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Network of Concerned Historians

The Network of Concerned Historians (NCH) is an international observatory founded in October 1995 by Antoon De Baets at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands to monitor and advocate against censorship, persecution, and ethical violations affecting historians and historical inquiry worldwide.^[1] It operates as a bridge between human rights organizations addressing cases of censored or persecuted individuals concerned with the past and the broader community of historians, drawing inspiration from the International Committee of Historical Sciences' commitment to defending freedom of thought and expression in historical research and teaching while opposing the misuse of history.^[2] The NCH's core activities include compiling annual reports that document specific instances of oppression, abuse, state secrecy, and attacks on historical practice, with coverage spanning from its inception through the most recent years up to 2025.^[3] It maintains resources like a handbook cataloging attacks on history, a memorial for deceased historians, analyses of defamation cases against scholars, and compilations of professional codes of ethics, all aimed at promoting ethical conduct and raising awareness of human rights issues in historiography.^{[4][5][6]} Under leadership transitioning from founder Antoon De Baets—an emeritus professor of history, ethics, and human rights—to current editor and coordinator Ruben Zeeman as of October 2025, the NCH has sustained campaigns for affected historians and contributed to discussions on United Nations resolutions related to historical truth and academic freedom.^{[1][7]} Its defining characteristic lies in this focused vigilance, providing empirical documentation of threats to historical integrity without alignment to partisan narratives, thereby supporting causal analysis of how censorship impedes truthful reconstruction of the past.^[8]

Founding and Historical Development

Establishment in 1995

The Network of Concerned Historians (NCH) was formally established on 13 October 1995 at the History Department of the University of Groningen in the Netherlands.^[9] Founded by Antoon De Baets, then a professor of cultural history at the university, with support from two colleagues, the initiative directly followed the Eighteenth International Congress of Historical Sciences (CISH) in Montréal, Canada, from 27 August to 3 September 1995.^{[9][10]} A key catalyst was a roundtable at the congress titled "Power, Liberty, and the Work of the Historian," which underscored global threats to historians' freedom, including censorship and persecution.^[9] De Baets' establishment of the NCH stemmed from his extensive research in the 1980s and 1990s on postwar censorship of historical thought, which documented hundreds

of cases but highlighted the need for active intervention rather than passive observation alone.^[9] ^[1] The timing aligned with the mid-1990s expansion of electronic mail among academics, enabling rapid, low-cost international coordination without reliance on traditional infrastructure.^[9] On the day of its founding, De Baets launched the NCH's website, marking the network's operational start as an informal observatory linking human rights advocates with the global historical community.^[9] From inception, the NCH adopted a deliberately unstructured model—no formal membership, board, budget, or offices—to prioritize responsiveness to urgent appeals on behalf of imperiled historians.^[9] De Baets assumed the roles of editor and coordinator, positions he held continuously until 2025, guiding early efforts toward documenting violations at the intersection of history, ethics, and human rights.^[1] This foundation emphasized practical advocacy over institutional pomp, positioning the NCH as a niche responder to cases often overlooked by broader academic or rights bodies.^[9]

Key Milestones and Expansion

The Network of Concerned Historians (NCH) marked its initial operational milestone shortly after founding by issuing its first annual report in 1995, focusing on documented instances of historians facing censorship, persecution, or professional threats worldwide. This report initiated a tradition of systematic compilation, with subsequent editions released each year, culminating in the 31st report published on March 27, 2025, which details evolving challenges at the nexus of historical scholarship and human rights.^[11] The progression to 31 reports underscores expansion in scope, as coverage has grown to encompass not only individual cases but also broader trends like state-sponsored historical denialism and attacks on academic freedom across diverse regions.^{[11][3]} A parallel development involved the intensification of advocacy efforts through urgent campaigns and collaborative actions with human rights groups. Over its first decade (1995–2005), the NCH contributed to 30 such campaigns addressing cases in 18 countries spanning all continents, reflecting a shift from primarily informational roles to active intervention in real-time crises affecting historians.^[12] This expansion in engagement was supported by the organization's evolving documentation of history-related legal disputes and defamation suits, which by the early 2020s included resources aiding global networks of scholars.^[13] The website, operational since 1995, has continually amplified reach, enabling public access to reports, case archives, and calls to action, thereby broadening participation beyond its Dutch origins at the University of Groningen to an international roster of concerned academics.^[13] By 2022, the 28th annual report highlighted intensified global censorship patterns, such as those tied to geopolitical conflicts, signaling the NCH's adaptation to rising demands for monitoring in an era of heightened authoritarian pressures on historical inquiry.^[14]

