



Book Burning: A Not-So-Ancient Tradition

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ABSTRACT

Books can be dangerous objects. One of the easiest ways to prevent the spread of ideas that might harm the regime in power is to burn them, and sometimes even their authors. This article examines the history of book burning from antiquity to the modern day and the reasons that could be behind such a violent, symbolic form of destruction. It also looks at the differences in contexts and motivations between ancient book burning and the book burning that still occurs today.

Book burning today seems like an act out of the past. The most recent example most might think of would be the Nazi book burnings in the 1930s and 1940s. However, book burning as a practice has continued on into the twenty-first century, as recent as 2022. This means that book burning as a practice has been around for almost as long as humans have. Historically, the motives behind book burning have been political, or in favor of keeping control over a population; most of the time, the act was ordered by a ruler or leader of some kind. In more modern times, the motives have become quite different, although the symbolism of the act is

still provocative.

History of Book Burning

The earliest instances of book burning date all the way back to the first century AD. In *Books for the Burning*, Charles Forbes chronicles the history of book burning in Greek and Roman antiquity. He cites the treatise of Protagoras as the first case of a political body burning a book for religious reasons, for in his treatise Protagoras claimed he was not sure whether or not the gods really existed.^[1] The persecution of what could be called heretical texts was essential to the Roman state's authority. As the Christian cult became more prolific in the Roman empire, there came the need to suppress the burgeoning religion as a threat to that state's authority.^[2] One of the most well known Roman emperors to lead a direct attack on ancient Christians was Diocletian of the late third century, whose intense persecution of Christian writings led to the deaths of many.^[3]² Yet, even with this history of persecution, once Christianity came into power, there was little difference in the tolerance (or rather, the intolerance) of books used by those of different beliefs. As with the pagans, Christian Romans knew that any text that could be seen as opposing or threatening to the ruling state had to be destroyed, now in order to protect "the unity of Christian society."^[4] This practice, first held by pagans, then by Christians once they assumed power, would continue on well into the early modern period, and even to the twentieth century, with fluctuations in frequency. While a large amount of these burnings are documented in various ways, there is much less information about book burning in the Middle Ages, until about the eleventh century, when heresy became a much larger issue to the Christian church in Europe. As a result of the Church's rising fear of heresy leading to apostasy within its congregations, church fathers began to focus their attention on those they deemed threatening to their religion, and thus their power, who would preach and spread their ideas through their writings. This is ultimately what led to the burning of heretical texts and heretics alike in the later Middle Ages. In order to control the masses, the Church had to censor texts that had the potential to divert power away from itself, and the best way for it to do this was to burn the books it deemed dangerous. In some cases, burning only the book was enough: the act served as a metaphorical execution of the heretic and their ideas.^[5] This sentiment would continue on through the early modern period, especially for books that were deemed lewd or too radical for public consumption.^[6] Generally, the Church was behind most authorized book burnings; if not directly, then it was at least the inspiration behind such actions. As time moved on and church and state separated in the Western world, for the most part, book burnings were taken over by authoritarian regimes, again using the tactic as a way to suppress voices and ideas they believed were dangerous to their own power. The clearest example of this in the twentieth century would

be the Nazi book burnings, though this was of course disguised as concern for Germany and its citizens.^[7] Since this particular incident, however, there have been many more instances of book burnings throughout the world.

Modern Day Book Burnings

Book burning has continued on into the modern day, with zealous religious communities condemning books they view as against their religion. In the early 2000s, and even in recent years, the Harry Potter books have been burned by far right Christians who view the series as promoting witchcraft.^[8] The burning of fictional texts is not new; it has happened many times throughout the history of book burning. There are clear differences between the time periods and contexts in which books are burned. The motivations share striking similarities, but those actually committing the act of burning books are no longer people in power, or in charge of worldwide congregations like the Church was in the Middle Ages. For example, in 2023, Pastor Greg Locke in Mount Juliette, Tennessee, held a book burning event at his church with members of his congregation in which they burned “cultic materials that they deem are a threat to their religious rights and freedoms and belief systems.”^[9] This event was livestreamed on Facebook and posted about on Instagram. A bit further back in time, copies of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* were burned in an Italian city square for its perceived hereticism and offensiveness toward the Catholic Church.^[10] Other than burning secular texts, many other modern day book burnings carry on the ancient tradition of burning religious texts, like those ancient Romans. Even here in the United States, bibles are still burned, although the reasoning behind this is usually more complicated than one would think. For instance, after Pastor Locke’s book burning event, a trailer full of bibles was burned right in front of the church.^[11] Perhaps this was done in retaliation to the livestreamed book burning, but the culprit and their true motivation is still unknown.

Reasons for Burning Books

Burning books is clearly a strong symbolic action meant to send a message not only to the authors of the books, but to the would-be audience of the books as well, whether they would have read the book or not. Rebecca Knuth uses the term “cultural destruction” to describe the act of book burning, among other destructive actions one may take to send a symbolic message to a specific group.^[12] Books are able to hold such power as cultural objects available to anyone with a library card. Even back before libraries were public, books as a form were compact objects that were easily transportable to those who desired them; it was relatively easy to pass around a book in secret. This is likely the foundation of book burning—the fact that anyone could have a

book that might make them realize perhaps the system they are living under is unfair, or might make them rethink their own beliefs, is threatening to those in power. The book as form is helpful in disseminating ideas and information, but it is also an easy target for those who might feel their authority is beginning to be questioned “because of [books’] symbolic nature and relative vulnerability. They are fragile and easily destroyed by fire, pulping, and exposure to the elements.”^[13] Inanimate objects that represent powerful ideas have always been subject to destruction; just look at the ancient pagan statues and figures that were defaced by Christians, or depictions of Egyptian pharaohs destroyed by their successors. The idea is not new, but the levels of authority of who decides what is destroyed has. Now, any Evangelist priest can burn a copy of *Twilight* if they decide to, but this does not necessarily represent the entire Evangelical church as a whole. It is an isolated event that occurs in its own specific context. In the Middle Ages, the Church was essentially a (Western) world power; when its representatives burned books and/or people, they were doing so for the whole Church.

Contexts and power regimes change; time moves forward and advancements take place in technology and philosophy. Yet book burning continues on today, in an age where we would like to think we are advanced culturally, technologically, and philosophically. There is still a real power in burning books that some continue to recognize, even if it is a much smaller number than those five hundred years ago, or even a thousand years ago. However, even with different contexts, the motivations behind burning books appears to be the same. This is why here in the United States certain books are banned. Books can be threatening objects because of what they represent and what they contain.

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[1] Clarence A. Forbes, “Books for the Burning,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 67 (1936): 118, <https://doi.org/10.2307/283231>.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Daniel Sarefield, “The Symbolics of Book Burning: The Establishment of a Christian Ritual of Persecution,” in *The Early Christian Book (CUA Studies in Early Christianity)*, edited by William E. Klingshirn and Linda Safran (Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 166, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2853v4.15>.

[4] Ibid., 170.

[5] Hans J. Hillerbrand, “On Book Burnings and Book Burners: Reflections on the Power (And Powerlessness) of Ideas,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 3 (2006): 605, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4094001>.

[6] Wikipedia contributors, “List of Book-Burning Incidents,” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, accessed March 23, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_book-burning_incidents.

[7] Hillerbrand, “On Book Burnings,” 607.

[8] Ibid., 602.

[9] Wikipedia contributors, “List of Book-Burning Incidents.”

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Rebecca Knuth, *Burning Books and Leveling Libraries: Extremist Violence and Cultural Destruction* (Bloomsbury, 2006), 6.

[13] Ibid., 11.

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