

“PLEASURE TO BURN:” A COMPREHENSIVE LOOK INTO THE HISTORY OF CENSORING LITERATURE IN SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

Jessica Marston
Arkansas State University

Abstract

The literature review below was done to investigate the history of censorship, specifically book burning and how it relates to the modern-day censorship that is seen in our country today. Using scholarly articles and books, news articles, professional organization websites, video documentaries, and data from prominent anti-censorship organizations, this article strives to tell the full story of the world’s complicated history with the censorship of knowledge. This review of literature makes clear that contemporary and historical censorship is an attempt to gain power and suppress the voice of those under authority. As educators, students, and community members, it is vital to use this knowledge to protect students’ right to read.

Keywords: censorship, historical approach, book burning, book banning

Introduction

The Flicker of the First Page

I remember the first book that I ever checked out of my elementary school library. On the first day of kindergarten, my small frame got lost in the shelves and shelves of books that towered over me. Finally, my hand grasped hold of a picture book: *Madeline* by Ludwig Bemelmans. I went home and read it every night before I went to bed for the next two weeks. I was hungry for the words.

However, one night I panicked when I spilled chocolate milk all over the colorful pages of the picture book, thinking I would be banned from the library forever. Luckily, the nightmare was over before it began thanks to my mom, armed with paper towels and a hair dryer. Heat.

Despite the mess, this first experience with the school library is what sparked my love of books and reading. It opened a world for me to learn about the lives of those both like and unlike me. Throughout elementary and middle school, I fell head over heels for books like *Junie B. Jones*, *Captain Underpants*, *Goosebumps*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, and *The Giver*. Years later, I would learn that while I was enjoying these books, they were being snuffed out in other schools (“Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books for 2000-2009,” 2020).

One of the many books that I fell in love with once I started junior high was *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. The first graphic novel that I had ever read, Spiegelman's depiction of his father's experience during the Holocaust was one that was both beautiful and sorrowful. I was enraptured by the words and drawings and, if I am being honest, I never would have picked it up had it not been assigned in class. Later during my sophomore year of college, I received my own copy of the book which I treasure to this day.

I was shocked in January of 2022, when I read that the McMinn County School District in Tennessee had banned *Maus* from its shelves. The reasoning for this removal from the district's eighth grade curriculum was the use of vulgar words such as "bitch" and "goddamn" (Kasakove, 2022, para. 11). This blatant act of censorship, which restricted an important book over such minute wording, fanned the flame of my interest into this topic.

The Momentum of *Maus*

The removal of *Maus* drove my curiosity into understanding the history of censorship and how it has led to the increase in book bans that are seen today. A quote that another educator in my life, Shelly Elliott, used to have written above her white board was "History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme," by Mark Twain. I believe this to be true and it can be seen in the censorship attempts in recent years. In the 2021-2022 school year, 1,648 books were banned from over 138 school districts in 32 states. Of these books the top reasons for the bans included LGBTQ+ themes, protagonists of color, and sexual content (Friedman & Johnson, 2022, para. 4-6). While the language around the removal of these books has changed, the mindset is reminiscent of the outdated book burnings that set ablaze books written by Ernest Hemingway, Helen Keller, Jack London, and many more (Rittenberg, 2022, para. 18).

With this in mind, I intend to dig into the past and understand why and how censorship has occurred. I will then use this information to contextualize the modern challenges that we see today. I believe that by looking at this history, it will be clear how censorship (especially in school environments) has evolved over time and in the digital age, and why it continues to persist today.

Literature Review

The erasure and destruction of knowledge is not a recent phenomenon. It is not even something that began under the reign of Hitler over the Nazi regime. Censorship is an idea that has existed as far back as our ancient civilizations, though it took on a different form. Book burning can be found as far back as 221 B.C. and its motives are like those who are trying to ban books in schools today. It is important, therefore, to understand this history of censoring and book burning if we are to recognize the issues with book banning in our country right now.