Organizational Framework

Leadership and Governance

The Network of Concerned Historians (NCH) was founded in October 1995 by Antoon De Baets, who served as its editor and coordinator from inception until October 2025.^[1] De Baets, an Emeritus Professor of History, Ethics and Human Rights at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, initiated the organization at the university's History Department to address cases of persecution and censorship affecting historians worldwide.^[1] During his tenure, he oversaw the production of annual reports, campaigns, and

documentation efforts, establishing NCH as a bridge between human rights organizations and the international historical community.^[1] As of October 2025, leadership transitioned to Ruben Zeeman, who assumed the roles of editor and coordinator.^[1] Zeeman, previously co-editor from July 2020 to October 2025, holds a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Groningen, a bachelor's in philosophy from the University of Leiden, and a master's in comparative history from the Central European University in Vienna.^[1] De Baets continues as co-editor, maintaining involvement in editorial decisions and content oversight.^[1] NCH operates as a small, informal observatory without a formal board, governing council, or hierarchical committee structure documented in public records.^[1] Decision-making appears centralized under the editor and coordinator, focusing on monitoring human rights violations against historians, compiling reports, and coordinating urgent actions through collaborations with international networks.^[1] Technical operations, including website management, are handled externally by Harras Network, with Koen Vangrinsven as manager in Antwerp, Belgium, and Gergely Zayzon as network administrator in Budapest, Hungary, but this does not extend to substantive governance.^[1] The absence of elaborated governance mechanisms reflects NCH's status as a specialized, volunteer-driven initiative rather than a large institutional entity.^[1]

Affiliations and Networks

The Network of Concerned Historians (NCH) maintains friendly ties with a range of international organizations focused on historiography, human rights advocacy, and academic freedom, serving as a conduit between historians and broader human rights networks.^{[2][15]} Its official website has been archived in the Human Rights Web Archive of Columbia University since March 2011, enhancing its visibility within global human rights documentation efforts.^[15] These affiliations underscore NCH's role in fostering collaboration on issues like censorship, persecution of scholars, and threats to historical inquiry, without formal membership in supranational bodies. Key partnerships include historical and educational societies such as the Swiss Society for History (since July 2025), the Royal Netherlands Historical Society (since January 2023), the Brazilian National Association of History (since July 2013), the European Association of History Educators (EuroClio, since November 2012), and the International Students of History Association (since April 2013).^[15] Human rights-oriented collaborations encompass PEN America (since January 2024), Contested Histories (since February 2021), the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies (since July 2011), Scholars at Risk (since February 2007), the Scholar Rescue Fund of the Institute of International Education (since June 2008), and the Science and Human Rights Coalition of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (since October 2008).^[15] More recent ties extend to Historians without Borders (since October 2025).^[15] NCH's network also reflects historical shifts, with some affiliations now defunct, including Academia Solidaria of Historia a Debate (since July 2003) and the Network for Education and Academic Rights (since June 2001).^[15] These connections facilitate joint campaigns, resource sharing, and advocacy for at-risk historians, aligning with NCH's observatory function in monitoring human rights violations in historical professions worldwide.^[2]

