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Exhibition: Intellectual Freedom –  
Banned, Removed, Debated

## **Freedom of speech. What exactly is it?**

From book bans in the USA and Nazi censorship in Hamburg to the outcry over a public drag queen reading in Munich: This exhibition explores various contexts in which books are banned, removed or debated in libraries. Often the issue is not just the books themselves but also overarching topics such as freedom of expression, censorship and free access to education.

What can we learn from history and if we look beyond the borders of Hamburg? What role do libraries play as places of democracy and education?

### **We want to create a space for:**

- open dialogue
- respectful discussions
- different perspectives
- shared reflection
- mindful participation

➔ **How does it work?** You'll find instructions on the bookshelves!

***In our exhibition Intellectual Freedom we provide space for freedom of expression.***

*We are convinced that openness in society is not only demonstrated in elections, but also on its bookshelves.*

## Banned Books

Since 2021, an increasing number of books have been removed from schools and libraries in the US, initiated by members of the public or government bodies. In over 45 states – particularly in conservative ones such as Florida, Tennessee or Texas – parents and, increasingly, advocacy groups want to have a say in what children are allowed to read. The bans focus on books that deal with topics such as racism, ethnicity, sexuality or gender identity. On the surface, the issue is one of child protection, but in the background, political and ideological debates are clearly playing a role.

President Donald Trump has issued executive orders supporting the book bans, and laws such as Florida's Stop WOKE Act restrict school curricula. Meanwhile, a chilling reality is becoming apparent in some school boards as they pre-emptively remove literature that might be classified as controversial.

But resistance is growing. Libraries, civil society organisations and individuals argue that book bans restrict young people's right to freely access literature. Diverse perspectives and engagement with topics that are particularly important for young people – such as personal identity, mental health, suicide, drug abuse or sexual violence – are losing their influence on education and everyday life as a result of these bans.

*„Book bans don't just remove titles from shelves; they erase voices, limit ideas, and undermine the very foundation of a free, open society.“*

(PEN America)

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### What is a book ban?

PEN America defines a book ban as the permanent or temporary removal of a book or the restriction of access to a book on the basis of its content. This includes any action taken against a book following complaints from parents or communities, administrative decisions, or direct or threatened action by legislative bodies.

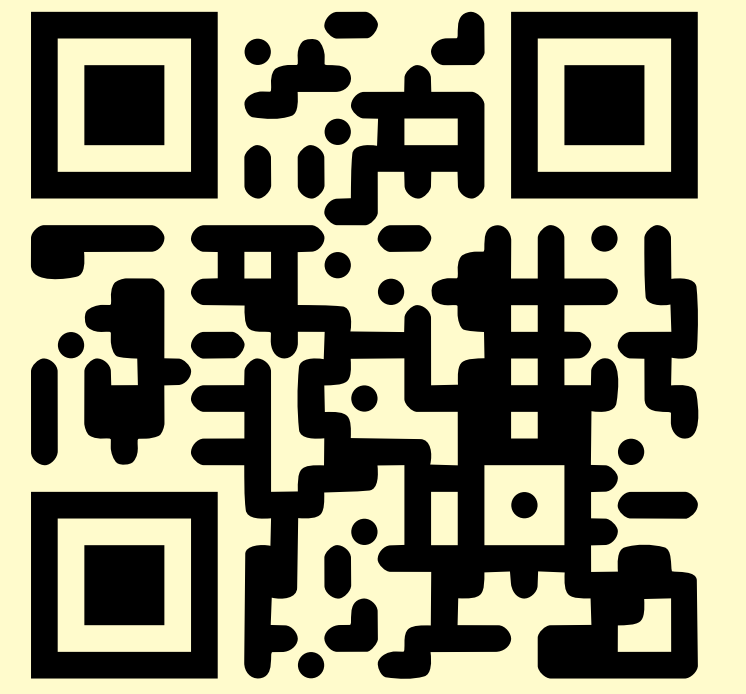


### **A safe space for stories**

These book bans are not going unchallenged. Campaigns such as Banned Books Week and Unite Against Book Bans – an initiative of the American Library Association (ALA) – are drawing attention to these developments, and progressive states are attempting to counter their effects with new legislation.

