

Gaslit Nation Transcript
The War on History Teachers: The Sari Beth Rosenberg Interview
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<https://www.patreon.com/posts/war-on-history-63968201>

[intro theme music]

Sarah Kendzior:

I'm Sarah Kendzior, the author of the bestsellers, *The View From Flyover Country* and *Hiding in Plain Sight*, and of the upcoming book, *They Knew: How a Culture of Conspiracy Keeps America Complacent*, available for pre-order now.

Andrea Chalupa:

I am Andrea Chalupa, a journalist and filmmaker and the writer and producer of the journalistic thriller, *Mr. Jones*, about Stalin's genocide famine in Ukraine, a film the Kremlin doesn't want you to see so be sure to see it.

Sarah Kendzior:

And this is *Gaslit Nation*, a podcast covering corruption in the United States and rising autocracy around the world.

Andrea Chalupa (00:00:48):

Welcome to our special spring series, *Gaslit Nation Presents... Rising up from the Ashes: Cassandras and Other Experts on Rebuilding Democracy* [Symphony SFX]. Our bonus episodes available to Patreon subscribers at the Truth-teller level and higher feature our esteemed guests taking the *Gaslit Nation Self Care Q&A*, so for fun ideas, sign up to hear that.

Sarah Kendzior:

Joining at this level also gives you access to hundreds of bonus episodes on topics in the news today. We'll be back with our regular episodes in July. If you're signed up any time between now and then at the Democracy Defender level or higher on Patreon—

Andrea Chalupa:

You'll get special access to watch a live taping of *Gaslit Nation* over the summer. More details to come.

Sarah Kendzior (01:39):

This interview is recorded at the end of December, 2021.

[News Clip] (01:43):

Host:

This morning, Texas schools are at the center of a national fight over banned books, an NBC News investigation finding that at least a dozen Texas districts have removed books about race, gender, and sexuality after a surge of parent complaints.

[News Clip Quoting Some Rando] (01:57):

Why are we sexualizing our precious children!?

Host (02:00):

Since the fall, Iris Chang, a junior at Katy Independent School District who identifies as queer has watched books vanish from her school library.

Reporter:

What do you think these parents want?

Iris Chang (02:10):

To keep their children in this protected bubble in which the only opinions they really hear are the ones that they themselves represent.

Host (02:19):

Records requests to nearly a hundred Texas districts found that during the first four months of this school year, parents made at least 75 formal complaints compared to only one filed during the same period last year. Texas governor Greg Abbot even calling for criminal charges against staff who provide kids with “pornographic books”. It's part of a national pattern of parents and school officials banning books at an unprecedented rate, one Tennessee district just last week banning *Maus*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel about the Holocaust. George M. Johnson's memoir, *All Boys Aren't Blue*, is one of the books banned in Katy and elsewhere. It's about a queer Black child that at one point details sexual abuse.

Reporter:

What's it like to see this fight now play out on a national stage?

George M. Johnson(03:02):

To kind of wake up every day and see that more and more people within the country who have power are trying to deny kids who are like me access to my story is heartbreaking.

Host (03:17):

Katy schools declined NBC News's requests for comment. Katy parent, Mary Ellen Cuzela, was inspired to fight for book removals after watching parents fight over books during the Virginia governor's race.

Mary Ellen Cuzela (03:27):

What we're talking about is vulgarity that is inappropriate for any child.

Broadcaster (03:32):

Iris, a member of her school's speech and debate team, is no stranger to speaking out. Lately, she doubts the adults are listening.

Iris Change (03:39):

It sends this message to myself and my peers that our opinions aren't valued.

Reporter (03:48):

Librarians are now coming together and trying to keep these books on their shelves. Some of them have launched a campaign called the #freedomcampaign to bring attention to librarians stories and to try to bring attention to what's happening across the state of Texas.

[end news clip]

Andrea Chalupa (04:04):

Today, we're joined by Sari Rosenberg, a history teacher of 11th graders in New York City and a writer. As the host of the *PBS News Hour Extra Educator Series*, Rosenberg has interviewed many notable guests for the series. She also writes about education for *PBS News Hour Extra*, including her 13 part series, "Teaching in the age of Coronavirus." She collaborated with the New York City social studies high school instructional specialists, history professors, and social studies teachers to create the new global and US history curriculum that integrates the New York State social studies standards as well as the social studies practices, essential questions, inquiry questions and content is outlined in the grades 9-12 New York City scope and sequence. Written like a true teacher there [laugh]

Sari Beth Rosenberg:

Exactly.

