



ARTICLE

Experiencing Exclusion: Scholarship after Inquisition

Natalie Zemon Davis and Foreword: Stefan Hansß 

School of Arts, Languages and Cultures, University of Manchester, Manchester, and The John Rylands Research Institute, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK
Email: stefan.hanss@manchester.ac.uk

Abstract

In 1952, while working on my Ph.D. at the University of Michigan, two men from the Department of State came to our apartment and picked up my passport and that of my husband, Chandler Davis. In 1962, Chandler was finally allowed to immigrate to Canada with his family and take up a professorship at the University of Toronto. The ten years in between were packed with politics: Chandler's refusal to answer questions before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC); his firing from the University of Michigan; his court case challenging HUAC; his six months' prison term for contempt of Congress; and throughout, his inability to get a tenure-track appointment at any American university. I myself was not called to confess my political views or memberships but investigations against Chandler were based on the publication of *Operation mind* – a pamphlet which I had co-authored together with Elizabeth Douvan and which is presented here. I was without a passport and not part of a university community for years. This article reflects on the impact of this experience of persecution on my work as a historian, and the relationship between politics, activism, and what Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre called 'the historian's craft' and 'consciousness'.

Foreword

Among the many academics affected by the 'red scare' of McCarthyism was an exceptionally gifted and courageous young couple: Chandler and Natalie Zemon Davis. Chandler was to make pivotal contributions to linear algebra and operator theory in Hilbert spaces, with several mathematical theorems named after him. Natalie's publications were to reshape early modern history, and cultural, gender, and social history more generally. Her work ranks among the finest microhistories ever published, and she was to present some of the discipline's most astute reflections on the theory and practice of historical research and history-writing. As a young couple subject to political persecution, Natalie and Chandler

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themselves faced history with unsaid bravery. To know more about this episode in their lives means to better understand the nature of Natalie's work to come. This article is a critical autobiographical reflection on the historian's experience of political persecution and its impact on the life, work, and thinking of academic intellectuals. When read alongside *Operation mind* – the original pamphlet that set the machinery of persecution into motion (see Supplementary Material, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X24000311>) – this article reminds us of Natalie's courage, the creativity of the historian's critical independent mind, and its power to contest totalitarian and exclusionist tendencies and unquestioned authorities past and present. The historian's critical independent thinking establishes an ethical ground for action, and historical research and writing opens a space to express resilience and resistance.

When called to give testimony in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee, Chandler refused to answer questions about political affiliations on grounds of the First Amendment of the US Constitution, thus, freedom of speech rather than choosing the 'safer' option of evoking the Fifth Amendment's right to refuse answers that entail self-incrimination. He could have easily chosen the latter or a combined strategy, like friends, colleagues, and his father who called Chandler once – in Natalie's presence – 'a red diaper baby' who 'sucked in Marxism with his mother's milk'.¹ With their decision, the couple challenged the constitutional legitimacy of the 'Red Hunt' itself which resulted in the imprisonment of one of the most gifted mathematicians of the twentieth century.

I was deeply moved and grateful when I first learned about Chandler's position, and I thought about the impact of such an experience on Natalie's life and work – at that time, she was researching the subversive deeds of Protestant printers in Lyon and their creative engagement with censorship, and some of her most celebrated studies like *The return of Martin Guerre* (1983) or *Trickster travels: a sixteenth-century Muslim between worlds* (2006) address the topic of disguise. I got in touch to ask if she would be interested in taking this biographical incident as a starting point to write a short piece on the relationship between politics, activism, and what Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre called 'the historian's craft' and 'consciousness'.²

Only six hours later, I received a surprising response. 'I have written a little piece related to your topic', Natalie wrote. 'Why don't you read it and let me know what you think?'³ It was a revised version of the Academic Freedom Lecture, held at the University of Michigan, 8 October 2015, and then revised

¹ 'Keeping in mind: the McCarthy era at the University of Michigan', by Adam Kulakow, 1989, restored and enhanced by Adam Kulakow and Dave McVeigh with funding by the Academic Freedom Lecture Fund, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LdJHUqoAvdi, 12:53 (accessed 2 Feb. 2024). See also Natalie Zemon Davis, 'How the FBI turned me on to rare books', *New York Review of Books*, 30 July 2013, www.nybooks.com/online/2013/07/30/fbi-turned-me-on-to-rare-books/; Ellen W. Schrecker, *No ivory tower: McCarthyism and the universities* (New York, NY, 1986).

² Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien* (Paris, 1949), translated into English with a preface by Peter Burke as *The historian's craft* (Manchester, 1992); Lucien Febvre, 'Examen de conscience d'une histoire et d'un historien', in idem, *Combats pour l'histoire* (Paris, 1953), pp. 3–17.

