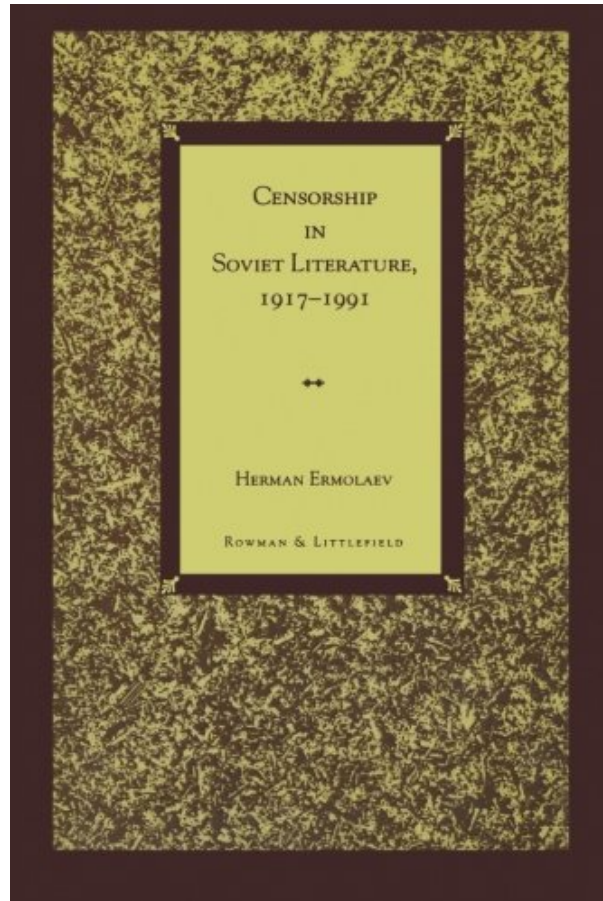
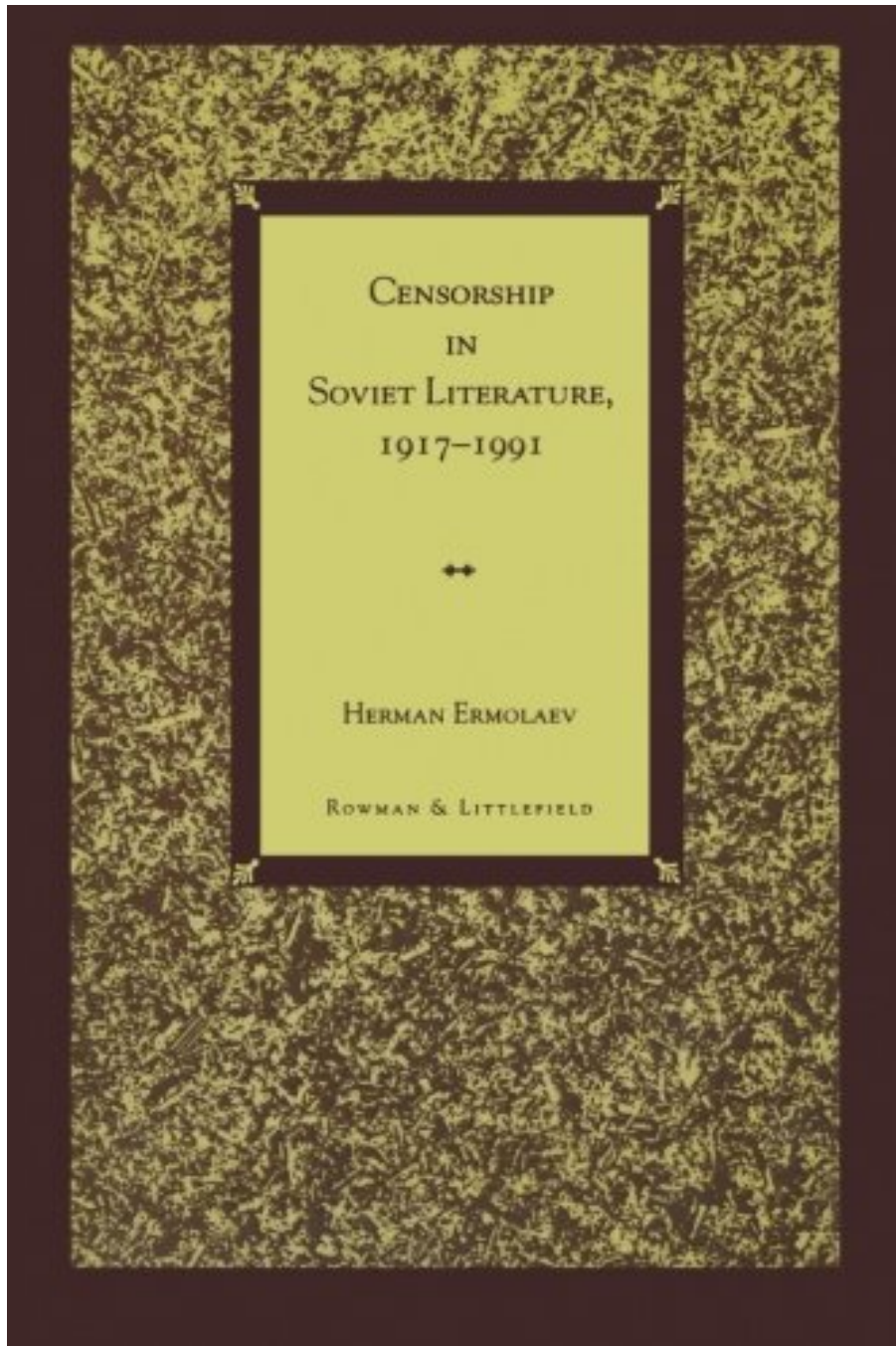


