on_education
Journal for Research and Debate

the censorship of history and the fragility of power

Eric Berkowitz

The desire of governments to justify their authority and discredit adversaries by revising history is as old as history itself. While it is no surprise that authoritarian regimes would jettison truth in these efforts, the compulsion to abandon historical accuracy is no less evident in democracies such as the United States. This article traces the history of government censorship of history education over the past century and argues that a warts-and-all approach to such instruction is essential to teach students critical reasoning, the skills needed for self-government, and a measure of compassion for their fellow citizens.

Keywords: censorship, education, history, Orwell, Smithsonian

As the United States entered World War I in 1917, the Hollywood film *The Spirit of '76* seemed a perfect complement to the government's massive anti-German propaganda campaign. Authorities were working overtime to galvanize patriotic sentiment, whip up hatred against "the Hun," and suppress aberrant forms of expression. Thousands of people were prosecuted under sprawling new sedition and espionage laws for opinions diverging even slightly from all-out support for the war. People of German ancestry—one quarter of America's population—were particularly targeted for suspected disloyalty. Vigilante groups spied on them and ransacked their homes and businesses. In several states, the German language was banned and its use prosecuted. The government also entered the movie business, turning out films with subtle messaging such as *The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin* (Berkowitz, 2021; Inman, 2014).

In such a heated climate, it was a safe bet that a big-budget film celebrating the American War of Independence would be embraced by authorities. But *The Spirit of '76's* German-American writer-producer, Robert Goldstein, had made a critical mistake. Along with familiar episodes in the U.S.'s origin story, such as the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Goldstein included depictions of British soldiers bayoneting women and children in what came to be known as the Wyoming Valley Massacre. For that, Goldstein was fined and sentenced to ten years in prison. It mattered not that the massacre had in fact occurred. "History is history and fact is fact," the judge allowed, but the film would nevertheless "make us a little bit slack in our loyalty to Great Britain," and "this is no time … for those things that may have the tendency or effect of sowing dissension … or want of confidence between us and our allies." (Berkowitz, 2021, p. 177; Inman, 2014) In effect, historical truth was burned on the altar of wartime public relations.

In an overlooked 1946 essay called "The Prevention of Literature", George Orwell argued that the nipping and tucking of history "to show that this or that mistake was not made, or that this or that imaginary triumph actually happened" (Orwell, 1946/1984, p. 371) was not limited to totalitarian states. And when this process is joined with censorship allowing just one opinion at a time, a

"disbelief in the very existence of objective truth" (Orwell, 1946/1984, p. 371) could result, with history becoming "something to be created rather than learned" (Orwell, 1946/1984, p. 371). Orwell's ire was mainly directed at Britain's leftist journalists, who were suppressing negative information about Josef Stalin's Soviet Union: "If you possess information that conflicts with the prevailing orthodoxy," he wrote, "you are expected either to distort it or keep quiet about it" (Orwell, 1946/1984, p. 372). But he could also have been criticizing the contemporary United States and other democracies as well as authoritarian states.

Mr. Goldstein was convicted, but the judge told him to consider himself lucky: He would "already be dead" (Inman, 2014) if he were prosecuted in a country without the right to trial by jury. The judge was probably correct. The physical elimination of those who advance inconvenient historical truths is one of the most consistent ways to censor history. That is why the Guatemalan government targeted the indigenous Maya for cultural extermination during that country's 1960–96 civil war. For the crime of supporting anti-government elements, Mayan elders, who were responsible for transmitting accumulated historical and cultural knowledge to younger generations, were "murdered with exceptional cruelty in order to destroy the people's links with their past" (Comité pro Justicia y Paz de Guatemala, 1984, as cited in De Baets, 2002, p. 29). As the government recognized, erasing the past helps to control the present and future.

Mao Zedong took this to extremes during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76, when he tried to force a complete break with thousands of years of China's historical development. The violent convulsions he orchestrated against what he called the Four Olds—old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits—involved the destruction not only of historians, schools, temples, and many millions of texts (termed "poisonous weeds" (Knuth, 2003, p. 183)), but also the invasion of private homes by Red Guards to destroy *feudal* relics such as family photographs. They were replaced with pictures of Mao, before which citizens were forced to confess their sins.

