

TIMELINE

# The books have been burning

## A timeline of 2,200 years of book burnings, from ancient China to The Book of Negroes

By Daniel Schwartz, [CBC News](#) Posted: Sep 10, 2010 7:36 AM ET Last Updated: Jun 22, 2011 5:24 PM ET



Fascist university students burned upwards of 25,000 books on the Opernplatz (Opera Square) in Berlin, Germany, on May 10, 1933. Nazi leader Joseph Goebbels spoke at the event, telling the students, "You do well at this late hour to entrust to the flames the intellectual garbage of the past." ((Courtesy U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum/U.S. National Archives and Records Administration))

There is something about burning books.

Shredding, soaking, pulping or any other method of destroying books just does not compare. Neither does banning or censoring books.

Many of us can even identify the temperature at which paper combusts. But can we answer the same question for other materials? *Fahrenheit 451* was the title of Ray Bradbury's famous 1953 novel about book burning and thought control.

Book burning has a long history, too. The first recorded state-sponsored book burning was in China in 213 BC, according to Matthew Fishburn, the author of *Burning Books*. The burnings were ordered by Qin Shi Huang, the Chinese emperor who also started the Great Wall and the Terracotta army.



Burning Books and Leveling Libraries is Rebecca Knuth's second book on book burning. The University of Hawaii professor also wrote *Libricide: The Regime-Sponsored Destruction of Books and Libraries in the Twentieth Century*.

Book burnings especially call to mind images of the [Nazi bonfires in Germany](#) in May-June 1933. But there is a long list of burnings that took place after the war.

On June 22, 2011 a group in The Netherlands burned the cover of *The Book of Negroes*, by Canadian author Lawrence Hill, continuing both an ancient and modern tradition.

"The horrific history of exterminating books, sometimes exterminating the authors at the same time, is as much a part of current history as it was of earlier times," Haig Bosmajian writes in his book, also entitled *Burning Books*. "Century after century, the book burners have lit the fearful, powerful, magical fire to reduce to ashes the fearful, powerful, magical books."

## Reasons for book burnings

For Rebecca Knuth, the author of two books on book burnings and the destruction of libraries, books are the targets because they "are the embodiment of ideas and if you hold extreme beliefs you cannot tolerate anything that contradicts those beliefs or is in competition with them."

Book burnings "are highly symbolic. When you destroy a book you are destroying your enemy and your enemy's beliefs," she said in an interview with CBC News. Knuth's latest book is *Burning Books and Leveling Libraries: Extremist Violence and Cultural Destruction*.

In her research Knuth found that book burnings are seldom isolated barbaric acts. She explains that there are patterns and the book burners "are following out some kind of logical game plan."

Here is a list of some of the book burnings that have happened since the end of the Second World War.

### Iran, 1946

In December 1946, Iranian forces defeated the autonomous Kurdish government, known as the Republic of Mahabad, which was formed in northern Iran during the Second World War. The victors burned all the Kurdish-language books they could find. They also banned the teaching of Kurdish and closed Kurdish presses.

### United States, 1948

That year residents in Binghamton, N.Y., went house-to-house gathering and burning comic books they feared would spread moral depravity among American youth.

"Groups of students continued to burn comic books in schoolyards around the country, some under the sway of their parents and teachers, some in concord with them," writes David Hadju in his 2008 book *The Ten-Cent Plague: The*

*Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America.* ([Bookforum has a long excerpt](#) and a photo of a Binghamton burning.)

Another wave of comic book burnings followed the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent*, by American psychiatrist and comic book foe Fredric Wertham in 1954.

## United States, 1956

In 1956 psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich was convicted of contempt of court in connection with his research on orgasm and his orgone energy accumulators.

On two occasions Reich's books were burned, overseen by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. In New York six tonnes of his books and papers were burned, including *The Sexual Revolution*, *Character Analysis*, and *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*.

## China, 1966-1976

Books were burned in China as part of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, while about seven million people died during those years.

## Chile, 1973

After their violent overthrow of Chile's elected government on Sept. 11, the military conducted public book burnings of works they considered subversive.

## United States, 1973

In Drake, North Dakota the school board had "objectionable" books thrown into the school furnace. The books included 32 copies of *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut and 60 copies of *Deliverance* by James Dickey. After learning about the burning, Vonnegut wrote to the school board chairman, "If you are an American, you must allow all ideas to circulate freely in your community, not merely your own."

