

THE FIGHT FOR THE *ENCYCLOPAEDIA*'S PUBLICATION

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Part 1 – The first attacks

How did the publication of this huge book, the *Encyclopaedia*, play out? The piece of work was supposed to be published at the rate of one volume a year, in alphabetical order. For example, Volume 1 contained all the words starting with A. But the publication wasn't a smooth process, on the contrary.

Let us start with the first attacks. The abbot of Prades, who had submitted and completed a theology thesis at the Sorbonne, the faculty of theology at the time, was accused in 1751 of favouring natural religion and materialism. It had just come to light that he was a contributor of the *Encyclopaedia*. The denunciations started multiplying then, targeting in particular an article by Diderot on political authority beginning with these words: "No man has received from nature the right to command others". In February 1752, a royal decree declared that the *Encyclopaedia* contained maxims, I quote, "aiming to destroy royal authority, to heighten faulty basis, corruption of morals, irreligion and incredulity", and prescribed the work's prohibition.

Thanks to Malesherbes, who was director of bookstores, a kind of Minister of Culture, the publication was able to resume in late 1752, surrounded by a large support system where we see both the Marquise de Pompadour, literary people like Voltaire and a whole European public mind which saw in this confrontation the combat of philosophical spirit against devout spirit. Volume 3 of the *Encyclopaedia* was thus published in 1753 and then Volumes 4, 5, 6 and 7 came out at the rate of one per year. But other storms were brewing.

Part 2 – The second prohibition

In 1757, Damiens's attack against Louis XV reinforced police vigilance towards any book that could contribute to undermine royal authority and religion. A hostile press was unleashed from there. For example, the Jansenist Abraham Chaumeix wrote *Legitimate Prejudice against the Encyclopaedia*.

But it is above all the publication in 1758 of *Of Spirit* by materialist philosopher Helvetius that caused a scandal and attracted the violent indictment of the prosecutor of the Parlement de Paris in January 1759 against subversive works, among which was the *Encyclopaedia*. It was then prohibited a second time, after being slashed and burned by an executioner. A few months later, on September 3, 1759, the Pope proclaimed in an apostolic letter in the form of a papal bull, the condemnation in Latin of the *Encyclopaedia* and forbade its reading under penalty of excommunication.

Part 3 – The banned *Encyclopaedia*

The book is thus stopped at Volume 7, that is to say at the end of letter G. It is again the Minister Malesherbes who rescued the enterprise by warning Diderot that he received an order to seize the *Encyclopaedia*'s manuscripts, which are then secured. The last ten volumes of articles will be continued in secret and released all together in 1765, without any publisher name and with a false address. For the illustration plates, the associated booksellers obtained a new authorisation thanks again to Malesherbes, but this time, the name "Encyclopaedia" disappeared from the title and the volumes were only named *Collection of Plates*. It wasn't over yet. Let us say a word about the last outrages that Diderot had to undergo.

Part 4 – Last outrages before publication

D'Alembert had already left since 1758 the co-direction of the *Encyclopaedia*. Diderot, for his part, refused to abandon and expatriate himself to continue the work, as the King of Prussia and the Tsarina of Russia offered him. But many other obstacles would cross the company's path. Charges of plagiarism circulated suddenly. A hostile press took hold of this charge. Not only were the Encyclopaedists impious, but they also are thieves. As Diderot later wrote, "the name of Encyclopaedist was turned into an odious label, which was attached to everyone that one wanted to show to the king as dangerous subjects".

Last outrage but not least, Diderot discovered a secret censorship of the *Encyclopaedia* by its principal bookseller, Le Breton. The latter, anxious to ensure peaceful income gain, had redacted many articles whose philosophy seemed to him dangerous to publish. These were essentially Jaucourt's and Diderot's. But the work was finally completed, and in the *Encyclopaedia*'s final preface Diderot pays tribute to Jaucourt, faithful and last co-editor. "If we have raised a shout of joy like the sailor when he espies land after a sombre night that has kept him midway between sky and flood, it is to M. de Jaucourt that we are indebted for it." That is why Jaucourt wrote the *Encyclopaedia*'s last article: "Zzuéné".

In conclusion, what should we remember? A famous work disseminated and imitated throughout Europe, the *Encyclopaedia* was, in the kingdom of France, the most monitored book and the one whose publication has overcome the most obstacles. To manage to complete its publication was a real fight for freedom of thought that Diderot, accompanied by Jaucourt, led all the way through.