

# **“Why were Book Burnings so often an Accompaniment to Extremist and Fundamentalist Ideologies in the Twentieth Century?”**

**Tom Bonnington**

## **Abstract**

This paper looks at the reasons why fundamentalist and extremist ideologies resorted to book burning in the twentieth century. These fires were often shrouded in ceremony, both carefully planned and executed and were an act of symbolic defiance against an opposing culture. The perpetrators often felt ignored or helpless in the face of a changing cultural climate that they wanted to control. Burners could be from high up in government, intellectuals, religious leaders or angry protestors, and they could target an idea present in the book or something more abstract such as culture itself or the symbolic value of the author. The article asks why they chose to burn books, using several prominent cultural theories from the likes of Bourdieu and Barthes, and whether these theories can explain the phenomenon that occurred so frequently in the twentieth century; and if not, how we can reshape these theories to comprehend the act of book burning.

## **Key Words**

Book burning, cultural theory, identity, fundamentalism

---

## **Introduction**

The remarkable aspect of twentieth century book burning was the sheer frequency and magnitude of its occurrence. Books have been burnt in town squares, in fireplaces, on pyres, outside churches and mosques; they have been destroyed by falling bombs, by uniformed men carrying torches, and by so called defenders of morality. A purely symbolic act, book burners have targeted culture itself to fashion their own discourse. This culture can take the form of the intellectualisation of something they distrusted, or a hated concept present in the book, or because the author was of a certain race, religion, sexuality or political persuasion. Using several prominent cultural theories, this essay seeks to challenge the idea that culture is autonomously working within its own field. Book burnings in the twentieth century all have one common theme: to show distaste for one culture, idea or person, and replace it with another. It is both an extremist act and a desperate act but one with its own guiding set of principles that allow it to flourish even in the most apparently democratic and civilised places.

## **Burning Culture**

Before analysing specific examples of book burning, it is important to outline Bourdieu's (1993) theory of an autonomous cultural field. He argued that culture works within its own set of laws, free from interference by political and economic functions (1993, p.6). The idea being that culture still retains its 'field of power' while not being manipulated by external events (Bourdieu, 1993, p.15). Something this theory relies on is the idea of a class system. He specifically says that forms of capital 'are unequally distributed among social classes and class factions' (Bourdieu, 1993, pp. 7-8). When the class system is challenged, however, Bourdieu's theory stumbles. The most obvious example is the Nazis, who had a shared hatred of intellectual culture, which they often treated synonymously with Jewishness. Their 1933 book burnings were an 'obsessive attempt to purify the German language' and were meticulously planned by German students who, until very late on, were working autonomously from the Nazi government (Ritchie, 1988, p. 627).

However, it would be wrong to suggest the Nazis had not set a precedent for the students. This war on culture had been an agenda for them since 1930, when they tried to introduce a

law criminalising ‘cultural treachery’ before, somewhat less publicly in 1932, creating an author blacklist to be used upon their attaining power (Ritchie, 1988, p. 632). The propaganda minister Goebbels was aware of the power of the cultural field and performed the keynote speech at the 10 May 1933 Berlin book burning, where he hoped ‘the Phoenix of the new Reich would rise’ (Fishburn, 2008, p. 31). The themes of the targeted books included pacifism, Marxism, defeatism, or simply pretences of some higher culture that did not suit the Germanic ideals of Nazism. This demonstrates exactly what Bourdieu fails to grasp, as he has adopted idyllic societal functions for his theory. He even claims that transferring concepts from one field to another is ‘an eminent heuristic virtue’ (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 9). But with a totalitarian ideology, the melding of the political and the cultural fields only serve to silence the culture. The combative nature of cultural production is something proven in countless book burnings. Why else would Franco have burnt seventy-two tons of Marxist literature upon entering Barcelona in 1939? (Baez, 2004, p. 204). Why else would the Nazis choose to burn every Yiddish book they found in Poland? (Baez, 2004, p. 216). There was a fear of culture and an acknowledgement that it could damage them. As Brown argues, the German’s feverish attempt to burn knowledge in books was ‘in a sense, to believe in them’ (1934, pp. 231-32).

