

“FORMATIVE CENSORSHIP” WITHIN “SOVETSKII PISATEL”
PUBLISHING HOUSE (1934-1940)

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Literature of the 1930s became the subject of research on many occasions, but said research was mostly focused on either the work of individual writers, usually included in the Soviet or modernist canon, or on large-scale institutional phenomena and processes: government directives, Union-wide congresses, etc. At the same time, the everyday “literary life” of the 1930s and the network of ordinary interactions between actors of the literary process, which had perhaps no less an influence on literature than the decrees of the Central Committee, seem to have been studied rather fragmentarily.¹ Soviet censorship is no exception: while the structure of Glavlit (Main Directory for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press under the Council of Ministers of the USSR) and the main stages of the censorship process are well known to historians of Soviet literature,² the exact protocol of implementing those restrictions within the walls of publishing houses was not adequately examined. A case study of the “Sovetskii Pisatel”, one of the main publishing houses of fiction in the USSR in the latter half of 1930s allows to discover the phenomena of “formative censorship”, which, unlike Glavlit, facilitated the adaptation of a certain text to constantly changing circumstances. An institutional analysis based on archival references³ and contemporary press (“Literaturnaia Gazeta”), acknowledges the specifics of everyday publishing work, mundane

¹ See, for example, numerous works by N. Gromova dedicated predominantly to the writers’ biographies during the Stalinist period; see also: V. Antipina, *Povsednevnaya zhizn’ sovetskikh pisatelej v 1930-1950-e gg.*, Moscow, Molodaya gvardiya, 2005; *Konec institucij kul’tury dvadcatyh godov v Leningrade: po arhivnym materialam*, Sankt-Peterburg, IRLI RAN (Pushkinskij Dom), ed. by M. Malikova, Moskva, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2014, etc.

² See works of A. Blium, T.M. Goryaeva; see also: *Censorship in Russia: history and the present: Collection of research works*, Sankt-Peterburg, National Library of Russia, 2001-... (currently contains 9 editions).

³ Funds preserved at the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI) and the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GA RF).

communication of writers, editors and organizations, and the preliminary censorship conditions that were formed as a result. Comparative study of various editing and censoring practices employed by different actors within the publishing house shows a multitude of scenarios, by which an institution could influence and shape fiction.

It is necessary to emphasize that the period that is covered in this paper, which is the latter half of 1930s, is characterised by tremendous changes in Soviet literary process, as well as cultural and social spheres. In 1934, the Socialist realism was declared the reigning method at the First Congress of Soviet Writers. Shortly after, a massive wave of political repressions starting after the murder of S. Kirov in 1934 and reaching its peak in 1937-1938 has further centralised the literature process and solidified the aesthetic canon. Additionally, the state of external affairs leading up to the start of the military conflict with Nazi Germany has contributed to the universal feelings of tension, anxiety and mutual suspicion. However, contrary to the general idea of this cultural period as being entirely determined by total censorship and the inevitable conventions of the socialist realism aesthetic canon, the example of “Sovetskii Pisatel” and its operational processes shows that, within the literary community, polemics, discussions and ambitious projects still occurred even under the most tense pressure.

“Sovetskii Pisatel”. Role of the director in the content selection

“Sovetskii Pisatel” (“Soviet Writer”) was founded in 1934 on the basis of three publishing houses: “Moscow Writers' Association”, “Leningrad Writers' Publishing House”, and “Soviet Literature” (known as the “Federation” until 1933). By 1934, each of them had a particular established reputation. “Moscow Writers' Association” was considered extremely unreliable due to the low quality of its production⁴ and was on the verge of closure due to criminal prosecution of its directors.⁵ “Leningrad Writers' Publishing House” was organized by members of the “Serapion Brothers” literary association and known for its professionalism; it was there that the “Poet's Library” series, iconic for the Soviet publishing industry, was first released.⁶ “Soviet Literature” or “Feder-

⁴ A. Stremnin, *MTP zasoriaet knizhnyi rynek khalturoi i brakom*, “Literaturnaia gazeta”, 57 (373), 1934, May 8th.

⁵ *MGK VKP(b) ob izdatel'stve MTP (Postanovlenie biuro MGK VKP(b) ot 2 iulia 1934 g.)*, “Literaturnaia gazeta”, 85 (401), 1934, July 6th.

⁶ See more on the publishing house's history: T. Kukushkina, *K istorii “Izdatel'stva pisatelei v Leningrade” (1927-1934): Neizvestnye epizody*, “Russkaia literatura”, 2 (2020), pp. 170-183.

ation”, associated with the Organizing Committee of the Soviet Writers’ Union, was a successful publishing house in terms of production and ideological quality.⁷

The merging took place in 1934. Although no official documents facilitating this process were found, it is clear that it coincided with the official foundation of the Soviet Writers’ Union – a new administrative formation that devoured all of the conflicting groups that were still in existence and was appointed to determine the course of the Soviet literature process. The disbanded publishing houses transferred some of their employees to *Sovetskii Pisatel*’, as well as their production portfolios, i.e., the publications that were in progress. This legacy largely determined the operational activity of “Sovetskii Pisatel” in the following years. Employees of the Leningrad branch, coming from the “Leningrad Writers Publishing House” (namely, head of the branch Zoya Nikitina (1934-1937), Yury Tynyanov, responsible for the edition of the “Poet’s Library” series,⁸ etc.) preserved some of the modernist literary traditions and felt somewhat oppositional to the main Moscow branch. “Sovetskaya Literatura” became its organizational core, and poor reputation of the “Moscow Writers’ Association” undoubtedly cast a shadow on the new publishing house (see quote from the interview with the first director of “Sovetskii Pisatel” Fyodor Levin):