³ Personal correspondence, 24 May 2022.

for a presentation to the programme in Book History and Print Culture at the University of Toronto, 23 March 2017. I was at Manchester Airport when receiving this email and read the attached document immediately – with my one-year-old daughter in arms. The text was inspiring; filled with humanity, insight, and critical reflection, and Natalie and I agreed still on the very same day to publish the article. It is a testament to her generosity that she left the text with me for publication. Since she had been on a ‘health journey’, as she used to call it, Natalie asked for editorial suggestions and help with editing, footnotes, and images. Readers will spot the notes that Natalie has provided herself. Those missing, I have added after re-reading her publications with a focus on Natalie’s footnoting style. It fills me with sadness that she cannot see the result of her generosity now that Natalie has died on 21 October 2023. Historians all over the world have been deeply saddened by the news of losing one of the most inspiring and generous historians of the century who shaped generations of us, and those to come. I owe special thanks to the editors and editorial board of *The Historical Journal* for making this article available to all of us. I wish to express my gratitude to Natalie’s family, who read and commented on this text with generosity and enthusiasm.

What makes this text unique is Natalie’s critical autobiographical approach to positionality; her incisive mind, kindness, and close archival and textual scrutiny; her call for optimism in living through history and history-writing; her insistence on the ethics of historical research. This article reminds us of the significance of scholarly community and female solidarity; it is a plea for listening to the ‘many forms of life in-between’ and ‘possibilities in the past’; it is a powerful ethical stance on historical research and academic freedom, and a reminder that ‘the historian’s task is to understand them [the people] and interpret their actions in terms of the values of their own time’. Natalie presents here an astute comment on what she has called, elsewhere, ‘the historian’s compact with the past’.⁴ Yet, there is also an empowering message for the future in her insistence on freedom of speech, scholarly solidarity, and the integrity of both research and researcher, as well as her call for hope. Natalie reminds us of the power of wit, integrity, and intellectual creativity in even the fiercest times. Today, this publication is needed more than ever.

Stefan Hanß

I

In the fall of 1952, while I was working on my Ph.D. at the University of Michigan, two men from the Department of State came to our Ann Arbor apartment above the Campus Bike and Hobby Shop and picked up my passport and that of my husband, Chandler Davis (1926–2022). In August 1962, the Canadian minister of immigration finally allowed Chandler to immigrate to Canada with his family and take up a professorship at the University of Toronto. The ten years in between were packed with politics: Chandler’s refusal to answer questions before the House Un-American Activities

⁴ Natalie Zemon Davis, ‘Narrative as knowing’, *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 5 (1992), p. 163.

Committee (HUAC); his firing from the University of Michigan; his court case challenging HUAC, ultimately unsuccessful; his six months' prison term for contempt of Congress; and throughout, his inability to get a tenure-track appointment at any American university.⁵

So told, our move to Canada in 1962 may seem like the happy ending to a very trying time. But in fact, we also look at those years as filled with joy and accomplishment (Figure 1). Our three wonderful children were born. We both made important advances in our intellectual work and publication, and I received my history doctorate *in absentia* from the University of Michigan in 1959. (The institutional affiliation of one of Chandler's mathematical papers is 'Danbury Correctional Institution'.)⁶ Nor did we experience the political ups and downs solely as victims. The HUAC subpoena was certainly not welcome – I would not recommend to any young couple the disruption it brought into our lives. But once it happened, we agreed together that Chandler would bring a test of the constitutionality of the Committee by refusing to answer its questions only on the basis of the First Amendment. Supported by some friends and colleagues, we felt our lives were in part of our own making.

I thought it might be interesting to tell you what influence the events of those years had on my scholarship – and to go on to speak as well of a few others in a similar situation. I myself was not subject to inquisition, that is, was not called to confess my political views or memberships either before a congressional committee or a university committee. But I was without a passport for eight years, and was not part of a university community from the time we had to leave Ann Arbor in December 1954 until I began teaching at Brown University in the fall of 1959.

II

My doctoral dissertation was entitled 'Protestantism and the printing workers of Lyon: a study in religion and social class'. I wanted to look at the great religious changes of the sixteenth century from the vantage point of 'the people' – tradesmen and artisans – rather than from that of theologians like Calvin and Luther and of kings and city councils, as was the usual approach at the time. Were Max Weber and Karl Marx right, I wondered, in the differing connections they made between social forces and religious change? I chose the printing industry of Lyon because many of its members had become Protestants, indeed, had helped bring about a short-lived Protestant revolution

⁵ Chandler Davis, 'The purge', in Peter Duren, ed., *A century of mathematics in America*, part 1 (Providence, RI, 1989), pp. 413–28; Steven L. Batterson, *The prosecution of Chandler Davis: McCarthyism, communism, and the myth of academic freedom* (New York, NY, 2023); and the obituary by Alan Wald in *Jacobin*, 10 June 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/10/h-chandler-davis-lifelong-radical-communism-academia-obituary> (accessed 2 Feb. 2024).

⁶ Note the acknowledgements in Chandler Davis, 'An extremum problem for plane convex curves', *Convexity: Proceedings of Symposia in Pure Mathematics*, 7 (1963), p. 181: 'Research supported in part by the Federal Prison System. Opinions expressed in this paper are the author's and are not necessarily those of the Bureau of Prisons.'



Figure 1. Natalie and Chandler with their children Aaron and Hannah during a visit to Sandwich, Massachusetts, 1955/6. Photograph reproduced with kind permission of the family.

in that city; but at the same time, the printing shops were riven by industrial conflict and strikes. So in 1952, I spent six months in the Lyon archives trying to find out which people became Protestant and what happened to them. After Chandler finished his teaching, he came and kept me company in the archives.

