

The Libri Prohibiti

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The Czech Republic, which was formerly Czechoslovakia, is a rich, educated and culturally rich country, whose extensive history has been laced with war, hardships, and different types of leadership and politics. One of the biggest and most influential political periods of this time was after World War II and during the time afterward when the country was under the power and control of the Communist party.

This time period had an enormous effect on all aspects of living. Not only was the complete political and governmental structure changed and uprooted, but the citizen's way of life and routine were also completely altered. Some of the simplest pleasures, rights, and daily routines were no longer options. Many resources became scarce and limited, when one had never questioned their availability before. The freedoms to speak, write, or read anything one wanted were no longer safe to do without fear.

The types of literature and the amount produced were regulated by the communist party, while Czechoslovakia was ruled by the Germans. These strict limitations, constraints, and censorship of all kinds caused a group of authors to begin writing, producing, and distributing literature illegally. This underground literature, which is commonly known as samizdat, has been collected and preserved through the years and is now housed in the center of Prague at the Libri Prohibiti, the focus of this paper.

Czech Republic and Samizdat

During the communist reign in the former Czechoslovakia, there were many forms of censorship which affected the amount and type of literature that

was produced and available at this time. The government had influence over the amount of what was published, produced, and distributed, and who was writing and producing literature. This had a huge impact on what the public had access to. The censorship was extreme, authors were banned or exiled and lists of prohibited books were produced.

During this time, the Czech citizens' love and enthusiasm for literature did not disappear. After being suppressed for over twenty years a group of authors began writing, producing, and distributing their works illegally through an underground network. These illegally produced works are called samizdat. Samizdat is literature which is secretly written, produced, and/or distributed during times of increased censorship and regulation.

This time of censorship and cultural cleansing had an important impact on this country. The samizdat produced during this time period helps explain and illustrate this time period, by demonstrating the in-depth and extreme steps and measures that had to be taken in order to produce these illegal texts. The different types and genres of samizdat shows what kind of literature was prohibited by the communist ruling party as well as what types of literature the public really wanted to read. Much of the samizdat also exemplified the public's opinions and attitudes toward the stern and strict communist reign.

The importance of the samizdat was gratefully recognized early on. Jiří Gruntorád, a former samizdat publisher and producer, who was subsequently incarcerated in the former Czechoslovakia in the 1970s, recognized this and

began collecting and preserving samizdat. His collection was the beginning of the library now known as the Libri Prohibiti (Stastnova 1).

The Czech Republic was under communist reign from 1948 to 1989. During this time religion, literature, finances, and political issues were restricted, regulated, and under inspection by the Communist party (Scott 12). The type and amount of literature produced was greatly reduced during this period. Although the type of literature and information that was produced during the Communist reign was limited and restricted, it has been said that the Czech people were very interested in reading, literature, and books in general. In an article entitled "Libraries under Communism and Capitalism," Pateman reiterates this idea by stating that

"... Czechoslovakia is a highly literate market. The passion of the Czechs and Slovaks for books was remarked on by many companies. This passion was not diminished by the Communist regime."

The importance of literature in the Czech Republic can also be seen by the fact that it was found in a "comparative sociological survey" that one third of adult Czechs spent one to three hours a week reading (Smejkalova 88). Authors were seen as national heroes in the Czech Republic due to the importance of literature in this country.

During this restrictive period of the Communist reign in the Czech Republic, over 400 writers and journalists were not allowed to publish any of their works. Any past works by these authors were also not allowed to be sold or distributed in the country. These authors were sometimes even exiled from their homeland if they decided to leave (Gruntorad 2). Some were persecuted and

sentenced to prison if they did not comply with the restrictions placed upon them. During this time, many different types of performers, entertainers, and various types of creators were persecuted for and banned from performing or creating their specific art forms. It was almost impossible for these persecuted individuals to find any kind of employment.

In order to continue their work or craft, they went “underground” with their writing and began producing samizdat. These prohibited writers started writing secretly in order to continue their work. Because their work was not allowed to be published, the writers had to produce them on their own. In order to produce multiple copies of their works, they sometimes used carbon paper to type up to twelve pages on average at once (Stastnova 3). After being typed up these materials were hand delivered and passed around by trusted friends. All of these actions were very dangerous, and those caught faced punishment of either imprisonment or exile. During this time, Jiří Gruntorád, the current caretaker of the Libri Prohibiti, was imprisoned for four years for distributing samizdat literature (Stastnova 2).

Not only was the act of producing and distributing samizdat dangerous, but it was also very difficult due to the limited amount of resources and materials. Paper was a limited resource in the Czech Republic during this time, it was difficult for even publishing companies to publish a large amount of books due to this shortage, let alone illegal independently-run underground publishing productions (Smejkalova 96).

