



## Garden of Broken Statues: Exploring Censorship in Russia

Author \_ Marianna Tax Choldin

Publisher \_ Academic Studies Press, 2016. 188 p. Cloth (also available in paper and as e-book)  
\$69.00. ISBN: 9781618115010

Reviewer \_ Henry Reichman, California State University, East Bay

Memoirs by western scholars of Russia and the Soviet Union have emerged in recent years as a mini-genre of academic writing. Such works have common virtues. They depict, sometimes quite graphically, the many challenges and trials experienced by Western researchers in Moscow, Leningrad-St. Petersburg, and less accessible Russian cities; they offer keen, sometimes heartbreaking, insights into the daily life of Russians, mainly from the intelligentsia, both under Soviet and post-Soviet rule; and, through the recounting of personal experience and at times painful life choices, they sometimes humanize their authors and academic life itself in fresh ways. The tales repeatedly recounted in such works—of commodity shortages and the smuggling of American cigarettes and blue jeans to Soviet friends, of the warm hospitality (and chilled vodka) of the Muscovite intelligentsia in their cramped apartments, of the professionalism and friendship of harried archivists, for examples—have almost become clichés, even when individual stories still hold readers' attention.

In most respects this engaging and readable memoir by Marianna Tax Choldin is typical of the genre, no better nor worse than most. But what distinguishes Choldin's from other such efforts is that the author is a university librarian and one of the world's eminent (perhaps *the most eminent*) historians of Russian and Soviet censorship. In 2011, she received the Robert B. Downs Intellectual Freedom Award "for her extensive contributions to intellectual freedom over the span of her professional career," most of which was spent at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. In 2005, the ALA honored her significant contributions to international librarianship. She was also the third recipient of Russia's prestigious Pushkin Medal for extraordinary contributions to Russian culture. (I should note that Choldin, who is nothing if not modest, does not tout these richly deserved honors in her book.)

Informed readers seeking to learn more about either librarianship or censorship might be better advised to turn

to Choldin's more scholarly works, *A Fence Around the Empire*, her 1985 now-classic study of tsarist censorship, for instance, or her many essays and reviews on Soviet libraries and censorship. However, most readers, especially those less familiar with Russian history and life, will still find things to learn here. And, more important, all readers will enjoyably encounter and indeed come to know and admire a compelling cast of characters, Choldin's family, colleagues, and friends, as well as Choldin herself.

The book's title refers to what is now a museum-park in Moscow, where old Soviet monuments were dumped and later restored. Choldin visits it twice, once in 1997 and again in 2013, and it becomes the book's central metaphor, with a series of "stops" around places evocative of the actual garden, which interrupt the text, mostly in the introductory and concluding chapters. The technique is clever, but it didn't work for me; it seemed more distracting than illuminating. I became far more absorbed in Choldin's essentially chronological narrative—with multiple digressions—of her life and career, from her childhood as the intellectually precocious daughter of a prominent University of Chicago anthropologist to her mature ruminations on Russia's fate, religion, and, of course, libraries and censorship. The story is usefully organized around a second metaphor, that of two "planets" between which Choldin travels—both in reality and in her mind—her American planet and her Russian planet. (There is also a gripping account of her two years as a young woman in Bangladesh, which led to a nearly decade-long interruption in her focus on Russia, not to mention a harrowing tale of pregnancy and childbirth with twin daughters.)

Blessed with a facility for languages, Choldin is in many ways a truly international figure. She began as a Germanist, then learned Russian, picked up some Bengali, and is capable in French (and perhaps a few other languages) as well. Hence a cosmopolitan spirit suffuses these pages. Her thinking, she recognizes early on, is



characterized by three components—“tolerance for people different from myself, the rejection of controls on thought and expression, and my intense interest in a community’s history as expressed through tangible symbols.” In her hostility to what she calls the “omnicensorship” of the tsars and, especially, their Soviet successors, Choldin thus articulates a classically liberal vision.

She is, however, conscious as well of the dangers posed by less authoritarian means of controlling free expression. “Here’s my understanding of American ‘censorship,’ a word that remains in quotes because I remain unconvinced that it is the right term for what we do,” she writes. “I have no name for our kind of ‘censorship.’ I tend to think of it as ‘from-the-bottom-up challenges,’ which isn’t very elegant.” I think Choldin may be a bit naive about the extent of “top-down” censorship, even in the western “free market of ideas,” but this is not her main concern and it would be churlish to fault her too strongly for this.

Somewhat surprisingly, at least to this reviewer who has not had the pleasure of knowing Choldin personally, is her extraordinary concern with religion, from her secular Reform Jewish upbringing and the role played in her mind by the specter of the Holocaust to her growing interest in and respect for the Russian Orthodoxy of her closest Moscow friends. Though she (and her friends) embrace ecumenism, Choldin never loses her connection to her Jewishness and her broader spirituality. Several of her closest Soviet friends are converts from Judaism to Orthodoxy, which she freely acknowledges makes her “uncomfortable,” even as her rational side affirms that “every individual should have the right to espouse any religion he or she chooses.” Hence, hostility to Soviet-era atheism and

anticlericalism becomes an important, if secondary, theme in her scholarship.