My thesis topic was of no interest to the House Un-American Activities Committee, even though it circled around the subversive topic of ‘class’. They did not care about the sixteenth century. Rather, the Committee’s attention was caught by a pamphlet produced in Ann Arbor a month before I left for France, entitled *Operation mind: a brief documentary account of the House Committee on Un-American Activities* (Figure 2). I read extensively in the governmental and other sources, and then, together with the late Elizabeth Douvan (1926–2002), a graduate student in social psychology and dear friend, wrote up an account replete with proper footnotes. Rather than seeking information about acts of force and violence to overthrow the government, HUAC was targeting ideas and associations. We concluded with a call to readers to oppose the announced visit of the Committee to Michigan. Libby and I did not put our names on the pamphlet, which was described only as ‘Distributed by [the] University of Michigan Council of the Arts, Sciences and Professions; [and the] Civil Liberties Committee of the University of the University of Michigan’. It was printed in photo-offset by the Edward Brothers of Ann Arbor, the only such establishment in town. Their bill was paid by Chandler, who was then treasurer of the University of Michigan Council of the Arts, Sciences and Professions.

Operation mind seems to have been part of the background for the seizure of our passports. Pressed by us for a reason, however, the Department of State said we were ‘alleged to be members of the Communist Party’. There was no way that I was going to subject myself to the inquisition required to establish the truth that I was not then a member – and I still might not have had my passport restored. I had to live without it, and I was disconsolate at its loss. My precious six months in France had been a preliminary exploration before taking my general exams. How could I carry on my dissertation if I could not get more Protestant printers on to my three by five cards?

But then I remembered that my Lyon printers had been producing books, some of them heretical books that put them in much greater danger than faced me with *Operation mind*. These books were all around me in the rare book collections in the New York libraries and at Harvard. (Chandler was then putting his mathematics to use in the unfamiliar setting of a Park Avenue advertising agency.) I needed only a library card, not a passport, to get to them. Among the books I sought were those published in Lyon by the brothers Jean and François Frellon, since they were early converts to Protestantism and Jean Frellon was a friend of Calvin. Many of you will be familiar with one of the most famous books they first brought to the world: *The dance of death* by Hans Holbein the Younger, or as it was called on its title page, ‘The pictures of death’. In each picture, skeleton Death seizes an unprepared human: a judge ignoring a poor supplicant while taking a bribe from a rich man, a nun ignoring her prayers to attend to her lover, a merchant greedily opening his treasures, a cardinal giving out a papal indulgence with one hand while receiving money with the other (Figure 3).

When I actually had the original volumes of Holbein’s pictures in my hands, I noticed a strange difference between the first edition of 1538, when the Protestant Frellon brothers merely paid for the paper and distributed the

