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BOOKS IN THE SOVIET SECOND ECONOMY

Keith Bush

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Introduction

In a world where many have forgotten, or have never learned, to read and enjoy a good book, and who instead remain captives of the television screen, the pulp paper-back, or the predigested periodical, Soviet citizens' love of books for their own sake stands out as a wondrous phenomenon. It might be argued that this passion represents, to some extent, a virtue derived from the lack of alternative vices. There is, after all, not a great deal to do for most Soviet toilers during their increased leisure time spent in cramped living quarters other than drink or watch an improved, albeit still turgid, television fare.

Nevertheless, in view of this hunger for books, the evident blessing of the authorities for universal reading, and the fact that the Soviet Union is a leading producer of paper, it might seem curious that there exists, and has long existed, a chronic shortage of books that people want to read. This unmet demand has given scope to various manifestations of the second economy. The supply of, and demand for, books might serve, then, as a simple case study of why and how the second economy intervenes.

Abundance and Scarcity

In 1980, some two billion books and pamphlets will be published in the Soviet Union¹ - i.e., more than seven for each man, woman, and child, or about one quarter of the world's output. There are said to be over 350,000 public libraries in the USSR, holding more than four billion volumes that are used free of charge by three-quarters of the population.² And yet innumerable sources, official and samizdat, Western observers and recent emigres, testify to an acute shortage of readable books.

By far the greatest part of this unmet demand consists not of clearly forbidden fruits as Orwell, Solzhenitsyn, or Zamyatin, or even uncomfortable works like Akhmatova, the Bible or Bulgakov, but for such names as Andersen, Balzac, Byron, Christie, Cicero, Dostoyevsky, Dumas, Gogol', Hemingway, Hugo, Lermontov, London, Maupassant, Montaigne, Pil'nyak, Pushkin, L. Tolstoi, Twain, Verne, and Zweig.

Authorities' Distinction between 'Demand' and 'Need'

As in many other spheres of the Soviet socialist economy, consumer demand in the matter of which books are published and the print run for each volume tends to take second place to the preferences of the authorities. Or, as Gregory Walker has put it "the undifferentiated satisfaction of 'raw' demand, expressed in pre-publication orders and queues in bookshops, is not the primary aim of socialist publishing."³ The value of a book and, hence, of the publishing house's activity may be determined, according to one school of thought, by its ideological content rather than consumer satisfaction⁴: by this criterion, presumably, Agatha Christie would have died a pauper and Frederick Forsyth would starve.

In theory, the size of a given printing is based on orders from book trading organizations that are guided by orders from readers. In practice, it seems, publishing plans rarely take demand into account. When asked why an evidently popular book was not republished, a Russian editor told a Western publisher: "We have a paper shortage and, if we reissued a popular book, then another will not be printed."⁵ Furthermore, the size of a print run may be set with hard-currency earnings in mind; thus the bulk of a 50,000 to 100,000 print run of Mandel'shtam or Tsvetaeva can be destined for hard-currency stores or for Western markets.⁶ According to a recent emigre, a high Soviet official told a meeting of the editors of Sovetski pisatel'

that: "We published Mandel'shtam for the purposes of stuffing it down the throats of our ideological enemies abroad." To which came the inevitable response from the hall: "How about stuffing it down ours!"⁷

Pricing

Generally speaking, books are priced like metal pipe, wheat, or any other fabricate or commodity, i.e., at the average cost of production plus a predetermined profit margin, or so many kopeks per publisher's sheet. (This may help to explain the verbosity of so many present-day Soviet writers). Since supplies of paper are finite, and as so many of the required or recommended books are so long-winded, the conventional pricing policy cannot but have a deleterious effect on the number and print run of popular titles. Similarly, unlike the Western system of royalties, payment of the author's fee is not conditional upon the number of copies sold nor upon the publisher's making a profit on the work.⁸

"Nonbooks"

