From 1968 to 1994, the Malawi Censorship Board has banned hundreds of books, including many important (and especially left-wing) works of history, one of the disciplines most affected. The September 1964 cabinet crisis, in which President Hastings Banda eliminated a series of potential rivals from the government, was the most important historical taboo. The names of those who contributed to the rise of Malawian nationalism in the 1950s, such as Henry Chipembere or Kanyama Chiune, could be mentioned only in secret. The history of Malawi course at the University of Malawi had to be taught selectively to avoid police intervention. Clearance for field research was difficult to obtain and the trips were allegedly monitored by security agencies. Access to the National Archives at the University of Malawi had to be taught selectively to avoid police intervention. Clearance for field research such as Henry Chipembere or Kanyama Chiume, could be mentioned only in secret. The history of Malawi course at the University of Malawi had to be taught selectively to avoid police intervention. Clearance for field research was difficult to obtain and the trips were allegedly monitored by security agencies. Access to the National Archives was strictly controlled and manuscripts which had benefited from them had to be cleared by various government agencies. One source described the situation as follows: “During the show trial of Orton and Vera Chirwa in 1984, when Vera Chirwa began her testimony with the statement ‘When I founded the Malawi Women’s League’, a tremor of excitement ran through the spectators. The simplest historical fact has become subversive.”

1959 Following disturbances in March, the Nyasaland African Congress was outlawed and its leader Hastings Banda ([1906]–), who had studied history at the University of Chicago, was arrested and imprisoned in Southern Rhodesia until April 1960. Banda became prime minister (1963–66) and president (1966–94).

1968 In a November speech, Banda strongly objected to a text on Malawi’s history which referred to the role played by the predominantly Muslim Yao people of southeastern Malawi in the precolonial Arab slave trade, in order to avoid tribal conflict. At the same time, the Yao were unfavorably presented in official Malawian historiography.

1970 A History of Torture throughout the Ages, by G.R. Scott, was banned.

1970s In the 1970s the University of Malawi, Limbe, was purged of northern administrators and academic staff, including historian Chifipa Gondwe, as one of the measures to favor students from the Central Region (the region where Banda, John Tembo, and others in control of the Malawian government came from).

1972– Historian Landeg White (1940–), lecturer at the University of Malawi (1969–72), was deported after Vanguard, a radical student magazine of which he was editorial adviser, had published a poem critical of old men. This was regarded as offensive to the government. His work was banned. White became a research fellow (1980–84) and director (1984–) at the Center for Southern African Studies of York University, United Kingdom. In 1999 he taught at the Universidade Aberta, Lisbon. He also worked in Trinidad and Sierra Leone.

1975– Among the books banned as of 31 December were history books, particularly studies of the Russian Revolution, the overthrow of Ghana’s first president Kwame Nkrumah, and accounts of the problems of postindependence Africa. They included The History of the Russian Revolution (1929), written by Leon Trotsky (1879–1940) while he was exiled in Turkey; Impact of the Russian Revolution by historian Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975); The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa: The Making of Malawi and Zambia 1873–1964 (Cambridge MA 1965) by Robert I. Rotberg; and Banda (London 1974), a biography by journalist Philip Short (of which three thousand copies were destroyed in December 1972, a few weeks before its publication). One of the reasons for the ban on Short’s book may have been Short’s probing into Banda’s exact age, a politically sensitive subject because it could affect the popular image of his heroic march to South Africa as a young person. Also banned was Strike a Blow and Die by the President’s chief, an account of the 1915 anti-British uprising of pastor John Chilembwe, the first founder of an independent church in Malawi, a document of prime importance for the study of Malawi’s past. The book was edited by a non-African scholar whose work The Rise of African Nationalism was also banned because it was unacceptable to Banda. The book bans were cited as evidence for the reason that Malawian historians did little research on Malawí’s modern history.

pre-1977 On 3 September 1977, Albert Muwalo Nqumayo (1927–77) was executed. A former secretary-general of the ruling Malawi Congress Party and a former minister of state in the president’s office (1966–76), he was arrested in October 1976, found guilty of treason, and sentenced to death after an unfair trial with inadequate evidence by the Southern Regional Traditional Court in Blantyre in February 1977. Muwalo had allegedly been involved in a plot to assassinate Banda and overthrow the government. One of the charges was that he possessed the banned Animal Farm, by George Orwell (1903–50), a historical study of the assassination of Zulu leader Tshaka (1787–1828), and political and historical works on the
USSR. The judges found that, although these latter works were not banned, they undoubtedly would have been if they had been imported legally. Possession of them was deemed evidence of subversive intention. As an influential politician, Muwalo had been responsible for many detentions in 1975–76, particularly those of members of the University of Malawi’s academic staff.

1982 In July a proposal of historians Leroy Vail [1940–99] and White [q.v. 1972–] to a meeting of Malawian historians and political scientists to hold a seminar on the 1964 cabinet crisis met with complete silence. Several people left the room.

1984–85 In 1984, at a conference on Malawi’s development strategy held at Edinburgh University, a paper by Andrew Ross, containing reportedly privileged information on the 1964 cabinet crisis, was suppressed by the organizers. It was subsequently presented to a research seminar at York University in 1985.

1989— Books on Malawian history by such authors as Landeg White [q.v. 1972–], Philip Short [q.v. 1975–], Robert Rothberg, and John Pike remained out of circulation.

Also see Zimbabwe (1962: federal project).

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