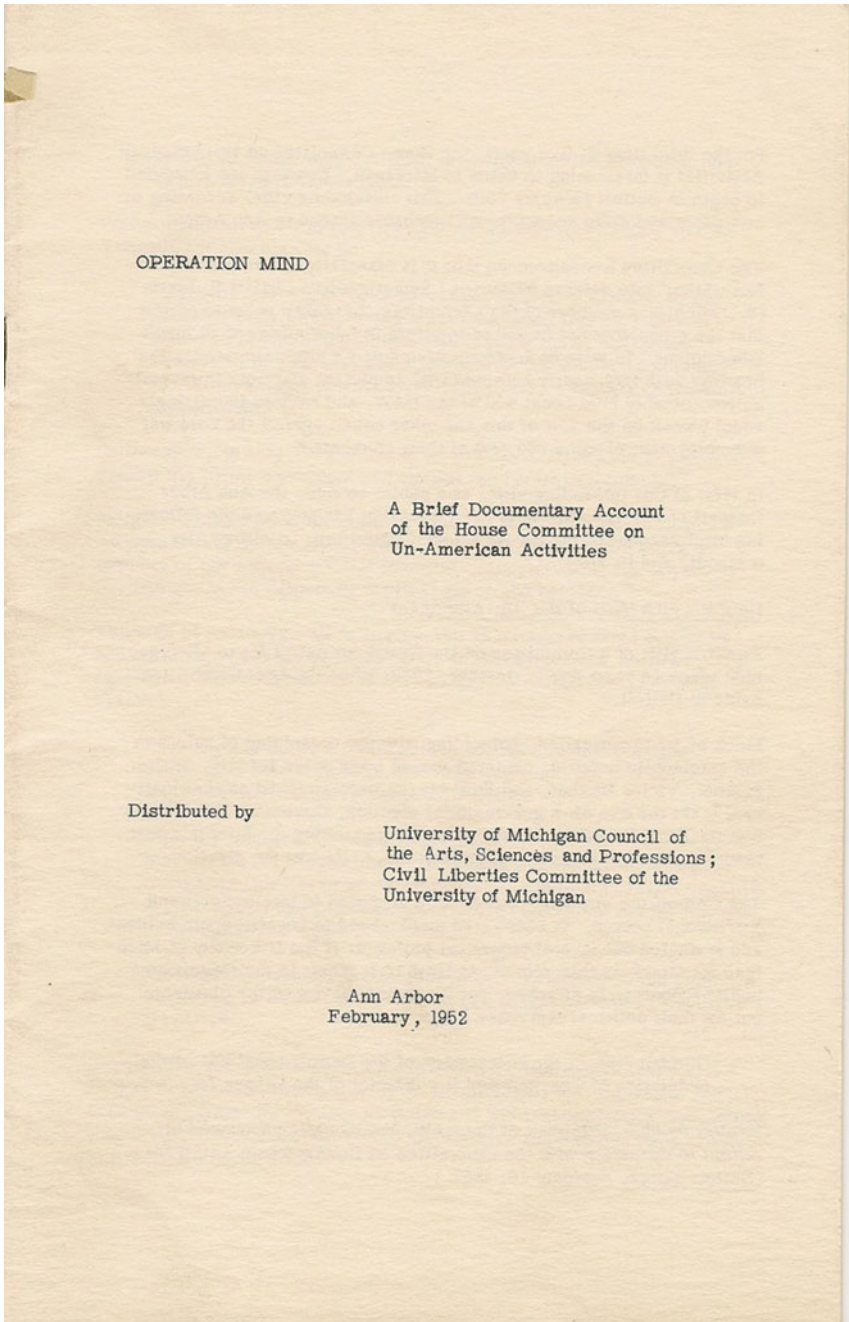


Figure 2. Title page of the unpublished typescript of *Operation mind: a brief documentary account of the House Committee on Un-American Activities* (Ann Arbor, 1952), co-authored by Natalie Zemon Davis and Elizabeth Douvan. Photograph by Natalie Zemon Davis.



Figure 3. Hans Holbein the Younger; 'The cardinal', from *The dance of death*, c. 1526 (published 1538 by Hans Lützelburger, printer). Woodcut. 6.5 x 4.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 19.57.9, www.metmuseum.org/.

book, but the Holbein woodcut blocks and the printing press were in the hands of reform-minded Catholic printers; and the 1542 and all later editions, when the Frellon brothers owned the blocks themselves and had their own printing press. The moralistic verses were the same in the two editions, but the essays elaborating on those morals were very different. In the 1538 edition, the most important humanist Catholic cleric in Lyon drew out lessons about ethical

living in the reforming spirit of Erasmus, even while making a crack against the Protestants as 'furious iconoclasts'. The cleric dedicated Holbein's pictures to the abbess of the most important nunnery in Lyon, a reforming abbess whose nuns several years earlier had been receiving lovers in their cells just as in the Holbein picture. The printers had here given a reforming Catholic frame to Holbein's satire.⁷

In contrast, the only noticeable clerics in the Frelon edition of 1542 are those mocked in Holbein's pictures. An anonymous essay entitled *The medicine of the soul* followed the pictures. It had in fact been written by a Lutheran pastor, and while telling Christians how to prepare for death, it included Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone. The Frelons added a few Catholic sentences to the essay in hopes of getting the book by the Catholic theologians at the University of Paris, but essentially they had given a Protestant frame to Holbein's image of the world. To be sure, their effort to give a Catholic camouflage to their edition did not succeed, and it was soon put on the Sorbonne's index of condemned books. But *mirabile dictu*, the Frelon brothers were not themselves seriously harassed, and the edition became a European bestseller, with reprintings in French, Latin, and Italian.⁸

The discovery of the role printers could play through their editorial choices, including at a time of severe censorship, fascinated me as I sat in the New York rare book library in the mid-1950s. I decided to write up this story for a Renaissance journal, which accepted it, one of my first publications.⁹ But more important, I now had a new technique to add to my historian's bag of tricks: what we came to call the new history of the book. Can it be a coincidence that one of the most important founders of that field in the 1950s, the French historian Lucien Febvre (1878–1956), had lived through and coped with the censorship imposed by the German occupiers of Paris and their collaborators during the Second World War?¹⁰

But let me give you one other example of scholarship after inquisition, here from the seventeenth century. It, too, illustrates nicely how we can get our ideas around when they are considered dangerous by the powers that be. In June 1633, Galileo Galilei's *Dialogue concerning the two chief world systems* was placed on the Index of Prohibited Books and he was condemned to spend the rest of his life under house arrest at his villa in Tuscany. Galileo's disciples remained loyal to him and a few friends got papal permission to come and visit him there, so long as they stayed away from discussing the heliocentric theory of the universe. But his extensive correspondence with lovers of science and patrons of letters in Rome dropped precipitously, and printers in Italy were

⁷ Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Holbein's pictures of death and the Reformation at Lyons', *Studies in the Renaissance*, 3 (1956), pp. 97–130; *Les simulachres et historiees faces de la mort, avantant elegamment pourtraictes, que artificiellement imaginées* (Lyon, 1538), fos. Aiiiir–Aiiiv (*furieux Iconomachiens*). See also the new edition Hans Holbein, *The dance of death*, intr. Ulinka Rublack (London, 2016).

⁸ *Les images de la mort, avxquelles sont adioustées douze figures...* (Lyon, 1547).

