

A good time to celebrate our best

By Nate Smelle

It is after midnight on May 10. I am sitting beside my first bonfire of the season; watching the flames swallow up the remnants of yesterday's news. Two sacred words, "democracy" and "freedom" leapt from the headlines; flashing before my eyes in the fire's rising glow, and then vanishing into the ashes.

Feeling the warmth on my face as the newspapers were incinerated, I thought of how fragile the state of our democracy and freedom still are in 2022. Reminded of the events that led to these two words being published in recent editions of Bancroft This Week, I soon found myself immersed in a fireside research session, focused on the biggest threat to our liberty - the rise of fascism in the modern world.

Seconds into my investigation, I discovered that May 10, 2022 marked exactly 89 years ago to the day, that students from 34 universities throughout Germany also warmed themselves beside a series of word-fuelled bonfires. Stoking the flames of fascism, the youth rallied behind their ruling Nazi masters by publicly burning books that embodied what they considered to be the "un-German spirit."

Among the authors whose books were outlawed and torched by the Nazis were: Albert Einstein, Maxim Gorki, Helen Keller, D.H. Lawrence, Ernest Hemingway, Sigmund Freud, Hermann Hesse, Franz Kafka, Karl Marx, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Thomas Mann, H. G. Wells, Vladimir Lenin, Vladimir Nabokov, Leo Tolstoy, Leon Trotsky, Bertha von Suttner, as well as many others.

The biggest blaze on that notorious day was a fire that consumed more than 25,000 books in a single night. Lit in the public square at the State Opera in Berlin, some 40,000 people assembled to hear a speech by the Nazis' propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels. Amid the flames, the words of nineteenth century Jewish poet, Heinrich Heine sizzled, foreshadowing the atrocities that would eventually be committed by the Nazis. Heine wrote, "Where they burn books, they will, in the end, burn human beings too."

Despite the Nazis' deadly war on truth, many of the artists, scientists, philosophers, writers, doctors, and other intellectuals escaped Germany during the Second World War, and added their voices to the global anti-fascist resistance. With so many of the world's greatest minds dedicated to finding a solution to the Nazi problem at the time, how is it possible that in 2022 we are still fighting a war against fascist dictators who capitalize on the ignorance, hatred, and inequality that in many ways fuels our global economic system?

Nearly eight decades have passed since the Nazis attempted to cancel cultures in favour of white supremacy, and sadly we are still forced to waste our valuable time and words on convincing the next generation that fascism and hate are a dead end street?

So, why is it that so many self-proclaimed "freedom fighters" these days are aligning themselves with anti-democratic politicians, who see no real value in quality education or freedom, except in terms of getting re-elected? Rather than sharing what we have learned and warning the next generation about our mistakes - war, greed, racism, and homophobia to name a few - these conveyors of corruption would prefer to cancel the facts in order not to make people of privilege feel uncomfortable.

Well, anyone who has done even a little digging into human history knows that we still have a lot of work to do before we can put our feet up.

Voices from political dinosaurs on the far-right love to whine about anti-fascists on the left trying to cancel their culture by taking down statues of leaders, who in retrospect made the world worse during their lifetime. The fact of the matter is that when we erect a statue or name a school in honour of someone, we are celebrating that person's achievements along with their contributions to society. This is why no one has ever campaigned to put up a statue of Joseph Goebbels, in Millennium Park.

It is time to flip the script and start asking new questions when discussing so-called "cancel culture." Instead of asking who we should be cancelling, we would be much better off deciding who we should be celebrating and why.

Putting the historic record of Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald and his views on Indigenous people to the test, I wouldn't waste a single five dollar bill on a celebration of his legacy.

Shedding light on his role in attempting to cancel Indigenous cultures back in 1873, here, Macdonald clearly explains his approach to his fellow members of Parliament: "When the school is on the reserve, the child lives with its parents, who are savages, and though he may learn to read and write, his habits and training mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write. It has been strongly impressed upon myself, as head of the department, that Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men."

We must not ignore the historic role that individuals such as our first prime minister played in shaping this country. That doesn't mean we need to honour them as heroes. Only by celebrating those who inspire us to make the world a better place through their actions, will we be able to put an end to the violent and oppressive legacy of colonization and slavery that still haunts North America today.