Mission and Scope

Core Objectives

The Network of Concerned Historians (NCH) primarily aims to serve as a conduit linking international human rights organizations that advocate for censored or persecuted historians—and others engaged with historical inquiry—with the broader international community of historians.^[2] This bridging function seeks to amplify awareness and coordinated action against threats to historical scholarship, including censorship, persecution, and professional ethical breaches.^[2] NCH's objectives are explicitly guided by Article 1 of the Constitution of the International Committee of Historical Sciences, originally adopted in 1926 and amended in 1992 and 2005, which mandates defending freedom of thought and expression in historical research and teaching while opposing the misuse of history and promoting ethical conduct among historians.^[2] To fulfill these aims, NCH pursues targeted activities such as compiling annual reports documenting human rights violations against historians, maintaining a handbook cataloging attacks on historical work, and providing resources on ethical codes, defamation cases involving historians, and relevant United Nations resolutions concerning history.^[2] Additional core goals include commemorating persecuted historians through a dedicated memorial and facilitating campaigns to support individuals facing repression, thereby fostering a global ethical framework for historical practice that prioritizes evidentiary integrity over ideological distortion.^[2] These efforts underscore NCH's commitment to safeguarding the autonomy of historical inquiry amid documented patterns of state-sponsored interference and professional ostracism in various regimes.^[3]

Focus Areas and Topics

The Network of Concerned Historians (NCH) primarily addresses threats to the integrity of historical scholarship, with a core emphasis on human rights violations targeting historians and the historical profession. Its work centers on documenting and combating censorship of historical thought, which encompasses state-imposed restrictions on research, publication, and teaching of history, as detailed in resources like the *Handbook of Attacks on History*.^[4] This includes global patterns of suppression since 1945, such as prohibitions on discussing sensitive topics like colonial legacies or wartime atrocities, often analyzed through case studies in Europe, Asia, and Africa.^[1] Persecution of historians forms another key focus, involving physical threats, imprisonment, or extrajudicial killings for political reasons tied to their work. NCH maintains a provisional memorial for historians killed in such circumstances, with documented cases spanning Ibero-America from 1920 to 2020 for challenging official narratives on politics or human rights abuses.^[5] Annual reports systematically track these incidents, highlighting patterns in authoritarian regimes where historians are targeted for uncovering evidence of corruption or genocide denial.^[3] Academic freedom and ethical responsibilities in historiography represent ongoing topics, with NCH advocating for protections against institutional pressures that compromise scholarly independence. This includes examinations of defamation suits against historians, where legal actions are used to silence critiques of national myths or powerful interests, and proposals for professional codes of ethics to uphold truth-seeking amid political interference.^{[6][16]} Additionally, the organization explores intersections between human rights law and history, such as UN resolutions addressing the misuse of historical narratives in propaganda, and state obligations in history education to prevent indoctrination.^[7] These areas are pursued globally, bridging historians with international bodies to amplify advocacy against systemic biases in academic environments that favor ideological conformity over empirical inquiry.^[2]

Core Activities

Annual Reports on Human Rights

The Network of Concerned Historians (NCH) has published annual reports since 1995, documenting cases at the intersection of history and human rights, with a primary emphasis on censorship of historical research, persecution of historians, and threats to academic freedom worldwide.^[17] These reports compile verified incidents drawn from international news sources, human rights organizations, and direct appeals, presenting them chronologically and thematically without explicit advocacy, to serve as a factual resource for historians and rights groups.^[2] Each edition typically spans dozens to over 100 countries, highlighting patterns such as state-sponsored historical denialism, imprisonment of scholars for documenting atrocities, and restrictions on archival access.^[18] The reports' structure includes an introductory overview of global trends, followed by country-specific entries with precise details like dates of incidents, names of affected individuals or institutions, and contextual explanations of violations such as violations of freedom of expression under international standards like Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.^[19] For instance, the 2024 report—the 30th in the series—covers events including the detention of historians in authoritarian regimes for researching sensitive topics like genocides or colonial legacies, and institutional pressures in democratic states to suppress dissenting historical narratives.^[19] Earlier reports, such as the 2005 edition, analyzed 61 countries with a focus on post-Cold War transitions and emerging digital censorship.^[20] NCH maintains source transparency by referencing primary reports from bodies like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, while noting potential biases in media coverage of politically charged cases, such as underreporting in state-controlled outlets.^[21] The reports are distributed as free PDFs on the NCH website, facilitating their use in academic advocacy and legal appeals, though they explicitly disclaim endorsement of any political stance to prioritize empirical documentation over interpretation.^[17] By 2022, the series had amassed coverage of over 100 countries annually, underscoring persistent global challenges to historical truth-seeking amid geopolitical tensions.^[22]