Andrea Chalupa:

She also recently contributed to a forthcoming edition of the Hidden Voices curriculum. Sari is a frequent curriculum consultant at New York Historical Society, recently contributing as the teacher developer for the Hudson Rising 2019 Exhibit. In March, 2019, she was awarded the Paul Gagnon Prize by the National Council for History and Education. She has been active a lot locally in various issues, including being selected as New York City Department of Education's "Sheroes" for Women's History Month in March, 2019. Rosenberg holds a BA from Columbia College, Columbia University and a Master's from Teacher's College, Columbia University. Welcome to *Gaslit Nation*.

Sari Beth Rosenberg (05:43):

Thank you so much. And as I've told you before, *Gaslit Nation* is—and I'm not just saying this because I'm your guest—this is one of my favorite podcasts and you've both helped guide me through a really turbulent.... It feels like a decade or two, but I think it's been less than a decade, right? I don't know.

Andrea Chalupa (06:00):

It's been a decade. [laugh] That means a lot coming from a history teacher. As a teacher, what are your thoughts, of course, you know, this is a series we're doing, running this spring, trying to get us all grounded for the midterms. And one of the favorite loaded terms that Republicans and Fox News are

going to be batting around left and right and getting their base all frothy in the mouth about is, of course, critical race theory. So we want to really hear a teacher's perspective—a white teacher's—perspective, too, because you know, this isn't a bBack issue. It's an American issue. So as a teacher, someone that as a white woman happens to teach American history, you can talk to other white women across the country about, “Do not be scared about teaching Black history and here are the reasons why.” So as a teacher, what are your thoughts on the weaponization of history in America, especially critical race theory becoming a Republican Fox news scapegoat favorite?

Sari Beth Rosenberg (07:05):

It's terrifying, and I'm saying that as someone who teaches in one of the most progressive high schools, in one of the most progressive districts, in the most progressive cities in America. It still terrifies me because it's an attack on my profession, but really I see it as an attack on America. And it's a backlash to the progress—the slow progress—that we've been making. I never heard of CRT, I never talked about CRT, until we started hearing about it all summer. Now, am I familiar with the concepts and the framework? Absolutely. And when I say, had I ever heard of it, the terminology? No, because we don't teach that framework in K-12. Do we teach about systemic racism? Yes, because that is unfortunately a fundamental part of America that I would hope that all Americans would be on board with dismantling.

Sari Beth Rosenberg (08:14):

Now, I'm a history teacher so I'm always so prone to do the whole, like, contextualization, but long story short, this has been a focus group, tried and tested process to figure out how to deal with the fact that there are unfortunately way too many Americans who are uncomfortable with the backlash, I think, really the new iteration of the civil rights movement in response to the murder of George Floyd, and the intergenerational intersectional protests that... What's interesting is that I was so inspired by them—and I'm sure you were too and everyone I keep in close company were—but unfortunately there were way too many Americans who felt threatened by those protests, who felt threatened by the fact that they were being forced to reckon with the fact that we've come a long way in this country, but not far enough.

Sari Beth Rosenberg (09:16):

And so to me, the using of the term “critical race theory” is really smart. The reason why it's smart is, I'm gonna actually quote one of my students. One of my students said, “Miss—” because they all call me Miss. The student said, “Miss, I know why they like using that term, because the three words in that phrase actually do sound scary. Critical, that sounds negative. Race—” and he said, “You know how white people feel about, you know, other races, and Theory sounds really complicated.” And honestly, I've been spending months trying to, you know, grapple with why this phrase has taken off and been so successful and honestly I think that's probably the best explanation because I don't know if you've noticed: Every single person, when they throw out a mic in front of them, like during the Virginia governor governor race, they would throw a mic in front of someone who's definitely not voting for that Democrat because they're against CRT, and then they would be asked, “What's CRT?” And not one person could explain what it was, right?

Andrea Chalupa (10:22):

Exactly.

Sari Beth Rosenberg (10:23):

Yeah, no one could explain what it is because they don't know what it is.

Andrea Chalupa (10:25):

Right. It's the history of racism in America.

Sari Beth Rosenberg (10:29):

It's the history of racism in America and I think, you know, if they would've said, "We're against teaching about racism and the history of racism and slavery in America", even they... I guess the good news is we're at a place in America where even the white supremacists are scared to say that out loud yet. We're close to it, right? We're very close to it, but they still know that they shouldn't say that they're anti anti-racism education because the two antis cross out and that means that they're—

Andrea Chalupa (11:00):

Yeah, that means they're racist. Yeah.