The dichotomy between the abundance of books produced in the Soviet Union and the scarcity of books that its citizens want to read is attributable, in large part, to the massive output of what are sometimes known as "nonbooks" and which, in the view of one possibly biased observer, may constitute up to 80 percent of all books published.⁹ According to the publishing handbook, for the years through 1977, 115 million copies of the works of Marx and Engels and 518 million volumes of Lenin have been produced.¹⁰ At any given period of Soviet rule, the writings of the current leader are "recommended," nay obligatory, candidates for large scale reproduction to underscore his exceptional position in the hierarchy, his power, authority and popularity. Thus, in their times, Stalin

and Khrushchev were best-sellers or at least top of the recommended list. And now Leonid Brezhnev has doubtless climbed to the top of the charts, with some 65 million copies to his credit.¹¹ It is reported, although it cannot be confirmed, that large print runs of memoirs are authorized as a legitimate way of providing additional income through royalties to the widows and dependants of prominent personalities. This may explain the very large tirazh given the second edition of Marshal Zhukov's memoirs.

Many books on socially desirable themes are commissioned and published but not necessarily read. For instance, according to a samizdat source, some thirty-five books and brochures on alcoholism were published in 1973-74, yet the author considered that alcoholics would not read these studies and that non-alcoholics were just not interested.¹² To a proud obkom secretary, it might appear desirable to mark the fifteenth anniversary of, say, the Baranovichi Cotton Processing Plant, but it is hardly probable that the resulting volume will be widely read.¹³ A mediocre novel on a Siberian theme by Markov, deemed progressive by some functionary in the Writers' Union, may be awarded a print run of half a million, while a coveted reissue of Bulgakov may be allocated at most 100,000 copies.¹⁴ Many such books find their way into public libraries; this may account for the result of a survey that showed that one fifth of all books in public libraries had never been taken out.¹⁵

One criterion in the Soviet context of which books are selected for publication and which are consigned to oblivion is reported to be the "utility" of the respective author. Thus, according to Vladimir Voinovich, "one must separate the needed authors from the unneeded. Needed people are the secretaries of the Writers' Union, the directors of publishing

firms, editors-in-chief of journals. You do them a favor, they'll do you a favor, they will publish you... The most unneeded writers are Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol' and the other classics - you can't get a single thing from them."¹⁶

Investment and Speculation

An appreciable overhang of excess purchasing power exists in the Soviet Union resulting from the fact that the supply of desirable consumer goods and services has not kept up with the growth of money incomes. Most urban households have two wage-earners. Most are allocated small apartments that set a physical limit on the possession of consumer durables and soft goods. Once the family apartment is furnished and equipped, there is not a great deal on which to spend disposable income, other than a savings account offering 2-3 percent interest. State housing is rationed and rents and utilities are subsidized. Cooperative housing is limited and dachas are for the fortunate few. Soviet citizens may not invest in stocks or bonds, and few can pop off to Paris or Venice when they feel like it. Thus, short of emulating Ostap Bender by travelling endlessly on trains, many Soviet citizens find it difficult to spend even their legally earned cash and much of this money has been channeled into books for investment purposes and for speculation.

Books take up relatively little space. They are decorative and represent a status symbol attesting to their owner's taste and sophistication even if, in many instances, the "bibliophiles are well informed about a book's market value but not about its contents."¹⁷ And few investments could offer the kind of appreciation that has been reported for such staples as The Three Musketeers, with an original retail price of 1.70 rubles that changed hands for 25 rubles, or a four-volume edition of Zweig that commanded a resale price of 200 rubles in Makhachkala.¹⁸

And books are often used for barter, in exchange for other books or for goods and services in short supply.

Cornering the Legitimate Supply

In conditions of chronic deficit, where a rare 100,000 printing of Pasternak's verse or Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings sells out within hours,¹⁹ it is hardly surprising that personnel in the book trade often exploit their position to corner the consignments of books in great demand. The coveted volumes are purchased at the designated retail price by store assistants for their own or for friends' use, or they may be resold at various multiples of the nominal price. (Much the same is, of course, true for tradespeople handling good cuts of meat, tropical fruit, imported clothing, etc.).

