

CENSORSHIP IN THE SOVIET UNION AND ITS CULTURAL AND PROFESSIONAL RESULTS FOR ARTS AND ART LIBRARIES.*

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Abstract: Although official censorship ceased 10 years ago, the effects of censorship in the Soviet Union in art and art libraries are still felt. The focus of this paper is on censored library materials, and on the censorship of art. The censored books were marked with a hexagon, and relegated to the „spets-hran“ or special stacks which for many years were off limits to the public and library staff alike. The author takes a look at materials from the All Russia State Library for Foreign Literature that had been censored, and examines the rules of the censors to determine why certain items were censored. In art, only certain themes were sanctioned. Because art can be abstract and difficult to interpret figuratively, it was determined that the only allowable style of art was that of social realism.

In 1998 we are celebrating a significant date. 10 years ago the official censorship in the Soviet Union was ceased. I wonder if many of our citizens noticed this undoubtedly historical moment immediately, but for the libraries a new era began in its full sense with all necessary challenges, questions and hopes. In the library I'm working in it was a physical action of opening the doors of the department, which in former days used to be «for official use only». All the banned publications, that had been kept there for decades, became at once accessible for the general public. I must say that the publications kept in such departments, known as «spets-hran» or special stacks, beforehand were not accessible for the librarians either. The staff of those departments had to be well tested and controlled in the political and ideological loyalty. No «strangers» could ever enter those «solemn islands».

You may ask why again to talk about those years, which fortunately belong to the history. Firstly, because now we can talk about the fruits of that ever-present censorship, which some of us just did not notice because it seemed to be a natural part of our life. And secondly we should keep on comparing what we used to have and what we have got now in terms of freedom of expression.

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We used to feel «an eye» everywhere, therefore everyone had to develop an inner-censor for self-controlling of whatever was to be written, said or expressed in any media. So we can talk about two kinds of censorship, both well developed in the Soviet Union:

- *a preliminary personal censorship or self-controlling of an author;*
- *an official censorship, provided by special governmental bodies, like the State Committee for Protection of the State Secrets in Publications, all kinds of state and local Art Councils, Committees on Arts and Culture, editorial boards, etc.*

Libraries were considered to be the best places for state regulation and control of the access to the publications. I assume that it's not exclusively a Soviet approach, but I'm sure that in case of the Library for Foreign Literature it was a particular instance. Working with the foreign publications the censors had to be very knowledgeable and to possess some special abilities. They ought «to protect the minds of the Soviet people from the harmful influence and infection of the West». As far as the art process and publishing in the world couldn't have been put under control of the Soviet censors. However, at the same time they were bound to provide the public with some distilled information on the progressive artistic movements abroad, their task was to limit the access to the foreign publications by housing them in the major state libraries only. Foreign materials were not permitted either in small local libraries or even in private book collections. Therefore private persons were not allowed to bring any publications from abroad or to receive them by post. Each attempt of that kind was suppressed by the customs. The publications were confiscated even being the private postage except the diplomatic mailing.

Having passed the official censorship at the above-mentioned State Committee the foreign materials were forwarded to the main state libraries, minding their specialization. So twice a year our Library received the «gifts of Glavpochta» (Glavpochta or Glavlit were abbreviation of that Committee). Normally each of those «gifts» contained about 200 books. Each one bore a special mark on the title page with a personal number of the censor. Triangle meant that the publication could be stored in the main stacks and be accessible to the general public. Hexagon meant that the publication should be kept in the special stacks and the access to it should be strictly limited. It could be even two or three hexagon marks on the title page indicating that it might have been an enormously harmful publication. Very few libraries in the whole country (KGB, Central Committee of the CPSU, and may be 1 or 2 more) could have such publications even if they had «special stacks». I must notice that the route the foreign publications had to pass

before they were received by the Libraries was exactly the same regardless either it had been a subscription, order, exchange or occasional «donations».

