

In the literature of oppression “a poem can be both hiding place and megaphone”

Caveat Censor!

Lorrin Philipson

Since its inception in 1972 *Index on Censorship*, a bi-monthly journal, has been wreaking havoc wherever possible with those who wield blue pencils and worse weapons. *Index* publishes writing of literary merit that has been banned and exposes cases of suppression and censorship wherever they occur.

The founding of *Index* represents the happy but all too rare situation of people mobilizing promptly in the service of a dream. In 1968 Pavel Litvinov, the well-known Soviet dissident, and Larisa Bogoraz wrote an open letter protesting the contravention of Soviet laws by judicial authorities during the trial of Galanskov, Ginsberg, Dobrovolsky, and Lashkova. In response to their appeal, published in newspapers of various countries, the English poet Stephen Spender sent a telegram to Litvinov expressing his sympathy and saying he would like to assist these people in their plight.

Spender was joined by W.H. Auden, Bertrand Russell, Igor Stravinsky, Henry Moore, and others. As a result of their offer to help, Litvinov wrote to request the formation of an organization in Western Europe that would write about the activities of the Soviet dissidents and publish some of their works. He established three conditions: that the organization not be anti-Communist; that it not be run by Russian emigrés, but by Western colleagues of intellectuals in the USSR; and that it take a global view of the problem, dealing with countries of political systems different from those of Eastern Europe.

Spender joined forces with philosopher Stuart Hampshire and eventually David Astor, former proprietor and editor of the *London Observer*. They formed the trust, Writers and Scholars, International, directed by Michael Scammell, a British translator of Russian literature, who conceived of and became editor of *Index*.

Adhering to Litvinov's stipulation that the perspective be genuinely international, *Index* treats the problem of curtailment and denial of free expression in countries

as diverse as India, Cuba, Sri Lanka, the United States, Portugal, England, Chile, Singapore, and many others. Its authors have included George Mangakis, Nadine Gordimer, Reiner Kunze, Andrei Sakharov, Heriberto Padilla, Natalya Gorbanevskaya, Marya Mannes, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and Kim Chi Ha.

The practice of censorship is more extensive today than in the past because sophisticated technology creates the means and the “need” to censor. Information that previously could be kept hidden from the public is now more readily available, and to far larger audiences. But when governments wish to manipulate minds, they have at their disposal elaborate systems of communication to do so. Formerly the emphasis in bowdlerizing and banning books was primarily on those deemed heretical or obscene. Controversies over the latter have, of course, been legion—and the battle continues.

But what distinguishes current forms of censorship from those of the past is the totality of thought control effected by governments for “reasons of national security.” Consequently, as Scammell noted, “At *Index* we have adopted the strategy of the ‘big stick,’ i.e., publicity. Our assumption is that most repressive regimes fear exposure above all. The one thing that truly defines the censor in all societies is that he tries to conceal the fact of his own existence. Therefore, we have taken it as our task to expose the censor and to reveal the results of his work.” Since propaganda and censorship became a science perfected by the Nazis and Stalinists, strictures on the free exchange of knowledge have become the first resort of despots everywhere, applied today with alarming speed and facility.

With the problem of censorship so persistent and widespread, *Index* fulfills the vital purpose of allowing silenced voices in any country a chance to be heard by the rest of the world. By giving writers access to the public, *Index* helps them continue their vocation in conditions not only of censorship but also of exile. The magazine serves as a port of call for works by those driven from their native countries and faced with the uncertainties and bureaucratic entanglements of establishing residence elsewhere.

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The problems of the emigré writer are treated in all their complexity by *Index*. The writing of Thito Valanzuela, for example, a poet forced to leave Chile after the 1973 coup, who lived in numerous other countries before settling in London, expresses the confusions of "being constantly in front of a map" and of looking over one's shoulder with regret and longing for one's lost homeland. The following is one of eleven of his poems to appear in *Index*:

Letter

Here

where the Cordillera of the Andes
is merely upside-down breasts
on the other side of the planet.

Here

where the Blue Danube
is not blue but brown

Here

where the Black Sea
is not black either but also brown.

