
Ideology, Economics and Reader Demand in Soviet Publishing

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IN ANY INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON, Soviet book publishing stands out on several counts. The first is scale: not only the scale of book copies published, but administrative scale. Publishing, printing and book distribution, with a combined personnel of well over 300,000, are administered in many respects as a single undertaking. The organizational structure and control techniques used in this administration are much more elaborate (by approximately an order of magnitude) than those applying in Western publishing.

This great accretion of centralized administrative power is the product of persistent efforts by the Communist party and the Soviet government to place the processes of book production and dissemination under a considerable degree of supervision — a degree which is, again, prominent in international comparisons. This commitment to effective supervision reflects the importance attributed to the role of publishing in a socialist society, and to the need for books produced under such supervision to be made readily accessible.

Soviet views expressed in print about the status and purposes of publishing are by no means unanimous in their emphasis. The principles of “Party spirit,” “closeness to the people” and direction by Party and government are not placed in public question; but other matters quite fundamental to the ideological function and economic status of book publishing are under active debate, although dominant or more deeply established views are often discernible. This article examines some of the more important prevailing assumptions and disputes about publishing as an industry: demand and pricing; profit and subsidy; quality, effectiveness and “optimality”; and the power of the reader.

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PUBLISHING AS AN INDUSTRY

There is general acceptance in the Soviet Union that publishing, like other mass media, is in some sense a cultural activity. The State Committee for Publishing, Printing and the Book Trade (the ministry-level agency which administers these industries) is often classified as an organ of cultural organization, alongside the Ministry of Culture of the USSR, the State Committee for Television and Radio, the State Committee for Cinematography, and the Committee for Physical Culture and Sport. To a much greater degree than the other mass media, however, Soviet publishing depends on a considerable industrial capacity to fulfill its cultural and ideological purposes: over 87,000 books and pamphlets, in about 1.7 billion copies, were issued in 1974.¹ The question of publishing's place in the Marxist analysis of production relations continues to arouse controversy which throws some interesting light on Soviet views of the function of publishing, despite the restricted premises on which the argument is conducted.

It is common opinion among modern Soviet commentators on the subject, that a book, though a commodity, is a special kind of commodity; and secondly, that its status in a socialist society is qualitatively different from its status under capitalism. It is claimed that a Soviet author does not sell a product (as an author would to a capitalist publisher), because the fee he receives is for the use of his work in the interests of all society; whereas the capitalist publishing house has the two aims of maximum profit and of serving the interests of bourgeois society.² An excessively profit-oriented approach to publishing, at the expense of what are regarded as the interests of a socialist society, is often warned against; and the admonition has been made that to inflate a publishing house's profits by such devices as increasing the issue of books in heavy demand, or simplifying the design of a work, is to satisfy "commercial interests on an unhealthy basis."³

It is maintained in one line of argument that in a socialist society, the value of a book, and hence of a publishing house's production, is determined basically by its ideological content. Demand and profitability cannot be allowed to be the sole guides in the matter of which books to publish; otherwise highly specialized works and books in minority languages (to cite two common examples) would never appear.⁴ Due to the peculiar nature of the value of its products, this argument continues, the economics of publishing cannot be directly compared with those of most manufacturing industries.⁵

Another argument is that a book also has a value derived from the

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expenditure on its production, since production cost is one of the elements (though not the only one) in a book's retail price; and that, for this reason, although the book is an ideological commodity and the chief aim of publishing a work is to achieve a desired social impact, a publishing house's economics may nevertheless be discussed in the same terms as those applied to the remainder of industrial undertakings, and these terms need not have the "purely conventional significance" usually attributed to them in evaluating ideological work.⁶ A refinement (perhaps an overrefinement) of this view is that the sale for money of books whose purpose is ideological shows the dialectical relationship between ideology and economics in publishing.⁷

The idea of the book as a "direct force in production," which can contribute measurable improvements to the country's economic performance, has been aired by several Soviet writers. One has gone so far as to estimate savings achieved in the construction industry through the use of certain works on improved organization, and others⁸ have calculated that engineering plants could gain 8450 rubles per year by improved performance from each machine tool to which they applied the advice in the book *Adaptivnoe upravlenie stankami* (issued by Mashinostroenie in 1973). One scholar has taken this line of thought to the point of suggesting that a loss-making book should have its losses made good by a deduction from the profits of the industry in whose interests it was published.⁹ The difficulty of applying such calculations to the great majority of books is obvious; but this view of the book (or of some books) as having a determinable effect on the economy remains as one of the arguments used to justify the publication of loss-making works.

