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The Black Book of Polish Censorship

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THE BLACK BOOK OF POLISH CENSORSHIP. Translated and edited by Jane Leftwich Curry. New York: Random House. 1984. Pp. xii, 451. Cloth, \$24.95; paper, \$8.95.

Eight thousand Polish army officers were massacred by the Soviet army in the Katyn forest in 1940. When the Germans occupied the area the following year, they found mass graves and brought the event to the attention of the international media. However, during the 1950's and 1960's, the Polish government's desire to encourage positive feelings toward the Soviet Union mandated a policy of silence on the massacre. On January 14, 1975, the Main Office for Control of Press, Publications and Public Performances (GUKPPIW) issued an Informative Note instructing its censors that future reports of the Katyn massacre should be censored to bring them within the basic outline of that event as presented in the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* and the communique of the special commission created by the Soviet authorities in 1943. The Polish people were to be told that the event transpired as follows:

The Polish officers interned by the Red Army in September 1939 in camps in the Smolensk area fell into the hands of the Germans, who took over this area in August 1941. These officers were shot by the Nazis in the autumn of 1941 and were buried in mass graves in the Katyn forest.

. . . .

At the beginning of 1943, in connection with the deterioration of Germany's military situation and the rising military power of the Soviet Union and the progressive consolidation of the anti-German coalition, the Nazis decided to try to stir things up, and ascribed their own crimes to agencies of the Soviet leadership. [P. 341.]

After receiving a regulation preventing the publication of the names of the officers massacred, Tomasz Strzyzewski, censor no. C-36 of the Krakow GUKPPIW, whose grandfather was among those assassinated at Katyn, decided to defect from Poland. In February 1977, Strzyzewski arrived in Sweden with 700 pages of classified censors' documents strapped to his back and legs and stuffed in his pockets. His defection and the publication of Curry's translated excerpts has enabled Strzyzewski to realize his goal of letting the world know how the Polish government under Edward Gierek was distorting the truth (p. 3).

The documents that Strzyzewski smuggled out were issued from 1974 through 1977. They afford a picture of Polish life during the middle phase of the Gierek government, and thereby enable one to understand the forces that led to the toppling of that government and the growth of the Solidarity movement. Despite the seven-year delay in publication of the documents in English, "minor, though irritat-

ing"¹ inaccuracies by Curry, and her at times superficial analysis, the work makes a unique contribution. First, it enables the reader to examine the massive efforts made by a Communist country to control the information received by its citizens concerning virtually every aspect of their existence. Second, it opens the door to further investigation of how the Poles were able to circumvent the censorship apparatus and obtain information. An examination of the inability of the Polish government to keep information from its citizens could lead to fruitful discoveries about informal methods of information dispersal. In addition, a study of the impact of Western efforts to inform the citizenry of Soviet bloc nations through propaganda efforts such as Radio Free Europe could illuminate some of the reasons for the ineffectiveness of the Polish censorship system.

Clearly, Curry's expertise in the area of censorship² enables her to evaluate the system set up in Poland. Curry provides a general overview of the workings of the censorship bureaucracy and then presents selected documents expounding censorship decisions in a number of different areas, namely, Polish politics, world politics, social problems, economics, religion, history, and culture.

In the introductory chapters of the book, Curry places the Gierek period and Polish censorship within their historical context. While it is essential that she do so, she also introduces some misleading concepts. For example, Curry paints an all too idealistic picture of journalists who, she asserts, "developed a whole unspoken code to communicate to their audiences ideas that they had no hope of expressing directly" (p. 9). Professor Stanislaw Baranczak points out, however, "that in a typical Communist country every honest journalist has at least a dozen colleagues whose sycophantic articles need no censoring whatsoever."³ Curry's consistent portrayal of the journalists as the heroes of the censorship saga colors the work, but does not detract greatly from its value once the reader becomes aware of it.

Curry carefully describes the structure of the censorship bureaucracy. The directors of the GUKPPIW, along with their superiors in the Polish United Workers' Party Press Department, established standards for what could and could not be published in different journals. They sent reports and directives to the censors instructing them on what had to be eliminated from different journals depending on the

1. In an earlier review of this book, Prof. Stanislaw Baranczak mentions a number of inaccuracies in Curry's work. See Baranczak, *Big Brother's Red Pencil: The Black Book of Polish Censorship*, THE NEW REPUBLIC, Apr. 2, 1984, at 33, 34.

