Words on Trial: The Nazi Book Burnings, Censorship, and Propaganda

AnnaClaire Schmiedel

Individual Performance
Senior Division
Process Paper

Originality and intrigue were my initial prompts for finding my topic. When the Nazi book burnings came to mind, I knew right away that it was perfect for me, not only because it deals with the fundamental rights of free speech and the press but it also is an important event that is not often mentioned in the historical realm. I enjoy reading, so I was curious to know how citizens in Germany responded to this event. Furthermore, my father is German, so I have a connection to the land, language, and culture that helped me better understand the research material.

Right from the start of my research, I was intent upon immersing myself in primary sources to get a feel for the time period and the event. Instead of focusing heavily on statistics, I wanted to understand how a normal civilian lived in the midst of the propaganda of the time. As I looked over my sources, certain aspects of my topic, such as censorship in education, caught my eye more than others, and helped me narrow my topic to areas that interested me more. Time after time, I came upon wonderful articles from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum that gave me a comprehensive and concise look at the book burnings and censorship. One of my favorite parts of research was listening to radio broadcasts from the time and watching film footage that brought the era to life.

When I was younger I was first introduced to historical reenacting through a performance at the National Constitution Center. Ever since then I have wanted to try this medium of presenting history to the modern world, and thus chose the performance category for my topic. During my research I found it difficult to find individuals who would best help me portray my topic, and so I decided to use an anonymous civilian from Germany during this time to describe the book burning and effects of propaganda. When I considered what I would include in a
museum presentation if I were a historical reenactress, I was able to design a performance that draws the audience into 1943 wartime Germany.

   One of the fundamental rights of humans is freedom of speech and the press. Through the book burnings, a symbolism of the censorship to come, the right to free speech was brutally trampled by an ideology that recognized the power of words, and sought to extinguish all conflicting ideas through propaganda and the education system. Early on in this regime, the people of Germany failed to take on their responsibility as citizens of holding on to their freedoms, and thus lost them. Because of the intimidating nature of the regime, many citizens resisted only in small ways. With my performance, I hope to challenge Americans to take the initiative in preserving the freedoms they want to have, in order to keep them from slipping away.  

   483 words
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


This book was very interesting because it took a detailed look at the life of Alfons Heck, a boy who rose to a high leadership position in the Hitler Youth. It was very intriguing to read selected pieces from two first-hand accounts, one of which detailed the infatuation with Hitler and his ideas that many youth of the time experienced. Since I gleaned the most from Alfons’ direct quotes and not the surrounding commentary, I consider this a primary source.


This resource was the very best primary resource I could have wished for. Not only was it a radio broadcast from 1942 on the book burning of Nazi Germany, but it was a radio drama very much like the performance I planned to do and even focused in on censorship in education.


This source was quite amazing due to the wealth of primary resources (translated by Bytwerk), most of which were Nazi propaganda. It was particularly helpful to investigate the material concerning the Hitler Youth and education.

After much searching, I at last found two civilian eyewitness accounts of the book burning on this German website, including the account of Erich Kästner. This is how I found out he was an onlooker at the Berlin book burning.


Since this version of the footage of the book burning was from a German website, it did not have subtitles and so I was able to pay more attention to the visuals than the content of the speech. I also noticed the chanting of the author's names at the end.


This photograph showing a poster on the Nuremberg Laws allowed me to see what would have been posted on streetcorners everywhere. In particular, the racial diagrams are sickening.

Drossel, Heinz. "Transcript or Notes for Oral History Interview with Heinz Drossel."


In this interview with a man who lived under the Third Reich, the man describes his civil disobedience in reading the forbidden books in a secret meeting during the book burnings. Furthermore, he read through *Mein Kampf* and annotated it with his views. He believes that the book burnings were only a concern to book-lovers, which brought an opposing view to my project.


This was a fascinating story of a Jewish lady who married a Nazi officer during the war. For my project, I incorporated into my performance the fact that she and her neighbors all listened to foreign radio broadcasts in secret. I was amused to find out that they always
happened to be very noisy around this time in order to not draw attention to the broadcast. Also, she tells of how she made her husband listen to the broadcast from Stalingrad by the BBC in order to hear what was really going on.


Since I decided to do a performance, I realized I needed to learn how much normal civilians knew about topics such as the concentration camps, in order to properly portray my character. This book was the answer, with tons of interviews of people who lived during the war. I used this as a primary source since I focused exclusively on the interviews of eyewitnesses.