DEMAND AND PRICING POLICY

The place of reader demand in book publishing has received equivocal treatment in the USSR. It has generally been agreed, as a corollary of the arguments already summarized, that undifferentiated satisfaction of "raw" demand, as expressed in prepublication orders and queues in bookshops, is not the primary aim of socialist book publishing. Concern is nevertheless expressed about the shortage of books in certain fields — at present particularly fiction and children's books — and about the importance of ensuring the "correct" proportion of each type of book in the total output. It was claimed in 1975 by a deputy chairman of the State Committee for Publishing of the Ukrainian SSR, that supply is further behind demand in publishing than in any other sphere of production aimed at satisfying mental needs.¹⁰

Some Soviet commentators have applied to publishing the distinction between "demand" and "need," arguing that publishing should be guided by needs rather than by demand and (concomitantly) profit. A theme which frequently accompanies this suggestion is that the tastes of the Soviet people must be "formed," a process in which publishers are said to have an important role. Demand, in other words, must be educated to become more closely identical with authoritatively defined needs; and the book trade has on occasion been accused of placing over-large orders for "time-honored" works which presumably reflect uneducated demand.¹¹

One reputable Soviet economist, L.S. Gliazer, has maintained that readers' needs cannot be accurately measured for the purposes of economic decisions, and that it is their solvent demand which should be measured, and which ought to form the basis for determining a pricing structure and fixing rational volumes of production for different types of literature.¹² The approved view of retail pricing policy in Soviet publishing is, however, well removed from that of Gliazer, who appears to be advocating that prices should reflect the state of the market and should, if necessary, be adjusted to alter the demand pattern. The existing price system is regarded by its supporters as an important means of giving effect to a book's ideological function, by ensuring that books intended to be widely accessible bear low prices, although this may lead to titles and even entire publishing houses experiencing a loss and requiring a subsidy. This policy consciously denies itself the use of higher prices either as a means of limiting demand or as a stimulus to publishers' economic performance.¹³

Book retail prices in the Soviet Union were set separately by each publishing house until 1952, when a succession of standard national price lists became enforced. Although the price lists have given some recognition to quality of paper and binding, and to the presence of illustrations or color printing, their major principle of differentiation, which has increased in detail over the years, is subject matter. The price list now in force, introduced in 1972, enumerates 191 different types of books and pamphlets according to subject and intended readership, compared with 129 in the superseded list of 1965.¹⁴ The principles on which the retail price lists are drawn up have never been stated in detail. Production costs for each type of literature are only one consideration, but it is accepted that for most types of books, the retail price (less the wholesale discount of 25 percent) should enable the publisher to cover production costs and make a profit.¹⁵ The production cost element in retail prices is based on average costs and edition sizes for each of the types of work on the price list.

Provision is made for works published in small editions to be given

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retail prices of up to ten kopeks per sheet to avoid a loss. (The basic range of prices is between two kopeks and seven kopeks per sheet, with school textbooks as low as one kopek per sheet. A sheet is approximately equivalent to sixteen pages in an average-format book.) Particularly expensive works may be given a price founded directly on production costs, plus a profit of not more than 15 percent, if issued with the explicit permission of the State Committee for Publishing.¹⁶ These exceptional cases apart, however, book retail pricing is not an integral part of the annual and longer-term planning cycles in the publishing industry. Prices are not automatically altered to account for rises in printing and paper costs, although charges for printing and paper have formed an increasing proportion of publishers' production costs, rising from 46.3 percent in 1947 to 73.3 percent in 1967 in a selection of central publishing houses.¹⁷

Beyond statements of the general principle that the retail price should not hamper the book's circulation among the group of readers for which it is intended, no description has been found of the considerations other than production cost which determine, for example, that mass political literature shall be given a price per sheet of about one-third that given to scholarly monographs. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, it seems likely that production costs are the most important factor in retail price-setting, but that political, or purely traditional, views on low book prices are allowed to be an overriding consideration in the case of certain types of publication only (perhaps most outstandingly school textbooks and works in minority languages).

PROFITS AND SUBSIDIES

As has already been stated, profit and loss are not admitted to be overriding considerations in Soviet publishing. Efficient economic performance by publishing houses is frequently stressed, however, and profitability is one of the yardsticks used to assess it. Profitability has received increased emphasis since the publishing industry began to transfer to a new planning and incentive system at the end of the 1960s. The Central Committee of the Communist Party issued a decree in 1970 on improving the profitability of book publishing in which it was noted that the state budget was currently receiving profits of 120 million rubles annually from book and journal publishing, but that subsidies to publishing houses, running at over 9 million rubles a year, were unacceptably high.¹⁸ Nevertheless, by 1976, 41 publishing houses were still operating at a loss (just over one-fourth of the total number), and the sum of their annual losses was still about 9 million rubles. The provincial publishers and those in the

peripheral republics showed the highest proportion of loss-makers, and in 1975 publishing as an industry was profitable in only seven of the fifteen union republics.¹⁹ (Disguised subsidies in the form of cheap capital have less impact on publishing than on most Soviet industries, since publishers' capital requirements are relatively low.)

