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Forward Into the Past: Forbidden Books In Russia

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Typical typewritten samizdat, films and manuscript photocopies (to be sent abroad for publication), exhibition in Moscow, 2017. **Nkrita (CC BY-SA 4.0)**

Since Feb. 24, 2022, the Russian book market has faced many problems: rising prices for paper, logistics, new laws against so-called LGBT propaganda and foreign influence, and the refusal of foreign authors and publishers to work with Russia. A writer's anti-war position may also be a make it difficult to find a publisher.

Officially, Russian authorities don't pull books from bookstores, but there is self-censorship at every part of the book-to-bookstore chain. Publishing houses don't take on new books by 'undesirable' authors, and bookstores pull books written by them off their shelves. As the situation in the publishing industry grows more and more similar to the situation in the U.S.S.R. many Russian writers have to find other ways to publish their works.

In the past

Censors in the U.S.S.R. banned anti-Soviet books, books about sex, LGBT, religion and other

many topics. The novel "Doctor Zhivago" by Boris Pasternak was deemed anti-Soviet for not toeing the party line on the 1917 Revolution and could not be printed in Russia. In 1956, the writer smuggled the manuscript out to Italy, where it was published and then won the Nobel Prize for literature the following year. This did not improve the Soviet authorities' attitude to the novel.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote "The Gulag Archipelago" in secret. Parts of the manuscript were in different cities, and the writer kept only the chapter he was working on. The first volume was published in Paris in 1973.

Zamyatin's novel "We" was also banned in the U.S.S.R., but in 1921 the manuscript was miraculously sent to Berlin by registered mail. After the English-language publication in 1924, a wave of harassment from the authorities and the literary community hit Zamyatin: the book was considered to be a mockery of the communist society of the future.

The list of 'unwanted' writers and prohibited books was long. However, Soviet people found ways to read them nonetheless. "My father was a pilot, and our family had many privileges and opportunities. While some of my friends had problems finding food to eat, I wore jeans and drove a car. We often moved, but I loved to read books, and my father helped me find books like "Lolita" by Vladimir Nabokov, "Doctor Zhivago" and others. He was acquainted with many powerful people, and prohibited literature was always in our home. My father never told me how he got them, but I think he received them from his friends living abroad," Ludmila Kovtun from Krasnodar told The Moscow Times.

Alexander Nesterchuk from Lipetsk lived in a poor family, but he also read a lot. "In Rostov, where I went to the university, there was a place where sellers of prohibited literature would gather. Information about them was passed from hand to hand. You'd pay for sheets of paper with a text, not a book. Since I was in the communist party, after I read them I usually burned them," he said.

In the late Soviet period some books by authors that had been previously banned were published, but in small editions. An editor of The Moscow Times recalled buying volumes of poetry by Anna Akhmatova and other "rare" books in Beryozka foreign currency stores for friends.

Back to the past

In the Soviet period, some publishing houses moved abroad. YMCA-Press was one of them; in 1925, it moved from the U.S.S.R. to Paris, France. It has published many Russian writers throughout its history, including Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Mikhail Bulgakov, Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Ivan Bunin, and Osip Mandelstam.

Today the situation is reminiscent of the Soviet period. Russian literary journals and publishing houses are appearing outside Russia. In Amsterdam the writer Maxim Osipov just published the first edition of "The Fifth Wave," a literary journal that will bring prose, poetry and other literary genres to readers in Russian and English translation, in paper or electronic form. In Riga the Russian bookstore Novaya Riga published a volume by film critic Anton Dolin and, spurred by its success, hopes to continue.

Freedom Letters became one of the first new publishing houses abroad for Russian-speaking readers when it opened on April 17, 2023. The house also publishes books in Ukrainian and English. “The novel 'Springfield' by Sergei Davydov can’t be published in modern Russia, and not just because the main character is LGBT. There are many reasons. We published it as an e-book and in paperback," Georgy Urushadze, CEO of the publishing house, told The Moscow Times.

Freedom Letters started its production with ten e-books. Among them were the first complete edition of "The Big Ration" by Yuli Dubov and poetry collections by Evgeny Klyuev and Vitaly Pukhanov. The publishing house also initiated a series called "Words of Ukraine": "Sit and Watch" by Andriy Bulbenko and Marta Kaidanovskaya, a collection of poems by Alexander Kabanov called "The Snowman’s Son," and a novel that predicted war called "Lair of Zmievo" by Artyom Lyakhovich.

Urushadze did not expect such a positive response. “It gives us energy,” he said. “That’s important because about 25 volunteers work on the Freedom Letters. All of them live in different countries: one of our proof-readers lives in The Netherlands, one of our typesetters lives in Latvia. Writers and readers also live in different countries. The publishing house will be based in the U.S."

"We don’t have money for marketing, but pro-Putin activists help get out the word about us," Urushadze said. "They accuse me of everything. One person wrote that Russia is losing the war because I publish anti-war literature. It’s comical, but it helps us."

Russians in country are also buying e-books from Freedom Letters. They can pay for them with international debit cards or by asking their foreign friends to pay for them. "If we find book-sellers that will sell our books in Russia, we'll work with them. And we’re trying to figure out a way to sell them for payment by Russian debit cards."

Books of Freedom Letters are sold on freedomletters.org, Amazon, iBooks, and in other e-book shops around the world.

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