

# TAXONOMY OF CONCEPTS RELATED TO THE CENSORSHIP OF HISTORY

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## ABSTRACT

*The question of how we know when censorship occurred has several sides. Problems of evidence of censorship do not only arise from practical obstacles, but also from its very nature as a knowledge-related phenomenon. Scarcity and abundance of information about censorship may be determined by the extent of the censors' success or by uneven research efforts. These factors often make it complicated to demarcate censorship from similar restrictions and to identify patterns and trends in the relationship between power and freedom. The present chapter looks into this epistemological problem by mapping the set of concepts governing and surrounding censorship in the particular field of history. It draws up a mini-dictionary with definitions of 26 key concepts related to, larger than, and different from the censorship of history. As these definitions are interrelated, the set in its entirety forms a taxonomy.*

**Keywords:** censorship; freedom of information; history; propaganda; secrecy.

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Government Secrecy

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## INTRODUCTION: TRACING CENSORSHIP

The question of how we know when censorship occurred has several sides. Problems of evidence of censorship do not only arise from practical obstacles, but also from its very nature as a knowledge-related phenomenon. Three epistemological paradoxes are worth mentioning.

First, many forms of censorship are invisible and difficult to trace, since censorship normally takes place in an atmosphere of secrecy. Michael Scammell (1988) wrote that censorship hides itself: “One of the first words to be censored by the censors is the word ‘censorship.’” Clive Ponting (1990) made a similar remark: “In a secretive country, the extent of secrecy is itself a well-kept secret.”<sup>1</sup> The less visible the censorship, the more effective it is.<sup>2</sup>

Second, in repressive societies there is less information about more censorship, whereas in a democratic society there is more information about less censorship. Under dictatorial regimes, insiders (or outsiders allowed to visit the country) who are aware of censorship mostly do not report it because they fear research or career troubles or backlash effects on themselves or their wider circle. The result is wide under-reporting. Authors who do mention the subject typically do so in passing. Sometimes they treat it more extensively, as they write under the vivid impression of a recent famous case. If they systematically research and report it, and become whistleblowers, they may encounter disbelief. Data from the censors themselves are generally lacking, at least until the moment when a postconflict transition arrives. Several exceptional but most important moments of repression, and moments of large operations in particular, are ill-suited for recording. Active recording of repression of scholars typically requires stability and routine. In more democratic regimes, censorship is certainly not absent, but it is usually less unobserved and less uncriticized.

These twin paradoxes entail a third one that comes to light when censorship is seen as problematic: studying censorship is the beginning of its suspension. Censorship has a backfire effect and the study of censorship is itself one of the manifestations of that effect. In this chapter, we limit our attention to one particular field of censorship study: the censorship of history. Although the censorship of history is a well-known and obvious area of interest, it has also been, until recently, a relatively underestimated and neglected field of systematic historical research. Scarcity and abundance of information about the censorship of history may be determined not only by the extent of the censors’ success (see paradoxes one and two), but also by very uneven research efforts (see paradox three). They make it often difficult to distinguish important and typical information about censorship from

surrounding data and, hence, to identify patterns and trends in the relationships between history, power, and freedom.

The question of how we know when censorship occurred, therefore, presupposes transparent definitions of the set of concepts surrounding censorship and secrecy. The term censorship, the leading specialist in media law Eric Barendt (2005) wrote, is emptied of real meaning if it is applied to any social convention or practice that makes communication for some individuals more difficult. Therefore, the emphasis here lies on the coercive and the tutelary practices of the state or other authorities. Even with this fundamental caveat, and whatever the regime, it is often difficult to distinguish the censorship of history from similar restrictions on the activities of historians and thus to demarcate it from surrounding concepts. Bearing that in mind, I have attempted to give interrelated definitions of some key concepts in the following mini-dictionary.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Preliminary notes*

Legal experts make a basic distinction between *facts* and *opinions* (Schauer, 1982; Barendt, 2005).<sup>4</sup> They use “information” as a synonym of facts and “thoughts,” “ideas,” “beliefs,” “comments,” “views,” or “value judgments” as synonyms of opinions. Historians prefer to call opinions “interpretations”. *Silence*, *omission*, and *secrecy* are general terms. Silence covers all types of omission. Omission can be deliberate; when it is, it is the result of (responsible or irresponsible) selection. Secrecy covers all types of intentional concealment (Bok, 1983).

