

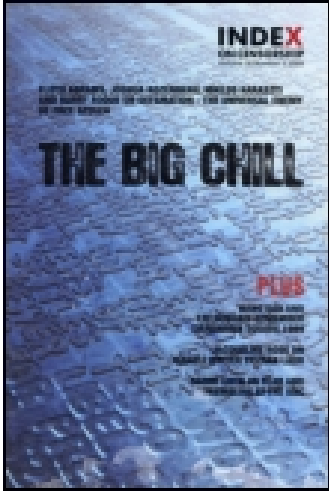
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On: 17 August 2015, At: 05:48

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London, SW1P 1WG



## Index on Censorship

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rioc20>

### 2. Who is afraid of Franz Kafka?

Published online: 24 Oct 2007.

To cite this article: (1975) 2. Who is afraid of Franz Kafka?, Index on Censorship, 4:3, 76-77, DOI: [10.1080/03064227508532457](https://doi.org/10.1080/03064227508532457)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03064227508532457>

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thus pass themselves off as 'leading writers'. Their literary importance is negligible; after all, they themselves claim that they only want to be 'the propagandist avantgarde of the Party'. Despite their privileged position, they have not been able to produce a single worthwhile novel since 1970.

The second group consists of the underground. It is part of the Czech literary tradition (not altogether surprising in a nation that, apart from the 20 years of the pre-war Republic and the first three years after the end of the Second World War, has not known independence since 1620) that its best writing has developed underground, in opposition to the rulers. The present Prague group, which numbers some 30 writers (Ludvik Vaculík, Jiří Šotola, Ivan Klima, Pavel Kohout, Bohumil Hrabal, Václav Havel, Ota Filip) have over the past five or six years produced about 40 books, many of which have been published in the West.

The third group are the writers in exile. Each of these groups has its specific ailments but all three have one thing in common: the lack of free and open criticism. This can best be seen in the case of the 'official' Prague literature. The more fervently an author follows the Party line, the higher he stands in official estimation, the greater the praise lavished on him by the critics who do not even try to measure this 'progressive' literature with their own esthetic yardstick, and of course the more money he earns. There is not one Marxist critic in Czechoslovakia today who would dare to stand up against this practice. Should somebody do so, he would soon be reporting for duty as a window-cleaner, thus being able to meet many of his former colleagues.

The literary underground has the best critics in its ranks, but none of these can find it in his heart to slate an author who is now earning his living as an unskilled worker and has to do his writing in his spare time. The critical impulse is thus tempered by insight into human tragedy, losing its essential sharpness and irony.

Virtually no Czech literary criticism exists in the West either. Which Western paper would be prepared to review books published in Czech by emigré publishers? The critics who write in that language have only the emigré magazines, and the space available there for literary criticism is naturally limited.

This survey can lay no claim to comprehensiveness. I have had to rely mainly on my own experience and on information provided by my friend, the Czech writer Josef Jedlička, who now lives in exile. I fear that a detailed study would reveal a situation far worse than that which

I have described. As Jedlička puts it: 'I have a horrible suspicion – in fact, practically a certainty – that during the past 27 years someone has written a work, perhaps even a work of genius, the only reader of which, the only critic and judge in the most sinister sense of that word, has been an official of the secret police.'

## 2. Who is afraid of Franz Kafka?

*Franz Kafka is without doubt the best known of all the writers to have been born and lived in Prague. Yet his works are again not published in his native country and the fiftieth anniversary of his death last year was passed over in silence. In a report on 'The Cultural Scene in Czechoslovakia: March 1974-April 1975' Radio Free Europe (27 March 1975) quoted a leading Prague literary critic to explain why one of the greatest of the world's modern authors has once more become an 'unperson'.*

Kafka is continuing his second appearance in the index: his work was proscribed after 1948 and again after 1968. Although the date of the anniversary fell in June (Kafka died of tuberculosis in a sanatorium near Vienna at the age of 40 on 3 June 1924 and was buried in Prague on 11 June), it was only in the November issue of the official organ of the Union of Czech Writers, *Literární Měsíčník* (no.9, November 1974, pp.120-1), that a sharply critical commentary on Kafka's heritage appeared. The article was entitled 'Franz Kafka – Myth and Reality' and its author was the director of the Institute of Czech and World Literature at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, Vladimír Brett, who concentrated his attack on Max Brod's views on an edition of Kafka, and on the interpretation offered 'by Czech elitists and right-wing revisionists'.

