

Censorship and Intellectual Freedom: Reflections 30 Years After Chernobyl and Glasnost (1986–2016)

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Following current trends in New Censorship Theory concerning the dominant paradigms for understanding freedom of speech and censorship, I focus in this paper on the unfolding situation in Russia. I specifically concentrate on the phenomenon of the returned intellectual material, formerly forbidden for publication, as part of the democratic reforms that started in the 1980s. New Censorship Theory stresses multiple forms of censorship, and no longer sees censorship as a purely repressive activity. In place of the binarism of free speech vs. censorship, New Censorship Theory offers a conception of censorship as a productive, structural and even necessary part of communication.¹ As Bunn has recently noted, to study censorship “requires situating it within the communicative paradigms of specific historical contexts”.² In addressing the paradoxes of intellectual freedom and the abandonment of state censorship in post-Soviet Russia, my paper specifically raises questions of the role of censorship in the dissemination of past nationalistic and racist writing in contemporary societies.

When the Soviet Union started to crumble as the result of the biggest environmental disaster of the end of the twentieth century – the Chernobyl

nuclear catastrophe of 1986 – constraints on intellectual censorship collapsed with it. Since an atomic cloud knows no national or geographical borders, this material evidence could not be declared classified information, and principles of censorship were rendered superfluous. This situation triggered one of the largest intellectual freedom reforms of the twentieth century, that of Glasnost. The term ‘Glasnost’ relates to the word ‘Voice’, as in ‘give voice’. This implies giving voice not only to phenomena hitherto concealed, but allowing the embodied and, by implication, subjective expression of ideas in the public sphere since the very notion of vocalisation of an idea requires an addressee and an audience.

The specific result of the open ‘Voiceness’ was the disclosure of the formerly forbidden intellectual heritage of the past: archives were opened and for the first time in seventy years the literary, philosophical and political writings of the last two centuries were made available to the Russian reading public. Intellectual “blank spots” were filled in by the (re)published intellectual heritage of the past, consisting of the work of pre-revolutionary religious philosophers and conservative thinkers censored in the Soviet era, conservative Russian émigré intellectuals, as well as works of western thinkers and intellectuals.³

The intellectual scene became sharply polarised by divisions between ultra-conservative nationalists who uncritically accepted the thinking of the past to promote their political views, and democrats who often interpreted the newly returned intellectual ideas with the tools provided by western poststructuralist and postmodernist thinking. The publication outlets, the journals and the newspapers, were accordingly divided into warring camps, and the decade following 1986 – the year of the Chernobyl disaster and the opening of Glasnost – was dubbed the era of the “philological wars”.⁴ It received its name because of the material which the intellectuals were fighting over: the interpretation of the formerly unpublished literary works, including fiction, literary criticism, and philosophical essays.

From today’s vantage point, it is clear that it was the group of nationalistic and patriotic intellectuals that gained political power. How did the intellectual freedom of the uncensored publication of the intellectual heritage contribute to the establishment of new political totalitarianism, or, as it has been aptly called recently, of “postmodern dictatorship”?⁵ The answer lies in the paradox: the absence of censorship allowed contemporary nationalists and patriots to substantiate their political ideas and actions by the authority of the intellectual writings of past generations. The very fact that this material was censored in the Soviet period gave it an aura of sacredness and authority. Moreover, the nationalistic, chauvinistic and patriotic tendencies, which existed subterraneously in socialist society and were hiding under internationalist

sloganeering could come to the surface thanks to the lack of censorship. Because chauvinistic, racist and antisemitic ideas could not be propagated openly in the censored writing and speech at the time of “developed socialism”, they could not be made an official part of the discourse. The nature of the paradox is dual: while censorship kept radical nationalism and xenophobia at bay, the supposedly democratic process of the end of censorship brought the extreme ideological views to the surface. Hiding under the rhetoric of intellectual freedom of speech and expression, the political right used the simulacra of democracy as a means to promote extreme ideas and ideologies.