## CONCEPTS RELATED TO CENSORSHIP

**Censorship of history:** the systematic *control* over historical facts or opinions and their exchange – often by suppression – imposed by or with the connivance of the government or other powers (compare Hampshire & Blom-Cooper, 1977; Scammell, 1988).

*Types.* Precensorship (prior restraint) or postcensorship, direct or indirect, formal or informal, official or unofficial, public or private.

*Comment.* Often accompanied by self-censorship and propaganda. “Other powers” include superiors, institutions, sponsors, source providers, and pressure groups.

**Self-censorship of historians:** irresponsible omission by historians, often after pressure, of historical facts or opinions – or avoidance of investigating them in the first place – for fear of negative consequences.

*Comment.* Also called the *Schere im Kopf* (scissors in the head) in German-speaking countries. Most efficient, widest spread, least visible form of censorship. Often due to the chilling effect produced by censorship installing a climate of threat and fear. It restricts the public's access to information.

**Historical propaganda:** systematic *manipulation* of historical facts or opinions by or with the connivance of the government or other powers.

*Types.* By commission (i.e., by falsification or lie), by omission, by denial.

*Comment.* Also called “positive censorship” (Spender, 1984). Second and third types close to censorship and self-censorship. Censorship is often part of propaganda campaigns, but propaganda, being broader, does not necessarily imply censorship.

## CONCEPTS LARGER THAN CENSORSHIP

**Abuse of history:** the use of history with an intent to deceive (De Baets, 2009).

*Comment.* Part of irresponsible history. Censorship is the abuse of history committed under the control of others. Propaganda is often an abuse of history. The result of abuse can be termed “pseudoscientific history,” “pseudohistory,” or “bogus history.”<sup>5</sup>

**Irresponsible history:** the abusive or negligent use of history.

*Comment.* Part of the misconduct by historians.

**Misconduct by historians:** violations of legal, professional, or moral norms, which are either general or specifically related to history (the latter being called irresponsible history).

*Comment.* General misconduct includes, for example, the use of offensive language in classrooms or the intimidating and discriminatory treatment of colleagues and students.

## CONCEPTS DIFFERENT FROM CENSORSHIP

### *Diffuse Collective Agency*

**Social forgetting (amnesia, oblivion):** situation in which specific historical facts or opinions are or seem generally forgotten.

*Comment.* One special type is traumatic social forgetting in postconflict situations. Reasons for social forgetting vary with agents (victims of crime, survivors of crime, perpetrators, new regimes ...). In its pure form, “social forgetting” is rare and it has a self-defeating quality (nobody remembers something that is generally forgotten). It is often an incorrect label: social forgetting can be an involuntary result, but it can also be the result of suppression, including self-censorship or censorship. “Social forgetting” is close to censorship when induced. It is the same as censorship when enforced. Thus, “selective amnesia” or “taboo” is an often more correct label.

**Historical taboos (blank spots, black holes, memory holes, zones of silence):** historical facts or opinions that cannot be mentioned, especially when they are embarrassing for reasons of privacy, reputation, or legitimation of power and status.<sup>6</sup>

*Comment.* Because taboo facts or opinions are embarrassing, they are either falsified, omitted, or denied. They may result in social forgetting, with which they are often confused. Taboos are related to irresponsible omission. They are often part of propaganda (when facts are falsified), censorship (when facts are omitted), or both (when facts or opinions are denied). Taboos are close to censorship when induced. They are the same as censorship when enforced. Frequently accompanied by self-censorship.

**Historical myths:** uncorroborated historical facts or unsubstantiated historical opinions. All myths have authors, although the latter’s identification is typically difficult.

