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Soviet Russia's Bibliophiles and Their Foes: A Review Article

An article printed in 1970 in the third edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, of which several volumes are still to appear, defined *bibliofil'stvo* and *bibliofiliia* as the pursuit of collecting "rare and valuable publications." The author of the entry, O. G. Lasunskii, had nothing but praise for the activity:

In addition to its great value in enhancing the intellectual and spiritual growth of the collector (bibliophile) himself, bibliophilia also plays a significant social role. It promotes the assembling of significant collections of printed materials, the preservation of rare publications, of individual books noteworthy for the quality of their print, illustrations and bindings, as well as of books that contain autographs and markings by their former owners that are of historical and scholarly interest.¹

This exceptionally benign view of book collecting stands in sharp contrast to the total silence of the corresponding volume of the *Encyclopedia's* second edition. Not a word is said about it in its fifth volume which came out in 1950, and in the entire fifty-one volume set there is but a single reference to book collecting or, more precisely, to its demise: an article on public libraries identifies formerly privately owned collections among their holdings. The *Encyclopedia's* first edition, in a volume printed in 1927, does not maintain the ominous silence of its Stalin-era successor, but the tone of its entry is decidedly unfriendly:

Bibliophilia, a passion for book collecting, wherein the collector's attention is centered predominantly not on the contents of the book, but on its appearance. To a bibliophile, a book is not so much a source of scholarly information as an object to be collected.²

Between 1927 and 1970 most Soviet reference works preferred to avoid the subject of book collecting altogether. No entry is found in the first volume of the *Literaturnaia entsiklopediia* printed in 1929, and none appears in the first volume of the post-Stalin *Kratkaia literaturnaia entsiklopediia* which came off the presses in 1962, in spite of the fact that both sets devote hundreds of columns to various aspects of book publishing. Finally, only a few words are

1. *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia*, 3rd ed., vol. 3 (1970), p. 312.

2. *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia*, vol. 6 (1927), pp. 199–200.

devoted to the Soviet period in a twenty-four article section on bibliophilia in a specialized reference work printed in 1931.³

Not that Russia lacks bibliophilic traditions. Book collecting in Muscovy began in the sixteenth century, and among the best known early collectors was Prince A. M. Kurbskii.⁴ Kurbskii's subsequent fate as one of Russia's earliest political émigrés may have been an ominous portent of fortunes of Russia's bibliophiles in decades and centuries to come. In the eighteenth century, the library of Prince D. M. Golitsyn numbered about six thousand volumes: we have this information because when the prince fell into disfavor with the monarch, the library was confiscated by the police.⁵ Early Russian collectors, for the most part, gathered foreign books. Russian book printing was in its infancy, and early Russian books were not particularly attractive in appearance. It was not until the end of the eighteenth century that Russian books began to be equipped with jackets and bindings, and little attention was paid to such things as illustrations, covers, and the quality of paper for a century thereafter—that is, until the late 1800s.⁶ Still, the number of private Russian collections continued to expand rapidly. Most belonged to aristocrats and were housed in their estates in the countryside; many were impressive by international standards. Thus, the holdings of the library of N. P. Rumiantsev, probably the largest in nineteenth-century Russia, included 28,000 books, 710 manuscripts, and 1,500 maps.⁷ At the turn of the century, in the distant reaches of Siberia, Gennadii Vasil'evich Iudin, a wealthy merchant, amassed a library of 80,000 volumes. Iudin was a jealous guardian of his possession, but he would on occasion relent. Thus, he allowed the use of his library to a political exile then in Siberia who, like so many others, used the period of his banishment to catch up on research and writing. The exile was Vladimir Ul'ianov, who later became Lenin. It should perhaps be noted in this bicentennial year that the Iudin collection was purchased in 1906 with American taxpayers' money and now reposes in the Library of Congress—where it is used, among others, by more recent Russian political exiles.⁸

Pre-Soviet Russia had many varieties of collectors. Thus, one Russian author wrote:

A bibliophile is a true lover and connoisseur [of books] who prizes books not only for their appearance, but also for their contents. . . . A

3. A. V. Mez'er, *Slovar'nyi ukazatel' po knigovedeniiu*, part 1, A–Zh (Moscow-Leningrad: Sotsekgiz, 1931), pp. 380–404.

4. *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia*, 3rd ed., vol. 3, p. 313.

5. V. Osipov, *Kniga v vashem dome* (Moscow: "Kniga," 1967), p. 10.

6. P. N. Berkov, *Russkie knigoliuby: Ocherki* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1967), pp. 213–15.

7. *Bol'shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia*, 3rd ed., vol. 3, p. 313.