Sari Beth Rosenberg(11:01):

That means they're racist. Right. So instead they use "CRT". But you know what's so funny? I talk about it all the time in class now. "Oh no, send the CRT police after me", because my students want to know what the hell it is! [laughs] "What's CRT, Miss.?!". Well, now I'm gonna teach you. So good job, Republicans. Now we're all teaching about it. Well, in places where they're not going to put a bounty on my head and, you know, the Moms for Liberty aren't gonna come and knock down my door for mentioning the word in class, right? I'm lucky I'm in New York.

Andrea Chalupa (11:30):

Yeah. CRT (Critical Race Theory) is taught on the college and graduate school level. It's about the nitty gritty of the legal system, the systemic structure, through laws and existing systems like the electoral college, for example, that preserve/protect white supremacy. But at its core, it's the teaching of Black history, of racial oppression, discrimination and genocide in America. It's the teaching of racism.

Sari Beth Rosenberg (12:06):

It's the teaching of systemic racism. It's the teaching that there are systems that are inherently racist in this country, so let's explore that. right? And it came from the fact that you had Derrick Bell and Kimberlé Crenshaw and they were investigating how you have all these laws in place that were supposed to have ended discrimination by the 1970s—you know, both gender and racial discrimination,—but it was still occurring. So it's a legal framework to explore how this is still happening. Case in point, the Kyle Rittenhouse trial, right? I mean, that's a great lens for one to understand that entire trial.

Andrea Chalupa (12:48):

Oh, especially the judge who was acting like his lawyer. But so it's the Lee Atwater approach. Lee Atwater famously got caught saying, "You can't say the N word anymore, but you can say voter ID law" or whatever example he gave. CRT is the new N-word for Republicans. So have you experienced backlash as a teacher when it came to CRT?

Sari Beth Rosenberg (13:12):

Absolutely not because I teach in New York city and in fact—

Andrea Chalupa (13:17):

But you've had harassment target you online. You were telling me.

Sari Beth Rosenberg (13:20):

Okay. So, right. So literally like teaching every day, no. However, I've become very outspoken about it from the start because I want to use my platform, I want to use the fact that I have the privilege to not get fired for my job. I'm tenured. I'm a part of a union. I have a superintendent and I work in a school system that actually wants us to be teaching culturally responsive, sustainable education and infuse it into our curriculum. And so I decided that I'm gonna be outspoken against it and I'm going to use my background as a history teacher and as a student of history and call bullshit where I see it. And so this summer, I started tweeting about it. At first, it didn't really get much traction aside from people who agreed with me and were terrified that this was happening and looking at these bills getting passed.

Sari Beth Rosenberg (14:17):

And that my tweet got discovered by—I don't wanna give the person a platform—but I got discovered by some far-right operative and this was my tweet. I spent my 4th of July weekend blocking trolls on Twitter because I simply, every 4th of July, as every history teacher does—as every good history teacher does—I revisit Frederick Douglass' *What to the Slave is the 4th of July?*, written in the 1850s before the civil war. And in that speech, he questions America. He calls bullshit on America in a country that's celebrating liberty while 4 million human beings are enslaved in that very country. And it's a speech that every American should read. And my tweet simply asked, it looks like from the language of most of these CRT bills, that this speech, if you look at the content of it, goes against the CRT bills. It does. It does. Now Frederick Douglass' slave narratives are allowed according to the CRT bills but that speech is not, and that's important.

Sari Beth Rosenberg (15:25):

And this is the kind of gaslighting that the far right does. So I tweeted that and I could read from the tweet—I think I have it pulled up—and fired it off. It was a thread. And they came for me. They came from me really hard. They're very good in their trolling, very evil and malicious. They clearly were in a group together, a room together, because their messaging was all the same. "Sari Beth Rosenberg is a liar. She's lying. You can teach Frederick Douglass. She's a liar." And they also, I happen to have a blue check, I'm verified on Twitter, which also really bothered them. "This blue check teacher person who says they're a teacher belongs nowhere in a classroom because she's a liar."

Sari Beth Rosenberg (16:17):

That was their mantra, over and over again. "There's nothing in the bills that says you can't teach Frederick Douglass." Now, of course, if I were to go back and forth with them (which I did not), I would've said, "Yes, you can teach slave narratives, which is far different than the language in *What to the Slave is the 4th of July*, right? That speech, even today, is really fiery and really powerful and evocative and goes against everything that they don't want being taught, which is about racism in America and how America isn't living up to its ideals. So what I did is I think I blocked all of them and because I blocked all of them, they decided to go onto some site I'd never heard of called Twitchy, post my thread and respond to me there instead, basically saying, "Sari Rosenberg's a liar and this is where she works." That's what they did.

Andrea Chalupa (17:08):

And what was the response at your school? Did they contact your principal? How did the harassment continue?

