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Textual hauntings: Samizdat reading practices

Abstract:

What does it mean to take the act of reading to the extreme? I will consider the act of reading illicitly under various countries within the Soviet Union (USSR), where the underground production, smuggling and consumption of illicit texts of all kinds took place on a huge scale over a span of decades. I focus on the reading practices of samizdat: underground, illegally produced or reproduced literature. I will explore samizdat not only as a text type, but as a wholistic practice that involves reading, textual production and maintenance, and social networking. I will explore the unique characteristics of these texts, the reading practices associated with them and the ways in which samizdat resists the contemporary notion of reading, and what a text is on a number of fronts.

Biographical note:

Marija Perić is a writer of fiction based in Naarm/Melbourne, Australia. She is a creative writing doctoral candidate at the University of Melbourne. Her research focuses on dangerous reading acts: limit cases of reading practice that challenge the notion of reading as a domesticated and virtuous act.

Keywords:

Reading practice, samizdat, haunting, underground literature.

Background

Literature, in particular poetry, was an artistic form that carried an enormous amount of significance across Soviet Bloc states. Stalin's description of writers as "engineers of the human soul" (Westerman, 2002, pp. 33–34) reflected the belief that literature was not only central to the regime, but also to the human psyche. In Phillip Oltermann's book *The Stasi Poetry Circle: The Creative Writing Class that Tried to Win the Cold War* (2022), he outlines a German Democratic Republic (GDR) operation attempted to harness poetry as a weapon of Soviet propaganda. The GDR culture minister at the time, Johannes Becher, a great lover of poetry and a poet himself, believed that the sonnet presented not only a powerful form with the potential to shape the state, but that its three-part structure exactly mirrored the Marxist view of historical progress and therefore might be used as a tool to proliferate Soviet socialist ideology (Oltermann, 2022). Of course, by no means all – or even most – poetry was seen as desirable reading material for model Soviet citizens. In practice, only a narrow field of styles was acceptable, generally in the form of state-sanctioned socialist realism. This strict limitation of literary styles took place alongside the widespread banning of poems, novels, plays and other texts, as well as the execution or incarceration in Gulags of writers and their families. In response to the atmosphere of censorship and repression, the production, consumption and circulation of non-sanctioned literature went underground in a phenomenon known as samizdat (сам себя издат/*samsebiaizdat*/“published yourself”). The practice of samizdat production involved the illegal printing and/or reproduction of banned books, either through serialised journals or as standalone texts. The reproduction of the texts was often performed through handwriting or typing the work in carbon copies, and later photocopying them.

The origin of samizdat is generally traced to the early 20th century Russian poet Nikolai Glazkov, who would hand-type and bind his work for distribution among his friends. On the flyleaf of these homemade books, in the place where the publication name and logo would appear in a traditionally published book, Glazkov would type *samsebiaizdat* (“self-published” or “self-publishing house”) (Komaromi, 2004, p. 598) [1]. *Samsebiaizdat* is a pun on the commonly abbreviated names of commercial publishing houses: *Litizat* (Literary Publishing House) or *Gosidat* (State Publishing House) (von Zitzewitz, 2020, p. 6). Samizdat texts, such as those I will discuss in this article, were mostly produced during the period from the 1950s to the mid-1980s (Komaromi, 2004, p. 598).

Samizdat was common across various Soviet Bloc states and flourished throughout the Soviet era. Ann Komaromi, a samizdat scholar, points out that this period can be differentiated from the rest of the much longer history [2] of unofficial publishing due to its particular political climate and technological means of textual production. The phenomenon of samizdat existed across many states that fell under Soviet rule, but in this article my focus is primarily on accounts of samizdat from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. It is important to note that there were regional differences in the political landscapes across these states in terms of social structures and state tolerance for dissidence (Steiner, 2008, p. 615). Different Soviet states also used different terminology to refer to illicit, non-traditionally published texts in circulation. In the Polish People's Republic

the term *bibula* (“blotting paper”) was used to describe this text type and practice, in part because the association of the Russian language term samizdat was undesirable and controversial. The term samizdat was however used in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (Parfianowicz-Vertun, 2014).

To complicate matters further, coexisting with samizdat was also the phenomenon of *tamizdat* (“published there”; tam: *tam*, “there”), which refers to books that were published abroad, then smuggled back into the USSR and circulated (often in samizdat versions) [3]. Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*, the manuscript of which was dramatically smuggled out of the Soviet Union (USSR) by the Italian publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli (see Feltrinelli, 2001) is perhaps the most well-known example of this text type [4].

The distinctive reading practices of samizdat represent an important era of culturally and politically situated book history that has not yet been widely examined. It is worth noting that I began researching this article well before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Given the ongoing repression from Russian authorities, there is no doubt that repressive controls around reading and texts in the former Soviet states warrants further study beyond the time range that I examine here.

Aim

In this article I am interested in the experience of reading samizdat texts illicitly in various totalitarian Soviet Bloc states. What are the dangers of this reading practice? Why perform this reading, and what are some of its unique characteristics? What might this reading practice reveal about contemporary reading practices? What are the poetics of this unique literary form? I have chosen to focus only on the act of reading samizdat texts, not their production. The nature of this world of illicit literature is a complex one, involving an enormous industry and a number of networks that sprang up around producing, circulating, and reading samizdat texts, as well as specific reading practices that are unique to this social context.

In this article I draw on a wide range of research by samizdat scholars that provide primary research into illicit reading practices through interviews with readers. I will also draw on interview articles with writers and readers that give firsthand accounts of reading and/or producing samizdat. The work of the Russian literature scholar Josephine von Zitzewitz, in particular forms a strong foundation for this article. As part of the research for her book, *The Culture of Samizdat: Literature and Underground Networks in the Late Soviet Union* (2020), von Zitzewitz, together with Gennady Kuzovkin, a historian, archivist and director of the History of Dissent in the USSR programme at the Memorial Society in Moscow [5], designed a survey about samizdat reading experiences. The survey was hosted online by the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages at the University of Cambridge and received 155 responses between 2017 and 2019. As von Zitzewitz (2020) notes, this survey is the first large-scale attempt to gather data from “ordinary” samizdat readers (p. 26). I also draw on Donald J. Raleigh’s *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia’s Cold War Generation* (2011), which includes interviews with sixty participants from Moscow and Saratov who graduated

high school in the year 1967. The interviews were conducted in the Russian language between 2001 and 2008 in a combination of face-to-face interviews at Raleigh's home; interviewees' homes and workplaces; cafés and other public spaces such as parks; in Moscow, Saratov, Montreal, Portland (Oregon) and Ames (Iowa). Some interviews were conducted over the telephone for interviewees located in Cyprus and Israel.