This radio broadcast from the 1940s made me realize how radio was treated just like TV is now (it used a radio drama to illustrate the message) as well as how propaganda was recognized by the Allies to be a potent weapon.


In this interview with an eyewitness to the Third Reich, I learned yet another fascinating tale about books during the time. During the regime, Goebbels passed an edict that declared that there were no Jewish veterans who participated in World War I. This man happened to have books on Jewish veterans from World War I, and preserved them as proof to counter the outrageous statement.

This interview contained another unique account of an experience with books under the regime. The lady describes how private houses were being cleansed of undesirable books (referenced in my performance), and how, one day, she came upon her father burning the forbidden books so he wouldn't be arrested. She recalls he spoke of them as his "old friends."


I was thrilled to listen to a large chunk of this interview to hear in detail how life was like in Germany under Hitler. This lady experienced the book burnings and compared them to a "rock concert," crazy and unconstrained. She also rejoiced in the freedom she felt when she came to America after 6 years under Hitler and could freely criticize him.


In this interview, May recounts her experience when her house was raided for books - Jewish books and other forbidden materials. I was glad to have this eyewitness account to back up the material presented in my performance.


I printed out the front page of this newspaper from February 4, 1943, as a prop to illustrate how propaganda was used even for such an event as Stalingrad. After Stalingrad, many began to doubt that the Nazi-supplied news was reliable, so I chose 1943 for my time setting.
This was a very interesting short clip that featured a witness to the book burnings, Elfriede Brüning. It was intriguing to hear about her experience. I also got to see the open square in front of the University of Berlin as it is now. Since I mainly used this to draw information from Brüning’s experience, I consider it a primary resource.


Before coming to this interview, I was under the impression that there was not much resistance to the regime, apart from the efforts of youth such as the White Rose society. This interview brought up the Confessing Church, of which this lady was a part of. The church was a widespread effort to resist Hitler, and thus this piece of evidence brought more ideas to my project.


Throughout my research, I wanted to find accounts of how people tried to keep books alive. In this lady’s account, she describes how her friends would pass around forbidden books, reading them and then ripping the pages out. In this way, German people silently resisted the regime. I refer to this in my performance.

Schmiedel, Leonhard. "Interview with Opa." Interview by AnnaClaire Schmiedel and Thomas Schmiedel. Telephone interview. 15 June 2014.

With my father translating, I was able to interview my German grandfather about his experience under the Third Reich. He described the Nazi campaign concerning “Entartetekunst” (degenerate art), and reflected that the book burnings were a “spiritual act” to “extinguish thoughts.” He brought up the interesting observation that Hitler’s agenda focused keeping the people “clean” (culturally, racially, etc.), which can be so
clearly seen in the propaganda and censorship. Furthermore, he also described the “Bildersturm,” or, cleansing of art (similar to the removal of forbidden books from private houses), that I had not previously known about.

Schmiedel, Margot. "Interview with Oma." Interview by AnnaClaire Schmiedel and Thomas Schmiedel. Telephone interview. 15 June 2014.

With my father translating, I was also able to interview my German grandmother about her experience under the Third Reich. First, she confirmed my observation that there was a sense of oppression with regard to free speech. Her family was against Hitler, so her father exempted her from the Bund Deutscher Mädel on the claims of poor health. He also listened to the foreign radio in secret and hid the family’s collection of forbidden books after the book burning.


I printed this radio tag out as one of my props to demonstrate that Nazi’s understood the power of outside information and sought to forbid it from flowing into Germany. This was distributed to citizens who had radios at the time.


I watched some of this in order to see one of the most famous, or infamous, propaganda films of the Nazis. It never spared a moment of glorifying Hitler, and gave me a taste of the film techniques of the day that apparently appealed to many Germans.

I reproduced this poster in my window scene in my set with pastel chalk. The poster is from 1943, the year when my performance takes place, and demonstrates the ongoing anti-Semitism.


This original footage of the book burning is one of the several versions I watched that allowed me to see how the event looked in newsreels and get a feel for the atmosphere of the night, helping me in my performance. This included a transcript of Dr. Goebbels’s speech, which I used in my performance.


I got the poem in the children’s primer from this page. It demonstrates how Hitler realized the potential of youth to be shaped into the instruments of National Socialism, a tactic mirrored in many communist and socialist countries.

I used the picture (at the beginning of this magazine article) of the store-front taken during the 1930’s as the main inspiration for the window scene in my set. Since the photo itself is from before World War II, I consider it a primary source.