After many of the students studying the books refused to turn them in, "the board ordered that their lockers be searched," the [Minot Daily News reported](#).



Demonstrators burn an effigy of U.S. President Barack Obama during a protest in Jammu in India-administered Kashmir on Sept. 14, 2010. The protesters were responding to reports that copies of the Qur'an had been damaged in the U.S. Eighteen people were killed, nearly all of them by police gunfire, during anti-India and Qur'an demonstrations in the disputed region. ((Mukesh Gupta/Reuters))

## Sri Lanka, 1981

In 1981 the Jaffna Public Library in northern Sri Lanka was considered one of the best libraries in Asia. Following the shooting deaths of three Sinhalese policemen in the majority Tamil city, Sinhalese security forces went on a brutal rampage and burned down the library. More than 95,000 books were destroyed.

## United Kingdom, 1988

As soon as it was published, Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* was under attack by people who considered it anti-Islamic. The first British burning was at a protest in Bolton. It attracted little coverage but then a burning in Bradford got the world's attention.

"To show your disgust or your dislike for the book, you just burn it," Liat Husseini, an organizer of the Bradford book burning said on the CBC Radio program, *Ideas*.

More burnings would follow in the U.K. and elsewhere. In 1989 CBC reported that copies were burned at two Toronto bookstores.

## Abkhazia, Georgia, 1992

During the Abkhazian-Georgian war following the end of the Soviet Union, Georgian paramilitaries broke into the Institute of the Abkhazian Language, Literature and History in Sukhumi and set it ablaze.

Neighbours, including Georgians, immediately extinguished the blaze but paramilitaries returned and set the archive on fire again and prevented neighbours and firefighters from fighting it. [The fire](#) destroyed 95 per cent of the collection.

## Bosnia, 1992

Serbian nationalist forces started a fire in the national library of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo by bombing the building. When it started burning they shot anybody who tried to save the books. About 1.5 million books were destroyed.

Author and University of Hawaii professor Rebecca Knuth said it was part of a deliberate policy. By destroying the books, the Serbian nationalists' goal was to "wipe the Muslim presence out of the whole country and deny a long history of the Muslims in Bosnia," she told CBC News.

"You can deny a lot of that history if you go after the primary source material." They had been purging every library, every Muslim institution, she added.

### The burning books

"The burning of books publicly and ceremonially is a bizarre subtext of history, repeated constantly. It's an act of violence, a punishment, a deterrent, a death by proxy. To assume this is a futile act, a deluded, empty ritual, to think of it as something that has only happened at other times, to other people, in other places, is wrong. Books were burning thousands of years ago, in other countries, and books are burning, here and now."

Margaret Horsfield from "The Burning Books," on CBC Radio's *Ideas*, which she wrote and

## United States, 2000

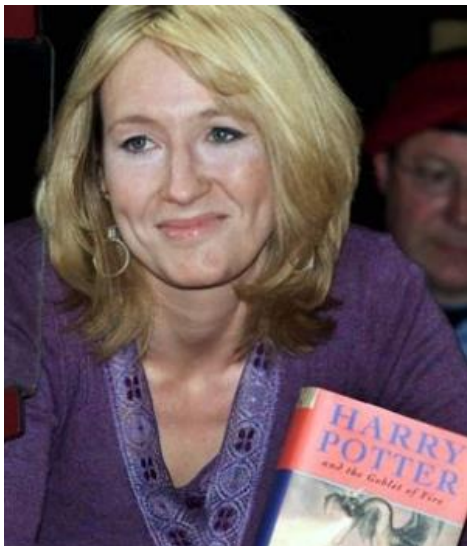
A public lecture at the University of California, Berkeley by author Dan Flynn about his book on Mumia-Abu Jamal was disrupted by Jamal supporters. (Jamal had been convicted of killing a police officer in 1981.) The protesters seized copies of the book that were for sale and burned them outside the building.

## Egypt, 2001

Cairo newspaper Al Hayaat reported that the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, under pressure from Islamic fundamentalists, opted to burn 6,000 volumes of poetry by Abu Nuwas. The eighth-century poet is famous for his homoerotic verse.

## India, 2001

Hindu fundamentalist activists with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) burned copies of the Qur'an in New Delhi on March 5. They were protesting the Taliban's destruction of the giant Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan. The Qur'an burning led to protests and riots around India.