Finally, it would be wrong not to recognize the important role played in Choldin’s life and work by her “sister-friend,” the extraordinary Russian librarian Katia Genieva, to whose memory the book is dedicated. Choldin’s work and life with Katia is a continuing theme (Genieva’s entry is by the far the longest in a disappointingly limited index of proper names), but Katia also receives her own chapter. Indeed, in many respects Choldin’s work—what one might call her “activist” scholarship (Choldin’s father, Sol Tax, was famous for creating “action anthropology”)—really begins in the early 1990s when she and Genieva agree to mount jointly a major international library exhibition on Russian and Soviet censorship. This led to Choldin’s later work with George Soros’s Open Society Institute and as director of the University of Illinois’ Mortensen Center for International Librarianship, in which roles she visited some twenty-five countries to promulgate the core principles of intellectual freedom in libraries.

I wish Choldin had written more about the substance of that work, its successes and failures. Instead, Choldin spends much of the book on periods before she could travel regularly to Russia. (Choldin recalls more than fifty separate visits to Russia, most of them after the 1991 Soviet collapse.) But this is a more personal volume, a work of an elder stateswoman looking back to make sense of her entire life for the enlightenment of those who follow. It is worth reading just to get to know Marianna Tax Choldin, a fascinating woman and an exceptional librarian with a memorable circle of colleagues, family, and friends.

## On the Burning of Books

Author \_ Kenneth Baker

Publisher \_ Unicorn, 2016. 266 p. \$40. 978-1-910787-11-3

Reviewer \_ Professor Robert Ridinger, Social Sciences and Area Studies Librarian,  
Northern Illinois University

The image is unmistakable—pages of printed or handwritten words reflecting the sustained thought processes of the author being taken (sometimes forcibly) from the security of desks, personal bookshelves, libraries, archives, royal palaces and places of worship among other locales and unmade by fire. The hands that feed the fires are driven by a wide range of motivations, and the events themselves are often chronicled as merely one part of a broader historical narrative of social change or stand as footnotes

to the lives of authors, their heirs and executors. Publishing within the history of the book on book burning (a somewhat inaccurate term, as the practice has frequently been applied to unpublished letters and draft manuscripts as well) often takes the form of examining specific cases (such as the eradication of “Un-German” literature by the Nazis and the thirteenth century trial of the Talmud in France) or reviewing a defined group of centuries to trace the application of and justification for the practice.



Kenneth Baker's *On the Burning of Books* departs significantly from this, both through its thematic structure and its accessible approach to the subject.

The author (a British peer and former home secretary) introduces the volumes with a thoughtful consideration of the idea and occurrence of book burning, clarifying the main features of its history for both general and specialist readers, and then relates the growth of his own awareness of the practice. The main body of the work is divided into sections covering political burning, religious burning, war burning, personal burning, accidental burning, royal burning, and some lucky escapes. The first two categories are perhaps the most frequently associated with book burning in the public mind, while the third focuses on instances of book destruction occurring during wartime but not done as a part of a campaign of censorship. An example of this is the damage done to the Library of Alexandria by Roman legions. The image of the writer as a fervent proponent and defender of his or her work and ideas almost precludes the notion that they would give their own words to the fire, yet many of the examples given in this section show authors engaged in deliberate management of their legacies so as to present a desired image to both the contemporary public and posterity. Perhaps understandably, given the author's nationality, many of the examples given of personal burnings come from the pool of leading literary figures of nineteenth century Britain. The category of accidental burning covers the loss of manuscripts

through mischance, with the most spectacular case noted being the burning of Parliament in 1834 and the loss of the records of the House of Commons. The idea of "royal burning" is centered exclusively on incidents involving members of the British royal family from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, including Queen Victoria, while the final category of "lucky escapes" has among its varied actors dustmen, poets who misplaced their works in manuscript multiple times, and a wide range of writers from Robert Louis Stevenson to Franz Kafka, Dylan Thomas, and C. S. Lewis.

Through a deft combination of illustrations (both color and monochrome) and extensive use of quotations from primary documents, many of them not easily accessible, each example is set out with cogent attention paid to its political, cultural, literary, or religious contexts. Discussion also explores the often complicated roles of kin, friends, lovers or employees who, while named as executors with instructions to incinerate specific items or sections of an individual's written creations, sometimes failed to completely eradicate the targeted texts. In other cases, the executors displayed a dogged persistence in tracking down offending letters or manuscripts, sometimes persisting for years or a lifetime. The brief index provides access by subject, personal names, and the titles of works. A colorful and accessible work suitable for augmenting the intellectual freedom collections of public, college and university libraries.

