

PERIODICALS SUPPLY FROM RUSSIA AND CIS SINCE 1992

Frank Clasquin

This article considers the publication and distribution system for newspapers, periodicals and journals in the former Soviet Union and how this has changed since December 1991. It looks at the break up of monopoly control, and the progress and problems involved in establishing a democratic and independent publications industry. It covers the problems of the supply of western material into Russia and the CIS, and the supply of Russian and CIS material to customers in the west.

Frank F Clasquin, Director of Swets International Moscow. He served as Executive Vice Chairman of F W Faxon Co from 1960-1980, and returned to active service after 10 years retirement. In 1990 Frank went to Moscow to open a foreign office, initially to supply Western periodical literature to the USSR. Since 1992 the office has been involved in collecting Russian and CIS material for customers in the west.

Understanding the current problem of measuring the effectiveness of an assured and uninterrupted supply of newspapers and journals from the geographical area formerly included in the USSR, requires a review of the supply system before the fragmentation of the Soviet empire into its now 15 independent parts. Our Western model of a free publishing industry where each publishing entity can act independently to decide what to publish, target its market and hazard the financial quagmire of profitability, yet legally have clean hands in both the launching and ongoing business practices of the enterprise, has to be set aside. We can then judge the rewards, prejudices and pitfalls of the pre-1992 monopolistic publishing system, and its subsequent replacement by an evolving system shaped by its attempts to solve the problems strewn in the wake of the disintegration of the USSR.

Pre-1992: Publication and distribution system within the USSR

Prior to the break up of the USSR, the State Committee for Publishing Activities selected and granted approval to publish material which was either meritorious in nature and/or of political merit and interest. Well positioned and influential people could also affect the decision to publish, regardless of any redeeming social value in the proposed literature. Once approved, financial support was assured. The distribution system was designed to relieve the publisher of the burden of handling each order for a publication separately. The published output was sent in bulk to another subsidised enterprise such as Soyuzpechat (actually a warehousing and forwarding centre) which, under orders from the State Committee, distributed copies to those organisations approved to use the specified publications. In addition, the pre-1992 Soviet postal service covered all CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) geographical entities, including the Baltic States, in an integrated postal system. All publications originating within the former Soviet boundaries were naturally included in this chain of supply. The postal system was the major internal distributor, handling orders from both individual citizens, libraries, organisations, institutions and enterprises. Orders from each subscriber, using a standardised post office order form, were submitted and registered at a central postal station, which in turn

ordered copies from Soyuzpechat or similar distribution sources. Soyuzpechat's activities naturally affected the total number of copies to be published so that the 'Central Postal' centres would receive the correct number of copies. Then by postal zones, the local post offices received the copies of each publication for final distribution in each local postal geographical area. Individual citizens' copies were delivered to a subscriber's address, while organisations usually picked up their copies from their local postal stations. Soyuzpechat also served the kiosk distribution system, whereby anyone could purchase a wide variety of popular publications.

Pre-1992: Publications and distribution for foreign subscribers

The principal distributor to the foreign market was a controlled monopoly which we all knew as 'Mezhdunarodnaya Kniga' (MK). As a subsidised activity, it too exercised censorship over what literature could be sold for hard currency to the foreign market, and controlled all agreements with foreign agents and/or subscribers. 'MK' had free use of the international post, subsidised by the government. Supplementing their activity was the system of Foreign Exchange whereby corresponding higher education institutions in particular, contracted or otherwise agreed to exchange selected publications without regard either to the cost of the publication or the cost of transportation. By way of exchange, foreign educational institutions either had access to their own or other published titles or bought those titles which a Soviet partner desired on the open market and arranged postal delivery to that partner. The Soviet partner obtained the agreed-upon Soviet publications and handled transportation through the Soviet International Postal Authority - also a subsidised activity. The dependability of the supply chain, to apply the best construction on results, was not entirely satisfactory. An explanation of why turns on two factors: the extreme slowness and unreliability of the Soviet Postal service, and the inability of Soviet partners to exact a quality of service from their supply system equal to Western standards, to the point where the Soviet partner service could be described as lethargic.

One of the first casualties of the Gorbachev democratisation programme was to relieve the postal system of the burden of the subsidised delivery expense, regardless of the mission activity. This occurred even before the actual disintegration of the USSR in December 1991. Each institution or enterprise in the former USSR had to pay the cost of postage, which exacted an intolerable financial expense. This in turn interrupted the delivery system. After December 1991, 15 separate postal systems and 15 separate state publication entities were created, so destroying the central ordering mechanism. There were now 15 geographically independent publication sources.

It was this situation that required the setting up of an alternative method for the supply of Russian, CIS and Baltic publications.

Publication and distribution since December 1991

Russian institutions could no longer use their postal system to order titles published in any of the three Baltic Republics or the 12 CIS countries. Likewise, the Baltic and CIS states no longer had access to the Russian postal order system to order Russian publications.

This vacuum in the previously simple interchange of publications within the former Soviet boundaries, opened an opportunity for any enterprising organisation willing to analyse the problem, supply the necessary resources and offer a solution to the problem.