The goal of the publishing house *Sovetskii Pisatel*’ is to eliminate the “traditions” of MTP with its focus on “mediocre” literature: we will most categorically pursue a line of struggle for the high quality of the published products. In this direction, we are currently reviewing the editorial portfolios of MTP, from which all works calculated to receive a lenient attitude from the editors will be mercilessly removed.⁹

In addition, the foundation of “Sovetskii Pisatel”, which was supposed to acquire Union-wide significance, could not be carried out without taking into account “Goslitizdat”, a publishing house founded in 1930 under the name “GIKhL” (“State Publishing House of Fiction”) and dominating the sphere of fiction before the emergence of “Sovetskii Pisatel”. Both of them were supposed to divide the literary field in two parts: the former would take on the responsibility of publishing contemporary Soviet literature, while the latter would specialize in classics, as Levin pointed out in an aforementioned interview: “Sovetskii Pisatel” will publish fiction and poetry exclusively: we will

⁷ Transcripts of meetings of the Commission for the party purge of the “Sovetskaya Literatura” publishing house (Aug.-Oct. 1933). GA RF, f. 7953, op. 1, d. 19.

⁸ A. Ostrovsky, *U istokov “Biblioteki poeta”*. *Vospominaniya o Yurii Tynyanove*, Moskva, Sovetskii Pisatel, 1983, pp. 173-187.

⁹ *Sovetskii pisatel*. *Beseda s t. F. Levinym*, “Literaturnaia gazeta”, 95 (411) (1934), July 28th.

not publish critical literature, nor will we publish works of foreign literature: these are the functions of “Goslitizdat”, created under the Council of People’s Commissars of the RSFSR.”¹⁰ In fact, those fields of responsibility soon began to overlap, as can be seen from the correspondence between the two publishing houses. See, for example, this undated letter, supposedly belonging to the end of 1940:

The “Sovetskii Pisatel’” publishing house informs that of the manuscripts transferred by Goslitizdat to Sovetskii Pisatel’, the books by N. Biryukov “On the Farmsteads,” I. Evdokimov “Surikov,” A. Bek “Blast Furnace Workers,” and O. Erberg “Afghan Stories” do not require any significant revision and may well be included in our publishing house’s plan for 1941. <...> This entire issue will be finally resolved in the near future, depending on the paper limits that will be approved for the publishing house for 1941.”¹¹

On a microlevel, personal factors also played an important role in large institutional processes. The decision to publish certain books at “Sovetskii Pisatel’” and their ultimate form and content was determined collectively by the publishing house staff. Individual reviewers and editors could play a decisive role in the fate of a manuscript; even technical editors and proofreaders influenced the final version of the text. The verdict of editors-in-chief, or heads of the prose and poetry sectors, also had considerable weight, but the main share of power belonged to the board and the director of the publishing house.

“Sovetskii Pisatel’” vigorously sought to find a suitable manager for the first five years of its existence. During this short period, the publishing house changed six directors. First of them was Fyodor Levin, who was a board member of Sovetskaya Literatura and actively participated in the organization of the new publishing house. In 1928 he published a collection of poems called “In the Daily Whirlwind”, aligned with the aesthetic values of the Proletkul’t poetry;¹² in 1933, he graduated from the Literary Institute of Red Professors.¹³ Perhaps, of all the heads of the publishing house during this period, Levin was most closely tied to literature. However, as soon as 1935, he was removed from his position for standing up for the *trotskyists* among his employees –

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Publishing house’s correspondence (1940). Vol. II. RGALI, f. 1234, op. 5, d. 28, p. 156.

¹² For more information on F. Levin, see the article by T. Levchenko, his granddaughter: T. Levchenko, *Literaturnye kritiki zhurnalov “Literaturnyi kritik” i “Literaturnoe obozrenie” po materialam arkhiva F. Levina*, “Izvestiia Ural’skogo federal’nogo universiteta. Serii 2. Gumanitarnye nauki”, Vol. 19, No. 2 (163), pp. 38-55. See the memoirs of F. Levin as well: F. Levin, *Iz glubin pamyati: Memories*, Moskva, Sovetskii Pisatel’, 1983.

¹³ F. Levin, *V bure dnei: Stikhi*, Simferopol’, Krymgosizdat, 1928.

according to Feoktist Berezovsky, a constant chairman of the Writers' Union Audit Commission since 1934, he delayed their dismissal despite the instructions of SSP officials:

[...] the apparatus <of the publishing house – M.M.> was selected by Fyodor Levin, and when we told him that this one <worker – M.M.> was unsuitable, and that one was unsuitable, he decisively rejected our advice and declared: "I will work with them and I will select the apparatus." In particular, there was the Trotskyist Kozlovskaya, the Trotskyist Fischelev, Kamanchikov. [...] Kozlovskaya was a well-known Trotskyist. We pointed this out to Levin. The party group of the publishing house demanded that Levin fire her, because she was doing dirty work, not our kind of business. She was head of the editorial office. Despite this decisive demand, he kept her in the apparatus for six months and eventually gave her a two-month vacation and a resort allowance. He fired Fischelev when it became known that he had been running an underground Trotskyist printing house in his apartment. We fought against his presence in the apparatus for 2.5 months, and Levin still did not fire him. In the end, Fischelev was arrested. This was soon after he was fired from the publishing house.¹⁴

