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Attacks on History and Historians – Historical Studies, History Education, and Freedom

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Attacks on History and Historians

Historical Studies, History Education, and Freedom

International Conference

Convenors: Sorin Antohi, Antoon De Baets, Andreas Holtberget, Ruben Zeeman

Academia Europaea Bucharest Hub

29-31 October 2026, Academia Română, Calea Victoriei 125

Partners: International Commission of History and Theory of Historiography (ICHTH), Academia Europaea (Section of History & Archaeology), Network of Concerned Historians, EuroClio, Bucharest City Hall, University of Bucharest, Institutul pentru Investigarea

Crimelor Comunismului și Memoria Exilului Românesc (IICCMER) Institutul de Istorie
“Nicolae Iorga”, Universitatea “Petre Andrei”, Georg Eckert Institute

Several years of work on the forthcoming *Palgrave Handbook of Attacks on History*, initiated and edited by Antoon De Baets, President of the ICHTH, have resulted in many public events, including two panels at the Sixth Network Conference of the International Network for Theory of History (INTH), *Rethinking Historicity: Exploring Temporal Relations in a Changing World*, held at Tallinn University (19-22 May 2026), and a panel at the Centennial Conference of the International Committee of Historical Sciences (ICHS/CISH) (Leipzig, 26-30 August 2026). Our Bucharest encounter concludes the circuit.

It will be prefaced by the IXth Royal Colloquium, under the High Patronage of His Royal Highness, Prince Radu of Romania, devoted to the discussion of the topic in the Romanian context. Sadly, besides censorship, propaganda, and history rewriting, this context includes the assassination of historian N. Iorga by the Iron Guard, and the killing of many historians, such as Gheorghe I. Brătianu by the Communist regime. On 30 October, during a ceremony at Palatul Elisabeta, the XIIIth Cantemir Prize, linked to the Royal Colloquium, will be awarded to Antoon De Baets.

Antoon De Baets has long been thinking, communicating, and advancing a human rights framework in order to address all forms of attacks on history and historians. This approach has inspired many researchers around the world, resulting in a long series of conference and congress presentations, academic papers and volumes, public debates, panels, and colloquia. This conference is bringing this long-term process to its conclusion, by involving the editor and some of the contributors to the above-mentioned reference work, various other researchers, educators, and public figures from many countries on several continents.

Antoon De Baets states that his human rights framework is meant “to understand attacks on history and historians as the most violent form of memory and history politics. The wide variety of attacks on history today begs for an analysis of the core concept of *attacks* in order to assess – and combat – violent conduct that threatens the integrity of history and its practitioners.” This approach has several intertwined dimensions: “In the first place, it differentiates between the abusive and responsible use of the term *attacks*. Subsequently, the concept of *attacks on history* is defined as threats or uses of force by State or non-State actors against historians or their work with the intent to silence them.” The concept of *attacks* “is distinguished from related concepts such as persecution, crime, and abuse of history. Finally, the limits of the concept are examined: at its lower end, it excludes conduct that does not reach the threshold of an attack; at its higher end, it only partially covers the phenomenon of systemic bias and it is itself swallowed by generalized systemic violence of the type that we usually witness in authoritarian regimes.”

Sorin Antohi, starting from the Romanian case, and keeping the general picture in mind, is adding more contextual/historical/theoretical dimensions to the debate: „While historians had been under various forms of extra-professional, mostly political, pressure and attack before 1944, ranging from defamation to assassination (the killing of N. Iorga by the Iron Guard is the most infamous example), a systematic assault on history and memory was only introduced in connection with the onset of the Communist regime. Formally, Romania became a People’s Republic on December 30, 1947, but the Sovietization process had started in the summer of 1944. Some historians who came under attack, as well as some works of historical writing (or writings inspired by and related to history, such as memoirs, novels, poetry, drama, etc.), were

related to the interwar Far Right. Their fate under Communism (especially in its early Stalinist version) needs to be corroborated with the contemporaneous fate of their Western counterparts (and sometimes models, teachers, etc.), as well as to a short-lived campaign against the Iron Guard under the military dictatorship of Marshal Ion Antonescu, and forms of retroactive (or merely retrospective) justice and of vengeance, retribution, elimination of competition, etc.” To complicate things and go beyond moralist and self-serving Good/Evil dichotomies, Antohi also signals the “effects of persecution, censorship, marginalization, manipulation, all the way to recruitment by Party-state officials, secret services, etc. Here we step on ambiguous ground, as some historians collaborated with the various dictatorial/authoritarian regimes, and helped them attack other historians and the entire canonical historical narrative and culture that had been included in the public sphere. Occasionally, some historians were tasked by Party-state authorities to serve their foreign propaganda through publications, monitoring/manipulation of foreign scholars arriving in the country, organization of major international events long after the regime had changed its pro-Western course (one spectacular example was the 1980 CISH Bucharest Congress), etc.”

Beyond the diversity of case studies, which could only be suggested in this brief introduction, the approaches quoted above are laying the ground for a systematic, timely, even urgent global debate. In our time, even established democracies witness attacks on history and historians. Whatever can be learned from dramatic and tragic developments is also useful to understand and improve the global democratic condition, and advance freedom everywhere.

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