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Human Rights 227: Dissent and Totalitarianism in Eastern Europe

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Censorship and Dissidence: Media in a Totalitarian State

Collectively called media, the conveyances of fact and fiction come in many forms. Forms of such media – or *arts* – vary innumerable: from poetry to prose to music and songs to theater to dance to painting to photography to film and beyond. Any perspective or view presented through any of the various forms of media, regardless of its basis in fact or fiction, exposes its audience to an experience which may otherwise never break the surface in their reality. This experience of art provokes reaction. This reaction, best summarized as thought and emotion, is as important to an artist as his paper and instrument. Without these essential reactions from an audience, art retains no meaning and no purpose. But when thought and emotion incite further reaction – when the media sets its audience ablaze with questions and passion, and when art has the potential to affect change in politics and society, a struggle occurs – an evolutionary back-and-forth in which one adapts to outsmart the other. This universal and timeless struggle traces from ancient times to present, around the globe and back. Perhaps the most exemplary and densely eventful of all these battlegrounds was that of Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th century era of samizdat and its contemporaries. The European stage of censorship and dissidence offers such an extensive array of actors and events that it reveals to a critical audience the nature of repression and censorship and dissident responses and it shows the necessity of media and art as ammunition to both of the opposing sides.

Though it has evolved through time, the essential nature of censorship has changed little since its conception. The defining circumstance of censorship arguably traces to ancient Rome.

While society today continues to idealize ancient Rome for its great advancements and general contributions to knowledge and for its undying legacy of military, political, and intellectual superiority, the Roman legacy not only passed on those attributes for which it remains romanticized, but also established a precedent for authoritatively imposed restrictions in media. In fact, Roman authority entrusted this duty only to high-ranking officials known as the *censura*. These “censors” had various tasks, but maintained a very important role in “supervising public morality” to prevent immorality and to maintain traditional Roman values (Wikipedia). The censors’ only role seen as more important than policing morals was taking the census, and censors often combined these duties with their final duty of financial administration by employing the three to mutually enforce one-another. Public morality, insomuch, was enforced by means of exclusion from the census, forfeiture of publicly-subsidized property, or social-class and rank demotion (Wikipedia).

These punitive options have thrived throughout historical cases of censorship. A host of other penalties has evolved, however, in response to changing times and varying degrees of responsive insubordination. Mid-twentieth-century Europe concisely showcases this evolution, wherein the imposed restrictions on freedom evoked some degree of rebellion, which cyclically led to increased restrictions and escalated punishments, which in turn caused greater opposition, and so on and so forth.

Expressing dissent from the ruling government, or sympathizing with any perspective from outside of one’s government was strictly forbidden under the authoritarian leadership in Europe, as is the nature of authoritarianism. Similarly, most regimes that restricted dissidence also restricted public availability of news on current events. In fact, even non-threatening media was censored in Europe, to the dismay of many non-political artists. In Nazi Germany, paintings

and songs only entered the free public realm if approved by the government censors or if used for the purpose of nationalist propaganda whereby the *party* would exhibit non-approved media to show the ‘unworthiness’ of such media. In Russia, Stalin actually banned a great amount of art and media which had already been in circulation before his reign. The USSR, which used excessive propaganda, had strict rules prohibiting non-Soviet media in Soviet Russia (Skilling 9) and even stricter rules guiding media within the Bloc.

Media and art in the Soviet Union was so strictly controlled that even non-political artistic works had to enter the underground arena in order to gain any audience. Written works were self-published in the underground market, with authors using carbon-paper and other “pre-Gutenberg” reproduction methods (Skilling 9-10) to avoid bringing too much attention and getting caught. Self-publication in Russia became known as samizdat in this period, and soon shifted from a primarily literary composition to a concentration of politically-tuned works. Samizdat entered the political scene in Czechoslovakia and Poland in a similar fashion, and in all three countries it experienced such a shift. The shift made samizdat “not merely a voice for literature, but a vehicle for the expression of all forms of dissent and protest” (Skilling 8). Of all its implications, the shift in samizdat’s essence opened the floodgates for commentaries on human rights.