In response to the increasing number of book bans, the ‘Book Sanctuary’ campaign was launched in 2022 in Chicago, a twin city of Hamburg, initiated by Chicago Public Library. Together with the City of Chicago and the ALA, the campaign calls for banned books to be given a safe space – whether online or in person. A Book Sanctuary can be created anywhere books are read, borrowed or discussed: In a library, a café, a school or a park, at home on your own bookshelf or on social media. From collecting and storing banned books to reading parties and political engagement, various forms of participation are possible and everyone can get involved.

CREATE YOUR OWN  
BOOK SANCTUARY!



<https://www.booksanctuary.org/>

“A book sanctuary protects more than books. It protects the freedom to think, speak, and read. For generations, libraries in Chicago have defended access to ideas, stood for inclusion, and looked out for every reader. That work continues today through the Book Sanctuary movement, which invites communities everywhere to create safe spaces for stories, dialogue, and the freedom to read. Intellectual freedom remains essential to democracy and our shared humanity.”

(Chris Brown, Commissioner of Chicago Public Library)

## Gaps on the shelves

Just a few weeks after the Nazis came to power in January 1933, public libraries began independently 'purging' their collections of books that did not conform to the Nazi ideology. Even before official lists were published, Director Wilhelm Schuster issued instructions at a meeting in mid-March to adapt the collection to the new political situation. No objections from the librarians present have been recorded - instead, the task was tackled efficiently and pragmatically. The discarded books were initially put into storage or handed over to academic libraries.

On 15 May 1933, students in Hamburg burned books by so-called "un-German" authors as part of a Reich-wide propaganda campaign. Further book burnings followed in Hamburg in late May and mid-June, organised by Nazi organisations. During a book burning in Bergedorf on 24 June 1933, over 400 books from the local library were thrown into the fire, having been previously removed from the collection by staff.

After 1933, the Hamburg Bücherhallen conformed without resistance to the laws of the Nazi unjust state. Colleagues deemed politically undesirable, Jewish or perceived as Jewish were dismissed. Sources contain no evidence of solidarity with the persecuted, and a reflective acknowledgement of responsibility did not occur for many decades. In 2023, the Hamburg Bücherhallen commissioned a historian to investigate the history of the public libraries during the Nazi era.

By 1935, in a spirit of pre-emptive obedience, an estimated quarter of the total collection had been removed.



IN MAY 2023, A MEMORIAL STONE (STOLPERSTEIN) WAS LAID IN MEMORY OF HEDDA GURADZE OUTSIDE HER LAST PLACE OF WORK.



<https://www.buecherhallen.de/geschichte.html>

Hedda Guradze was born on 12 July 1904 in Kiel. After graduating, she began working as a librarian at what was then the Bücherhalle on Mönckebergstraße in 1930. Her duties included lending books, advising readers and writing book reviews. After 1935, her Jewish heritage meant she was no longer permitted to work in the lending department. With the 'Nuremberg Laws', she then lost not only her right to marry but also her right to employment in the public sector. She was dismissed in 1937 and, two years later, managed to emigrate to the USA. The consequences of years of discrimination and her concern for her relatives back in Germany wore her down. Hedda Guradze suffered increasingly from depression and, after learning of her mother's murder in the Holocaust, took her own life on 30 June 1945.

## Politics in libraries?

Attempts to exert influence over libraries are not confined to the past or to distant countries such as the USA. Even in Germany there are growing signs of efforts to exploit libraries and their work for the purposes of cultural conflict.

### **Trial in Münster**

**"THIS IS A WORK WITH CONTROVERSIAL CONTENT. THIS COPY IS MADE AVAILABLE ON THE GROUNDS OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, FREEDOM OF OPINION AND FREEDOM OF INFORMATION."**

In 2024, Münster City Library labelled two books with this warning. One of them was "2024 – The Other Yearbook: Concealed, Covered Up, Forgotten" (translated from original title) by Gerhard Wisnewski, in which the author disputes the manned moon landing and the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Wisnewski took legal action against the classification notice, but the Münster Administrative Court did not consider the author's fundamental rights to have been seriously infringed. It ruled in favour of the label. The Münster Higher Administrative Court, however, reached a different conclusion in 2025. In this specific case, the label infringed the author's freedom of expression and his right to privacy. Consequently, the City Library was required to remove the labels.