8. Osipov, *Kniga v vashem dome*, pp. 13–14.

bibliomaniac, too, is a lover of books, and sometimes a connoisseur as well, but primarily of their external appearance. . . . A bibliotaph is a lover of books, occasionally closely resembling a bibliomaniac. He collects books without any criteria, and guards his riches so zealously, that the books are not only of no use to other people's enlightenment, . . . sometimes he [the bibliotaph] is himself unable to locate the books that were so carefully hidden. He is a true gravedigger, a pathological character who really belongs in a mental hospital. On second thought, one must not ostracize such collectors. Some are known to have been reformed by enlightened bibliophiles.⁹

Much as similar accounts in other countries, the annals of prerevolutionary Russia's bibliophilia and bibliomania record both crime and folly. Thus, in 1888, A. S. Suvorin, Chekhov's longtime friend and publisher, needed a rare book. The work in question was Alexander Radishchev's *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*, a fictionalized eighteenth-century tract that was banned by the censors because of its attack on the institution of serfdom. Suvorin finally prevailed on P. V. Shchapov, described by a historian as a "book fanatic," to lend him a copy so that it could be reprinted (the ban had by then been lifted). The copy was sent to the typesetters who, unaware of the book's rarity, tore it up into individual pages, losing a few in the process. And even though Suvorin bought (at enormous expense) an exact replica of the destroyed copy, Shchapov "soon died in a state of complete insanity caused, in the opinion of his doctors, by mental suffering that was triggered by the loss of a beloved book."¹⁰ That bibliophiles are erratic, capable of extremes of greed as well as selfless concern for the happiness of fellow collectors, is attested by the biography of P. A. Efremov (1830–1907). His passion for collecting rare books led him to "manufacture" rarities, which he did by reproducing articles from journals and having them bound into covers and jackets printed privately for him alone.¹¹ On the other hand, in his last will

9. N. M. Lisovskii, "D. V. Ul'ianinskii kak bibliofil i bibliograf," *Bibliograficheskie izvestiia*, no. 1–2 (Moscow, 1918), pp. 16–17. Cited in M. N. Kufaeu, *Bibliofiliia i bibliomania: Psikhofiziologiia bibliofil'stva* (Leningrad: Izdanie avtora, 1927), pp. 32–34. Kufaeu's book, incidentally, is the only book the present writer has ever seen that was legally published in the USSR by the author himself. It thus is *legal samizdat* in the strictest sense of the term. As indicated on the last page, Kufaeu's book was printed in the state-owned "Komintern" printing shop and was cleared by the Leningrad censor (Gublīt No. 25481). The press run was only 500 copies, but nevertheless the book was distributed by a state agency, Gubprofsoviet. At that time private bookstores and publishers still existed, and Kufaeu might have been expected to avail himself of the services of both. By having a book published for him by the state, Kufaeu produced (perhaps not inadvertently) a collector's item.

10. Kufaeu, *Bibliofiliia i bibliomania*, pp. 46–47.

11. Berkov, *Russkie knigoluby*, pp. 210–11. Vladimir Lidin, a minor Soviet novelist and well-known bibliophile, recalls an attempt by a living author at creating a "post-humous" edition of his own work. In 1897, the Symbolist poet Valerii Briusov wrote an

and testament he actually requested that his impressive collection *not* be preserved intact. Rather, he wrote, it should be broken up by having the books scattered as widely as possible. In this manner, Efremov thought, he would bring much joy to many collectors who would have as much fun hunting for these books as he did in his lifetime.¹² Then there is also the documented story of a Russian aristocrat who, eager to impress friends and acquaintances with his erudition, created what may be called a Potemkin library. He borrowed *overnight* a large collection of impressive books and had them displayed conspicuously in his house, where he was giving a large party. The following morning all the books were returned to the dealer.¹³

The swan song of old Russia's bibliophilia was a magnificent volume entitled *Pokhvata knige (In Praise of Books)* that appeared in 1917, only a few months before the Revolution. Six hundred fifty copies were printed on rag paper and 400 more on ordinary paper.¹⁴ Superbly illustrated, the collection attests to the great interest in book collecting and in the graphic arts in Russia at the turn of the century.

The Communist seizure of power on November 7, 1917, was soon to affect the seemingly innocent hobby of book collecting. Within a year, on December 27, 1918, the People's Commissariat of Education ordered the confiscation of privately owned collections exceeding 500 books, except in cases where the owner could demonstrate to the authorities' satisfaction that these were a tool of his trade.¹⁵ Nine months later, on September 4, 1919, Lenin urged that such exceptions be made with greater strictness, and demanded also the confiscation of books belonging to individuals whose whereabouts were unknown; it was assumed that many persons in that category were enemies of the Soviet regime in hiding, émigrés, or actual participants in the anti-Soviet White armed forces.¹⁶ Lenin's appeal merely gave official

introduction to one of the early collections of his verse: "*Me eum esse* is the last book by Valerii Briusov, who passed away on (date) of 1896 in Piatigorsk. The manuscript was prepared by the author shortly before his death, even though he did not consider it quite ready for publication. The publishers propose to also bring out in the near future all of Valerii Briusov's already published translations. A. L. Miropol'skii, Moscow, 1896." Ultimately, Briusov's book appeared without the introduction, the manuscript of which is preserved in the archives. Presumably, young Briusov wanted to elicit generous reviews of a book by a "prematurely deceased" author. See Vi. Lidin, *Drus'ia moi, knigi* (Moscow: "Iskusstvo," 1962), p. 161.