## Which Side Are You On? Seven Social Responsibility Debates in American Librarianship, 1990–2015

Author \_ Elaine Harger

Publisher \_ McFarland, 2016. 236 pp. Paper. \$25.00. ISBN 978-0-7864-9455-2

Reviewer \_ Martin Garnar, Dean, Kraemer Family Library, University of Colorado Colorado Springs

Many people would not associate the governing body of a professional association of librarians with high drama. However, the council of the American Library Association (ALA) has been the venue for some rather contentious debates. These livelier sessions are usually related to proposed resolutions related to some aspect of social responsibility and libraries. The debate may focus on whether the issue at hand has a strong enough connection to libraries or librarianship, or it may be about how strong the argument regarding the issue can or should be in light of political concerns, whether it's related to funding, legislation affecting libraries, or the general reputation

of the profession. Regardless of the topic, the final language of an approved resolution rarely captures the emotions expressed in these debates. Using seven such debates from the last twenty-five years, Elaine Harger provides a first-person perspective on controversies including the ALA-produced film *The Speaker*, anti-apartheid boycotts, censorship in Israel and the Occupied Territories, McDonald's, the Boy Scouts of America, Edward Snowden, and climate change.

Harger, a long-time member of the ALA's Social Responsibility Round Table (SRRT) and a former councilor, is well-positioned to share the perspective of SRRT



members on these debates as well as to explain the workings of Council, which can seem quite arcane to the uninitiated. For each debate, Harger also provides the context of the external situation. For example, in the case of the anti-apartheid boycotts, she first looks at U.S. librarians' responses to racism in the Jim Crow period, then turns to a brief history of South Africa's reaction to the inclusion of human rights in the United Nations Charter before discussing the Sharpeville Massacre that drew international condemnation and provoked the first economic sanctions. With this background, Harger then turns to the cultural boycotts that ultimately led to the fight within ALA on whether books and other materials should be exempt, and examines the arguments presented by both sides through analysis of meeting minutes and transcripts from ALA units and groups. Finally, she weaves threads of critical theory into this chapter and throughout the rest of the book, looking at the power structures within ALA and their impact on each debate.

The title of the book signals the tone of the author's arguments, which are clearly based on her strongly held beliefs on these social issues: you are either with us or against us. As the blurb on the back cover of this book leads off with "shattering any idea that librarianship is a politically neutral realm," so must this reviewer acknowledge that writing an objective review of this book has been challenging. This reviewer's formative experience within ALA was with groups connected to the Office for Intellectual Freedom, including the Intellectual Freedom Committee and the Intellectual Freedom Round Table, and is currently serving the latter group as its representative to the ALA council. Not surprisingly, this reviewer doesn't always agree with Harger's characterization of the actions of his colleagues and of other members of the association, but he respects her commitment to her ideals. Having said that, the author made some assertions that, in this reviewer's opinion, weaken her arguments.

In her introduction, Harger quotes an important statement on social responsibility from the ALA Policy Manual's introduction, but says it comes from the association's mission statement. However, the actual mission statement is as follows: "The mission of the American Library Association is to provide leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all."

Later in that section of the Policy Manual, social responsibility is listed as a core organizational value, along with eight other values including intellectual freedom.

This may seem like a minor point, but when framing the importance of social responsibility in the library profession, the erroneous reference to social responsibility's place within the mission statement has the impact of elevating it above the other core values with which social responsibility is occasionally in conflict. Additionally, there are some errors in the book, such as the wrong date of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table's separation from SRRT (10) and the claim that SRRT "has long been ALA's largest round-table" (20), which has not been true since 2009, thus potentially overestimating the influence that SRRT currently has within the association. However, the latest figures do show a trend of increasing membership, though they would have to see significant continuing growth to regain the top spot.

Though these minor errors can distract the reader into wondering if other facts in the book are correctly stated, the greater concern with Harger's approach is when she speculates about the motivations of various members of ALA, as these can begin to cross the line into *ad hominem* attacks. When she recounts the admittedly frustrating use of parliamentary procedure to substitute a watered-down resolution for one that had already been adopted by council, she suggests that perhaps the mover of the substitute resolution "wasn't quite awake" when the original resolution was passed (155). When she notes that one councilor voted in support of both the original and substitute resolutions, she states that the councilor "simply abandoned her conscience" (168). These are just two examples of a trend that becomes more apparent in the book's later chapters. Harger's arguments would have been stronger if she had let the actions of the council speak for themselves. Instead, by including the names, statements, and votes of numerous councilors obviously not on her side, and by providing commentary clearly disapproving of their actions, the author appears to be more interested in shaming those councilors. Perhaps that's the point, as there are few options left to oppose hegemonic power when it's being used to overturn the democratic process, which this reviewer believes to be an accurate description of how Harger would view what happened with the Snowden resolution.

Ultimately, Harger has succeeded in providing an insider's view, albeit just one of multiple perspectives, of the politics and principles at stake when issues are debated on the ALA council floor. The story of these debates told through official ALA records is greatly enhanced by the author's viewpoint. For a complete picture, we must wait for someone from the "other" side to weigh in with their behind-the-scenes account of the same debates.