## Outcry in Munich

Drag queen readings for children are common in libraries. As well as improving reading comprehension, they also teach children about diversity.



"LIBRARIES, IN PARTICULAR, ARE USUALLY THE FIRST TO COME UNDER PRESSURE WHEN ANTI-DEMOCRATIC FORCES GAIN POWER – BECAUSE THEY PROVIDE SPACES FOR DIVERSITY, FREE EXPRESSION OF OPINION AND CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT. THIS MAKES DECISIVE SUPPORT FROM POLITICS AND CIVIL SOCIETY ALL THE MORE IMPORTANT, BECAUSE DISCRIMINATION IS NOT A PROBLEM FOR MINORITIES ALONE, IT IS A TASK FOR SOCIETY AS A WHOLE."

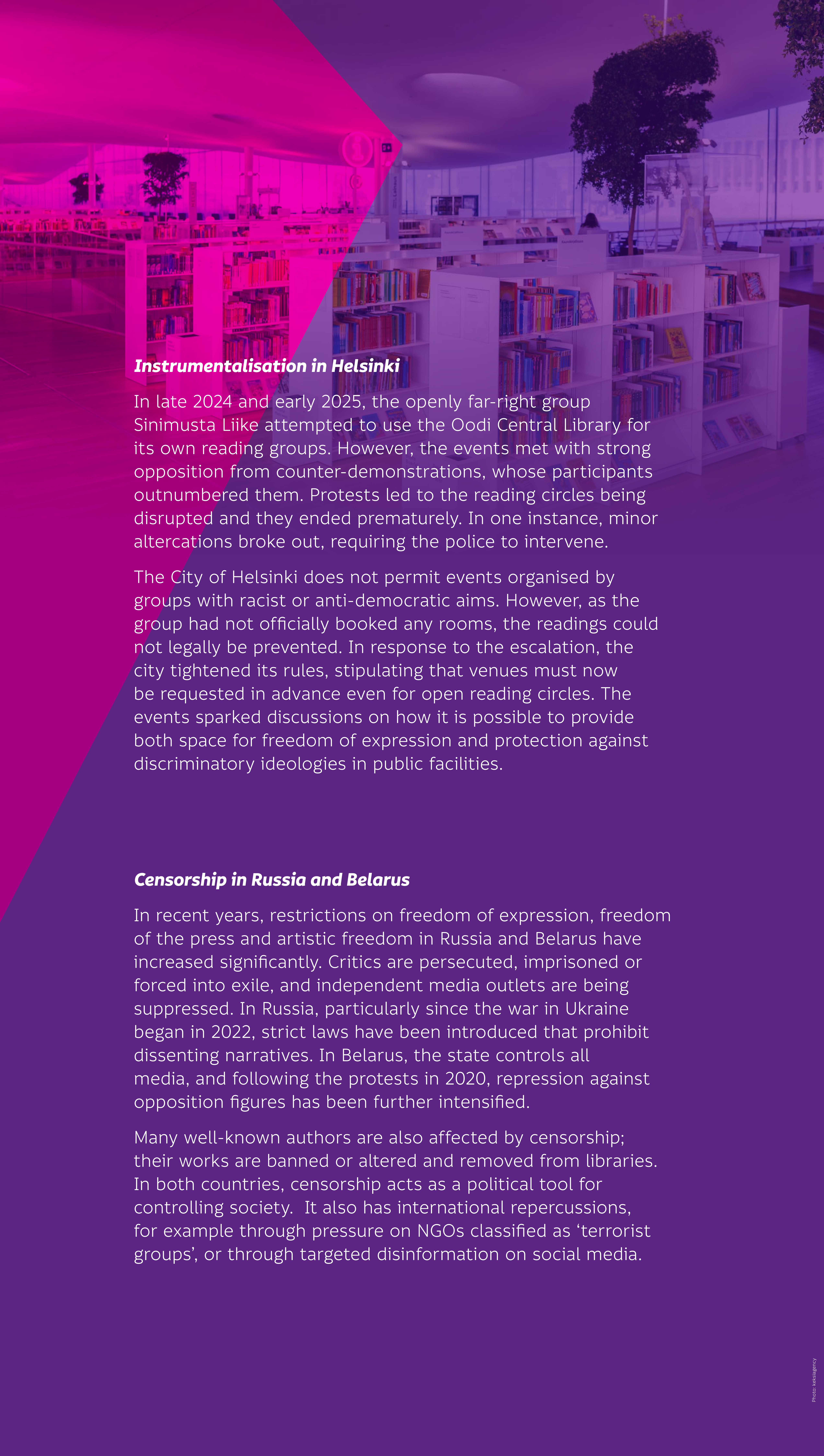
(Dr. Arne Ackermann, Director Of The Munich City Library)

