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Russia's Growing Army of Censors

By Andrei Sinitsyn

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Last Wednesday, the day before it was to begin appearing in Russian movie theaters, the authorities canceled screenings of the Hollywood film "Child 44" about a Soviet intelligence agent investigating the mass murder of children. The distributor, Central Partnership, with a little "friendly persuasion" from the Culture Ministry, concluded it was unacceptable to show such a film on the eve of the 70th anniversary of the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War.

Following an emergency meeting, the mayor's office of Orenburg recommended closing down the Credo dance school in town. A video showing girls from the school dancing provocatively clad in Russia's most patriotic colors went viral on the Internet and elicited unwanted attention from the national media, as well as from the central Investigative Committee and Prosecutor General's Office.

The Investigative Committee is looking at it as a possible case of "criminal negligence" and "indecency," and intends to look into not only the dance school, but also all extracurricular activities at the Molodyozhny Palace of Culture in Orenburg. An alarmed Russian public has requested that the Prosecutor General's Office check dance schools

throughout the country for similarly inappropriate behaviors.

Ever since the recent scandal in which the authorities banned a production of Wagner's opera "Tannhäuser" in Novosibirsk for offending religious believers, no theater in the country has felt at ease. A group of actors at the Pskov Drama Theater wrote to the Culture Ministry complaining that the play "Banshchik" (Bath Attendant) slated to appear there, contains foul language violating censorship laws as well as scenes with scantily clad women. As a result, the opening of the play was postponed.

The authorities in Yekaterinburg not only shut down the photo exhibition "Triumph and Tragedy: Allies in World War II," supposedly because of repairs to the museum housing it, but also had journalists fired for suggesting in an article in a regional newspaper that the Federal Security Service had had a hand in canceling the exhibition.

This is all perfectly logical.

In their rush to multiply the number of prohibitive laws governing public activities, so as to ensure that "nothing bad could possibly happen," the authorities have created a new industry for law enforcement officials. Now they hardly have time to walk away from the computer as they type up reports detailing their efforts to protect religious feelings, the prevailing system of government and the sanctity of childhood.

The cultural sphere depends on federal funding, so the moment it became apparent that "correct" and "incorrect" forms of culture exist, a battle began for the limited funds available between those on the "right" side — as defined by the prevailing mood of the authorities at any given moment — and those on the "wrong" side of the issue.

The ideology of a country at war with its enemies, domestic and foreign, is constantly taking on greater symbolic scope, and by defending the "right" symbols, individuals can earn symbolic capital. Whereas before, anyone defending the interests of the Russian Orthodox faith could expect promotion and praise, now anyone speaking out in defense of a vaguely-defined set of "traditional values" and "morals" can expect to sail up the career ladder.

As the room for free thought and action continually narrows, ordinary citizens and professionals become increasingly afraid. With loyalty rewarded in place of competence, public administrators are more frequently inept and unqualified for their tasks.

However, the culture minister believes it is time to "finally put a stop to these endless attempts at schizophrenic self-reflection." Indeed, it is high time to declare that all reflection is sick, harmful or helpful to the enemy. That is how we show loyalty in Russia!

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