Book burning can be seen as a form of reverse snobbery against higher realms of culture. This can be seen in practical ways from the formation of blacklists for certain authors that publishers could not publish (with threats to seize and destroy any such work), to more symbolic methods, such as the Bradford Council of Muslims burning *The Satanic Rituals* to gain attention for their cause to ban it (Webster, 1990, p. 126). The fields of the political and the religious are naturally incompatible with some textual culture, and that is when book burnings occur. The destruction of a book is of symbolic significance because it is a certain group invading the autonomy of the cultural field that Bourdieu wishes to separate. Coser’s idea that publishers are ‘the gatekeepers of ideas’ (1975, p. 14) can only be proven correct under the right political conditions. The Nazis, soon after obtaining power, used the publishers to project their own sense of nationalist culture, which can be seen in their forcing them to publish certain authors and avoiding others (Ritchie, 1988, p. 641).

Yet book burnings also offer an insight into the mind of some prominent culture creators too. In 1933, when Oskar Maria Graf was informed that none of his books were being burnt, he was very disappointed as he saw the burning as a badge of honour (Fishburn, 2008, p. 39). Though intended to be a humorous anecdote, it reveals plenty about high culture’s attitude to the masses. They wanted to be separate. They did not want to be accepted by the state. They saw themselves as apart from the political machinations of the time. It was the same with Ulysses among the upper classes in America, ‘The more copies they burnt, the more people saw it as a status symbol to own one’ (Rolph, 1969, p. 73). The fact that so many writers fled Germany in 1933, and those left behind put in concentration camps, proves that Bourdieu’s concept of the autonomous cultural field was forced to fit in with the totalitarian society that surrounded it in Nazi Germany. Book burning is a signifier that extremist and fundamental regimes must impose their will on culture for their voices to be heard.

### **Burning Ideas**

Guy Stern claims that ‘if you have any respect for the mere idea of books, what they stand for in life, if you believe in paper and print, you cannot burn any page of a book.’ (Stern, 1933) Of course, the ideologies this essay is concerned with do not respect the idea of books but the ideas contained inside them. All book burnings of the twentieth century have been resolutely explained by the perpetrators, whether it takes the form of speeches or the ceremonial nature of the event, or even of the establishment of an organisation that perpetrates it. American reaction to Nazi book burning in 1933 was one of shock, but twenty years prior, the ‘Society for the Suppression of Vice’ had burned 160 tons of what they classified to be ‘obscene literature’ in just a few years (Fishburn, 2008, p. 25). This organisation, headed by Anthony Comstock, waged war on the indecency they felt had ‘infected’ American literature (Fishburn, 2008, p. 25). The use of the word ‘infected’ is significant, because metaphorical language was often used to describe the afflicted books. Words like ‘pestilence,’ ‘plague,’ ‘cancer,’ and ‘poison’ were both condemnatory and figurative (Bosmajian, 2006, p. 6). Language, somewhat ironically, has been used to attack books containing ideas that do not fit with fundamentalist ideologies.

What is remarkable is just how much strategy went into denouncing the ideas present in the books themselves. The Nazis had grand parades and treated the burning like a ceremony,

complete with detailed speeches specifying exactly why a certain book was going to be burnt (Fishburn, 2008, pp. 33-34). Rolph sees censorship as ‘today’s demagogue, teacher, priest, psychiatrist, editor and commercial advertiser’ and this is a very apt description (Rolph, 1969, p. 11). Book burnings allow ideologies to advertise their own beliefs. When *The Grapes of Wrath* was burnt in three American states, the participating churches made sure to identify that they were opposed to the ‘filthy, vile, Socialist propaganda,’ (Bosmajian, 2006, p. 14) to prove they detested Socialism rather than the idea of books themselves. Book burning is perceived by most of society to be an extreme act, and this has been exploited on countless occasions by those who want to both proclaim their own ideologies and to educate others.

To achieve this end, intellectual help was often sought by book burners to help give the act legitimacy. The students in Germany were especially aware of this and put in great effort to gain the approval of professors. They wrote sixty letters to prominent right-wing writers asking them to publicly support the event (Ritchie, 1988, p. 631). This use of academic capital indicates that not only were the students keen to burn the ideas they disliked but replace them with new ones. The professors would give speeches and even light the fires, as if to offer a new German culture that even great thinkers such as Heidegger thought had descended into the ‘moribund’ (Heidegger, 1990, pp. 7-9).