There were some curious instances when two copies of the same publication could be directed to different stacks, one can only wonder why. In a way it was a complicated task to judge and make a decision. Every time it was a personal decision of a particular censor and his personal responsibility except the cases of «generally banned» periodicals (like «Time», «Life», «Paris Match», «New York Times», «Times», «Cosmopolitan», «Panorama», etc) or names (Solzhenitsin, Trotsky, Kissinger et al.). Some particular issues of generally «opened» periodicals could for some reasons also be directed to the special stacks. It sometimes happened to the art periodicals, like «Art in America», «Art Forum» and other quite harmless titles.

When I finally got access to those stacks, you can imagine my curiosity and enthusiasm while selecting the books for the open access in the Arts reading room. But I kept on asking the same question «why?». In many instances I managed to find the answer, but sometimes I was left embarrassed or confused. I could understand it in case of the monographs on Kandinsky, Chagall, Malevich, Melnikov, Dali, Magritte, Egon Schiele; on Surrealism, Dada, Expressionism and other «harmful» trends in modern art. It was clear why it was forbidden to the general Soviet public to read Dali's diaries for instance: people could have learnt some secrets of his physiology. But what was wrong about Giotto, Matisse, Picasso, Bauhaus architecture, Le Corbusier or Beatles' lyrics? The most astonishing instance was «Encyclopedia of Gnomes» - a lovely children's book with funny pictures and text.

Having done a thorough analysis of the probable reasons which defined the censors' decisions to put a hexagon on the title page of an art publication I may classify them as following:

- political reasons (criticism of the Soviet Union, CPSU, Soviet regime, particular political bodies and figures);
- political unreliability (temporary or permanent) of an artist, whose work was the subject of the publication;
- political unreliability (temporary or permanent) of an author of a publication;
- mentioning an unreliable person, unworthy fact or event in the text unless it was criticized (possible cuttings of the text or plates);
- generally prohibited subject (for instance: unofficial Soviet art);
- propaganda of fascism, violence or terror (horror films belonged to that category);

- pornography (a magic word - none of the censors could ever give a distinct definition of this term in their special vocabulary; the most frequent reason for art publications to become banned as most of the artists, since the ancient times, had made the studies of the nude models);
- themes, subjects, facts, events which caused or might have caused undesirable thoughts, associations or illusions not in favour of the Soviet state.

It might seem to be quite a simple task to separate a harmful publication from a «good» one taking in account only ideological reasons. A censor had to be aware of the political platform of an author and his loyalty towards the Soviet Union and Communist Party. In case of political or economical publications it was true. In case of fiction, poetry, or art it appeared to be much more difficult for censors to judge.

The access to the original works of foreign art had been controlled by the state in different ways:

- general limitation of the traveling abroad and instant control of the behaviour of the Soviet citizens while in the foreign countries;
- strict limitation and censorship of the type of art objects to be displayed in the museums both at the permanent and temporary exhibitions;
- limitation of the import of the art objects by private persons;
- prohibition of the private art galleries and thus strict state control of each public presentation of the private art collections.

Within the country it became vital for the sake of «the mental health» of the Soviet people to intrude in the very process of creation of an art object regardless to its media. This task was articulated shortly after the Revolution on the earliest days of the Soviet state, but it was not an easy one. Perception of the art works is more a sensation than a rational understanding. For example, the Russian avant-garde art of that period was predominantly non-figurative and the subjects could hardly be guessed or were too abstract. In this regard the decision of the Soviet cultural authorities was as simple as brilliant: *To avoid any kind of double or hidden meaning, equivoques, misunderstanding of the contents of the art works the socialist realism was declared the one and only acceptable style and method of all arts in the Soviet Union.*

After the Revolution the foremost Russian artists were forced to emigrate. It was a great tragedy of the national art. Those who for various reasons refused to leave the country had either to accept the communist dictatorship in art or to give up working. It took about 10 years (1922-1932) for the final break down and to put an end to «the art of the bourgeois past». Every *-ism* of the early 20th century art

became the synonyms of the rudest words, generalised in the worst two terms: «*formalism*» and «*modernism*». Thus a great man-made gap had been generated in the evolution of Russian art. Every single attempt to change the direction of the main trend was suppressed and the guilty artist badly prosecuted.