Another means of disposal of the legitimate supply in the Soviet context is that of "tie-in" sales, officially described as a kompleksny nabor ("combined offer") or zagruzka (burden).²⁰ Typical in this respect was the experience of a proud new owner of a "Zhiguli" motor car who wanted to buy a service manual to guide his "do-it-yourself" maintenance; he was obliged to purchase, in addition, a volume on the automated system of management at meat industry plants.²¹

"Makulatura" or Popular Books in exchange for Waste Paper

In mid-1974, someone hit on the bright idea of combatting the shortage of paper by limiting the purchase of certain popular titles to those customers who turned in twenty kilograms of waste paper. In theory, citizens handed in sacks of old books or journals at designated collection points, received a coupon entitling them to purchase a given volume, then proceeded

to the bookstore armed with coupon and cash.²²

The scheme met with mixed results. Initially, response was overwhelming and the experiment was extended to 22 cities. In less than five years, it was reported, some 600,000 tons of waste paper were exchanged against the right to purchase about 34 million books.²³ However, flaws soon developed, and the system was to earn the classification of kavardak or foul-up. It appears that five additional scrap recycling plants should have been commissioned to handle the increased load of makulatura but, on the contrary, the number of these plants actually declined.²⁴ In 1977, Literaturnaya gazeta sent some correspondents to various cities to test the procedure: they reported a singular lack of cooperation on the part of many scrap-paper collection point personnel.²⁵

Abuses of the system soon crept in. A lathe-operator handed in no less than 80 coupons for books "in great demand," including the evergreen The Count of Monte Christo. At home, he was discovered to have another forty coupons. To earn 120 coupons legally, he would have had to collect 2.4 tons of waste paper. How, it was asked, could this 40-year old man hand in more waste paper in one month than an entire Young Pioneer detachment had been able to assemble? The mystery was soon resolved. It transpired that the lathe operator had purchased counterfeit coupons at two to four rubles apiece from an employee of the Secondary Raw Materials Production and Procurement Enterprise who, in turn, had received them from a gang of swindlers at the Moscow Offset Printing Plant.²⁶

Shortfalls in implementation and the corruption of a promising experiment, like those listed above, appear to have combined to bring the scheme to an end; at any rate, a recent issue of Literaturnaya gazeta pronounced the makulatura system to be virtually inoperative.²⁷

Public Libraries

As might have been expected, many of the books that were handed in for pulping came straight off the shelves of public libraries. It seems that the staff at collection points were not overly concerned about the origins of books delivered or, perhaps, unscrupulous borrowers were able to remove signs of ownership. Formerly, virtually any Soviet citizen was permitted to take out up to five library books at a time free of charge. Many of the books that landed in the makulatura presumably left the libraries concealed under coats. But for the failure to return those books that had been properly checked out, the system provided for monetary fines equivalent to five times the retail price of the missing volume. Yet because this fine was paid into the local authorities' budgets and not to the respective library, considerable strain was put on library finances and led, in some instances, to restrictions on book lending. Indeed, one recent emigre claimed that many libraries no longer allow books to be removed from the premises.²⁸

Some of the more valuable volumes in public and institute libraries may have been spared from the pulping machines only to fall victims to more discriminating operators. For example, an historian was convicted in 1978 of having stolen hundreds of rare books from the library of the Ukrainian Institute of History and selling them privately for over 12,000 rubles. He was sentenced to ten years' hard labor.²⁹

Samizdat

Although the primary function of the phenomenon known as samizdat has little to do with speculation or the generation of income, a whole realm of such activity has arisen based on unauthorized publishing.

