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Bücherverbrennung

There are many important dates in human history to commemorate: marking uplifting times of governance, birthdays and terms of office of heroic or influential citizens, treaties ending wars, and maybe even declarations of unavoidable wars. January 30, 1933 is not one of these. It is the date when Adolf Hitler was naively handed power as Chancellor of the Third Reich, appointed in the twilight of the democratic Weimar Republic and the dotage of its President Paul von Hindenburg.

On the evening of May 10, 1933, only a few months after Hitler became Chancellor, “there occurred in Berlin a scene which had not been witnessed in the Western world since the late Middle Ages.” At Unter den Linden, some 20,000 books were put to the torch by “students.” Similar events occurred in other Reich cities. In the German language these were the infamous bücherverbrennungen.

So chronicled William L. Shirer in his much acclaimed tome, “The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany” (1960). The Berlin book burning took place just a senior’s lifetime away historically, so one would hope, considering all that has taken place since then, that it is fresh in mind. Yet the fine details of the twelve-year terror of the Nazis can now essentially only be remembered by the relatively few who have read or are reading such an exhaustive account as Shirer’s.

Shirer wrote as well of the Nazi’s “proscribing the sale or library circulation of hundreds of volumes and the publishing of many new ones.” He named numerous German-speaking authors of world reputation such as Albert Einstein whose works were consumed in bonfires, but not only them. Authors whom you easily recognize for their writings in English were among the unfavored, including Jack London, Upton Sinclair, Helen Keller, Margaret Sanger, H.G. Wells, and Sigmund Freud.

“In the words of a student proclamation, any book was condemned to the flames ‘which acts subversively on our future or strikes at the root of German thought, the German home and the driving forces of our people.’”

Dr. Joseph Goebbels, new Propaganda Minister, was pleased.

Again from Shirer: “The Reich must not only determine the lines of progress, mental and spiritual, but also lead and organize the professions.” Those who staff American Libraries have professional degrees in the Library Sciences usually, and, as part of that profession, they follow the guidance of the American Library Association (ALA), and in Pennsylvania the Pennsylvania Library Association (PaLA) and the Office of Commonwealth Libraries (OCL), as torch-bearers of the profession. Not torch wielders.

This bücherverbrennung, burning of books in English, is but one way that book banning manifests, and it can be but a microcosm. Lois Albrecht of Murrysville before her passing, who had an M.S. in Library Science, worked for the PA State Library System, and was a Library consultant, informed me insistently that healthy, professional public

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Libraries are at the root of democracy. So, too, does Thomas Jefferson: “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be. An informed citizenry is at the heart of a dynamic democracy.”

Amen!

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