Books, like most other forms of printed matter in the USSR (except calendars, picture reproductions and postcards), are not subject to the "turnover tax" which is levied on most goods; but the deduction of a large part of an enterprise's profits to the state budget is, of course, a different form of taxation, and publishing houses are subject to this just as other enterprises are if their profits are substantial enough to warrant it. The state can, of course, deduct "surplus" profit at any figure it considers appropriate, so the fact that a publishing house escapes turnover tax does not necessarily (in fact, does not) mean that it can retain more profits. Publishing houses and printing enterprises subordinated to the central administration of the State Committee for Publishing passed on to the state 395 million rubles out of the 514 million rubles profit secured between 1971 and 1973, i.e. 76.8 percent.²⁰

The enhanced role given to profit under the economic reform has been accompanied in the Soviet publishing industry by attempts to make profit act as an incentive for improving a book's quality and social impact, and for ensuring that the titles in a publishing house's annual plan are issued on schedule. So far, however, it has not proved possible to make profit other than directly dependent upon production costs, overheads and deductions to the state budget on the one hand, and upon income from sales on the other. Quality (as distinct from salability) and adherence to the annual publishing plan have had to be made conditions for the award of full bonuses to publishing-house personnel.²¹

QUALITY, EFFECTIVENESS AND OPTIMALITY

Although the importance of profits as an indicator in plan fulfillment has been enhanced, the two most important yardsticks by which fulfillment is judged, in the case of publishing houses, remain (1) the annual plan of titles to be issued, and (2) the total physical volume of output, measured in printed sheet-copies (i.e. the amount of paper used in one book, multiplied by the number of copies in the edition). It has been pointed out by Soviet publishing administrators that none of the many indicators applied to the planning and analysis of publishing work enables any reliable assessment of the quality of a book's contents. Qualitative criteria, by which a publishing house's superior organ could assess the

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ideological, scientific or even literary worth of the house's output, are regarded as highly desirable, but have yet to emerge in any trustworthy form. The suggestion has been made that, instead of measuring output in printed sheet-copies, which only show the amount of paper used, the unit of publisher's sheet-copy should be used. Since a publisher's sheet equals 40,000 typographical units, measurement by this means would at least show the amount, if not the quality, of the text.²²

Another proposal has been that a "coefficient of effectiveness" should be calculated for each title, putting a value on its importance to the subject and the standard of its treatment, and that this value should be incorporated into planning indicators, as well as into authors' fees and book prices.²³ The fact that this elaborate superstructure turns out to rest ultimately on a personal, even if "expert," opinion of each work, points up the difficulty of finding a consistent measure for some notional worth of a book which does not depend on either volume of demand or sales revenue. The most recent Soviet attempt at establishing criteria for the "effectiveness" of publishing admits to two assumptions: that a house's publication plan "fully expresses social needs," and that demand is 100 percent correctly forecast.²⁴ That the quest for such criteria continues in the USSR suggests a persisting desire to find a means of judging a work definitively before it is entrusted to the possibly unreliable verdict of the reading public.

Some had hoped to see optimal planning methods become widespread in the printing and publishing sector as a result of the Soviet economic reforms. Optimal planning was canvassed as a procedure which would use mathematical methods to allow the choice of the most effective use of economic resources in achieving the planners' intentions. The application of these methods has, however, been as limited in the field of publishing as in most other sectors of Soviet industry. All the optimal planning procedures discussed for publishing since the economic reform began take as a starting point the publishing house's finalized annual publication plan; that is, optimal planning is assumed to begin only in the choice of subordinate alternatives, after the most significant decisions have been made on which titles will be published, how much paper and printing capacity will be allocated to the publisher, and what his output target will be.²⁵ Although publishing houses retain a measure of discretion in their choice of manuscripts (subject to their superior organ's approval), the allocation of materials and production facilities is effectively out of their hands; and since publishers cannot influence demand through a flexible pricing system, they are reduced to manipulating the edition size (*tirazh*) of each

book title (the only important planning variable remaining to a considerable degree under their own control) in order to achieve maximum profits.

The idea of "optimality" recently appeared in a different context when the State Committee for Publishing began studies to establish what are described as the "optimal proportions" of different types of publications and different subjects in the total output of printed matter. These proportions are now being planned at all-Union and republic levels more systematically than before. At least one union republic has concluded that it must choose between compiling a single combined plan for the issue of every title in the republic itself, and regulating publishing houses' own plans to achieve the most desirable proportions. This republic has chosen the latter course — presumably because the former would appear to remove the *raison d'être* of the publishing house itself. The criteria for determining these "optimal proportions" have not been stated, but publication plans for 1976-80, which are said to express optimal judgments, suggest that the degree of unsatisfied reader demand has strongly influenced the way in which existing proportions are to be altered.

