

Abolishing Ambiguity: Soviet Censorship Practices in the 1930s

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After reading Andrei Platonov's 1929 story *Usomnivshiisia Makar*, Joseph Stalin reportedly reacted by calling it "an ambiguous work" (*dvusmyslennoe proizvedenie*). Leopold Averbakh later wrote about Platonov's story: "There is ambiguity (*dvusmyslennost'*) in it. ... But our era does not tolerate any ambiguity."¹ Both reactions point to an obsession with reducing signs to a single meaning, an undercurrent of Soviet culture in the 1930s.² Censorship practices offer a rare glimpse at *how* the Soviet regime attempted to achieve "one-meaningness" (*odnoznachnost'*). While it is true that throughout the Soviet era censorship was primarily concerned with excising what was deemed heretical, during the 1930s, with outright heresy effectively effaced from public discourse, the abolition of ambiguity became an important secondary mode.

Much of the available literature on European and especially Russian censorship has defined censorship as the repression of the inherently and essentially free word.³ The binary pairing of censorship and cultural production has generated further binaries of writers vs. censors and is ultimately embedded in a dichotomy of state vs. society. While the state/society dichotomy has been questioned in other areas of historical research, the binary

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¹L. Averbakh, "O tselostnykh masshtabakh i chastnykh Makarakh," *Na literaturnom postu*, no. 21–22 (1929): 164 (quoted in Viktor Chalmayev's foreword to Andrei Platonov, *Gosudarstvennyi zhitel': Proza, pis'ma* [Moscow, 1988], 23). Stalin's reaction is recorded only in second-hand accounts (*ibid.*, 22).

²It has been noted, *inter alia*, by Oksana Bulgakowa, "Die Gartenbank oder wie ein ikonischer Diskurs entsteht: Vertovs 'Drei Lieder über Lenin'" in *Kultur im Stalinismus: Sowjetische Kultur und Kunst der 1930er bis 50er Jahre*, ed. Gabriele Gorzka (Bremen, 1994), 198; and Igor Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's Republic of China* (New York, 1990), 179.

³According to a specialist on Soviet censorship, "the word, especially the free and independent word, since time immemorial has been evoking the hatred of the ruling powers. ... On some unexplored deep level resistance against dictatorship, against violence, is a part of language." See A. V. Blium, *Za kulissami "ministerstva pravdy": Tainaia istoriia sovetской tsenzury, 1917–1929* (St. Petersburg, 1994), 6.

definition of censorship has proven curiously resilient, perhaps because it is at the core of the self-definition of contemporary producers of texts, scholarly ones (on censorship, too) included. This dichotomy obfuscates the actual processes of cultural production, which remain buried under the weight of a paradigm of repressive violence directed from top to bottom, from censors as the party-state incarnate to the cultural producers.⁴

This article assumes that censorship is not a unidirectional flow of power from censors to the censored and begins with the notion that censorship is no more and no less than one of the forces shaping cultural circulation.⁵ Censorship can be seen as one of the many “practices of cultural regulation,” a broadly defined rubric that is meant to accommodate market forces in the capitalist West, too.⁶ Once the nature of the interaction between censors and cultural producers is no longer determined *a priori*, once various practices of cultural regulation in different times and places open up for comparison, the historian’s task becomes one of figuring out the commonalities and differences and ultimately the logic at work in each case.⁷

Studying censorship practices during the first two decades of Soviet power has further been hindered by the unknown whereabouts of the central archive of Glavnoe upravlenie po delam literatury i izdatel'stv (Glavlit) for the period 1922–37.⁸ One way out of this dilemma is to use the archives of regional Glavlit organizations, many of which are preserved for this period. This inquiry uses the regional Glavlit archive of Karelia, but its aim is neither to present a full-blown history of a regional censorship board, nor to fill in the gaps in the central story (as might be possible on the basis of documents that central Glavlit circulated to the region).⁹ Its aim is to demonstrate through a detailed case study how the

⁴This paper uses the terms “cultural product,” “cultural production,” and “cultural producer” to encompass texts, sounds, and images as well as their making and makers—writers, composers, and visual artists.

⁵As early as 1927, Walter Benjamin found cultural producers and the state in Soviet Russia not standing opposed to one another, but deeply interwoven. “The intellectual,” he wrote, “is above all a functionary, works in a censorship, justice, or finance department ... and partakes in labor—which means, at least in Russia, in power.” See his “Moskau” in *Denkbilder* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1974), 39.

⁶See Robert C. Post, ed., *Censorship and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Regulation* (Los Angeles, 1998).

⁷Robert Darnton has called for the comparative study of censorship practices. He suggests focusing on censorship’s organizing principle in a given polity (in Darnton’s cases, privilege in Old Regime France and planning in East Germany). See his “Censorship, a Comparative View: France, 1789—East Germany, 1989,” *Representations* 49 (1995): 40–60.

⁸According to Blum and T. M. Goriaeva, Glavlit and the KGB successor organizations’ standard answer to all queries regarding the whereabouts of the central Glavlit archives has been that these archives are “lost” or “destroyed.” See Blum, *Za kulisami*, 17–18; and T. M. Goriaeva, ed., *Istoriia sovetskoi politicheskoi tsenzury: Dokumenty i kommentarii* (Moscow, 1997), 18.

⁹Karlit’s depository is in Tsentral’nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Respubliki Karelii (TsGA RK), f. 757, and covers the years 1922–24 and 1934–39. The only existing studies of regional censorship, to my knowledge, are Merle Fainsod, *Smolensk under Soviet Rule* (London, 1958), esp. chap. 19; T. V. Oleinikova, “Deiatel’nost’ spetsial’nykh organov ideino-politicheskoi tsenzury literaturnykh proizvedenii v SSSR v kontse 1920-kh—nachale 1930-kh godov (po materialam Sibiri),” in *Razvitie knizhnogo dela v Sibiri i na Dal’nem Vostoke* (Novosibirsk, 1993), 66–82; and articles by Galina Stepanova, Anetta Bakanova, and Il’ia Levchenko in *Tsenzura v Rossii: Materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii 14–15 noiabria 1995g. Ekaterinburg* (Ekaterinburg, 1996). On Soviet censorship further see document collections by L. G. Fokelevich, *Deistviushchee zakonodatel'stvo o pechati: Sistematicheskii sbornik* (Moscow, 1927, and later editions); D. L. Babichenko, “Literaturnyi front”: *Istoriia politicheskoi tsenzury 1932–1946gg. Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow, 1994); and Goriaeva, *Istoriia sovetskoi politicheskoi tsenzury*. For archivally based monographs, article collections, and individual articles see Babichenko, *Pisateli i tsenzory: Sovetskaiia*

larger totalizing drive toward *odnoznachnost* worked in practice and to offer an explanation of its genesis and workings. The article begins by providing regional and institutional background on Karelia, then moves to such macro practices as the *Perechen*, and finally and most importantly turns to the attempts of censors to eliminate ambiguity. In so doing, it introduces, among other things, empirical cases of censors who detected swastikas where we would not see swastikas today and closes by outlining how Pierre Bourdieu's field theory and his writings on polyseme can explain this phenomenon.