12. P. N. Martynov, *Polveka v mire knig* (Leningrad: "Nauka," 1969), pp. 44–45.

13. Librovich [pseudonym?], "Biblioteka na odnu noch'," *Na knizhnom postu* (Petrograd: Izdatel'stvo Vol'fa, 1916), pp. 360–62. Cited in Kufaeve, *Bibliofiliia i bibliomaniia*, pp. 29–30.

14. P. N. Berkov, *Istoriia sovetskogo bibliofil'stva* (Moscow: "Kniga," 1971), p. 28.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

16. Osipov, *Kniga v vashem dome*, p. 33.

sanction to procedures that had already been followed in practice for some time. Besides, the confiscations were not the only danger to which book collections were exposed. Countless private libraries were simply looted, and millions of books were probably used for fuel. And yet, incongruously, neither famine nor terror could stop bibliophiles from searching for rare books to be added to their collections, and with good reason: the chaos of the civil war resulted in many unusual opportunities to acquire rare editions.¹⁷ A magnificent portrait of one such crazed collector in a starved and freezing Russian city may be found in "Mamai," a short story by Evgenii Zamiatin. Furthermore, the civil war resulted in the creation of books actually produced as collector's items. It appears that some resourceful Russian writers conceived the idea of making handwritten copies of their works, some with their own illustrations as well. The "books" were written on wrapping paper, parchment, cartons, wallpaper, sackcloth, and even uncut sheets of Soviet rubles. The price was indicated in pounds—of either flour or butter. The number of copies of each book thus produced was for the most part one or two, and never exceeded seven. Collectors quickly got wind of the new merchandise, the books sold well, and some Russian authors thus averted starvation.¹⁸ Authors participating in the venture included a number of prose writers and poets who were to become famous—Andrei Belyi, Fedor Sologub, Aleksei Remizov and Sergei Esenin—and also lesser talents, such as Anatolii Mariengof and Vadim Shershenevich.¹⁹

The most interesting period in the history of Soviet book collecting were the years 1918–29. Those were also the years of greatest activity in the secondhand and antiquarian book trade, which remained by and large in private hands, as did a number of Russia's publishing houses. Naturally, no overtly anti-Soviet books were published or sold. Still, the degree of latitude that remained was considerable, and the trade in old books was not merely brisk, it was booming. Old and rare books were sold not only in bookstores, but also in tents, at marketplaces and under open skies. Of course, not all of the buyers were serious bibliophiles. In 1918, one bookstore received an order

17. M. A. Osorgin, who subsequently became an émigré, recalls that in the Writers' Bookstore in Moscow, which existed from 1918 to 1922, books that were once among the most expensive (such as elegant eighteenth-century French editions, leatherbound tracts of the Old Believers, woodcuts, and books from before the period of Peter the Great, which occupy in Russian collecting a position analogous to Western incunabula) could be purchased for a few pounds of black bread. On the other hand, reference works were relatively expensive. Grabar's five-volume history of Russian art sold for "up to thirty-five kilos of rye flour," while the eighty-six books (forty-three volumes) of the Brokgauz-Efron encyclopedia cost fifty to eighty kilos of rye flour. Since only barter was accepted (currency was quite worthless), payment could also be made in soap, butter, oil, and sugar. Another participant in the Writers' Bookstore was the poet V. F. Khodasevich who, too, left Russia for the West. Berkov, *Istoriia*, pp. 38–39.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

19. Lidin, *Druz'ia moi, knigi*, pp. 10–11.

for one hundred *feet* of books “in fine bindings,” with the stipulation that they must be “different books.” It appears that a citizen had just acquired a magnificent bookcase that had to be filled.²⁰ But then, not all of the book vendors were men of erudition and refinement. To many, rare books were merchandise like any other. Thus, some sold old books with the aid of scales, charging 50 kopeks to a ruble per kilo. True antiquarians considered such practices barbaric, and the booksellers disgracing the profession earned a contemptuous nickname: they were called “Americans.” A curious feature of the trade in the 1920s was that a great many old books were sold without covers and bindings. It appears that these were sold to shoemakers who used them for lining. There was, for that reason, more money to be made on the covers than on the old books themselves.²¹

In the opening scene of Vladimir Mayakovsky’s famous comedy, *The Bedbug* (1928–29), spectators see on the stage a picturesque flea market, where one vendor peddles fur-lined brassieres, while a book dealer shouts: “What a wife does when her husband isn’t home! One hundred and five amusing anecdotes by the former Count Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy, instead of a ruble twenty—only fifteen kopeks!”²² Students of the play generally assume that the advertising slogan is Mayakovsky’s own. It now turns out that the advertisement is a matter of historical record. In Russia in the 1920s, street vendors of old books employed people they called “poets.” The job of a “poet” was to compose “shouts” (*kriki*), that is, a catchy ditty or slogan that would help sell books. One survivor of that era recalls:

Thus, a pamphlet on homemaking was supplied with the shout “What a wife does when her husband isn’t home.” A few shouters stationed themselves with the book on crowded streets and enticed people who wished to acquire this kind of book. The book sold out quickly, the investment was retrieved, the “shouters” made money, as did their helpers, the “poets.” In the winter, even when the frost was fierce, these toilers invariably sold out their merchandise, and would then repair to a teahouse to warm up and have some dinner. But even here, after dinner, they wouldn’t remain idle. The “shout” would attract people in the teahouse, and the remaining books would be sold out. Their bags would get emptier and emptier.²³

20. Berkov, *Istoriia*, p. 44.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 69–70.

22. Vladimir Maiakovskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v trimadtsati tomakh* (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1958), 11:219.