From a theoretical perspective, I draw on theories of haunting. I am interested in particular about the temporal aspect of haunting that is discussed by several critics. Jacques Derrida (1994) uses the term *hauntology*, initially in *Spectres of Marx*, to describe the way the ghost of Marxism would haunt Europe from beyond the grave. Derrida first gave the lecture that makes up *Spectres of Marx* in 1993 [6], only a few years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Central to the concept of the ghost and the experience of haunting/hauntedness, is time. Something living in the past has strayed into the present, where it does not belong. The incontrovertible order of time has been transgressed. Derrida (1994) often refers to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in particular the Prince's line about time being "out of joint". Sociology scholar Avery Gordon, in her work *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008), posits the idea that haunting is characterised by the presence of unresolved past social violence, and its clamour to be addressed. Like Derrida, Gordon describes the essence of haunting as a temporal disruption of the linearity of time, noting that haunting:

Alters the experience of being in linear time, the way we separate the past, present and the future ... things are not in their assigned places, when people meant to be invisible or absent or dead show up without any sign of leaving, when the present seamlessly becoming the future gets jammed up. (Gordon, Hite & Jara, 2020, p. 338)

Haunting is central to the samizdat practice and its textual objects. On one hand, the practice, network and textual objects of samizdat operate within a spectral parallel world, hidden and beyond the purview of the Soviet establishment. On the other, the samizdat network, particularly when circulating *tamizdat* texts, allowed for the ghostly presence of the non-Soviet world to pass through the iron curtain. Here, the texts might be ghosts, but they might have the power to suspend the world in which they are read – the Soviet world – behind a curtain, and perhaps for this world to temporarily become spectral as the reader enters the world of the book. Samizdat texts and practice allowed for free passage across boundaries and between worlds, just as ghosts move freely through time and between the realms of the living and the dead.

What is samizdat?

Before I move on to consider the reading practices around this form of illicit literature, I would like to first outline a few definitions of this phenomenon. There is some disagreement about what the term samizdat refers to: is it a text or a text type? A publishing practice? A reading practice? A proscribed set of texts or a state of mind? (Kind-Kovács & Labov, 2013, p. 20). Although the term may appear to refer to a text type or a body of texts, von Zitzewitz (2020) considers it "a reductive interpretation" to conceptualise samizdat as merely referring to the textual object in this way (p. 7–8). Rather, von Zitzewitz defines it as "a literary process" (p.

13). Similarly, Friederike Kind-Kovács and Jessie Labov (2013) consider samizdat a “media form” (p. 21), and Komaromi (2008) refers to it as a “textual culture”. This is because samizdat involves an entire ongoing network of production, reception and circulation: from the first generation of the text – either by way of typing or photocopying, and in some cases hand-annotating – to the distribution, reading, redistribution, repair and recirculation of the text. All of these parts of the network and the life cycle are crucial to samizdat and cannot be separated out from the object of the text.

Samizdat texts are often characterised as highly oppositional and political. . Although some samizdat texts were of this kind – which Komaromi (2004) refers to as “idealised” samizdat (p. 597) –the range within samizdat texts was much more varied and complex, and included everything from poetry to pornography to fiction (Kind-Kovács & Labov, 2013, p. 2; Komaromi, 2004, p. 606).

Why read samizdat?

On the face of it, the answer to this question is a simple one: because no access to these texts existed other than through the samizdat network. But there are also additional reasons behind the choice to undertake this type of reading. Samizdat has often been seen as the voice of “repressed truth about current events, history, and social issues” (Komaromi, 2008, p. 630). Regular samizdat publications such as the long-running journal *Chronicle of Current Events* (*Khronika tekushchikh sobytii*) [7] certainly fulfilled this function, as did literary texts that appeared in samizdat, such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* (1974).

Because of the oppositional status of some samizdat texts, together with their illegal status, some scholars argue that performing this kind of reading became an act of political opposition. Komaromi (2004) defines engagement with samizdat as “essentially subversive”, claiming that this practice acted as “the lifeblood of all Soviet dissident culture of the late period” (p. 618). Similarly, historian Piotr Wciślik (2021) characterises samizdat as being “about bottom-up political action and ideas rooted in the lifeworld of the participants” (p. 135), and, as cultural studies scholar Weronika Parfianowicz-Vertun (2017) writes: “The very act of reading [samizdat] was the meaning. It was the sign of engagement and of the political contestation” (p. 47). The act of reading becomes a political act, and one in which “the more efforts one took to get a text and read it, the more heroic was the gesture” (p. 47).

But Jiřina Šmejkalová (2011), among others [8], notes that in many cases the word “gesture” may be the operative term here, as the action of reading samizdat might serve as a substitute for more public or political action, where:

The excitement of indulging in forbidden fruit constituted a kind of act of resistance, a substitute for action for those who simply lacked the willingness or the courage to engage in open political protest. Sharing samizdat texts with close friends and family members, or just reading it, could make a person whose attitude towards the regime was otherwise apathetic feel like they were somehow making a stand. (p. 112)

A present-day parallel of this idea would be signing online petitions rather than participating in other forms of political action. Other scholars argue that the politicisation of samizdat reading is little more than, as Komaromi (2004) puts it, an “idealised characterisation [that] made a compelling Cold War political narrative” that is deployed primarily by non-Soviet critics and scholars (p. 597). Anthropologist Serguei Oushakine (2001) has challenged the notion of samizdat texts, readers and writers as performing any truly oppositional function at all. Firstly, Oushakine argues that “criticism of the Soviet regime was not [the] primary aim” of samizdat but rather that it was “an attempt to overcome stylistic restrictions of socialist realism” (p. 195), as if these two points are not entwined. Oushakine then goes on to argue that rather than challenging the state, samizdat presented a mimicry of the regime’s rhetoric, which it “echoed and amplified...rather than positioning itself outside of or underneath it” (p. 192). Kind-Kovács and Labov (2013) point out that a view such as Oushakine’s could only have appeared after 1989, when the discussion of samizdat had to a great extent been depoliticised (p. 5). However, Komaromi (2004) argues that regardless of the content of these texts, and whether or not they fell into the “idealised” form of dissident literature, the experience of reading samizdat, simply by the virtue of the fact that they were underground texts, is different to reading sanctioned texts (p. 603). Šmejkalová (2011) describes the differences in this reading experience as almost transcendental, “a kind of orgiastic experience that stood out from other ordinary experiences, in the way that festive occasions stand out from everyday events” (pp. 112–113).

Whether the act of reading samizdat is a political act, political inaction wearing the mask of a dissident act, or a more intense form of reading, it is clear that readers embarked on this reading practice for reasons more than simply to have access to information restricted by the state.

What is the violence in this act of reading?

The question of whether or not this reading practice was seen as a dissident act by the state, and therefore punishable as one, is the essence of the violence associated with this reading practice. Šmejkalová (2011) states that because “the reading of samizdat largely lay beyond the direct control or penalising power of the authorities” readers of samizdat faced “relatively little real risk” of punishment (p. 112). However, several scholars point out that the samizdat form and practice involved an entanglement between reading and writing, and that most samizdat readers would likely have also participated in the creation or some aspect of the production of the text. In von Zitzewitz’s survey of samizdat readers, only 12 of the 122 respondents report engaging with samizdat through reading alone. This is in comparison with the 71 respondents who report that they had also had some role in reproducing samizdat (von Zitzewitz, 2020, p. 59).