KARELIAN PROLOGUE: REGIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

Histories of early Soviet censorship customarily begin with Lenin's November 1917 decree on the press, continue with Civil War censorship, and culminate in the creation of central Glavlit on 6 June 1922. In the provinces, Glavlit's foundation was to be mirrored by the creation of regional Glavlit branches. In Karelia, therefore, censorship's functions and files were transferred from the GPU War Censorship Department to a new Glavlit branch in October. For about a year Karlit, as the branch came to be known, was preoccupied with what it termed "analytical activity," that is, the collection of information on censorship targets, and the centralization of the output of printed production. More precisely, Karlit registered printing houses, libraries, clubs, theaters, cinemas, and publishing houses by "ascertaining [the personnel's] societal, political, and property situation."¹⁰ Among the institutions examined were the Karelian Central Public Library (with 272,000 volumes, Karelia's largest), the State Drama Theater, and the cinema for GPU officers. In tandem with the GPU, Karlit confiscated 6,053 books and 197 audio records from Petrozavodsk and *uezd* libraries, book depositories, and bookstores. During 1923 it issued 713 permission visas for various kinds of increasing amounts of printed production.¹¹ Precirculation censorship, however, went into effect nearly a year later than planned in July 1923, when censors began work at the editing offices of the Russian- and Finnish-language editions of the autonomous republic's daily newspaper, *Krasnaia Kareliia*. Because of budget constraints Karelia's Glavrepertkom, the theater censorship board founded by a Sovnarkom decree of 9 February 1923, at first operated under the auspices of Karlit.

literatura 1940-kh godov pod politicheskim kontrolem TsK (Moscow, 1994); Blium, *Za kulisami*; idem, *Evreiskii vopros pod sovetsskoi tsenzuroi* (St. Petersburg, 1996); idem, *Sovetskaia tsenzura v epokhu total'nogo terrora: 1929–1953* (St. Petersburg, 2000); Michael Fox, "Glavlit, Censorship and the Problem of Party Policy in Cultural Affairs, 1922–28," *Soviet Studies* 44, no. 6 (1992): 1045–68; T. M. Goriaeva, ed., *Iskliuchit' vsiakiye upominaniia...: Ocherki istorii sovetskoi tsenzury* (Minsk, 1995); G. V. Kostyrchenko, "Sovetskaia tsenzura v 1941–1952 godakh," *Voprosy istorii*, 1996, no. 11–12: 87–94; and M. B. Zelenov, "Glavlit i istoricheskaia nauka v 20–30-e gody," *Voprosy istorii*, 1997, no. 3: 21–36. Also see Martin Dewhirst and Robert Farrell, eds., *The Soviet Censorship* (Metuchen, 1973); Marianna Tax Choldin and Maurice Friedberg, eds., *The Red Pencil: Artists, Scholars, and Censors in the USSR* (Boston, 1989); and Herman Ermolaev, *Censorship in Soviet Literature: 1917–1991* (Lanham, MD, 1997).

¹⁰TsGA RK, f. 757, op. 3, d. 1/1, l. 5.

¹¹Most of the visas were for Petrozavodsk (84 percent) and periodical literature. The overall print run (*tirazh*) climbed from 9,395 in January 1923 to 67,971 in December of that year. Of this output, 48 percent were issued by the government, 19 percent by private people (this figure includes personal classifieds; no privately published books were recorded), 9 percent party publications, 8 percent publications by NEP cooperatives, 7 percent by trade unions, 5 percent by the military, and 4 percent by educational institutions (*ibid.*, l. 7ob., 8ob.–10).

Karlit also set up sub-branches outside the Karelian capital, Petrozavodsk, so that in fall 1923 Karelian censorship was in the hands of eleven men, ten of them party members with three- to six-year tenures.¹² Most of the censors in Petrozavodsk and the *uezdy* had worked in agitprop departments, and the censor for Red Army wall newspapers was a GPU officer from the political section of Karelia's borderland troops. Only the chairman of Karlit held a full-time position, all others worked for other administrative and party organizations as well. Eight of the censors were ethnic Russians, three Finns, seven spoke only Russian, two only Finnish, two were bilingual. The chairmanship of Karlit closely follows the Soviet Union's ethnic master narrative:¹³ A Russian, A. A. Khokhlov, founded and ran Karlit from 1922 and a Finn, Kangasniemi, succeeded him later in the 1920s during the state policy of indigenization (*korenizatsiia*). Kangasniemi was followed in 1934 by another Finn, I. S. Miakinen, who stayed in his post until January 1938, when he was forced out and replaced by the Russian, G. I. Sviridov. The Leninist-Stalinist policy of national self-determination and the fight against "Great Russian chauvinism," accompanied by "Karelianization" and "Finnization," gave way in the 1930s to an elevation of Great Russians to a status of first among equals, followed by a full-fledged purge of Finns and Karelians from the party *nomenklatura* in 1936.¹⁴

By 1934 more full-time censors both in Petrozavodsk and on the *raion* level were doing increasingly diverse work with a censorship machine that targeted more and more new objects. Among them were the hypnotizer, Gutman, who presented his show to the audience at cinema "Krasnaia zvezdochka" without running it past Glavlit and newspapers, used as wrapping paper in stores.¹⁵ The latter were censored to avoid "enemies of the people" creeping into the public eye from a dated issue of *Pravda*.¹⁶ For these manifold tasks specialized skills were needed.¹⁷ Glavlit functionaries, who had once been all-round censors, were assigned to the sectors of military, civilian, technical, radio, or literary censorship.

¹²This and the following information on Karlit's composition is from *ibid.*, II. 2ob.–5. Party cadres were a rare resource in Karelia in the early 1920s. If in May 1920 there had been a total of 2,224 party members, after the purge of 1921 that number plummeted to 825 (in 1922), 566 of them ethnic Russians, 150 Karelians, and 109 Finns. See Pekka Kauppala, "Die qualvolle Geburt und das kurze Aufblühen des autonomen Sowjet-Karelien: Ost-Karelien 1917–1930," in *Finnland-Studien*, ed. Edgar Hösch (Wiesbaden, 1990), 208. Censors themselves have left few traces in the historical record. The publication of a theater censor's memoir, though bereft of a single reference to censorship, was perceived as a sensation in 1958 (Blum, *Za kulisami*, 161, 315 n. 1). For post-Soviet exceptions see Steven Richmond, "'The Eye of the State': An Interview with Soviet Chief Censor Vladimir Solodin," *Russian Review* 56 (October 1997): 581–90; and, by a former censor from Bashkiria, O. K. Valitov, *Pechat' i tsenzura* (Ufa, 1995).

¹³See Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53 (Summer 1994): 414–52.

¹⁴The purge centered on the Gylling-Rovio affair, named after Karelia's ethnic Finnish Sovnarkom secretary (since 1923) Edvard Gylling and party secretary (since 1929) Gustav Rovio. See E. I. Takala, "Delo Giullinga-Rovio," in *Ikh nazvali KR: Repressii v Karelii 20–30-kh godov*, ed. Anatolii Tsygankov (Petrozavodsk, 1992), 34–73.

¹⁵This 8 May 1934 example is from TsGA RK, f. 757, op. 1, d. 1/4, l. 3.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, op. 2, d. 1/1, l. 51. For an example of how the unconquered niche of photo production (postcards, portraits) was placed under the authority of war censorship (Otdel Voennoi Tsenzury, OVTs) see *ibid.*, op. 1, d. 1/2, l. 40. Probably in the context of the general militarization of Soviet society, the Manchurian crisis, and Hitler's ascendance to power, OVTs was founded by a Sovnarkom decree of 23 September 1933 (*ibid.*, d. 1/1, l. 1).