23. Martynov, *Polveka v mire knig*, pp. 38–39. Incidentally, the discovery sheds new light on a minor aspect of Babel’ scholarship as well. The name of Benia Krik, the Odessa gangster, should perhaps be translated as Bennie the Huckster, rather than “the Yell” or “the Shout.” This new translation describes more accurately the flashy king of Odessa’s underworld.

It is interesting to note that the nationalization of all of Russia's bookstores in 1929 also marks the beginning of the end of private book collecting.²⁴ P. N. Berkov, the literary scholar and author of the only book-length history of book collecting in the USSR to date, writes: "By the end of the 1920s, all privately owned secondhand and rare book stores ceased to exist."²⁵ Within months of their replacement with state-owned bookstores, the country's central bibliophile society was closed as well: "The Russian Association of Friends of Books existed until January 5, 1930, when it was liquidated as a result of a reduction of the overall number of social and scholarly organizations."²⁶ The remaining bibliophile societies (for example, in Leningrad, Kiev, and Minsk) were all closed by 1931. In the Ukraine and Belorussia, all organized bibliophile activity came to an end. The survivors of the Moscow and Leningrad clubs made some timid attempts to function as bibliophile and bookplate sections of the Philatelic Society and of the catchall Collectors' Association.²⁷ Indeed, most of what remained of the once vibrant activity of the bibliophiles now dealt with the more modest subject of bookplates. Meetings were devoted to such noncontroversial problems as bookbinding, the then-new technology of microfilming, and Pushkin's dedications on books presented to friends. In desperate attempts to acquire an acceptable image of a politically relevant hobby, bibliophile and bookplate collectors' sections sponsored lectures on subjects such as the portraits of Lenin on bookplates, Karl Marx in literature, and Lenin in wood engravings, but to no avail. There is no evidence of a *single* publication by either the bibliophile or bookplate collectors' sections in the early 1930s.²⁸ The last recorded activity of the two sections was their co-sponsorship of an exhibit on the occasion of the Pushkin centennial in 1937. Significantly, their participation in the venture was not officially acknowledged.²⁹ A sad postscript is provided by the last will and testament of N. M. Somov, once a prominent book collector, whose sole wish was that other collectors be informed of his death. Berkov writes: "However, [in 1951] it proved impossible to have the press publish an obituary or an announcement of his death."³⁰ This extraordinary hostility to book collecting coincided with the height of Stalinism. Yet we must also note that Soviet attitudes toward the country's bibliophiles were most unfriendly well before Stalin and, as shall be seen, remain cool to this day.

24. Martynov, *Polveka v mire knig*, p. 24.

25. Berkov, *Istoriia*, p. 20.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 94. The Russian name of the organization was *Rossiiskoe obshchestvo družei knigi*.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 165 and 169. The Russian name of the Collectors' Association was *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo kollektionerov*.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 169 and 173.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 168.

Who were the Soviet book collectors prior to World War II? For the most part, they appear to have been people whose occupations required significant numbers of books. Furthermore, the books they owned were largely concerned with their field of professional interest: it was only people in this category who were exempt from the 500-book limit imposed in 1918 on private collections. Thus, B. L. Modzalevskii (1874–1928), an eminent Pushkin specialist, owned some 15,000 volumes, most of them dealing with his area of scholarly work. After his death, the library was inherited by his son, L. B. Modzalevskii (1902–48) whose scholarly interests overlapped to a great extent with his father's.³¹ Other prominent collectors included N. K. Pikanov and V. A. Desnitskii, both noted literary scholars.³² The latter's library, numbering more than 15,000 items (including pamphlets, offprints, and so forth) was the second largest private collection in the USSR before World War II. Desnitskii even had a "specialty" that was not directly related to his scholarly work. He collected pirated editions of French Romantics printed in Russia in the 1820s and 1830s, many of them totally unknown to French bibliophiles and antiquarians. Desnitskii also owned books that had belonged to Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon brought them to Russia and when the French began to retreat, he took them in his sleighs. As the weary Grande Armée moved westward, the French emperor, to lighten the load of the horses, began to throw out the large and heavy books, keeping only books that were light.³³ At least that is what Desnitskii claimed and Berkov apparently accepted.

Most Western scholars, and even a few Soviet ones, regard Dem'ian Bednyi as the epitome of a crudely propagandistic versifier, whose clumsy rhymes may have been useful to the party but have little poetic merit. Yet, unbeknownst to all but a handful of people, Dem'ian Bednyi was an avid and discriminating bibliophile, and his private collection of 30,000 volumes was the largest ever assembled in the USSR. Bednyi specialized in prerevolutionary editions of Russian literature, particularly books that were once banned by the censorship. In 1937, Bednyi fell into disfavor, particularly because of the disrespectful attitudes toward the Russian past in his opera libretto *Bogatyri* (*Epic Heroes*) at a time when the Communist Party began to view the past in a benign light.³⁴ As a result, Bednyi was forced to sell his collection, which had previously been stored in his apartment in the Kremlin (from which he was, of course, evicted) and in his country house.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

32. Berkov, *Russkie knigoliuby*, pp. 127–31.

33. Berkov, *Istoriia*, pp. 176–79.

34. Gleb Struve, *Russian Literature Under Lenin and Stalin* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), p. 284.

