PART I

THE COMMAND BOOK PROJECT: ORIGINS AND FEEDBACK
CHAPTER ONE

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT (TOTALITARIAN) BOOKS?

Books, publishing, and reading have traditionally been the target of regulation. Fears have surrounded the (potentially mass) reproduction and reception of (potentially unwanted) ideas in print ever since pages began to run off the, allegedly first, printing press in Mainz. It may seem like a banal statement, but, consequently, no story of a printed text can ever be fully separated from the social networks in which it was published and read.1 The ‘sociology of literature’, the roots of which are linked to enlightened works by Madame de Staël, is an umbrella discipline that represents just one possible approach to considering the power of the social pressures and expectations imposed on a printed text. René Wellek, for example, suggested that the “sociological approach to literature is in particular cultivated by those who profess a specific social philosophy”, such as ‘Marxist critics’.2 But this does not mean that we can simply make direct connections between theories of the social determination of textual production, intellectual sensitivity towards social aspects of textual communication, the interest in common texts and readers outside the spheres of privilege and literary canons, leftist and Marxist political leanings, and the regulatory and controlling practices exercised over textual production and reception in many parts of the Cold War world. All these areas of theory and methodology and beliefs and practices have their own distinctive

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1 I use the term ‘printed text’ here in order to emphasise, as, for example, Roger Chartier has done, that the form in which a text is transmitted has an impact on both its meaning and on the construction of its audiences, and therefore, the meaning of a text cannot be solely derived from the function of language (R. Chartier, 1995). In this perspective, it is useful to make a distinction between the text (in, say, Derrida’s terms) as any kind of entity suitable for interpretation, the literary text as a form of aesthetically informed textual expression, and the printed text as a particular, historically defined material form of textual production, dissemination and reception, which can take the form of a book, leaflet, poster, etc. The problem, however, is that many of the theoretical accounts that will be discussed in this book do not explicitly articulate these distinctions. In this book, I am mostly concerned with the printed text in the format of a book, the definition of which remains problematic.