

Christopher Browder

Professor DelVecchio

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### Russian Self-Censorship Revival

Censorship is deemed an illicit practice in American culture with the First Amendment rights promised under our Constitution. The imagery that is painted when one imagines or discusses censorship is that of burning books and redacting passages from published documents with thick black lines. However, the issue runs much deeper than the mere act of censoring information. Nobel Prize winner Nadine Gordimer once said “Censorship is never over for those who have experienced it. It is a brand on the imagination that affects the individual who has suffered it, forever” (Telegraph). To understand exactly how censorship brands the imagination, one must first understand the consequences of not censoring oneself in a repressive environment.

In her essay “Fear and Self-Censorship in Vladimir Putin's Russia,” author Masha Gessen exposes the plight of media censorship from a journalist perspective. She opens with summaries of two landmark legal suits, both aimed at members of the National Bolshevik Party. The verdicts are uniform: imprisonment for all, varying only in length of time to be served. Gessen concludes that these verdicts are the catalyst which mark the rebirth of self-censorship in Russian media and culture. She explores the conundrum in reporting these landmark cases, which are viewed as risky and unflattering of the current regime.

The first main point to Gessen's article is the conclusion that censorship has returned to Russia. This conclusion is formed based on the context of the legal suits. She summarizes the

first trial in which seven National Bolshevik Party members are sentenced to five years for the civil disobedient crime of protesting. This verdict is alarming, but "The second of the two verdicts was, in a way, the more frightening" (Gessen 115). This was the trial of Andrei Skovorodnikov, who dared to criticize President Putin on his personal website. Police arrested him the day the site went live, and the courts sentenced him to six months in prison. Gessen leverages this evidence to draw the conclusion that "The two verdicts were the most ominous political events in months, the definitive indication that Russia had entered another age of state terror" (115).

It is impossible to argue with Gessen's position that these two cases are indicative that Russian is returning to Soviet-era policies. She scrutinizes the details in the case against Skovorodnikov, writing "The prison sentence ... sent the message that no media outlet, no matter how small, is immune to the Kremlin's unfriendly attention any longer" (Gessen 115-116). The concept of imprisonment for the criticism of a political figure on a website is outlandish to an American. However, Gessen explains that Russia has lost all its democratic tools under Putin: the media is state controlled, Russians cannot directly elect governors or Parliament members, and the judges serve the president not the people. She convincingly draws the conclusion that those who step out of line will pay a price.

The second main point in her article is that censorship's return creates a conundrum for the true journalist. Gessen writes, "This is how self-censorship works ... One bargains with oneself. How Much can I sacrifice before I lose respect for myself as a journalist?" (116). Gessen introduces an example of this self-censoring: the Russian edition of GQ's Man of the Year contest. The readers chose Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a philanthropist, political activist, and

successful businessman who was jailed on imaginary tax evasion charges. His charges were believed to be motivated by politics and that “His well-publicized trial has sent a message to all Russian entrepreneurs, warning them that they will suffer gravely if they ever happen to displease the Kremlin.” (Gessen 116-117). The publisher of GQ pulled the issue with the Khodorkovsky results and replaced it with fake results. The fascinating fact about this act is that the publisher is German, and is not directly impacted by Russian authority. Putin's power extends well beyond his borders. Returning to the topic of the trials, Gessen states, “we would want to do a more in-depth story, one that would analyze the dire implications and consequences of the verdicts” (116). She cites that at least one state-controlled television outlet reported the verdicts, and that a newspaper reprinted the offensive slur from the website. However, Gessen's magazine sought to report the truth in the matter.

Unfortunately, it has been made clear that such free thinking is no longer allowed in Putin's Russia. She ponders her options: kill the story out of fear, or force the readers to look between the lines for the truth. She invokes her book, *Ester and Ruzya: How My Grandmothers Survived Hitler's War and Stalin's Peace*, for some reference on how to cope with the censorship. She recalls a passage where one grandmother, Ester, refused to be drafted by the secret police. Ester joins the secret police when her son becomes ill and she cannot find any other employment. Gessen concludes, “If one does anything at all—edits a story, for example, or kills one—one is in some way becoming an accomplice of the regime” (118). There is no winner in a censored society for the journalist.

Gessen is unable to tell the reader how she solves the dilemma. The open ending of the article best articulates the complex situation Russia now faces. She concluded in her book that

there are no decent compromises, and she backs that thesis up with this introspective about the current state of self-censorship. Invoking her grandparents experiences and relating them to her own, Gessen shows the reader how difficult and harmful censorship is. How does one report that the emperor has no clothes when one knows the punishment for such criticism? For Gessen and the remainder of the dwindling Russian independent media, this is the conundrum that has no clear answer.

Works Cited

- “Nadine Gordimer: Ten inspiring quotes” *The Telegraph*. Telegraph Media Group Limited, 15 July 2014. Web. 14 September 2014.
- Gessen, Masha. "Fear And Self-Censorship In Vladimir Putin's Russia." *Nieman Reports* 59.2 (2005): 115-118. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 24 Aug. 2014.