After Levin's layoff, for a few months the directorial position was occupied by his deputy, the Hungarian emigrant Alexander Fonyo, who did nothing noteworthy during his short period of management.¹⁵

After Fonyo, Grigoriy Lazar' became the director of the publishing house, remaining at his position during 1936-1938. Information about Lazar, as well as the reasons for his dismissal, are unknown. However, his engaged and energetic correspondence with writers has been preserved, amounting to hundreds of pages for 1936 alone,¹⁶ as well as an interview with Lazar, published in "Literaturnaya Gazeta" immediately after his appointment. In this interview, he promised to release a number of publications for the anniversary of October Revolution, expand the editorial department and improve qualifications and salaries of editors.¹⁷ While Lazar, presumably, treated the publishing business attentively and conscientiously, his successor, L. Shekhtmeister (name unknown) apparently had the most distant relation to literature and culture. His activities received negative responses both in the press, where Lenin-

¹⁴ Soviet Writers' Union Party organization of the Krasnopresnensky district, Moscow. Protocol and transcript of the party meeting (March, 9th, 1949). TsGAM, f. 8131, op. 1, d. 21, pp. 141-142.

¹⁵ See his interview: *Khudozhestvennaia proza v 1935 godu* (A. V. Fon'ov), "Literaturnaia gazeta", 72 (563) (1935), December 31st.

¹⁶ Correspondence of Grigory Lazar' and editor-in-chief P. Timoshevsky (name unknown) with writers, poets and the Leningrad branch (1936). RGALI, f. 1234, op. 1, d. 3.

¹⁷ "Sovetskii pisatel'", "Literaturnaia gazeta", 32 (595) (1936), June 5th.

grad writers accused him of paranoid caution and outright indifference to writers,¹⁸ and among the staff.

The next head of the publishing house, however, played an even more disastrous role in its history. In 1938, the duties of the director were assumed by Yakov Rudoy, who kept the position for less than ten months. This was the most conflict-ridden period of the publishing house in the 1930s, which led to a deep financial crisis. In one year, the publishing house suffered losses in more than 500.000 roubles, the plan fulfilment fluctuated from 27% to 90%, and more than half of the contracts concluded in 1938 were overdue.¹⁹ The situation was so dire that the very existence of “Sovetskii Pisatel’” was called into question. At a meeting for the publishing house’s activists that took place in December 1938, Solomon Lozovsky, member of the Soviet Writers’ Union revisionary commission, said it quite bluntly:

If we now move on to the state of the contract portfolio, editorial and production portfolios, then the situation here is as follows. If we do not take a number of radical measures now, then we can, to put it mildly, call the situation catastrophic. (FROM THE AUDIENCE. And if not to put it mildly?) Then we must close the doors of the Publishing House.²⁰

However, Rudoy was accused not only of the financial collapse, but also of spoiling relations with both writers and employees, of arbitrary rule and an aprioristic mistrust of everyone around him. Trying to protect himself and the publishing house from possible problems, Rudoy tried to get editors to sign statements about the reliability of the authors assigned to them and to survey the writers. See speech given by the publishing house’s editor Malakhov (name unknown):

It was not funny at all, when the editor was told: give a written promise about such and such a person that nothing will happen to him in the near future. /laughter/. When I came to meet the director, he told me: many accidents happen to authors, how can we insure ourselves? You can’t invent any insurance company here, no questionnaire will give you anything. First of all, what needs to be taken into account here is the artistic quality of the work itself. If he is an enemy of the people, then no questionnaire will infringe on him.²¹

¹⁸ M. Slonimskii, V. Kaverin, M. Zoshchenko, Iu. Tynianov, N. Tikhonov, B. Lavrenev. *Ravnodushie k pisatelii. Kak rabotaiut v izdatel'stve “Sovetskii pisatel’”*, “Literaturnaia gazeta”, 8 (715) (1938), February 10th.

¹⁹ Resolutions and orders of the governing organs regarding publishing matters; acts for handover to the newly appointed director of the publishing house (1938). RGALI, f. 1234, op. 3, d. 3, p. 1.

²⁰ Ibid. P. 64 (rev.).

²¹ Ibid. P. 80 (rev.).

Such hyper-cautious management policy was quite natural both in the broader political context of the period and the fact that his predecessor, Shechtmeister, made numerous mistakes by concluding a number of contracts for “unnecessary editions, prohibited by the directive organs”, and “poor-quality manuscripts”,²² and it was evidently dangerous to repeat his mistakes. It finally became possible to bring the publishing house out of the crisis in 1938, with the simultaneous decline in domestic political tension: Georgiy Yartsev, who took over the post from Rudoy, occupied it for the next ten years. In 1948 a new wave of repression began in the USSR under the auspices of the fight against cosmopolitanism, which concerned the literature process as well. That is when Yartsev was fired for the publication of Anna Akhmatova’s collection of poems in 1940, and a number of other publications issued in 1947-1948, among which were books by Boris Pasternak, Ilya Ilf and Evgeniy Petrov, etc.²³

Thus, a candidate suitable for the post of director of the publishing house had to have cultural and political awareness, be able to build democratic relations with the team and authors, be attentive to writers and at the same time remain a strong manager” At first, representatives of the *intelligentsia* (Levin, Fonyo, Lazar) were appointed to this post, then party officials (Shechtmeister, Rudoy); the optimal candidate, combining all the necessary qualities, was not discovered immediately, and even after successfully working in the publishing house for ten years, the director found with such difficulty was accused of political mistakes. Depending on his cultural background, political views, management experience and ability to negotiate, the director determined the current trajectory of “formative censorship” and the degree of risk: he could publish original and potentially highly successful pieces, or, on the contrary, opt for “gray literature” (a term used for describing average fiction) to remain on the safe side.