Ironically, Mao drew on an ancient model for key aspects of his rupture with history: China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang (259–210 BCE). A man of both tremendous talents and acute paranoia, Qin felt that his authority was threatened by the rumblings of scholars who compared his reign unfavorably to past ages. He decided to immolate that past. Countless history, philosophy, and poetry texts were destroyed, most private book ownership was prohibited, and it was decreed that those who compared Qin's regime unfavorably with examples from the past—or even discussed the ideas in banned books—were to be executed along with their relatives. Qin also buried hundreds of scholars alive, but Mao was unimpressed by that body count. In 1958, nine years before the Cultural Revolution began, he bragged in a speech: "[Qin] buried 460 scholars alive—we have buried 46,000 scholars alive … We have surpassed Qin Shi Huang a hundredfold" (Gracie, 2012, after the third picture).

Cases such as Mao's China, Stalin's Soviet Union, or Pol Pot's Cambodia (where the teaching of history was barred and a spokesman declared that "2,000 years of history has ended" (De Baets, 2012, p. 352)) are dizzying in their kaleidoscopic violence, but as Orwell pointed out, the censorship of history is not confined to the most murderous regimes. All governments massage the past to the extent they can because all governments—whether they are the products of free elections, military invasions, or coups from within—see it as imperative to do so. Ruling regimes need bespoke interpretations of the past to justify their authority in the minds of those they rule. Even autocratic power relies in some measure on popular faith, and all faith is fleeting. Thus, over history a continual buttressing process has taken place by which rulers seek to legitimize themselves as both

historically inevitable and uniquely suited to govern their subjects' lives.

The revision of historical narratives becomes an urgent necessity when one or more aspects of the past either reflects too well by comparison on those presently in power or contradicts whatever story is being advanced at the time. The truth of what had occurred is usually beside the point. As the historian J.H. Plumb trenchantly observed, "History is to teach, and its imaginative or moral truths are more important than factual accuracy" (Plumb, 1969, p. 20). Yet this periodic cleaning of the collective historical attic carries its own destabilizing risks. How, for example, does a regime borne of violent revolution justify itself without simultaneously laying the groundwork to justify another one? It cannot. The fragility of power haunts rulers, and they use censorship (among other tools) to conceal their failings and bolster their legitimacy. "Authority requires a mask" (Bailey, 1971, p. 294) observed the sociologist F.G. Bailey, which is made not only by adding features to the disguise that were never there, but also by removing those that had always existed.

While history has always been a form of practical literature, useful to sanctify institutions and provide people with a sense of shared destiny, it is never static and, as Plumb stressed, it is not even really the past. Rather, history is a "psychological reality," (Plumb, 1969, p. 21) a "created ideology with a purpose, designed to control individuals, or motivate societies, or inspire classes" (Plumb, 1969, p. 16). And when that reality clashes with the ruling authority's political goals, it is often amended. As understood by Winston Smith—the protagonist of *1984* whose job it was to rewrite historical documents to conform to the ruling party's ever-changing imperatives—"[a]ll history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and re-inscribed exactly as often as was necessary" (Orwell, 1950, p. 35).

The events of the Second World War have been aggressively targeted for resculpting. Poland offers a complex case in point in sorting out the war's perpetrators and victims. As M. Gessen observed, the government's ruling party from 2015 to 2023 sought "to restore [Polish] society to a lost self-understanding" as a "noble victim," perennially suffering predations at the hands of its powerful neighbors, Russia and Germany (Gessen, 2021, para. 4). To this end, it maintained that any statement connecting Poland to Nazi murders is *per se* false and defamatory—a position leaving no room for inquiry or discussion about its citizens' collaboration with Nazi attempts to exterminate Poland's Jews. In 2018, in a law adopted with the purpose of defending Poland's "good name" (Gessen, 2021, para. 6), speech ascribing blame to Poland or Poles for Nazi atrocities was criminalized. (It was later changed to a civil offense.) That same year, a 1,700-page scholarly two-volume book entitled *Night Without End: The Fate of Jews in Selected Counties of Occupied Poland* was published, one chapter of which assembled facts showing that a small-town mayor led Nazis to a forest where Jews were hiding. Twenty-two were killed. After years of litigation, the two historians who edited the book were found liable for defaming the mayor's granddaughter—who was a small child during the war—and were ordered to apologize to her (Higgins, 2021).

