

“Twisted into Myth”: Book Burning as a Weapon of Fascism and Anti-Fascism, 1933-1946**Siân Heap****Abstract**

This article will explore the common misconceptions surrounding the relationship between book burning and fascism, focusing on the 1933 Nazi book burning and its reception outside of Germany. It will establish that despite common perception, the links between fascism and book burnings are considerably more complex than they initially appear, as is the relationship more generally between censorship and governments. It will focus on book burnings in the denazification of Germany to establish that book burnings have been associated with Nazis retrospectively, and that book burnings and censorship used for different purposes have been ignored.

Keywords

Censorship; 1933 book burnings; Book burnings; Denazification; Democracy.

‘Dort, wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen’:

‘Where they burn books, they will also ultimately burn people.’

- Heinrich Heine, “Almansor”

Introduction

This quote from Heinrich Heine’s 1821 play “Almansor” appears in almost every article or book in the somewhat limited scholarship of book burnings, consistently reinforcing a link between book burnings and fascist and tyrannical governments. Indeed, the common argument of the current scholarship in this area, primarily led by Matthew Fishburn and Jonathan Rose, is that book burnings are ultimately a warning sign of worse things to come. Rose equates book burnings with both censorship and tyrannical governments, asking “how do tyrannies determine which books will be banned?” (2001, 2). This statement is echoed by Stephen Whitfield who discusses book burnings and totalitarianism as one in the same (2002).

It is easy to understand why, with hindsight, these links have been drawn, but as will be argued here, it is dangerous and restrictive to consider book burnings as solely tools of undemocratic regimes. As Fishburn argues, “these fires have since become synonymous with the barbarity of the Nazi regime” (2008, 31). Furthermore, Hans Hillerbrand argues that “book burning is the epitome of censorship; it is the end of discourse, the end of the exchange of ideas” (2008, 606). The line between book burning and censorship is considerably more complicated, and indeed, as is the relationship between book burnings, censorship and societies in general. To make such sweeping assertions ignores the complexity of the relationship between censorship and democracy more generally.

After all, it is not only fascist and totalitarian governments that censor, and this is particularly true in wartime. As Curry Jansen argues, “even under the best of circumstances, Liberal societies do not keep the promises upon which Enlightened philosophies and symbols of legitimation were secured. These promises were utopian” (1988, 203). It is

unrealistic and impossible for governments to allow complete freedom of information, if for no other reason than national security and safety. In wartime it cannot be expected that governments will reveal every operation their soldiers are involved in for their safety. However, Curry Jansen argues that particularly in recent years, the “Nazi precedent” has been used as a “cathartic sponge” for other societies to “deny and excuse their own crimes” (n.d., 29). This is not to vindicate Nazism, but it “was not a historical anomaly or aberration” (31).

Totalitarianism was not limited to the Nazi government, and not every totalitarian government burned books. The Soviet government under Stalin was responsible for the deaths of millions of people, and yet in the Soviet Union “books and manuscripts were not burned, but preserved” (Fishburn, n.d., 65). The widespread assumption of a link between fascism and book burnings ignores the book burnings in the denazification of Germany by the French and the complexities of the widespread post-war censorship of Nazi works. Although many of these works were not burned in the traditional sense, they were pulped and destroyed. Mass purges still took place in the post-war years, and it is vital here to explore the complexities of censorship and its relationship to democracy.

“Twisted into Myth”: The 1933 Nazi Book Burning

As Hillerbrand argued in his 2005 AAR Presidential Address, book burnings are demonstrative of a “censorial attitude against intellectual freedom” (n.d., 594). The book as a physical object holds little threat, but rather it is the content and the ideas that it encapsulates that poses a danger. Fishburn writes, “as the stories about the Library of Alexandria show, book burnings are often overloaded into cliché or twisted into myth” (n.d., 2). It obviously cannot be denied that the 1933 Nazi book burnings were a seminal moment in both Nazi and book history. They were, without a doubt, a clear attack on intellectual culture, and Jewish intellectualism in particular. Indeed, as students hurled books onto the

bonfire in Berlin, Nazi Propaganda Minister, Josef Goebbels, proclaimed, “Jewish Intellectualism is dead!” from his swastika-draped podium (Norwood 2007, 253).