¹⁷A Glavlit *krai* inspector from Moscow ordered Petrozavodsk to "organize systematic training of the [Glavlit] representatives" (*ibid.*, d. 1/2, l. 50).

In 1934 a Moscow inspector found Karelian censorship wanting in many respects and reminded his provincial subordinates of “Karlit’s special conditions, where it is particularly important to observe secrecy.”¹⁸ He was alluding to Karelia’s role as a borderland region and site for forced labor. More specifically, he was referring to Karelia’s export-oriented timber economy, large-scale Gulag operations (at times prisoners outnumbered the local population), and a high percentage of an ethnic group—Finns—who had relatives in the West (apart from Finland, especially in the Midwestern United States). One border *raion* censor, for instance, worried about a newspaper that actually reached readers from Finland. He complained that “the paper [*Udarnik splava*] immediately after its publication gets into the hands of those Finns who arrive in Ust’e to receive timber; they read it from beginning to end, which increases our responsibility for its contents.”¹⁹ Therefore Karlit eliminated references in newspapers to spoiled export timber or projected new roads in the border zone.²⁰ On the other hand, describing Finland in 1933 as enemy territory was prohibited.²¹ Censors were also told to catch incorrect translations of shop signs into Finnish.²² In 1937 Moscow demanded that all regional Glavlits compile lists of foreigners who subscribe to publications emanating from the regions. Karlit produced a list of twenty-one international subscriptions to *Krasnaia Kareliia*’s Finnish-language edition with addresses ranging from a post office box in Berlin to the Finnish Workingmen’s Association in Norwood, Massachusetts.²³ Moreover, references to the presence in Karelia of forced laborers or exiled kulaks were strictly forbidden. A taboo was placed on one of the words for exiled kulaks—laborer-exiles (*trudposelentsy*)—and in one case a censor was instructed to replace it with “brigadiers” who “in terms of their social origin are former kulaks.”²⁴

To sum up, central decrees issued from Moscow determined the creation of the Karelian censorship board in the early 1920s, even if this creation happened late and haphazardly. Later on, changes in world politics heightened the perception of Karelia as a sensitive borderland, Soviet nationalities policy altered the ethnic composition of the Karelian censors, and central censorship policy changed the interior institutional structure of the Karelian censorship board.

CENSORSHIP PRACTICES

The 1930s saw the rise of a secondary censorship mode, the abolition of ambiguity. Throughout the Soviet era, however, censorship practices aimed at eliminating heterodoxy. What does the case of Karelia contribute to our knowledge of this primary censorship mode?

Censorship in the Soviet Union took place before and after circulation. In precirculation censorship censors influenced the producer in various ways to refashion the cultural

¹⁸Ibid., d. 1/5, l. 37.

¹⁹Ibid., d. 1/25, l. 15.

²⁰Ibid., d. 1/5, l. 24.

²¹For example, Karlit held back an article titled “Anti-Soviet Military Training of Finnish Fascists,” reasoning that it created an impression as if the “Soviet Union had a hostile relationship with Finland” (ibid., l. 29).

²²Ibid., d. 1/25, l. 15.

²³See ibid., d. 4/3, ll. 10–11, 18–20.

²⁴Ibid., d. 3/16, l. 6 (dated 27 January 1935).

product during the process of cultural production.²⁵ One *raion* censor, for instance, asked the commander of a rifle regiment before the 1936 May Day parade to lead his soldiers into public in such a manner that “photographers could not photograph ... the regiment entrusted to you.”²⁶ And at printing houses, censors were busy filtering products too.

Postcirculation censorship involved several practices. First, a cultural product could be withheld from circulation (a book, for example, went off the press but was destroyed rather than delivered to the stores). Second, products already in circulation might be retrieved, as in the case of the village newspaper *Kolkhoznik*, the 6 October 1934 issue of which had been run at 1,900 copies: 1,507 were confiscated at the village post office before distribution while another 300 copies were retrieved from newsstands and subscribers. Yet another 12 copies had apparently been used as toilet paper, 50 sold to “an unidentified citizen” who bought them as wallpaper, and 11 people refused outright to return their copies. All confiscated papers were incinerated by the *raion* censorship board, the party members among the refractory subscribers were reprimanded, and the “former White bandit Myl’nikov’s [case was turned over] to the *raion* NKVD chairman.”²⁷ Third, undesirable parts of products already in circulation could be eliminated (as in the blackening of names in library books). Fourth, restrictions might be placed on access to products already in circulation (see the *spetskhran* at libraries).²⁸ And, finally, special annotations or commentaries could be added to products before or after their release into circulation.

The central tool used to maintain orthodoxy, censorship’s primary goal, was the *Perechen’*, the “list of information constituting a state secret.” The *Perechen’*, often called “Talmud” among censors, was a top-secret list of authors and texts banned from circulation and was distributed from Moscow Glavlit to its branches in the regions.²⁹ Much like the Papal Index of prohibited books (*Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, 1559–1966) served as the negative mirror image of texts deemed sacral in Catholicism, the *Perechen’* was the dialectical counterpart of the Soviet canon, a selection of cultural products placed closest to the ideological center of Soviet society. In their work on canon and censorship, Aleida and Jan Assmann distinguish between the ideal types of sacral and ideological canon.³⁰ A sacral canon is firmly implanted in collective memory and possesses such an aura of timelessness that it requires little in the way of social maintenance—repetition, reenactment, and rituals. “Ideologies,” by contrast, “are under pressure of constant articulation and repetition of [their]

²⁵When union republics, for example, embarked upon their own encyclopedia projects in the early 1930s, OVTs, Moscow, ordered the editors of the Ukrainian Soviet Encyclopedia to “send to OVTs SSSR a *slovník* (a list of terms, for which entries in the encyclopedia ... will be written), in order to determine which manuscript articles must be examined by the Military Censorship Department of the USSR before they are sent to the typesetters” (ibid., d. 1/1, l. 11). In this case censors themselves—not just editors—interfered with the writing process.

²⁶Ibid., d. 3/30, l. 23. Mentioning the presence of troops outside Petrozavodsk was prohibited—and violated more frequently than anything else (for example, see ibid., d. 2/4, ll. 28–30, d. 3/16, l. 2, and d. 3/20, l. 5).

²⁷Ibid., d. 1/25, l. 28.

²⁸To illustrate further, military censorship detected information not meant for publication in the published 1934 Budget of the Karelian ASSR and ordered all institutional recipients of a copy to stamp “not for circulation” on the cover (ibid., d. 1/10, l. 11 [7 December 1934]).

²⁹For the Talmud metaphor see Dewhirst and Farrell, *Soviet Censorship*, 55–57; and Choldin and Friedberg, *Red Pencil*, 18.

³⁰See Aleida and Jan Assmann, eds., *Kanon und Zensur: Beiträge zur Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation II* (Munich, 1987), 7–27.

fixed nucleus of meaning. The truth ... never becomes quietly self-evident, it asks to be confirmed from all sides.”³¹ In early Stalinism, with the traumatic upheavals of collectivization, industrialization, and famine fresh in society’s collective memory, the Soviet canon very much fit the ideal-typical description of an ideological canon. A huge propaganda machine constantly celebrated the newly canonized cultural products and tried to embed them in collective memory.

