

APPROVE, BAN OR ENFORCE COMPLIANCE:  
COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL APPROACHES TO CENSORSHIP

This special issue examines Russian literary censorship by moving beyond the traditional conception of censorship as a purely institutional, repressive apparatus imposed upon literature.<sup>1</sup> In recent decades this view has been radically revised. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Bourdieu<sup>2</sup> or Durand,<sup>3</sup> the field has expanded to include the concept of ‘systemic’ or ‘hidden’ censorship. This term captures the routine, often invisible processes embedded within the social and professional milieus where literary production occurs. Consequently, literary censorship is now understood not merely as a state-driven system enacted through official institutions, but as a complex of professional and everyday practices carried out by a wide array of actors. These include producers –writers, illustrators, publishers, editors, translators–as well as consumers, from professional critics to ordinary readers. As Matthew Boone observes, “Instead of ideology proceeding from a unitary source, we have discourse proliferating from multiple, diffuse sites of power, organized around authoritative bodies of knowledge and the institutions formed to cultivate and disseminate them”.<sup>4</sup> These “localised systems of control” constitute intricate practices shaped by a spectrum of individual and group interests.

The present issue explores these dynamics by investigating how various actors within the Russian literary sphere have participated in the censorship process over the past 150 years. Our contributors analyze the roles of chief editors of publishing houses and ‘thick’ journals, internal and external reviewers, samizdat publishers in the perestroika era, and authors themselves – both those who submitted their work for publication and those who chose to leave manuscripts in their desk drawers, ‘for better times.’ Through various case

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<sup>1</sup> M. Bunn, *Reimagining repression: new censorship theory and after*, “History and Theory”, 2015, 54 (1), pp. 25-44.

<sup>2</sup> P. Bourdieu, “*Censure et mise en forme*”, *Ce que parler veut dire. L'économie des échanges linguistiques*, Paris, Fayard, 1982.

<sup>3</sup> P. Durand, *La censure invisible*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> M. Bunn, *Reimagining repression: new censorship theory and after*, “History and Theory”, 2015, 54 (1), p. 37.

studies, this collection aims to shed light on the general patterns of censorship (co-)participation that have shaped Russian literary history.

The issue opens with three articles devoted to the functioning of censorship practices at the stage of working with manuscripts in publishing houses. Maria Mayofis's contribution examines internal reviews of literary works in Soviet publishing houses and literary magazines during the 1950s and 1960s. By carefully analyzing the evaluative criteria employed by reviewers of different status and authority, Mayofis identifies the pragmatic functions embedded within the reviewing process. These non-anonymous reviews, a formal part of the editorial process, functioned as a compulsory mechanism for controlling and approving texts for publication. The analysis raises the question of the boundary between literary editing and censorship. Typically, editorial suggestions are assessed by the degree of their stylistic intrusion into the author's text—and nothing more. In the Soviet context, however, stylistic concerns represented merely the surface. Reviewers—often editors, writers, translators, and critics who had accumulated significant symbolic capital—leveraged their expert status to deliver overarching assessments of a text and to recommend 'improvements' that were frequently ideological in nature. These reviews could serve as a shield, protecting controversial works from internal censorship, or as a weapon to ban or suspend work on disfavored manuscripts. Tellingly, many unfavorable reviews that prevented publication were less the product of direct repression by state censors than the result of internal power struggles—clashes between the literary elite and marginalized (often younger) writers, or between competing professional factions. By studying the internal archives of Soviet publishers, we can thus understand not only how cultural policy was imposed from above, but also how 'grassroots', behind-the-scenes practices determined which innovative works of the de-Stalinization and Thaw era were ultimately allowed to see the light of day.

Maria Mizernaya reconstructs the history of editorial policy at the "Sovetsky pisatel" [Soviet Writer] publishing house on the eve of the Second World War. Her study reveals that frequent turnover of the publishing house's directors, interventions by high-ranking officials from the Union of Soviet Writers, the aesthetic tastes and ideological apprehensions of individual manuscript reviewers, together with the political unreliability of compilers and editors during the mid-production, demonstrate what the theory of self-organization would label as 'bifurcation points' in terms of censorship: this is the situation when the system proves to be unstable and uncertainty arises. Some of these multi-level events—like a change of the publishing house director—provoked systemic shifts while others determined only the fate of single books. Behind this kaleidoscopic practices lies evidence of an intensive production of censorial actions

by a vast array of actors. These actions became routinized, forming a dynamic system within the everyday reality of publishing.

A similar picture emerges in Ekaterina Tarasova's thorough study of the editorial environment at the journal "Krokodil" between 1922 and 1934. A shift in the censorial climate in 1923 led to a drastic change in the selection of material for satirical depiction. While a personal conflict between the editor-in-chief and a senior party official resulted in the former's dismissal, it did not foster a radical change in the journal's course, which maintained its focus on state cultural policy. Operating under a regime of self-censorship and caution, whereby satire was directed at strengthening the existing order rather than destabilizing it, the journal managed to balance external pressures with the supervisory functions it had voluntarily assumed. However, the boundaries of the permissible shifted radically at the turn of the 1920s-1930s. At this point, the journal's internal system of checks and balances could no longer withstand the pressure from the party apparatus, which sought to eliminate the duplication of control functions "Krokodil" had undertaken. The state asserted that only official bodies could dictate the themes and targets of criticism, and only state censorship could claim ultimate control over literary and, more broadly, cultural production.