Thematic plan. Conflict between censorial and economic concerns

The document defining the publishing house’s yearly work course was the thematic plan. It contained a list of books planned for publication the following year, their print run and the number of author’s sheets. The plan was discussed and approved at meetings at the publishing house that included the director and high-ranking representatives of the Union of Soviet Writers. Dur-

²² The act of transfer of the publishing house “Sovetskii Pisatel” to the jurisdiction of the Union of Soviet Writers and handover of the publishing house’s affairs with the appointment of Comrade Rudoy as director (April 1938). RGALI, f. 1234, op. 2, d. 21, p. 5.

²³ B. Sarnov, *Stalin i pisateli: V 4 kn. Kn. 2*, Moskva, Eksmo, 2009, pp. 133-134.

ing the discussions, protocols were made, which the management could subsequently refer to if a conflict would arise. For instance, in 1940, the head of the Leningrad branch, Nikolay Brykin, seeking to maintain good relations with writers Mikhail Zoshchenko and Yury Tynyanov, included the release of their collected works' first volumes in the thematic plan, ignoring the instruction of the Central Committee of the Communist Party's Printing Department to transfer these publications to Goslitizdat. Yartsev, clearly worried about potential problems with the Central Committee, demanded an explanation from Brykin, supported by the protocols from meetings regarding the compilation of thematic plan.²⁴

The only thematic plan preserved in the publishing house's documentation relating to the 1930's was the approved plan for 1937. It had the following sections: prose, containing 237 titles, poetry, which included 47 titles, and 80 critical works.²⁵ Thematic plan did not actually consist of specific topics and was divided, rather schematically, into genre blocks; however, thematic adjustments were possible at the level of general discussions. The plan was compiled according to practical considerations: for example, which authors would be ready to sign a contract with "Sovetskii Pisatel'" and comply with it. At the same time, the publishing house could send requests for specific topics to trusted authors. For example, in a letter to Mikhail Koltsov from September 17th, 1936 Lazar writes:

The publishing house "Sovetskii Pisatel'" asks you to write a book about Spain and the heroic struggle of its people against the rebels for their freedom. We are currently drawing up a thematic plan for 1937 and would like to receive your consent to include a book on Spain in it.²⁶

According to the thematic plan for 1937, it is noticeable that the largest print runs were allocated to books either on ideologically impeccable topics, – for example, *Lenin and Stalin in Fiction* had a print run of 30.000, – or to publications from reliable and respectable authors: the same print run of 30.000 was assigned for Aleksey Tolstoy's *Defense of Tsaritsyn*.²⁷

Political risks played a primary role in the implementation of the thematic plan, especially when the publishing house collaborated with a new author and even more with relatively unconventional texts. Among other important fac-

²⁴ Publishing house's correspondence (1940). Vol. II. RGALI, f. 1234, op. 5, d. 28, p. 218.

²⁵ Thematic plan for 1937. RGALI, f. 1234, op. 2, d. 13.

²⁶ Correspondence of Grigory Lazar' and editor-in-chief P. Timoshevsky (name unknown) with writers, poets and the Leningrad branch (1936). Ibid. Op. 1, d. 3, p. 49.

²⁷ Thematic plan for 1937. RGALI, f. 1234, op. 2, d. 13, pp. 1-13 [Prose section].

tors was the paper shortage, which was an extremely acute issue in the 1930s. The lack of paper forced each potential publication to be treated very carefully and plans to be reduced to the utmost in order to be able to implement them; the resolution for Lazar’s 1936 annual report states: “Because of the reduction in paper limit, recompile the subject plan for 1937 and begin compiling a topic plan for 1938. It is necessary to involve all members of the board in this work, as well as the writers’ activists, librarians and readers.”²⁸ Moreover, the plan was constantly modified under the influence of personal factors; writers consistently missed the deadlines for their contracts, sometimes by several years.²⁹ As a result, the percentage of plan fulfilment decreased, and the publishing house was unable to release editions that were relevant to the current agenda.

At the same time there was an important, although not explicitly stated, factor of economic benefit. Despite the centralized distribution of a significant portion of books to libraries, publications had to be interesting to the Soviet reader for the publisher to sell out the edition and not suffer losses. The publishing house operated on a profit basis; additionally, significant financial losses were strongly discouraged as a sign of mismanagement. For this reason, during the latter half of the 1930s, a policy of combating the so-called “gray literature” was carried out in the publishing sphere. Gray literature was unremarkable, uninspiring, published exclusively to fulfill the plan; see Brykin’s speech at the meeting regarding the dismissal of Rudoy in 1938:

We have a great many books set up, ready for publication. But when you start looking through these books, you see that there are many books, but no books. We are consumed by the grey book. We must devote all our attention to the fight against this grey book. We must prohibit the publication of the grey book.³⁰

Nevertheless, this problem was practically insoluble: if the publishing house had practically no right to make a mistake, both in the political and economic sense, but production coincided with an acute shortage of resources, publishers inevitably followed the path of least resistance, and editions acquired a somewhat averaged character. However, despite all the limiting factors, “Sovetskii Pisatel” sometimes made attempts to start innovative projects that were potentially interesting to the reader.