⁹ Davis, 'Holbein's pictures of death'.

¹⁰ Febvre, 'Examen de conscience', and Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, eds., *L'apparition du livre* (Paris, 1958).

afraid to touch his books, even in Venice, a city proud of its independence from the papacy.¹¹

What to do? Encouraged by a loyal friend from Venice, himself a maverick theologian, Galileo reached out to a Calvinist lawyer in Paris who had good connections with the printing industry. As a result, Galileo's books were published by the Elseviers, one of the great houses of the Netherlands (would that the present-day Elsevier were equally dedicated to the defence of free circulation of science!). In 1635, two years after it had been banned by the pope, Galileo's *Dialogue on the two world systems* was published at Leiden in Latin translation.¹² It was followed in 1638 by the first edition of Galileo's *Two new sciences* in Italian, his important book on motion.¹³ In his introductory letter to the reader, the Protestant publisher Louis Elsevier was glad to have the chance to point out how Galileo's astronomical discoveries had 'effectively demonstrated fallacies in many of our current conclusions'.¹⁴ So much for the Catholic inquisitors.

III

Let me return now to my own time of relative exclusion. In 1956, when my essay on the Holbein printers appeared in *Studies in the Renaissance*, I proudly presented it to my neighbour in Bronxville, New York: Charles Trinkaus (1911–99), who would later become one of our greatest interpreters of philosophy and religious belief of the Renaissance. I had been ecstatic in the spring of 1955, upon moving to Bronxville, to discover that Charles Trinkaus and his family lived across the street. I had not read any of his 1930s essays in the Marxist periodical *Science and Society*, but for my Senior thesis at Smith College a few years before, I had read his 1940 book *Adversity's noblemen: the Italian humanists on happiness*. I thought it was a marvellous book. Hard though it may be for some of you to believe, my Senior thesis was on Pietro Pomponazzi, a radical Aristotelian philosopher of the Italian Renaissance. Trinkaus's book showed with the utmost delicacy and learning how one could link social experience and philosophical thought. The humanists' social unease, their still ill-defined social role, and their constant quest for patronage gave a distinctive cast to their writings on the classical idea of Fortune and its ups and downs in human life. Thought and social experience were in interchange. I learned much from his method also in my later work on themes quite different from Renaissance philosophy.¹⁵

¹¹ I am here indebted to the splendid paper by Paula Findlen and Hannah Marcus, 'The breakdown of Galileo's Roman network: crisis and community, ca. 1633', *Social Studies of Science*, 47 (2017), pp. 326–52. I am also grateful to Paula Findlen for her suggestions here.

¹² Galileo Galilei, *Dialogos de systemate mvndi...* (Leiden, 1635).

¹³ Idem, *Discorsi e dimostrazioni matematiche, intorno à due nuoue scienze...* (Leiden, 1638).

¹⁴ Idem, *Dialogues concerning two new sciences*, trans. Henry Crew and Alfonso de Salvio, intr. Antonio Favaro (New York, NY, 1954), p. xx.

¹⁵ Charles E. Trinkaus, 'On Ernest Nagel's review of Lovejoy's "The great chain of being"', *Science and Society*, 1 (1936), pp. 410–12; idem, *Adversity's noblemen: the Italian humanists on happiness* (New York, NY, 1940); idem, 'Toynbee against history', *Science and Society*, 12 (1948), pp. 218–39.

As it turned out, our two-year-old sons, their Peter and our Aaron, were regular playmates, and Charles's then wife and I had coffee together as our sons ran about and I held my infant daughter Hannah on my knee. But Charles, though always greeting me correctly, never talked to me of scholarly work during our two years as neighbours – not even to respond to my Holbein essay – and never invited me to converse with him or to visit Sarah Lawrence, where he was a long-time much appreciated professor.

I was disappointed, for I was myself, even more than his Renaissance humanists, in search of a scholarly community. I had tried to find it, graduate student though I was, through going to meetings of the American Historical Association and especially of the newly founded Renaissance Society of America and the Society for French Historical Studies. Some people snubbed me there, including one of my former professors at Harvard, but I did make a few woman friends – Nancy Roelker (1915–93) and Rosalie Colie (1924–72) – with whom I remained in touch for many years.

What I did not know at the time was that on 4 June 1953 Charles Trinkaus himself had had an unsettling encounter with the Jenner Committee, that is, the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee. Machiavelli's Goddess Fortuna had sent one of her arrows his way. Accompanied by a lawyer who had advised other Red-Hunt victims, Charles stated in closed and open sessions that he was no longer a member of the Communist Party but refused to name names on the grounds of the Fifth Amendment. Sarah Lawrence stood by him. The College review committee found that at no time had Charles Trinkaus indoctrinated students and, though he had tried unsuccessfully to establish a union among the professors, his political affiliation had not interfered with his work as a faculty member. Invoking the Fifth Amendment was not in itself grounds for dismissal, so President Harold Taylor (1914–93) had insisted – a rare voice of honour among college presidents of his day.¹⁶

Charles had remained uneasy, however. At his open testimony in Washington, the Jenner Committee counsel had commented that Mr Trinkaus was 'in great distress', 'very much troubled by his testimony'. His lawyer had indicated that he needed more time to think about answering questions, and the committee said that it would subpoena him at a later date. Thus for months, Charles lived