In Czechoslovakia, samizdat circles revealed Charter 77 and the Czechoslovakian human rights movement. Czechoslovakians, through Charter 77, raised issue directly with government involvement in the media, citing Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights:

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds regardless

of borders, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice. (Skilling 19)

The significance of media to human rights is so strongly identified by the members of Charter 77 that it quickly became one of their most demanding focuses. *Charter* was not alone in this effort. Similar issues were raised in samizdat circles elsewhere, including Charter 77's Russian predecessor, *The Chronicle of Current Events*. While Charter 77 was the poster-child of the human rights movement in Czechoslovakia, the *Chronicle*, which "reported on violations of human rights, house searches, arrests, trials, and imprisonments," was the core of the human rights movement in Soviet Russia (Skilling 6-7).

Individuals involved in both *Charter* and the *Chronicle* faced persecution and prosecution, to the extent that the latter was interrupted from publication for a year and a half in the early 1970s. The propagators of these illegal social commentaries joined the ranks of many countless painters, musicians, novelists, playwrights, actors, and others who worked against great odds to assure the "continuity of national culture at a time when it was threatened by repression and censorship" (Skilling 17). Also among these ranks, though not entirely within the defining parameters of samizdat, were various other publishers and underground-publishers throughout Europe, notably the publishing-house Solidarity of Poland.

The publisher used loopholes in Polish law to produce uncensored newsletters and newspapers that would eventually find their way to the public at large. When a military takeover in Poland led to the forced closure and reorganization of Solidarity, anonymous uncensored newsletters appeared again within a matter of days. The underground press slowly became institutionalized, and with assistance from technological advances underground media as a whole was booming. Video cassettes illegally surged into Poland, allowing the repressed populous to

view banned Polish and foreign films, history and news programs, and even listen to banned music (Skilling 24). Crack-downs like that on Solidarity continued to occur in Poland and elsewhere, and they all seemed to have comparable success.

The continued proliferation of prohibited materials allowed certain groups to take stands against censorship and the government implementation of such repression. Various publication groups focused more and more explicitly on these issues of human right, to the point that the “‘underground counter-culture’” encompassed not only artistic outlet, but also non-state news broadcasts and human rights organizations (Skilling 25). These groups gained influence by reporting on human rights abuses that otherwise could have gone undocumented. The governments’ typical response of forcibly closing down the organizations and their resources only fed the reporting monster they aimed to destroy and, it would seem, cyclically strengthened the underground media and weakened the above-ground authority. Generally speaking, though, the era of underground culture served mainly as a means to protect and contribute to the historical cultures of the people, not necessarily as an explicit subversive attack on government. In fact, while censorship in Europe began with ancient Rome’s attempts to purify media to the state’s satisfaction – particularly to maintain traditional cultural values – it twisted form in 20th-century Europe to attack the purveyors of ‘traditional’ culture in favor of the authoritatively imposed and strictly regimented ‘culture.’ The role-reversal between underground culture and government censorship between ancient and recent times may evince why Rome maintains its prestige, while totalitarian states of 20th-century Europe have retained no respect or appreciation since their time.

This connotative explanation may suggest why little information exists on subversive media in ancient Rome, as compared to illegal media and art in recent Europe. That is to say,

perhaps societies possess a greater appreciation for repression and censorship when it is done in the name of the preservation of culture, rather than when it is done to quash popular and traditional culture. No matter the case, however, censorship was used to control information and culture, and subversion of the rules of censorship threatened the authoritarian regimes' control.

This speaks to the evolution of the institutionalization, which began simply out of cultural and artistic – not political – motives, of prohibited cultural materials. After all, art has no value, no meaning, and no purpose if it is not genuine. As a Russian writer commented in 1967,

There are now two kinds of art in the country. One is free and uninhibited... whose distribution and influence depend only on its genuinely artistic qualities. And the other one, commanded and paid for ... is badly mutilated, suppressed and oppressed. It is not hard to predict which of these two arts will be victorious.

