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Censorship and Underground Systems in the Nineteenth Century

By BENJAMIN SACKS

THE HISTORY of censorship is replete with tales of courageous individuals and groups who have refused to join the bandwagon in the face of what they regard as "truth crushed to earth." Passive resistance and physical force methods from time immemorial have been the chief weapons of these pariahs of society. In our own day, however, the greater concentration, at least initially, is being placed upon the release of propaganda via *sub rosa* channels to the public at large. Both the daily press and periodical literature in our country contain many accounts of the elaborate underground systems in existence in Europe today. Not infrequently the further claim is made of originality for many of the methods used. While it is true that technological advances have introduced more ingenious mechanical devices for the spread of prohibited ideas, the origin of the major procedures followed dates back to the nineteenth century. An examination of the struggle of nonconforming groups during this period will bear out amply this contention. The absence of any discussion of the effectiveness of underground systems in cracking the shell of authoritative ideologies or the dangers involved in not permitting unlimited public discussion is intentional. Any statements that might be made here in this connection could add little to what has already been said and said far better by abler students of the general subject of freedom of thought.

At the outset, the goal of the nineteenth century utopians was individualism. Each mortal should be given an equal start in life and then the opportunity to climb as far as his ability permitted. Against such an objective the proponents of the established order—autocracy, aristocracy, and orthodoxy—waged a relentless war. France, the birthplace of

equality, liberty, and fraternity, was no exception to this rule. Here the protagonists of "things to be" fought courageously to place their case before the masses. Newspaper columns that felt the heavy hand of the Bourbons were left blank, an invitation to readers to use their imagination. Under the caption of foreign correspondence, insertions were made exhorting their followers to maintain the united front. Not infrequently foreign dailies circulating in France, such as the London *Times* and the *Gazette D'Augsbourg*, would contain articles in the private correspondence section for French consumption. Attempts were even made at times to distribute their own banned articles. In the ear of Napoleon III, a famous revolutionary paper, *La Lanterne*, was circulated secretly through such channels as match and tobacco boxes, pipes, ornaments for watch guards, and even the busts of famous personages in art galleries, including those of Napoleon III himself.

Because of the restrictions placed upon freedom of association, it was found necessary to exercise similar ingenuity for contact purposes. A favorite ruse was to frequent the *cafés* and, amidst liberal imbibing of alcoholic spirits, plan their future maneuvers. When the *cafés* were supervised more closely, the banquet was found an excellent substitute. Meeting avowedly to observe a friend's birthday, to reminisce as old comrades, or to celebrate the anniversary of the establishment of the National Guards, they would actually talk reform and often as not conclude by singing the *Marseillaise*. Indeed one such banquet, in 1848, was the prelude to the famous revolution of that same year. Even more beguiling perhaps was the transformation of funerals of prominent radicals into political demonstrations of unity and strength. The procession in the course of the interment of General Foy, an eminent Liberal, in 1825, was estimated to have run into the thousands.

Whether it was because of national characteristics or the fact that the intellectual class dominated the radical movement, the devices utilized in Germany were quite differ-

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ent from those in France. Although the origin of the Burschenschaft societies among university students may be traced back to Napoleonic days and their initial purpose may be acknowledged as that of arousing patriotic fervor against the French despot, the years following 1815 found their use more and more directed towards the advancement of democratic ideals. Under the pretense of supervising student-life and duelling etiquette, the Burschenschaft societies discoursed freely upon unity, equality, and the fatherland. In like fashion the Turnvereine gymnastic clubs, founded by Jahn for the purpose of meeting in friendly athletic competition, were often turned into forums for the discussion of social questions. Until the Carlsbad resolution put an end to such practices, it was not unusual for academic men of radical inclinations to transform their professorial chairs into platforms, their lectures into harangues, and their classes into public meetings.

More difficult was contact by the doctrinaires with the masses. One favorable opportunity for igniting the spark of public enthusiasm were the many festivals which were held annually in German towns. An excellent example of this approach was the Wartburg festival in October, 1817, held in commemoration of Martin Luther and the battle of Leipzig. During the numerous prayers, sermons, and speeches that followed, the students of Jena University emphasized the fact that in these two historical incidents Germany had led the way in the overthrow of two despots, the Pope and Napoleon Bonaparte, and urged that the occasion be used to relegate to the oblivion a third tyrant, absolutism. At a bonfire which was held shortly afterward, a number of emblems symbolic of reaction were committed to the flames—the works of Schmalz and Kotzebue, both notorious propagandists of the established order, a corporal's cane, a pigtail, and a soldier's stay.

The leaders of the new order in Italy were grouped together under the *Risorgimento* movement. The young men of Italy were urged to bear the torch of liberty everywhere.