Dem'ian Bednyi was not the only bibliophile whose collection was destroyed during the great purges of the 1930s. Unlike thousands of others, he was never arrested and was allowed to die in obscurity. Others were not as fortunate. While Soviet sources are singularly reticent in discussing the subject, occasionally there is a mention of a collector whose books were in part stolen and in part confiscated while the owner was in exile or prison.³⁵ Also, in discussing book collecting in the USSR, one must not lose sight of one very important nonpolitical factor that discourages it, namely the extremely crowded living conditions. As Alexander Tvardovsky, the late editor of *Novyi mir* observed, most Soviet book collectors live in one-room apartments. This may also be one reason why so many of them collect books on a single narrow subject or content themselves with bookplates, which require even less space.³⁶

Still, the most important obstacles are clearly political. As Berkov attests, even in the relatively liberal atmosphere of the 1920s the authorities "authorized the establishment of bibliophile societies with extreme reluctance," allegedly because book collecting was viewed as a bourgeois and aristocratic pursuit.³⁷ In the mid-1920s, A. M. Loviatin, another Soviet scholar, argued that "bibliophile collections of 'rarities and curiosities' were begotten by capitalism, and should disappear with its demise."³⁸ Indeed, hostility toward *any* concern for a book's pleasing appearance could be found even in the *Literary Encyclopedia*—the publication of which, incidentally, was interrupted for political reasons. In 1930 the *Encyclopedia* rebuked the Academia publishing house for "catering to the tastes of refined philistines." Specifically: its "choice of type, format, covers, and dustjackets—all this is executed with much taste."³⁹ Clearly, those who viewed good taste as disreputable could hardly be expected to advance the bibliophile cause. Others tried to redefine the concept of a rare book along what they perceived to be Marxist lines. A. I. Kondrat'ev wrote in 1931:

Only those books can aspire to the name of real rare books which were once of definite social significance—and which retain that significance to the present. As for books which were merely printed or preserved in small numbers of copies, these must be considered merely pseudo-rare. They are simply a swindle perpetrated on society.⁴⁰

Outlandish as such claims were, it *is* true that not many Russian bibliophiles before 1917 were workers and peasants, and there *may* be something

35. Berkov tells the story of N. N. Orlov "who was forced to leave Moscow," a curious circumlocution for arrest and exile. Berkov, *Istoriia*, pp. 119–22.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 74–75.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

39. Cited in Berkov, *Istoriia*, p. 160.

40. Cited in Berkov, *Istoriia*, p. 77.

faintly un-Soviet about the pursuit. Thus, in 1927, A. A. Sidorov wrote an "Ode to a Bookplate" in which the modest label was hailed for "resurrecting the forgotten foundations of heraldry."⁴¹ It may well be that some hidden aristocrats—or proletarians with aristocratic urges—sighing after the delights of an Almanac de Gotha, sublimated their lust in bookplates. A much more dangerous suggestion was made in 1927 by M. N. Kufaev, perhaps the most prolific Soviet writer on all aspects of publishing and reading of books. According to Kufaev, bibliophiles and bibliomaniacs are like greedy men who know the value of money and therefore like to hoard it, not spend it.⁴² Bibliophilia may thus be viewed as a socially acceptable sublimation of man's capitalist instincts. To add insult to injury, Kufaev also discerned clear sexual connotations in book collecting. Collecting books, in his view, fit neatly into A. P. Pavlov's definition of the reflex of purpose, which Pavlov described as "a striving to possess an arousing object, with the terms 'object' and 'arousal' used in their broadest sense."⁴³ It goes without saying that the Soviet authorities eyed suspiciously a hobby that was not only a waste of time, but smacked also of sex, aristocracy, and capitalism.

It was not those specters, however, that constituted the main threat to the bibliophile cause in the USSR. Its real and, as it turned out, very deadly enemy—the one that was and remains at the root of the Soviet authorities' hostility toward the bibliophiles—was and remains political censorship which was instituted in the USSR within days after the establishment of the Soviet regime.⁴⁴ Rarely was there a more apt illustration of the French adage *rien ne dure que le provisoire*. Originally promulgated as an emergency measure during the civil war—with the promise that it would be abolished as soon as conditions reverted to normal—Soviet censorship, usually known under the name of *Glavlit*, continues to function to this day. Indeed, except for a few minor categories of books such as foreign-language editions produced for export, the censor's number and the dates of approval are openly printed in every book and pamphlet published in the USSR.

The menace to the bibliophile cause was one particular feature of Soviet censorship, namely its *retroactive applicability* to books published decades and centuries ago, whether in Russia or abroad.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

42. Kufaev, *Bibliofiliia i bibliomaniia*, p. 28.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

44. The best treatment of this elusive subject (most information on the workings and even the existence of Soviet censorship is itself censored) is Martin Dewhirst and Robert Farrell, eds., *The Soviet Censorship* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1973).