However, much of the scholarship follows the common misconception that this organised book-burning event was ordered directly by the Nazi government when it was organised and led by students. They were meticulously organised, student-run events, not spontaneous outbursts. For example, Fishburn writes that “the impresario for the night was the propaganda minister [...] Joseph Goebbels” (2008, 31), whilst a booklet from an exhibition produced by the US Library of Congress Centre for the Book and the United States Holocaust Museum proclaimed “the Nazi book burnings of May 1933 were consciously staged spectacles and among the new fascist dictatorship’s first acts in ‘purifying’ German culture” (Library of Congress 1988, 1).

It was in fact, the students who requested the support of the Nazi party but in continuing to attribute the organisation of the event to Goebbels, current scholarship ignores that the Reich Propaganda Ministry only agreed to participate in this student-organised event ‘at a fairly late stage’ (Ritchie 1988, 627). Although it is clear Goebbels himself provided extensive support which included giving the key-note speech in Berlin, Ritchie notes that “there were doubts about the wisdom of the symbolic act of burning books” (n.d. 641) within leading Nazi circles, suggesting that book-burning was not a central tenet of Nazi tactics or policy.

It is important to remember, therefore, that this event was not a government initiative. Ultimately, as Marking points out, “the point of burning a book is visibility”, and what this demonstration did was to provide the Nazi regime with free publicity for their more official censorship policies (2002, 63). It was not after all, Nazi policy to burn books, only to ban them, and the real significance was that it provided publicity for the official censorship policies of the party. As Hill notes, “the infamous 10 May 1933 public book burnings made the newly composed but unofficial blacklists of condemned ideas, authors, and books more widely known in Germany and the larger world” (2001, 12).

Indeed, it must be remembered that, although historians such as Rose, Whitfield and Hillerbrand among others have remembered these events with accusations of cultural barbarism, the contemporary reaction towards the event in the UK and US particularly was largely dismissive. In a discussion between a husband and wife reported in *The Times*, the 1933 book burning was characterised as “a few books from a public library” and “student mania”. Indeed, it was the wife who informed her husband of the event, almost a month after it had taken place because “he had not heard of this” (Bagnold 1933). *The Manchester Guardian* reported the event, focusing on the “pomposity”, “falsehood” and “hysteria” of those involved, not attributing any real significance to the event (*The Manchester Guardian* 1933). Indeed, the indignation reported was based more in rhetoric than in anti-fascist political feeling, with reports of shock soon forgotten.

The body of work in this field positions Goebbels and the Nazi government at the centre of the event and may be attributed to inaccurate reporting of the event at the time. A 1933 *Time Magazine* article called Goebbels the “organizer of the great midnight bibliocaust” (‘Bibliocaust’ 1933, 23). It was not until the 1940s that the book burnings began to feature prominently again in the public mind as the atrocities of the Nazi government began to come to light, featured most notably in wartime posters from the United States.

One famous poster shows a scene of the 1933 Nazi book burning, with the writing “10 years ago: The Nazis Burned These Books... but Free Americans Can Still Read Them” (Office of War Information 1943) and another which proclaimed “Books are Weapons in the War of Ideas” (US Government Printing Office 1942). These posters reinforced links between the book burnings and fascist governments in the public mind, making them appear exclusively and intrinsically linked. However, this is a narrative that has been perpetuated by governments and societies through newspaper reporting and propaganda posters like the ones produced by the Office of War Information in the USA. It is ultimately false to further this idea that book burnings are only tools of totalitarian governments.

It's Complicated: Book Burnings, Censorship and Denazification

Whitfield argues that “book burnings could be denounced as signs of incipient tyranny, as the very opposite of what a free society is supposed to represent” (n.d. 227). This is a recurring view in the scholarship on book burnings, however it ignores the widespread destruction of books in the denazification of Germany after the Second World War.

On 27 May 1946, *TIME*, reporting on denazification, wrote that, in attempts to “re-educate Germany, the Allies last week adopted a typically Nazi device” when they decided to “reduce to pulp all ‘undemocratic, militaristic and Nazi’ literature, museum and library material, newspapers, films and war materials” (‘Read No Evil’ 1946, 31). *TIME* interviewed a young, former member of the Women’s Army Corps about the destruction of Nazi material, concluding, “was the order different in principle from Nazi book burnings? No, not in Miss Cox’s opinion” (31).