They were directed to climb the mountain slopes and share the humble food of the laborer and to invade the rapidly growing industrial centers and seek out the artisans in their factories and homes. As an opportunity for full dress rehearsals of their principles before the public, great stress was placed upon participation in scientific congresses. They supported vigorously, for instance, the effort to persuade Leopold II of Tuscany to permit such a congress at Pisa. When Leopold II, flattered by the prospect that his reputation as a patron of the sciences would be enhanced, acceded, the conspirators secured a voice in drawing up the program. This, apparently, was so evident that the Pope in strict language forbade the learned men of his temporal possessions to attend the congress. During the sessions the air was full of accusations by secret agents from the various Italian principalities that the most spirited discussions were those which digressed the furthest from scientific topics. The addresses, made during the consecration of a monument in honor of Galileo, gave added confirmation to these suspicions. As much stress was bestowed upon the handicaps interposed by the Inquisition as upon the scientific contributions of Galileo. The inference of "Young Italy" was evidently to contrast the superior quality of man's handiwork if afforded intellectual freedom. How much stock Mazzini and his followers placed in music as a vehicle for propaganda is open to debate. Certainly it is true that the authorities gave credence to such intentions. Many operas were interdicted on the ground that they were insurrectionary in tone and spirit. Among these was Rossini's *William Tell*. Especially incriminating was the scene when the representatives from the three cantons swear to vindicate their liberty at all costs and the deep voices of the chorus and bass chords intonate an irresistible call to deeds of prowess and of self-sacrifice. So deep was this fear of the role of music that the Austrians in their provinces of Lombardy and Venetia actually made it a treasonable offense to applaud or to hiss certain passages in various operas.

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In Russia an elaborate espionage system was set up to uncover the secret springs of radical activity. The deeds of the Cheka in Soviet territories have their counterpart and perhaps their inspiration in those of the Okrana during the reign of Nicholas I. Whether it be, however, the inherent corruptness of Romanoff officialdom or the low salaries paid, the censors tolerated evasions in return for "gifts." Favorite among the practices indulged in by the Slavic admirers of individualism was the eighteenth century French medium, the *salon* or circle as the Russians called it. Many were the famous weekday gatherings at private homes under the gay front of pleasant *soirées*. To tie up the movement, one account mentions the insertion in appropriate places in news columns of a code of dots, and the action of the government in forming a committee of music experts to determine whether the musical composition was being used as a subterfuge for the relay of messages might indicate another possible method of contact.

After the middle of the nineteenth century the objectives of the agitating groups shifted somewhat. Largely as the result of the industrial revolution demands were made by some that individualism be cross-sectioned at certain points by additional pillars, such as imperialism, state socialism, and communism. The latter case was especially true in Germany. Here a bitter duel was in progress between Bismarck and Marxian socialism. With characteristic Teutonic thoroughness, the German social democracy set up a secret hierarchy to keep the spark of collectivism in existence. At the head was a committee of direction, holding power from the Party. Confidential men put this committee in touch with members in different localities by grouping men of military age in electoral circles, a type of club which had the least, apparently, to fear from the police. Under the auspices of these clubs, speakers would be brought in and contraband literature distributed. When suspicious proprietors denied them the privacy of their halls, they would attend the meetings of their opponents and air their

views during the discussion period. Later, resort was had to choral societies, educational classes, and sporting events. By arranging picnics and excursions into the country, these organizations found it easy to circumvent the vigilance of the police.

More troublesome perhaps was the question of the future enrollment of members. Unless new recruits could be secured, the influence of the movement would never grow. An early, although precarious means, of rallying the masses to socialistic banners was the *fete* of May 1, a day once settled upon by Robert Owen, in 1833, for the commencement of the millenium and selected by the Second International officially in 1889 as the date for annual expressions of the solidarity of the working class movement throughout the world. Even today these celebrations produce frequent clashes between police and participants. An attempt was also made to emulate the French in the use of burial processions for political demonstrations. Illustrative is the funeral of the great socialist leader, Wilhelm Liebknecht. The preparations for the event were so suspicious, however, that the police took extra precautions against political ebullitions. Before the cortege was allowed to proceed, the 45,000 people calculated to have assembled were compelled to remove all banners and emblems. Much more effective was the use of the Reichstag debates and elections. Socialist representatives were sent to the Lower Chamber largely because of the immunities accorded in publicising socialist principles. August Bebel, for instance, after having his speech on "The Future State" censored for platform purposes, was able to deliver it on the floor of the Reichstag and to have it printed in the press as a parliamentary speech. Hundreds of thousands of copies were estimated to have been distributed.