(Skilling 7)

Embracing genuine, uncensored art caught on, as discussed, and became a sort of vent for the repressed – both the artists and their audiences. The uncensored arena of underground culture eventually gave rise to political critique, which was fueled by every condition of the time.

Evidence remaining of this underground culture clearly shows its magnitude and diversity. This magnitude and diversity of prohibited media and art was accompanied by an equally grand and diverse array of government retaliations and punishments. As stated before, this array visible in Europe during the period serves fittingly as a synopsis of censorship and dissent and punishment seen around the world and throughout time. Continuing with this thought, a brief look at punishment seems only appropriate.

Punishments for the dissident movements in samizdat and its contemporary vents for art and media varied as greatly as the art and media themselves. They also shared in the common

punitive themes of the times. Ironically, in other words, a dissident writer or publisher for *The Chronicle of Current Events* may have used his underground voice to object to the penile system and its human rights abuses in general – publicizing invasions of privacy and the penile system’s own function as an insult to and mockery of justice. The dissidents who were caught, then, would of course wind up a victim of this system in various manners.

Especially in the earlier cases of underground culture, excessively severe punishments were not uncommon. After all, executions in the early 20th and preceding centuries were one of the most typical punishments assigned. Executions became less and less common, however, as a growing sense of human rights crept up over Europe and its dissident force in particular. Still, severe repercussions existed, like Dostoyevsky’s sentence for his treacherously dissident behavior (Dostoyevsky was sentenced to 8 years of penal servitude – a sentence which led to his death while serving the Russian military) (Skilling 3). Exile was another punishment seen more often in the early and preceding times of/to subversive culture.

Harassment was very common, as is described in nearly every account of dissidence in Europe. Perhaps the best summary of castigation, however, is imprisonment. Vaclav Havel and Alexander Solzhenitsyn were both subjected to and both wrote extensively of imprisonment. Gulags, work camps, were very common, and just as Dostoyevsky’s punishment led to his death, so were many dissident deaths caused by conditions in the gulags.

Tom Stoppard’s play about Czechoslovakian dissidence, *Rock ‘n’ Roll*, brings in imprisonment as a punishment to the protagonist, Jan.

Yet, just as European dissidence shows a comprehensive array of dissident figures and methods and means of dissent, it also shows such an array of the penalties. In fact, “the ruling powers used every provision of the criminal code and every means of police harassment – house

searches, interrogations, detentions, imprisonment, and forced exile – to discourage people from writing *samizdat* and from copying and passing it on, or even from storing it in their dwellings” (Skilling 18).

Such variety of attacks between dissidents and government – ranging from poetry to prose to paintings to photography to plays on one side to imprisonment, interrogation, exile and execution on the other – illustrates the passion with which both sides fought. While similar battles appear throughout history and around the globe, that of Europe in the 20th century essentially summarizes every prior case. Events such as the flooding of Poland with video cassettes exemplify the variety, density, and intensity of incidents occurring within the human-rights-based struggle. Further, the tactful employment of media by dissident figures and groups illustrates the major ammunition of political dissent. In fact, just about the only other ammunition used in dissent to politics is physical protest, such as the movements of Gandhi and Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. Because of the importune nature of public dissent in a totalitarian state unafraid to execute excessive punishments, the cultural-political dissent method of subterranean artistic movements and political commentary presents the most feasible means for deriding and attacking government abuses of power. For that reason, public and active dissent is uncommon in totalitarian states – subversive efforts are simply safer and more effective. With this taken into consideration, the events seen in Europe under authoritarian regimes adeptly summarize dissident movements in any non-democratic state throughout time. While technology and democracy are changing the face of dissident movements to some degree – or at least are changing their penalties – the vast majority of dissident movements fits into this mold exceptionally well. This being the case, it is fair to say that European dissidence in the 20th century competently summarizes the greater part of dissident movements through time and

around the globe, and serves to illustrate the relation between censorship and repression and dissidence in general.

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