*Comment.* Sometimes historical myths amount to lies. High risk of propaganda.<sup>7</sup>

**Denial of historical facts:** opinion that events underlying corroborated historical facts did not take place.

*Comment.* Synonym of negation (especially in French). Sometimes confusingly called “historical revisionism”. If historical revisionism means replacing less accurate historical facts and less plausible opinions with more accurate

and plausible ones, it is a normal feature of scholarly procedure. Denial is often negation with intent to deceive. It is censorship if the denialist view is imposed by authority. In the latter case, it is often accompanied by historical taboos and social forgetting. Minimization of the importance of corroborated historical facts is often a disguised form of denial. Denialism or negationism is frequent in debates about genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. Denial of historical facts can be a form of hate speech, which is the advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence (United Nations, 1966).

*Unofficial (Private or Nongovernmental) Agency*

**Charge of (1) invasion of privacy or (2) defamation and insult:** charge (or threat of charge) that historian (1) invades the private life or correspondence or (2) harms the reputation, or insults the honor, of living or deceased historical subjects.

*Comment.* Privacy and reputation of the living are universal human rights (United Nations, 1948).<sup>8</sup> Posthumous privacy and posthumous reputation are partially moral, partially legal concepts. Privacy invasion or defamation charges are frequently disguised censorship attempts. Their chilling effect often induces self-censorship.

**Commissioned history:** historical genre produced when a person or institution gives a time-limited assignment, optionally including contracts and funding, to historians or others to write a specified historical work.

*Comment.* Called official history when the institution is official. High risk of censorship and propaganda by commissioning entities; high risk of self-censorship by historians.

*Official Agency*

**Legal forgetting (including prescription, pardon, and amnesty):** annulment of prosecution, judgment, and/or sentence for a criminal act.

*Comment.* Legal forgetting transforms into censorship if the act that became statute-barred, pardoned, or amnestied cannot be mentioned in historical works.

**Official history:** history commissioned and/or controlled by an official institution.

*Comment.* High risk of censorship and propaganda by official institutions; high risk of self-censorship by historians (Butterfield, 1951; Maret, 2009).

**Official secrecy of current and archival records:** official restriction on access to current and archival records deemed necessary for one of six purposes: respect of the rights or reputations of others, for the protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals (United Nations, 1966).

*Comment.* Official secrecy of records is censorship if the restriction is unlawful (not provided by law), involving purposes not mentioned in the list, and/or unnecessary in a democratic society (e.g., if a restriction on archival access is disproportional). When it is illegitimate, secrecy conceals sensitive information, protects arbitrariness, evades control and criticism, impoverishes debate, and reduces accountability.

**Selection of archives:** selection (including destruction) of records by archivists.

*Comment.* Censorship if the selection is not part of a lawful and transparent procedure in which archivists assess content of records carefully.

### *Historians' Agency*

**Rejection of historical work by peers:** rejection, after peer review, of historical manuscripts, books, research proposals, and historical courses.

*Comment.* Rejection of historical work can occur in different contexts: publication, employment, tenure, promotion, grants, congresses, and prizes. No censorship if part of a transparent quality control procedure in which peers assess content carefully. May be censorship if carried out by peers, anonymous or not, whose interests conflict, or appear to conflict, with the historians under review.

**Copyright:** part of intellectual property; consists of a moral right (of authors to be recognized as creators of their works and to object to any defamatory distortion or mutilation of these works) and an economic right – constituting an incentive for intellectual creation – until (in general) 50 years after the historian's death.

*Comment.* No censorship if fair practice clauses allow free use of excerpts in historical teaching and research (provided that the work and its author are

acknowledged). The violation of the moral right may induce a chilling effect on authors.

**Plagiarism:** Deliberate presentation of historical facts or opinions expressed originally by others as own work (that is, without due acknowledgement of original authors).

*Comment.* Copyright violation. May induce chilling effect on original authors.

### **Theft of manuscripts**

*Comment.* Copyright violation. Form of censorship.