²⁸ Resolution for the publishing house’s director Grigory Lazar’s annual report, presented for the publishing house’s board (1936). Ibid. Op. 2, d. 20, p. 2.

²⁹ Reproaches about the disastrous state of the contract portfolio, addressed to “Sovetskii Pisatel”, began to appear in press as early as 1936: *Itogi kvartal’nogo plana*, “Literaturnaia gazeta”, (24) (1936); *Bezzabotnost’ i bezrukost’*, “Literaturnaia gazeta”, (70) (1936).

³⁰ Resolutions and orders of the governing organs regarding publishing matters; acts for handover to the newly appointed director of the publishing house (1938). RGALI, f. 1234, op. 3, d. 3, p. 85.

Moscow Almanac. Preliminary censorship by the senior literary management

The Moscow Almanac, a collection published by “Sovetskii Pisatel” from 1939 to 1941, was one of such projects. In January, 1939, a group of authors headed by the publishing house director Yartsev gathered to approve the concept of the new almanac, which was born in conversations between the director and writers.³¹ The group members agreed that the new almanac should meet the main goal of the publishing house, – that is, to be innovative and bold. The discussions included words about the author’s individuality, creative risk, boldness of concept, “new people and new society”, personal and intimate topics dominating over public ones, refusal to “weigh feelings and relationships on the scales” and accept any predetermined program instead of the editorial board’s objective opinion.³² The discussion was summed up by Alexander Fadeyev, who worked in the leadership of the Soviet Writers’ Union at the time and curated the discussion of the almanac as a high-ranking representative of the Union and, consequently, as a retranslator of the Party’s general line. He came up with the following thesis, which sounded quite provocative: “Do not publish respectable, prosperous topics. Focus on works and authors that have a distinct individuality, sharp courage, and their own personal approach to the topic”³³

However, later on, when all the logistical and organizational issues had been resolved and the first layout of the almanac had been compiled, Fadeyev suddenly made a number of protective comments that directly contradicted his own words in an undated note sent to the Editorial council. First, he pointed out that it was necessary to remove from the almanac the texts of compromised writers – anticipating the “Zhdanovsky” campaign of 1946 in combining the names of Mikhail Zoshchenko and Anna Akhmatova:

Previously, I had a different opinion, underestimating one very significant circumstance: this is going to make an impression in the Soviet public – especially considering the nature of the works by Aseyev, Zoshchenko, Akhmatova – that this almanac was created bypassing the existing system of magazines, in order to “give an outlet” for things that could not be published elsewhere. Or, in other words, the very first book of the almanac will have a bad political resonance, no one will understand why it was published. And meanwhile, according to the plan, it should show the face of our talented young authors, in no way inferior to the old ones.

³¹ Protocol of the Moscow Almanac’s editorial board meeting. *Ibid.* Op. 4, d. 3, p. 1.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 1-3.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 2 (rev.).

Secondly, the collection should not have included Ernest Hemingway’s text:

To publish the literary utterances of Hemingway alone in an almanac of Soviet youth is to create the impression that the almanac has chosen him as a kind of “banner”. Meanwhile, Hemingway has many incorrect (contradictory to the Soviet, Marxist understanding) views on literature.

Thirdly, the sharp boldness and bright individuality needed to be slightly shaded, according to Fadeyev:

This first almanac <...> must be approached very strictly not only from the standpoint of artistic quality, but especially from the standpoint of ideological quality – approached, if you like, with “nitpicking” – not petty, “overcautious”, but from the heights of a great and principled public consciousness. From this standpoint, I would not advise publishing - A) “In the Steppe” - a poem by Markov. This is not a Soviet poem. <...> B) Matusovsky’s quatrain “Never Understanding You”. The lyrics are pretentious, but petty, album-like – why is it there, when there are other good poems by Matusovsky? C) “Katyusha” – Ya. Smelyakov. The idea of this poem is correct and the poem is talented. But the phenomenon that he wants to condemn is shown by him in a “light” ironic sense, I would say in a frivolous-ironic sense, or even frivolously ironic. And yet, the entire progressive Soviet public is now waging a very serious struggle against this phenomenon, as one of the remnants of capitalism (the issue here is not precisely in the abstract intellectual morality, which is alien to us, and especially not in the hypocrisy that we despise, but in the remnants of capitalism, in the fact that this phenomenon is socially hostile to us). It is known that our press is furiously attacking this phenomenon in literature as well.³⁴

In the first issue of the almanac, published in 1939, Fadeev’s recommendations were fully complied with. The works of the older generation of writers (Anna Akhmatova, Mikhail Zoshchenko, Nikolay Aseev) were not published; sections of poems by Mikhail Matusovsky, Sergey Markov and Yakov Smelyakov were preserved in the publication, but the aforementioned texts were cut out.³⁵ Nevertheless, even the vigilant Fadeev could not foresee all possible scenarios, and one published text turned out to be “socially hostile”: in 1940, the publishing house terminated the contract for the novel *Chinese Wall*, published in the first issue. The novel was written by Evgeniy Bosnyatsky and Sergey Urnis, who wrote under the common pseudonym “Tikhon Bulavin”, and the contract cancellation was caused by Urnis’ arrest.³⁶ However, this did not interfere with the publication of the second issue in 1941.³⁷ The publica-

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 14-15.

³⁵ *Moskovskii al'manakh. Kn. 1*, Moscow, Sovetskii pisatel', 1939.

³⁶ Publishing house’s correspondence (1940). Vol. II. RGALI, f. 1234, op. 5, d. 28, p. 170.