Chief among the problems which faced the Russian revolutionary elements was how to win over an illiterate nation. If it was difficult to maintain contact among the party membership, it would certainly be doubly difficult to

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secure the contact with the masses necessary for educational as well as propagandist purposes. For these purposes there was set in motion the *narodniki* or "go to the people" movement. Young men and women were dispatched to the villages, ostensibly to engage in their professions as physicians, assistant surgeons, midwives, nurses, school teachers, clerks, blacksmiths, woodchoppers, and day laborers. While the dullness of the *muzhik* was a source of irritation, there was compensation in the fact that the obtuseness of the police made easier the evasion of the censorship laws. One simple practice was to print an unusually large edition of a pamphlet or book and distribute the greater portion before the censors had made their examination. Then, if the latter objected to the contents, the writer and publisher would acquiesce without much ado in the destruction of the remaining copies which might reasonably be expected to be the entire number. Another favorite ruse was to interchange different books of the same surface binding after the police had condemned one set and approved another set. Some purveyors of forbidden literature had their readers carry and pass around large volumes of government statistics which would contain well-concealed tracts on the merits of individualism. Often the stupid government examiners were deceived by accounts of the Russian situation dressed up as descriptions of Roman, Turkish, and French historical episodes. Also interesting were the ways by which they protected their leading writers against the gullible representaatives of autocracy. When the police would break into a newspaper office to make an arrest for an attack on the Tsar, the office force would point to a meek man in the corner as the guilty one. With the arrest of the janitor, as the "sitting editor" was apt to be, the real scribe would return to his desk and the war for freedom would continue apace. Again, when a license to publish a paper was revoked, un-discerning officials would grant a permit to respectable friends of the former editor. Later the new owners would fail financially and their conservative publication would be

sold to a "dummy" holding for the suspended editor. If the lethargy of the censor was not sufficient to achieve the desired ends, attractive gifts were still found a supplementary means. Many printing presses actually were set up in the dwellings and offices of public functionaries. The storage rooms of the customs house in St. Petersburg were discovered at one time to be a main depository for revolutionary pamphlets.

On the other hand, when the censors really did their work, the agitating groups were equal to the task of keeping the channels of communication open. Such objects as engravings, photographs, atlases, and music sheets were conveyors of messages. So suspicious did the police become that they even scrutinized the little gilt paper rings which encircled the cheap cigars and cigarettes and which ordinarily contained the name of the brand. The working classes in the cities found the contraband literature under envelopes, slipped into conservative papers, and dropped under the seats of street cars and stage coaches. The rural population found them on the roads weighted down with stones. One of the most striking measures undertaken to combat the censors occurred during the reign of Nicholas II. To prove the latter's incompetence a pamphlet of eighty pages was published containing every public utterance of the Tsar since his accession in 1894. These speeches, over one hundred in all, and copied from official records, revealed Nicholas II as guilty of *lèse majesté* against himself. Needless to say, the effect desired, to make the people scornful of the autocratic regime under which they labored, was achieved. Thus did censors who strained at gnats swallow a camel. A favorite recourse when repression grew too severe was to transfer headquarters beyond the Russian frontier. A printing office, for instance, was set up in London and from here attempts were made to smuggle the *Bell* into Russia. Often special copies would be printed for the Romanoffs in order to gain their sanction for admission of the rest of the edition which would attack and revile the Russian bureaucracy. Little suc-

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cess was attained by the use of foreign newspapers, for they were examined at the border, often held back altogether, and when delivered at all would have the objectionable parts or paragraphs stamped out or made illegible. The *Times* frequently appeared with paragraphs or portions of columns blocked out in this manner. One writer tells the story that when Rubenstein, the famous composer, returned to Russia upon one occasion, his manuscripts were seized and kept in custody until he was ready to depart. Incidentally some of his papers were lost in the interim with the result that Rubenstein was much chagrined upon departure.

In the light of this array of facts, it would seem certain that the nineteenth century was the pioneering era in underground systems. Present day methods, to repeat, differ from preceding procedures mainly in the use of the technological improvements of a machine age. A few examples from Germany before concluding will serve to illustrate this difference. Fast moving motorcycles are utilized to scatter hundreds of toy balloons to which leaflets are attached. Until the Nazis ferreted them out, secret radio stations broadcast radical propaganda. When foreign stations were resorted to, the government set up powerful dispersers to prevent reception by the average radio set and confiscated those powerful enough to receive them. Even the productive processes in industry are utilized. Leaflets are placed on conveyor belts and carried to the workers in every corner of the establishment. In the mines the empty returning wagons are apt to be filled with tracts. Many papers are printed in such small type as to require magnifying glasses and so special pocket glasses are in vogue among the workers. Exposed films on which messages have been photographed are sent by mail in light, proof-sealed envelopes to anti-Nazis who know that the envelopes may be opened only in dark rooms. Lest it be thought that music no longer performs its share in a machine age, mention must be made before concluding that phonograph recordings are made which play a few strains of some popular song and then abruptly launch into attacks on *Der Fuehrer* and the totalitarian program.