**Piracy of manuscripts:** illegal reproduction or distribution of copyrighted work of others.

*Comment.* Copyright violation. Censorship if name of author is omitted.

**Omission by historians of own historical opinions:** *absolute* right not to mention own historical opinions.

*Comment.* Part of the right to silence (the right not to speak), itself derived from the universal right of freedom of expression (United Nations, 1966). Applied principally in cases where historians refuse to make explicit their own moral evaluations about the past. Omission by historians of own historical opinions is no self-censorship.

**Omission by historians of historical facts:** *exceptional* right not to mention historical facts affecting the privacy and reputation of persons, either living or dead, in cases where informed consent by the latter or their authorized representatives cannot be obtained, *after* a fair balancing test in which the omission is weighed against the public interest.

*Comment.* Part of right to silence. No self-censorship if applied properly. Censorship or self-censorship if applied outside the narrow exceptional-right formula.

**Confidentiality of historical facts or opinions after conditions imposed by archive holders:** duty of historians, under a legal embargo or after a confidentiality pledge, not to publish or publicly mention historical facts or opinions (nor their authors' names) accessed by them.

*Comment.* High censorship risk if legal embargo or confidentiality requirement is excessive.

**Nondisclosure of information sources by historians:** *exceptional* right of historians (Council of Europe, 2000).<sup>9</sup>

*Comment.* Here “information sources” mean the names of those possessing the information; given that historians possess countervailing scholarly duties of transparency and accountability, nondisclosure should be balanced against disclosure with a presumption in favor of the latter. Censorship risk if the use of the right is not (sufficiently) justified.

**Code of ethics for historians:** set of principles clarifying the legal, professional, and moral accountability and autonomy of historians.<sup>10</sup>

*Comment.* Codes of ethics do not restrict freedom of expression, but clarify its limits. They are more concerned with the *intention and conditions* accompanying the conduct of historians, rather than with its *content* (De Baets, 2009). Censorship risk if applied or enforced when not emanating from a recognized, democratically organized association of historians. Codes of ethics should conform to academic freedom, which, according to the UNESCO, is “[T]he right [of higher-education teaching personnel], without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies” (UNESCO, 1997).

## **EPILOGUE: THE BACKFIRE EFFECT OF CENSORSHIP**

The results of censorship are often ambiguous. In 213 BCE, the Chinese emperor Qin Shihuangdi ordered a large-scale book burning of historical works and had possibly hundreds of intellectuals executed in an attempt to eliminate tradition and its guardians. This major censorship operation hampered the development of historical writing, not only because much information was destroyed, but also because it provided an excuse to future scholars to falsify ancient texts. At the same time, however, it caused an immense arousal of historical consciousness: Han scholars tried to recover and edit whatever texts remained and a cult of books developed. Thus the aim of censorship defeated itself.

Censorship may have unintended positive effects. Alberto Manguel (1995) spoke of “the paradoxical ability of censorship that, in its efforts to suppress, it highlights that which it wishes to condemn.” Hermann Weber (1992) recognized this effect after the dictatorship had withered away: “For

decades the exclusion of ‘blank spots’ had been ordered ... only to provoke a stronger and almost obsessive interest in these issues nowadays.”

If it is not all-pervading, censorship provides an indirect incentive for creativity and criticism. Taboos always attract curiosity. Repression may discourage that curiosity for decades. But when history as a classical vehicle of the past is silenced and compromised, every utterance – graffiti, literature, theater, film – becomes its potential vehicle. Thus, the censorship of history generates the emergence of substitutes: whenever the silenced and silent historians are not able to refute the heralded truths of official historical propaganda, philosophers, poets, novelists, playwrights, filmmakers, journalists, storytellers, and singers take care of the historical truth and keep it alive. Paradoxically, the ostensible vulnerability of many of these substitutes is their power: writing, for example, is a solitary act requiring little institutional support. Sometimes, fictional genres are not taken seriously by the authorities and hence escape their attention. Thus, censorship may not suppress alternative views but rather generate them, and, by doing so, become counterproductive.<sup>11</sup> Censorship backfires.