This situation raises a more general question: is total freedom of publication of intellectual material a good or a bad thing? Can censorship be a useful tool that democratic society has to apply in order to prevent dissemination of hideous ideas, such as racism and xenophobia?

I would like to use two examples related to the question of the return of formerly censored intellectual material. My first example is linked to the publication of the infamous work written during the Beilis Affair (1911-1913) by the controversial turn-of-the-century philosopher Vasily Rozanov (1856-1919). Following the blood libel trial of the Kiev Jew Menachem Mendel Beilis, who was unjustly accused in the ritual murder of a Christian boy, Rozanov wrote a series of articles which he published as a book under the title *The Olfactory and Tactile Attitude of Jews to Blood* (1914). In it Rozanov maintained that Jews have a special rudimentary attitude towards blood and suggested that due to the atavistic biology of the Jewish body they can commit murder out of an uncontrollable need for blood. Dramatically, before his death in 1919, Rozanov denounced this book, admitted that it was a political slander, and in his last will and testament he asked for all the copies of the book to be destroyed.⁶ The book, however, was disseminated during the Glasnost era by ultra-right groups, which included the revived Black Hundreds.⁷ In 1998 it was published as part of the full edition of his works which de facto legitimised it.⁸ Of special note is that the editor of the volume in his commentaries did not mention Rozanov’s final will.⁹ Rozanov’s work became a much-quoted source in uncensored publications disseminating the blood libel. His authority as an original thinker and intellectual was used by ultra-right sources as proof of the existence of ritual murder of Christians among the Jews. It was not only ultra-right fringe intellectuals who used this book to their political ends. One extraordinary example is Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s citing Rozanov’s book as a historical source in his two volume history of Russian Jewry, *Two Hundred Years Together* (2002). In Solzhenitsyn’s view of Russian history, the Beilis Affair was a catalyst for the collapse of the Russian Empire, since it ruined its reputation in the international arena.¹⁰ This is an example when a Nobel Prize winning author unethically uses notoriously

slandorous intellectual material. While it is true that the Russian jury acquitted Beilis of the accusation, the huge government apparatus for two years (1911-1913) supported the blood libel trial as a means to divert political unrest and release class tensions in order to save the monarchy. This case of uncritical treatment of intellectual material of the past for contemporary political purposes raises an issue of intellectual freedom and the role of censorship in application to such material.

If 2016 is a year to think about the beginning of Glasnost in relation to intellectual freedom and censorship, it is also an important year for the re-publication of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Published for the first time in Germany after WW2, the book is being made available to the public concurrently with the publication of this current issue of *Continental Thought and Theory Journal*. German historians from the Munich-based Institute for Contemporary History claim that it is precisely the critical interpretation of Hitler's ideas that will have a big impact on the public. They assume that readers of *Mein Kampf* – the book will be studied in schools – will attentively scrutinise the thousands of academic notes and commentaries contained in the two volumes. With the publication of this edition, it transpired that the book was never banned in Germany and second-hand copies have been available on the market. In this context the publication of the edition with academic comments certainly appears to be desirable.

According to media reports the new German edition has been a huge commercial success with the publisher being inundated with orders. It has all the makings of a bestseller and its popularity is difficult to ascribe simply to marketing. We are evidencing a dynamic that needs the attention of researchers. Can the book's commercial success be explained by interest in the formerly tabooed material – the term used by the Director of the Munich Institute for Contemporary History?¹¹ Or is it the upsurge of racist xenophobia that feeds the astonishing consumer demand for the book?

Do we as academics suppose naively and arrogantly that the dry critical evaluation of intellectual and quasi-intellectual material neutralises the harmful effects, which the dissemination of these ideas will have on their readership? Do we underestimate the notorious power of *Mein Kampf's* rhetoric? Do we presume that contemporary readers will be immune to the mesmerising effect of Hitler's inflammatory polemical prose – the power which several generations of German-speaking people found so pervasive and irresistible? It is imperative that the publication of *Mein Kampf* produces academic and scholarly research on the reception of the new edition. The findings of such research will be relevant to the question of the effects of the dissemination of dangerous racial and ethnic stereotypes among the younger generation, in Germany and beyond.