Campaigns and Urgent Actions

The Network of Concerned Historians (NCH) conducts campaigns and urgent actions by monitoring international human rights organizations for appeals involving persecuted or censored historians and related professionals, then selecting and forwarding relevant cases to its network of participants for advocacy support.^[23] This bridging role emphasizes rapid response to threats such as imprisonment, death sentences, or censorship targeting those engaged in historical research or writing about the past, without NCH independently initiating petitions but amplifying established calls from groups like Amnesty International.^[24] Key activities include daily review of urgent appeals, with selected cases distributed via email circulars that recommend specific actions, such as sending letters to governments or institutions.^[25] For instance, in 1996, NCH circulated an appeal for Albanian historian Elvira Shaplllo and others facing repression amid political instability.^[26] In 2002, it highlighted the death sentence against Iranian historian Hashem Aghajari for alleged apostasy related to his academic critiques.^[27] Other documented urgent actions address forensic anthropologists under threat, such as repeated appeals in the early 2000s for Guatemalan teams investigating mass graves from the civil war, who received death threats for exhuming evidence of state atrocities.^{[28][29]} In 2008, NCH supported an appeal for Tibetan history teacher Dolma Kyab, imprisoned by Chinese authorities for possessing materials on Tibetan culture and history deemed subversive.^[30] These efforts extend to cases like Iranian women's rights activists at risk of imprisonment in recent years for historical documentation of gender issues.^[31] NCH's

selections prioritize cases with direct links to historical inquiry, aiming to mobilize academic solidarity while maintaining independence from partisan alignments.^[23]

Resources and Documentation

The Network of Concerned Historians (NCH) hosts a dedicated website serving as a repository for resources and documentation on threats to historians, historical archives, and scholarship, including censorship, persecution, and attacks on historical inquiry. These materials draw from reports by human rights organizations, international bodies, and primary sources, emphasizing empirical cases of violations. Access is primarily through downloadable PDFs and linked documents, with content updated periodically to reflect ongoing global developments.^[13] Central to NCH's documentation are its **Annual Reports**, published annually since 1995, totaling 31 reports as of 2025. Each report compiles news on the intersection of history and human rights, focusing on censorship of historical narratives, persecution of historians, archivists, and archaeologists, and related abuses across dozens of countries. Coverage has expanded over time, from 17 countries in the 1995 report to 120 countries in the 2025 edition (186 pages), with recent examples including 111 countries in 2024 (149 pages) and 105 in 2023 (158 pages). Reports aggregate verifiable incidents sourced from nongovernmental organizations and official records, avoiding unsubstantiated claims, and are available as free PDF downloads for each year.^[17] NCH contributes to scholarly documentation through its involvement in **The Palgrave Handbook of Attacks on History** project, which provides structured resources for analyzing assaults on historical work. Components include a 40-page introduction, a one-page typology of attacks, organizational details (3 pages), a timeline (1 page), editorial guidelines (14 pages), and a comprehensive dataset of NCH-documented attacks from 1995 to 2025 (2,556 pages). Aimed at prospective contributors, the handbook employs categorical frameworks to classify threats empirically, with materials accessible as PDFs; the project page was last updated on June 25, 2025.^[4] Additional resources encompass **Human Rights Resources**, offering curated links and documents on academic freedom, basic rights for scholars, and intersections with history, including multilingual materials from United Nations bodies and international courts. NCH also documents **UN Resolutions on History**, compiling official texts addressing historical denialism and related issues, alongside sections on codes of ethics for historians and cases of historians facing defamation. These are presented as reference compilations to support advocacy and research, prioritizing primary international sources over secondary interpretations.^{[2][32]}