Engaging in the production and distribution of samizdat texts was liable to be met with punishment of some kind, if not necessarily sentencing under Article 70 (1) of the Soviet Criminal Code: “anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda” (von Zitzewitz, 2020, p. 44). As the dissident poet and editor of *The Chronicle of Current Events*, Natalya Gorbanevskaya (1977)

points out in an interview in *Issue*, a range of punishments could await an individual who had been found to be producing samizdat:

For example, I read a xerox copy of *Tales of the Troika* by the Strugatsky brothers ... [Xeroxing] entails ‘abuse of an official position’ ... it is a criminal matter: malfeasance ... If a xerox is ordered in a library, there will be a stamp to say it has been done in a library. But if there is no such stamp it means someone did it at work, where he has the right to make xerox copies only officially, only of what is authorised for work ... if he is caught ... it is not a political matter because he is copying published material, but it can be a criminal matter, or he can be dismissed from his job or deprived of access to the photocopying machine. There can be various degrees of punishment. (p. 33)

The punishments mentioned by Gorbanevskaya may not necessarily be severe, but, as she notes, were of varying degrees.

The Soviet Criminal Code contained no articles against samizdat specifically, however, many of those arrested for any kind of political activity, including for the production and distribution of non state-sanctioned texts, were sentenced to Article 70 (von Zitzewitz, 2020, p. 44). Severe punishments were meted out against those who were sentenced for producing and distributing samizdat. Jiří Gruntorád, the current director of Prague’s Libri Prohibiti was jailed from 1980 to 1984; Jaromír Šavřda, journalist, poet, and fiction writer, was jailed from 1978 to 1981 (Šmejkalová, 2011, p. 112). Von Zitzewitz’s survey of samizdat readers also reflects more severe punishment encountered by the respondents. Of her 122 respondents, 34 report that either themselves or one of their family or friends had experienced some form of persecution for samizdat. These ranged from being summoned for a “chat” with the KGB (14 mentions), house searches, (10 mentions), losing one’s job or other work-related punishments (5 mentions), exclusion from university (3 mentions). Seven respondents report that either they or one of their immediate family had served prison sentences of between one and seven years (von Zitzewitz, 2020, p. 44).

The tight entanglement between the reading and production of samizdat texts brought the threat of punishment to the front of readers’ minds. Even if the risk of severe punishment may have been statistically low for the average reader – particularly for the small number that were readers only – the threat still remained. This risk, of the threatening fist of the state that was perhaps poised to come down on you is one violence associated with this reading practice that would have affected all readers, not only those that were the actual victims of punishment by the state. When it was not realised violence, this violence was of a ghostly, imagined kind. Samizdat readers were always accompanied by the silent, formless shape of the state, hovering over their shoulder, like a malevolent ghost. The potentiality of this violence profoundly shaped the unique reading practice of samizdat texts.

Reading practices

Secrecy

Because of the risk of punishment for reading samizdat, either perceived or otherwise, secrecy was central to the practice of reading samizdat. Samizdat texts were not the sorts of texts one carried openly as one moved through the city, or read during one's commute or lunch break. Samizdat was read privately – in homes or other private locations – always with a weather eye out for interruption. Code words and euphemisms developed around samizdat. As historian and activist Lyudmila Mikhaylovna Alexeyeva, notes, questions such as: “Have you finished the pie my wife gave you last night?” asked among friends were as likely to be often enquiries about samizdat texts as about baked goods (as cited in Boobbyer, 2005, p. 134).

Secrecy also surrounded the sourcing of samizdat texts, which moved through illicit channels. Samizdat readers had to be “in the know” to a certain extent, and be connected with other readers in order to get their hands on the texts. Samizdat was particularly difficult to access outside of metropolitan centres. One participant in Raleigh's oral history, Aleksandr Trubnikov, describes being aware of samizdat and wanting to read it, but not knowing anyone in his provincial area who could supply it. “It was simply very hard to get hold of in Saratov,” Trubnikov notes (as cited in Raleigh, 2011, p. 181). Von Zitzewitz's (2020) survey results reflect the closely-networked nature of samizdat, with the majority of samizdat readers reporting that they knew many other samizdat readers (p. 55). Samizdat readers, von Zitzewitz notes, tended to be more the “sociable networker rather than the proverbial solitary bookworm” (p. 55). They needed not only to know other readers, but also to win their trust. Commentator Jonathan Bolton (2012) describes samizdat as “a bit like a club that you could join by invitation only, or only once you had established your trustworthiness or ‘oppositional’ credentials” (p. 107).

A network and collective of like-minded readers lies at the heart of samizdat, even if the practice of reading was often conducted in solitude. The very *raison d'être* of samizdat was quite opposed to how citizens of non-totalitarian states, like myself in Australia, tend to think of printed texts circulating. Most of the books that I read, I buy from a shop. After I have read them, I usually put them on my bookshelf for possible rereading at a later time. Sometimes I lend books to friends – sometimes the books are returned to me, sometimes not. But most of the time, my books are more static than active objects and they spend more time sitting on a shelf (the bookshop's, mine, my friends') than being read. This is at odds with samizdat texts, which, as Šmejkalová (2011) points out, were more active texts and were “intended to circulate continuously within a particular community” (p. 111). These texts spent almost no time sitting on shelves, and instead were either being read, transported to a new reader or being repaired. An in-demand library book is perhaps the most similar textual object in an Australian context. The life of a samizdat text was continually circulating through the hidden networks to individual readers, just as blood cells continually circulate through the blood vessels to different organs in the body, sustaining them.

Reading on the clock, and collective readings

The constantly circulating nature of samizdat texts meant that this reading practice was in some ways marked by a hauntological return to older and more collective pre-modern reading

practices. On occasions that samizdat readers were lucky enough to get their hands on a samizdat text, it was always for a limited time, often just for a single night. This time pressure added a unique element to the practice of reading samizdat. Several samizdat readers report routinely reading through the night and calling in sick to work the next day in order to finish a samizdat text in time and hand it on to the next reader (Bolton, 2012, p. 108; von Zitzewitz, 2020, pp. 16–17; Parfianowicz-Vertun, 2014). As Šmejkalová (2011) points out, this time pressure was unlike “traditional or standard” reading practices where the time allocated to reading tends to be dictated by the readers’ daily schedule (p. 111). In standard reading practices, readers have control of the time spent with the text. In the case of samizdat, however, the “intense reading” was due to various pressures (social, legal, political) that were – in a sense – external to the personal life of the reader (Šmejkalová, 2011, p. 111). In this reading we might say, it was the text that controlled the reader rather than the other way around.