In many instances, the kinds of literature thus reproduced are wholly inoffensive to the Soviet authorities, and their market appeal may be ascribed to a largely unintentional scarcity value. For example, lengthy passages of modern American writings in translation appeared in the September and October 1978 issues of Inostrannaya literatura, and these issues of this "widely sought but hard-to-get journal" were promptly sold out. Samizdat rose to the occasion and photocopied editions of these American works could be purchased for 30 to 100 rubles.³⁰ An emigre from Kiev reported that most of the samizdat circulating in that city consisted of works by accepted or tolerated Soviet writers whose works just could not be found in regular bookstores.³¹

Some highly laudable examples of private enterprise in the printing and publication of handbooks and business manuals have surfaced in the official press. Mutually advantageous to author and to user, these have sought to fill gaps left by bureaucratic inertia and inflexibility. One writer published a brochure on "The Ins and Outs of the Dispensation of Privileges to Workers in the Far North" and retailed it at 65 rubles a copy.³² Another author offered plans for a new method of removing unstable loads from trucks, while a third entrepreneur sold 200 copies at 55 rubles each of a description of a device for adapting a cutting machine.³³

What were reported to be less innocent reproductions emanated from an "underground network" in Taganrog which duplicated "mainly works of foreign authors, published in prerevolutionary Russia, which advocated violence and robbery, glorified the cult of cruelty, and justified colonialism. Others were saturated with mysticism and eroticism."³⁴

Unofficial publishers do not always have to resort to underground, home-made or stolen, reproducing equipment: one group ran

off "pornographic, anti-Soviet and antisemitic literature by arrangement [and presumably at night and over the weekend] at the Moscow Printing Plant No. 3."³⁵

Resale of Confiscated Literature

Many hundreds of thousands of books, pamphlets, and newspapers are confiscated every year by the vigilant customs watchdogs on duty at Soviet airports, ports, and rail and road entry points; at Moscow airport alone, an average weekly haul of some 1500 "anti-Soviet" items was recently claimed.³⁶ Presumably the relevant regulations stipulate that these harmful items are to be consigned to the shredding machines or stoves. However, many emigres claim that the resale of confiscated literature on the black market is a widespread and accepted phenomenon.

Perhaps the most celebrated case to come to light involved Andrei Sokolov, the deputy director of Glavlit's "second department," which scrutinizes all incoming foreign books. For fifteen years, it appears, his office had confiscated books, as well as records, clothing and other goods, from incoming mail, declared the items to have been destroyed, but in fact sold them on the black market. A raid on Sokolov's office uncovered 170 sacks of confiscated literature in his sealed safes and closets that had been registered as having been destroyed. Sokolov was jailed for seven years, and his immediate superior was retired by the personal order of Premier Kosygin.³⁷

The Second-Hand and Exchange Trade

For the law-abiding citizen, the network of second-hand bookstores (Staraya kniga) offers, in theory at least, a straightforward and adequate vehicle for buying and selling used books. One impediment, however, is the technical illegality

of selling second-hand goods, other than genuine antiques, for more than their formal list price when new. In view of the high premium commanded by rare books, the temptation is high to bypass the legitimate channels of trade.

In an effort to circumvent and to deflate the black market in books, book exchange stores were set up in 1974. Here a customer could hand in a popular title and stipulate another book or books that he wanted in exchange. For a set commission, reportedly amounting to 20 percent of the agreed price, the bookstore undertook to find someone willing to part with the book(s) required.³⁸ However, recent unconfirmed reports from emigres suggest that the superior rewards and the greater variety offered by the unofficial market have combined to stunt the activities of the exchange network.

Conclusion

Despite massive production of books, pamphlets, journals and newspapers, there exists in the Soviet Union a chronic shortage of readable literature. This is largely attributable to the tendency of the authorities paternally to prescribe only writings that they feel the Soviet citizen ought to read rather than abdicate to the market the determination of titles chosen and print runs ordered. It is also a function of repressed inflation and the general lack of alternative entertainment.