Brett pointed to the principle of alienation in Kafka's work – alienation from himself and from the whole of society – which Kafka supposedly experienced 'as the son of a Czech Jewish businessman in Prague who had Germanised himself'. This attitude of Kafka's, he said, suited the Czech 'revisionist elitists' in their 'nonsensical search for an analogy for the alienation of man in capitalist society and in socialist society. It is with this unhistorical and forced metaphysical interpretation that we have had to cope since

1969'. In another passage Brett declared that an end must be put in Czechoslovakia to the Kafka myth, which he said was used by the 'revisionist forces in their slanders on the socialist system and their anti-Communist attacks'. This myth had also provided a springboard for the enemies of Communism during the crisis period, he said.

A general reappraisal of the history of literature – although not directly mentioned – is clearly implied in the various anthologies from the works of Czech and Slovak poets and prose writers that appeared in 1974. Editions of writers who had been political prisoners and were rehabilitated at the time of the Prague Spring have not appeared. The death during the year of the prominent prose writer Václav Prokupek, winner of the 1937 State Czech Literature Prize, is a case in point. A report of his death appeared only after a delay of more than three weeks in the Protestant weekly *Kostnické Jiskry* (12 June 1974), while the official press and literary periodicals ignored it. The deaths of other writers who had been political prisoners in the 1950s were handled similarly – for instance, that of the publisher and writer Ladislav Kuncif. The death on 30 January 1975 of the poet Josef Palivec, who spent many years as a political prisoner in Nazi and Communist concentration camps, meant a great loss to Czech poetry. His collections of poems are masterpieces of modern reflective lyricism, and he was partly influenced by Paul Valery, whom he translated into Czech verse with great skill. The contribution Palivec made to his country's poetry through his own works can be seen in the numerous neologisms that have enriched Czech poetic expression.

## Lithuania: Censoring Shakespeare

*Shortly after sending an 'open letter' to the Soviet authorities protesting against censorship in the theatre, the leading Lithuanian avantgarde stage producer, Jonas Jurašas, was dismissed from his post as Director of the Drama Theatre in Kaunas in September 1972. (His open letter was printed in Index 1/1974.) For two years he was unable to work in his profession; then, in December of last year, he was suddenly granted permission to emigrate and now lives in Munich with his wife, a writer and editor, and their six-year-old son.*

*This is a shortened text of an account of his long battle with the censors, given in an interview with the Chicago Lithuanian-language daily, Draugas, published on 25 January 1975.*

### **What is your view of the situation of the Lithuanian theatre today?**

Even under the Soviet system the people still nourish hopes for the creation of a theatre that would carry on the traditions of independent Lithuania, stimulate the national spirit, and touch men's hearts and minds by presenting topical problems. During 1967-72, the so-called period of the political thaw, I partly succeeded in 'restoring' the Kaunas theatre, which had become ossified, and in creating a series of productions which aroused enthusiastic interest among the public. However, they also provoked the hostility of the authorities.

### **Which plays were subject to especially severe censorship measures?**

Practically all the plays I produced. Whenever my productions finally reached the stage, even though in a mutilated form and after long deliberations, negotiations and alterations, they were so 'controversial' that the authorities usually had them taken off after a short time. Sometimes the censors did make certain concessions, permitting me to experiment with new stage forms, but then they would insist on a pitiless distortion of the play's innermost meaning. Let me give you a few examples:

Slawomir Mrozek's *Tango* (the only Mrozek play ever to be staged throughout the Soviet Union) was shorn of its final scene, which was meant to express the very essence of my interpretation. Then, following the events of 1967 in Poland and the playwright's protest and emigration, the production was withdrawn on orders from Moscow. The play *Mamutu medzioklé* ('The Mammoth Hunt') by Kazys Saja was banned just as we started rehearsals. It was then that I wrote my first letter of protest to the Ministry of Culture, but in the end I did not mail it at the request of my colleagues in the theatre. We were allowed to go on with the production, but only in Kaunas, not in Vilnius, with the result that people flocked to Kaunas from all over Lithuania. On the opening night KGB agents tried to provoke an incident in the audience in order to provide a pretext to close the show. A year later the play was removed from the repertory, although most theatre-lovers remember it to this day as a significant and topical cultural event.

The production of *Grasos namai* ('The House of