³⁷ *Moskovskii al'manakh. Kn. 2*, Moskva, Sovetskii pisatel', 1941.

tion of the following issues, apparently, was suspended because of the Great Patriotic War that began soon after. In addition to the fact that “Sovetskii Pisatel’” suffered significant organizational difficulties during the war,³⁸ which prevented it from technically complex editions such as the Moscow Almanac, thematic priority during this period belonged almost exclusively to militaristic publications, and not to experimental collections.

Thus, Fadeyev certainly contributed to the publication of the almanac. At the same time, he reformed it in accordance with his political concerns and his position in power. His intervention, that was censorial in its essence, simultaneously helped the almanac to be published and at the same time changed the initial concept, turning the almanac into a somewhat different product.

Academic edition of Russian tales. Preliminary censorship by the NKVD

Unforeseen difficulties could arise even in cases where the project had clear institutional support and ideological relevance. In 1938, the secretariat of the Soviet Writers’ Union’s Leningrad branch along with the director of “Sovetskii Pisatel’” Leningrad branch Nikolay Brykin sent a letter to the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR’s chairman, Vyacheslav Molotov. In this letter, they expressed the need to publish a multi-volume edition of the Russian fairy tale and expressed their readiness to undertake this publication. The letter was formulated in a deliberately patriotic manner, in accordance with the prioritization of Russian-language culture that had emerged in the latter half of 1930s:

Russian epic holds one of the first places in the treasury of world culture. No nation in the world is as wealthy with monuments of verbal art as the Russian people. The attempts of Western scholars to collect fairy tale materials from their nations have once again proven how poor Western culture is in genuine creativity of the masses in comparison with the opportunities that we have; the famous collection of Grimm's fairy tales is no exception in this regard. [...] In twenty years since October, Russian folk tale has blossomed and has been enriched with new content, new images, new inspiration. A colossal number of remarkable tales have been inherited from the past and have been created anew in our days by masters of artistic words, mainly collective farmers. In recent years, Soviet scholars have recorded more fairy tales than in the entire 150 years

³⁸ See, for example, the only research paper on the Stalinist period of “Sovetskii Pisatel’s” history: E. Naumova, *Lenotdelenie izdatel'stva “Sovetskii pisatel'” nakanune i v pervye mesiatsy Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny*, “Uchenye zapiski Zabaikal'skogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Seriya: Filologiya, istoriya, vostokovedenie”, 2012, pp. 240-242.

before the Proletarian Revolution. [...] Western bourgeois scholars make a fuss about a discovery of some storyteller from whom a few printed sheets have been recorded, while in our country great masters from whom hundreds of sheets of the most magnificent artistic fairy tales, epics and songs have been recorded pass unnoticed. [...] The publication of two collections of Russian folk tales that we have conceived can only be carried out in our country, with the support of the Party and the Government and the deep attention of the Soviet public.”³⁹

The publishing house and the Union even proposed the composition of the editorial committee for this edition, which was to include 12 people. However, in the file kept in the Council of People’s Commissars’ archival fund, a certificate compiled by an NKVD major was attached to the letter, in which 4 of these 12 people were characterized as anti-Soviet (Mark Azadovsky,⁴⁰ Alexander Nechayev, Grogoriy Gukovsky (repressed in 1950), Nikolay Andreyev).⁴¹ This certificate described not only the supposed political sentiments of the potential editors, but also their nationality and origin, scientific activity and relations with other writers (for example, closeness to the Leningrad formalists): such a project of Union-wide significance, apparently, required increased attention to detail on the part of the defenders of state security.

As a result, the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR decided to proceed with the publication, but to transfer it to Goslitizdat; the editorial board of the proposed candidates included, for example, the trustworthy Aleksey Tolstoy, Alexander Fadeyev, Mikhail Prishvin and others.⁴² Thus, the writers and employees of the publishing house’s project was nevertheless approved by the highest authorities. At the same time, part of the proposed editorial board came under the close attention of the NKVD, and “Sovetskii Pisatel” lost the chance to undertake a prestigious and beneficial edition, yielding it to its main competitor, Goslitizdat. However, as in the case of the Moscow Almanac, the plan was interrupted by the outbreak of war: this multi-volume edition was never published.

³⁹ The USSR Council of People’s Commissars, Department for Culture. On the edition of the Russian folk tale collection by the Leningrad branch of “Sovetskii Pisatel” publishing house (9th Jul. - 14th Aug. 1938). GA RF, f. R5546, op. 22, d. 1368, pp. 6-9.

⁴⁰ More on Azadovsky in his son’s recently published book: K. Azadovsky, *Zhizn’ i trudy Marka Azadovskogo*, Moskva, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2025.