Architecture, being the most social and the least personal art, was put under the total state control. The only accepted official architectural image was that of the *imperial greatness of the Soviet state*, which could have been produced only by the *classical forms* and language of masses and space borrowed from the Roman architecture. Few exceptions, presented by Melnikov for instance, were merely experiments. *Demolition of the historical buildings* was another form of censorship in the architectural environment. Even some architectural forms were considered to be associated with the «hatred past» and therefore banned. That was the *church dome* - symbol of the heaven. Thousands of churches had been demolished in the country during that battle with the symbols of the past. The same was the fate of numerous manor estates, palaces, and private houses. Some of them, however, were successfully used by the new Soviet «aristocracy» or converted into the residential blocks, museums, warehouses, garages, etc.

In fact the Soviet sculpture had suffered the similar fatal violence. Immediately after the Revolution it had been worked out a special *Plan of Monumental Propaganda*, under which all the statues to the tsars had to be demolished or taken away, with the few exceptions. They were to be replaced by the new monuments to the progressive leaders of all times according to the special approved list. Strangely, some really good monuments were erected in the first years of that «pilot-project», like the one to Timiryazev by Merкуроv in Moscow. In general the Soviet sculpture was aimed to glorify the formal party leaders in the basic forms of the socialist realism. Only the II World War monuments bare the true emotions of their authors and express the total grief and glory of the nation.

The recognition of the power of art in promotion of the state ideas to the masses was well demonstrated by the emerging of «agit-farfor» (propaganda pottery) - a unique type of Soviet pottery design. The painters on their part were highly recommended to learn from the works of Repine and to follow the tradition of Russian critical realists of the 19th century. The language of Soviet painting should be strictly realistic and the themes chosen should depict and praise the delights of the life in the Soviet Union.

As the result of such a violent «weeding» during a substantial period of time a certain generation of the obedient artists had been brought up. They knew the rules of the play they were all playing. The censors had done a good job offering the public well-selected information concerning the national cultural and

historical heritage. There appeared some blank periods in the pre-Revolutionary history, some cultural epochs were totally neglected, some important names crossed out for decades (at that time it seemed forever). The Soviet art criticism suffered the same pressure of censorship. The only accepted approach for an art critic was that from the ideological position «of the class struggle», which was regarded more important than consideration of the aesthetic values. From that point of view the world art had been divided into two parts: *progressive* and *regressive* (often called *reactionary*).

The quoting of classics of Marxism-Leninism in any work on any subject was required. Selection of appropriate citations became a sort of a new art. Those were the requirements for every publication and public speech. The Bibliographies were to start with the works of «classics», even though none of them had ever written anything on the subject. The best scholars, like Lazarev, Grabar, Bakushinski, Vipper, Zavadskaya, Kaptereva, Nekrasova somehow managed to publish their works in the history of art paying only a little fee to that set of rules. The less prominent scholars had to pay a bigger tribute. Those, who refused to accept the rules were prosecuted and «taught» in the Stalin camps

The criteria for division of art of the past into two categories was quite simple: the work of art should bare or not some peculiar signs of progressiveness, such as themes of labour, struggle for justice, protest against the bourgeois society, pity for suffering, depiction of poor people, social and class struggle. For obvious reasons the mediaeval art, being the art which served the religion, was not worth studying. Some excellent surveys on Byzantine and Ancient Russian art were published, because the art works had been taken only as the cultural, not religious objects and certainly because of the highest prominence of the authors (Grabar, Lazarev, Alpatov). Strangely, the art-nouveau was badly criticized in spite of the obvious socialist ideas of the improvement of the society by means of art. The attitude towards this style has gradually changed only in the late 70s. The same was true about the historicism (eclectic style) of the mid-second half of the 19th century.