The Purification of the First Chinese Dynasty

The first recorded book burning was during the reign of the first Chinese emperor Qin Shi Huang. His name might sound familiar to some as he is the same leader who instigated the building of the Great Wall of China as well as the now infamous art piece: The Terracotta Army. Huang took control over China and was the first emperor to unify China in 221 B.C. (Ermerins, 2017, para. 1-3). This forceful unification was executed under the philosophy of legalism. Legalism is a way of thinking that puts laws and the rule of the land over all else. It creates a binary-thinking society that sees no room for gray areas. Legalism became prominent as a response to the chaos and lack of structure that existed between the many warring states in ancient China. However, this legalistic point of view can be difficult to maintain when controlling an entire nation of people, especially when there are many different philosophical views, histories, and other texts that contradict the law of the land. It was this weak point as well as pressure from his Grand Counselor Li Ssu that pushed

Huang to implement the first book burning in recorded history (Chan, 1972, p. 105). This act called for the burning of books that contained history, poetry, and philosophy. Scientific and medical books were spared from the inferno. In an attempt to not completely erase the history of pre-unified China, copies of these forbidden texts were spared from the initial flames in the imperial archives for a time. However, siege from neighboring people caused these copies to be lost forever (Chan, 1972, p. 107). It is important to recognize that this origin of book burning was rooted in political gain and control. Qin Shi Huang wanted his people to follow only what he believed to be true and, in an effort to control their actions as well as their thoughts, he burned anything that would make them believe differently. Book burning, from its spark of conception, is entrenched in politics.

The Siege of Baghdad

Moving from the East to the West of Asia, it is clear that Shi Huan's burning of literature was not an isolated offense. The Mongols, a group of nomadic conquerors and pillagers, ruled a large part of the world from 1206-1368 CE. Though most famously led by Genghis Khan, by January 29, 1258, Hulangu Khan, his grandson, was in control of this feared group. They were looking to continue to grow their empire and had their eyes set on a prize: Baghdad, a landmark city and in its prime during this time (History Dose, 2022). It was said to be beautiful and adorned with precious architecture. Within Baghdad, the arts and science flourished beyond measure. This included studies like "literature, music, calligraphy, philosophy, mathematics, chemistry, history" (Frazier, 2005, para. 15) and astronomy due to the very strict Muslim calendar, as well as the need for their mosques to face in the direction of Mecca. This intellectual surplus was aided because a new method for making paper began in China and it allowed neighboring places like Baghdad the chance to make copious amounts of books as well as other printed materials. All of these books were stored away in the libraries of Baghdad controlled by the caliph (the Muslim chief civil and religious leader) of the Abbasid dynasty: al-Musta'sim (Frazier, 2005, para. 14). It was this man who dared the Mongols to siege the city, and siege is exactly what they did. The Mongols breached the city walls and, for 10 days, they ravaged the city killing men, women, and children (History Dose, 2022). The river ran red with their blood. Most notably, the Mongols also destroyed all of the prized manuscripts that were housed within Baghdad. They burned what they could and, when the pages were not burning fast enough, they were thrown into the Tigris River. It was said that "the water ran black from the ink" (Westcott, 2018, para. 7). This destruction of books was done as a power move to show conquest and it was clear that "a golden age [was] laid to waste by the House of Genghis Khan" (History Dose, 2022). This Golden Age of Islam, which had seemed never ending, was supported by the knowledge contained in those books. So, on February 20, 1258, when the Siege of Baghdad was over and the caliph was killed, the Mongols solidified that the Golden Age of Islam was over.

The Catholic Church and the Index Librorum Prohibitorum

Continuing west into Southern and Western Europe, a new advancement in technology proved to be a blessing for the people but a curse in the eyes of censorship. Johann Gutenberg created the printing press in 1448 and with it came a new, and unprecedented wave of knowledge sharing ("Johann Gutenberg", n.d., para. 1). Now, not only could common people have access to cheap books, but they could also express their own ideas within them. Though this seems like a step in the right direction, the Catholic Church thought otherwise. The Catholic Church became the main propagator of censorship from 1500 to 1700. Due to strict religious viewpoints, art of any form that either conflicted with or explicitly condemned the Catholic Church was considered immoral, earning it the title of living amongst the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, a list which was first

“printed in Venice in 1554” (Ovenden, 2022, p. 124). The *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* was the list of books, art, and people that were banned from the Catholic Church which, since there was no separation of Church and State, meant everyone within Southern and Western Europe. This lack of separation meant that if citizens began to question their beliefs in the Catholic Church, the Church’s political power was at risk. It was also believed that if they read from any of the books on this list, that they were putting themselves at risk of living an eternity in Hell (Sarwark, 2018, para. 3). The fear that the list created caused many communities to host their own book burnings, censoring themselves. They truly believed that by burning these forbidden texts, they were cleansing themselves of sin.