Impact, Reception, and Critiques

Documented Achievements

The Network of Concerned Historians (NCH) has documented its primary achievements through sustained documentation and advocacy efforts spanning nearly three decades. Since its founding in October 1995, NCH has published over 30 annual reports detailing intersections of history and human rights, with the 2024 report covering cases in more than 100 countries, thereby compiling a comprehensive global record of threats to historians, including censorship, persecution, and attacks on historical scholarship.^[3] These reports have served as a resource for international human rights monitoring, bridging academic historiography with advocacy by alerting organizations to specific cases of historian imprisonment or suppression.^[1] NCH's advocacy has directly influenced outputs from

intergovernmental bodies. Between 2020 and 2025, founder and former coordinator Antoon De Baets submitted at least 11 expert opinions to entities such as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), with notable inclusions: a 2021 contribution referenced in a UN General Assembly report on religious freedom, and input incorporated into the ICRC's 2021 Draft Guiding Principles for the Dignified Management of the Dead in Humanitarian Emergencies.^[1] Additionally, a November 2025 opinion on atrocity denial was provided to the UN Special Rapporteur on Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence, contributing to ongoing policy discussions on historical denialism.^[1] Through its resources, NCH has compiled verifiable datasets advancing historical ethics, including a provisional memorial documenting historians killed for political reasons from ancient times to 2017, featured in De Baets' 2019 book *Crimes against History*, and collections of history-related legal cases and defamation instances against historians.^{[5][1]} These efforts have garnered institutional recognition, evidenced by De Baets' election as president of the International Commission for the History and Theory of Historiography in 2022 and induction into Academia Europaea in 2024, roles that amplify NCH's framework for addressing historiographical integrity.^[1] By 2023, NCH's newsletter had attracted nearly 1,800 subscribers among historians and related professionals, indicating broad academic engagement with its outputs.^[33]

Criticisms and Limitations

The Network of Concerned Historians (NCH) operates with a narrow mandate confined to human rights violations specifically impacting historians, archivists, archaeologists, and history-related practices, such as censorship of historical research or persecution of practitioners, thereby excluding analogous issues in other academic disciplines like sociology or literature.^[1] This focus, while enabling specialized documentation, limits its applicability to broader intellectual freedom concerns not explicitly tied to historical inquiry.^[21] As a small, coordinator-led initiative founded in 1995 and primarily managed by individuals such as Antoon De Baets until 2025, with technical support from a limited network like Harras Network, the NCH lacks large-scale funding, formal membership, or institutional backing, relying instead on volunteer efforts and secondary reports from organizations including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.^{[1] [19]} This structure constrains its operational capacity, restricting activities to annual reports, opinion letters to international bodies, and resource compilation rather than fieldwork, legal advocacy, or policy enforcement.^[33] Public criticisms of the NCH remain undocumented in major academic or media sources, reflecting its niche role and low-profile status since inception. However, its dependence on external human rights reports introduces potential vulnerabilities to source biases, as acknowledged in NCH disclaimers stating that presentation of news does not imply endorsement of the views therein.^[19] In specific cases, such as support for historians facing conservative media scrutiny (e.g., critiques in outlets like narod.hr regarding historical publications), the NCH's positioning has indirectly drawn attention to polarized debates, though without direct accusations against the organization itself.^[19] Overall, the NCH's impact is primarily informational, bridging awareness to larger human rights entities but lacking mechanisms for measurable outcomes like case resolutions.^[21]

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