Importantly, such much needed research will be able to ascertain the value and the effectiveness of the academic commentary to the current critical edition of the book.

My own preference in the context of intellectual freedom today and current developments in New Censorship Theory is to see discussions on the role of censorship in the perpetuation of dangerous intellectual ideas. Censorship should become a subject of cross-cultural research, taking into account culture-specific situations. Censorship is not something that is done only by authorities in totalitarian societies. I am thinking of the role of censorship in contemporary democratic societies, with a focus specifically on the dissemination of the intellectual material of the past.

This issue of censorship brings me to the issue of self-censorship in relation to censorship. It has been argued that under the pressure of state censorship in the nineteenth century, Russian literature and polemical essayistic writing developed sophisticated techniques of Aesopian language, language of allusion and polyphonic poetics precisely because it had to trick the clever censors.¹² Recently, studies of the role of censorship in European literature and film have similarly noted that this form of cheating the system resulted in development of creative narrative techniques.¹³ It also educated a sophisticated readership, which was able to decipher and decode hidden subtexts.

While in the context of New Censorship Theory some western scholars see self-censorship as a constructive way to avoid state censorship in literature and film,¹⁴ the evaluation of self-censorship in Russia is different. It is based on the experience of some seventy years of Soviet totalitarianism and is viewed as the negative side of censorship. This concrete culture-specific self-censorship is the twentieth century's shady double of censorship. As such it is akin to the Freudian 'uncanny': "an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced" (367).¹⁵ This situation of authorial substitution of freedom of speech with imaginary freedom, I suggest, leads the author to Freudian "doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self" (356). This divided author-intellectual is not a creative trickster who cheats the system in order to subvert it, but rather someone who by becoming a changeling, a double-agent of sorts, collaborates with the system and cheats the public by trading in simulacra of intellectual freedom.

The dynamics between censorship and intellectual freedom today is complex and goes beyond official state regulations. The Constitution of the Russian Federation adopted in 1993 clearly states in paragraph 29 that Censorship is forbidden. Significantly for my examples, Paragraph 29 states that the Constitution "forbids propaganda and incitement of social, racial, national, religious and language superiority".¹⁶ The reality of the situation regarding these

issues in the public and social media is different, since the internet is flooded with overtly racist, nationalistic and xenophobic material. This is even more the point in the context of Government authorities blocking access to many internet sites. According to the opinion of the State Duma Deputy, Dmitry Gudkov (2015), all Russian mass information sources are censored today, and paragraph 29 can be overridden by the state's decisions in certain situations.¹⁷ As Gudkov puts it, the Constitution is democratic up to paragraph 80, after which follow laws which allow government officials to manipulate the laws stipulated in previous paragraphs, including the laws on freedom of expression and on censorship. The editor-in-chief of "Komsomol'skaia Pravda", Vladimir Sungorkin, also stresses this aspect of manipulation of censorship.¹⁸ He argues that censorship today is more sophisticated not only because it has to deal with the internet, but also because it skilfully manipulates the evaluation of information.

Regarding the role of censorship in preventing the dissemination of racist intellectual thought, in some cases state interference can come too late. The journal *Atenei* presents one such example. This publication of the extreme Russian "new right" existed for almost ten years (2000-2009) before it was closed down for the incitement of racism and xenophobia. However, as Aleksand Kuz'min rightly points out in his study of this journal, during its existence the authors "managed to accomplish a gigantic work in dissemination of nationalist, racist, antisemitic and other extremist ideas" and, importantly, to unite many representatives of the "new right".¹⁹ The journal was sold in fifty cities in the Russian Federation and in twenty countries. Its main ideologue, Vladimir Avdeev, published anthologies and books such as *Raceology: The Science of Hereditary Qualities of People* (2005), which contained historical material of the past, which Avdeev and his circle used to support and to further theorise biological racism.²⁰ Importantly, his book *Raceology* became a bestseller in 2006.²¹ It took years for various opposing academics to write articles refuting views of racist biology and anthropology published by the journal *Atenei*. While their efforts contributed to the closure of the journal, their academic articles cannot neutralise the lasting effects of the disseminated material.