Book burning can also be a response to the fear of one’s own culture being silenced. This can be seen mainly in religious burnings, where they feel their voices are being ignored or mocked. When *The Satanic Verses* were burned, it was only after an extensive lobbying campaign to both publishers and politicians (Webster 1990, 126). Sameer Rahim recently claimed that ‘The political identity of British Islam was forged in those flames.’ (*The Telegraph*, September 10, 2012). This particular burning was a cry of dissatisfaction from a group who felt let down and isolated by western society. Similarly, when D.H. Lawrence’s *The Rainbow* was burned in 1915 for being indecent ‘without any prosecution or, therefore, any chance of its adequate defence,’ (Rolph, 1969, p. 64) the reason given was that the eroticism present in the book was considered to be uncouth and degrading by the establishment. This allergy to any form of sex was a growing fear at the time for the immorality of the younger generation, and lasted right up until the reformed 1959 Obscene Publications Act. Sagar personifies the book in his Lawrence biography, writing that the book

was ‘brought before the bench and sentenced to death’ before being ‘burnt by the public handyman outside the Royal Exchange’ (Sagar, 1980, p. 90). This humorous description accurately identifies the motives of the perpetrators. They were essentially burning the Modernist ideas, and the most appropriate way for them to do this was burning their books.

A significant recurring theme of twentieth century book burnings was the speed and efficiency with which books were burned. New books that were controversial were almost always burned within a year of their publication (Baez, 2005, p. 218). To look at why this happened, it is appropriate to look at Foucault’s ‘Founders of Discursivity’ concept. He argues there are some authors, such as Freud(ian) or Marx(ist), who create a discourse that is then expanded by other authors who ‘refer back to their work as primary coordinates’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 154). Perhaps this idea origination is what scares the book burners the most; that a whole new discourse could be built upon one book’s foundations. *The Satanic Rituals* was one of the first examples of explicit criticism of Islam that was levelled against the mainstream consciousness, and Bradford’s Muslims may have felt the need to prevent this from spreading further, or to have Rushdie as a figurehead of the anti-Islamic movement. Sir Stanley Unwin, in 1915, identified the motive for the targeted suppression of books, writing that the government ‘had succeeded with some publishers in getting books suppressed without anyone hearing about them’ (as cited in Rolph, 1969, 72). The censors did not just want to destroy the books, but destroy any chance that the ideas could flourish further. The means of doing this could be secretly or with great ceremony and fanfare. The importance was that the ideas would subsequently disappear. As the case with Lawrence shows, this was by no means a peculiarity of only extremists and fundamentalists.

### **Burning Authors**

The fear of a certain individual may have its roots from before the twentieth century. Foucault points out that in the Middle Ages, a habit developed where people used a name such as Hippocrates or Plato to demonstrate truth (Foucault, 1980, p. 150). Sometimes a name can mean something far more symbolic than just a person. What cultural theorists have argued is that the fixation on an author can ‘arrest meaning’ as Barthes (1977) puts it. Instead, he sees the reader as the ultimate unifier of the text’s meaning. But the problem with this theory, like Bourdieu’s (1993), is it ignores the possibility of intervention from third parties.

Censorship will always target particular authors for representing certain ideas. In the 1933 fires, Erich Maria Remarque, along with Nobel Prize winner Alfred Fried, were the personifications of pacifism (Fishburn, 2008, pp. 44-45). The very fact the Nazis gave publishers blacklists not for specific works but for authors, prove that they were treated as symbols (Ritchie, 1988, p. 641). Authors who had books burned in 1933 had their works displayed in New York bookshops like Doubleday, as if making the author into a literary martyr (Fishburn, 2008, p. 38). In a totalitarian state or a fundamentalist sect, the reader can also become the destroyer. When Barthes (1977) claims ‘the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the author,’ could the readers he had in mind be Josef Goebbels or Ayatollah Khomeini; readers whose path would then influence an entire culture?