2. Curry's translation was sponsored by The Rand Corporation. As well as serving as a Rand consultant, Curry is a professor at Manhattanville College. Her doctorate is in political science and she has previously edited PRESS CONTROL AROUND THE WORLD (J. Curry & J. Dassin eds. 1982), DISSENT IN EASTERN EUROPE (1983), and POLISH DISSIDENT WRITING: AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY (1983).

3. Baranczak, *supra* note 1, at 34.

purpose and readership of the journal (pp. 25-26). According to Curry, the Polish and other Eastern European governments "invested in diverse media with something targeted for almost every interest group and some kinds of information deliberately given to some but not others" (p. 26). Variation was built into the media, and censorship was designed to be inconsistent. Curry states the rule of thumb as follows: "the smaller the audience, the larger the margin for criticism" (p. 34). This rule "allows sociopolitical weeklies more leeway than dailies and tiny-circulation scholarly journals even more room" (p. 34). Curry describes the process through which powerful journalists and editors could appeal decisions to censor their work. Officially, the first appeal was to the Press Department. If necessary, one could also argue to a Politburo member. In practice, the interconnections between the media establishment and party authorities resulted in a far less formal process (p. 37).

The problems faced by censors may have been most severe in editing information concerning world politics. While it was imperative that the political leadership learn about international events, "the foreign affairs materials confronted the censors with a world whose events seldom proved Marxist theory right" (p. 109). Curry claims that far more information on events and conditions elsewhere was available in Poland than in other Soviet bloc countries through foreign journals, Western wire-service reports, and West-sponsored Polish-language radio broadcasts such as Radio Free Europe (p. 110). While the availability of such information clearly presented a problem for Polish censors, Curry's characterization of them as the most severe in Eastern Europe is questionable. In the German Democratic Republic, the vast majority of people can receive television and radio broadcasts from the Federal Republic of Germany or from West Berlin. In addition to the ease with which Western broadcasts are received in East Germany, the fact that West Germans and other Westerners can enter East Berlin freely on day visas makes the control of Western information in East Germany a very complex problem. Further, the East Germans are not only receiving the information in their native language, but also from their own countrymen. They are continually confronted with the fact that their country is divided. The legitimization problems that the East German government faces are, therefore, even more severe than those facing the Polish regime.

The problems of differentiating between the two Germanies and legitimizing the East German government can be seen in Polish censorship directives. Elaborate detail was provided the censors to ensure that the correct political stance toward the division was always taken. The following regulations governed terminology:

3. Given the existence of two German states, the following rules of nomenclature are to be binding for all publications.
 - a. There should be strict adherence to the proper nomenclature for

the Zgorzelec Pact of July 6, 1950, the official name of which is: "The Pact Between the Polish Republic and the German Democratic Republic Concerning the Established, Existing Polish-German National Border";

b. The terms given below may be used to designate our Western border:

- the border on the Oder and the Neisse
- the border between Poland and the GDR
- the Polish-GDR border, but this term should not be used: Polish-German border;

c. Proper nomenclature for institutions, organizations, sports unions and so on of the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany should be observed, and the adjective "German" should not be used but should be replaced by the more precise terms "GDR" and "FRG," or "East German" and "West German," respectively;

d. The term "German" should not be used to refer (in the context of the present day) to the territory or state of the GDR, FRG or West Berlin;

e. In mentioning the capital of the GDR, the term "Berlin" should be used, to differentiate it from "West Berlin." (See Informative Note No. 43/73) [Pp. 126-27.]

Censors were required to assure that the image presented of other Eastern bloc countries was positive. Information concerning the Soviet Union was very closely monitored. The second permanent regulation for censors dealing with foreign affairs stated:

Any information on diplomatic steps or initiatives by countries of the socialist community (especially Poland and the Soviet Union) may appear only after appropriate official communiques have been issued by PAP or TASS, and simultaneously with them. In no case may the publisher's own information precede the official news or conflict with its content. [P. 116.]

Information about economic problems in the Soviet Union was blocked (p. 119). Mentions of Stalinist repression were unprintable (p. 121).