Some samizdat readers solved the problem of the small window of availability of samizdat texts by engaging in collective readings. Various samizdat readers describe meeting in groups to read, handing the pages of the samizdat text around the room one by one (Boobbyer, 2005, p. 134; Cseh-Varga, 2016, p. 90; Feldbrugge, 1975, p. 18; von Zitzewitz, 2020, p. 57). In *Conscience, Dissent and Reform in Soviet Russia* (2005), Phillip Boobbyer recounts the mathematician and dissident Tatyana Velikanova’s recollection of the collective reading of Solzhenitsyn’s *Cancer Ward* as a collective “in a room with a large number of people, reading each page separately and passing it on to the next person” (p. 134). One respondent of von Zitzewitz’s (2020) survey describes a similar situation when an eagerly awaited samizdat text became available:

I don’t remember who gave us the *Archipelago* ... I phoned those same faithful girlfriends; I didn’t have to explain anything. When somebody phoned you just like that and invited you with the words: ‘Come today, my mum has made a cake,’ you wouldn’t ask any questions, but get into a taxi and go. All three volumes were typed out on very thin onion-skin paper. They had been given to us for a very short time. And so we sat up all night, enveloped in silence, and passed each other the pages we had read. (p. 57)

Other samizdat readers undertook collective reading sessions in which texts were read aloud: “We would read Voinovich aloud, I remember that,” one respondent recounts in von Zitzewitz’s (2020) survey (p. 57).

Whether the collective readings of samizdat were performed by reading in silence, or by reading out loud, this reading practice challenges contemporary notions of what it means to read and is an example of older reading forms breaking through time to haunt this reading practice. Reading today tends to be a solitary if not a private practice. Book and reading culture researcher Elizabeth Long (1992) argues that the very understanding of reading in the modern context tends to be “governed by a ... powerful picture of the solitary reader” (p. 105).

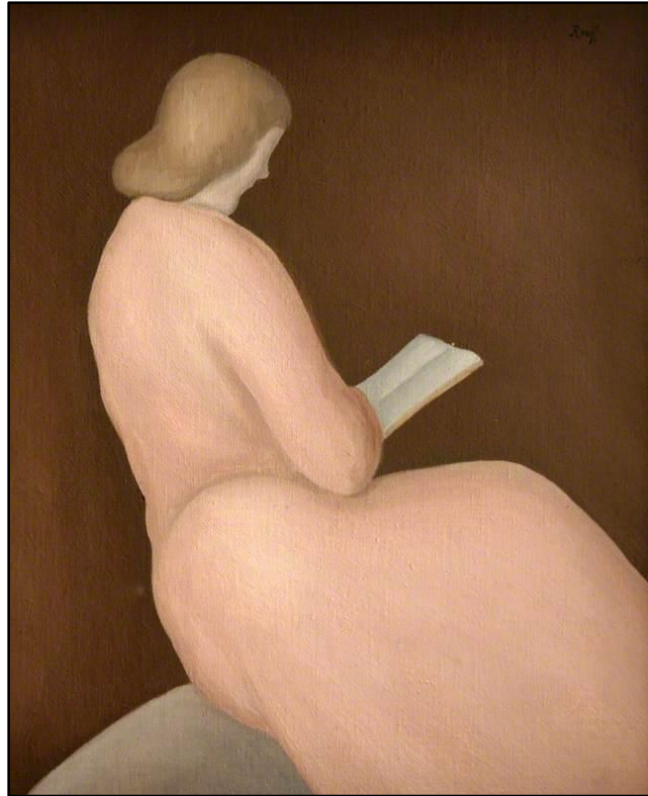


Figure 1. Albert Reuss, *Woman Reading*, 1943.

Long argues that this notion of reading is reflected in literary theory, for example, reader-response theory, with its central idea of “the ideal reader”. It is also reflected in the historical iconography of reading. The solitary reader can be found depicted as early as the seventeenth century, with Rembrandt’s *St. Jerome Reading* (1634). Images of the solitary reader extend through to the twenty-first century through works like James McNeill Whistler’s *Reading by Lamplight* (1859) and Albert Reuss’s *Woman Reading* (1943), and Nancy Cadogan’s *Where The Wild Things Grow II* (2021),



Figure 2. Rembrandt (Rembrandt van Rijn), *St. Jerome Reading*, 1634.



Figure 3. James McNeill Whistler, *Reading by Lamplight*, 1859.



Figure 4. Nancy Cadogan, *Where The Wild Things Grow II*, 2021.

In images such as these, Long (1992) argues “the reader ... is withdrawn from the world and suspended from human community and human action” (p. 105). As Šmejkalová (2011) points out, such images of solitude are opposed to the practice of collective readings of samizdat where rather than readers being withdrawn from human community and action, they were instead in the midst of just these things (p. 111).

Of course, there exist reading practices older than those depicted in the work by Rembrandt. There is strong evidence of collective oral reading practices dating from ancient Greece and Rome, through the Middle Ages and the early modern period, through to the modern era (Coleman, 1996, pp. 1–2). As medieval literature and culture scholar Joyce Coleman (1996) notes, this collective reading practice is often equated with low literacy causing orality and literacy to be placed at opposite poles of a continuum (also see Briggs & Burke, 2009, p. 15), suggesting that this reading mode was driven by necessity. However, Coleman (1996) argues that oral collective reading was the “modality of choice” rather than a practice dictated by circumstance, citing the fact that all social classes, including the nobility, engaged in this reading practice (p. 2). Various scholars have noted that with the rise of literacy, particularly following the advent of the printing press, oral reading practices declined (Lyons, 1999; Briggs & Burke, 2009, p. 56; Burke, 2000). Indeed, the poet Anna Akhmatova, a prominent reader and writer of samizdat, describes the entire Soviet period as “pre-Gutenberg”, a description which Komaromi (2008) notes is often invoked in relation to late-Soviet culture (p. 632; also see Skilling, 1982). Media studies scholar Katalin Cseh-Varga (2016) and Komaromi (2008,

p. 634) note that the reading and circulation practices of samizdat are in some respects closer to an older oral practice and culture than to more modern textual cultures. Cseh-Varga (2016) describes samizdat as “immediately performative”, and notes that the practices of samizdat were “visual, embodied and oral” (p. 90) as well as textual. This echoing of past time through the form and practice of samizdat illustrates its hauntological aspect. This aspect of samizdat also recalls Gordon’s (2020) notion of the temporal rupture as the essence of haunting.

However, Komaromi (2008), echoing Moscow conceptualist Lev Rubenstein, has defined samizdat more broadly as “extra-Gutenberg” – a definition that Komaromi argues is based on the instability of the samizdat text. Other samizdat scholars, such as Kind-Kovács and Labov (2013) and Schmidt (2013), argue that many of the textual and reading practices of samizdat were more futuristic than anachronistic, and presage many of the characteristics of the internet. Possibilities for self-publishing; horizontal, decentralised flows of information; and a (relatively) unrestricted public sphere are all characteristics shared by samizdat and the internet (Schmidt 2013).