Returning to 1986, the year of the nuclear disaster that triggered the lifting of state censorship, it has to be noted that this kind of censorship-lifting, this kind of openness, served an ambivalent role in the history of intellectual freedom in Russia. Like its counterpart in the 1850s, also called Glasnost, it served to help the state to consolidate its autocratic authority. As elucidated by Nicholas Galichenko, Glasnost in the 1850s reduced the radical pressure, which came from the suppression of ideas.²² Then it was meant to generate mainstream public opinion, which would ensure the survival of autocracy. It resulted in the emancipation of serfs in 1861 but did not take much needed

democratisation reforms further. The Glasnost in the post-Chernobyl decade constructed intellectual freedom in the form of the unlimited intellectual resources of the formerly forbidden material and the ability to debate ideas. But that kind of intellectual freedom resulted in supplying nationalistic groupuscules and patriotic think-tanks with the resources which they used as ammunition to consolidate their position.²³ As in the 1850s the reforms did not go far enough but helped undemocratic forces to stay in power. The qualitative difference between the two historical situations is related to the importation of postmodernist thought in the 1980s. The era of Glasnost's lifting of censorship and of intellectual freedom coincided with the popularity of newly discovered postmodernist thinking in Russia. The postmodernist accent on fluidity and lack of a single authority created conditions for heteroglossia, which regrettably helped the consolidation of power by the nationalistic groups. Intellectual freedom in Russia today is an illusion, a simulacra, to a great degree resulting from the lifting of censorship in the first decade following the Chernobyl catastrophe. It is this simulacra that forms a fluid basis of today's postmodern dictatorship.

This specific historical material demonstrates the complexity of the censorship-intellectual freedom dynamic advanced by New Censorship Theory and challenges the notion that the absence of state censorship constitutes in any meaningful sense freedom of speech. Among the thinkers who had a complex views on censorship is Louis Althusser. My examples illustrate the applicability of his concepts of Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) to the censorship issues in modern states, albeit in a modified way.²⁴ In line with Althusser's thinking, the success of the dissemination and reception of uncensored material shows that censorship is not the only factor in the deployment of power. Censorship institutions belong to the domain of RSAs, but they serve to secure the conditions for ISAs to function. The groups in my examples that choose and select the material for dissemination belong to the regrouped post-Soviet quasi-ISAs domain, and they often function independently of the state. These groups could select and disseminate the material because there was a consent required for reproduction of extremist ideas, such as nationalism, patriotism, racism and xenophobia.²⁵

While the dissemination of the extremist ideas in the post-Glasnost era suggests that state censorship has to have a structural role in dealing with intellectual material of the past, the popularity of extreme right ideas in this period presents a challenge to the notion of the power of state censorship. The censorship-intellectual freedom dynamic in this period shows that state censorship of the previous dictatorial epoch did not eliminate the xenophobic and racist ideas in the society that was dominated by internationalist ideology;

it also shows that the abandonment of state censorship does not lead to the democratisation of society.

¹ New Censorship Theory is informed by writing of Foucault, Bourdieu, and Judith Butler and is not a cohesive theory. See Freshwater, H. "Towards a Redefinition of Censorship." *In Censorship and Cultural Regulation*. Edited by Muller, B. 225-245. Rodopi: Amsterdam, 2004.

² Bunn, M. "Reimagining Repression: New Censorship Theory and After." *History and Theory* 54 (2015): 25-44.

³ Mondry, H. "Invocation of Russian classics in the present-day nationalist and philosemitic press." *East European Jewish Affairs* 29, n.1 (1999): 83-93.

