting himself as the harbinger of stability after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, while promising Russia’s return to power in a new world order, or the attempts of the Bharatiya Janata Party to push a view of India inspired on an aggressively excluding Hindutva ideology.

Similar processes were found at work in how the past was allowed to be remembered. [Elsewhere, I argued](#) that the governments of Rwanda, Russia, China and Sri Lanka channeled their legitimizing interpretations of the past into national commemorative practices. Similar examples took place in Vietnam, where human rights activists were put under house arrest on

important commemoration days, such as April 30 (the end of the Vietnam War); in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Bosnian Serb authorities of Prijedor banned the annual White Armband Day commemoration (for the victims of ethnic cleansing during the 1992–1995 war) on the grounds of a “serious danger of violence” by two far-right Bosnian Serb nationalist groups, thereby strangely reversing its responsibilities; and in Israel, where in June 2022 the Knesset approved a provisional bill banning the display of “enemy flags,” including the Palestinian one, at state-funded institutions, after Palestinian flags had been waved on May 15 (known by Palestinians as Nakba Day to commemorate the 1948 Declaration of Independence of Israel and the accompanying displacement of Palestinians), in direct opposition to a September 2021 ruling by the Jerusalem Magistrate's Court.

When analyzing the censorship of history, one is drawn to look at the backsliding of democracy in the world, as shown time and time again by democracy watchers such as Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit, since 2005 as well. The pursuit of historical truth and the falsification of historical revisionism, depend on such freedoms that are foundational for democracy: freedom of expression, freedom of information and the right to truth. When democracy is under threat, historical research is among the first casualties. Both need our fullest support.