High-level secrecy governed the handling of the *Perechen’*. Glavlit in Moscow sent out a specific quantity of numbered copies to a branch. Karlit, in our case, confirmed the receipt of these copies in writing and reported which copy had been handed out to which censor,³² who, in turn, was reminded that he carried “party and criminal responsibility” for the loss of a *Perechen’*.³³ Apparently no *Perechen’* was intended for permanent deposit in Karlit’s archive. Rather, specialists in “secret record-keeping” (*sekretnoe deloproizvodstvo*) from Narkompros, the party Obkom, the NKVD, and Karlit periodically burned outdated issues.³⁴ The fact that the changing *Perechen’* was hidden even from censors, despite their high security clearance, points to the instability of the Soviet canon and confirms its status as an ideological, rather than a sacral, canon. By contrast, the Papal Index always was a public document. The secrecy surrounding the *Perechen’* further points to an undercurrent of tension caused by the implementation of a Socialist utopia—by definition removed from time and space—in a concrete place during a real time.³⁵ As party ideologists represented it, the Soviet Union had begun building Socialism during the First Five-Year Plan and finished by the end of the second at around the time of the proclamation of the Stalin Constitution in 1936. However more complicated the self-understanding of the party actually was in 1936, in Socialism time was supposed to stand still and the select body of canonical texts—first and foremost the classics by the tetrad Marx-Engels-Lenin-Stalin—was supposed to be sacral and eternal. The rapid movement of texts from the canon to the *Perechen’* certainly did not correspond to the Soviet regime’s self-image in the second half of the 1930s. It was thus with a sense of embarrassment over the gap between what was and what ought to have been that central Glavlit kept away lower-level, regional censors from yesterday’s *Perechen’*.

A NEW CENSORSHIP MODE IN THE 1930s; OR, POLYSEME AS A PROBLEM

Enforcing the positive canon by cutting the cultural products listed in the *Perechen’* was undoubtedly censorship’s main preoccupation throughout the Soviet era. In the 1930s,

³¹Ibid., 15.

³²See, for example, TsGA RK, f. 757, op. 1, d. 3/1, l. 19.

³³Ibid., d. 3/23, l. 10 (23 November 1935).

³⁴Thus an *akt* of a 1936 incineration lists different kinds of *Perechen’* from as far back as 1928 (ibid., d. 3/33, l. 12).

³⁵On anxiety during NEP over the contamination of Socialist utopia through language and history see Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (Princeton, 1997), chap. 7. On utopia further see Thomas Lahusen, *How Life Writes the Book: Real Socialism and Socialist Realism in Stalin’s Russia* (Ithaca, 1997), 26.

however, when censorship was long supposed to have withered away and official Soviet discourse began identifying censorship in enemy countries like Japan as a sign of political backwardness, a secondary censorship mode emerged alongside the primary mode.³⁶ Censors increasingly worried that recipients might ascribe to a canonical cultural product meanings that diverged from the meaning intended by its producer. More than during the 1920s, censors began putting themselves in the place of consumers and attempted to eradicate the very possibility of unintended heterodox interpretations. As demonstrated below, they saw the danger for such interpretations lurking in a number of meaning-generating processes, such as the unintended combination of a sign with its surroundings, a text with its contexts. The elimination of such contexts became an important part of censorship work.

The sources in Karlit's archive reflect a heightened sense of anxiety over semantic ambiguity from 1934 on. In November 1934 censors were warned from above: "In light of repeated distortions of the names of a number of towns on geographic and other maps ... I order you to pay close attention to the transcription of town names (particularly Leningrad, Stalingrad, Stalinabad, and so on)."³⁷ And during the 1935 purge, censors were told to be particularly attentive to monosemic pictorial representations: "In *Isutue* of Segozerskii *raion* there is a picture of Comrade Kalinin that resembles Trotsky more than Comrade Kalinin. It is imperative that clear, understandable pictures be published. Unclear ones must be removed during preventive censorship."³⁸ Similarly, simple technical mistakes in the process of reproducing the canonical images of the Communist elite could harm not only the censor but also the typesetter. Thus, typesetter Kuznetsov of the village printing house in Sheltozero made some technical blunder that resulted in a "distorted portrait of Comrade K. E. Voroshilov" and the confiscation and pulping of 962 copies of the 18 August 1936 issue of *Krasnoe Sheltozero*. Kuznetsov received an "administrative reprimand" and was forced to pay for the paper and recompense the labor costs for pulping.³⁹

In some instances, censorship boards perceived as inappropriate the context in which utterances by Soviet luminaries were reproduced. For example, "in the journal *Krolikovodstvo*, no. 7 ... the article 'People Hinder Comrade Stalin's Speech on Cadres' was reproduced in the form of a junk (*khaltura*) literary essay. The essay began thus: 'It was sunny when Shevelev read Comrade Stalin's speech, held on 4 May. ... High in the sky larks sang. ... Ol'ga Kovaleva sang a joyous *shendarba*. ... The rabbit-keepers (*krolitintsy*) sang 'kormai-vaty-vaty-vaty.' They listened to the great words of the *vozhd*.'"⁴⁰ Here the heavy and impeccably formulaic "they listened to the great words of the *vozhd*" was perceived as ridiculed in the context of the dialect-singing rabbit-keepers.

According to Moscow, a case at Minsk radio censorship violated the directive that "the character of radio programming must fit the political moment": "Regardless of these

³⁶During the Manchurian crisis a *Pravda* article of 21 March 1932 ("Censorship works...") associated censorship with Japanese fascism: "The Chinese press particularly emphasizes that as a result of extremely strict Japanese censorship presently no news regarding the deteriorating political, economic, and social crisis come to Tokyo." In this context it is also worth remembering that the existence of Soviet censorship itself was censored, especially during 1933–56 (Dewhurst and Farrell, *Soviet Censorship*, iii–vn.5).

³⁷TsGA RK, f. 757, op. 1, d. 1/3, l. 37 (OVTs circular dated 28 November 1934).

³⁸Ibid., d. 1/9, l. 39.

³⁹Ibid., d. 3/31, l. 8.

⁴⁰Ibid., d. 2/3, l. 90ob.



FIG. 1 Kirov statue on Ploshchad' svobody, Petrozavodsk. Author's photograph

instructions, in Minsk on 22 January, the anniversary of Lenin's death, radio played several 'gypsy romances' and fox-trots. And on 23 January in Minsk, after the airing of the indictment text in the trial against the Trotskyist anti-Soviet center, funeral music was played (Chopin, *Sonata in C, B-flat minor*)."⁴¹

⁴¹See Glavlit Moscow chairman S. Ingulov's circular letter of 5 February 1937 (*ibid.*, d. 4/1, l. 26).