More importantly perhaps, is that the destruction of books did not only come in the form of pulping. Fishburn reports that video footage shows a crowd of civilians, and provides stills from these videos that show people “gathered around a pile of burning books in the street” accompanied by a voiceover that says: “we will abolish all Nazi laws in which these ideas are fixed – all laws of discrimination by race, creed, or political opinion” (n.d. 153-4). Book burnings therefore, were not only orchestrated by the Nazis. However, Fishburn’s argument underplays the significance of these later burnings and their role in censorship and book history, and their inclusion appears to be an afterthought. Indeed, the book burnings by the French were not an attempt to exclude intellectual culture, as the Nazi demonstrations had been.

While the books banned and burnt by Nazis were meant to “persecute every shade of thought at variance with [Hitler’s] own” (‘FIRESPELLS’ 1933, 18), the burning of Nazi books

by the French was designed to do the opposite, to destroy anything supported by, or supporting Hitler and his regime. This is an excellent example of the fact that book burnings are complex, and cannot be collected into a simplified narrative of totalitarianism, fascism or Nazism. If the Nazis targeted books for their ability to spread ideas, then the French did the same with Nazi books in an attempt to prevent the further spread of extremely damaging ideas following the end of World War Two.

The burning of Nazi material in the denazification was chaotic, as a result of the lack of a cohesive denazification programme between the Allies, which in 1948 Strätzer termed a “complete failure” (1948, 43), while Herz wrote that it “had not been a success” (1948, 569). The lack of a cohesive plan meant that in the French zone Nazi books were burnt, but they were not in other Allied zones. Steig attributes this to the fact that France had been occupied, “exploited, and humiliated by the Germans” and as a result, there was a strong desire for “retaliation and reparation in a physical and moral sense” (1993, 146).

The reaction to this display was largely negative; Gollancz called it a “moral nightmare” and “Hitlerism in reverse” (Fishburn 2008, 157). Yet, it is easy to understand why the destruction of these Nazi books seemed like a necessity, given the atrocities perpetrated by the regime. As Price, the Director of the US Office of Censorship during World War II, wrote in the *American Political Science Review*, “even the most vociferous critics of the principle of censorship agree [...] some form and amount of censorship is a necessity” (1942, 837). Here, he refers to the necessity of censorship in wartime for national security, but this is an important idea that needs to be explored in a wider context, especially with regard to the censorship of Nazi material after the war.

Fishburn discusses the shift from burning books to pulping them in post-war Germany after the American Information Control Division (ICD) “issued strict orders against burning”, wanting to “avoid the stigma of Nazi-style book burning” (n.d 153). The desire to avoid links to the theatrical aspects of book-burning were strongly rooted in the idea of fire as “the

dominant metaphor of Nazi iconography”, a motif which features heavily in *Mein Kampf* (Fishburn, n.d. 35). In his article “Books are Weapons: Wartime responses to the Nazi Bookfires of 1933”, Fishburn discusses how the Third Reich “adopted the purifying fire as its fundamental symbol” (2007, 233), yet to the Allied powers fire was a violent symbolic reminder of Nazi atrocities and to be avoided.

However, the aim of these practices was the same: to ensure “that the German public had no access to the material” (Fishburn 2008, 153). It must, therefore, be considered whether there is, ultimately, a difference between burning and pulping books. After all, the final aim of both practices was the same, and the move from burning to pulping could be characterised simply as a public relations ploy. It was, after all, the comparisons to the theatricality of Nazi book burnings that the Allied powers wanted to avoid. This is not to say that Nazi material should not be prohibited, only that the relationship between censorship and democracy is significantly more complex than it initially appears.

Censorship of Nazi material in Germany after the Second World War

The United States and other Allied powers engaged in the strict censorship of Nazi material in the denazification, further signalling a conflict here between the relationship between censorship and democracy. As Stieg argues, “removal of Nazi material was the precondition for library operation” in post-war Germany (n.d., 148). To some Germans these “allied guidelines as just one more index in a long line of banned books” (Stieg 1993, 148-9), suggesting that public opinion found it difficult to differentiate between Nazi censorship and the subsequent censorship of Nazi works. Furthermore, Stieg demonstrates the conflict between democracy and censorship by arguing that “even so ostentatiously democratic a

country as the United States not only acquiesced in censorship – it planned, supported, and advocated it” (n.d., 157).