The notion that one can be defamed by historical research concerning their ancestors appears nonsensical until one remembers that the law's aim is to free today's Poles from any sense of culpability for previous generations' misdeeds. If Poland's current "psychological reality" is to be defined as a nation of honorable victims, then facts clouding that self-regard must necessarily be suppressed. Some nations use censorship to fix moral blame even when they have vanquished their enemies. This is the case with the United States's post-war occupation of Japan. Even as American authorities were widely disseminating shocking accounts from Nazi concentration camps, they suppressed information about the ghastly results of the nuclear attacks on residents of Hiroshima

and Nagasaki. All might be fair in war, but only the enemy is evil.

American authorities did their utmost to hide the true toll of the damage, particularly the horrific effects of radiation exposure on civilians. Southern Japan was made off-limits to news correspondents, and no Western reports emerged for weeks after the attacks on the bombs' health effects. When the Australian reporter Wilfred Burchett nevertheless made his way to Hiroshima and filed the first accounts of radiation exposure, American military brass denied the reports. "I'm afraid," a brigadier-general said to him, "you've fallen victim to Japanese propaganda" (Berkowitz, 2021, p. 196). Even the accounts of survivors were banned. A 15-year-old Nagasaki girl's personal story of the bombing, in which she describes seeing "bodies like peeled peaches" and a river "filled with corpses," was suppressed for fear that it would disturb "public tranquility in Japan" and that it "implies that the bombing was a crime against humanity" (Berkowitz, 2021, p. 197). And physician-survivor Takashi Nagai's celebrated book *The Bells of Nagasaki* was suppressed by American censors for two years. Publication was only allowed on condition that "The Sack of Manila," an American-prepared description of Japanese atrocities in the Philippines, be appended to the work. Without it, censors believed the "Jap military acts that were provocation of motive" (Berkowitz, 2021, p. 197) for dropping the bombs would not be shown. In both cases, censors suppressed information to bar the Japanese population from learning about the suffering of their countrymen and to minimize American moral culpability.

While some governments seek to suppress historical truths, others use censorship to protect history from distortion. South Korea, for example, passed a law in 2021 criminalizing the spread of falsehoods pertaining to the 1980 Gwangju pro-democracy uprising, where thousands took to the streets to protest that country's former military dictatorship. The law's purpose is to counter misinformation about the uprising spread by right-wing extremists, many of whom maintain that the event was the work of North Korean manipulators. The law's validity does not appear to have been tested in the courts, but several historical societies have already warned that it risks undermining the democratic values it was passed to protect (Sang-Hun, 2021). As South Korea refines its efforts to combat misinformation, it would do well to learn from Canada's attempt to compel historical accuracy in public speech, which provides a cautionary lesson in unintended consequences.

In 1985, one Ernst Zündel was put on trial in Canada for publishing a pamphlet called *Did Six Million Really Die?*, which claimed the Holocaust was a Zionist hoax. There was no law in Canada specifically proscribing holocaust denial at the time, so he was charged under a statute criminalizing false news causing "injury or mischief to the public interest" (Berkowitz, 2021, p. 4). Zündel arrived at the courthouse each day wearing a hat emblazoned with the words "freedom of speech." Not wanting to shortcut the prosecution's duty to prove guilt, the court required the state to demonstrate that the Holocaust had in fact occurred and allowed rebuttal evidence that it had not: exactly what Zündel wanted. During the lengthy, circus-like trial, he and his "experts" spewed the same calumnies that filled the pamphlet, but on a bigger, more legitimate platform than his pamphlet had enjoyed. Newspapers ran headlines such as "Women Dined and Danced at Auschwitz, Expert Witness Says" (Kahn, 2004, p. 57). Zündel was found guilty, but the conviction was thrown out on appeal, partially because a documentary film about the death camps was rejected as hearsay.

