

They Shoot Writers, Don't They?
George Theiner
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Diana Giese's review, broadcast on ABC Radio National, *Books and Writing*, October 1984

'A Turkish man is beaten to death; Russians are interned and exiled; South Africans are banned; Czechs are forced underground; a Kenyan, a Nigerian, a Chinese and an Indonesian are imprisoned; An Argentinian journalist joins the "disappeared".

It is books and their authors and publishers which have aroused such official rage and over-reaction. "Living when we do, where we do, as we do...When people think of freedom for writers," observes the South African Nadine Gordimer, "they visualise at once the great mound of burnt, banned and proscribed books our civilisation has piled up." Words, we are constantly reminded throughout George Theiner's collection of pieces from *Index on Censorship*, *They Shoot Writers, Don't They?* can cost lives.

The first issue of *Index on Censorship*, the British-based quarterly magazine that charts this "geography of censorship" and oppression, was published in 1972. The idea for it dates from that *annus mirabilis*, 1968. Then Pavel Litvinov, grandson of the former Soviet Foreign Minister, his English wife and Larisa Bogoraz, the former wife of the writer Yuli Daniel, appealed in the London *Times* for international condemnation of the rigged trial of two young writers and their typists: the charge was 'anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda'. Yuri Galanskov subsequently died in a labour camp in 1972, and Alexander Ginsburg was released in 1979 and now lives in Paris. Litvinov answered a telegram of support and sympathy that was a response to the *Times* appeal with a request for continuing support for the democratic movement in the USSR. This should take the form, it was suggested, of a committee of universally respected writers, scholars, artists and public personalities, from England, the United States, France, Germany, Latin America, Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe.

“Of course,” Litvinov wrote, “this committee should not have an anti-Communist or anti-Soviet character. It would even be good if it contained people persecuted in their own countries for pro-Communist or independent views...the point is not that this or that ideology is not correct, but that it must not use force to demonstrate its correctness.”

One of the strengths of *Index* over the years that have followed the committee’s decision to set it up, has been that it has followed this recommendation. In much the same way that Amnesty International chooses its prisoners of conscience, it has documented abuses of human rights in both East and West. So Theiner’s book includes a reaction from the American Kurt Vonnegut to the burning of copies of his *Slaughterhouse Five* in a North Dakota school furnace on the orders of the chairman of the school board, as well as those to state-organised censorship and restrictions of freedom in China and Hungary. There is certainly a difference between these, but whether or not it is as marked as some of the more smug apologists for Western democracy like to believe, is open to debate. The name of the chairman of the American school board who ordered the burning was McCarthy.

George Theiner, current Editor of *Index*, has gathered together in his book articles by a list of people which reads like a Who’s Who or celebrated dissidents: Solzhenitsyn, Mangakis, Kundera, Gordimer, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, Denis Herstein on Camara Laye. Many of the themes that are to recur throughout the book are stated with the numbing regularity of blows. Two two early pieces are a poem by Solzhenitsyn, *God keep me from going mad* and George Mangakis’ wonderful *Letter to Europeans*, from his prison cell, and used in the very first issue of *Index*:

I write these papers and then I hide them. They let you write, but every so often they search your cell and take away your writings. They look them over, and after some time they return the ones which are considered permissible. You take them back, and suddenly you loathe them. This system is a diabolical device for annihilating your own soul.

They want to make you see your thoughts through their eyes and control them yourself, from their point of view. It is like having a nail pushed into your mind, dislocating it. Against this method, which is meant to open up breaches in our defence and split our personality, there are two means of defence. First, we allow our jailers to take away some of our writings—the ones that express our views unequivocally. It is a way of provoking the jailers. We even derive a sort of childish satisfaction from thinking of the faces they'll make as they read. Then there are other papers which we prefer to hide—the ones we want to keep for ourselves.

In 1969, Mangakis was suddenly dismissed from his post as Professor of Penal Law at Athens University, for “a lack of spirit of conformity” with the regime of the Colonels. He vividly defines the experience of the ten-by-ten cell with the disembodied eye of the jailer at its spy-hole, and the endless “stagnant hours” to which he opposes a dialogue of his ideas on the nature of dictatorship, the torturer, endurance, solidarity, conscience and humanity. On dictatorship he writes:

When a dictatorship is imposed upon your country, the very first thing you feel, the very first day, is humiliation. You are being deprived of the right to consider yourself worthy of responsibility for your own life and destiny. This feeling of humiliation grows day by day as a result of the oppressors' unceasing effort to force your mind to accept all the vulgarity which makes up the abortive mental world of dictators. You feel as if your reason and your human status were being deeply insulted every day. And then comes the attempt to impose on you, by fear, acceptance of their various barbarous actions—both those that you hear about and those that you actually see them commit against your fellow human beings. You begin to live with the daily humiliation of fear, and you begin to loathe yourself. And then, deeply wounded in your conscience as a citizen, you begin to feel a solidarity with the people to whom you belong. With a unique immediacy, you feel indivisibly bound to them and jointly responsible for their future fate.

“We [prisoners] exist as a result of the justification of our conscience,” he writes. “We have to struggle with ourselves, to balance ourselves upon the magnetic needle of conscience in its ceaseless quivering. Because of this constant effort...we are not yet dead.” This is his answer to those who, like the imprisoned Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, cry later in the book: “I need life to write about life.” “At this moment,” continues Mangakis, “I am deprived of the joy of seeing children going to school or playing in the parks. Whereas [our torturers] have to look their own children in the face.”

Letter to Europeans was smuggled out of the Colonels’ jail by an Italian prisoner. This necessary link with others, and with a wider social responsibility, is another constantly reiterated theme of the book. It is also, of course, one of the best reasons for the existence of *Index*: its contributions often have the feel of an international dialogue of the oppressed.