CENSORSHIP IN SOVIET LITERATURE, 1917-1991 BY HERMAN ERMOLAEV



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In the first comprehensive picture of Soviet literary censorship, Herman Ermolaev highlights the aims of censorship and its evolution during shifts in Communist Party policy. He draws on a great variety of primary and secondary sources, including over 200 literary works; the Soviet government's decrees on censorship and publishing; books and articles on censorship; political and historical writings; and personal correspondences with writers, editors, and a former high-ranking Glavlit official.

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Indoctrination Through Sanitization

By Hamilton Beck

As the title indicates, "Censorship in Soviet Literature: 1917-1991" focuses on writers who lived and worked in the Soviet Union, not foreign authors whose works were translated and published there. Herman Ermolaev's study addresses specialists already familiar with the field, and deals mainly with novels, though the occasional play is touched on; Eisenstein's "Ivan the Terrible" is one of the few films mentioned. Though he discusses Babel, Sholokhov, and Solzhenitsyn, general readers should be warned that many of the writers examined here are not exactly household names in the West. While there is little on Pasternak, Nabokov, Vasilii Grossman, Akhmatova or Brodsky, the following authors and novels get extensive treatment: Fedor Panferov ("Bruski"), Alexander Fedeev ("The Rout"), Fedor Gladkov ("Cement"), Aleksei Chapygin ("Stepan Razin"), Vsevolod Ivanov ("Armored Train No. 14-69"), Nicolai Ostrovskii ("How the Steel was Tempered"), and Artem Veselyi ("Russia Washed in Blood").

Lenin regarded freedom of the press not as an abstract value but as a weapon in the arsenal of class warfare. So it comes as little surprise that censorship was present from the very beginning of the USSR, having been introduced as a "temporary measure" as early as 1917. After shutting down all the bourgeois papers, by the end of 1918 the communists went on to silence the non-Bolshevik socialist press as well, in spite of the efforts of the relatively liberal Lunacharsky. Libraries were another early target. Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's wife, ordered older literature removed from them on the grounds of "obsolescence."

After this early period, who was given the drudge work of identifying specific passages to be expunged, and what was their daily schedule like? "At the grass-roots level," we are told (pg. 56), "many censors were poorly qualified or even negligent." Even so, they exercised an important function. Nor should it be assumed that they came in only at the end of the creative process; in fact, many of them combined the work of censor with that of editor.

How much discretion did they have? Not much, it seems. It is easy to imagine that there might have been a downside to letting something pass that was later found objectionable, and no upside to being permissive. Very likely this led to a mindset of, "When in doubt, delete."

The usual way their superiors evaluated their work was simply to count the number of cuts they ordered. At the same time, censors at all levels could not merely require the removal of offensive matter; on occasion, they also demanded the addition of positive elements: Fictional characters thus could have their names changed and their level of culture elevated – which extended even to the specific volumes on their bookshelves.

It would oversimplify things, however, to imagine that narrow-minded bureaucrats compelled authors to make changes that they heroically resisted. Take Panferov, the author of "Bruski," who seemed quite ready to jump on the anti-Bukharin bandwagon in 1937, the moment it became opportune to do so. He and others like him hurried to grovel before authority without any prompting. Indeed, some engaged in self-censorship so drastic they effectively defaced their own work.

On the whole, though, conformity was enforced from above. Practically the only escape was to appeal directly to Stalin, the top censor himself. This approach sometimes met with success, for example in the case of Sholokhov's "Virgin Soil Uplifted." When given the choice of making changes or seeing publication cancelled (or at least postponed), the author refused to budge, even when Stalin personally asked him to. This resulted in a two-year delay. Ermolaev was able to correspond with the editor of Sholokhov's "The Quiet Don" (also translated as "Quiet Flows the Don"), who subjected this work to so many revisions that they "virtually spelled the end of 'The Quiet Don' as a historic and artistic work." (pg. 105) Comparatively speaking, Sholokhov was fortunate. Other authors who remained stubborn, such as Bulgakov, saw their works forbidden for decades.