⁴¹ The USSR Council of People’s Commissars, Department for Culture. On the edition of the Russian folk tale collection by the Leningrad branch of “Sovetskii Pisatel” publishing house (9th Jul. - 14th Aug. 1938). GA RF, f. R5546, op. 22, d. 1368, p. 2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

The Russian ditty edition. Two editorial concepts

While the involvement of NKVD, Fadeyev or the director could be considered as macro-interventions, there were also multiple micro-influences on any given edition. In collective editions, the final form of the book was determined by a group of authors. At the same time, ordinary editions, which required the work of one author in tandem with his editor, were, in a sense, also a group effort. In addition to the obvious editorial work on the text, other employees were also involved in the process: proofreaders, along with spelling corrections, sometimes corrected political errors, editorial boards made collective decisions on finalizing manuscripts, and Glavlit checked and sometimes sent for correction texts that were already signed for publication. However, the second role after the author usually belonged to the editor. Depending on his attitude towards the text and the author, the editor could play the role of judge, censor, mentor, defender, or comrade. In 1938, at a meeting in “Sovetskii Pisatel’”, discussions about the need to establish friendly relations between the editor and the author were taking place – this wish was expressed both by authors and editors; see speech of Anatoly Vinogradov, a writer, at a meeting in “Sovetskii Pisatel’” in 1938:

We look at the editor as a guardian of the author’s concept, as a comrade in work who, together with the author, brings the book, product of many years of creativity, to the reader. In a word, the editor should help the writer in the Publishing House in such a way that this help becomes an enriching process for the manuscript itself.⁴³

Moreover, some authors expected their editors to support them in controversial situations, despite the verdict of the publishing house management: writer K. Zinchenko (name unknown), stated at that same meeting:

I am somewhat surprised that comrade <M.> Chechanovsky, who accepted my book, presented it to the Editorial Council and edited it, did not take the floor in defense of this book, similar to what comrade Malakhov did in relation to the defense of the book by comrade <K.> Eggert. In my opinion, the editor who presents a book takes responsibility for this book upon himself.⁴⁴

In fact, relations between author and editor were frequently tense: they often harbored mutual suspicions of each other’s insufficient competence or personal bias. Any author could potentially make a political mistake, and the editor was capable of damaging the author’s original text. These suspicions were

⁴³ Resolutions and orders of the governing organs regarding publishing matters; acts for handover to the newly appointed director of the publishing house (1938). RGALI, f. 1234, op. 3, f. 3, p. 81.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

fueled from the outside: as political tensions grew, calls appeared in the press for authors and editors to increase vigilance and start keeping a closer eye on each other.⁴⁵

Manuscripts submitted to the publishing house could receive up to seven reviews by different referees,⁴⁶ often directly contradicting each other in their assessment of the quality and political reliability of the text. Meanwhile, individual editors and editorial boards made efforts to find compromise evaluation criteria. The most frequent one was the ordinariness of the text, the absence of potential claims against it; however, even more significant factors contributing to the acceptance of the text to print were reputation of the author and thematic orientation of the book.

Each of the thousands of editions published by “Sovetskii Pisatel” in the 1930s could potentially become an object of research interest, but one particular case shows characteristic features of editorship especially well. In 1940, “Sovetskii Pisatel” proposed to publish a collection of ditties called *Russkaya Chastushka*, compiled by folklorist Viktor Sidelnikov. Sidelnikov already had a history of successful cooperation with the publishing house,⁴⁷ and his editions even received positive reviews in the press.⁴⁸ However, the material he proposed for publication was quite risky; folklore was not subject to the same strict moderation as authorial texts, but at the same time even experienced folklorists could be accused of publishing anti-Soviet material.

Sidelnikov’s new collection was reviewed by L. Razin (name unknown) and Alexey Surkov, a famous Soviet poet and high-ranking literary official.⁴⁹ Razin’s complaints came down to the incorrect selection of ditties for publication: 80% of the publication consisted of ditties from the Soviet period, and Razin believed that they were selected irresponsibly. Several ditties were considered politically harmful; for example, those that expressed an attitude toward laziness that was too frivolous (in the “Idler” section) or a ditty from the “Culture” section, which mentioned opposition.⁵⁰ Razin also strongly disapproved of the “Love” as a whole:

⁴⁵ *Bditel'nost' v izdatel'stvakh*, “Literaturnaia gazeta”, 49 (612) (1936), September 1st.

⁴⁶ See reviews of the “Moscow Stories” collection by Alexander Vyurkov (1940). RGALI, f. 1234, op. 5, d. 3.

⁴⁷ V. Sidel'nikov, *Volzhskii fol'klor*, Moskva, Sovetskii pisatel', 1937; V. M. Sidel'nikov, *Krasnoarmeiskii fol'klor*, Moskva, Sovetskii pisatel', 1938.

⁴⁸ S. Mints, *Volzhskii fo'klor*, “Literaturnaia gazeta”, 45 (681) (1937), August 20th.

⁴⁹ Reviews for works of authors, whose surnames start with R-S (1940). RGALI, f. 1234, op. 5, d. 13, pp. 29-31.

⁵⁰ “I don't want to thresh <grain> / I'm twisting a roll-up / I'll snooze all day long / I don't

The ditties in this section were especially uncritically selected. You read all the ditties and it gets scary. People's love is so very primitive, crude and shallow. An awful lot is devoted to betrayals and mutual hatred based on jealousy. The ease and instability of love relationships are celebrated.

Additionally, Razin questioned the author why the "Red Army" section did not contain ditties about heroes and Voroshilov. His verdict was highly negative:

The selection was not done well. There is a lot of old material. Much that life has contributed is not reflected. Love is presented in an offensive and rude manner. It cannot be published in such a composition. Additions and cuts must be made.⁵¹

Surkov's review turned out to be more insightful and subtle: in his opinion, the selection was carried out efficiently and conscientiously, and his comments, on the contrary, reflected that the material looked too manufactured, artificial:

...alas! In these sections, it is not the genuine folk ditty improvisation that predominates, but newspaper material composed by poets of regional newspapers and authors of various pop collections for the villagers. This is easy to establish both by formal criteria [...] and by character – the majority of ditties are slogan-like and directive, which contradicts the nature of the ditty as a genre.

