

Samizdat:
The Literary Self-Publishing Movement in Leningrad
1950s – 1980s

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Abstract

V. Dolinin and D. Severyukhin are authors associated with the authoritative encyclopaedia *Samizdat Leningrada* (2003). Both were deeply involved in Samizdat publishing in Leningrad. Dolinin was arrested in 1982 and spent four years in prison. This article is a broad survey of the origins, development and values of Leningrad unofficial culture during the ‘classical’ period (1950s-1980s) of Soviet Samizdat.

Keywords

Second culture, Samizdat, unofficial literature

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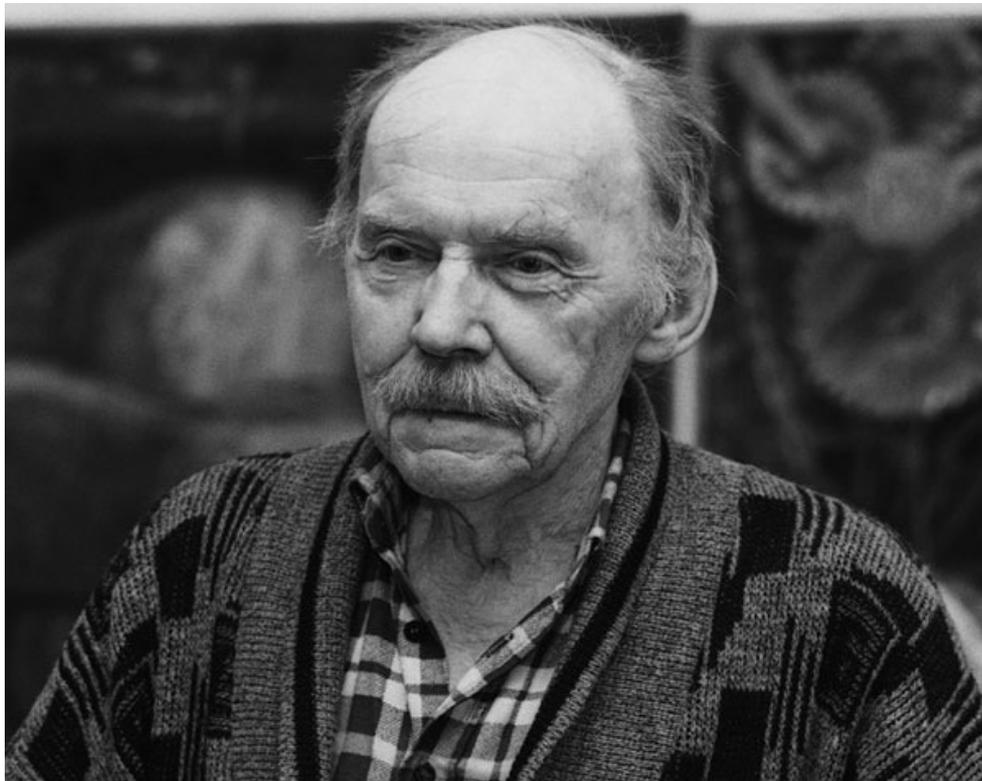


Fig. 1. Boris Ivanovich Ivanov. Photo by N. Simonovsky.

On February 5, 2015, in Saint Petersburg, at the age of 86, one of the prominent activists of the independent cultural movement of the Soviet era in Leningrad (Saint Petersburg), Boris Ivanovich Ivanov passed away. During the 1960s-1980s the writer Boris Ivanov contributed greatly to the development of the Samizdat movement. Samizdat - which stands for «Self Publishing» - was the form and method of creating and distributing uncensored forms of art and literature during the time of the total Soviet State publishing monopoly and censorship of any creative activities in the Soviet Union. Thus any form of uncensored, self published literature was illegal at that time.

We dedicate this article to Boris Ivanovich Ivanov who was the founder and Editor-in-Chief of the self-published independent art/literature magazine The Clock (Časy) for many years.

