Samizdat

Samizdat was a form of dissident activity across the Eastern bloc in which individuals reproduced censored and underground publications by hand and passed the documents from reader to reader. This grassroots practice to evade official Soviet censorship was fraught with danger, as harsh punishments were meted out to people caught possessing or copying censored materials. Vladimir Bukovsky summarized it as follows: "Samizdat: I write it myself, edit it myself, censor it myself, publish it myself, distribute it myself, and spend jail time for it myself."[1]

Samizdat

Russian samizdat and photo negatives of unofficial literature

Russian	самиздат
Romanization	*samizdat*
Literal meaning	self-publishing

Contents

Name origin and variations

Etymologically, the word *samizdat* derives from *sam* (Russian: сам, "self, by oneself") and *izdat* (Russian: издат, an abbreviation of издательство, *izdatel'stvo*, "publishing house"), and thus means "self-published". The Ukrainian language has a similar term: *samvydav* (самвидав), from *sam*, "self", and *vydavnytstvo*, "publishing house".[2]

The Russian poet Nikolai Glazkov coined a version of the term as a pun in the 1940s when he typed copies of his poems and included the note *Samsebyaizdat* (Самсебяиздат, "Myself by Myself Publishers") on the front page.[3]

Tamizdat refers to literature published abroad (там, *tam*, "there"), often from smuggled manuscripts.[4]

Techniques

Samizdat copies of texts, such as Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* or Václav Havel's essay *The Power of the Powerless* were passed around among trusted friends. The techniques used to reproduce these forbidden texts varied. Several copies might be made using carbon paper, either by hand or on a typewriter; at the other end of the scale mainframe printers were used during night shifts to make multiple copies, and books were at times printed on semiprofessional printing presses in much larger quantities. Before glasnost, the practice was dangerous, because copy machines, printing presses, and even typewriters in offices were under control of the organisation's First Department, i.e. the KGB: reference printouts for all of these machines were stored for subsequent identification purposes, if samizdat output was found.

"Эрика" берёт четыре копии, /
Вот и всё! / ...А этого достаточно.

The "Erika" takes four copies, / That is all! /

...But that is enough.

Alexander Galich on the Erika typewriter commonly used for carbon copies in Russian samizdat production.[5]

Physical form

Samizdat distinguishes itself not only by the ideas and debates which it helped spread to a wider audience, but also by its physical form. The hand-typed, often blurry and wrinkled pages with numerous typographical errors and nondescript covers helped to separate and elevate Russian samizdat from Western literature.[6] The physical form of samizdat arose from a simple lack of resources and the necessity to be inconspicuous. In time dissidents in the USSR began to admire these qualities for their own sake, the ragged appearance of samizdat contrasting sharply with the smooth, well-produced appearance of texts passed by the censor's office for publication by the State. The form samizdat took gained precedence over the ideas it expressed, and became a potent symbol of the resourcefulness and rebellious spirit of the inhabitants of the Soviet Union.[7] In effect, the physical form of samizdat itself elevated the reading of samizdat to a prized clandestine act.[8]

Samizdat in disguised book-binding seen in the Museum of Genocide Victims, Vilnius

Readership

Samizdat originated from the dissident movement of the Russian intelligentsia, and most samizdat directed itself to a readership of Russian elites. While circulation of samizdat was relatively low, at around 200,000 readers on average, many of these readers possessed positions of cultural power and authority.[9] Furthermore, due to the presence of "dual consciousness" in the Soviet Union, the simultaneous censorship of information and necessity of absorbing information to know how to censor it, many government officials became readers of samizdat.[10] Though the general public at times came into contact with samizdat, most of the public lacked access to the few, expensive samizdat texts in circulation, and expressed discontent with the highly censored reading material made available by the state.[11]

The purpose and methods of samizdat may contrast with the purpose of the concept of copyright.[12]