However, before a commercial enterprise can legally carry on a business activity with any degree of competence, official registration is necessary. The Commonwealth of Independent States Organisation grants to any legally registered Russian enterprise the right to engage in legal business activities in each state. Faxon International Moscow effected legal registration in April of 1992 for this purpose. In September 1994, a re-registration process provided Swets International Moscow with similar authority.

As early as 1992, the opportunity to engage in the export of Russian and CIS publications moved this Moscow office to develop a unique supply chain for Russian/CIS publications for customers outside the former USSR.

Russian publications are available through the Post Office. Any legal entity with a rouble bank account and legal address may order titles through that facility. However, there are a large number of publishers in geographical sites distant from the Pechat/Post warehouse distribution system which may or may not be subsidised by the Russian government and no longer have the cooperation of this official system. There are other institutions (libraries, educational institutions, industrial enterprises etc.) who have lost their sources of foreign literature. One of the principal suppliers of foreign literature, the State Public Library for Scientific and Technical Information, was previously authorised to collect foreign literature orders from small enterprises and place these orders through 'MK'. The demise of 'MK's' foreign literature service due to serious financial problems, closed this source.

Those institutes or other enterprises who have sources for Russian or CIS literature not available through the postal system and who were in need of foreign literature, were identified as we received requests at Swets' Moscow office for titles in their geographical areas. A barter/exchange arrangement was developed that permitted Swets to obtain this local site literature by extending a fair credit for this work to each supplier. As the credit accounts grew, suppliers could use that credit to purchase the foreign literature of their choice. These arrangements are also available in the Independent and Baltic States. Hence it made no difference whether the Swets client for this literature was within the CIS or a foreign customer, for a supplier to take advantage of this unique source for foreign literature. Baltic State publications are also available through this system. Although a limited number of suppliers prefer hard currency payment for their work, the majority of these suppliers only perform because of their need for foreign literature - that is, hard currency payment had no allure.

What truly qualifies this Moscow office as a 'one of a kind' source for Russian, Baltic and CIS material is the Russian office staff of local librarians who know the literature and in many cases have a personal acquaintance with suppliers.

This project is in its infancy as we develop and modify not only the best supply sources but the most economically efficient delivery methods. Delivery from distant Russian sites or the CIS has to be reliable and timely. Here again, because the Swets office has a large number of official government clients, a special document delivery organisation which carries classified government documents is available to us for this purpose.

Most of the client sources have little or no choice to use Western agency services partly because they have only limited amounts of foreign currency and also the banking system in these countries is far from offering a truly international service.

The publication industry

The status of the total publication industry in all of the CIS since 1992 is best described as "tenuous". A soon to be published article¹ relates in considerable detail the serious problems in the industry for which there are no apparent solutions. At the core of this situation is the financially desperate position of all the CIS. Democratisation, with all its bright allure and warts, demands first public and private responsibility hand in hand with freedom to act independently. Downsizing the monopolistic control system could not be achieved without absolute chaos if a decision to 'sink or swim' without any subsidies were imposed. Nevertheless there has been slow and steady progress in privatising a number of the larger publishers as enterprising groups have attempted to go it alone without subsidies or with government cooperation inherent in the independent registered status of a joint stock company. Managerial skills, which in our western society include financial responsibility, are difficult to comprehend by the body of managers who have formed joint stock ventures using their political connections. If the total management skills needed to balance an enterprise in all facets of a publication activity has one weak link, the flow of the end product can be interrupted. Consistent financial support, quality staff ready to apply their knowledge and skills in production, editorial policy, marketing and sales over and above participation in the government distribution scheme are new responsibilities

which are still in the learning process stage. Disruptions in publication schedules, announced (or unannounced) delays, complete or temporary shutdowns, discontinued publication, all without any recourse, are regular occurrences. Reciting specific examples is unnecessary to the knowledgeable reader who has experienced these frustrating and annoying events.

Conclusion

Locating reliable suppliers is the first and most important step in reinstating a complete list of journals, periodicals and newspapers available before the break up of the USSR monopoly. However, changing attitudes and work habits which reflect the concept of 'competitive improvement' in the absence of competition is another goal upon which our agency must focus. After 70 years of subordinating efficiency to bureaucratic management one cannot expect immediate change in the quality of service. At least we can announce that our 'service mission'

at Swets International Moscow must be tilted in the direction of Western standards, and then work at the tedious task of panning for nuggets of improvement where long term gains are measured in grains.

'Segodnya' ie. 'Today' and 'Seichas' ie. 'Now', are not compelling or consistent standards of behaviour where 'service' was considered menial and repugnant for so long in the socialistic system. Nevertheless, viewing the above review in the light of 'results not excuses' we can expect reluctant patience and understanding from clients, while explaining why service standards are less than satisfactory.

References

1. *Serials Librarian* Russian Newspapers and Journals: Publishers-Publications-Circulation/Distribution by Titana Ershova and Frank Clasquin