Zündel was tried and convicted again in 1988. But this time he won a much bigger victory on appeal. Canada's Supreme Court held that the law against spreading false news unconstitutionally abridged speech. The law's vague prohibitions could have totalitarian effects, the court held, because it allowed convictions "for virtually any statement which does not accord with currently accepted

'truths'" and could "permit the prosecution of unpopular ideas" (R. v. Zundel, 1992). To freeze history into one acceptable narrative, the court reasoned, would repeat the errors of the Nazi and Communist regimes, as well as the racist slanders regarding Native Canadians and African Americans that were once taught as fact. In its attempt to protect truth, the Canadian legal system had, in the end, amplified noxious falsehoods and protected Zündel's prerogative to spread them. Zündel's troubles were not over—he was later deported to Germany, where he was imprisoned for inciting hatred. What remained, however, was the longstanding tension between the ideals of free speech and the urge to prevent the harms that false history can cause. Each of the above examples involved speech in the broad public arena. In the more focused setting of history education, the controversies over speech restrictions have unfolded with equal or even greater intensity. The divisiveness of such censorship, particularly regarding slavery and racial discrimination, is currently on full display in the United States, where advocates of all stripes have transformed the classroom into a forum to advance their partisan objectives and suppress those of their adversaries. At any given moment, one or another censorship initiative will catch headlines, which opponents will inevitably claim violates sacred tenets of free expression—until the roles are reversed. This tug-of-war did not start with the recent barrage of "anti-woke" laws suppressing instruction on slavery and its legacy, nor with the re-naming of schools to avoid honoring slaveholders. It began more than a century ago.

In the 1920s, prominent groups of white Southern women sought to buttress racial segregation with the censorship of schoolbooks that accurately described the region's racial history, and to promote teaching materials with fanciful accounts of slavery and the Civil War. In 1920, Mildred Lewis Rutherford, the president of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), published an influential pamphlet advancing a "Measuring Rod" to evaluate textbooks, which demanded that texts endorse ideas such as "The Slaves Were Not Ill-Treated in the South" (Rutherford, 1920, p. 4), and encouraging schools to "reject a book that says the South fought to hold her slaves" (Rutherford, 1920, p. 5). As proof of the first point, the Rutherford booklet cited a source reporting that the slaves on one plantation were "the happiest people I have ever seen. They are oily, sleek, bountifully fed, well clothed and well taken care of. One hears them at all times whistling and singing cheerily at their work" (Rutherford, 1920, p. 10).

Under pressure from the UDC and similar groups, textbooks in the former Confederacy soon reflected the segregationist precepts of the Jim Crow South. By 1938, the Mississippi Educational Association found that if a student in that state read all the textbooks in all the subjects throughout primary and secondary school, they would never encounter one African American by name. While perhaps not so overtly racist in messaging, the efforts to whitewash America's racial history have continued past the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation decision, through the so-called culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, and into the present day, particularly in the South. As recently as 2015, one McGraw Hill textbook in Texas referred to enslaved Africans as "immigrants" (McRae, 2024, p. 2). And with the ascent of Donald Trump and the entrenchment of his supporters in many federal, state, and local governments, the censorship of American history in education has expanded to an extraordinarily broad degree.

But history education in the U.S. is not confined to schools. It also is conducted at places such as historical sites and museums, where the history on display is undergoing radical revision. In August, 2025, for example, Trump complained that the Smithsonian museums—which include the National Museum of American History and the National Museum of African American History and Culture—are "OUT OF CONTROL, where everything discussed is how horrible our Country is,

how bad Slavery was, and how unaccomplished the downtrodden have been" (Kanno-Youngs, 2025, para. 2). At the same time, his administration demanded that the Smithsonian turn over broad categories of documents—including digital photographs of labels, placards and other texts on display in its museums—for ideological review, and when the materials weren't produced fast enough, it threatened to withhold vital federal funding (Ables & Kingsberry, 2026). Among Trump's targets are what he called the Smithsonian's distorted focus on the "negative aspects of slavery" and how other racial issues are portrayed. At federal historical sites, the administration has directed that signs and exhibits relating to slavery be removed, including a photo of an enslaved man's badly whipped back at Harpers Ferry National Historic Park and information about George Washington's use of slaves at the President's House Site in Philadelphia.

Plumb was correct to observe that throughout history, "an explanation of the past … was essential for social stability, and therefore an essential part of government" (Plumb, 1969, p. 23). More than a collection of events, history has always been a "handmaid of authority" (Plumb, 1969, p. 33). As such, the temptation for any government to bend historical narratives to justify its power or discredit adversaries has been almost impossible to resist.