Closeup of typewritten samizdat, Moscow

History

Self-published and self-distributed literature has a long history in Russia. *Samizdat* is unique to the post-Stalin USSR and other countries with similar systems. Under the grip of censorship of the police state, society turned to underground literature for self-analysis and self-expression.[13]

Samizdat books and editions

Certain works published legally in the State-controlled media were practically impossible to find in bookshops and libraries and found their way into samizdat. The first full-length book to be distributed as samizdat was Boris Pasternak's 1957 novel *Doctor Zhivago*.[14] Although the literary magazine *Novy Mir* had published ten poems from the book in 1954, a year later the full text was judged unsuitable for publication and entered samizdat circulation.[14] The novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn had a similar fate and was widely distributed via samizdat.[14][15]

At the outset of the Khrushchev Thaw in the mid-1950s USSR, poetry became very popular and writings of a wide variety of known, prohibited, repressed, as well as young and unknown poets circulated among Soviet intelligentsia. A number of samizdat publications began circulating which carried unofficial poetry: The Moscow samizdat magazine *Sintaksis* (1959-1960) by writer Alexander Ginzburg, Vladimir Osipov's *Boomerang* (1960) and *Phoenix* (1961) produced by Yuri Galanskov and Alexander Ginzburg. The editors of these magazines were regulars at impromptu public poetry readings in 1958-61 on Mayakovsky square in Moscow. The gatherings did not last long, as soon the authorities began clamping down on them. In the summer of 1961, several meeting regulars were arrested and charged with "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda" (Article 70 of the RSFSR Penal Code), putting an end to most of the magazines.

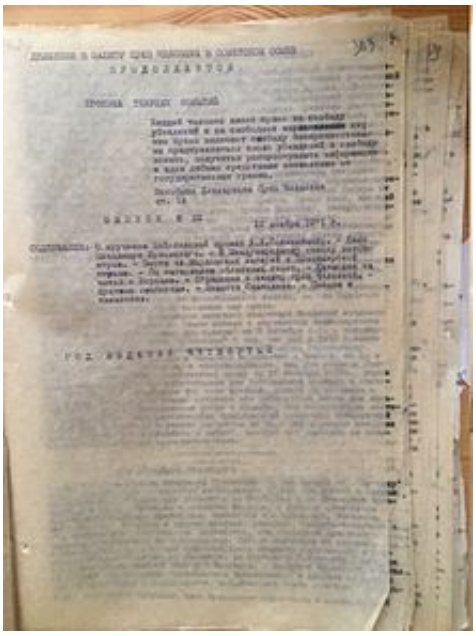
Not everything published in samizdat had political overtones. In 1963, Joseph Brodsky was charged with "social parasitism" and convicted for being nothing but a poet. His poems circulated in samizdat, with only four judged as suitable for official Soviet anthologies.[16] In the mid-1960s, the Youngest Society of Geniuses, an unofficial literary group known by the acronym SMOG (Samoye Molodoye Obshchestvo Geniyev; the acronym also forms the Russian verb for I, He, One "Could") issued an almanac titled *The Sphinxes* (*Sfinksy*) and collections of prose and poetry. Some of their writings were close to Russian avantgarde of the 1910s–1920s.

The 1965 show trial of writers Yuli Daniel and Andrei Sinyavsky (Sinyavsky–Daniel trial, charged with anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda) and increased repressions marked the demise of the Thaw and harsher times for samizdat authors. The trial was carefully documented in a samizdat collection called *The White Book* (1966), compiled by Yuri Galanskov and Alexander Ginzburg. Both writers were later arrested themselves and sentenced to prison in what was known as The Trial of the Four.

In the following years, some of the samizdat content became more politicized and played an important role in the dissident movement in the Soviet Union.

Samizdat periodicals

The earliest samizdat periodicals were short-lived and mainly literary in focus: *Sintaksis* (1959-1960), *Boomerang* (1960), and *Phoenix* (1961). From 1964 to 1970, communist historian Roy Medvedev regularly published *The Political Journal* (in Russian Политический дневник or political diary) which contained analytical materials that later appeared in the West.