The fourth contribution broadens the scope to include different actors who create opportunities for previously banned works to re-enter the public sphere in a moment of relatively relaxed state control. Valentina Parisi's article investigates the repatriation of Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography, *Drugie berega* (*Other Shores*), from *tamizdat* to the official state publishing system (*gosizdat*) during the 'weakened' censorship of the perestroika era in the late 1980s. By characterizing the competitive strategies employed by different publishing clusters—*tamizdat*, *samizdat*, and the official press—in the process of reintroducing an émigré author to a Russian-language readership, Parisi convincingly demonstrates that the inertia of state censorship remained potent, even amidst a significantly transformed bureaucratic and public discourse on free speech. The long shadow of Soviet censorship effectively recreated the preconditions for *samizdat*-specifically, its public print incarnation in the 1980s as a low-circulation journal – to continue playing a role in disseminating 'correct' versions of *tamizdat* works.

Polina de Mauny's article shifts the focus to the actors who sustained and triggered the machinery of state censorship in the Russian Empire during the 19th century. Thanks to a meticulous analysis of publisher Mauricii Wolf's 1880 resistance to a censorship ban, the article illuminates, through a case study of the ban of two children books, the role of contingency in overcoming state proscriptions. Her study traces how the sanctions of censorship authorities sought legitimacy by appealing to the professional community, in this instance, the

expert assessment originated from within the literary guild itself, with a fellow author acting as an unofficial – and arguably adversarial – reviewer. De Mauny demonstrates that Wolf found himself powerless to challenge a censorial decision backed by this guild expertise; only a subsequent change in the leadership of the censorship administration provided him with the opportunity to successfully overturn the ban.

This scenario presents a striking contrast to Kirill Zubkov’s article, which explores the inverse situation: participants in the literary process actively attempting to weaponize appeals to censorship for their own competitive advantage. His focus is the polemic between critic Dmitry Pisarev and writer Nikolai Leskov regarding the novel *Nekuda* [*Nowhere to Go*]. By situating this conflict within the reforms of the 1860s, Zubkov clearly shows how Pisarev sought to use the censorial apparatus to discredit and sideline his rival, thereby framing literature itself as a political battleground. Zubkov analyses the divergence between liberal critics, who defended artistic autonomy to claim freedom from state censorship, and radical critics, who equated aesthetics with political reaction and viewed literature as a space for collective political action. In this light, the critic Pisarev was engaged in less of a polemic with the writer Leskov, and more in a struggle with censorship itself for the right to influence the literary process – a struggle he waged by calling upon the literary community to boycott his rival.

Finally, the last two articles focus on the author as an actor and subject of censorship. How does a writer respond to a climate of external regulation? A central methodological challenge in studying censorship lies in analyzing not merely edited or banned texts, but what was never written at all. How can scholars detect, whether through subtle traces or overt strategies, an author’s conscious omission of certain thematic aspects or their recourse to Aesopian language, driven by the fear of censorial intervention or outright prohibition? In addressing this question, researchers typically have two paths to follow: they either examine drafts for evidence of excision and rephrasing, or they scrutinize the published corpus looking for marks of authorial self-censorship. The latter approach, however, raises the problem of the “discerning reader”, capable or incapable of deciphering a text’s hidden meanings – a phenomenon widely debated in Russian culture of the late 19th century. If a reader is astute, then “silence does not create a mystery but serves to accentuate what is what is not explicitly stated.” Otherwise, the attempt to decode these traces becomes virtually impossible. In his article devoted to the Gulag theme in Soviet literature subject to pre-publication censorship, Duccio Colombo demonstrates this dynamic through examples of metonymic transfer. He shows how Soviet writers used references to the Solovetsky Islands or the White Sea-Baltic Canal as metonyms to broach the taboo subject of the camp system (though the

article also questions the very stability of such taboos). From the researcher's perspective, these metonymies are not evidence of the theme's absence, as is often assumed, but of its diverse and nuanced presence.

A different form of engagement with censorship is evident in the work of Sergei Dovlatov. As Ilaria Remonato illustrates, Dovlatov's poetics were fundamentally shaped by his ingrained habits of 'evasion' and 'avoidance'. Even after his emigration, when the direct influence of Soviet repressive censorship was gone, the writer continued to maintain a dialogue with it, preserving various forms of euphemism in his literary language.

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The case studies presented in this issue reveal several key patterns in the functioning of censorship. Rather than a monolithic, repressive system, censorship emerges as a complex, multi-layered, and evolving network of practices carried out by diverse actors.

Censorship is deeply internalized and routinized within everyday professional processes—writing, editing, peer review, publishing policy—where stylistic corrections are often inseparable from ideological interventions. In this context, both stylistic and ideological criteria become instruments in competitive struggles or in the elimination of disfavored authors, both in the Russian Empire and in the Soviet Union.

The intensity of censorship is contingent upon both the macro-political climate—such as authoritarian shifts in state regimes or the relaxation of state control – as, for example, during “the Thaw” or the perestroika era of the late 1980s—and micro-level events, including personal conflicts within the professional community or changes in institutional leadership.

A paradoxical inertia develops, whereby the strategies of self-censorship, euphemism, and Aesopian language, once cultivated under state control, continue to shape literary production long after formal restrictions are eliminated. This is evident even in the works of authors who have emigrated.

Finally, censorship itself constitutes a field of struggle for symbolic power. Within this field, actors—from writers and critics to party officials—appeal to censorial mechanisms to legitimize their own positions. This transforms the literary process into an arena of political contestation, where calls for boycotts or the damning expert assessments of one's peers become effective weapons for excluding opponents.

*The Editors*