Whether this hauntological reading practice is anachronistic or futuristic, the reason for engaging in this collective reading practice may be as much socially motivated as by necessity. I would suggest that the samizdat practice of collective reading may have been as much about the establishment of a feeling of community as about access to the texts. By this I do not mean that samizdat was necessarily about dissidence per se (although in some cases this was true), but rather that there is the possibility that the collective reading practice was as much about fostering and strengthening social connection under a punitive totalitarian regime as about accessing the banned texts. Cseh-Varga (2016) defines samizdat as being inseparable from its social networks (p. 97), and I would add, a force with which to strengthen such networks in the face of oppression.

Poetics

The abject textual object

Samizdat poetics were heavily entwined with the materiality of these texts. The most striking and characteristic visual element of samizdat texts, which was remarked upon by many samizdat readers, was their abject and “wretched” (Komaromi, 2004, p. 603) physical state. The degraded state of the texts affected both the experience of reading samizdat and the meaning conveyed, and formed a basis of the poetics of these texts. Samizdat was usually printed on very thin, often translucent, tissue or onion paper, sometimes even cigarette paper (Pavlosky as cited in Morev, 2015), usually in carbon copy (Bolton, 2012, p. 104). These practicalities were devised to accommodate the scarcity of paper and make the texts easier to conceal (Komaromi, 2004, p. 599). Very small print size that was crowded onto the page and printed with faint ink were other visual characteristics of samizdat – contingencies to navigate material scarcity (Parfianowicz-Vertun, 2017 p. 47; Kind-Kovács, 2014, p. 123).

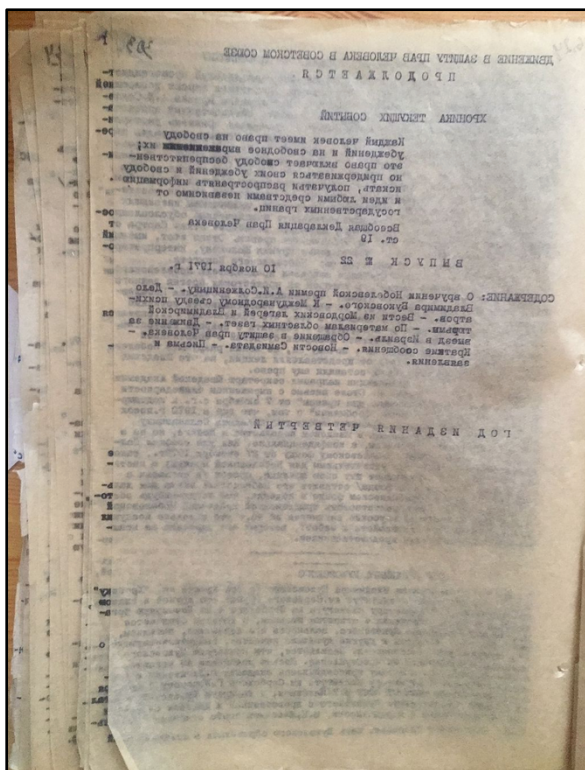


Figure 5. Typewritten copy of the Russian language samizdat human rights periodical, *Chronicle of Current Events*. Issue No 22, dated 10 November 1971. Front cover, several pages visible. Moscow, 2017.

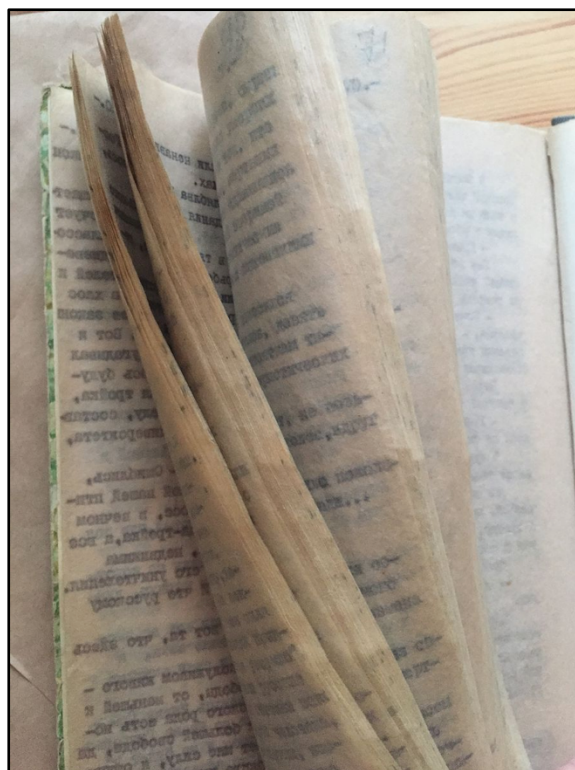


Figure 6. Typewritten Russian language samizdat. Moscow, 2017.

Traditionally printed texts contain visual elements, such as kerning and serifs, that are designed for readability, to ease the readers' eye along the lines of text. Samizdat texts were not concerned with reader comfort, but to present the letters on the page as economically as possible. As a consequence, samizdat was notoriously uncomfortable to read. When these texts were produced on a typewriter, the text was crowded and faint, and the technological advance to a photocopier scarcely gave a better outcome, with copies of copies of copies resulting in faded, blotchy and grainy texts. All of this had the effect of making samizdat texts "barely legible or even illegible" (Parfianowicz-Vertun, 2018, p. 191; also see Parfianowicz-Vertun 2017, p. 47; Parfianowicz-Vertun, 2014; Komaromi, 2004; Kind-Kovács & Labov, 2013, p. 9).

The effect of the material character of samizdat on the act of reading was significant, and indeed for many readers of samizdat, inextricable from its meaning. As Glanc (2018) notes "even after decades many readers identify the reading experience with the physical attributes of the copy they had available" (pp. 214–215). Russian journalist David Bonavia, for example, describes "the feel and smell" of samizdat as foremost in his memory of these texts: "those wedges of tissue-fine typing paper – with blurred carbon print on them, folded and re-folded, rubbed on clothing and smelling of sweat" (as cited in Kind-Kovács 2013, p. 124). Russian actor and journalist Vladimir Berezin recounts his experience of reading *Lolita* in samizdat,

and the way that the physicality allowed the “stolen air” of the text to be preserved, “even in the hard-to-read xerox on thin paper, but with the traces of mysterious copy rollers like the tracks of insane Humbert's automobile tires” (as cited in Komaromi, 2004, p. 616).