The second economy has moved in to fill the gaps in supply. Its manifestations have taken many forms, ranging from the officially lauded initiatives in publishing pamphlets that help enterprises fulfill their plan targets, to politically harmless reproductions of acceptable writings, to the publication of "pornographic, anti-Soviet and antisemitic" literature, to the resale of works confiscated by the customs authorities.

Here, it might be argued, is an area where the Soviet authorities could, with relative ease and without any re-allocation of resources, do much more to correct the known shortage and therewith to remove or diminish any intervention by the second economy. There would appear to be no valid objection to, say, running off 20 or 30 million copies of such popular and harmless titles as "The Three Musketeers," "Madame Bovary" or the collected works of Agatha Christie. The market would surely bear a doubling or trebling of the retail prices for such books (cost-plus prices could be retained for required reading like Lenin and Brezhnev), and the additional turnover tax thereby generated could be devoted to laudable ends such as investment in housing, education and health facilities. The increased (legitimate) retail trade turnover would absorb many additional billions or rubles each year and reduce the overhang of pent-up purchasing power. Yet, to date, the powers that be have not adopted any such course. Moreover, their attitude towards the unofficial publication and trade in books has generally been permissive and almost benevolent. Unable or unwilling to rectify the shortage of popular reading material, the authorities appear to have tolerated the operation of the second economy in this sphere, penalizing only the most blatant excesses.

Footnotes

1. The figure for 1977 was 1,801,700,000: Pechat' SSSR v 1977 godu, p.8
2. Radio Moscow in English, 1900 GMT, September 11, 1978. A sceptical qualification of the official data for libraries and books appears in AS 3526, "Knigi dlya naroda?"
3. Gregory Walker, Soviet Book Publishing Policy, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978, p.9
4. Ibid., p.7
5. The New Leader, December 5, 1977
6. Much the same was true for a Russian-language edition of Tolkien (Reuter, December 30, 1976)
7. New York Review of Books, May 31, 1979
8. Walker, op.cit., p.72
9. New York Review of Books, May 31, 1979
10. Pechat' SSSR v 1977 godu, p.24
11. APN, December 17, 1979
12. AS 3526, op.cit.
13. Sovetskaya kul'tura, September 21, 1979
14. Der Spiegel, No. 18, 1977, p.143
15. The Times, June 9, 1975
16. As cited in the New York Review of Books, May 31, 1979
17. Komsomol'skaya pravda, November 13, 1978
18. Komsomol'skaya pravda, November 4, 1976
19. See the New York Times, May 27, 1966 and Reuter, December 30, 1976
20. Literaturnaya gazeta, No. 33, 1978, p. 12; cf. RL 208/78, "Tie-in Sales--An Illegal Method of Raising Prices," September 26, 1978
21. Sovetskaya kul'tura, November 29, 1977
22. See Literaturnaya gazeta, No. 34, 1976, p.12 and No. 44, 1976, p. 12; cf. Sovetskaya kul'tura, October 8, 1976

23. Agitator, No. 9, 1979, p. 61
24. International Herald Tribune, February 21, 1977
25. Literaturnaya gazeta, No. 33, 1977, p. 10
26. Trud, November 2, 1978
27. Literaturnaya gazeta, No. 29, 1979, p. 11
28. RFE/RL BGR 15/78
29. Pravda, September 11, 1978; cf. RL 84/79, "Case No. 2-71 and the Fall of Arnol'd Shevelyev," March 13, 1979
30. IHT, May 30, 1979
31. RFE/RL BGR 11/75
32. Trud, October 30, 1975; cf. RL 199/76, "Public Prosecutor justifies Economic Samizdat," April 14, 1976
33. Sotsialisticheskaya industriya, November 18, 1975; cf. RL 199/76 op.cit.
34. Trud, April 5, 1979
35. Vechernyaya Moskva, May 14, 1964; cf. NYT, May 18, 1964
36. Sovetskaya Rossiya, December 2, 1979
37. IHT, February 2, 1979
38. Trud, July 7, 1976; cf. RFE/RL BGR 17/78