¹⁶ Here and in the following, I have used the published report of the testimony of Charles Trinkaus before the United States Senate Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act, Subversive Influence in the Educational Process, public hearing of 4 June 1953; and the Stenographic Transcript of the testimony of Charles Trinkaus before the Executive Session of the same sub-committee, 4 June 1953. In both cases, Charles Trinkaus was accompanied by his counsel R. Lawrence Siegel. These two reports are included in the Harold Taylor papers in the Sarah Lawrence College Archives, Series II, box 2, 38, Academic Freedom – Jenner Committee Hearing Excerpts, 1953. Further in the Harold Taylor papers, I have used two reports from President Harold Taylor: his report of 20 June 1953 of his meeting with Charles Trinkaus to discuss his work as a faculty member of Sarah Lawrence College, and his report to the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Board of Trustees, 20 October 1953, which includes as Appendix A the report of Dean Esther Raushenbush on Charles Trinkaus as a teacher. I am grateful to Professor Daniel P. Tompkins for giving me the links to this material. The Sarah Lawrence Archives has prepared an exhibit on *Sarah Lawrence under fire: the attacks on academic freedom during the McCarthy era*, <http://archives.slc.edu/exhibits/mccarthyism/> (accessed 2 Feb. 2024).

under the threat that he would be summoned again, an anxiety as unnerving as that of a Florentine humanist in disfavour with his Medici prince. He may, too, have feared a contempt of Congress citation for having invoked the Fifth Amendment after having waived that privilege by answering some questions.

Thus, when a young politically engaged couple moved across the street from him, in which the husband had been very publicly fired from the University of Michigan and cited for contempt of Congress, it cannot have been good news. Associating with such people would not sit well with the Jenner Committee. Moreover, if Charles was 'distressed', 'troubled' by what kind of testimony he should make before the committee, Chandler's First Amendment plea would have added further weight to his uncertainty and fine moral sensibility. Better then to keep apart. So at a time of repression, fear erodes communication and impedes the lines of friendship.

Once these times of trouble were well passed, my relations with Charles and his later wife, the historian Pauline Moffitt Watts, herself an outstanding scholar, were most cordial.¹⁷ Charles had moved to the University of Michigan in 1970, and he invited me to participate in a conference he organized there in 1972 on *The pursuit of holiness*, and to contribute an essay to the interesting volume he then edited.¹⁸

Aside: I could not detect an influence of this Red-Hunt scare on the scholarly writing of Charles Trinkaus in the years from 1953 to 1970, when he finally published his great two-volume work *In our image and likeness: humanity and divinity in Italian humanist thought*.¹⁹ The main thing I noticed looking through the inventory of his papers, held by Sarah Lawrence College, is how relatively little there was of it, compared to what came before and after. He had completed a manuscript by the late 1940s on 'The individual and society: theories of estrangement and reunion from the Greeks to Freud', which he never published as such.²⁰ The impact of the Red Hunt on Trinkaus may have been a kind of silencing or at least a slowing down – a reaction perhaps true of other scholars in a similar situation.

My last example concerns a historian whose organizing energies in the 1940s went well beyond a faculty union: Perez Zagorin (1920–2009), author of major books on the political culture of seventeenth-century England and Europe. Pete, as his friends called him, had worked for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) for several years after getting his BA from the

¹⁷ For example, see her *Nicolaus Cusanus: a fifteenth-century vision of man* (Leiden, 1982) and 'Prophecy and discovery: on the spiritual origins of Christopher Columbus's "enterprise of the Indies"', *American Historical Review*, 90 (1985), pp. 73–102.

¹⁸ Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Some tasks and themes in the study of popular religion', in Charles E. Trinkaus and Heiko A. Oberman, eds., *The pursuit of holiness in late medieval and Renaissance religion* (Leiden, 1974), pp. 307–36.

¹⁹ Charles E. Trinkaus, *In our image and likeness: humanity and divinity in Italian humanist thought* (2 vols., Chicago, IL, 1970).

²⁰ The unpublished manuscript is included in the Charles Trinkaus papers in the Sarah Lawrence College Archives, Series V, box 4. An additional chapter draft survives in box 5. Dr Christina Kasman (College Archivist, Esther Raushenbush Library) deserves special thanks for helping to verify this reference.

University of Chicago, but kept his historian's life active writing reviews on economic history for the Marxist periodical *Science and Society*.²¹ In 1946, he came to Harvard for graduate studies, initially discussing with his thesis director, the eminent W. K. Jordan (1902–80), 'the possibility of writing a Marxist history of the English Revolution'.²² I met him in the spring of 1950 at Harvard, when he looked me up, I think, at W. K. Jordan's suggestion. (I was then discovering the wonders of social history with Jordan, and would have probably started off as a historian of England rather than France, if we had not left for the University of Michigan.) Pete's dissertation ended up less grandiose in scope: *A history of political thought in the English revolution*, which was published in 1954.²³

As far as I know, Perez Zagorin was never summoned to testify on his politics before a Congressional committee, though his name came up several times in HUAC's prying into Communist infiltration of labour unions.²⁴ But, gifted historian though he was, he was let go from Vassar and Amherst, and not awarded his due at Harvard, even though I am sure that W. K. Jordan supported him (Jordan was *not* the Harvard professor who snubbed me at the AHA). With his wife, the artist Honoré Desmond Sharrer (1920–2009), Zagorin moved to Canada and taught at McGill until 1965, when he was able to get a professorship at the University of Rochester.