Secondary Sources


I really enjoyed reading this book because not only did it give a comprehensive overview of living under the Nazi regime, it also presented me with a convincing argument that the youth were the key instruments in the war, brainwashed and used by Hitler for his purposes. Originally I had wanted to focus on the Hitler Youth, but could not adequately connect them to my project, so when I read this book I realized that focusing on the subsequent censorship of education materials after the book burning would allow me to focus on the youth. I got Hitler’s quote on educating the youth from this book.


This was a very interesting contemporary radio program that I came upon from the BBC covering the art show put on by the Nazi's to show how "degenerate" Jewish art was, and featured a speaker who had gone to that show. I learned that the Nazi's purposefully tilted the frames, painted graffiti on the walls, and sent actors in to negatively comment on the art all in order to ensure that the crowds believed the Nazi's ideology.


While researching, I was very excited to find that a new movie was coming out that featured the book burnings of Nazi Germany from a young girl’s perspective. I was able to purchase and watch the film and gained a lot of visual inspiration for my performance,
such as what my costume could look like. I also used a compilation of the soundtrack as background music for my whole performance.


This documentary provided archival film footage of Hitler and more contemporary interviews with people who lived at the time to paint a picture of how Germans responded to Hitler. This included interviews with Alfons Heck, a Hitler Youth leader who was also featured in _Parallel Journeys._

_A Film Unfinished._ Dir. Yael Hersonski. Oscilloscope Laboratories and Belflms Ltd., 2010. DVD.

This film provided a view into the complex propaganda machine with regard to the Jews before deportation. It gave me an insight into how to interpret visual records and also the lies that ran rampant during this time.


I watched this movie on Dr. Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda for the Reich. By using his diaries and tons of footage from the time, the movie put the thoughts of this man who did so much damage to the world out in the open. It was put together in 2005, so it can be viewed as a secondary source since the content was chosen by the producers.


Since this is an encyclopedia entry, I gained a brief overview of the effects of "Nazi press controls" and some major events with regard to this. An entry right before this one called "Nazi art censorship" brought to my awareness the fact that the Nazis censored art as well as books and newspapers, which I had not previously known.

In this book, I found a retelling of an account of a man who was arrested for possessing an illegal newspaper. I reference this in my performance when I talk about “a lady whose husband was arrested because of a book.”


This is one of the several contemporary articles on book burning that helped me to look at it through a modern perspective. I gained insight on the generalizations the public makes concerning book burning and the history behind events like this.


When I first began writing my script, I wrote it to the music of this soundtrack. I soon realized that the music fit perfectly to the finished piece, and so this compilation of the movie soundtrack, *The Book Thief*, became part of my performance.


This article talked about one man's deep investigation of Goebbels' private diaries and his theories on how it was Goebbels, not Hitler, who was the mastermind of the Holocaust. I thought this was very interesting to read, although I did not agree with it entirely.


This was one of several versions of the original footage of the book burning. In contrast to the other versions I watched, this one had color and thus allowed me to see the event
and the people participating in a whole different way than before. I decided this was a secondary source because, although it was the original footage, the color was conceived at a later date and thus projects a more-contemporary view of the event.


This contemporary article had about a dozen photos and descriptions that noted various book burnings in history, and had a main article on the Nazi book burnings. It helped me visually connect my event to the broader scale of history.


Though I found it difficult at first to understand the scale of the facts presented in this book, I found it to be a wonderful resource that pertained to the heart of my project, linking it with similar events of the past and future.


This article was helpful because it reviewed a contemporary book on foreigners' responses to the Nazi dictatorship. It ends with an interesting point on whether such a regime can arise out of the modern world.


This article talked at length about various aspects regarding the book burning, and even analyzes the radio play from 1942 that I found to be such an amazing resource.

This is one of the many invaluable resources provided by the US National Holocaust Memorial Museum. It provided many helpful links about the book burning and censorship.


This online interactive exhibit powered by the National Holocaust Memorial Museum was an exceptional resource. I referred to it for endless points in my performance, including how a 1940s radio looks, the translation of the radio tag, when it became mandatory to join the Hitler Youth, and much more.


This was a great comprehensive overview of the whole event of the book burnings that included how people responded to and interpreted the event.


This video was helpful because it was created by a reliable source and included both actual footage and the thoughts of several individuals who each had a unique connection to the featured subject.

Of all the resources I looked at, this secondary-source article best summarized the scope of Nazi censorship and helped me to organize my research and choose a narrower approach to my topic.


I read a section of this book and gained a much better understanding of the book burnings. I learned about many different motivations for the book burning and how the German population received this event.