After the Kirov murder, Petrozavodsk erected a statue of Kirov on its largest public square (Fig. 1). From the very beginning, however, viewers interpreted the Kirov monument in ways that countered the sculpture's intended signification. The Karelian Party Archive holds a denunciation of Karelia's highest political figure, Obkom secretary Irklis, sent to Leningrad's party chief and Central Committee secretary Zhdanov. In it someone named I. G. Laatikainen concluded a list of accusations on a shrill note by charging Irklis with a lack of "party vigilance" (*partiinaia bditel'nost'*) in what the author perceived as Irklis's worst blunder—and the culmination of the denunciation:

In addition to everything said [above] I will mention one more fact, which, in my opinion, must be seen at least as an act of serious negligence, if not as conscious wrecking or political hooliganism. In ... Petrozavodsk on Freedom Square a monument [in honor of] S. M. Kirov was erected in Fall 1936. The monument's pose is not characteristic of S. M. Kirov at all. Besides that, he stands with his back turned toward Karl Marx Avenue (main street) and the House of Folk Art, and with his face toward the city *bania*; when looking at the statue from the angle of the entrance to the summer garden, one hand, which points forward with a stretched-out index finger (the other, left hand [rests] in the pocket of the pants), creates the impression of male genitals. When I reported this to Irklis he merely burst out laughing, suggesting that it is not worth paying attention to all sorts of trifles.⁴²

Viewers saw Kirov's index finger both as hand and penis (Fig. 2). During the Great Terror, the double-reading of Kirov's finger acquired a potentially lethal dimension. During High Brezhnevism the finger lost none of its multivalence but most of the repressive social consequences that could accompany its double-reading during High Stalinism. Kirov's multivalent finger became an ironic element of Soviet everyday life in Petrozavodsk.

At times papers printed quotes from persons identified as enemies of the people in order to discredit them. Apprehensive of what it deemed to be a potentially self-defeating project, censorship often countered these strategies of public shaming by excising such passages. The following example is from the Finnish-language edition of *Krasnaia Kareliia*: "From the article 'On the Kulak Attack' in no. 25 we excised one place that mentioned kulaks making an attempt to set the administrative buildings of the kolkhoz and the village soviet on fire, and organizing an armed assault on the village soviet's chairman."⁴³

During the Great Terror Karlit sent out a circular to Karelian *raion* censors, which exhorted them to watch out for "so-called typographic errors." "So-called" because typographic errors in political contexts could engender meaning perceived as heretical. Censorship increasingly labeled the production of such errors "counterrevolutionary activity." Apart from typographic errors, the circular admonished censors to avoid the "incorrect division of words" (*nepravil'nyi perenos slov*), citing the hyphenated—and thus visually separate—words "counter-revolutionary" and "anti-Bolshevik" in the newspaper *Sovetskaia Kareliia* of 14 November 1938. "Such a hyphenation of words constitutes the gravest political

⁴²Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv obshchestvenno-politicheskikh dvizhenii i formirovaniia Karelii, f. 3, op. 4, kor.[obka] 175, d. 280, ll. 76–79 (dated 10 August 1937).

⁴³TsGA RK, f. 757, op. 1, d. 1/3, l. 19.



FIG. 2 Kirov's multivalent finger. Author's photograph

distortion,” concluded Karlit chairman Sviridov in Petrozavodsk.⁴⁴ In other words, if the reader misses the negating prefix, “counter-” and “anti-,” the meaning is inverted.⁴⁵

⁴⁴Ibid., d. 5/7, ll. 60–61 (dated 27 November 1938).

⁴⁵Many other cases of typographic errors and their polysemic resonance are recorded. A typical list of cuts from precensorship, sent from Sorokskii *raion* to Petrozavodsk, also mentioned the error of a missing negating prefix in

Censorship also strove to minimize multiple meanings that could arise from the physical proximity of picture and text that were unconnected in every other respect. Karlit warned its *raion* censors against repeating the unfortunate occurrence at one local newspaper, in which “there was a portrait of the Chinese People’s hero, Mao Zedong, but right under that portrait was placed a small note with the title ‘Cholera Epidemic in China.’ Thus a politically incorrect and even counterrevolutionary combination came out.”⁴⁶ In a similar vein, according to one source, censors in the 1930s were expected to hold newspaper pages against the light to prevent undesirable juxtapositions from emerging. In a 1937 issue of *Trud* one page showed a portrait of Stalin, while the backside showed a worker swinging a hammer. When held against the light, the worker seems to be hitting Stalin on the head with the hammer.⁴⁷

In the late 1930s efforts to eradicate polyseme reached new heights. Omsk’s censors confiscated an entire circulation of brochures with a Stalin speech fresh from Omsk’s OMOGIZ printing press because “the graphics of the cover were executed in such a way that, when turning the picture, above the columns a Tsarist crown becomes visible.”⁴⁸ The first example of what was to develop into a widespread phenomenon of censors seeing swastikas where we today would not see any surfaced in December 1935. A circular from Glavlit Moscow reads: “During the Seventh Comintern Congress the photo journalist Loskutov of ‘Soiuzfoto’ shot a picture ... of Comrades Stalin and Dimitrov, sitting in the presidium. The curls on Comrade Dimitrov’s forehead interweave in such a way that they create the impression of a drawn swastika. ... Glavlit categorically forbids further printing of this picture.”⁴⁹ The only document in Karlit’s archive with the actual picture attached as evidence is a canonical Stalin portrait printed in the Finnish-language journal *Rintama* (Fig. 3). A letter from Moscow to Petrozavodsk reads: “Glavlit RSFSR brings to your attention that in issue no. 9–10 of *Rintama*, published in Finnish, on Comrade Stalin’s portrait (p. 6) the service jacket’s button is sown [on the jacket] in the shape of a cross and bears great resemblance to the Fascist swastika. Inform us about the measures you took” (Fig. 4).⁵⁰

How to make sense of such cases? Vladimir Papernyi and Katerina Clark, among others, have treated the production of meaning in Stalinist culture and have touched upon

an adjective: “We are sure that the Leninist Central Committee and our *vozhd*’ Comrade Stalin in their battle for the building of a class [censorship: -less, or *besklassovyy*] socialist society” (ibid., d. 3/21, l. 3). Memoirist Natal’ia Perl recalls a list of prohibited hyphenations for newspaper copy editors, including *veli-kogo Stalina* and *uchi-telia Stalina*. See her *Zakon sokhraneniia* (St. Petersburg, 1994), 102–3. Émigrés gleefully took note of typographic errors, as in the missing “dse” in Sovnarkom “predsedatel” Molotov, turning the “chairman” into a “traitor” (*predatel*). See P. Shpilevoi’s letter to the editor, “Opechatki s drugim iskhodom,” *Novoe russkoe slovo*, 15 July 1958. Thanks to Roman Timenchik for these last two sources.

⁴⁶TsGA RK, f. 757, op. 1, d. 5/7, l. 61.

⁴⁷See A. Gaev, *Tsenzura sovetskoi pechati* (Munich, 1955), 23 (quoted in Dewhirst and Farrell, *Soviet Censorship*, 61 n.94).

⁴⁸TsGA RK, f. 757, op. 1, d. 2/3, l. 92. Also see “a famous scandal in Moscow when it was discovered that the picture of a torch on a matchbox label resembled the face of Trotsky if looked at the wrong way up.” See A. Finn, *Experiences of a Soviet Journalist* (New York, 1954), 6 (quoted in Dewhirst and Farrell, *Soviet Censorship*, 61 n.94).

⁴⁹TsGA RK, f. 757, op. 1, d. 3/5, l. 1 (dated 27 December 1935).

⁵⁰Ibid., d. 4/3, l. 70 (dated 23 December 1937).