It was also difficult for samizdat producers to get the needed typewriters, typewriter equipment, and glue and other items which were needed for binding the samizdat. Typewriters were hard to get and even harder and more difficult to fix or maintain. The typewriters used to help produce the samizdat were used continuously and the overuse was not easy on the machines, especially since most of the typewriters were older and used. Typewriters sometimes had to be disassembled and later reassembled in a different location to “prevent confiscation,” which also quickened the demise of many of the used typewriters (Huffman 18). By the end of the communist reign, ditto and mimeograph machines were used to produce duplicates (Huffman 17).

Most of the samizdat was produced to look as the main published items, in plain simple “state-controlled bookbinders” (Klima 49). This made it possible to travel with a large quantity of the samizdat without as much trouble. Samizdat was also produced in forms that were very discrete. Some books were produced as miniature books. Many of these had a magnifying glass incorporated with the book, to enable the reader to more easily read the small miniature text. Some texts were made to look like they were a simple bar of soap, which made these easier to transport and share among the underground circles.

Although the conditions were a hardship and made production difficult, many works were produced and distributed in this fashion. There were also works reproduced as samizdat so that they could be distributed for reading. These included translated texts, publications from exiled authors that were snuck into the country, and published items that were banned by the communist party.

Among some of the most famous works that were reproduced into samizdat are George Orwell's 1984 and J.R.R. Tolkien's 900 page The Lord of the Rings, both of which are held at the Libri Prohibiti (Gruntorad 4).

History of the Libri Prohibiti

In 1990, the Libri Prohibiti was opened with help from different organizations including the Czechoslovak Charter 77 and the President of the Czech Republic. The original location was on Podskalská Street, and later moved to its current location at Senovážné náměstí 2. The collection was begun with around 2,000 monographs and magazines which had been acquired by Jiří Gruntorád, the current caretaker of the Library, during the years of “normalization” in the Czech Republic (Annual 2). Since then the collection has continued to grow and expand with the help and support of interested and generous parties.

The Society of Libri Prohibiti was established on April 24, 1991. The Society was established because the Libri was in need of the status of a legal entity. After registering the Society with the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic, the Society was officially established. The primary goal of the Society is to help the Libri Prohibiti to continue operating and to help them to complete their collection (Annual 2).

Many of the founding members of this society were significant and established authors, former government and academic leaders and employees, as well as teachers and other prominent members of the community. Among

some of the most prominent founders of the Society are: Václav Havel, Ivan Klíma, and Jan Vladislav (Gruntorad 2).

Today there are over 180 members of the Society of Libri Prohibiti. Members' contributions to the Society and Library are voluntary. The Society invites any interested people to join if they would like to contribute or help the Libri Prohibiti in any way. Currently there are five committee members of the Society of Libri Prohibiti. Ivan M. Havel is the chairman, Dr. Oldřich Černý is the vice-chairman, and Jiří Gruntorád, who is the library's caretaker, is the secretary. Zdeňka Gruntorádová and Michal Holeček are also members of the committee (Libri 1).

General Information

The Libri Prohibiti is a library located in Prague, Czech Republic, which collects prohibited or banned books, as well as samizdat. This library is a nonprofit, private, and independent organization which was first opened on October 2, 1990 (Annual 1). The library's collection is maintained and preserved by Jiří Gruntorád, a former samizdat publisher and producer, who was subsequently incarcerated in the former Czechoslovakia in the 1970s (Stastnova 1).

The Libri Prohibiti is managed and run as a traditional library. All traditional services of a library are provided, such as photocopying, reference, and research. Service is provided in person, online via email, and over the telephone. There is a reading room that can fit eighteen people, which is normally quite full with an average of about ten library users visiting each day.

Another indication of the Library's popularity is a statistic from their 2005 Annual Report which states that over 30,000 pages had been photocopied that year for users (Annual 6).

The collection's uniqueness as well as the frailty of some of the items limits the borrowing privileges of most of the collection. Only items that have multiple copies can be borrowed from the library with a required small security deposit. The staff consists of volunteers, as well as library and information science students from the nearby universities, Charles University and the Josef Škvorecký private college, who use this opportunity for valuable training and educational experience before graduation (Huffman 37).

Collection

The Libri Prohibiti's collection is a mixture of Czech, Slovak, Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian exiled and samizdat literature. The majority of the collection is made up of samizdat. This collection has a variety of different types of exiled or samizdat literature which includes monographs, periodicals, archival works, reference resources, and audiovisuals. The collection is over twenty-seven thousand items, with approximately 2,000 of these being periodicals. The Libri Prohibiti has a collection of more than 20,000 monographs and periodicals, about 1,800 reference resources, and over 3,000 audiovisual resources (Annual 2).

The library is divided into nine distinct sections based on type, origin, and content of the item. The sections are: Samizdat Monographs and Periodicals in Czech, Exile Monographs and Periodicals in Czech, Monographs and Periodicals

of the First and Second War Resistance, Samizdat Monographs and Periodicals from foreign countries, Exile Monographs and Periodicals from foreign countries, Documentation and Archives, Reference Materials, and Audiovisual Materials (Huffman 32).