On November 8, 1923, Maxim Gorky wrote from Sorrento to the poet Vladislav Khodasevich, then in England, that Lenin's wife

. . . Krupskaya and a certain M. Speranski have forbidden the reading of: Plato, Kant, Schopenhauer, V.I. Solovev, Taine, Ruskin, Nietzsche, L. Tolstoi, Leskov . . . and many similar heretics. And it is further decreed: "The section on religion must contain only anti-religious books." All this, supposedly . . . printed in a booklet entitled *A Guide to the Removal of Anti-Artistic and Counterrevolutionary Literature from Libraries Serving the Mass Reader*.⁴⁵

According to Bertram Wolfe, Gorky was not entirely candid in reporting the alarming news as mere rumors. At the time he wrote the letter, a copy of the circular had actually been in his possession for about two months. Another copy is preserved at the New York Public Library. Krupskaya wrote in it that the Commissariat of Education, as early as 1920, had issued an order "to purge the public libraries of obsolescent literature," but that until 1923 the order was largely ignored. It was only after direct intervention by the GPU, the Soviet secret police, that the job of removing undesirable books from the libraries was started in earnest. Krupskaya's circular, a photostat of which is reproduced in Bertram Wolfe's article, includes a list of authors whose books were to be removed from library shelves. We find among them Descartes, Kant, Mach, Schopenhauer, Taine, Spencer, Plato, Rudolf Steiner, Maurice Maeterlinck, Lossky, Solov'ev, and F. Strakhov, as well as two categories of works—interpretations of dreams (presumably of the pre-Freudian, Gypsy variety) and books on spiritualism. Krupskaya rescinded earlier orders to purge the libraries of books by Tolstoy and Prince Kropotkin, an anarchist theoretician.⁴⁶ In 1924, a somewhat different list appeared in the journal *The Red Librarian*. It included 55 authors of fiction, 118 authors of juvenile books, and 51 historians and authors of historical fiction.⁴⁷ Ordinary medium-size libraries were allowed to retain only basic religious texts, such as the Old and New Testaments and the Koran, and no literary classics (undefined) were to be removed. The library purges were to involve a variety of organizations, such as the local branches of the Communist Party and Young Communist League, the trade unions, boards of education, as well as the censorship, the secret police, "and other interested organizations." Natu-

45. Quoted in Bertram D. Wolfe, "Krupskaya Purges the People's Libraries," *Survey* (London), no. 72 (Summer 1969), p. 141.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

47. *Krasnyi bibliotekar'*, no. 1 (1924), pp. 135–41. Cited in Bertram D. Wolfe, "Krupskaya Purges the People's Libraries," p. 148. The new set of instructions was signed by Nadezhda Krupskaya, in her capacity as chairman of the Bureau of Political Education; P. Lebedev-Polianski, head of Literary Censorship; and M. Smushkova, chairman of the Central Library Commission.

rally, some libraries displayed more zeal than was desired by the authorities, and just to be on the safe side, also got rid of *Don Quixote*, Jules Verne, Victor Hugo, Maupassant, Gogol, Pushkin, Tolstoy, Maxim Gorky—as well as works by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and even Lenin's own writings published under different pseudonyms. Not all of the banned books were to be destroyed. One or two copies—but no more—of each were to be retained in one central library, where they were to be listed only in a special catalog and read “exclusively for scholarly or scientific purposes.”⁴⁸ The last regulation remains fully in force in 1976.

Traditionally, Russia's bibliophiles collected books that had been, at one time or another, banned by the censorship.⁴⁹ The Siberian merchant Iudin, referred to earlier, “spent large sums acquiring publications banned by the [tsarist] censorship and published without its knowledge,”⁵⁰ and several of the Soviet collectors mentioned, notably Dem'ian Bednyi, had similar predilections. One distinction between Soviet bibliophilia of the early 1920s and that of the years that followed was that in the former, collectors might, at worst, have been preserving undesirable books of pre-Soviet origin. With passage of time, however, such books were becoming less relevant and therefore also less harmful. Furthermore, the “bourgeois” origin of such books could readily be ascertained from their title pages which gave the dates of publication, the pre-Soviet name of the city where they were published, and, finally, because of the spelling reform of 1917. By 1930, however, there was already a sizable body of books that had been brought out by Soviet publishers with the blessings of the Soviet censorship, but which had in the meantime become a political embarrassment—for example, books by and about Leon Trotsky. If a religious simile be permitted, undesirable books of pre-Soviet vintage were *pagan* books, while similar books of Soviet origin were *heretical* books, and hence the more dangerous. This consideration may have been a serious factor in the decision to nationalize all secondhand bookstores in 1929—that is, at a time when some other types of petty trade were still tolerated—and also in the suppression of the national society of book collectors in 1930.