Author J. K. Rowling is shown in this July 8, 2000, photo with her book *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. There have been at least six burnings involving Rowling's popular *Harry Potter* children's books in the U.S. ((Alastair Grant/Associated Press))

## United States, 2001

*Harry Potter* books were a "flashpoint" for book burners in the U.S. in 2001. One of those burnings was in the Harvest Assembly of God Church in Pennsylvania. "We got some people mad at us, but it's good to have publicity," said Rev. George Bender.

Besides the *Potter* series by J.K. Rowling, books by actress Shirley MacLaine and psychic Edgar Cayce were also torched.

There have been at least six book burnings involving *Potter* books in the U.S.

## Iraq, 2003

Following the allied takeover of Baghdad during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, almost all the books in both the national library and a nearby Islamic library were destroyed by fire.

Looting was widespread in the city at the time but it was not clear who

set the fires.

## Canada, 2004

The United Talmud Torah school library in the St. Laurent neighbourhood of Montreal was set on fire, destroying about 15,000 books.

[The burning](#) was carried out by Sleiman El Merhebi. The 18-year-old said he was motivated by events in the Middle East.

## Italy, 2006

In Ceccano, a small town near Rome, two local councillors, from different conservative parties, burned a copy of *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown. They called the book "blasphemous."

A film based on Brown's bestseller had just opened in India.

## Germany, 2006

*The Diary of Anne Frank* was burned on June 24 in Pretzien, Germany, at a far-right summer festival. Five men in their 20s were convicted of inciting racial hatred and disparaging the dead, according to Deutsche Welle, a German broadcaster.

## Israel, 2008

Orthodox Jewish students burned hundreds of copies of the New Testament in Or Yehuda, a suburb of Tel Aviv. The texts had been distributed by the group Jews for Jesus. The campaign was organized by the town's deputy mayor, Uzi Aharon.

"All the books went up in fire ... in Or Yehuda, where the residents observed the commandment to 'purge the evil from your midst,'" he said.

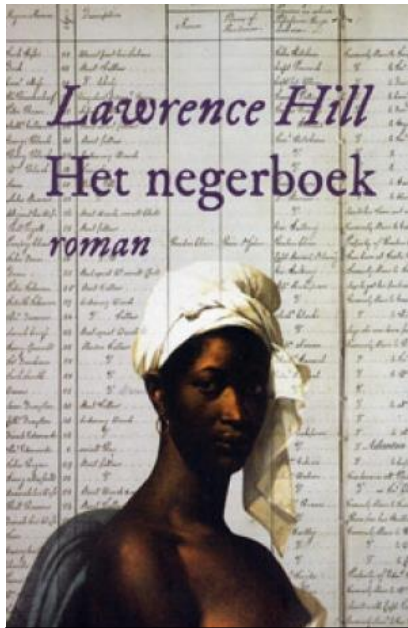
There had been earlier burnings of New Testaments in Israel.

## United States, 2011

On July 11, 2010, Florida pastor Terry Jones announced on his Facebook page "Islam is of the Devil," plans to burn Qur'ans on Sept. 11. Facing a barrage of calls from U.S. and world leaders imploring him not to burn Islam's holy book at his Gainesville church, Jones eventually cancelled the burning.

However copycat burnings did go ahead in Springfield, Tenn., and Topeka, Kan. Those burnings led to protests in Kashmir and elsewhere. Eighteen people died in the Kashmir protests.

On March 20, this time away from the media glare, Jones did burn a Qur'an, the Muslim holy book, at his church. In April 1, after Afghan President Hamid Karzai mentioned the burning, [at least 30 people died in protests in Afghanistan](#), including seven UN staff.



The cover of the Dutch edition of Lawrence's Hill's novel, The Book of Negroes, was burned in Amsterdam on June 22 by a group that says it is offended by the title.

## The Netherlands, 2011

Upset with the use of the word 'Negroes' in the title of Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*, a [group staged a public burning](#) of the book's cover in Amsterdam on June 22.

The group, Foundation Honor and Restore Victims of Slavery in Surinam, had said they would burn the Canadian author's novel unless the title was changed. The award-winning book came out in 2007 but was only recently published in the Netherlands.

A group member said the cover alone was torched because only the title offended them.

Hill's title comes from an historical document of the same name featured in the novel.

*Those are just some of the book burnings over the last 75 years.*

Book burning, biblioclasm or libricide is the practice of destroying, often ceremoniously, books or other written material and media. In modern times, other forms of media, such as phonograph records, video tapes, and CDs have also been ceremoniously burned, torched, or shredded. The practice, usually carried out in public, is generally motivated by moral, religious, or political objections to the material.