Studies of the history of independent, free cultural and social life in Russia during the second half of the 20th century would be impossible without references to the Samizdat movement. Samizdat at that time acted as a living voice of free culture, the tool of self expression for non-conformist intellectual and artistic members of society.

Actually, the suppression of freedom of expression and human rights has always been the main policy of Russian authorities. The forms of independent thinking and methods of its suppression and prosecution changed with every century, but the main tendency of the State's oppression of any form of free initiative always remained.

However, the uncontrolled forms of literature appeared in Russia as soon as the written word itself was born there. From ancient times, even before printing technology had been developed, the manuscripts of independent religious philosophers, religious sects' leaders and heretics changed hands in Russia.

The sect of «Old Believers» left behind a massive amount of illegal literature.

Since the beginning of the 19th century many unauthorized and illegal works of progressive writers and poets had been manually reproduced and widely dispersed throughout Russia. Among them were: *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* by Radishchev, *Notes on Ancient and Modern Russia* by Karamzin, *Woe from Wit* by Griboyedov, *Philosophical Letters* by Chaadayev and multiple poems by Alexander Pushkin. Exiled «Decembrists» produced handwritten journals in Siberia. Many Russian books and magazines were printed abroad and came to Russia illegally. A century later an echo of Herzen's *Kolokol* returned to the USSR in the form of such journals as *Continent*, *The Edge (Grani)*, *Seeded Crops (Posev)* and other foreign publications for free readers in suppressed Russia.

October, 28 (November, 10), 1917, can be considered a starting point in the history of unofficial literature in the Soviet period. Just three days after the Bolshevik Revolution in Petrograd, the new rulers issued the Decree of Print which banned all private publishing as «anti-revolutionary» activity, and thus ended a very short period of freedom initiated by the February Revolution which had cancelled all censorship in Russia. This document opened the whole series of legislative measures aiming for strict Bolsheviks control over Freedom of Speech in the Soviet Union. In the 1920s not only any private publishing was banned but the import of printed materials from abroad was banned as well.

That is how the Soviet Union became isolated from any foreign culture.

The suppression of civil rights was naturally reflected in the fate of literature and art. The first years of the Bolsheviks' dictatorship resulted in mass arrests, prosecution, repressions, physical elimination, exiles, forced emigration of multiple creative and independent artists, musicians, writers and poets whose works were banned and were not accessible for readers in Soviet Russia.

Among the first victims of 'Red Terror' was Nikolai Gumilyov, the prominent poet of the 'Silver Age', translator, literary critic and philosopher. On August, 26, 1921 Nikolai Gumilyov was executed as a political dissident.

During the following three decades the sad list of murdered workers of culture rapidly grew. During the 1930's the powerful repressive mechanism of the Stalinist regime crushed so-called 'bourgeois' and 'peasant' writers, 'politically incorrect' ones, so-called 'fellow travelers', as well as those writers who were sincerely loyal to Soviet Regime, yet nevertheless were accused of «political errors» and «deviations» of all sorts. Later the accusations of «Formalism» were added to the list of cultural sins and in the 1940s-1950s the accusations of «Cosmopolitanism», as well. Actually, the prosecutions of «Cosmopolitans» were aimed toward repressions of Jews and support of the State's Anti-Semitic policies. Needless to say, writers shared the fate of Russian representatives of culture, and the fate of other 'politically unreliable' classes of the Soviet population. Usually after arresting and prosecuting a writer, his name was eliminated from the list of writers; his/her books confiscated from libraries and stores, and destroyed.

Besides prosecuting individual writers, the Soviet Government chased after entire range of literature styles, movements, ideas, schools, publishing houses, magazines and journals. Perhaps the most infamous document illustrating this practice was the «Decree on the Journals *The Star* and *Leningrad*» issued on August, 14, 1946. In accordance with that decree Mikhail Zoshenko, the prominent Russian writer, and the famous poet Anna Ahmatova (the widow of murdered Nikolai Gumilyov) were excluded from the list of official Soviet writers and from the writers Union. However the 'rebel' poetry of Anna Ahmatova was illegally published and distributed by Samizdat.

