

21:02 A Tale of Glavlit and Samizdat

by PML

Gather around, neighbors. You’ve all heard the tale of Samizdat, and of course these pages *are* Samizdat. But now it’s time for a darker tale: that of *Glavlit*, Samizdat’s opposite, nemesis, and chief reason for existence. As many things in the history of humanity, it was thought to be a thing of the past—and yet it rises again.

Glavlit (ГЛАВЛИТ) started as a part of the Commissariat of Enlightenment, to prevent printing of harmful things: religious, anti-science, anti-Communist, pornographic, liable to stoke hate or spread rumors, and otherwise misleading¹ or contrary to the public enlightenment as the Commissars saw it.² Glavlit was also charged with removal of previously printed harmful materials from libraries, bookstores, and any other places they could be found. It grew and grew, until it came to report directly to the Party’s Central Committee, and its purview included any posters, note pads, and theater tickets. Nothing could be printed without its approval, and nothing printed could persist without its approval.

This sounds Orwellian, and it sure was, but that’s not my point today. The point is that, despite employing an army of well-educated human censors, Glavlit was *incredibly dumb*. Anyone whose occupation involved printed words knew it, no matter how loyal to Soviet ideology they were. Glavlit would reject the most loyally written books because it creatively imagined some allusion critical of the Soviet system, but would pass things it should have obviously caught, and then confer on them the special quality of suppressed truth by chasing them down.

In short, Glavlit was a disaster. It was the disaster that begat Samizdat.

It turns out that a lot of people who were made to learn to read actually *want* to read—and they want to read stuff that interests them. Scaring them away from reading unapproved things works to a point, until the difference between what’s approved and what’s not stops making sense. At that point, the folks who don’t care whether their words make sense beyond their own career advancement take over the printed word, with Glavlit’s blessing. The folks who care about the actual subject-matter—

the fools, the nerds, and those obsessed with their profession—try and try, and then reinvent Samizdat, as the official print becomes synonymous with hypocrisy.

It really didn’t matter then if the official press had any redeeming value or not. In the end, Soviet society became almost entirely rumor-driven and cultish, despite science being its official highest value. Worse, it erupted in ethnic cleansing wars as soon as it could, despite decades of “peace and friendship between the peoples” lessons dominating the school curricula, the news, the TV, and any other mass medium. Glavlit absolutely succeeded in its mission of control—and it totally failed at every good thing it was meant to achieve. It even failed at pushing the Party line, because the press it shaped was so stupid and boring that it wasn’t even good for propaganda, let alone persuasion.

These days, there seem to be quite a few folks trying to reinvent Glavlit with technology. Wouldn’t it be nice if computers could tell what’s harmful and block it before it could do any harm, or at least unprint it soon afterwards? Lately it’s been looking like the “Web 2.0” is having a giant Glavlit cosplay party. Even nerdy news some days look like there’s been a record-smashing new manga about Glavlit-senpai who is part AI and part superhero.

It might behoove us all to remember how the actual continent-scale 100% expert human baseline effort turned out. As they say, “Play Soviet games, win Soviet prizes.”

There’s an old Soviet joke about a bicycle factory worker who wanted a bicycle but couldn’t afford one. So he started sneaking out parts, one at a time, to assemble them at home. But no matter how hard he tried, he’d get not a bicycle but a machine gun. Well, Glavlit was that kind of a factory. It wouldn’t produce enlightenment no matter how hard they tried.

For what it’s worth, here’s a prediction: there is no such thing as a smart Glavlit, and the larger it gets, the dumber it will be. So we might as well work on building a better Samizdat, neighbors, for it was the past and it will be the future. Amen.

¹Also state secrets, which included any kinds of statistics that contradicted the official Party line. So it goes.

²At the start of the XXth century the idea that the generally uncouth population was there to be forcibly enlightened by their betters was shared by imperial elites and socialists alike. Judging by how the first half of the century worked out, it was not the best of ideas, but the meeting of minds that refined British intellectuals had with Bolsheviks on this was truly touching.