In fact it had been only one book called «Modernism: Analysis and criticism of the major trends in art of the 20-th century» (the last edition of which was published in the late 1980-es) in which one could get an information on the art movements and key-figures of the 20-th century and even to look at the poor black and white plates. Along with the rude criticism of the bourgeois art, presented by the obedient authors some good art critics managed to present just a brief review of facts, names and events avoiding any judgment at all. But even that limited information had been invaluable to the researchers and reading public.

By the mid 1970s the protest against that total brain-control couldn't have been concealed any more and it burst out. An unofficial Soviet art at that time had been well known abroad but at home we witnessed the first public exhibitions of the Soviet underground art only in 1974 and 1975. It was a great scandal about the first one. It was moved away by the bulldozers and the fire-machines smashing and watering the paintings and painters at the exhibition site. The artists became the real heroes having been suppressed by the State. They were opposing the official art and considered themselves to be progressive avanguard artists. But in fact «progressive» was only the act of protest, not the art itself. What had been vanguard in the early 20-th century could hardly pretend to be progressive in the last quarter of the century. It's not the fault of that brave artists. It's just a sad story how they'd been seeking for the new ideas and forms in art challenging the official trends, taking a risk, having found their own path, but they didn't happen to know that the same path had been already passed by the Russian artists more than 50 years ago.

The state policy had to be changed. It was decided to be less harm to «let the steam out» along with controlling the main official trends. So gradually the public got acquainted with the few examples of the non-official Soviet art and masterpieces of Western art kept in foreign collections. Even the personal exhibition of Marc Chagall took place at the Tretyakov Gallery in 1975. The vivid picture of the art process of the late 19-century to the late 1920s had been revealed as late as in 1981 at the great *Moscow-Paris* exhibition. It was a kind of explosion of the public interest to the home art demonstrated at that significant exhibition. A good number of new names in Russian art were introduced to the public. But the fact, that the French edition of the catalogue of that exhibition had got the hexagon, meant that even as late the Soviet exhibition visitors were shown less than their French colleagues.

The biggest problem was that of learning of the «foreign language» of the contemporary Western art, truly foreign for both artists and public. The creators and spectators found themselves both illiterate and had to take the same intensive course. It was the most interesting to witness that overwhelming progress in the whole cultural life of the country. At once there appeared thousands of private art galleries, art shops, exhibitions. Art auctions became a regular event. New titles of the art periodicals started to be published. The old ones often failed to win the competition at the new art market.

Cultural life of the recent years became kaleidoscopic offering a great variety of choice for the art lovers. Socialist realism is now present again but this time because it's just in fashion along with many other styles and manners. The

exhibition policies of galleries and museums is no longer dictated by the state censors. A number of big exhibitions revealed the very work of the communist censorship, like the *Gold of Schliemann, The Unknown Masterpieces, 500 years of the European Drawing*, for the first time exhibiting the art works which had been brought from Germany as the war trophies. *Moscow-Berlin* exhibition was one of the kind nobody could ever have dreamed about in the Soviet times; the parallels and links between the Stalinist art and that of the Third Reich looked too obvious.

What should the art libraries do in this circumstances? Should they become real navigators in the flood of visual information, swept over society? Do they have enough tools to undertake this job and enough skills to judge themselves without any official guidance? Do they have to get involved in the battle for good public taste, for raising the general cultural literacy of artists and spectators or should they stay indifferent to the real art process, just collecting and preserving the information for the future researchers? My answer is YES, the art librarians should get involved in the most exciting process of creation of the new cultural and informational environment in the country now opened to the rest the world, trying at the same time to leave the thorough documentation of our peculiar time.

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