After an initial drag queen reading at Munich City Library in 2022 had been well received, the next one – which was intended to mark the start of a regular series of drag readings in June 2023 – sparked a media shitstorm. Politicians seized on the issue. Three months before the Bavarian state parliament election, the reading became a tool for political controversy.

Hatred was directed primarily at the participating artists. In particular, the personal account by young trans author Julana Gleisenberg and the name of drag king Eric BigClit\* led to threats, insults and damage to property at the library hosting the event. The AfD covered Munich with posters featuring imagery reminiscent of the 'Stürmer' (a Nazi propaganda newspaper), fuelling anti-queer sentiment.

However, there was also a committed counter-movement comprising local government, city politicians, queer-friendly media and associations. The civil society alliance "München ist bunt" responded to the protest outside the library with a demonstration of its own. It was attended by over 500 people.

\*The name deliberately draws on sexual connotations to challenge common gender norms – at least from an adult's perspective. For children, however, 'clit' – the English term for the clitoris – carries no such sexual connotation, but simply refers to a body part. Particularly in the context of preventing sexual assault, it is important that children, especially girls, are able to name this body part. For them, Eric remains, first and foremost, simply Eric.



### ***Instrumentalisation in Helsinki***

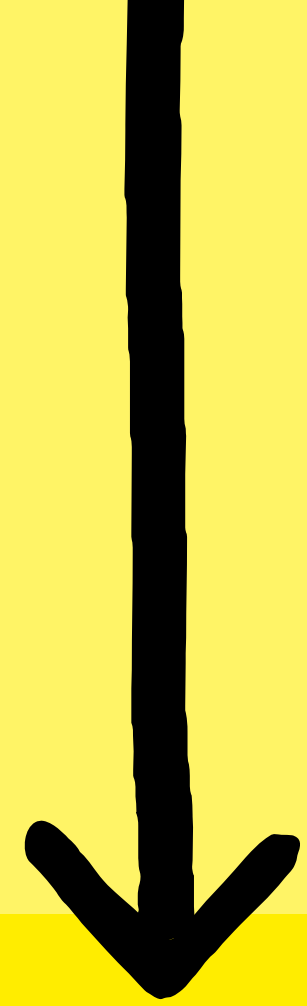
In late 2024 and early 2025, the openly far-right group Sinimusta Liike attempted to use the Oodi Central Library for its own reading groups. However, the events met with strong opposition from counter-demonstrations, whose participants outnumbered them. Protests led to the reading circles being disrupted and they ended prematurely. In one instance, minor altercations broke out, requiring the police to intervene.

The City of Helsinki does not permit events organised by groups with racist or anti-democratic aims. However, as the group had not officially booked any rooms, the readings could not legally be prevented. In response to the escalation, the city tightened its rules, stipulating that venues must now be requested in advance even for open reading circles. The events sparked discussions on how it is possible to provide both space for freedom of expression and protection against discriminatory ideologies in public facilities.

### ***Censorship in Russia and Belarus***

In recent years, restrictions on freedom of expression, freedom of the press and artistic freedom in Russia and Belarus have increased significantly. Critics are persecuted, imprisoned or forced into exile, and independent media outlets are being suppressed. In Russia, particularly since the war in Ukraine began in 2022, strict laws have been introduced that prohibit dissenting narratives. In Belarus, the state controls all media, and following the protests in 2020, repression against opposition figures has been further intensified.

Many well-known authors are also affected by censorship; their works are banned or altered and removed from libraries. In both countries, censorship acts as a political tool for controlling society. It also has international repercussions, for example through pressure on NGOs classified as 'terrorist groups', or through targeted disinformation on social media.



# **Intellectual Freedom – Banned, Removed, Debated**

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Millerntorwache is a branch of the Museum of Hamburg History, operated by the Alfred Toepfer Stiftung F.V.S.

*Hamburg, May 2026*

