

An Open Letter on Censorship (Instead of a speech)

To the presidium and the delegates of the congress to members of the Union of Soviet Writers, to editors of literary newspapers and magazines:

I.

The oppression, no longer tolerable, that our literature has been enduring from censorship for decades and that the Union of Writers cannot accept any further.

This censorship under the obscuring label of Glavlit¹ [Executive Council for Literature and Publishing] not provided for by the Constitution and therefore illegal and nowhere publicly labeled as such, is imposing a yoke on our literature and gives people who are unversed in literature arbitrary control over writers.

A survival of the Middle Ages, censorship manages in Methuselah-like fashion to drag out its existence almost to the 21st century. Of fleeting significance, it attempts to appropriate unto itself the role of unfleeting time of separating the good books from the bad.

Our writers are not supposed to have the right; they are not endowed with the right, to express their anticipatory judgments about the moral life of man and society, or to explain in their own way the social problems or the historical experience that has been so deeply felt in our country.

Works that might have expressed the mature thinking of the people, that might have timely and salutary influence on the realm of the spirit or on the development of a social conscience are prohibited or distorted by censorship on the basis of considerations that are petty, egotistic and, from the national point of view, shortsighted. Outstanding manuscripts by young authors, as yet entirely unknown, are nowadays rejected by editors solely on the ground that they "will not pass."

Many union members and even delegates at this conference know how they themselves bowed to the pressure of censorship and made concessions in the structure and concept of their books, changing chapters, pages, paragraphs, sentences, giving them innocuous titles, only to see them finally in print, even if it meant distorting them irremediably.

We have one decisive factor here, the death of a troublesome writer, after which, sooner or later, he is returned to us, with an annotation "explaining his errors." For a long time, the name of Pasternak could not be pronounced out loud, but then he died, and his books appeared and his verses are even quoted at ceremonies. Pushkin's words are really coming true: "They are capable of loving only the dead."

But tardy publication of books and "authorization" of names do not make up for either the social or the artistic losses suffered by our people from these monstrous delays, from the



¹ (After this letter, the office changed its name to Executive Council for Protection of State Secrets in Print.)

oppression of artistic conscience. (In fact there were writers in the 1920's, Pilnyak, Platonov and Mandelshtam, who called attention at a very early stage to the beginnings of the cult [of personality] and the particular traits of Stalin's character; however, they were destroyed and silenced instead of being listened to.)

Literature cannot develop between the categories "permitted" – "not permitted" and "this you can and this you can't." Literature that is not the air of its contemporary society, that dares not pass on to society its pains and fears; that does not warn in time against the threatening moral and social dangers, such literature does not deserve the name of literature; it is only a facade. Such literature loses the confidence of its own people, and its published works are used as waste paper instead of being read.

Our literature has lost the leading role it played at the end of the last century and the beginning of the present, and the brilliance of experimentation that distinguished it in the 1920's. To the entire world the literary life of our country now appears as something infinitely poorer, flatter and lower than it actually is, then it would appear if it were not restricted, hemmed in.

The losers are both our country, in world public opinion, and world literature itself. If the world had access to all the uninhibited fruits of our literature, if it were enriched by our own spiritual experience, the whole artistic evolution of the world would move along in a different way, acquiring a new stability and attaining even a new artistic threshold.

I propose that the congress adopt a resolution that would demand and insure the abolition of all censorship, overt or hidden, of all fictional writing and release publishing houses from this obligation of obtaining authorization for the publication of every printed page.

II.

The duties of the union toward its members:

Those duties are not clearly formulated in the statutes of the Union of Soviet Writers (under "Protection of copyright" and "Measures for the protection of other rights of writers") it is sad to find that for a third of a century the union has defended neither the "other" rights nor even the copyright of persecuted writers.

Many writers were subjected during their lifetime to abuse and slander in the press and from rostrums without ever being given the physical possibility of replying. They have been exposed to violence and personal persecution (Bulgakov, Akhmatova, Tsvetayeva, Pasternak, Zoshchenko, Platonov, Aleksandr Grin, Vasily Grossman). The Union of Writers not only did not make available its own publications for reply and justification, not only did not come out in defense of these writers, but through its leadership was always first among the persecutors.