Sari Beth Rosenberg (17:16):

Luckily school wasn't in session but they also included Randi Winegarten in their article, saying that, "Of course Sari Rosenberg got retweeted by Randi Winegarten", you know, because they also like to go after her as well.

Andrea Chalupa (17:30):

And who is she?

Sari Beth Rosenberg (17:31):

Sorry, Randi Winegarten is the president of the American Federation of Teachers. So, you know, they hate unions, and especially unions for teachers, so she was kind of broiled into it and she contacted me and essentially said she has my back. She had already made a statement saying that the AFT will protect teachers if they wanna teach about racism. Can you believe that we're saying this out loud? That the union will protect teachers if they teach about slavery and racism and get, you know, prosecuted by their respective district. She let me know she had my back if anything came of it. Luckily, it happened over the summer. It kind of boiled over, but you know what? If I wasn't teaching in New York City, if I was teaching in a school where they do have these CRT bills on the books or laws passed, I would've lost my job.

Sari Beth Rosenberg (18:20):

I can say that with all certainty. I would've been made an example of. I mean, I probably can't help myself. I probably would've tweeted that if I lived in Texas and lost my job, but it would've been worth it because we're living at a time where... I remember in college I was a history major and I wrote about the Vichy regime in France. And I thought to myself, "I'm Jewish, but what would I have done if I was not Jewish in Vichy, France? Would I have just been complicit?" And I said, No. And you can't make parallels like that, like, the days of Nazis is different than the days of what's happening now, but there are parallels. And if I don't speak out and if I just take advantage of the fact that I don't have to because I'm protected here, then I would be living a lie against my principles, which are, I believe that we are... People say it's like a slow crawl to fascism. I think we're going fast forward. I don't think we're just flirting with fascism. We aren't, but there are very powerful forces that I've learned about from you all who are not just flirting with fascism, they're taking us there. And I want to take advantage of the fact that I still have a voice and can speak out. But it was scary. I was a little scared. I didn't quite know what they could have done to me, but it's a scary feeling when you're getting ganged up on the internet because you are being called a liar when you know you're not.

Andrea Chalupa (19:37):

Right, when you're just advocating for the importance of teaching racism in schools so we can protect students from racism. There's also debate over how young is too young to teach Black history in America and non-white people have responded that it should be taught as soon as Black and Brown children experience racism which, of course, it can be as early as kindergarten, if not earlier. What are your thoughts on the debate about age appropriateness in terms of teaching about racial oppression to children?

Sari Beth Rosenberg (20:09):

Yes, Black and Brown children, studies do show that they unfortunately can experience racism as early as kindergarten and therefore I agree that kindergarten is not too young to start introducing the concept of racial oppression to children. Of course, you're not going to engage them in a college level doctoral

course on it, but there are excellent books written for kindergartners, some of which have been banned now in some schools unfortunately, that can help kids make sense of this world because that's what education is about. It's helping kids make sense of the world, contextualize it, and therefore face some of the uncomfortable truths in order to move forward and create a better society for everyone. So I don't think it's too young for white kids to learn about racism in kindergarten because Black and Brown children are experiencing it.

Andrea Chalupa (21:18):

What is the role of teachers and other educators to teach about authoritarianism?

Sari Beth Rosenberg (21:24):

I believe that one of the most fundamental roles of teachers and other educators is to teach about authoritarianism. Authoritarianism is a threat in our world today, just as much as it was a threat in the past when our grandparents and great grandparents were fighting it and we must, must not let those stories die. We also must teach young people about what's happening around the globe in our own country related to authoritarianism because it is a fundamental threat to our democracy and the future of this nation. So, it is our duty to teach young people about it so that they can understand it, they can name it, and fight against it and make sure they don't fall prey to it.

Andrea Chalupa (22:22):

How are you seeing education change, if at all, to the response of growing authoritarianism in America?

Sari Beth Rosenberg (22:29):

I am seeing education change in ways that terrify me. Teachers are very, very scared in the states where they are passing anti history laws about what they teach, how they teach, what they say, because some teachers aren't even protected by unions. And even if they are, they're not necessarily in the financial position or feel safe enough to challenge the unjust laws. And so what we are going to continue to see is the breakdown, the stripping away, of free speech in classrooms and also, if this keeps up, young people, Black and Brown kids, are going to not be able to hear the stories, experience the stories about their ancestors and their roles in the story of America. That should be deeply troubling to every single person in this country. And so we need to make sure that we push back against this.