## NOTES

1. This characteristic of censorship is similar to that of falsification, see Vidal-Naquet (1992, p. 51): “It is the distinguishing feature of a lie to want to pass itself off as the truth.”

2. See also Novick (1988, p. 331): “With respect to the consequences of repression, one confronts the paradox that the measure of its effectiveness is the scarcity of overt instances.”

3. The introduction and epilogue of this chapter owe much De Baets (2010).

4. The nongovernmental organization Article 19 defines opinions as statements “which either do not contain a factual connotation which could be proved to be false, or cannot reasonably be interpreted as stating actual facts given all the circumstances, including the language used (such as rhetoric, hyperbole, satire, or jest).” See Article 19, *Defining Defamation: Principles on Freedom of Expression and Protection of Reputation* (London: Article 19, 2000), principle 10 (“expressions of opinion”).

5. For surveys of pseudohistorical theories, see Carroll (2003), Corino (1992), Feder (1999); Fuld (1999) and Williams (2000).

6. For typologies of taboo topics that are potentially subject to censorship, see Hampshire & Blom-Cooper (1977) and Ferro (1985, pp. 52–60). A frequently used synonym for taboos is *blank spots*. According to Szayna (1988, pp. 37–38), the concept was apparently first used in Poland by Solidarity to indicate the topics too embarrassing to discuss openly and honestly. They were either ignored (such as the deportations of 1939) or falsified (such as the 1940 Katyń massacre), but they did not necessarily imply that the scholars or the public had no knowledge of them. Also see

Tolz (1988, pp. 1–3). For the synonymous term black holes, see Šimečka (1988, pp. 52–54), who defines them as “segments of history cloaked in total darkness, devoid of life, of persons, of ideas”. Another synonymous term, memory holes, was invented by Orwell (1949, p. 40).

7. Myths may provide meaning for those who hold them. As conjecture, they may anticipate or inspire future scientific theories. The power of myths to give meaning is clear from George Schöpflin’s taxonomy, which distinguishes eight motifs in myths: territory, redemption and suffering, unjust treatment, election and civilizing mission, military valor, rebirth and renewal, ethnogenesis and antiquity, and kinship and shared descent. See his “The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths,” in Hosking and Schöpflin (1997, pp. 28–35). For reflections on the excusability of the use of historical myths, see Lewis and Holt (1962, pp. 451–502), Plumb (1969, pp. 19–61), Gordon (1971, pp. 177–192), Vansina (1985, pp. 91–108), and McNeill (1986, pp. 6–9), and Lewis (1987, *passim*).

8. Privacy, honor, and reputation belong to the group of so-called “personality rights.” They are enshrined in Article 12, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Privacy is the right to respect for one’s private life, home, and correspondence. Honor is a person’s self-esteem. Reputation is the appraisal of a person by others, a person’s good name or fame. Defamation is usually defined as the act of damaging another’s reputation (“fame”), in oral (slander) or written (libel) form. For the distinction between honor and reputation, and between defamation, insult, hate speech, blasphemy, and privacy invasion, see Article 19, *Defamation ABC: A Simple Introduction to Key Concepts of Defamation Law* ([www.article19.org](http://www.article19.org); 2006), pp. 1–3, 5, 9–10; Barendt (2005, pp. 170–192, 227–246, 295–302).

9. Council of Europe (2000). The European Court of Human Rights has confirmed the right to nondisclosure of sources, most notably in *Goodwin v. the United Kingdom* at Strasbourg in 1996.

10. For a worldwide catalog of codes of ethics for historians, archivists, and archaeologists, see *Ethics* section of the Network of Concerned Historians website ([www.concernedhistorians.org](http://www.concernedhistorians.org)).

11. See Kołakowski (1983, p. 135) and Afanasev, (1995). Also see Marc Bloch’s remarks on the wary reception of propaganda and censorship in the trenches of World War I, which resulted in a revival of oral tradition (Bloch, 1967, pp. 50–51).

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