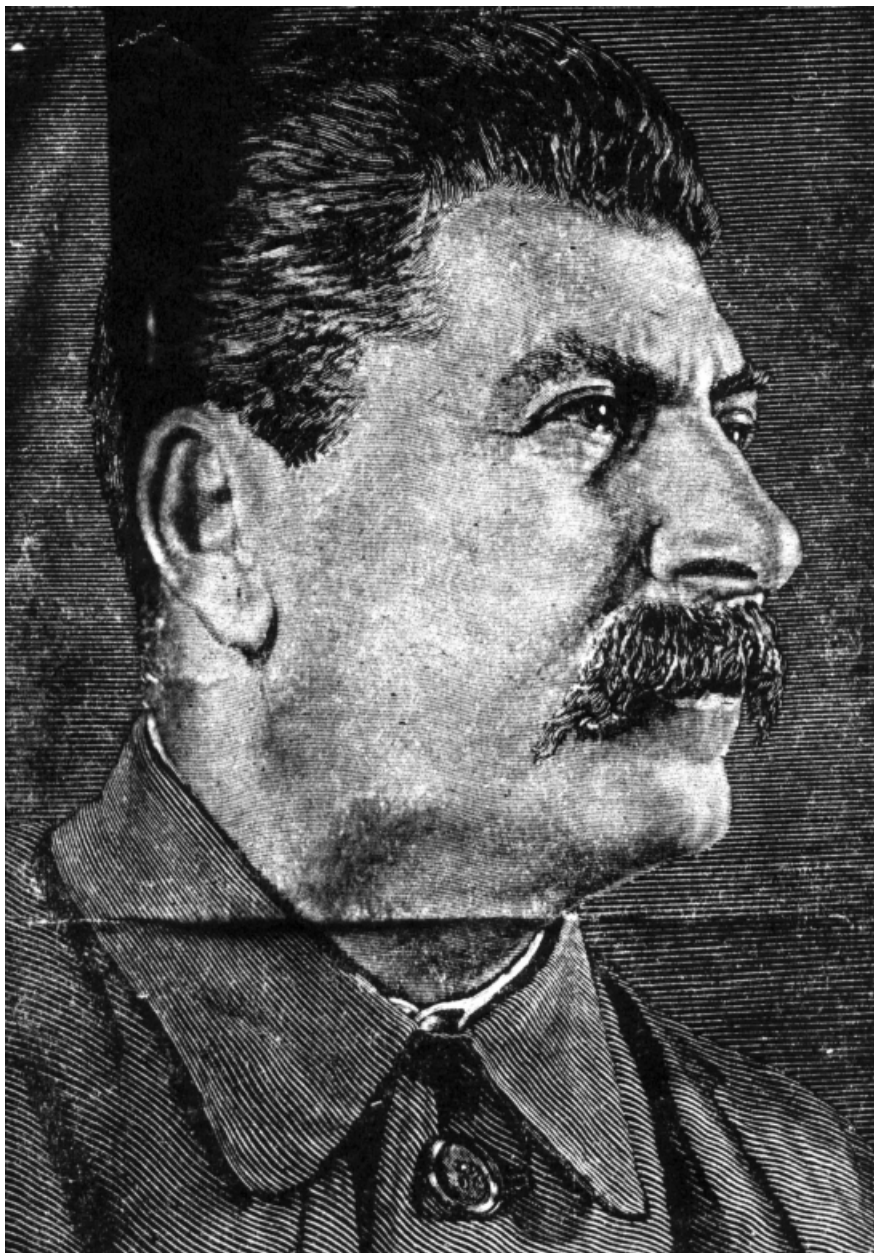


FIG. 3 A. P. Troitskii, *I. V. Stalin* (1930s?)

similar cases. Papernyi mentions a hammer and sickle sculpture that was removed from the “Mechanization” pavilion’s roof at the 1939 All-Union Agricultural Exhibition (VSKhV): “‘Out of sabotage,’ the head of the hammer was turned to the sharp edge of the sickle, which [was thought] to lead to the confrontation of workers and peasants.”⁵¹ Papernyi attributes to

⁵¹Vladimir Papernyi, *Kul'tura “dva”* (Moscow, 1996), 204.

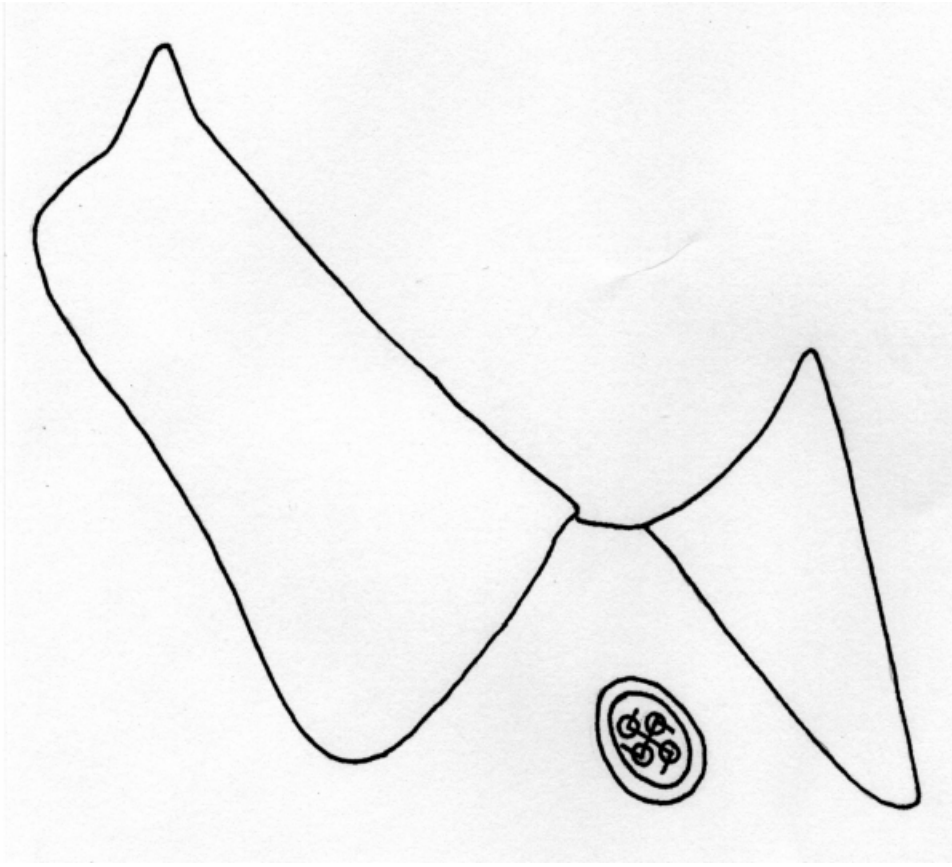


FIG. 4 The swastika in the button. Author's drawing

Stalinist culture a propensity for “mythological thinking” in which the sign—here, hammer and sickle—is directly identified with its meaning—workers and peasants. In a similar vein, NKVD agents checked the interior of a Stalin sculpture at VSKhV, since a bomb which was feared to have been placed inside the sculpture by wreckers, would hurt not only the sculpture, but Stalin himself.⁵² Papernyi also describes the seeming paradox of how the proliferation of representations of Lenin and Stalin, even on objects of everyday life, was accompanied by a dramatic increase in anxiety over their possible desacralization. Katerina Clark in turn argued that the more ritualized the Soviet novel became during High Stalinism, the more fixed its master plot, the greater became the possibility for the writer to play on “the latent ambiguities of the signs themselves.” “Thus, paradoxically,” she writes, “the very rigidity of Socialist Realism’s formations permits freer expression than would be possible if the novel were less ritualized.”⁵³

⁵²Ibid., 205. Applying Ernst Kantorowicz’s classic study (*The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* [Princeton, 1957]) to Soviet Russia, Victoria Bonnell has also noted a metaphorical merging of the Soviet leader’s body with the body politic. See her *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley, 1997), chap. 4.