Censors sometimes justified their rejection of a novel not so much on the grounds that it was false, as that "this is not the truth we need." The tsarist past of Odessa could not be presented in too attractive a light, so that a description of a pre-revolutionary wedding reception had to drop all references to plentiful food and drink. When it came to the confiscation of grain in 1918 and the uprisings that followed, it was decreed that the word "peasant" be replaced by "kulak." The entire topic of cannibalism among the starving peasants under Soviet rule was made taboo. "An important task of the censors was to Russify the Crimea, to erase evidence that it once belonged to the Greeks and Tartars." (pg. 112) In 1948, "Ukrainian aspirations for independence" were another reason for demanding changes to Panferov's "Bruski." (pg. 163)

Censorship was actually at its worst immediately after the end of the war, when the authorities were motivated by the need to counteract the returning forces' favorable impressions of life abroad. This was followed by a mild thaw a few years later, such that, for example, beginning in 1949 critical remarks about the Romanovs disappeared.

Stalin declared himself against the practice of disclosing authors' original Jewish names, which Ermolaev explains as part of his devious scheme to show the world that he was not really an anti-Semite. The treatment of Jews after Stalin's death he characterizes as "overt benevolence and covert animosity." (pg. 169) "The censorship of [Kuznetsov's] 'Babii Iar' gives us an idea of what an author was not supposed to say about Jews, Ukrainians, Russians, and Germans." (pg. 208) Ukrainian anti-Semitism was also toned down.

Stalin, who during his lifetime had always made a show of disdaining excessive sycophancy, became a target of repression himself after his death in 1953, as favorable references to him were removed under Khrushchev, only to be restored under Brezhnev and his successors. Whatever ideological principles the censors were guided by nominally, in the end they were most concerned to blow with the prevailing wind. Sometimes an editor who had insisted on puffing up Stalin's reputation during his lifetime was the very one who "degraded" him posthumously. (pg. 156)

For the post-war period, Ermolaev is able to draw on conversations and other personal communications involving not just authors but even a few retired guardians of the flame. One of them, Potapov, he terms "captious" and a super-purist who was determined to root out even the most harmless sexual allusions. On occasion, their work could be literally too successful, such that the names of some renegades were so thoroughly expunged that the censors themselves did not recognize them after a few years, thus permitting the "unpersons" to resurface, at least for a few editions. So if someone today should seek to prove a point by saying, "Just look at the literature of the period, which shows ...," Ermolaev reminds us just how unstable texts published in the USSR could be.

In the Khrushchev period a few authors began to fight back against the bureaucrats. Solzhenitsyn's public protest in 1967, when he pointed out that the constitution contained no provision for censorship, marked a turning point. Amazingly, after calling the practice "the curse of our literature," he escaped any immediate punishment. (pg. 220) Still, in the eyes of the regime, this was enough to mark him as their most dangerous literary enemy.

Under Brezhnev, censorship became both more severe and less consistent, as the system began to wear down. Lenin himself could be expurgated if his views were judged "great but untimely." (pg. 184) Books and periodicals containing Solzhenitsyn's essays were not just withdrawn from libraries but shredded. One novel submitted for publication at this time described characters burning volumes in their possession that had been published in the czarist era, or were written by foreign authors; these fictional book-collectors even burned their copies of Maxim Gorky, once rumors surfaced that he had been poisoned by the Soviet authorities. Since the topic of censorship was itself off limits, all these passages were deleted. At the same time, hoping

to avoid the creation of martyrs, the politburo ordered that prestigious mavericks like Andrey Sakharov be handled with care. And in the peripheral Soviet republics of Estonia and Armenia, authors were allowed greater leeway when it came to descriptions of sexuality than in Russia itself.

To impose some structure on his vast material, Ermolaev tries to separate "political" from "puritanical" censorship. This can prove problematic, as the dividing line is not always clear. He himself seems a bit unsure whether the removal of references to God, as in the expression "Oh God – what a life!" should be described as one or the other. In the case of Chapygin's "Stepan Razin," he concedes that the so-called puritanical cuts "have strong political coloration." (pg. 102) In any case, Soviet Puritanism meant the removal of such undesirable elements as "blat" – the jargon of professional thieves – and swearing. Since Russians are virtuosos when it comes to cursing, this led to the loss of some colorful dialogue. One writer's claim that "there was no style without swearing" was itself deleted.

It is worth bearing in mind that all these bowdlerized editions of course remain on Russian bookshelves – many readers (especially from the older generations) know no others, though naturally they could find unexpurgated ones now if they were so moved. Still, it should be kept in mind that though the old forms of state censorship have largely disappeared, the effect lives on.

In sum, the author has amassed some fascinating material and then given it conscientious if rather plodding treatment. If his goal was to inform, he has done so – thoroughly. If his goal was to avoid sensationalism, he may be said to have over-fulfilled the norm.

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