One of the most significant recent steps in this process of shifting priorities has been the reversal of the mid-1960s decision to expand production of journals and newspapers at the expense of books, because periodicals were allegedly more efficient as sources of information. The precise evidence on which the original decision was based (and which effectively caused the entire amount of growth in paper supplies during the second half of the 1960s to be devoted to increasing the number of copies of periodicals issued²⁶) has not — so far as is known — been made public. The effects of that decision are nevertheless indicated by publishing statistics. Between 1960 and 1970, the annual number of copies of journals issued increased by 246 percent, of newspapers by 108 percent, and of books by only 6 percent.²⁷

During the period 1975-80, however, the State Committee for Publishing intends to devote the entire amount of planned increase in its paper supplies to raising the output of fiction, and is adopting several other measures to increase the amount of children's books, textbooks and reference works at the expense of categories of publication in less demand.²⁸ This action has not yet been accompanied by any public discussion of the reasons why the supply of fiction, which has long been very far behind demand, should be permitted such a substantial improvement at this particular juncture. The surmise seems justified that the degree of underfulfillment of orders for fiction has become so blatant and widely criticized that pressure from publishers, and more indirectly from readers,

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has in this instance convinced the Central Committee's Department of Propaganda and the State Committee for Publishing that undersupply has gone far enough.

THE POWER OF THE READER

It appears to be the case that certain powerful and pervasive convictions are present among senior policy-makers in the Soviet publishing administration, and that policy decisions tend to follow or express these convictions. Among these convictions are: that publishing should be strictly regulated by the Party and the state; that it should reflect the views of Party and state about what should be read; and that Soviet citizens should be encouraged to read the books produced under this supervision. These convictions are reflected in the importance attached to reading as a factor in forming the individual's social consciousness, and a considerable amount of work has been done in the USSR on questions touching on the sociology of the book and the psychology of reading. Some of it has been criticized for a failure to study means of influencing the individual's choice and pattern of reading; and it has been remarked that Soviet cultural administration should take account of an alleged drop in "social forms of cultural consumption" in favor of "individual" forms of such consumption, which — like reading — are domestic and passive in character and harder to place under social supervision.²⁹

Rather ironically, some of this research into reading and the use of books in contemporary Soviet society appears to have had a powerful influence on publishing policy by providing, for the first time, well-grounded and voluminous evidence of the difficulties which so many Soviet readers experience in gaining access to the books they want. The widest discussion so far has been aroused by a study of books and reading in small towns undertaken by the Lenin Library in 1969-71.³⁰ The most pressing of its conclusions was generally taken to be that the growth of readers' requirements was "coming into contradiction with" opportunities for meeting those requirements, particularly in the case of readers not living in the larger cities. The frequency with which the work's figures and conclusions have subsequently been cited by senior individuals in Soviet publishing circles when speaking of the need for improved book supplies suggests that it carried weight in the adoption of the measures taken in 1975 to economize in the use of paper and alter the composition of book production.

At the same time, a separate force exists outside the policy-making procedures of the Party, the State Committee for Publishing and the pub-

lishing houses which exercises a considerable influence on their decisions. This is constituted by the potential purchasers and potential readers—two overlapping though not identical groups. The influence exerted by these groups stems from the fact that the very nature of publishing, in the USSR as in the West, requires the maximum amount of output to be bought (leaving aside unpriced publications, which even in the USSR are not widespread). As the director of the Lenin Library has observed, a book is a social phenomenon: if it remains unread, it is only a packet of paper.³¹ Although certain groups of readers are more or less compelled to acquire certain types of book (e.g., students following a particular course, or an enterprise needing instructions to maintain equipment), a great deal of published matter must rely to some degree on its intrinsic merits to attract the purchaser to buy and the reader to read—although, of course, a variety of external constraints and incentives can also be applied. The fact that paper shortages and book-pricing policies have combined to make Soviet book publishing at present a seller's market does not alter the fact that a market relationship exists. The millions of individual decisions to buy or not to buy collectively apply a separate range of constraints and incentives on the publishing industry and its administrators. To this is added the more direct stimulus that publishers are liable to booksellers for one-half the value of books remaining unsold in the bookshops.

An increasing awareness of pressure from this direction is shown by the growing attention being paid in the USSR to the study and forecasting of reader demand by departments of the State Committee for Publishing, the All-Union Book Chamber, the Moscow Polygraphic Institute and other bodies. This forecasting is explicitly concerned with demand, rather than with any officially defined "needs," which suggests that Soviet "reader power" is beginning to prove a partial counterpoise to administrative rulings on what ought to be read.

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