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Modern historiography has often been a tool to legitimate the nation-state. Many historians have promoted the political project of constructing national history. For those historians, history was the scientific apologia for the nation-state and a tool to make people subject to the hegemony of state power. When Jules Michelet defined the historian as an Oedipus who teaches the dead how to interpret and decipher the meaning of their lives and deaths, he exposed the historian’s professional secret to appropriate the dead for the cause of the nation-state. However, when historians’ public engagement does not fit in the political goal of the state power, they are vulnerable to the attacks by the political power. Historians have been subject to the varieties of censorship. They were suppressed, slandered, persecuted, and murdered. This book tells the story of how the oppression of historians turned into ‘deadly crimes against history’ and how historians resisted the political regulations by employing subversively historical analogies.

The author divides the legal definition of censorship into the „pre-censorship“ and „post-censorship.“ It depends on whether the views were censored before the expression or after. But „the figure of history censorship is less self-evident (p. 2).“ For instance, defamation as the attack on the reputation of historians is one of that less self-evident censorship. The malicious defamation trial of historians is a very malicious form of prosecution and censorship in disguise. Unfortunately, there are extreme acts of censorship, that is „crimes against history“ in De Baets’ terms. He mentions the assassination and murder of history producers, public personal attacks on history producers through hate speech, defamation, and malicious prosecution, disinformation including genocide denial, and censorship of history as crime against history, which is the underlying theme of this book. According to the author, „crimes against history are abuses of history that constitute violations of human rights (p.3).“

Antoon De Baets is satisfied with neither a declarative knowledge nor a theoretical abstract in pursuing the traces of the crime against history. All cases, his book describes, come from his „worldwide database on the censorship of history“ spanning the period from 1945 until today. Whoever subscribes to his newsletters of the „Network of Concerned Historians“ may immediately recognize what his worldwide database means. As a historian who experienced both the right-wing developmental dictatorship in South Korea and communist dictatorship in People’s Poland, I have thought I know relatively well about the crime against history. But the table 1.1 of „political murders of history producers (p. 12)“ truthenized me that I know very little about the crime against history. At the end of the book, De Baets compiled the names of the 428 history producers killed for political reasons. Among others, one can find familiar names of Ban Gu, Li Dazhao, Jan Patocka, Marc Bloch, Maurice Halbwachs, Walter Benjamin, Rudolf Hilferding, Edith Stein, James Connolly, Julius Caesar, Antonio Gramsci, Sin Ch’ae-ho, Emanuel Ringelblum and Marceli Handelsman.

About 23 percent of them were killed for political reasons connected to the historical interpretation. His investigation of the causes of killing historians shows a contrast between communist regimes and authoritarian regimes of Latin America. While communist regimes tend to kill historians and history producers to discipline the history profession, Latin American dictatorships tend to kill historians not for their professional conduct but their political activities. The more central role history plays in making ideology, the more devastating the impact of censorship is. As the case of Fritz Gerlich at the Bavarian National Archive under Nazis shows (p. 30), archivists were threatened to be killed and murdered too. The dissident views of class, religion, nation and past collective crimes were also punishable. Very often historians used the historical analogy to criticize the political leaders and their policies, which was persecuted on the pretext of defamation of leaders (ch. 3).
From the viewpoint of crime against history, iconoclastic breaks with the past are peculiar to things more than people. They destroy relics and emblems, monuments and statues, books and records, holy places and cemeteries. Communist regimes in Leninist Russia, Maoist China, Communist Romania, and Khmer Rouge’s Kampuchea, nationalist vandalism in Sadam Hussein’s Iraq and Serbian nationalist’s destruction of the Bosnian archives, and Islamic iconoclasm in Taliban’s Afghanistan belong to this category (ch. 4).

It is also interesting to note that “the work of historians living in dictatorships has been routinely dismissed as „fake history.“ Stalin denounced the dissident historian as „a falsifier of the history of our Party (p. 81).“ It is a dangerous paradox that a false charge of fake news is fake news itself. What is no less sensational is the false self-accusation or forced confession by historians persecuted by the political power. Historians critical of fake history reproduce the fake news through the false self-accusation. A cursory look at the list of accusations and charges directed at historians (table 5.2), compiled by Antoon De Baets, would lead readers to a deja-vue.

Historians have never been passive victims by the censorship. They have maneuvered skillfully „gray areas“ of the censorship. Under the dictatorial regime, strict censorship looks omnipresent. But the omnipresence of censorship is a delusion. At best, the censorship is porous with many holes, through which one can move swiftly in and out. The subversive power of historical analogies is a good example. De Baets suggest a typology of historical analogies contrasting „past freedom and present tyranny,“ „past and present tyrants,“ „past and present crimes,“ „past and present freedom struggles,“ and „featuring historians (p. 93).“ Under circumstances where the freedom of speech is inhibited, historical analogies provide historians with safety and connectivity. In a sense, historical analogies are an intellectual form of resistance. Some historians resort to a more direct way of resistance. Resistance from prison, insider solidarity among dissident historians, self-publication, and other numerous activities can be found in the traces of the critical historians (ch. 7).

This book is not imaginable without considering Antoon De Baets’ passionate and courageous work on the „Network of Concerned Historians.” I had a few opportunities to talk over the Network with other historian-colleagues who were approached by De Baets striving for the information of the censorship and freedom of speech in the historical research and publication. All of us admire his selfless commitment to the Network of Concerned Historians, which stands as a model for the „insider solidarity“ with the shaken historians. For the critical solidarity among historian-insiders, however, we expect a thorough study of the „self-censorship“ entrenched in the practicing and thinking of historians. As De Baets pointed out in the introduction, „self-censorship“ is the ultimate goal of any censorship apparatus (p. 2).” In the age of neo-populism, when the populist regimes are dominant in the Anglo-Saxon democracy, historian’s self-censorship becomes a more powerful weapon in disciplining historians and their audiences. Killing historians is a terrifying threat, but self-censorship is more persistent.


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