In addition, Surkov pointed out the need to mention protest folklore in the introductory article to the publication – and thereby partially undermine its power, bringing it out of the shadow sphere into the official, scientific one:

Comrade Sidelnikov's article is thorough and competent. It has one fundamental shortcoming: the lack of an indication of how the kulaks at all stages of the struggle in the village resorted to the ditty as an agitational form [...], of course, there is no need to provide illustrations here, but it is necessary to point out such a fact.⁵²

Surkov had to familiarize himself not only with the manuscript of the future book, but also with the opinion of his fellow reviewer, to which he replied in a reserved and noticeably critical way:

I have read both comrade Razin's comments and comrade Sidelnikov's insertions. What is my opinion? Let them insert whatever they want. All this is correct, although, to tell the truth, has nothing to do with art and especially with folklore, because it is a regional newspaper composition. But if "balance" is needed, let it be.⁵³

give a damn about standstills"; "Kolya, look out the window, / Look at this disgrace: / A lazy man is dragging bread in a basket / Exactly eight kilograms"; "I told my dear / Don't make tea, / You've joined the opposition / Don't talk to me." *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 30 (rev.).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

It was Surkov who became editor-in-chief of Sidelnikov’s book, and under his guidance it was published the following year, 1941. The final version took into account the comments of both reviewers: based on Surkov’s advice, a paragraph about a counterrevolutionary ditty appeared in the introductory article:

It must be mentioned that the hostile class forces of the village also took into account the agitational role of folklore and skilfully used its most widespread genres – the ditty – for their own purposes. With its aid, they spread false, harmful rumors, distorting Soviet reality; they intimidated and threatened with “God’s judgment” those who went to fight for Soviet power and who were involved in the construction of a new life; they tried in every way to promote the spread of anti-Soviet and hooligan ditties, thinking that this would distract the youth from the new life of the village, etc.⁵⁴

Following Razin’s instructions, several texts were removed: ditties about laziness and opposition, ditties about a woman’s love for several men, or the physical aspects of love. And, on the contrary, in the “Red Army” section four ditties appeared about Klim Voroshilov, as well as about Vasily Chapaev, Valery Chkalov, Mikhail Vodopyanov, Mikhail Gromov.⁵⁵

As a result of discussion between two reviewers and their censorious comments, the publication was not only reduced, but also supplemented with other, most likely constructed material. Moreover, paradoxically, in order to get to print the text had to openly express its own sore points, i.e., first and foremost, its counterrevolutionary potential. It is noteworthy that the final product took into account both positions, initially opposed to each other: “prohibitive” and “permissive” ones. In the case of Sidelnikov’s collection, this conflict, complicated by the personal preferences and views of the reviewers, and its consequences are clearly visible. But it is worth noting that similar principles functioned during the publication process of any given book: each edition became, to an extent, a product of compromise between author’s intent, editorial intervention, management of the publishing house, verdict of Glavlit, reader preferences, government directives, etc.

Political risks, the need to follow the requirements of planned economy combined with the human factor, and the difficulties of cultural management all made the successful work of the publishing house extremely difficult, especially within the initially narrow thematic framework. The censorship process within the walls of the publishing house was perhaps an even more complex process than other publishing tasks. Censorship at the level of Glavlit was quite systemic and strictly regulated; on the contrary, those elements of censorship that were carried out within the walls of the publishing house were often difficult to separate from editing and proofreading, writers’ self-promo-

⁵⁴ *Russkaia chastushka*, Moskva, Sovetskii pisatel’, 1941, p. 6.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 101-103.

tion tactics, preventive measures, and the practical considerations of the management. If censorship is perceived as an institutional restriction of freedom of speech, then it was certainly practiced at “Sovetskii Pisatel”; however, lack of clearly formulated rules and principles of such censorship, blurred boundaries between forbidden and permitted, and need for a consensus between many people with different ideas of aesthetics and politics shaped a somewhat different set of functions. The main task of the publishing house is not to ban books, but to publish them; therefore, publishing house’s censorship, generally, did not destroy the text, but restructured it in accordance with its own considerations.

The complex political situation in which the publishing house operated in the 1930s determined the duality of its policy. Taking into account several complicating factors, including the requirements of the plan, internal political campaigns and the unpredictability of the foreign policy situation, the publishing house tried to stabilize its activities by the means available to it. In this context, the policy of mistrust towards new people and texts was not so much one of the manifestations of censorship in its classical sense, as a preventive measure that protected the publishing house from reputational and personnel losses and potential liquidation. We believe that the case of “Sovetskii Pisatel” discloses a partially contentious nature of censorship at the lower levels of the literature process. In this context, censorship could be imagined as a chain of micro-conventions, adopted by multiple actors and institutions driven by their individual interests.

Abstract

“Formative Censorship” Within “Sovetskii Pisatel” Publishing House (1934-1940).

Stalinist censorship could be purely restrictive, but some of its institutional derivations might also perform a “formative” function. This paper examines the technical mechanisms of Soviet literary censorship taking place within “Sovetskii Pisatel” publishing house. A well-established regulatory system, managed by superior literary officials, heads of the publishing house and ordinary editors, contributed to permissible and relatively risk-free editions, although simultaneously reshaping their original concept. As shown based on the example of extensive organizational processes, such as the search for director, as well as specific editions, censorial interventions were often a collective and compromised action which allowed the publishing house to sustain its reputation and operational performance.

Keywords: Censorship, Editorship, Soviet Literature, Publishing House “Sovetskii Pisatel”, Stalinism.