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School Librarians: Firefighters of the Republic

A Brief History of Book Burning and a Ruminantion on What School Librarians Might Do Should They See Smoke Signals

Здравствуйте! Меня зовут Роджер Розен. Я хотел бы сказать, как я рад сегодня быть здесь с вами и говорить о нашем профессиональном будущем.

If you are somewhat disconcerted by the fact that I addressed you in Russian, stating how glad I am to be here to speak about the future of our profession, I can only wonder how your sense of disorientation compares to my shock at hearing the president of the United States call members of our press corps “the enemy of the people.” In the Russophone world, *враг народа*, “enemy of the people,” is a very specific expression that Stalin used in the great purges of 1934-1939 to send millions upon millions of his fellow countrymen to the forced labor camps of the gulag, a place from which half did not return. During the purges, neighbor denounced neighbor, identifying so-called enemies of the people, out of fear, communist orthodoxy,

desire for advancement, and sometimes just plain spite. So terrifying and traumatic were these words that Khrushchev banned their use in his 1956 speech to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In his so-called secret speech, he repudiated Stalin, calling him a dictator and ending his “cult of personality.”

In 1975, when I was a young student of the Russian language in Leningrad (now St Petersburg), I never once heard this phrase. And yet, of all the many Russian friends I made, and have made subsequently, there was not one who was not affected by the purges; not one who did not lose some relative to the *lagers* of Siberia.

Every Soviet citizen knew then, as we Americans know now, that words can be weapons. And in a like fashion, autocrats, and would-be autocrats, understand that the words in books and the words of our journalists can be powerful counter weapons, weapons of resistance.

To call journalists the enemy of the people is to brook no dissent, to cast doubt on the rigors of a respected profession, and to banish

facts and the quest for truth to the murky depths of competing versions of alternative realities. This hall of mirrors is an existential threat to our democracy, a threat that school librarians can be at the forefront of combating. I believe that the phrase *враг народа*, "enemy of the people," is one of the smoke signals that indicate the possibility of a larger conflagration down the road. Torchlight processions illuminate this road.

Will school librarians not stand shoulder to shoulder with journalists to protect a free press, civic discourse, and open access to information? Will school librarians not take the lead to teach the next generation of citizens how to be media literate and to navigate with sophistication the products of a "post truth" world; in short, to teach how to actively participate in our democracy? I know you will. I know how committed you are to your students, to the transformative power of information, and to the fight for equity of access to that information.

If one were given to conspiracy theories, which in these times are sometimes easy enough to credit, one might argue that it is not happenstance that school libraries are being underfunded and that

the profession is being subverted by non-credentialed practitioners. If you wanted to create a generation of citizens without critical-thinking skills, one susceptible to an onslaught of propaganda and sensational stories, wouldn't you start by disempowering school librarians? Might you not want to remove them along with journalists?

Who does not remember the famous words of the anti-Nazi Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller: "First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me." Well we are speaking out loud and clear right now and we should arm ourselves with the right words. As someone on the board of the American Association of Publishers, I particularly love this joint statement from ALA and the AAP on the freedom to read:

“We here stake out a lofty claim for the value of the written word. We do so because we believe that it is possessed of enormous variety and usefulness, worthy of cherishing and keeping free. We realize that the application of these propositions may mean the dissemination of ideas and manners of expression that are repugnant to many persons. We do not state these propositions in the comfortable belief that what people read is unimportant. We believe rather that what people read is deeply important; that ideas can be dangerous; but that the suppression of ideas is fatal to a democratic society. Freedom itself is a dangerous way of life, but it is ours.”

We know that many an autocrat would find these words anathema. In fact, that is precisely why they go in for book burning. I promised here a brief history of book burning to provide some historical context to the phenomenon. Mine was a foolish promise because in fact it will be hard to be brief—that is how long and ugly and pervasive the act has proved to be. But I will try. And let me commence with a warning: often librarians were complicit, committing professional suicide in the process: whether they did so with ideological enthusiasm or were co-opted, they nonetheless brought their curation skills to blacklists and

funeral pyres.