Although the importance of the materiality of a particular text might be true for any reader of any text, in samizdat this identification tends to focus on the degraded state of the text. In many accounts of reading samizdat readers describe the discomfort of navigating the physicality of these texts. Czech literary critic Miroslav Červenka describes the reading of samizdat as a “never-ending torture” (as cited in Parfianowicz-Vertun, 2014, p. 47). Czech journalist and dissident Josef Mlejnek recalls reading George Orwell in a samizdat edition “the twentieth copy of a copy, almost illegible even if you knew the trick of inserting a sheet of paper between the pages” (as cited in Parfianowicz-Vertun, 2014, p. 48). Komaromi (2004) points out that it is in this degraded physical form of samizdat, and the labour and pain that surrounded it, that its greater meaning can be found: “the wretched material character of the samizdat text evokes the deep abyss between the material and the ideal and between the desire for culture and the fear of its destruction” (p. 615).

These physical characteristics of scarcity and contingency also gave rise to a visual style that acted as a sign for a particular DIY, oppositional, underground aesthetic (Komaromi, 2004, p. 618). As I have noted, despite the fact that not all samizdat texts were oppositional or dissident texts, and copies of texts on subjects as workaday as recipes and health remedies were as common as dissident texts (von Zitzewitz, 2020, p. 11), an aura of oppositionality generally surrounds the notion of samizdat. This oppositionality is crystallised in various visual signs; the faded, uneven print and the suggestion of sticking typewriter keys has come to represent an “aesthetic of deformation”, as Kind-Kovács and Labov put it (2013, p. 9). but I would argue that in this aesthetic frame, the deformation stands primarily for oppositionality. This oppositionality also extends from the text itself to the reader engaging with it, and can become an outward concrete expression of their own political position.

Komaromi notes that this aesthetic, which Kind-Kovács and Labov (2013) term *deformation*, is significant because it is a visual sign of samizdat's departure from the “official” narratives of sanctioned, traditionally published texts (Komaromi, 2004, p. 609). There is an oft-repeated Soviet joke about a grandmother (or mother, but it is always a woman) labouring away at a typewriter, typing pages and pages. When asked what she is doing, she replies that she is having trouble interesting her daughter (or son/grandson/granddaughter) in reading the great classic *War and Peace*. The trouble isn't that the book is too long, but that it is too official. The woman is forced to type it out because the young person refuses to read anything but samizdat (Komaromi, 2004, p. 609; von Zitzewitz, 2020, p. 68). Official narratives, signified by visual coherence and professional neatness, were deemed worthless by readers; only the degraded visual form of samizdat could possibly have been the carrier of anything worthwhile (Komaromi, 2004, p. 609).

The significance of samizdat aesthetic as a sign for oppositionality also held true outside Soviet Bloc regimes. In the case of some samizdat texts being officially published abroad (*tamizdat*) some non-Soviet publishers, aware of the meaning of the samizdat aesthetic, chose to publish these texts in the same degraded visual style, with, for example, covers that mimicked non-typographical samizdat covers (Kind-Kovács, 2013, p. 135). Many Soviet émigré writers continued to adopt samizdat aesthetics when publishing outside the Soviet Bloc states. The almanac of Soviet literature, *Apollon 77*, published in Paris in 1977, preserves many characteristics of the samizdat aesthetic: crooked typewritten lines with hand-annotations and paper of poor-quality appearance.

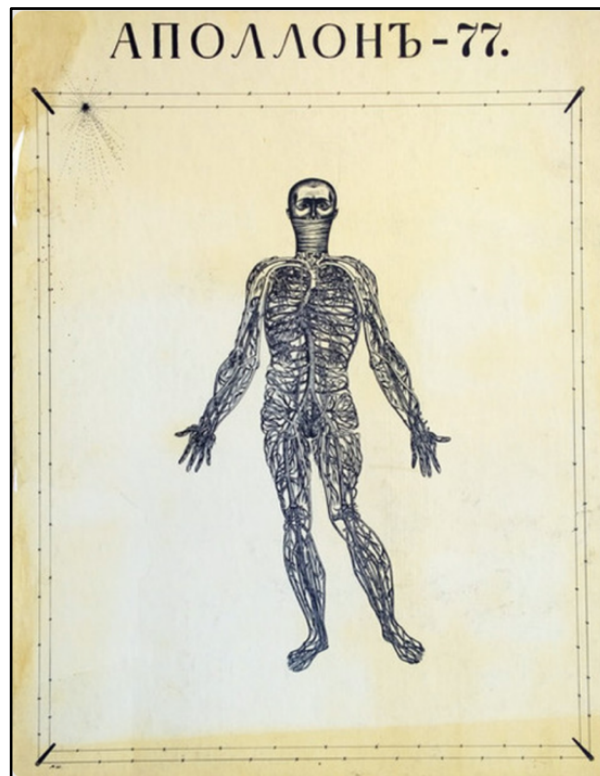


Figure 7. *Apollon 77*, cover, Paris, 1977.