Jones argues that “stringent censorship policies were instituted with the aim of eradicating every vestige of Nazi thought. No newspaper, magazine, or book could be published, no play staged, no film screened, no radio programme broadcast without a licence from one of the occupying powers” (2001, 931). The press was strictly regulated under a system of licensing from July 1945 “as the most practicable means of keeping Nazi sympathizers out of the publishing business” (Rich 1950, 75).

As Rich argues, the goal of this licensing agreement by the Military Government was “to establish a democratic press which would be strong enough to continue on its own after all controls were eliminated” (n.d., 76). Yet the very nature of these controls is censorious, and newspaper editors began to challenge them, arguing that they were “not representative and [the press] was not free” (Rich 1950, 77). This censorship of print and press in post-war Germany epitomises a key conflict surrounding the censorship of politically offensive material.

It has been well established, therefore, that the Allied powers—those supposedly on the “right” side of history in this respect—engaged in censorship in post-war Germany in order to aid the denazification process. So, how can this be reconciled with the perception of censorship as limiting free speech and totalitarianism? The answer is not simple. It depends entirely on the material of the book, and it is not possible to say for certain what should be censored and what should not. According to Curry Jansen, the powerful “invoke censorship to create, secure, and maintain their control over the power to name” (n.d., 7).

While this definition of censorship fits with the policies carried out by the Nazis, it is at odds with censorship of Nazi material that still continues today. That form of censorship is not an attempt to exert power, but rather an attempt to protect society and civilians from

offensive material and to rebuild a democratic process of government. The fact that democratic governments must place restrictions on racial hatred, discrimination and other forms of hate speech is contentious, but this is at odds with the definitions of censorship that have been shown: that it is always a force of limiting free speech. It is, therefore, necessary to discuss whether this is still censorship. It is a limitation on free speech, and it is an exertion of governmental power. The difference is the power of this material to offend, and the influence it may have on those who might read it. The ideology tied to Nazi material is one that has extremist political ties.

As has been established, words have a unique power to spread ideas and, in this case, to aid the proliferation of an extremist and damaging political rhetoric. Censorship is not, as Hillerbrand argues, the “deathblow to the free mind” (n.d., 606), but rather a tool that is sometimes used to prevent the proliferation of hate speech. Indeed, the German government itself has imposed laws specifically intended to “eradicate the ideology of Nazism and the racial prejudice underlying the Holocaust” (Timofeeva 2003, 260). Article 5 of the German Basic Law, which has been in effect from 1949, protects free speech but also expressly “imposes limitations” on this freedom of expression. Furthermore, Timofeeva sets out that in addition to the limitations in Article 5, the German Basic Law:

[It] contains other provisions that may serve to restrict freedom of speech: article 1, declaring human dignity as an utmost value; article 18, forfeiture of basic rights when abusing them; article 21, section 2, prohibition of political parties seeking to impair the free democratic order; and some other, implicit, provisions, all of which establish the basis for the functioning of the German militant democracy and allow German legislators to successfully restrain racist (hate) activities in almost any form. (Timofeeva 2003, 261)

These limitations, therefore, protect freedom, whilst also placing restrictions on hate speech, showing that censorship of books can be motivated by a desire for a government to

protect its citizens. Ignoring this aspect of censorship restricts the discussion around censorship and the need for a new, broader definition, which also encompasses this side.

Conclusion

The relationship between book-burning, censorship and democratic governments in the period 1933-1946, and still today, is complicated. Whilst the existing scholarship largely attributes this act exclusively to totalitarian and fascist governments, it is clear that this is not the case. However, the prevailing definitions of censorship are simplified and do not consider the wide number of reasons for which the censorship via the destruction of books has been used.

Censorship is exceedingly complicated, especially in respect to hate speech and Nazism. The myth and presentation of the 1933 book burning as an idea derived from the Nazi government only serves to propagate this perception. Whilst members of the Nazi government had some involvement in appearing to approve it, book burning was not a part of official Nazi policy.

As has been shown, what this event did do was provide publicity for their official censorship policies. Going forward, it is necessary for scholarship on book burning and censorship to move away from broad, sweeping statements that characterise the practices of book burning and censorship as being “the opposite of what free society is supposed to represent” (Whitfield 2002, 227). Censorship is a complex issue, and has also been used by governments against totalitarian and fascist ideas in Germany since the end of the Second World War.