The number of Soviet books that owe their rarity to the political ban imposed on them and hence also to their mass destruction must run into many thousands.⁵¹ One such book, of which Maxim Gorky was a coeditor

48. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

49. Thus, B. S. Bodnarskii maintained that a bibliophile may be interested in any one of a wide variety of unusual or rare books—very large or very small, strikingly elegant or singularly shabby—but adds, as a matter of course, that a bibliophile would also be attracted to “forbidden books.” See Berkov, *Istoriia*, p. 49.

50. Osipov, *Kniga v vashem dome*, pp. 13–14.

51. This factor is studiously avoided in Soviet discussions of rare Soviet books. For example, Lidin mentions the anthology *Kniga o golode* (*A Book About the Famine*) that was published in 1921 in Samara with all proceeds earmarked for victims of the

and which included contributions by some of the Soviet Union's most prominent writers, is discussed in Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*. The book described in glowing terms the construction of the Baltic-White Sea canal by inmates of concentration camps under the supervision of the Soviet police. Solzhenitsyn writes:

The book was published, so to speak, for eternity, to be read and admired by posterity. By an ominous coincidence, however, the majority of the leaders it glorified and depicted in photographs were, within two to three years, exposed as enemies of the people. Naturally, all the copies of the book were removed from the libraries and destroyed. In 1937, the book was also being destroyed by private owners who did not wish to risk a prison term for its possession. Only a very few copies are extant, and there are no prospects that the book might be republished. . . .⁵²

That such book-burning practices are not a thing of the past, a barbaric practice that existed under Lenin and Stalin but which certainly is unthinkable today, is attested by a resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union of September 22, 1959. On that day, at the height of the liberal post-Stalin era, the Ministry of Culture was instructed "to take the necessary steps for the removal of obsolete publications [*ustarevshie izdaniia*] from library holdings."⁵³ The language used—"removal of obsolete publications"—was almost identical to that of the first major purge of Soviet libraries in 1920. And when state libraries are periodically purged of materials that have, with the passage of time, become subversive, the atmosphere is hardly conducive to the hobby of collecting old and rare books.⁵⁴

famine. Lidin is doubtlessly correct in claiming that many copies of the book may simply have been used for fuel in those difficult times. It is more than likely, however, that many of the extant copies of the volume were systematically destroyed after its editor, V. A. Antonov-Ovseenko, a prominent Soviet leader who once served as Stalin's representative in Spain during the Civil War, was killed during the Great Purges. He was posthumously cleared of all charges after Stalin's death. See Lidin, *Druz'ia moi, knigi*, pp. 158–59.

52. A. Solzhenitsyn, *Arkhipelag GULag: Opyt khudozhestvennogo issledovaniia*. Books 3–4 (Paris: YMCA Press, 1974), pp. 78–79. The book in question was *Belomorsko-Baltiiskii kanal imeni Stalina* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1934), which was edited by Maxim Gorky, A. L. [?] Averbakh, and Semen G. Firin, the deputy chief of the Central Administration of Prison Camps (GULag). Upon completion of the canal on August 17, 1933, one hundred and twenty Soviet writers and literary critics were invited for a boat ride on the waterway. Thirty-six of them contributed to the volume. They included Gorky himself, Viktor Shklovsky, Vsevolod Ivanov, Vera Inber, Valentin Kataev, Mikhail Zoshchenko, Boris Lapin, Zakhar Khatsrevin, Konstantin Finn, Evgenii Gabrilovich, Lev Nikulin, Nikolai Tikhonov, Kornelii Zelinskii, Bruno Jasienski, and Aleksei Tolstoi.

53. *KPSS o kul'ture, prosveshchenii i nauke: Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoi literatury, 1963), p. 278.

54. Soviet sources never openly acknowledge the existence, let alone the workings, of Soviet censorship. Thus, when a conference on Soviet censorship was held in London in 1970, "articles [appeared] in *Izvestiya* (May 30 and August 20, 1970), and *Zvezda*

What is the present status of bibliophilia in the USSR? The general atmosphere is reminiscent of that which prevailed in the 1930s, and that atmosphere could be described as one of *distrust* of bibliophiles—there is neither the active hostility of the late 1930s and 1940s, nor the relative freedom and great activity that were the hallmarks of the 1920s. As of the early 1970s, the national bibliophile society that was closed in 1930 had not been re-established, although it may well be in the near future.⁵⁵ On the other hand, there exist bibliophile sections of larger organizations, small bibliophile clubs in Moscow and in the provinces with very patriotic and politicized activities, and informal (presumably typewritten) directories of bibliophiles and descriptive catalogs of bookplates.⁵⁶ At the same time, a 116-page directory of all Soviet collectors' societies published in 1965 did not list a single association of book collectors.⁵⁷

A Soviet scholar assures us that "Bibliomaniacs—to say nothing of bibliotaphs—have disappeared completely from the midst of Soviet bibliophiles."⁵⁸ This may be something of an overstatement, as is the same author's claim that since the 1920s *no* private manuscripts or early printed books remain in private hands.⁵⁹ It is contradicted by evidence found in the same book. The most *interesting* private collection in the USSR today belongs to the mathematician A. I. Markushevich and to his wife, A. V. Markushevich. Their collection contains a 1687 edition of Isaac Newton's *Principia*, a 1508 German book on the discovery of America, and more than fifty incunabula, that is, books printed before 1500.⁶⁰

(No. 12, 1971, p. 157) attacking not only the participants of the conference on the transcript of which this volume [*The Soviet Censorship*] is based, but also the conference itself, [although] the subject to which it was devoted was not mentioned or even hinted at" (Dewhirst and Farrell, eds., *The Soviet Censorship*, p. v). At the same time, an opportunity is rarely missed to claim that such censorship exists in the United States and that, as a result, Americans are afraid to collect books. Thus, a popular Soviet guide for persons desirous of building modest libraries in their homes quotes long excerpts from *The Morrison Case*, a play by Albert Maltz set during the McCarthy period, to make the point that owning books in America is downright dangerous. V. Osipov, *Domashniaia biblioteka* (Moscow: "Iskusstvo," 1959), pp. 23–26.