Let's start with Joe Stalin, who began purging libraries in the USSR in the 1920s and continued right through to his death in 1953. While Stalin himself had a very extensive personal library of over 25,000 volumes, which contained many of the works of his rivals for power, Trotsky and Bukharin, to name just two, he banned from the people access to these works and everything else that was deemed by his loyal librarians to be ideologically impure. According to Robert Rogers in *Censorship and Libraries in the Soviet Union*, "In 1927, 60 percent of all books were eliminated in most Soviet libraries. Between 1930 and 1932, libraries lost 60 percent more of their stock, which had already been purged at least three times. During just one year in Moscow, over 779,579 books were lost, and most books were never reprinted." Another *samizdat* source indicates that many were burned.

In the Jewish Autonomous region of Birobidzhan in the USSR—a weird Stalinist creation 50 miles from the border with China and a story unto itself—five years after the end of World War II, all of the

contents of the Sholem Aleichem Library of Yiddish books was burned in its courtyard.

This is a good example of how the tropes and the deeds of the Red and the Black, the Communists and the Fascists, find their nexus.

All of which brings me to Germany. As many of you know, I have been attending the Frankfurt International Book Fair for more than twenty years. This year, in preparation for these remarks, I sought out the plaque in the Römerberg, the square in front of City Hall, that marked the spot where Nazi book burning infamously occurred on May 10, 1933. Frankfurt, by the way, is not the only city in Germany where book burning occurred on this day. In fact, 34 cities participated—all university towns—not surprising since the event was organized by the Nazi-dominated members of the German Student Union. The purpose of this auto-da-fé was to cleanse the nation of un-German books. So, foreign influences such as Ernest Hemingway, Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, and H. G. Wells were put to the torch; as well as homegrown “degenerates” like Albert Einstein, Bertolt Brecht, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Thomas and

Heinrich Mann, Franz Werfel, Franz Kafka, and Erich Maria Remarque, author of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. More than 25,000 volumes were burnt on that night. How did the National Socialists decide which books were impure? I am indebted to Leonidas Hill's book *The Nazi Attack on Un-German Literature 1933-1945* for the following information: Two librarians, one from Berlin and one from Hamburg, Wolfgang Hermann and Wilhelm Schuster respectively—names that will live in infamy—were appointed in March of 1933 to a purification committee to draw up an initial list of un-German literature. Hermann went on to write in professional library journals his oh so helpful articles “General Principles for the Compilation of Blacklists” and “Principles for Sanitizing.” These initial lists were the basis for what the Nazi students heaped on the pyre. By 1934, there were 40 agencies that had decided upon 4,100 publications that should be banned. Further, anyone caught burning *Mein Kampf* would be immediately arrested and shot. The National Socialists were not stupid: they understood that professional purification required the work of professionals.

But let me go back to the plaque in the center of Frankfurt commemorating the book burning. On it are written the words of Heinrich Heine, a beloved, then purged, German-Jewish poet of the 19th century. He wrote “Where they burn books, they will also ultimately burn people.” These eerily prophetic words are to be found in his 1820-1821 tragedy, *Almansor*, which deals with the Christian reconquest of al-Andalus, the caliphate of southern Spain. Remarkably, the burned book in question is the Quran.

The dynamics of book burning seem always the same: those in power want to control the narrative and eradicate an alternative narrative. Whosoever does not reinforce the words of the leader is an enemy of the leader and by extension the people whom the leader believes he should lead. Alternative narratives are the enemy of the people.

That’s certainly what Qin Shi Huang, Emperor of the Qin dynasty in China, believed in 210-213 BCE. His is one of the first documented cases of book burning. He also took the opportunity to bury alive 460 Confucian scholars who disagreed with his philosophy.

So thought Julius Caesar in 48 BCE with the first fire and partial destruction of the Library of Alexandria, where rather than face defeat he would see the wisdom of the ancient world go up in smoke.

So thought Ximenes de Cisneros, archbishop of Toledo and leader of the Spanish Inquisition, who believed that entire languages were an offense to his truth, and in Granada, burned in 1490 all the Arabic and Hebrew books that could be found.

So thought Fra Girolamo Savonarola, who exhorted his followers in 1497 to create a Bonfire of the Vanities in Piazza della Signoria in Florence. Thankfully, Boccaccio and Ovid survived the attempts of Savonarola's theocracy to eliminate them.

So thought the *Conquistadores* who thanks to the good offices of Father Diego de Landa, Bishop of Yucatan, burned hundreds of Maya codices. Only three remain.