Typewritten copy of the Russian human rights periodical *A Chronicle of Current Events*, Moscow

The longest-running and best-known samizdat periodical was *A Chronicle of Current Events* (Хроника текущих событий).[17] It was dedicated to defending human rights by providing accurate information about events in the USSR. Over 15 years from April 1968 to December 1982, 65 issues were published, all but two appearing in English translation.[18] The anonymous editors encouraged the readers to utilize the same distribution channels in order to send feedback and local information to be published in the subsequent issues.

The *Chronicle* was distinguished by its dry concise style and punctilious correction of the smallest error. Its regular rubrics were "Arrests, Searches, Interrogations", "Extra-judicial Persecution", "In Prisons and Camps", "Samizdat update", "News in brief", and "Persecution of Religion". Over time sections were added on the "Persecution of the Crimean Tatars", "Persecution and Harassment in Ukraine", "Lithuanian Events", and so on.

The *Chronicle* editors maintained that according to the 1936 Soviet Constitution then in force their publication was not illegal. The authorities did not accept the argument. Many people were harassed, arrested, imprisoned, or forced to leave the country for their involvement in the *Chronicle*'s production and distribution. The periodical's typist and first editor Natalya Gorbanevskaya was arrested and put in a psychiatric hospital for taking part in the August 1968 Red Square protest against the invasion of Czechoslovakia. In 1974 two of the periodical's close associates (Pyotr Yakir and Victor Krasin) were persuaded to denounce their fellow editors and the *Chronicle* on Soviet television. This put an end to the periodical's activities until Sergei Kovalev, Tatyana Khodorovich and Tatyana Velikanova openly announced their readiness to resume publication. After being arrested and imprisoned they were replaced, in turn, by others.

Another notable and long-running (about 20 issues in the period of 1972–1980) publication was the *refusenik* political and literary magazine "Евреи в СССР" (Yevrei v SSSR, *Jews in the USSR*), founded and edited by Alexander Voronel and, after his imprisonment, by Mark Azbel and Alexander Luntz.

The late 1980s, which were marked by an increase in informal organizations, saw a renewed wave of samizdat periodicals in the Soviet Union. Publications that were active during that time included *Glasnost* (edited by Sergei Grigoryants), *Ekspress-khronika* (*Express-Chronicle,* edited by Alexander Podrabinek), *Svobodnoye slovo* ("Free word", by the Democratic Union formed in May 1988), *Levyi povorot* ("Left turn", edited by Boris Kagarlitsky), *Otkrytaya zona* ("Open zone") of Club Perestroika, *Merkurii* ("Mercury", edited by Elena Zelinskaya) and *Khronograph* ("Chronograph", put out by a number of Moscow activists).[19]

Not all samizdat trends were liberal or clearly opposed to the Soviet regime and the literary establishment. "The *Russian Party*... was a very strange element of the political landscape of Leonid Brezhnev's era – feeling themselves practically dissidents, members of the *Russian Party* with rare exceptions took quite prestigious official positions in the world of writers or journalists," wrote Oleg Kashin in 2009.[20]

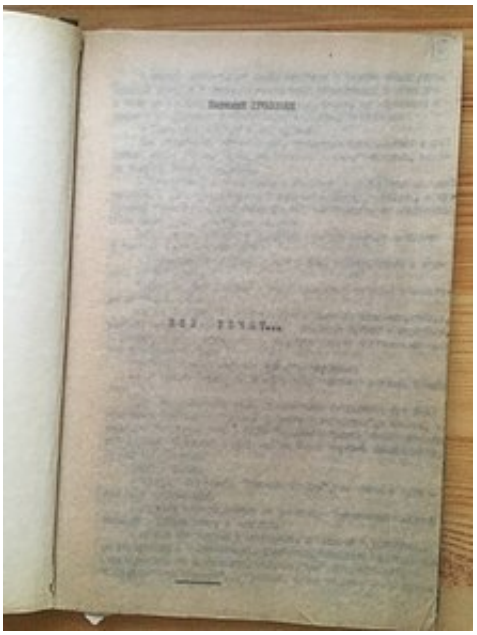
Genres of samizdat

Samizdat covered a large range of topics, mainly including literature and works focused on religion, nationality, and politics.[21] The state censored a variety of materials such as detective novels, adventure stories, and science fiction in addition to dissident texts, resulting in the underground publication of samizdat covering a wide range of topics. Though most samizdat authors directed their works towards the intelligentsia, samizdat included lowbrow genres in addition to scholarly works.[22]