⁵³Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel* (Chicago, 1985), 13.

Efforts to eradicate polysemy are not exclusive to Soviet culture.⁵⁴ What is special about censorship sources is that they allow us to follow—almost as if under the microscope—the *process* of how the Soviet regime dealt with the latent ambiguity that inheres in and between signs. The following then is an attempt to sketch out what Pierre Bourdieu's field theory in general and in particular his essay, "The Production and Reproduction of Legitimate Language," can add to an explanation of Stalinism's handling of ambiguity.

Soviet censorship's goal to reduce semantic ambiguity can be seen not as an isolated phenomenon but as part of what Bourdieu has called the "unification of the linguistic [field]."⁵⁵ Bourdieu refers to a process whereby different linguistic fields are collapsed into one. For example, a differentiated, democratic society is neither disturbed by the inherent polysemic potential of language nor the fact that different groups ascribe different meanings to the same words or signs.⁵⁶ It is only after "integration into a single 'linguistic community'" that these different groups begin communicating in a single field and that the different meanings which they assign to the same signs become noticeable.⁵⁷ In Bourdieu's words, "the unification of the linguistic [field] means that there are no doubt more and more meanings for each sign."⁵⁸

The period of the Great Break was precisely the Soviet regime's forced attempt at creating a "single linguistic community" after this project had been put on hold for pragmatic reasons during NEP, a period of greater differentiation of linguistic fields. With the collectivization and industrialization campaigns completed and the Second Five-Year Plan nearing its end, the Soviet regime expected everyone to be assigning the same meanings to the same signs. But "language," states Clark axiomatically, "is multivalent," and even if this axiom is modified to, "language has the socially mediated potential for multivalence," the anxiety reflected in the censorship sources was the result of the Bolsheviks' inability to strip from language its potential for multivalence.⁵⁹ Censors began to anticipate the multivalent reception of signs and attempted to engineer cultural products, before their release into public, in such a way that no unintended meanings could emerge at all. Therefore

⁵⁴Apart from religion, one could invoke numerous instances. Victor Klemperer noted in his 1939 diary that the Dresden Nazis had rearranged the paths dividing the grass on Bismarckplatz because they evoked the British flag's diagonal lines (see 25 July 1939 entry in Victor Klemperer, *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten: Tagebücher 1933–1941*, vol. 1 [Darmstadt, 1998], 477). And Burma in 1996 discontinued a one-kyat bill depicting the Burmese independence hero Aung San because, "when held to the light, the note's watermark shows a feminine Aung who looks suspiciously like his daughter, opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi" (*Newsweek*, 20 January 1997).

⁵⁵"Unification of the linguistic market," in Bourdieu's words. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, MA, 1991), 40. Wherever Bourdieu uses the concept "market," "field" has been substituted, since it is the better known of the two synonymous terms.

⁵⁶Bourdieu's examples for the unification of the linguistic field are either the universal claims of religion to be speaking for everyone in traditional societies or the universalizing tendencies of modern, capitalist nation-states (with their "high" language disseminated through universal schooling, with their national armies, roads, and communications systems). The Soviet case differs from Bourdieu's trajectory in one significant way: whereas for Bourdieu changes in the economic field—the transition to capitalism—are ultimately primary (whether also causal, is a question of considerable debate) to the unification of the linguistic field, in the Soviet Union the political field is primary to all other fields. Industrialization and collectivization were the result of political decisions with a linguistic fall-out, not the culmination of socioeconomic processes.

⁵⁷Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 46.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 40.

⁵⁹Clark, *Soviet Novel*, 12.

censors began seeing swastikas and Tsarist crowns in places where viewers today would not see any.

The reason why censors saw certain signs like swastikas and not others lies exactly in the social mediation of language's potential for polyvalence. In the culture of the Soviet Union from roughly the late 1920s until at least the end of World War II, censors saw the swastika and no other symbol because the swastika was the single most prevalent symbol signifying everything antithetical to Bolshevism. For example, even before the Nazis came to power in Germany, *Pravda* caricatures were saturated with swastikas as free-floating signifiers attaching themselves surreptitiously to just about anything, but particularly clothes.⁶⁰ In the collective imaginary, the swastika figured as the (often sartorial) marker of anti-Bolshevik infiltration and dangerous contamination. If any single sign for subversion was on censors' minds during the 1930s, it was the swastika.

Why was the search for swastikas only a phase that had a beginning and an end? A closer look at the Great Break and the reordering of fields is warranted. According to Bourdieu, each field functions according to its own logic. During the Great Break the economic field became so paramount that most other fields began to function according to its logic. This logic was the logic of a planned economy, achieved during crash industrialization. Science began to set plan targets, folklore poets began to draw up annual plans, musicians set plan targets for annual concerts, and censorship formed no exception. Even though no censorship plans per se have surfaced, numerous practices of the planned economy came to characterize censorship work, too. The statistics on precirculation cuts, the standardized forms in which all Soviet censors recorded their changes, the regularity with which they reported to their superiors, and the annual balance sheet (*otchet*) all came to structure censorship work.⁶¹ Toward the end of the Second Five-Year Plan, various productivity-raising campaigns such as Socialist Competition and Stakhanovism were introduced in the Soviet economy.

Much like coal miners from one region, whose output was compared in the newspapers to that of coal miners from other regions, censors began to see themselves competing against other censors in an imagined pan-Soviet socialist market space, fortified through the institution of the central circular that regularly compared and ranked the different censorship locales, and all-Union statistics, showing at the end of the year comparatively how much, and in which categories, had been censored by which Soviet censorship branch.⁶² At

⁶⁰One 1931 caricature depicts a German social democrat with a belt of meandering swastikas (*Pravda*, 23 June 1931). Another in *Pravda* from 15 December 1934 shows an Italian fascist journalist penning lies about Soviet Russia while swastika-shaped ducks fly from his open brain (a pun on the double-meaning of *utka*: duck and newspaper hoax). A third from a 31 March 1935 issue of *Pravda* features a Nazi airplane showering swastika-shaped "war microbes" upon the Balkans. And one year before the *Rintama* Stalin portrait, swastika cufflinks appear in a caricature (*Pravda*, 30 August 1936).

⁶¹Annual balance sheets became so ubiquitous that even Soviet diary writers recorded their personal development in the language of the planned economy's development. See Jochen Hellbeck, "Self-Realization in the Stalinist System: Two Soviet Diaries of the 1930s," in *Stalinismus vor dem Zweiten Weltkrieg: Neue Wege der Forschung*, ed. Manfred Hildermeier (Munich, 1998), 284–85.

⁶²The censorship board of Gor'kovskii *krai*, for instance, was said to have "won considerable authority and [to have] attained a great percentage of lowering the violation of military secrets in the press." And its OVTs chief, "Comrade Babkin, through his daily painstaking work with the duty of responsibility for the task entrusted to him, won the first place ... among other chairmen." See TsGA RK, f. 757, op. 1, d. 2/3, l. 1 (dated 8 December 1934).

the same time, during 1936–38 the infamously repressive side of the Soviet economy constantly threatened them. If one Karelian censor failed to see a swastika where a competitor, endorsed by someone higher in the power hierarchy (say at central Glavlit), saw one, the Karelian censor feared a plethora of negative consequences ranging from a reprimand to an accusation of “wrecking” or “counter-revolutionary activity” and possible death. Conversely, central power might reject a lower-level censor’s identification of a swastika—with the same negative consequences.