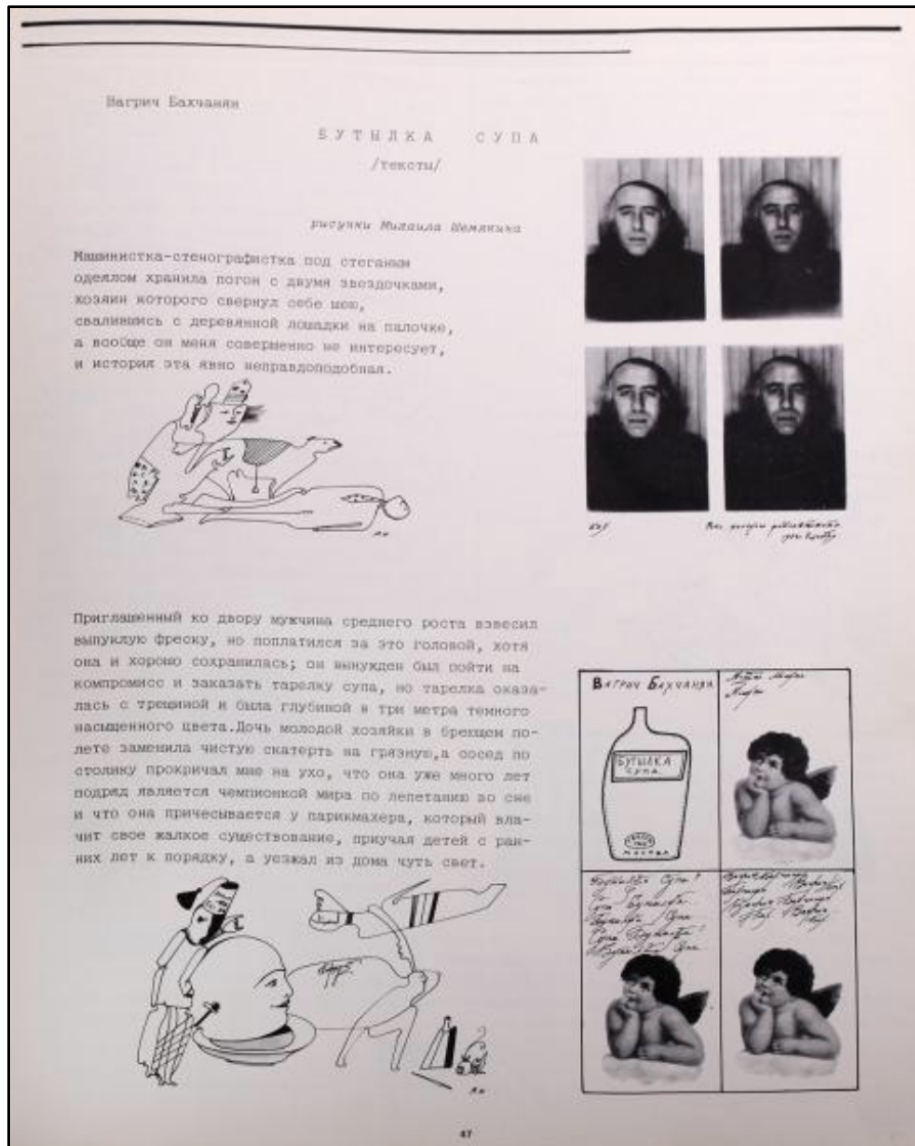


Figure 8. Apollon 77, Paris, 1977.

The Russian émigré writer and artist Konstantin Kuzminsky also maintains the samizdat style after his emigration to New York, where this aesthetic signals the radical avant-garde character of his work. Kuzminsky was a member of the NO!art movement – a radical, avant-garde, anti-consumerist anti-art movement founded in the late 1950s.

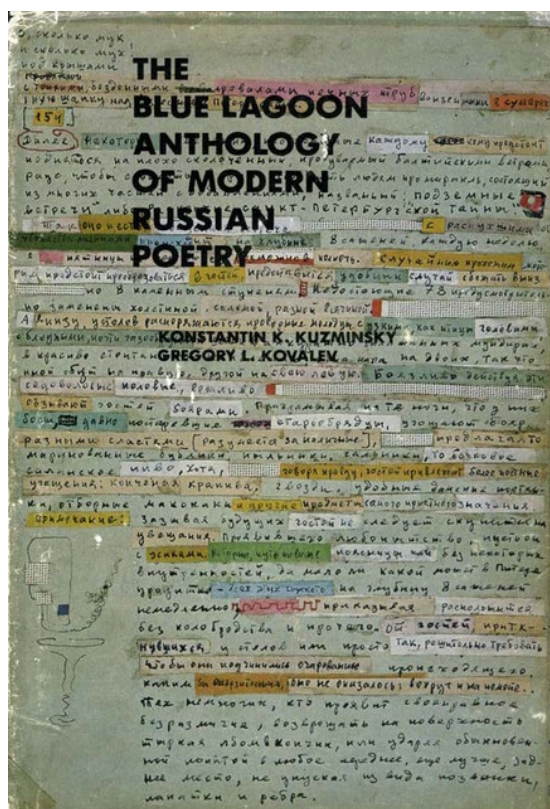


Figure 9. The Blue Lagoon Anthology of Modern Russian Poetry, cover, New York, 1981.

For example, his poetry collection *The Blue Lagoon Anthology of Modern Russian Poetry*, published in 1981 in New York in collaboration with Gregory Kovalev, draws heavily on the samizdat aesthetic. This aesthetic, signifying a DIY, oppositional ethos, and politically subversive material disseminated through personal networks carries over into the punk subculture (Bestley, 2020, p. 4).

Unreliability/flexibility

As well as each physical text being visually unique, the content of samizdat texts was similarly inconsistent. Samizdat texts were notoriously full of typographical and other errors (Červenka, 2018), but the differences between different “editions” of samizdat texts, or between samizdat and traditionally published texts, extended further than error. Von Zitzewitz (2020) notes that it was common for samizdat typists to take “liberties with texts, making decisions that are normally the prerogative of authors or editors” (p. 17). One samizdat reader in von Zitzewitz’s survey reports that she had a particularly cherished samizdat copy of Anna Akhmatova’s *Requiem*, which circulated a long time unofficially prior to being traditionally published. But when the book finally did make it into (traditional) print, this reader was bewildered to discover that her samizdat copy “didn’t correspond to the final published text” (as cited in von Zitzewitz, 2020, p. 17). Samizdat typists would at times only include selected parts of texts, making large omissions due to time constraints, or for aesthetic or other reasons. One samizdat typist who was a respondent in von Zitzewitz’s survey who typed, and in some cases translated, philosophical works such as those by C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton regularly omitted large

sections of text that she believed readers would lack the theoretical and contextual knowledge to comprehend (p. 17).

Textual distortions also happened by accident. Červenka (2018) describes the process whereby errors were created and passed on through various samizdat editions. During the publication process of traditionally published texts, new editions are made only on the basis of master copies which are verified and proofread by the author and/or the editor of the text, and checked and re-checked against the master copy at each iteration of the text. In samizdat however, the “errors increase as in a game of [broken telephone] ... it just needs three or four consecutive transcriptions without checking the original and we have a cruelly distorted text in front of us” (Červenka, 2018, pp. 33–34).

The establishment and circulation of various versions of a text in different iterations challenges the idea of the unified or coherent nature of “a” text; that copies of texts are all the same – and are in effect a single text – irrespective of the print run from which they originate. This in turn destabilises the notion of a “true” unified message of a text (Komaromi, 2004, p. 604). Several samizdat scholars point to this changeable and fluid aspect of samizdat as its extra- or pre-Gutenberg characteristic (Skilling, 1982; Komaromi, 2004; Komaromi, 2008; Cseh-Varga, 2016; Glanc, 2018; von Zitzewitz, 2020, pp. 17–18) and as challenging the idea of printing as a unifying, crystalising and standardising force (Eisenstein, 1979). Other scholars locate the fluid character of samizdat as one of its futuristic aspects, presaging the remixing that emerged with online texts (Kind-Kovács & Labov, 2013; Schmidt, 2013; Komaromi, 2008). But whether samizdat is suggestive of the past or the future, this textual form is wild, unpredictable and decentralised – a hauntological and haunting textual practice. Samizdat can also reveal the spectral nature of all texts that literature scholar Julian Wolfreys (2013) refers to as “a certain troubling, a trembling, in the idea of the text itself, something which can appear both real and phantasmic” (p. 71). Textuality extends beyond the material boundaries of the physical object of a text; it is in the meaning that is carried through time, beyond that particular textual object, or its imprint.

But what is the effect of this unpredictability on the reader of samizdat? As the respondent in von Zitzewitz’s survey recounts with the case of Akhmatova’s *Requiem*, the effect can be bewildering; what one had believed to be the content of a beloved poem or novel was suddenly made foreign and revealed to be a usurper – a pretender – by the emergence of the “real” traditionally published text. A moment of recalibration forces itself upon the reader. But, much as in the central problem of clone-themed sci-fi movies, the question then appears: which text is the “true” text for the reader? The beloved samizdat text, which was perhaps “authored” by a person (or people) quite other than that whom the reader had believed, and perhaps quite unknown, or the “real” and “legitimate” but unknown text?

