

GLOBAL VIEW

No unflattering portraits of the past, please

The USA is the latest country to try to airbrush its history, writes **JEMIMAH STEINFELD**

PERHAPS THE MOST bizarre evening I had during my time in China was at a Cultural Revolution-themed restaurant on the outskirts of Beijing.

The East is Red, named after the de-facto national anthem of the time, was huge. Propaganda posters plastered its walls, waiters wore red guard uniforms, and mock struggle sessions were performed on stage.

I was there for work. To my mind, a period famous for the public executions of teachers by their students was not a great Saturday night out. And yet it was packed. This was the early 2010s, a period marked by extreme pollution, intense materialism, glaring wealth disparity – and growing censorship.

What the restaurant marketed was a time capsule for patrons feeling old and escapism from the present-day tensions for the young. And with uncomfortable truths about the “10 years of chaos” officially downplayed, it was an easy sell.

The Cultural Revolution has always been a deeply uncomfortable chapter in the history of the Chinese Communist Party. When the nation’s first (and only) museum dedicated to the period and its victims opened in 2005, it enjoyed a brief moment of hype before the attacks started and it was eventually shut.

Historians struggled in their research, too. Files on the period were

redacted and even Chinese antique markets – once treasure troves for primary sources from Mao’s time – found their buyers and sellers targeted, and politically sensitive items removed.

In 2013, president Xi Jinping made his intentions clear. He warned the Communist Party against “historical nihilism” – any unflattering portrayal of the party’s past – a theme he has since expanded on. Today, textbooks inside the country reduce the Cultural Revolution to just a few short paragraphs and an artist has been imprisoned for allegedly slandering the heroes and martyrs of the time.

China is not alone in pruning its past. Amnesia around violent episodes is par for the course in nation building, as Benedict Anderson observed in *Imagined Communities*. Every country does it to some degree. China is just particularly extreme.

But with authoritarianism on the rise around the world, several others are joining this extreme club.

In early 2018, under the right-wing Peace and Justice Party, Poland passed a law that made it a crime to publicly attribute responsibility or complicity in the Holocaust to Poland. Originally carrying a three-year prison sentence, the penalties were removed in June 2018 following international criticism – a small victory for free speech.

But it wasn’t just in the courts that people could be punished. An ongoing campaign of intimidation against scholars and academic work has marked the years since.

The latest victim is German-Polish Holocaust historian Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe. In 2024, he published a book arguing that Polish mayors collaborated with German occupiers.

The Kulski Foundation – which, according to its website, is “focused on the promotion of patriotic values and Polish historical heritage” – tried to stop it being published because the book cover included a photograph of Warsaw’s wartime mayor, Julian Kulski. Former Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and right-wing journalists weighed in, all irate that the book sought to “blame the Poles for the Holocaust”.

Rossoliński-Liebe went on to have talks cancelled alongside receiving a deluge of hate mail and death threats.

“Even where one may disagree with aspects of its framing or conclusions, such disagreements must be addressed through academic discussion, not through unsubstantiated and generalised

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attacks. The actions of those attacking the book aim to suppress scholarly debate, intimidate researchers and promote a nationalist interpretation of World War II and the Holocaust,” wrote the Network of Concerned Historians in a statement in support of Rossoliński-Liebe.

It’s not just in Poland where Holocaust memorial gets nasty. In Ukraine, shame around the Babyn Yar massacre has led to Marta Havryshko, director of the Institute at the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Centre, being added to the controversial Myrotvorets database listing individuals allegedly endangering Ukraine’s national security.

In Croatia, right-wing nationalists – including at government level – have sought to minimise the numbers of victims and the nature of the Jasenovac camp. They even banned three top Montenegrin government officials from entering the country after they said “genocide” had been committed in Jasenovac.

It’s estimated that 100,000 ethnic Serbs, Jews, Roma and anti-Nazi Croats were killed at the camp, which was run by the Nazi-allied Ustasha regime. Zagreb described the Montenegrin declaration as “unacceptable, inappropriate and unnecessary”.

While countries want to wash their hands of involvement in the Holocaust, US President Donald Trump wants to wash away the stain of slavery in the USA.

Since returning to power last year, Trump has launched a series of attacks on the Smithsonian Institution, the world’s largest network of museums. Following a loaded Truth Social post, the long-time director was removed. Then Trump threatened to cut its funding due to its focus on “how bad slavery was”.

Trump wrote: “The Smithsonian is OUT OF CONTROL, where everything discussed is how horrible



ABOVE: A display in the “Great Debate” section of a democracy exhibit at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History

our Country is, how bad Slavery was, and how unaccomplished the downtrodden have been – Nothing about Success, nothing about Brightness, nothing about the Future.”

This led to a painful few weeks in which the descendants of slaves had to point out the obvious – that slavery was, in fact, very bad.

Of course, it was not just “very bad” – it was central to the American project, protected in the US constitution through clauses such as the three-fifths one, which determined a slave as three-fifths a person. That’s why the Smithsonian Institution, which for almost 200 years has been in charge of telling the story of the nation, emphasised it. The USA doesn’t add up without understanding its slave past. But in Trump’s USA, as in China and Poland, only “good history” is history.

The attacks haven’t stopped. In January, the National Park Service removed an exhibit on slavery at Philadelphia’s Independence National Historical Park in response to Trump’s

executive order of “restoring truth and sanity to American history”. This had been home to George and Martha Washington – keepers of hundreds of slaves – when Philadelphia was the nation’s capital.

One of the plaques, named The Dirty Business of Slavery, described the central role of the transatlantic slave trade in Philadelphia and how it destroyed the lives of around 12.5 million Africans. Empty bolt holes and discoloured brickwork are all that remain of it.

Fortunately, the assault on the historical record isn’t without challenge, even if the historians have their work cut out. In China, a bootleg industry for Cultural Revolution artefacts can be found on the messaging app WeChat. In Philadelphia, the city has sued the interior secretary and the acting National Park Service director for removal of the panels. At the site itself, flowers are laid and a hand-written sign reads: “Slavery was real”. ✕

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