Sari Beth Rosenberg (23:41):

We need to make sure that at the local level people run for school board, they run for the local offices and government positions and get rid of these laws that have been passed because they pose a fundamental threat to democracy and they're taking us one step closer to fascism. I'm not speaking in hyperbole when I say that. I think everyone needs to read or reread Timothy Snyder's incredible New York Times essay from the summer, *The War on History is a War on Democracy*. What they are passing in these states—these CRT laws, these anti history laws—are memory laws akin to what the Soviet Union did and Russia does in response to their history that they don't want people to learn about: the unsightly parts of their history.

Andrea Chalupa (24:42):

What inspires you to teach history and why do you see teaching history as important?

Sari Beth Rosenberg (24:47):

I am inspired to teach history because I can't think of a better way for people to really understand the daily headlines that we see, to contextualize them, understand them, synthesize them. Every day I walk into the classroom and I might be teaching about Andrew Jackson, I might be teaching about the market revolution of the 1820s or, you know, I might be teaching about manifest destiny, but I teach that because I want my students to be able to see the through lines from the past to the present so that they can make sense of what's happening, have a better grip of it and feel empowered to make a difference in the world. I think that we are seeing across the country attacks on history for that very reason. History, knowing our history, every single aspect of it is so powerful. And that is why certain forces from the right want to erase parts of our history, because they know how powerful it can be when you really understand the past, the complexity of it all, because only then can you make sense of what's going on today and create a more equitable society with that knowledge. And that's why they are attacking history right now. And that's why we need to fight back.

Andrea Chalupa (26:22):

And what more would you like addressed in terms of supporting our teachers, many who feel attacked and censored by local laws in so-called red states, threatening teachers and also librarians for teaching about the long history of racial oppression, LGBTQ and women's rights, and so forth?

Sari Beth Rosenberg (26:42):

I would like to see more people speaking out, more politicians and lawmakers speaking out publicly, taking a stand every day that we see a new headline about a law in Iowa, or about the Moms for Liberty saying they want to put bounties on teacher's heads for teaching CRT. All I see are a few educators and journalists (sometimes) speaking out against it. I think that we need politicians, legislators. I wanna see the Biden administration take a bigger stand against it. We need leaders who people look up to as defenders of our democracy to speak in plain English about why this is wrong and why attacking our history—attacking how history is taught, what is taught about our history—is an attack on our democracy. I don't see that spelled out enough. I don't see enough people doing that. I see them trying to equivocate and explain how it's not CRT and all that kind of stuff.

Sari Beth Rosenberg (27:51):

But I want people to call out what this is really about. This is an attack on teaching history. This is an attack on including all the voices of people in this country who have made America what it is. And this is an attempt to erase those stories, to blot them out of the American story. And I don't see enough people calling that out. That's why I do it on Twitter every day. And there are some amazing people who do, amazing historians who do as well, but I wanna see more politicians and people that other people look up to for being the arbiters of justice and democracy calling out what's happening.

[outro theme music]

Andrea Chalupa:

Our discussion continues and you can get access to that by signing up on our Patreon at the Truth Teller level or higher.

Sarah Kendzior:

We want to encourage you to donate to your local food bank, which is experiencing a spike in demand. We also encourage you to donate to Oil Change International, an advocacy group supported with the generous donation from the Greta Thunberg Foundation that exposes the true costs of fossil fuels and facilitates the ongoing transition to clean energy.

Andrea Chalupa:

We encourage you to help support Ukraine by donating to Razom for Ukraine at razomforukraine.org. We also encourage you to donate to the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian relief organization helping refugees from Ukraine, Syria and Afghanistan. Donate at rescue.org. And if you want to help critically endangered orangutans already under pressure from the Palm oil industry, donate to the Orangutan Project at theorangutangproject.org. Gaslit Nation is produced by Sarah Kendzior and Andrea Chalupa. If you like what we do, leave us a review on iTunes. It helps us reach more listeners. And check out our Patreon. It keeps us going.

Sarah Kendzior:

Our production managers are Nicholas Torres and Karlyn Daigle. Our episodes are edited by Nicholas Torres and our Patreon exclusive content is edited by Karlyn Daigle.

Andrea Chalupa:

Original music in Gaslit Nation is produced by David Whitehead, Martin Vissenberg, Nik Farr, Demien Arriaga, and Karlyn Daigle.

Sarah Kendzior:

Our logo design was donated to us by Hamish Smyth of the New York-based firm, Order. Thank you so much, Hamish.

Andrea Chalupa:

Gaslit Nation would like to thank our supporters at the Producer level on Patreon and higher—oh, and by the way, if you don't hear your name on this list and you've signed up, we're going to say your name starting in July and it keep it going for how long you've donated, FYI. So, we'd like to thank...Patreon supporter list...]