55. Berkov wrote in 1971 that "we are on the threshold of establishing an All-Union Society of Friends of Books, or Book Lovers," Berkov, *Istoriia*, p. 247.

56. Since 1966 there has been a bibliophile section of the Moscow House of Litterateurs (*ibid.*, p. 229). The activities of the Kharkov bibliophile club for 1967–68 included lectures on such subjects as "Karl Marx and Books," "V. I. Lenin and Books," "A. M. Gorky and Books," and "Books in the Life of the Soviet People" (*ibid.*, p. 225). The existence of "informal" directories of book collectors and catalogs of bookplates is attested by Berkov, *Russkie knigoliuby*, pp. 105–6.

57. Berkov, *Istoriia*, p. 210.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

60. *Ibid.*, pp. 215–16.

Bookplate collecting remains popular, and there is also the relatively new hobby of collecting *bon mots*, aphorisms, proverbs, and sayings.⁶¹ That book collecting also remains enormously popular in the Soviet Union is attested by the fact that multivolume sets of hundreds of poets, novelists, and dramatists—some famous and others less so, both Russian and foreign—are sold out as soon as they become available. Some are printed in as many as 350,000 copies per volume. And this in spite of the fact that such multivolume sets are reasonably expensive, are available by subscription only, and that buyers of the entire set also get the volumes containing materials of intrinsic interest only to literary scholars—for instance, early drafts of novels, private correspondence of authors and so forth. A Soviet scholar chides conservative bibliophiles who take a condescending view of such collecting, pointing out that the new editions are actually much to be preferred, because their texts are free of distortions by the tsarist censors.⁶² Another scholar writes:

I will take the liberty of asserting that the acquisition of a set of the [old] *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* is a bibliophile's dream. Its first edition appeared between 1924 and 1947 and has by now, grown so obsolete that one must use it with caution.⁶³

The signal word "obsolete" is, of course, a euphemism for "politically undesirable." Indeed, the *new* edition of the same encyclopedia, which began to be published shortly before Stalin's death, soon began to show signs of similar obsolescence even before its completion. In mid-1950, all of the *Encyclopedia's* subscribers—including those in the United States—received a letter from the publishers requesting that they cut out the entry for Lavrentii Beria—the secret police chief just executed by Stalin's successors—and also rip out his portrait. As a consolation prize they were sent—at no additional charge—more pages about the Bering Sea. The same scholar—Osipov—emphasized that old pre-Soviet books should not be kept if there are children around. He writes:

Just a few words about prerevolutionary publications. These may be found in [state-owned] rare and secondhand bookstores. Occasionally,

61. Such collectors, for example, gather quotations from "Marx, Lenin, Turgenev, Gorky and others" (*ibid.*, p. 211).

62. *Ibid.*, pp. 158–59.

63. Osipov, *Kniga v vashem dome*, p. 67. Osipov also related the story of one bibliophile who collected minutes of congresses of the Communist Party, but then *replaced them* with new editions which were supplied "with excellent commentaries" (*ibid.*, pp. 61–62). Osipov neglected to add that the new editions were also purged of all materials that had in the meantime become "obsolete." Elsewhere Osipov recommended that collectors acquire the most recent (fifth) edition of Lenin's collected works which, he claimed, is much to be preferred to the fourth (*ibid.*, p. 64). Be that as it may, trading in old editions for new ones is not, to put it mildly, traditional bibliophile practice.

a collector may acquire such editions. He may be attracted by their original bindings, illustrations, and sometimes even by the fact that his friends don't own anything like it. This is not very sensible. Let us recall, that prerevolutionary editions of the classics use the old spelling. If there are schoolchildren in the home such books may even prove harmful. But the main trouble with editions that are more than a half a century old is that they contain many distortions, and some works are not to be found in them at all.⁶⁴

Osipov does not say, of course, that the reverse is equally true: the old pre-revolutionary sets—even of the literary classics—often contain works that are not included in Soviet editions.⁶⁵ In any case, the message to Soviet bibliophiles is clear: collecting old books is fine, provided you get them in brand new editions.

64. Ibid., pp. 86–87.

65. For example, Nikolai Leskov's *Evrei v Rossii* (*The Jews in Russia*) was not included in the eleven-volume set of his works printed in 1957–58. Religious and moralistic writings of Tolstoy appear only in the *ninety-volume* edition of his complete writings, but not in multivolume sets of his selected writings.