References

- Author Unknown. 13 May 1933. "The Dismissed." *The Manchester Guardian*: 12. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Guardian and The Observer. Accessed February 27, 2017. <http://search.proquest.com.oxfordbrookes.idm.oclc.org/docview/478636294/91CB9B3C97184F9EPQ/9?accountid=13041>
- Author Unknown. 15 June 1933. "LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: GERMANY'S WAR ON PACIFICISM The Books the Nazis Ban." *The Manchester Guardian*: 20. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Guardian and The Observer. Accessed February 27, 2017. <http://search.proquest.com.oxfordbrookes.idm.oclc.org/docview/478658191/7051F55381BA4419PQ/10?accountid=13041>
- Author Unknown, LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: 'FIRESPELLS': Nazi Incantations at the Book Bonfire, *The Manchester Guardian* (1901-1959), Jun 29 1933, p.18, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Guardian and The Observer. Accessed February 27, 2017. <http://search.proquest.com.oxfordbrookes.idm.oclc.org/docview/478665452/4C9A329B923643D6PQ/1?accountid=13041>
- Author Unknown. May 22 1933. "Bibliocaust." *TIME Magazine* 21.21: 23.
- Author Unknown. May 27 1946. "Read No Evil." *TIME Magazine* 47.21: 31
- 'Ten years ago : the Nazis burned these books --but free Americans can still read them.' 1943. Office of War Information. <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc357/>
- 'Books are weapons in the war of ideas'. 1942. US Government Printing Office. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/96502725/>
- "Books Burn As Goebbels Speaks." May 10, 1933. United States Holocaust Museum. Historical Film Footage. Accessed March 26, 2017. https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_fi.php?ModuleId=10005852&MediaId=158
- Bagnold, Enid. 2 June 1933. "With The Nazis." *The Times*. 46460: 15. Accessed February 27, 2017. <https://goo.gl/9QSqoW>.

- Hammit, Frances E. 1945. "The Burning of Books." *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 15.4: 300-312.
- Herz, John H. 1948. "The Fiasco of Denazification in Germany." *Political Science Quarterly* 63.4: 569-594.
- Rich, Bennett M. 1950. 'Civil Liberties in Germany', *Political Science Quarterly* 65:1: 68-85
- Strätzer, Artur. 1948. "Denazification." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political Science* 260: 43-52.
- Bedürftig, Friedemann. 1995. "A People Without A State: Post VE-Day Germany." *History Today* 45.5: 47-54.
- Curry Jansen, Sue. 1988. *Censorship: the knot that binds power and knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fishburn, Matthew, 2008. *Burning Books*. London: Palgrave.
- Fishburn, Matthew. 2007. "Books are Weapons: Wartime responses to the Nazi Bookfires of 1933." *Book History* 10: 223-251
- Hillerbrand, Hans. 2006. "On Book Burnings and Book Burners: Reflections on the Power (and Powerlessness) of Ideas: AAR 2005 Presidential Address." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74.3: 593-614
- Library of Congress and United States Holocaust Memorial Council. 1988. "NAZI BOOK BURNINGS AND THE AMERICAN RESPONSE." Accessed March 26, 2017.
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951002958829g>
- Marking, Stacy. 2002. "The House of Burned Books." *Index on Censorship* 31.4: 63-68.
- Norwood, Stephen H. 2007. "Complicity and Conflict: Columbia University's response to Fascism 1933-1937." *Modern Judaism* 27.3: 253-283
- Ritchie, J.M. 1988. "The Nazi Book-Burning." *The Modern Language Review* 83.3: 627-643
- Rose, Jonathan (ed). 2001. *The Holocaust and the Book: Destruction and Preservation*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Stieg, Margaret F. 1993. "The Postwar Purge of German Public Libraries, Democracy, and the American Reaction." *Libraries and Culture* 28.2: 143- 164.

- Timofeeva, Yulia A. 2003. "Hate Speech Online: Restricted or Protected – Comparison of Regulations in the United States and Germany." *Transnational Law & Policy* 253: 253-284
- von Merveldt, Nikola. 2007. "Books Cannot Be Killed by Fire: The German Freedom Library and the American Library of Nazi-Banned Books as Agents of Cultural Memory." *Library Trends* 55.3: 523-535
- Whitfield, Stephen J. 2002. "Where they Burn Books." *Modern Judaism* 22. 3: 213-233.