This is how Boris Ivanov described the literary life of that time:

The centralized Soviet publishing practice could be imagined as if one Supreme Editor General decided what should or should not be printed in the biggest country in the World, covering one sixth of the Earth. All the while he remembered what had erroneously been published before Soviet rule, and what was published without his approval under the Soviet rule. He also had a legal right to conduct anti-publishing activities, such as to confiscate any printed material from libraries, warehouses, stores and private homes, and also to confiscate everything which could be published without his authorization, which included manuscripts, private journals, diaries, correspondence, documents and mail. The Supreme Editor also determined the strict punitive measures which included arrests, imprisonment and liquidation of the individuals whose heads contained the embryos of unwanted unauthorized publications. (Ivanov 188)

The repressive Soviet regime eventually drove uncontrolled words deep underground. But eliminating the free word entirely proved to be as impossible, as eliminating the laws of physics. Even during the gloomiest times brave writers denied the demands of the rulers in favor of truth and freedom of creativity. Fiction, poetry, essays, historical and philosophical writings, theological tractates, cultural and sociological studies were read in the company of friends, were copied manually, typed on typewriting machines, handed to friends and learned by heart.

And that is how the literature's inheritance of repressed and officially unaccepted writers was saved from being destroyed and forgotten. That is how the most important function of Samizdat movement revealed itself – Samizdat saved the free word.

The process of liberalization of internal policies during Khrushyov's 'warming' did not bring much improvement into the relationship between the Writer and the State. It was true that mass repressions finally came to a stop, but creative writing was still limited

by the communist ideology and by the State's monopoly on publishing. Authors still were not granted the rights to publish their books and magazines. Those factors, political and ideological ones, as well as social-economical conditions were dictated by the strict system dominating the society in the USSR.

By the end of 1980s Samizdat was a practically pan-Russian or, better yet, pan-Soviet phenomenon. However the Leningrad's branch of it was somewhat different and special.

Those differences were determined by the unique position of the city of Leningrad (Saint-Petersburg) in Russian history and culture.

Saint Petersburg, then Leningrad, the former Capital of Russia, was a city of enormous cultural potentials and ambitions. Once having been the cultural center of Russia, with a vast reading audience and active cultural life, the city fell down to the status of a provincial center during Soviet rule. Moreover, the city was pressed down by a double ideological weight from both the local and central Communist Authorities.

Therefore the majority of the important decisions regarding Leningrad's cultural activities were made in Moscow on the central bureaucratic departments' level. It was there where the destinies of books, magazines, stage productions, movies created by Leningrad's authors were determined, as well as the fate of the authors themselves.

Oddly enough, the local bosses were often more zealous in their conservatism than the central ones in Moscow which resulted in much more limited freedom in Leningrad than found in Moscow. Thus this conflict between the image of the brilliant capital city of Saint Petersburg in the minds of local intellectual elites and the one of the real Soviet Leningrad with its provincial status stimulated the development of Leningrad's unofficial culture. These circumstances determined the origin and development of Leningrad's Samizdat as a separate and independent cultural phenomenon.

The free cultural movement formed in the post-Stalin period went through a few stages during its development. The movement assigned itself names like Second Culture, Non-Conformism, Unofficial Culture, and the Underground. By the middle of the 1970s the original separate groups merged into the new wide movement with stable cultural connections, various functions and activities. By that time, besides all forms of literature, the unofficial culture already included visual arts, figurative arts, performance arts, theater, music, especially unwelcomed by official authorities, like rock-music, jazz and independent bards' songs.

That is when the first 'fat' literary journals appeared in Samizdat. These journals did not represent any particular group or movement but included articles on a wide spectrum of independent culture. Among those journals were included: literary, artistic, religious-philosophical journal titled *37* and edited and published by Victor Krivulin, Tatyana Goricheva and Lev Rudkevich; literary-artistic journal *The Clock* published by Boris Ivanov and Boris Ostanin; the journal of literature criticism and social polemics *Dialogue* created by Sergey Stratanovsky and Cyril Butyrin, and another journal founded by the same authors *Obvodny Canal*.