Closer to home and our time, so thought the senator from Wisconsin, Joe McCarthy, whose henchman Roy Cohn, a great mentor of our current president, thought that the State Department libraries in Europe contained too many books that were un-American. The State Department caved and forced their librarians to purge their collections.

As an aside, to his eternal credit, in a 1953 speech at Dartmouth, President Dwight D. Eisenhower had this to say about such acts: "Don't join the book burners. Don't think you're going to conceal faults by concealing evidence that they ever existed. Don't be afraid to go in your library and read every book."

But to return to book burning, so thought Pol Pot, who from 1975-1979, ordered his Khmer Rouge to burn books and cultural artifacts throughout Cambodia in a genocidal rampage to rebuild society.

So thought the Taliban in Afghanistan in 1988-2001, as they burned the holdings of libraries, museums, and personal collections, (particularly Persian texts) that were seen to "compete with the Quran" and challenge the rule of sharia law.

So thought the Chinese troops who invaded Tibet in 1950 and thereafter set about burning the libraries of the great lamaseries, destroying sacred texts that had been preserved there for hundreds of years.

So thought Mao's Red Guards in 1966 during the height of the Cultural Revolution as they sacked libraries and universities to build bonfires of any books deemed to be counter-revolutionary.

So thought the citizens of Bradford, England, and throughout the world who burned copies in 1988 of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. Most of them had never even read the book but were ecstatic when a fatwa was issued against Rushdie's life.

So thought the members of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb who burned two libraries in Timbuktu in Mali on January 27, 2013, destroying thousands of precious manuscripts.

So thought the Isis members in Iraq who burned the Mosul Public

Library in 2015, destroying 8,000 books and manuscripts.

And still, even here, even now, there are those who have resurfaced to burn *Harry Potter* once again because of J. K. Rowling's recent criticism of President Donald Trump.

как всегда, as the Russians say. "So it goes," is an expression of a people who knew they could be denounced as an "enemy of the people" at any time. Is it any wonder that in Soviet times if you asked a Russian how he was doing he might say, "Worse than yesterday but not as bad as tomorrow."

But this pessimism needn't be ours. We Americans know how to take positive steps to combat pernicious influences. So what steps can school librarians take should they see the smoke signals of potential bonfires?

I personally feel that you can do no greater service to the republic than to teach media literacy. It is what you do and what you know. I highly recommend a new work by my good friends Michele Luhtala

and Jacquelyn Whiting, both of New Canaan High School in Connecticut, *News Literacy: the Keys to Combating Fake News*. It is absolutely essential to our democracy that students grow up able to judge reliability and credibility. We must teach them to recognize hoax sites, satirical sites, cloaked sites, confirmation bias, content mills, echo chambers, filter bubbles, native advertising, herding phenomena, sock puppets, and weaponized bots. They must become sophisticated consumers of information and not suckers for clickbait. We need you to help ensure this. According to a recent study by Stanford University, more than 80% of middle schoolers cannot tell the difference between sponsored content and a real news article.”

I would love to see exhibitions in school libraries of books that were burned or banned by repressive regimes. Wouldn't it be great to encourage students to adopt a banned author? Why couldn't we have schoolwide events on just such a topic, features in the school newspaper, podcasts, book talks, and more?

Did you know that your own Dr. Susan Ballard wrote her Master's thesis on *samizdat* literature. *Samizdat* in Russian means self-

published, but not in the vanity sense of the West but because a work would never have passed the censors in the USSR. I learned about Susan's thesis over dinner some years back, and I was amazed because during my time in the Soviet Union, I knew many people who spent their evenings typing forbidden dissident works to pass along a copy as the price for having read the copy that they had. One of my dearest friends read Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life Of Ivan Denisovich* in just such a manner. An exhibition in your school library about *samizdat* literature would not be amiss. Susan and I could help you with it.

But I don't want the school librarians of the future to teach our kids how to create and disseminate samizdat literature because we have a regime that regards the work of certain writers as un-American or the works to be those of "an enemy of the people." Let's create news savvy citizens who have the skills to triangulate and corroborate information from various sources. I have tremendous faith in you school librarians, you firefighters of the republic, to get this job done, and I thank you so much for choosing me to speak at the New England School Library Association's 100th anniversary event. I know

you will continue to do your tremendous work for the next 100 years. .

Thank you so much.