The *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* was first published in 1554 and the Catholic Church released the last issue in 1966 (Sarwark, 2018, para. 4). The Catholic Church, specifically around the beginning years of the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, had the same two reasons for encouraging censorship and book burning that the Mongols and Shi Huang had. These reasons were wanting to maintain their existing power and gaining more at the same time. Along with these reasons, new ones were born out of this act of censorship. Religious motivations as well as the fear of widespread knowledge made possible with the creation of the printing press become reasons for censorship. While fear of widespread knowledge was a reason before the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, this fear was held only by leaders who were afraid to have their power taken from them. Now, however, the fear of knowledge was being employed by those same leaders to influence the people to burn their access to knowledge.

North American Censorship Begins

Though there were some religious texts burned by small Puritan and Calvinists communities in the United States’ beginnings, the first widespread banned book within the nation is no surprise given the history that surrounds it. It was Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which was banned during the Civil War era (Brady, 2016, para. 6). *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* depicts a critical and realistic portrayal of slavery within the American South through the fictional story of the titular character (Williams, 2020, para. 11-12). This book was created with the purpose of revealing the evil institution for what it was. With the Confederacy having already outlawed the expression of any anti-slavery sentiments, it is no surprise that the book was met with burnings as well as banning across the South. The fiery reaction to books like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was all due to the foothold that slavery held in the political and economic power within the South. An unfortunate example of the impact of the ban can be seen in the story of Sam Green, a freed Black minister who was incarcerated for 10 years in a state penitentiary for simply owning a copy of the book (Blakemore, 2022, para. 7).

After the Confederacy’s loss of the Civil War, which is believed to have been sparked by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* along with other events, the South still wielded its power to suppress the truth from young people. As public schooling became more prominent throughout the United States, Southern states quickly acquired statewide adoption policies for all textbooks used within these new schools (Marquez, n.d., para. 4). These policies required all books to be approved by state textbook committees before being bought and used. Many required that these textbooks tell an appropriate version of Southern history and culture, which whitewashed and romanticized the Civil War as well as Reconstruction. This whitewashing included the narrative being that slaves were happy and content as well as the requirement that infamous Confederate Leaders like Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis be mentioned just as much as Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant (Marquez, 2021, para. 5). For fear of losing money, Northern textbook publishing houses began printing a Northern and Southern version of history textbooks to be given to appropriate schools. These were called “mint juleps” and it showed that “the nation was willing to sacrifice its historical memory (with particular emphasis on race) for the sake of reconciliation” (Miller, 2020, para. 7). Though not

as obvious, these tactics are still well entrenched in the publishing of textbooks today with McGraw-Hill and Pearson both stating that they create different versions for different states “customized to satisfy policymakers with different priorities” (Goldstein, 2020, para. 7).

The Infamous Nazi Book Burnings

In May of 1933, book burnings gained world media coverage when university students in Nazi Germany burned over 25,000 books in public bonfires (“Timeline of Events: Book Burning,” n.d., para. 1), images of which likely fill the minds of most people when they think of book burnings. German students, having been raised and indoctrinated with Nazi rhetoric, wanted to purify themselves and their schools as well as unite Germany under Nazi rule. University leaders worked together with the propaganda ministry as well as booksellers to compile blacklists of authors who did not align with Nazi policy (Rittenberg, 2022, para. 17). These lists included any Jewish, Communist, and Socialist authors as well as any pornographic material or texts that advocated a bourgeois (characteristic of the middle class) lifestyle, much like many of the texts that appeared on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*. It was from these lists that students as well as the Nazi police force began pulling books from libraries and homes to be burned.

The carnage began with the burning of the Institute of Sexology on May 6th, 1933, four days before the famous photographs were taken. This building housed over 20,000 texts about intersexuality, homosexuality, and transgender people (Rittenberg, 2022, para. 14). From here, in 34 university towns, citizens of Nazi Germany excitedly gathered to celebrate the burning of these “Un-German” texts. These texts included the works of authors like Brecht, Einstein, Freud, Mann, Remarque, Jack London, Oscar Wilde, Helen Keller, Heinrich Heine, and more (Rittenberg, 2022, para. 18). In a prophetic statement from 1821, over 110 prior to the Holocaust, Heine had written: “Where one burns books, one will soon burn people” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2013). It was sentiments like these that fanned the flames of the book burnings. In Berlin, over 40,000 people attended the infamous burning and gathered to hear German Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda Joseph Goebbels praise the students for “[committing] to the flames the evil spirit of the past” (“Book Burnings in Germany”, n.d., para. 1). This series of book burnings, which were publicized, sparked outrage in many people, including prominent figures in the United States like Sherwood Anderson, Faith Baldwin, and Sinclair Lewis; however, many people were unaware of the overwhelming scope of crimes that the Nazi party would go on to commit. One journalist for the *New York Herald Tribune* named Walter Lippmann was aware and stated:

These acts symbolize the moral and intellectual character of the Nazi regime, ... For these bonfires are not the work of schoolboys or mobs but of the present German Government ... The ominous symbolism of [this act and] these bonfires are that there is a government in Germany which means to teach its people that their salvation lies in violence. (“Book Burnings in Germany”, n.d., para. 3)

These burnings were just the beginning, and “it has been estimated that over 100 million books were destroyed during the Holocaust” (Ovenden, 2020, p. 119). This act of violence and of consolidating power under this vicious regime fundamentally changed the way the world viewed book burnings. To this day, the images of German citizens throwing books into bonfires is forever connected to the atrocities that occurred under Hitler’s regime and was the inciting event that allowed for people to view this act for the sinister censorship that it was.

The United States from WWII to Now

The United States leaders, in the 1940’s, having witnessed the publicized Nazi book burnings of the Holocaust and Second World War, were at a stalemate socially, especially with the arrival of the Cold War. Officials and citizens within the United States were engulfed in the Red Scare and

McCarthyism, with their paranoia at high alert. Book burnings were already beginning in response to the encroaching Communist viewpoint, and dispositions toward censorship were observable when the members of the Binghamton New York Board of Education wanted to burn “subverse” textbooks in 1940.

It was in the midst of growing censorship that author Ray Bradbury released his dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451* in 1953 (Rothman, 2018, para. 13-14). This book foreshadowed the world without books and what society might look like if censorship continued to happen. Bradbury’s harrowing tale solidified the public opinion when it came to book burnings. However, censorship still found a way to thrive. With the arrival of the Reagan administration, censorship within school districts rose dramatically with at least “700-800 challenges per year” (Brady, 2016, para. 12). Many believed that Reagan’s election “encouraged challenges by people who were unhappy with books in schools and libraries that were increasingly realistic in their depiction of life” (Brady, 2016, para. 12). This line of thought is oddly familiar when considering the censorship occurring today. It was this rise in book banning within school systems that led to the arrival of Banned Books Week, hosted by the American Library Association (ALA), in 1982 (Fink, 2020, para. 4). The last week of September, Banned Books Week is a time intended to shed light on recent censorship incidents and provide resources for students as well as teachers to prevent future book challenges.

Since then, challenges and bannings of books within school districts have become increasingly common with multiple books being attacked at a time. In September 2022 in Oklahoma, the Owasso school district removed every graphic novel from its library in order to review each one individually for “pornographic” material (Woodcock, 2022, para. 2). This swift removal was done after a single complaint from the father of one child. In November 2022 in the state of Texas, the Frisco Independent School District uploaded a list with over 307 entries of books that have either been age restricted or removed entirely from their library’s collection (Howerton, 2022, para. 7). Some of the titles on this list include *Looking for Alaska*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, and *Eleanor Roosevelt Fighter for Justice* (Frisco ISD, 2022).

New laws within Missouri and Utah have pushed school districts to remove books due to fear of jail time for educators if the titles are left on the shelves (Friedman & Johnson, 2022, para. 18). Within my own state of Arkansas, the Conway School District has reportedly removed two books, *Felix Ever After* by Kacen Callender and *Beyond Magenta* by Susan Kuklin, which depict the experiences of transgender youth, from their junior high school’s library collection (Hale-Shelton, 2022, para. 2-5). It is important to note that in response to the decision made by the Conway School District, the American Civil Liberties Union has stated that they are “preparing to take possible legal action against the school district” (Horbacewicz, 2022, para. 6) due to the recent actions violating civil rights laws. In just the beginning of 2022, ALA reported that there had been “651 attempts to ban or restrict library resources and 1,651 unique titles were targeted” (Hines, 2022, para. 2).

These attacks on books within the classroom have led teachers to feel like there is a target on their back if they stand up for students’ right to read. Teachers’ fear of losing their license, which would be a result of the aforementioned legislation in Missouri and Utah, is coupled with the fear of public ridicule within their community. This was the reality faced by school librarian Martha Hickson at North Hunterdon High School in New Jersey. After fighting back against challenges on titles like *Gender Queer*, *Lawn Boy*, *Fun Home*, and more, Hickson received hate mail from angry community members and “[attempts] to file a criminal complaint with the local prosecutor’s office” (Hickson, 2022, para. 6). All of the hate that she received for simply standing up for students’ right to read led to severe stress-related health problems that resulted in “[her] physician [ordering her] to stop work” (Hickson, 2022, para. 9). Though this is the reality for educators today, there are still many ways that people can work to fight against censorship.