Many works published in those journals and their additional specialized issues were later officially printed and occupied their well-deserved niche in the history of the modern Russian literature.

When speaking about Leningrad Samizdat, first of all, we should highlight the main reasons for its origin and stability. We should find the common denominator for such totally different writers like Anna Ahmatova, Joseph Brodsky, Lev Losev, Rid Grachyov,

Boris Vahtin, Victor Krivulin, Tamara Bukovskaya, Yelena Shvarts, Oleg Grigoryev, Vladimir Erl, Arkady Bartov, Edward Shneiderman, and Arkady Dragomoshenko.¹

After all, all those authors possessed different talents, belonged to different generations, styles, schools, and had various aesthetic preferences. However all of those writers can be characterized as contributors to Leningrad's unofficial literature – writers whose creativity was developed freely, independent from the official demands and regulations of Communist's censorship.

This shared status within unofficial literature was based on three points.

The first point was their rejection of the official ideological doctrine, «Socialist Realism» – which was an artistic principle, officially established in the USSR in the 1930s, which demanded «a truthful, historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development» and of the «ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of Socialism».

Yet unofficial literature was characterized by its variety of genres and styles. The philosophy, religions, mystics, social, cultural and historical studies, satire, unlimited imagination, erotica, fantasy art, and sensuality found their places there just as everything else which did not fit the 'Procrustian bed' of the official ideological concept and therefore was banned in the USSR.

The second point in the base of the unofficial culture was its rejection of official aesthetics norms which also were parts of «Socialist Realism». Unofficial culture employed the widest range of aesthetic approaches, an extended range of formal languages and styles, starting from the variety of all classical forms and ending with the most advanced vanguard experimentations. The works of many independent artists and authors were absolutely unacceptable for official culture and literature, and not for political but solely for aesthetic, formal reasons. It was especially true when innovative forms of art and literature could not be understood, let alone accepted by bureaucrats, and because of this every initiative in art and literature was rejected by the officials.

And the third point can be explained like this:

Unofficial and very liberal culture was based on the idea that it was a part of world culture. The liberal artists and writers extended their loyalties into the whole World, being involved in the global cultural process. And no power would willingly encourage such extended loyalties, let alone the Soviet government.

Thus breaking from the enforced cultural isolation was a personal goal of independent authors. Their open minded thinking was not limited by a particular place or time. They realized the need for reacquiring and restoring banned and forgotten literature of the past, the need for reviving cultural traditions destroyed by Bolshevism, as well as the need for establishing new connections with the modern western world.

It is not by chance that the main part of Samizdat activities involved reintroducing works by poets of the Silver Age, the works of Futurists and Oberiuts, Russian religious and philosophical literature and fiction of Mikhail Bulgakov, Evgeny Zamyatin and Andrey Platonov. All of that literature had not been officially published. It is also not by chance that translations of Western modern literature, banned by the Soviet censors and therefore unavailable to Soviet readers, were included in Samizdat activities.

When reading the poetry of Joseph Brodsky which was written in 1960s, the modern reader would have trouble figuring out why his poetry was rejected by the official press

¹ See biographies of named and other authors of Samizdat with detailed descriptions of Samizdat's journals in our book *Samizdat Leningrada, 1950-1980. Literaturnaja ensjiclopedia* (Samizdat of Leningrad, 1950s-1980s: the Literary Encyclopaedia).

and why the author himself was falsely accused of a crime and prosecuted by the Soviet authorities.

After all, his poetry did not contain any anti-Soviet propaganda or criticism, political satire or even pornography. So why was he so hated by the Soviet bureaucrats of culture?

The answer is hidden in those three points discussed above. Brodsky's poetry was deep in content with multiple references to various cultures and written in an innovative manner. Neither form nor content could fit the package of official «Socialist Realism»; it was just too big for it.