Here

among hands bodies wine
is the hope
of re-turning you
upside-down breasts

affectionately
snow nipple in the sun.

—"Danube Delta, July, 1974"
(*Index on Censorship*, May/June, 1977)

By contrast, Petro Popescu of Rumania takes an optimistic view of banishment in an *Index* interview. He says: "To be the voice and conscience of one nation is feudal and boring... I find the English language immensely satisfying, liberating, rewarding, and it's a great experience to be able to use it to express a diametrically opposed mentality—an Eastern one like mine... I think it's very sad that people like Solzhenitsyn and Sinyavsky want so badly to remain Russian that they reject the rest of the world. They could be enormously influential if only they tried to forget their past. I must say that I distrust a writer who is unable to transform his immediate experience into a novel. What will they do? Write their memoirs until they die?"

"The Doves" he actually wrote in prison, scratching the words into the wall as he had no paper or writing utensils." The "he" in question is Reza Baraheni, an Iranian whose poetry and prose appeared in *Index*. Any evaluation of twentieth-century literature must take into account this kind of poem, which belongs to a growing genre—personal testimony from prison. Smuggled out of jails or written in the aftermath of torture and imprisonment, these documents are at once the author's source of salvation and admonishment to the rest of the civi-

lized world. They constitute the means whereby writer and reader stay in touch with their threatened humanity. Baraheni and many like him bring to light the sequestered world in which torturers practice their diabolic techniques. Such writers give us history as it happens, not in the abridged and falsified forms those in power usually prefer to provide.

Dr. Azudi, the professional

Azudi is just like
Genghis Khan when he walks
he walks on a pile of fresh corpses

The Khan did not clean his teeth either
the Khan also belched the Khan
did not take off his boots either Azudi
has shattered the mouths of twenty poets today

Azudi wears a tie something
Genghis Khan never did
only this splendid detail reveals the prodigious march
of history

The tragedy that emerges from the pages of *Index* is not only that of manacled dissenters or the eradication of particular works of art, but the attempted annihilation of culture itself. Where novelty is perceived as subversion, the point is to keep the artist from producing anything in the first place rather than appropriating his creations after they appear. Censorship then amounts to a kind of preventive detention of art, and no medium of expression is exempt. Even music is widely under siege, especially in Latin America, where persecution and execution of musicians is frequent. In Argentina, as one writer in *Index* notes, "There is an endemic censorship of everything which is new." Consequently, music is in a severe state of decline there, with a third of Argentina's musicians in exile. Another article chronicles the demise of a previously flourishing culture: "Uruguay, once the country of magazines, periodicals, and newspapers, and with the highest literacy rate in Latin America, today has no magazines and has lost eight of its twelve dailies... One can only conclude that there is a deliberate attempt by the government, not only to destroy the existing culture, but also its memory and its future—a 'scorched earth policy' of the mind."

The same theme echoes in articles on South Africa, where the near-impossibility of establishing any literary tradition becomes starkly apparent. Most of the best black writers have been censored, banned, or exiled so that their works exert no influence because they go unread, even by the current generation of young writers. But against these odds artists still create and *Index* continues to facilitate the passage of ideas through the many checkpoints of authority. In the words of Nadine Gordimer, who wrote in *Index* about how South African writers evade their oppressors with subtlety and courage, "a poem can be both hiding place and megaphone."

Interview with Michael Scammell
Editor of *Index on Censorship*



Q. Although there are no final victories, in which areas do you see the greatest progress for freedom of expression?

A. Of course, it's hard to see a struggle for human rights in the terms of a conventional battle, with advances and retreats, but if there is any sense in which the situation has improved in the last five years it is in the level of consciousness both in those countries that have freedom of expression and in those that don't. This is a process of mutual interaction between such countries. The free countries are able to act as a sounding board for ideas in countries that are unfree. When documents and stories come from the latter and are taken up, reprinted, and given coverage in the free world, they achieve a certain resonance, which in the long run may even achieve changes.