Hyung-Min Joo carried out a detailed analysis of an archive of samizdat (Архив Самиздата, *Arkhiv Samizdata* by *Radio Liberty* sponsored by the US Congress and launched in the 1960s) and reported that of its 6,607 items 1% were literary, 17% nationalist, 20% religious, and 62% political, noting that as a rule literary works were not collected there, so their 1% (only 73 texts) are not representative of their real share of circulation. [21]

Literary

In its early years, samizdat defined itself as a primarily literary phenomenon which included the distribution of poetry, classic unpublished Russian literature, and famous 20th century foreign literature.[23] Literature played a key role in the existence of the samizdat phenomenon. For instance, the USSR's refusal to publish Boris Pasternak's epic novel, *Doctor Zhivago*, due to its focus on individual characters rather than the welfare of the state, led to the novel's subsequent underground publication. The fact that *Doctor Zhivago* contained no overt messages of dissidence highlighted the clumsiness of the state's censorship process, which caused a shift of readership away from state-published material.[24] Likewise, the circulation of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's famous work about the gulag system, *The Gulag Archipelago*, promoted a samizdat revival during the mid-1970s.[25] However, because samizdat by definition placed itself in opposition to the state, samizdat works became increasingly focused on the state's violation of human rights, before shifting towards politics.[26]



Typewritten edition of *Everything Flows* by Vasily Grossman, Moscow

Political

Typewritten edition of *National Frontiers and International Scientific Cooperation* by Zhores Medvedev.

The majority of samizdat texts were politically focused.[21] Most of the political texts were personal statements, appeals, protests, or information on arrests and trials.[27] Other political samizdat included analyses of various crises within the USSR, and suggested alternatives to the government's handling of events. No unified political thought existed within samizdat; rather, authors debated from a variety of perspectives. Samizdat written from socialist, democratic and Slavophile perspectives dominated the debates.[28]

Socialist authors compared the current state of the government to the Marxist ideals of socialism, and appealed to the state to fulfil its promises. Socialist samizdat writers hoped to give a "human face" to socialism by expressing dissatisfaction with the system of censorship.[29] Many socialists put faith in the potential for reform in the Soviet Union, especially because of the political liberalization which occurred under Dubček in Czechoslovakia. However, the Soviet Union invasion of a liberalizing Czechoslovakia in the events of "Prague Spring" crushed hopes for reform and stymied the power of the socialist viewpoint.[30] Because the state proved itself unwilling to reform, samizdat began to focus on alternative political systems.

Within samizdat, several works focused on the possibility of a democratic political system. Democratic samizdat possessed a revolutionary nature because of its claim that a fundamental shift in political structure was necessary to reform the state, unlike socialists who hoped to work within the same basic political framework to achieve change. Despite the revolutionary nature of the democratic samizdat authors, most democrats advocated moderate strategies for change. Most democrats believed in an evolutionary approach to achieving democracy in the USSR, and focused on advancing their cause along open, public routes, rather than underground routes.[31]

In opposition to both democratic and socialist samizdat, Slavophile samizdat grouped democracy and socialism together as Western ideals which were unsuited to the Eastern European mentality. Slavophile samizdat brought a nationalistic Russian perspective to the political debate and espoused the importance of cultural diversity and the uniqueness of Slavic cultures. Samizdat written from the Slavophile perspective attempted to unite the USSR under a vision of a shared glorious history of Russian autocracy and Orthodoxy. Consequently, the fact that the USSR encompassed a diverse range of nationalities and lacked a singular Russian history hindered the Slavophile movement. By espousing frequently racist and anti-Semitic views of Russian superiority through either purity of blood or the strength of the Russian Orthodoxy, the Slavophile movement in samizdat alienated readers and created divisions within the opposition.[32]