Thus Karlit chief Miakinen on 22 December 1937 sent a letter to Glavlit Moscow in which he wrote about a brochure, put out by a central party publishing house: “There is a portrait of comrade Stalin on the second page. When looking at the portrait, an obvious counterrevolution becomes visible. On the sleeve an image of Mussolini can clearly be made out. On the chest one can distinctly see letters that form the word Hitler.”⁶³ Central Glavlit promptly responded: “We categorically prohibit any attempts to hold back comrade Stalin’s brochure ‘On the project of the constitution of the USSR (*Soiuz SSR*) report at the Eighth Extraordinary Congress of Soviets, 25 November 1936.’ Do not give in to this obvious provocation. The attempt to find any special signs on comrade Stalin’s portrait, in our opinion was an enemy’s attempt to deprive the country of this brochure during the election campaign.”⁶⁴

Again, to explain Stalinist censorship’s coping with semantic ambiguity this article took recourse to Bourdieu’s writings on the specific problem of polyseme. On a more abstract level, it engaged his field theory, which parts with the presupposition of a uniform development of all spheres of society and disaggregates the social into distinct spheres (fields), each of which works according to its own logic and at its own pace. More precisely, a number of reasons were strung together to explain the swastika cases. Clark’s argument that all language has the potential for generating infinitely many meanings for signs was mobilized at the outset. Second, the axiom of language’s inherent multivalence was modified by introducing Bourdieu’s idea about the social nature of language. The article specifically took up Bourdieu’s thought that the multivalence of signs only becomes visible in a situation where different groups, who usually assign group-specific meanings to the same signs, leave the boundaries of their own group and begin to communicate with other groups in a single space. This thought was applied to the Soviet Union: the Great Break was precisely an attempted unification of the linguistic field, that is the attempt to create a single discursive space to be shared by all. The attempt to unify the linguistic field was engendered by Bolshevik ideology’s teleological demand to continue the Revolution after the hiatus of NEP and to implement the Socialist utopia on earth. Third, the paper took up Bourdieu’s thought that each field works according to its own peculiar logic and argued that the logic of the economic field, deemed paramount by the political actors in power, began to structure all other fields. This logic was predicated on the characteristics of

⁶³Ibid., d. 4/3, l. 67. Possibly, Miakinen (and/or his censor[s]) received the stimulus for their discoveries in the form of the Moscow letter of 20 December 1937, drawing their attention to the swastika in Finnish *Rintama*. That letter, however, is dated 23 December as an incoming document, whereas Karlit’s letter bears a 22 December date. If it were true, therefore, that the discovery of Mussolini and Hitler by Karlit was a reaction to central admonishment for not detecting the *Rintama* swastika, Miakinen’s letter would have to have been deceitfully predated.

⁶⁴Ibid., l. 68 (dated 26 December 1937).

a planned economy. Thus, when the productivity-raising measures of the latter 1930s were initiated, censors began dealing with the polyseme inherent in language in the ways we have seen for two related reasons: on the one hand, they clung to the utopian idea that a pure, unified linguistic field should have emerged, and when they saw little outright heresy, they began to imagine potential heretical meanings that the public might read into cultural products. On the other hand, the logic of the planned economy during the late 1930s influenced everyday work practices of censors, and Stakhanovism in censorship emerged. As Stakhanovite censors, they overfulfilled their plan of eliminating heresies listed in the *Perechen'* and saw heretical signs that our eyes would not see.

Despite the persistence of “ordinary censorship,” directed at the elimination of heterodox cultural products, a fairly unique secondary principle began to govern censorship in Stalin’s Russia. Censorship in the 1930s not only saw to it that heretical cultural products be kept from public view, it also sought to control the interpretations of those products that actually were allowed to circulate in society. What is more, it aimed at reducing all potential interpretations of a cultural product to a single interpretation and was absorbed with eradicating the very possibility of divergent readings. In its purging of polyseme, Stalinist censorship during the 1930s created a paper trail that has yet to surface for any other society, authoritarian ones included. It also differed from Tsarist and early Soviet censorship of the 1920s.

To be sure, Tsarist censorship already concerned itself with the problem of ambiguity, albeit in a rather different context and on a smaller scale. Paragraph 151 of the “Regulation on Censorship” of 1826 reads: “It is forbidden to publish places in works and translations that have a double-meaning (*dvoiakii smysl*), if one of these counters the censorship laws.”⁶⁵ And a “Confidential communication of the former Minister of People’s Enlightenment of 31 May 1849” objected to the May issue of *Otechestvennye zapiski*, “even though nothing in direct violation of the censorship laws can be found.” With regards to a specific article in this “thick journal,” the author asked: “Might phrases like this one, in the hands of malevolent people or in the understanding of inexperienced youths, not become the basis for the most ambiguous (*dvusmyslennym*), contrary, and even criminal interpretations?” He further warned that “ambiguity is often just as dangerous as a clearly expressed objectionable thought, sometimes even more so, because anything outright harmful is prohibited by censorship.”⁶⁶ Overall, however, the thrust of Tsarist censorship was to hide from public view everything deemed objectionable, especially offenses to Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and the moral code of the age.⁶⁷ In the vocabulary of Tsarist censors “ambiguity” stood for subversive strategies consciously deployed by cultural producers; at no point before the Revolution did the abolition of ambiguity assume the quantity and forms that it acquired during the 1930s under Stalin.

⁶⁵*Sbornik postanovlenii i rasporyazhenii po tsenzure s 1720 po 1862 god* (St. Petersburg, 1862), 166. Thanks to Victoria Frede for directing my attention to this source.

⁶⁶“Konfidentsial’noe predlozhenie byvshego Ministra Narodnogo Prosveshcheniia, ot 31 Maia 1849 goda,” in *ibid.*, 259–60.

⁶⁷See Charles Ruud, *Fighting Words: Imperial Censorship and the Russian Press, 1804–1906* (Toronto, 1982), 3–4. Also see Marianna Tax Choldin, *A Fence Around the Empire: Russian Censorship of Western Ideas under the Tsars* (Durham, 1985).

The Revolution that began as a big bang of signifiers was continued under Stalin as a totalizing effort to control signification. A pure realm of *odnoznachnost* was supposed to emerge. Ironically, a decade after Stalin's death writers were already deliberately subverting the system by playing on language's inherent multivalence. Andrei Siniavskii, for example, has been called the "most dangerous of all thaw dissident writers ... in terms of the word, dancing, sparkling with laughter and a multitude of meanings, in contrast to the heavy and *odnoznachnyi* 'totalitarian word' of classical Soviet works."⁶⁸ And on Freedom Square in Petrozavodsk during the 1970s, a certain spot at the Kirov monument's pedestal became a favorite backdrop for tourist photographs. If during the 1930s laughter over the monument's double-meaning was recorded in a denunciation of Karelia's party secretary, half a century later Soviet tourists stored their pictures in family photo albums.

⁶⁸Nadezhda Azhdikhina, *Ogonek* 9–10 (March 1993): 17.