Zagorin's thought about the world changed over the years. As he said in 2007, not long before his death, '[I] changed [my] ideas very drastically', and 'stopped being an idealist'. But he still condemned 'the lack of courage of universities during the McCarthy period'.²⁵ The book he wrote that shows the impact of that period on his scholarship did not appear until 1990: *Ways of lying: dissimulation, persecution, and conformity in early modern Europe*.²⁶ Here, Zagorin described strategies for concealment of belief under circumstances of persecution, used and justified by Jews, Protestants, and Catholics in early modern Europe. In his Preface, Zagorin evokes the Red Hunt: 'From the 1930s to the 1950s, many people in the United States were faced with dilemmas

²¹ Perez Zagorin, 'Liberties and communities in medieval England, by Helen W. Cam', *Science and Society*, 9 (1945), pp. 275–7; idem, 'Studies in the development of capitalism, by Maurice Dobb', *Science and Society*, 12 (1948), pp. 278–81; idem, 'Thomas More and his utopia' and 'Communism in central Europe in the time of the Reformation, by Karl Kautsky', *Science and Society*, 25 (1961), pp. 187–91.

²² This quotation and other details from the life of Perez Zagorin are found in the extended interview he gave in 2007 in connection with a retrospective exhibition of the work of his wife: 'Oral history interview with Perez Zagorin, 2007, January 17–18', Archives of American Art: Smithsonian Institution, www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-perez-zagorin-13600 (accessed 2 Feb. 2024).

²³ Perez Zagorin, *A history of political thought in the English revolution* (London, 1954).

²⁴ For example, in the HUAC hearings on 'Communist infiltration of labor union' on 5–6 Dec. 1949, Julius Emspack, general secretary of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, was asked whether Perez Zagorin was one of his organizers (Emspack refused to answer all questions).

²⁵ 'Oral history interview with Perez Zagorin'.

²⁶ Perez Zagorin, *Ways of lying: dissimulation, persecution, and conformity in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

of truth-telling because of congressional inquisitions into their political beliefs and affiliations.²⁷ Zagorin gives the example of Bertolt Brecht's appearance before HUAC:

Brecht used equivocation to skew and withhold the truth, although when asked the central question of whether he had ever been a member of the Communist party, he denied it. The next day he left the United States for good...In subsequent disagreements with the East German authorities he acted in the same way. When some of his works were criticized for formalism or lack of positiveness, he complied by making slight changes in performance while leaving their published versions unaltered.²⁸

Zagorin went on to describe how Jews in Spain and Portugal, forced to convert, followed Jewish practice in secret while outwardly going to Mass. Protestants in Catholic lands conformed outwardly, rather than becoming martyrs for their faith, some of them claiming that all that mattered anyway was inward belief. Catholics in Protestant lands did the same in the opposite direction, even while their priests exhorted them to avoid deceit and dissimulation. Zagorin ended with Spinoza's plea for freedom of expression in his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* – a work, I might add, which had to be published anonymously after Spinoza's death with a false address of Hamburg: Henry Künraht, instead of the true Amsterdam Cartesian printer Jan Rieuwerts, whose printing shop was the home of radical discussion (Figure 4).²⁹ As Spinoza put it, if the sovereign insisted on conformity, then 'every day men will be saying one thing and thinking another: belief in another's word...will be undermined...and hence will come frauds and the destruction of all honest dealing'.³⁰ Still, Spinoza affirmed, there would always be people with 'independence of mind' who would oppose such repression. Zagorin thought Spinoza had been too sanguine here, but I believe Spinoza was right.³¹

IV

Looking back, then, at my time of exclusion, so much less dramatic than the *herem* cast by the Amsterdam rabbis against Spinoza, I am glad that it led me to the history of the book, or what I would call more generally cultural history. Without that, I might have written about peasant social movements, but not found my way to Judge Jean de Coras's 1560 book about the case of the peasant impostor Martin Guerre that he had just settled. It seems as though I, too, picked up early on the role of dissimulation in human behaviour. Previously when I had asked myself about the link between my own

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. V.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. VI.

²⁹ Baruch de Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus...* (Hamburg [Amsterdam], 1670).

³⁰ Benedictus de Spinoza, *The political works: the Tractatus theologico-politicus in part, and the Tractatus politicus in full*, trans. A. G. Wernham (Oxford, 1958), p. 235.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 237; Zagorin, *Ways of lying*, pp. 329–30.