In the context of the present-day, when opposition voices can readily find channels to amplify their arguments and government censorship rarely (if ever) squelches any idea, the issue becomes whether the curation of history education to build patriotic loyalties is necessarily a bad thing, or even works. This question—admittedly a counterintuitive one to be posed by an anti-censorship advocate such as myself—is more nuanced than it initially appears. That is in part because today's information environment is defined by saturation messaging. The proverbial marketplace of ideas has degenerated from a clean, well-lit venue to sift harmful ideas from healthy ones into a raucous junk-food bazaar, where sugar and raised voices are deployed to grab attention. It is disorienting, but it is the only landscape today's students know. The numbed disaffection resulting from such bombardment diminishes the impact of any one voice, including the government's. Any argument authorities try to make through textbook and curriculum manipulation becomes just one in the flood of messages students are drowning in. Censorship is simply less effective now, to the effect that government efforts to back-fill historical narratives can be framed more as fodder for partisan political fights than a genuine threat to the minds of students.

And what is so wrong with governments trying to foster a love of country in their youth? At its ideal, the patriotism instilled by such messaging would cause students to feel a stake in their compatriots' welfare, a sense of duty to care for them in times of threat or disaster, and a readiness to act for the health of the state. As students prepare to find their way through a convulsively changing world, a sense of connectedness with their fellow citizens may also cause them to feel less atomized, less alone, and more a part of a collective enterprise in which their own needs can be met (Merry, 2020). If the suppression of instruction about one or another gruesome episode in a nation's past can lead to a more secure and civically engaged electorate, then a solid argument for such censorship could be made.

But we do not live in the best of all possible worlds, and this Panglossian scenario simply does not exist. At least as practiced in the United States, the top-down censorship of history education is closer to the work of *1984*'s Winston Smith than anything else. It is a blunt instrument used less to foster civic engagement and harmony than to forge an uncritical embrace of many of the jingoistic and exclusionary practices that have long plagued American society (Merry, 2020). And despite the detritus piled on the shelves of the ideas marketplace, the government's voice remains for many a

trusted, reliable source. What our officials and their appointees say, do, and forbid still matters greatly, and when they bar materials students would be well-served to know, the collective suffers for it.

This is especially true in a democracy. As argued by Alexander Meiklejohn, the free access to ideas is a critical component of self-government. As the final arbiter of a state's legitimacy, the citizenry needs the resources to decide for itself what ideas and information it is exposed to. It is not the government's remit to dictate what facts its citizens should or should not know (Meiklejohn, 1948). Thus, when information about the two impeachments of the sitting U.S. president is removed from the walls of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, as occurred in December, 2025 regarding Donald Trump, visitors are handicapped by a distorted view of both the president and how government operates.

I agree with Merry that rather than striving for blinkered loyalty in students, the better policy is to aim for what he termed critical patriotism, by which students gain the analytical skills to "honestly assess historical truth" and are given the full range of (sometimes conflicting) information necessary with which to do so (Merry, 2020). That does not exclude love of country, but it does militate against a knee-jerk sense of superiority over others and, hopefully, foster a commitment to principles of justice and tolerance. To return to the previous example, the impeachments of Trump are unquestionably important historical facts for citizens to know. Rather than not being taught them, students would be better served gaining the cognitive tools to decide whether the impeachments were warranted or whether, as Trump states, they were injustices toward him and his policies.

The purpose of history is to teach, as Plumb observed, but the real question is how to go about doing so. While precise facts can be difficult to know, the teaching of history must impart to students the capacity to best determine *for themselves* what happened, why they happened, and their significance. Only by wrestling with all relevant information, warts and all, can students learn to fully participate in the democratic process and become productive, compassionate citizens.

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Recommended Citation

Berkowitz, E. (2026). The censorship of history and the fragility of power. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, *9*(23).
https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2026.23.1

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eric berkowitz

Eric Berkowitz is a Los Angeles-based author, human rights lawyer, and former journalist. His articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, as well as many other outlets. His latest book is *Dangerous Ideas: A Brief History of Censorship in the West, from the Ancients to Fake News*.