Barthes and Foucault (Barthes, 1977; Foucault, 1980) also fail to take into account the silenced author, and the one who is constantly targeted by the state to the extent that his name becomes a byword for oppressiveness. Such was the case with Pramoedya Ananta Toer who spent almost twenty years of his life in prison in Indonesia for his writings. In his essay ‘Manuscripts Banned and Destroyed,’ (1984) he details how he was imprisoned for writing material that was of a Marxist nature. During his imprisonment, he complained he was the victim of incessant slander that he could not refute. The government wanted him to disappear. Upon his eventual release, the novels he had written in prison were seized and some 10,000 copies burnt (1984, 88). His life and his trials are irrevocably attached to his writings, and he became a focus point of international justice in a way similar to Nelson Mandela.

Extremist and fundamentalist ideologies wanted to burn individualism, and individualism is the author’s agenda. Barthes and Foucault (Barthes, 1977; Foucault, 1980) use a free society with freedom of thought as their model and this is incompatible with the concept of book burnings. In fact, book burnings have the opposite effect on an author. The author and their work are forged in the flame. This is why certain ideologies burn books. It is the murder of thought and freedom laid there by the author. As Salman Rushdie said five years before his own books were burnt, ‘The worst, most insidious effect of censorship is that, in the end, it can deaden the imagination of the people’ (1984, 87).

## **Conclusion**

Book burnings, on the face of it, are simple rituals that show distaste for part of a book's contents. This essay strives to show, however, that they symbolise a clash of cultural forces. The perpetrators wanted not just to destroy but to create, and this is what the theorists referred to in this essay fail to grasp. Bourdieu's (1993) theory of the autonomous cultural field depends on the right political conditions to remain autonomous, while Barthes and Foucault (Barthes 1977; Foucault 1980) have ignored the idea of the author as representing more than their work. However, with book burnings, the author does not limit meaning, as they argue, and they can actually place the work within its own historical and political narrative. To make the 'Death of the Author' theory work in the context of book burning, they must create a subset of authors and readers; ones who do not fit the average description, such as an author of significant symbolic value like Toer, or a reader of exceptional influence like Goebbels. Every book burning in the century was different, but what they all wanted to achieve in the end was actually very similar.

## **References**

Báez, F. (2004). *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books: From Ancient Sumer to Modern Iraq* translated by Alfred MacAdam. Barcelona: Atlas & Company.

Barthes, R. (1977). *Image Music Text* translated by (S. Heath, Trans.). London: Fontana.

Bosmajian, H. (2006). *Burning Books*. North Carolina: McFarland & Company.

Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The Field of Cultural Production*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Brown, I. (1934). *I Commit to the Flames*. London: Hamish Hamilton.



Connor, S. (1996). *The English Novel in History 1950-1995*. London: Routledge.

Coser, L. A. (1975). Publishers as Gatekeepers of Ideas. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 421, 14-22.

<http://ann.sagepub.com/content/421/1/14.short>

Fishburn, M. (2008). *Burning Books*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*. London: Methuen & Co.

Gardiner, J. (2000). Recuperating the Author: Consuming Fictions of the 1990s. *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 94, 255-274. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24304348>

Heidegger, M. (1990). Self-Assertion of the German University. In G. Neske & E. Kettering (Eds.), *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism*, (pp. 5-21). New York: Paragon House.

Rahim, S. (2012, September 10). The Satanic Verses and me. *The Telegraph*, September 10. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/9523983/The-Satanic-Verses-and-me.html>

Ritchie, J.M. (1988). The Nazi Book-Burning. *The Modern Language Review* 83, 627-643. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3731288>.

Rolph, C.H. (1969). *Books in the Dock*. London: Andre Deutsch & Co.

Rushdie, S. (1984). Casualties of Censorship. In G. Theiner (Ed.) *They Shoot Writers Don't They?* (pp. 84-88). London: Faber & Faber.

Sagar, K. (1980). *The Life of D.H. Lawrence*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Stern, G. (1933). The Burning of the Books in Nazi Germany. *Museum of Tolerance Online*, Annual 2 Chapter 5. Accessed 29 March 2016.

<http://motlc.wiesenthal.com/site/pp.asp?c=gvKVLcMVIuG&b=395007>

Toer, P.A. (1984). Manuscripts Banned and Destroyed. In G. Theiner (Ed.) *They Shoot Writers Don't They?* (pp. 88-95). London: Faber & Faber.

Webster, R. (1990). *A Brief History of Blasphemy: Liberalism, Censorship and 'The Satanic Verses'*. Southwold: Orwell Press.