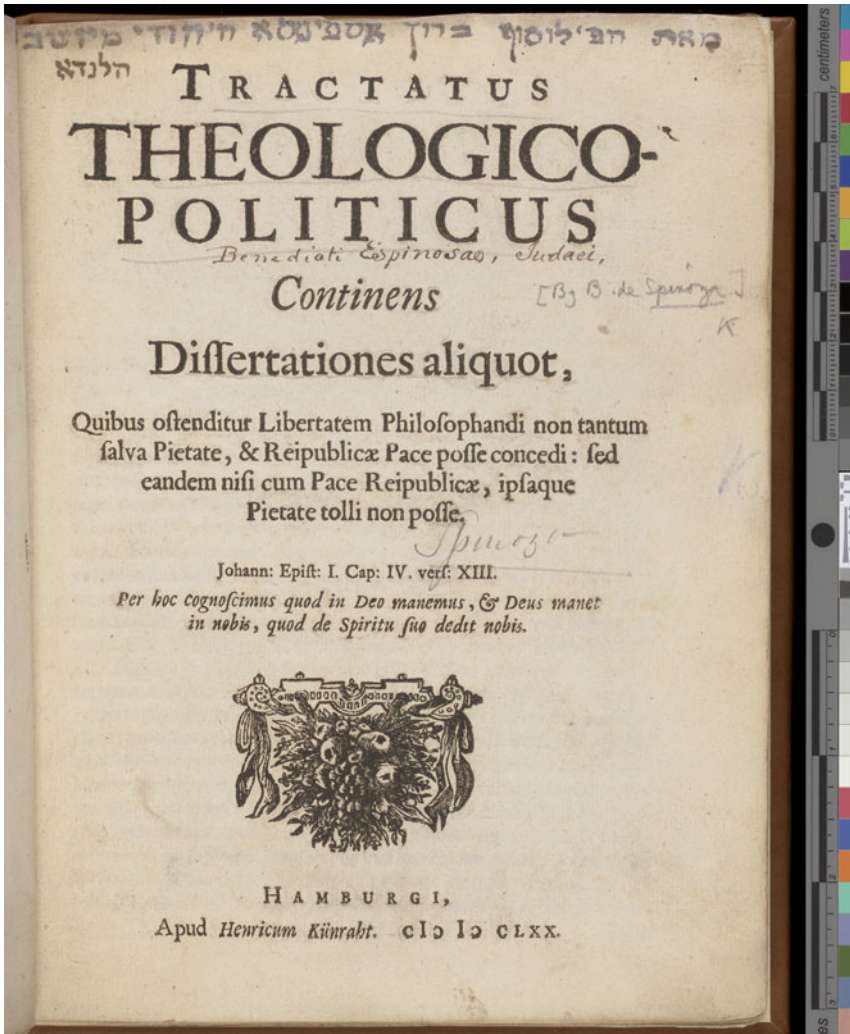


Figure 4. Baruch de Spinoza, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*... (Hamburg [Amsterdam], 1670), title page. The John Rylands Research Institute and Library, Special Collections, SC1040B. © The John Rylands Research Institute and Library, University of Manchester.

background and my book on *The return of Martin Guerre*, I had thought of my years of self-fashioning as a Jew on the margins of a non-Jewish world. But now I see how the HUAC scare may have turned my historian’s antennae in that direction as well.³²

Furthermore, those years, including the examples I have just given you, influenced my way of conceptualizing the destiny of historical actors. Any

³² Natalie Zemon Davis, *The return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA, 1983).

temptation I had at age twenty-three to categorize oppressed people in binaries, as either heroic resisters or unjust victims, was ended. Yes, there were sixteenth-century printing workers leading illegal strikes and provoking the Catholic clergy with their Calvinist Psalms and, yes, there were Protestant believers – men, women, and children – slaughtered during the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre. But there were many forms of life in-between. People cope in many different ways, and the historian's task is to understand them and interpret their actions in terms of the values of their own time.

Finally, there is one lesson I might have learned. In 1990, a University of Michigan student named Adam Kulakow made a wonderful film about the firings at the University of Michigan. When I saw it, I gasped after the interview with the aged Harlan Hatcher (1898–1998), who had been president at the time. Long before the congressional hearings, Hatcher had met with the representatives of HUAC, reviewed a list of targeted professors, and negotiated with them about which ones would be called publicly, with the expectation that the unfriendly witnesses would be fired.³³ So that individual man had determined our destiny well ahead of time! That conclusion sat ill with a historian like me who has always seen possibilities in historical situations, and assessed the role of the individual actor not as all-powerful as Machiavelli's Prince, but shaped and limited by the society and culture of his or her own time. When I expressed my surprise to Chandler after seeing the film, he reminded me that he had told me this in full detail in late 1953 after he had taken the initiative to discuss with Hatcher the subpoena he had received.

I had completely forgotten, and indeed, it seems to me that I experienced those months in 1954 as though our destiny had not been set in stone by Hatcher's decision, that given the protests at the university, other outcomes were possible. And, in fact, I was right. One of the men destined for discarding, Clement Markert (1917–99), was kept in spite of Hatcher. And look at Chandler and me – we haven't done so badly! I remain a historian who always sees possibilities in the past, and the expectation, with Spinoza, that the future will always contain some brave enough to speak with 'independence of mind'.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X24000311>.

³³ 'Keeping in mind', www.youtube.com/watch?v=LdJHUqoAvdI (accessed 2 Feb. 2024).