Listen to the voices of the South Americans, defining their challenges as writers: “To be an artist, only an artist, in our countries can become a kind of moral crime, a political sin. All our literature is marked by this fact.” The Uruguayan Eduardo Galeano says: “For those of us who want to work for a literature which will help to manifest the voice of those who have no voice, the question becomes, how can we act within this reality? Can we make ourselves heard in a deaf and dumb culture? Our countries are republics of silence.” The Argentinian Julio Cortazar sums up: “What we writers can do is insignificant in the face of the panorama of horror and oppression that the southern part of Latin America presents today. Nevertheless we must do it and indefatigably seek new ways of intellectual struggle.”

There are many warnings throughout the writings in Theiner’s book, from many different parts of the world, to those who would involve themselves in the ideology of a particular ruling group. “Ideology wants to convince you that it’s truth is absolute,” writes Milan Kundera, exiled from

Czechoslovakia to Paris. “A novel shows you that everything is relative. Ideology is a school of intolerance. A novel teaches you tolerance and understanding. The more ideological the century becomes, the more anachronistic is the novel...Today, when politics have become a religion, I see the novel as one of the last forms of atheism.”

“All the writer can do, as a writer, is to go on writing the truth as he sees it,” says Nadine Gordimer. “That is the writer’s unique contribution to social change. He needs to be left alone, by brothers as well as enemies, to make this gift.” She goes on to comment on the ideology of struggle and opposition as reflected in its language. “The jargon of struggle, derived internationally, is right and adequate for the public platform, the newsletter, the statement from the dock; it is not adequate, it is not deep enough, wide enough, flexible enough, cutting enough, fresh enough for the vocabulary of the poet, the short story writer or the novelist.” It is a tribute to the quality of the articles in this book and to most others used in *Index* that they use the vocabulary Gordimer recommends.

More modestly than either Kundera or Gordimer, the Chinese ex-Red Guard Wei Jingsheng recommends a *search* for the truth. His piece in the book is autobiographical, charting his growing disillusion over a year spent in the countryside with poor peasants, with Mao Zedong’s ideology of class struggle. “People didn’t want to be driven to such distraction that they beat their own friends to death for food. They wanted to go on living” he observes. Mao Zedong, he decides, relied on “dividing the people into different– and imaginary–interest groups as a way of concealing from them where their true interests lay.” For reaching such conclusions, published in the unofficial journal he edited during the brief period of liberalization in 1978-79 known as the Peking Spring, Wei Jingsheng was sentenced to fifteen years in prison.

It is perhaps in cases such as his, and those of others less well known in the insular West that *Index* performs a particularly useful service. Another example is that of the South African poet Don Mattera. He was

not allowed to publish in his own country, or to send work abroad for publication; his spoken words and opinions could not be quoted; he was watched by the police and forbidden to attend meetings. He became so depressed by this existence as a banned person that he stopped writing poetry. When, however, he learned that six of his poems had been published in *Index*, he was encouraged to begin writing again.

One of the most valuable functions of Theiner's collection is to draw the reader continually back to the pages of *Index* itself. One notices again how good it is at keeping in touch over the years with the people it features. Mattera and others are allowed several opportunities to write as they please; those who have been freed are celebrated; and the continuing struggle of thousands of others is remembered and documented. The current August issue is very much in this impressive and honourable tradition. It carries two reports on "the bounds of the officially acceptable" in Chinese writing, one claiming that these are now more widely set than at any time since 1949, but the other less optimistic.

Soviet reactions to Orwell's *1984* receive attention; there is an interview with one of Hungary's leading independent publishers, officially designated a non-person; there is some Saudi Arabian poetry. Regular features include *Index Index*, a "worldwide chronicle showing how freedom of expression is variously stifled"; a list of specially-prepared briefing papers ("New threat to press freedom in Malaysia"; the situation in Vietnam; writers and journalists in re-education camps; "USA orders expulsion of Latin American academics"). There are individual case studies, in this issue from Chile, Yugoslavia, Taiwan and South Africa. Earlier issues make equally instructive reading. In 1972, for instance, Allan Healy wrote of Australian censorship as a nineteenth-century survival. He reminded us of such embarrassments as the banning of the account of the Lady Chatterley trial as well as the book itself, the furore over the innocuous Little Red School Book, and the case of Steven Marcus' *The Other Victorians*. This last, it will be remembered, was reluctantly released to a university by the Customs Department when it

was put on a reading list in 1968, but on condition it be kept in a locked cupboard, that students fill in a form countersigned by a professor, that the librarian get access to it for a prescribed period, and that it be read only in the library.

The ridiculous official fear this reveals shows our legislators as akin to those in power in Eastern Europe. There, the Polish liver-sausage, because it is the cheapest of the pork butcher's products, is not to be mentioned in a poem, since this might imply a shortage of meat.

If the book contains lighter moments, however, what the writings in *Index* have more often shown is how quickly and easily the ludicrous can be transformed into the sinister. They show too how painfully slow progress in the recognition of human rights has been. The barbarians, it seems, are always at the gates. The Iranian Reza Baraheni, imprisoned under the Shah by the Savak secret police, writes:

*Azudi is just like
Genghis Khan when he walks
he walks on a pile of fresh corpses*

*the Khan did not clean his teeth either
the Khan also belched the Khan
did not take off his boots either Azudi
has shattered the mouths of twenty poets today*

*Azudi wears a tie something
Genghis Khan never did
only this splendid detail reveals the prodigious march of history.*

Against this, we must set Mangakis' ringing words. "Life," he asserts, "does not belong to the barbarians, even when absolute authority does belong to them. Life belongs to human beings; life goes forward because of them. This is the source of my hope."