That was the reason for rejection of Brodsky's poetry by official Soviet culture, thus leaving his poetry entirely to Samizdat.

The same could be said about other independent poets and fiction writers from Leningrad of the Soviet Era. Their talents placed them into the *cultural* opposition toward the official Regime; however most of them did not belong to the *political* opposition, even though their political neutrality did not prevent them from the threats from KGB, searches of their homes, confiscations of their works, arrests, and repressions. The repressive Soviet regime would not have tolerated any deviations from the official cultural demands and ideological policies, and every different and non-standard thinker, intellectual or creative individual was regarded as a threat to the system.

But the main uniting force of unofficial cultural movement was its goal of *free and unlimited creativity* which at that time was regarded as a vital and almost sacred principle.

One of the Samizdat manifestoes was published in 1977. It stated:

Hundreds of artists, poets and thinkers are in search of the rights to free creativity, in search of new and modern philosophical and artistic languages, of the right to express new creative experiences. These people alienated themselves from the norms of "Social Realism", but at the same time they do not oppose these norms. And that is what makes them strong. The specific character of Leningrad's unofficial culture lies in its positive attitude, in the constant avoidance of any negativism, nihilism, and blind rage. [...] Right now we are tested by our inner freedom and risks associated with it. That is where the noble principles of Leningrad's cultural and spiritual movement are revealed." (Krivulin and Goricheva 9-11)

The political reforms in Russia resulted in the fall of the Communist Regime in 1991, in spite of some recessions. The reforms resolved most of the problems faced by the unofficial cultural movement. With freedom of press and media, cancellation of the censorship and restoration of the private enterprise and free market the very word «Samizdat» lost its meaning. The creative, historical, cultural, social and political functions of Samizdat were no longer in demand.

As the non-conformist environment has always been a community of different types of people with different views and opinions about literature and social life, by the end of 1990s, when literary workers were not threatened by a communist ideology as their common enemy anymore, they parted ways.

Many former night guards, grounds keepers, and maintenance workers (preferred professions of authors of Samizdat during the Soviet time) finally got their works openly published, sold their books and even joined the reformed Writers Union. Some joined editing staff of "thick" literary journals and were offered positions in the publishing boards of directors. Some of them became well known journalists and reporters, some of them tried to get themselves involved in politics, and some headed private publishing houses.

Among former ‘unofficials’ a few writers preferred to remain literary hermits without any desire to step into the lime light and utilize the newly open possibilities.

Little by little the brightly colored illusions born of *Perestroika* (reconstruction) melted like a snow on a hot day, and censorship barriers were replaced by free market competition. And not everyone could pass those obstacles. As poet Edward Shneiderman noticed: «The test of not being able to publish our works was quickly replaced by its direct opposite, namely the temptation of the open market, which put any writer into dependence on his/her financial situation». That just means that poor writers could not publish their books out of their own pockets. Together with financial problems the independent literature faced new different challenges which are yet to be understood, analyzed and resolved.

So the epoch of Samizdat passed, leaving in history the unique experience of a Free Word spoken against the will of official silencers.

The test of time proved the powerful vitality of independent creativity which was not based on the official dead dogmas of «Socialist Realism» but, instead, on the personal experience of spiritual freedom and feeling of belonging to global culture.

Breaking out from the forced muteness was paid for by a very dear price. Several generations of writers who deserved the full right of reaching their readers were prohibited from accessing the printing press. Some of them did not live to see their works published, leave the underground, and have their names finally recognized with their talent, hard work and struggles appreciated.

Yet their works, carried by Samizdat through the gloomy years of intellectual and spiritual imprisonment, formed the living tapestry of modern literature and assured the continuity of cultural development. Many of those works are rightly included in the list of the best achievements of both national and international literature.



Vyacheslav Dolinin. Photo by N. Simonovsky



Dmitry Severyukhin. Photo by N. Simonovsky

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