Free societies have awakened to their responsibilities—though not nearly enough—but there is a growing momentum. This has had a reciprocal effect on those countries that are repressed because their academics, writers, musicians, and artists are aware that they are not crying in the wilderness, that if they communicate with outside countries, their voices will be heeded. Questions of human rights and freedom of expression have come to the forefront of the agenda. We are still probably at the stage of rhetoric rather than concrete action but at least that is preferable to silence.

One of the major efforts at organized resistance to censorship in the Soviet Union is the *samizdat* movement. How did it originate and how does it manage to survive?

This is a very good illustration of the dynamics of totalitarian societies. It is well known that under Stalin there was no *samizdat*, none that was actually circulated. If it was written, it was restricted to the desk drawer. We know that the relaxation in Soviet society has been relative. But there has been enough for intellectuals to organize in order to communicate with one another. Since the channels of official communication are closed to them, they had to think of another way. It became necessary to set out ideas at length and to create durable images and works of art. Access to copying machines is expressly forbidden in the Soviet Union and closely controlled by the KGB. So the only recourse, in the case of literature,

was the typewriter. *Samizdat* consists of works typed out, usually with as many carbon copies as the machine will bear. These copies are then passed around among a group of friends, who copy the texts they receive and pass them further.

One shouldn't underestimate the tenacity and dedication required for this. Most of this activity takes place outside of working hours and often at night. Frequently people devote the entire night to it, and for a book a series of nights, in great secrecy and in danger of discovery by unsympathetic relatives or neighbors. Yet this movement has burgeoned from very small beginnings in the mid-Fifties until there is a gigantic flood of material now. Qualitatively it is probably more important than the printed literature in the Soviet Union.

The term *samizdat* is an abbreviation that literally means self-publishing. It is also a parody of the existing term for the largest publishing house in the Soviet Union, Goslitizdat, or State Literary Publishing House. *Samizdat* came into being mainly because of the desire of Soviet intellectuals and readers to become acquainted with the works of past authors who were banned. Not those of the nineteenth century, with the exception of Dostoevski, but of the 1920's and 30's. A number of writers of that period were banned for political reasons and their works disappeared from bookshops and libraries and were not reprinted. At first it was mainly poetry, above all the works of the early Pasternak, Mandelstam, early Akhmatova, and of her husband, Nicolai Gumilyov, shot in 1921 as a sympathizer with the white forces. From typing out copies of poems no longer available it was only a short step to copying out books forbidden publication. The first great impetus given to this in prose was by Boris Pasternak, with the appearance in the West of *Dr. Zhivago*, still unpublished in the Soviet Union.

Samizdat succeeds in enlarging the boundaries of freedom for writers to the extent that it is not harshly persecuted. Each new work of *samizdat* presents a fresh challenge to the authorities, and they have to make a decision each time whether to repress it and on what scale. It is not only human but expedient not to do this continually. Thus, you tend to see a certain degree of tolerance in the beginning. Then people responsible for *samizdat* tend to press further, not for political reasons, but because the human spirit is constructed that way. Then the authorities have to decide where to draw the line, and often this means sentencing people to labor camps or exile, for "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda." Trials tend to come in waves. There are periods of limited tolerance, then a crackdown, and a period of quiet, until the whole cycle starts again.

In Eastern Europe the concept of *samizdat* has spread with lightning rapidity. After 1968 the Czechs, being as literate and gifted as they are, quickly found themselves resorting to *samizdat*, and next to the Soviet Union it's the country with the largest amount. It has spread to Poland, Hungary, and Rumania. Interestingly these countries, jealous and

resentful as they are of their neighbor, have nonetheless been unable to invent a word of their own and, with some discomfort for all, use the term *samizdat* for their writings. The nearest equivalent of *samizdat* I've come across are some publications in South Africa, one in particular called *Bandwagon*, a pun, since it dealt with the situation and activities of banned persons. To be a banned person in South Africa, means that you can't have a single word of yours reprinted in the press and that person himself must not be mentioned in print. This particular magazine continued for several months, but after about nine issues closed down.

What has been the impact of *Index* on customs and laws?