Names that adorned our poetry of the 20th century found themselves on lists of those excluded from the union or not even admitted to the union in the first place. The leadership of the union cowardly abandoned to their distress those for whom persecution ended in exile, camps and

death (Pavel, Vasilyev, Mandelshtam, Artem Vesoly, Pilnyak, Babel, Tabidze, Zapolotsky and others).

The list must be cut off at "and others." We learned after the 20th congress of the party [on de-Stalinization in 1956] that there were more than 600 writers whom the union had obediently handed over to their fate in prisons and camps.

However, the roll is even longer, and its curled-up end cannot be read and will never be read by our eyes. It contains the names of young prose writers and poets whom we may have known only accidentally through personal meetings, whose talents were crushed in camps before being able to blossom, whose writings never got further than the offices of the state security service in the days of Yagoda, Yezhov, Berla and Abakumov [heads of the secret police under Stalin].

There is no historical necessity for the newly elected leadership of the union to share with preceding leaderships responsibility for the past. I propose that paragraph 22 of the union bylaws be rewritten to clearly outline all the guarantees for the defense of union members who are subjected to slander and unjust persecutions so that past illegalities will not be repeated.

III.

If the congress will not remain indifferent to what I have said, I also ask that it consider the interdictions and persecutions to which I myself have been subjected.

My novel "In the First Circle" was taken away from me almost two years ago by the state security people, and this has prevented it from being submitted to publishers. Instead, in my lifetime, against my will and even without my knowledge, this novel has been "published" in an unnatural "closed" edition for reading by a selected unidentified circle. My novel has become available to literary officials, but is being concealed from most writers. I have been unable to insure open discussion of the novel within writers associations and to prevent misuse and plagiarism.

Together with the novel, my literary archives dating back 15 and 20 years, things that were not intended for publication, were taken away from me. Now tendentious excerpts from these files have also been covertly "published" and are being circulated within the same circles. The play "Feast of the Victors", which I wrote down from memory in camp, (where I had four different prisoner ID numbers and at a time when, condemned to die by starvation, we were forgotten by society and no one outside the camps came out against repressions), this play, now left far behind, is being ascribed to me as my very latest work.

For three years now an irresponsible campaign of slander is being conducted against me, who fought all through the war as a battery commander and received military decorations. It is being said that served time as a criminal, or surrendered to the enemy (I never was a prisoner of war), that I "betrayed" my country, "served the Germans." That is the interpretation now

being put on the 11 years I spent in camps and exile for having criticized Stalin. This slander is being spread in secret instructions and meetings by people holding official positions. I vainly tried to stop the slander by appealing to the board of the Writers Union of the R.S.F.R. [Russian Republic] and to the press. The board did not even react, and not a single paper printed my reply to the slanderers. On the contrary, slander against me from rostrums has intensified and become more vicious within the last year, making use of distorted material from my confiscated files, and I have no way of replying.

My story "The Cancer Ward," the first part of which was approved for publication by the prose department of the Moscow Writers Organization, cannot be published either by chapters, rejected by five magazines, or in its entirety, rejected by Novy Mir, Zvezda and Prostor [literary journals],

The play "The Reindeer and the Little Hut," accepted in 1962 by the Theater Sovremennik [in Moscow], has thus far not received permission to be performed. The screen play, "The Tanks Know the Truth," the stage play "The Light That Is in You," short stories, "The Right Hand," the series "Small Bits" cannot find a producer or publisher.

My stories published in Novy Mir have never been reprinted in book form, having been rejected everywhere – by the Soviet Writer Publishers, the State Literature Publishing House, the Ogonyok Library. They thus remain inaccessible to the general reading public.

I have also been prevented from having any other contacts with readers, public readings of my works – in November, 1966, 9 of 11 scheduled meetings were canceled at the last moment – or readings over the radio. Even simple act of giving a manuscript away for "reading and copying" has now become a criminal act, and the ancient Russian scribes were permitted to do.

My work has thus been finally smothered, gagged and slandered.

In view of gross infringement on my copyright and "other" rights, will the fourth congress defend me, yes or no? It seems to me that the choice is also not without importance for the literary future of several delegates.

I am, of course, confident that I will fulfill my duty as a writer under all circumstances, from the grave even more successfully and more unchallenged than in my lifetime. No one can bar the road to the truth, and to advance its progress, I am prepared to accept even death. But, maybe, many lessons will finally teach us not to stop the writer's pen during his lifetime. At no time has this ennobled our history.

A.I. Solzhenitsyn

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