⁴ Loshchits, Iu. "Klassika i my". *Moskva* 3 (1990):186-196, 188.

⁵ The term "postmodern dictatorship" in application to contemporary Russia was coined by Peter Pomerantsev in 2013, and since then it has become part of the political discourse on contemporary Russia.

⁶ See Mondry, H. *Vasily Rozanov and the Body of Russian Literature*. Slavica: Bloomington, 2010.

⁷ Dr Lanin criticized the Russian Orthodox priest Father Men' for denying existence of ritual murder among Jews. Lanin, P. *Aleksandr Men' i Delo Beilisa*. Chernaia sotnia, 1995.

⁸ Rozanov, V.V. "Oboniatel'noe i osiazatel'noe otnoshenie evreev k krovi." In *Sakharna*. Edited by A.N. Nikoliukin, 276-348. Moscow: Respublika, 1998.

⁹ Nikoliukin, A.N. "K voprosu o mifilogeme natsional'nogo v tvorchestve V.V. Rozanova." In V.V. Rozanov. *Sakharna*, 441-421. Moscow: Respublika, 1998.

¹⁰ Solzhenitsyn quoted the 1934 edition of Rozanov's book published in Stockholm at the time of Nazi Germany. Solzhenitsyn, I. *Dvesti let vmeste (1795-1995)*. Vol. 1. Moscow: Russkii put', 2001. 447. For a critique of Solzhenitsyn's views see Mondry, H. *Pisateli-narodniki i evrei (po sledam "Dvesti let vmeste")*.

St Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2005. 105.

¹¹ “Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* published in Germany for the first time”. RT. Question more. 29 January 2016. <https://www.rt.com/news/328301-hitlers-mein-kampf-published>, accessed 3 March 2016.

¹² Many censors were writers themselves who served in government departments. Ivan Goncharov is one such interesting case. On the creative censor in dictatorial societies see Boyer, D. “Censorship as a Vocation: The Institutions, Practices, and Cultural Logic of Media Control in the German Democratic Republic”. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, n.3 (2003): 511-545.

¹³ On the benefits of censorship in creative media see Gilbert, N. *Better Left Unsaid: Victorian Novel, Hays Code Films, and Benefit of Censorship*. Stanford Law Books, 2013.

¹⁴ See Gilbert, N. *Better Left Unsaid*.

¹⁵ Freud, S. “The ‘Uncanny’.” *The Penguin Freud Library*. Vol. 14. 335-376, 356. London: Penguin Books, 1990.

¹⁶ *Konstitutsia Rossiiskoi Federatsii*. 1993 (with amendments in 2007 and 2008).

¹⁷ “Est’ li v sovremennoi Rossii tsenzura? Dmitrii Gudkov i Vladimir Sungorkin.” *Diletant* 2 July, 2015. Diletant.media/duels/25221097/, accessed 1/03/2016.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Kuz’min, A. Novye pravye v sovremennoi Rossii: na primere zhurnala *Atenei. орум новейшей восточноевропейской истории и культур* 2. 2010: 35-60.

²⁰ Avdeev’s *Rasologiiia* is dedicated “to the great racial theoreticians from a grateful pupil”, as stated by the author on the front page. Avdeev, V. *Rasologiiia. Nauka o nasledsvennykh kachestvakh liudei*. Moscow: Belye Al’vy, 2005.

²¹ In terms of politicians’ support of this book it is significant that the Preface to the 2005 edition was written by the Deputy of the State Duma of Russian Federation, A.N. Savel’ev.

²² Galichenko, N. *Glasnost – Soviet Cinema Responds*. Austin: Texas UP, 2002.

²³ On nationalism and forms of Russian fascism see essays in the volume edited by Laruelle, Marlene. *Russian Nationalism and the National Reassertion of Russia*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2009.

²⁴ Althusser, L. *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, transl. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972, 150.

²⁵ On continuity in Russian nationalism of 1970s to Glasnost see Brudny, Y. 1998. *Reinventing Russia: Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953-1991*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.

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