The Samizdat Monographs and Periodicals in Czech section of the Libri Prohibiti are comprised of more than 13,100 items. These materials were produced in the Czech Republic during the time of Communist rule. Over 360 of these items are periodicals. The library has complete holdings of all of the periodical titles that have considerable importance due to content, reputation, or historical value. Some of the titles within this section are: Edice Expedice, Petlice, and Popelnice, as well as the periodicals Information about Charter 77, Revolver Revue, and Vokno (Annual 3).

In the section of the Library about Exile Monographs and Periodicals in Czech, there are 6,500 exiled items within this section of the library and over 750 banned periodical titles. The representation of four hundred different individual publishers is one of the main significant facts about this section of the collection. Out of the four hundred publishers represented, thirty-five published and produced exiled monographs or periodicals with continuous editions. Many of the publishers' complete productions or editions are held in the Libri Prohibiti (Annual 3).

The third section of the library about Monographs and Periodicals of the First and Second War Resistance is a collection of items from the First and Second War of the Czech Republic. From the First World War, there are a total

of 75 items of legionnaires' literature. From Czech war exiles there is a total of 780 monographs. This collection also holds other materials, such as magazines from World War I and World War II (Annual 4).

The Libri Prohibiti also collects samizdat from other countries, in order to have a complete and comprehensive collection of this type of literature. This section, Samizdat Monographs and Periodicals from foreign countries has samizdat from Poland, Russia, and Slovakia. The majority of the foreign material in this collection is from the Czech Republic's neighbors Slovakia and Poland, with more than 1,140 items from these areas, approximately 240 of these being periodicals. The Russian samizdat makes up a small portion of this section of the collection in comparison (Annual 4).

The Exile Monographs and Periodicals from foreign countries section of the collection is primarily items that are from Slovakia and Russia. The exiled items from Slovakia total over 680, including periodicals. There are about 400 monographs from Russia and the Ukraine from between the years of 1920 and 1990. Poland exiles' information is only represented with a small number of items (Annual 4).

The items in the section, Monographs and Periodicals in foreign languages, are items about or related to the former Czechoslovakia, as well as other Communist ruled countries, that were produced in a language other than the native Czech language. The Library boasts to have over 2,800 volumes in this section, as well as over 480 periodicals (Annual 4).

The section, Documentation and Archives, contains about 900 documents that vary in topic and medium. Most of the collection is written documents that originated from the activity of different organizations and agencies, such as Charter 77, the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Prosecuted (VONS), and the East European Information Agency. Within this collection are also unpublished works, such as manuscripts and correspondence letters. Archival resources, like flyers, posters, photographs, and newspaper clippings, are also a part of this section of the collection (Annual 4).

The Reference Materials section of the collection represents any general information resources that are about or related to topics covered in the Library. The main topics covered are samizdat and exiled literature. There are over 1,780 resources in this section. This section has information in various forms including: catalogs, dissertations, dictionaries, and bibliographies, which could be useful to users (Annual 4).

The Audiovisual Materials section is one of the larger sections of the library. There are approximately 2,300 cassettes, 700 CD-ROMs, and 160 gramophone records of “nonconformist music.” There are also close to 450 recordings of “underground lectures and seminars” and around 700 video documentaries (Annual 4).

Publications

The Libri Prohibiti has helped to write and publish several items including: Exilová periodika: Katalog periodik českého a slovenského exilu a krajanských tisků vydávaných po roce 1945 or Exile Periodicals: Catalog of Czech and Slovak

Exile Periodicals and Czech Printed Material Issued Abroad after 1945,
Informace o Chartě 77: Článeková bibliografie 1978-1990 or Information about Charter 77: An Article Bibliography, 1978-1990, Katalog knih českého exilu 1948-1994 or Catalog of Books of the Czech Exile, 1948-1994, and Sdělení Výboru na obranu nespravedlivě stíhaných a Zprávy Východoevropské informační agentury or Communications of the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Prosecuted and Reports of the East European Information Agency (Annual 7). Each of these publications offer valuable information about not only samizdat from the Czech Republic, but also a look at how life was during the communist reign in this country. All of these publications are also available at the Libri Prohibiti.

Conclusions

The Czech Republic has had a tremulous and politically unstable history after World War II, which has had an immense and unforgettable impact on the country and its people. The years of censorship and strict control over the types of literature produced not only affected the lives of the citizens during the communist reign, but the impact can be seen now as well because most Czech citizens have the exact same titles in their own personal libraries.

The reminder of this time period has been kept and preserved in the Libri Prohibiti, so that future generations will not forget how the citizens of the former Czechoslovakia were forced to go to such extremes in order to simply read different types of literature. The role of the Libri Prohibiti is not just a regular one, as it is in most libraries, to store and preserve items for pleasure reading or research, but also as a permanent and effective reminder of the charged,

complicated, and dramatic past of the Czech Republic. This library is an important and critical part of the Czech Republic's history of strength, courage, and independence during a volatile and trying era in time. Hopefully with the continued support and donations of patrons and supporters this library will continue to be a historically significant and important reminder for the Czech Republic, its citizens, and the world.

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