It would be foolish to presume that the impact of *Index* has been terribly great. We see our role as somewhat akin to the idea of water dripping upon a stone, *Index* being the water and public opinion the stone. The end is to wear away or influence that opinion to move in certain directions. Occasionally there are gratifying and practical results. In South Africa there was an active and progressive publishing company, the Raven Press, that published a lot of work by black authors, some of whom were banned. A play by a promising young black dramatist and theatre director, Mqayisa, had been performed in the black townships and published by the Raven Press and then was suddenly banned. We were able not only to reprint part of the play but to sell copies of the Raven Press edition of it, with the proceeds returned to them. The play thereby reached a far wider audience than it would have just in South Africa.

A young black South African poet, Don Matera, was brought to our attention. He was largely self-educated, became a writer, and is now a subeditor on the *Johannesburg Star*, but he is a banned person. A friend of his sent us his early poems and we published a large selection of them. Some time later we were told indirectly of a letter from him to an Englishman on a number of subjects. He wrote in it, "The publication of my poems in *Index* gave me new life. By that time I had abandoned writing and considered never returning to it again. But I am now writing more poetry and have been given a great deal of hope." We are planning to publish more of his work, and remain virtually his only publisher to date.

In Eastern Europe there has been a great deal of interchange, but perhaps I could cite the case of the Lithuanian theatre director Jonas Jurasas, who made a great name for himself as a director of Shakespeare. It soon became apparent that his versions of Shakespeare were, in fact, comments on the current political scene. Dismissed from his job, he was unable to find work and wrote a long and impassioned letter to the government protesting his innocence and his victimization. This letter reached the West and was forwarded to us. We published it and it received a certain amount of notice. Some months later Jurasas was given a passport. From Munich he wrote that he was convinced that the publication of his letter in

Index was the reason the authorities relented and granted him a passport.

An amusing and farcical case involves an article we published about the British press. When David Astor, the former editor of the *London Observer*, retired, I asked him if he'd write an article looking back on his years as an editor and commenting on the state of freedom of expression in British newspapers at the time. The printers' and journalists' unions have been causing a great deal of trouble with the managements. Mainly and ostensibly over industrial problems, but using the extreme vulnerability of the newspaper industry as a weapon in the struggle. The result of this was a loss of a number of newspapers and the frequent nonappearance of others. Also, when the unions were criticized in print, a pattern emerged of that paper being unable to appear because the printers refused to print it, or not without an accompanying comment from them.

David Astor described this in some detail, admittedly from a certain partisan point of view. The story was printed in *Index* with no problem from the printers. But it was then taken up by the *Times*, where it was paraphrased, described, and commented upon, and the printers at the time refused to publish it. There was an enormous scandal, since, in refusing to publish, the *Times* was in fact providing confirmation of the allegations in the article. When the *Times* appeared a day late, it carried the offending material. The editor refused to give in to the union's demands and insisted he would not publish the paper at all until he could publish it exactly as he wished.

In due course the printers were given space to reply, and there was a lively debate on the issue. We have been instrumental in prompting similar debates in France regarding the banning of certain books by the Ministry of the Interior, and in Austria on the status of the minister of culture, who seemed to have almost monopolistic control over certain aspects of Austrian literature. And in Finland an article of ours on the censorship in Finland of views hostile to the Soviet Union provoked something of a furor.

What case might *Index* make for censorship?

I have been involved in many controversies where I have been obliged to point out that the title of the magazine is not *Index* against Censorship but *Index* on, or about, Censorship. I don't embrace the extreme view that there should be no censorship in any situation. In any civilized society there are a number of competing rights involved. It is not always clear which rights should prevail, but if I accept the right to a certain degree of privacy, I must accept that there be a law of libel, prohibiting a person from publishing anything he sees fit to print. If there is a right to not having obscene materials thrust on one, then it seems normal that there be a law curtailing the rights of public display, of outrageous advertising, or direct mail campaigns. Likewise, the right to a fair trial entails some sort of restraint on newspaper reporters and commentators against publishing whatever they wish about the person to be tried.