Religious

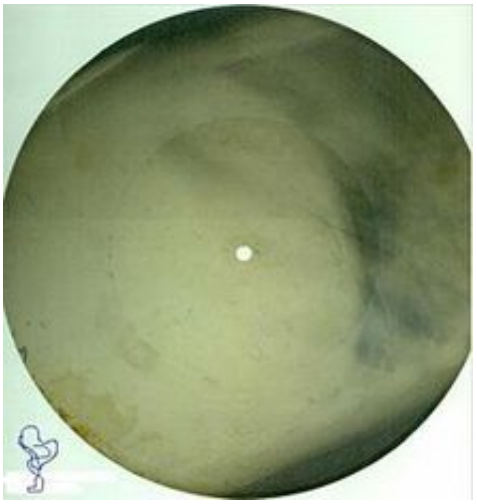
Predominantly Baptist, Orthodox, Pentecostalist, Catholic, and Adventist groups authored religious samizdat texts. Though a diversity of religious samizdat circulated, including three Buddhist texts, no known Islamic samizdat texts exist. The lack of Islamic samizdat appears incongruous with the large percentage of Muslims who resided in the USSR.[27]

Nationalist

Jewish samizdat importantly advocated for the end of repression of Jews in the USSR, and expressed a desire for exodus, the ability to leave Russia for an Israeli homeland. Jewish samizdat encouraged Zionism. The exodus movement also broached broader topics of human rights and freedoms of Soviet citizens.[33] However, a divide existed within Jewish samizdat between authors who advocated exodus and those who argued that Jews should remain in the USSR to fight for their rights. Crimean Tatars and Volga Germans also wrote samizdat protesting the state's refusal to allow them to return to their homelands following Stalin's death. Ukrainian samvydav opposed the assumed superiority of Russian culture over Ukrainian culture and condemned the forced assimilation of Ukrainians to the Russian language.[34] In addition to samizdat focused on Jewish, Ukrainian, and Crimean Tartar concerns, authors also advocated the causes of a great many other nationalities.

Contraband audio

Ribs, "music on the ribs", "bone records",[35] or *roentgenizdat* (*roentgen-* referring to X-ray, and *-izdat* implying samizdat) were homemade phonograph records, copied from forbidden recordings that were smuggled into the country. Their content was Western rock and roll, jazz, mambo, and other music, and music by banned emigres. They were sold and traded on the black market.


Homemade "bone record"

Each disc is a thin, flexible plastic sheet recorded with a spiral groove on one side, playable on a normal phonograph turntable at 78RPM. They were made from an inexpensive, available material: used X-ray film. Each large rectangular sheet was trimmed into a circle and individually recorded using an improvised recording lathe. The discs and their limited sound quality resemble the mass-produced flexi disc, and may have been inspired by it.

Magnitizdat, less common, is the distribution of sound recordings on audio tape, often of underground music groups, bards, or lectures (*magnit-* referring to magnetic tape).

Further influence

After Bell Labs changed its UNIX license to make dissemination of the source code illegal, the Lions Book had to be withdrawn, but illegal copies of it circulated for years. The act of copying the Lions book was often referred to as samizdat (see *Lions' Commentary on UNIX 6th Edition, with Source Code*). In hacker and computer jargon, the term samizdat was used for the dissemination of needed and hard to obtain documents or information.[36]

The hacker journal *PoC||GTFO* calls its distribution permissions *samizdat* license.[37]

Some samizdat periodicals in the Soviet Union

- *A-YA*
- *A Chronicle of Current Events*
- *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*
- *Phoenix*
- *Sintaksis*