Discussion

Book burning has evolved throughout history. What used to be a show of power to most countries now exists as a mark of backwards ideology. This shift from burnings to bannings was motivated by book burning in the 1930's and 1940's by the Nazi regime. As the Nazi party encouraged all German citizens to burn the books of Jewish, Gypsy and queer authors, the world began to see how this "[purging] of undesirable books" was a deplorable mark on the freedom of information (Ovenden, 2020, p. 121). This attitude is reflected in the words of Helen Keller, whose work was a part of the famous burns: "You can burn my books and the books of the best minds in Europe, but the ideas in them have seeped through a million channels and will continue to quicken other minds" (Ovenden, 2020, p. 120).

After considering the historical timeline that has brought us to modern book banning, it is clear that book burnings and book banning all stem from the same idea of maintaining power and control over a specific group or groups of people. While in the past this desire for control was only over the conquered, today's situation has put students at the center of this power move. Educators have several options to promote students' right to read.

What Teachers Can Do

For teachers and educators who are entering this mine field of literature and book bannings, it is important to have a plan of action for when challenges arise. The aforementioned experience of Martha Hickson, whom I was able to meet and hear from during the *Fighting Censorship* webcast sponsored by the *School Library Journal*, gives great insight into the reality of what a challenge entails (Hickson, 2022). In an additional article that was linked to participants in the webcast, Hickson wrote that there are many steps to make the inevitable challenge easier to take on. She first encourages educators to pay attention to what is happening across the country when it comes to book bans and challenges. By keeping recent censorship news in mind, educators can be prepared for when a book within their collection is challenged. It is also important to strengthen the criteria to initiate a challenge, including requiring that the book be read in its entirety, that professional reviews be consulted, and that specific citations where state requirements were violated be provided. Putting these enhanced criteria in place should help diminish challenges based on feeling. Finally, it is important to consistently review and, as needed, revise/update the challenge policy (Hickson, 2022, para. 17-19).

Professional organizations also provide plenty of resources for teachers undergoing legal battles as well as those who simply want to be prepared in the classroom setting. The American Civil Liberties Union works with law and policy makers to continue work in federal advocacy as well as provide resources concerning rights and civil liberty issues (ACLU, 2023). Meanwhile, the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) works to provide support and consulting services for anyone experiencing a challenge. Along with these services, many of the OIF's resources encourage education about the issue including training for educators and promoting awareness through Banned Books Week (ALA). The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) published "The Students' Right to Read" position statement, which is often cited while discussing challenges (NCTE, "The Students' ..."). The NCTE Intellectual Freedom Center has also established a hotline to aid those who are facing censorship challenges (NCTE, "IFC"). And the NCTE created a book rationale database in 2022, which provides teachers with rationales to defend the books in their curriculums and classroom libraries (NCTE, "Book Rationales"). Finally, the Freedom to Read Foundation works to provide legal aid as well as financial aid to support those who are willing to stand up to censorship within their schools (Freedom to Read Foundation, n.d.).

If a book challenge does occur, Lent and Pipkin (2012) make clear that one of the best things that can be done is to "reach out to your natural allies for support" (p. 65). By reaching out to

allies, which can include other educators, organizations, supportive community members, and more, we can help to diminish the loneliness and alienation that can occur for many educators like Martha Hickson.

The Power of Choice

Though the removal of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* was the spark for my research into book burning and censorship, it was not the spark for my love of knowledge and reading. That love started all the way back with my decision to reach for *Madeline* on the top shelf of the library at my elementary school. No matter if the book is *Madeline*, *Maus*, or *Beyond Magenta*, every student has the right to choose a book that sparks the same love for knowledge that I received. The NCTE's *The Student's Right to Read* position statement states: "But to deny the freedom of choice in fear that it may be unwisely used is to destroy the freedom itself" (2018). Whether someone is an advocate for students, an educator, or a student themselves, it is the responsibility of all to remember the fires of the past and make a commitment to stop the withholding of information or ideas from any group.

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Author Biography

Jessica Marston is a 2023 graduate of Arkansas State University where she received a Bachelor of Science in Middle Level Education with emphasis in English and Social Studies. Originally from Cabot, AR, Jessica chose to go into the field of teaching due to the many teachers who impacted her life. As she enters her new career field, she hopes to encourage kids to love reading and learning about the world around them. She can be reached at vjessie10@gmail.com.



Mary Harrison's classroom library at Wichita West High School