In censoring Western news, a balance had to be struck between the desire not to alienate Western leaders from whom Poland hoped to receive trade concessions, and the fear of presenting too rosy a picture of life in the non-Communist world (pp. 130-31). The treatment of an interview on the future of parliamentarism in France demonstrates the way in which censors were taught to present the West. The following excerpt was barred from publication because of the italicized passages:

"I see a fairly bright future for parliamentarism in France. It is more promising under Giscard than under de Gaulle, who most assuredly disliked parliament and regarded it as a necessary evil." "What about the Union of the Left in France?" *"I do not have much faith in its reputation. Besides, in France the Communists are a normal political party — in the towns and departments which they control, they are not carrying*

*out any reforms, but are simply performing administrative duties — they are doing a good job of administration. The same thing is going on in Italy*⁴

The document, as censored, presented a very different view of French government than the author intended.

Curry discusses the attempts to keep media coverage of domestic problems to a minimum in the chapters on social problems, economics, and culture. One of the most striking examples she presents is the censorship of information concerning health problems. The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare risked exacerbating epidemics by not warning people of the dangers or suggesting precautions that could be taken. The following information could appear only upon the approval of the Ministry:

- 1) mass poisonings and illness (regardless of cause) affecting large groups of the population or enterprises of particular importance to our country;
- 2) mass food poisoning in cafeterias of places of employment, vacation centers, summer camps and so on (including poisoning resulting from the consumption of food contaminated by pesticides);
- 3) occurrences of particular serious diseases (such as smallpox, cholera, etc.);
- 4) occurrences of epidemics of contagious diseases in this country, including influenza; and
- 5) concrete threats of epidemic diseases being introduced into this country [P. 211.]

The Polish government's desire to substantiate the validity of Marxist-Leninist doctrine becomes evident when one examines the directives on censorship of articles concerning religion and history. Although Curry discusses briefly the role of Judaism in Polish culture and history (p. 280), she fails to focus adequately on the growing anti-semitism in Poland and to evaluate whether the government was, in fact, attempting to further anti-Jewish feeling as an escape valve for the frustrations arising out of the worsening economic situation. The reader is left wondering whether the Jews are again being made the scapegoat for Polish problems.

Curry does a more satisfying job of discussing the directives given to the censors who handle Catholic publications. These censors were instructed to prevent religion and the Church from appearing to be as important or more important than Marxism-Leninism (p. 283). Church publications were to be carefully scrutinized, and publication of the most basic materials, such as affirmations of loyalty and cards notifying parish priests that parishioners were ill, was often interrupted (p. 289). Along with downplaying current activities of the Church, efforts were made to minimize the significance of the Church

4. P. 138 (emphasis in original).

throughout Polish history. References to the influence of religion on Polish national heroes were deleted (p. 297).

In addition to deemphasizing the role of the Church, censors tried to erase from historical accounts embarrassing personalities and trends that did not conform with the Communist view of history (p. 318). For example, censors were instructed to color accounts of leftist movements during the interwar period, if those accounts made clear that the "socialist" movements had actually been right-wing, nationalist forces (p. 332). When the history of socialism did not conform to the Marxist-Leninist paradigm, that fact had to be covered up. Therefore, the battles that were fought between anti-Communist, socialist parties and the Communist party during the prewar period became nonhistory, as did mentions of anti-Soviet sentiment among Polish socialists (p. 333).

Despite the great effort it made, the censorship system did not achieve its goals, according to Curry. She asserts that despite the censorship, the Poles were still informed about historical events:

Ironically, even though the media audience during the seventies was drawn increasingly from the postwar baby boom generation, with little or no firsthand experience of Poland's prewar or even Stalinist past, censoring history did not erase it for them. Images and events were transferred verbally from person to person, generation to generation. Instead of becoming less significant, historical events grew more symbolic, more and more emotionally charged, until in the spiral of events in 1980, when the victory of shipyard workers in Gdansk opened the possibilities for free discussion of Poland's past, the writing and rethinking of the country's history became as imperative a goal as programming its future for workers and intellectuals alike. [P. 369.]

The Black Book presents the reader with an overview of Polish society during the mid-seventies, but it fails to analyze adequately all of the problems it presents. Curry's failure to delve into the historical and political events she discusses lessens the book's potential impact. While the thoroughness and complexity of the censorship process is impressed upon the reader, the effect of that process is not. Because the censorship system is alien to the American reader, Curry's presentation of documents makes a valuable contribution to the American understanding of present-day Poland. However, she does not exhaust the usefulness of the smuggled documents. One hopes that historians and other scholars will be able to use them as a resource in examining the Gierek era.