I believe that this unreliability in samizdat, and the moment of recalibration that the reader faces in this reading practice as a result of it, acts as a shadow reflection of the totalitarian state itself. This totalitarian state is one that existed and proliferated its power by controlling its own

invented narrative about itself, largely through propaganda (the circulation of a false or alternative narrative). For example, one common propaganda narrative that circulated widely in Soviet Russia was that the nation was a “mighty industrial power”, while in actuality the majority of its population was rural (Siegelbaum & Sokolov, 2000, p. 281). If a citizen were to believe this propaganda narrative, upon discovering its unreliability a similar process of recalibration would be experienced – a truth is revealed. It might be argued that samizdat, though unwittingly, unintentionally, produces a similar effect for readers, at this moment of recalibration. This reflects Oushakine’s (2001) argument that the effect of samizdat fails to truly oppose the regime, and instead “echoes and amplifies” aspects of it (p. 190) as samizdat mirrors the unreliable narrative of the state. In this case, the way that states reproduce themselves is revealed through this reading practice.

Textual hauntings

In samizdat, the shadowy presence of state acts as an inescapable phantom that haunts the reader. But there are other ghosts that are called up from the pages of samizdat. In addition to the fragile paper, crowded pages and faint ink, another striking physical characteristic of samizdat was the presence of hand annotations, made by either the samizdat typist or by earlier readers. Corrections made by typists and readers were usually done by hand – in blue ink – and included non-standard characters that couldn’t be typed (Bolton, 2012, p. 104; von Zitzewitz, 2020, p. 17). In this way the physical trace of the publisher of the work was present for readers of these texts, and is read along with, and becomes part of, the “content” of the text.

Other traces too were present. As the samizdat text was passed through the network from reader to reader, the pages became physically marked with readings: finger marks, cigarette burns, underlinings, marginal notes, crossings out, ink blots, folded and torn pages, food stains (Glanc, 2018, pp. 201). Kind-Kovács and Labov (2013) see textual markings as a kind of “noise” that requires decoding, and forms samizdat’s “mark of distinction” (p. 26). But with another kind of reading, this “noise” of readers, of typists, comes to speak of other things. These markings represent a physical trace, the embodiment of previous readers. Although this might apply to all and any books that are passed from hand to hand, Glanc (2018) notes:

In the case of samizdat manuscripts and typescripts at least, the situation is different because a specific physical activity and uniqueness is behind every copy, every page and every letter. The body behind the text or other record stands out in its vivid presence ... their personal imprints. (pp. 199–200)

Past readers accompany the samizdat reader through their own reading of a textual body that is both fragile yet undeniably physical. The marks left by previous readers embody them for the current reader, call them up in the imagination, like ghosts that accompany the text, as the temporal slippage of this hauntological reading practice becomes apparent. And if a samizdat reader corrects and annotates during their own reading, they join the ranks of these ghosts that will rise at some time in the future, for readers as yet unknown. For samizdat readers, the impact of these bodily traces once again brings to the fore the networked and social aspect of samizdat, and these ghostly presences – unlike those of the state – are benign ones. These traces reveal

that even when samizdat readers are conducting solitary readings of these texts, they are always in the presence of their fellows in the samizdat network.

Samizdat texts are also haunted in another way, and are invested with an agency uncommon to any other type of text. As well as being “self-published” (*samsebiaizdat*), samizdat was also self-multiplying (*samorazumnozhatsia*/“self-reproduction”), reproducing through a kind of parthenogenesis (von Zitzewitz, 2020, p. 19; Komaromi, 2008, p. 660). Samizdat reader and typist Irina Tsurkova recounts the workings of samizdat networks and the way that a copy of a text would be passed on to a reader, who would type or photocopy the text and pass that text on (as cited in von Zitzewitz, 2020, p. 19). Komaromi (2008) sees this mechanism as the samizdat text compelling its readers – a kind of possession – to produce their own texts and “proliferate out of control” (p. 660). Again, the samizdat text exerts control over the reader in a way that other texts do not. In Tsurkova’s view, this ability to reproduce themselves was samizdat’s “special feature, which is why it was called samizdat, self-published – it was able to multiply by itself ... What was important was that these copies were alive – they were living a life of their own” (as cited in von Zitzewitz, 2020, p. 16; 19).

Conclusion: A community in a text

The unique characteristics of samizdat mean that this reading practice resists the standard contemporary notion of reading and of what a text is on a number of fronts. To read samizdat is never a solitary activity, but is always embedded within and reliant upon networks. Even when reading samizdat on their own, readers are accompanied by the presences of others, both gentle and malign. The physical traces of earlier readers that are found on the pages of samizdat texts are embodied records of past readings, or of the samizdat creators – perhaps known personally to the reader. At the same time, other, more sinister and potentially violent presences also accompany the reader.

The threat of state violence against those involved with samizdat is a constant presence, shaping the way this reading was conducted (clandestinely) and spoken about (in coded language). Although the threat of state violence may not have materialised into physical violence for many samizdat readers, the possibility alone of this violence puts this reading practice at odds with the notion of reading as a sanitised, bourgeois and leisurely activity.

The participatory nature of samizdat also puts this reading practice at odds with traditional notions of reading; as noted by Gorbanevskaya (1977), samizdat readers often also became publishers of samizdat (p. 34). Even for those readers who could not type or did not possess a typewriter, to read samizdat was still to participate in the network that it created. Samizdat is more than a text – it is a network and a channel across time and space, non-Soviet to Soviet, past to present.

Despite, or perhaps because of these points of difference, the limited case of samizdat reading can lay bare an often-occluded aspect of standard reading practices. Contemporary readers may see their reading habits and choices as the result of individual determination and free choice,

but the networked aspect of the samizdat reading practice can reveal the way in which all reading is always culturally, socially and politically situated and determined.

Notes

[1] *Samsebiaizdat* is a pun on the commonly abbreviated names of commercial publishing houses; *Litizat* (Literary Publishing House) or *Gosidat* (State Publishing House) (von Zitzewitz, 2020, p. 6).

[2] Which Komaromi (2004) argues, in Russia it stretches from the early nineteenth century to the internet age (p. 598).

[3] Also common at this time was *magnitizdat* (магнитиздат/“tape-recorded publishing”), a politicised version of bootlegging.

[4] The publication of *Doctor Zhivago* was later revealed to have taken place through intervention from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The CIA believed that the publication of this book had great value as anti-Soviet propaganda and coordinated the effort to facilitate Feltrinelli’s access to the manuscript; see Peter Finn and Petra Couvée’s *The Zhivago Affair: The Kremlin, the CIA, and the Battle Over a Forbidden Book* (2014).

[5] It has been dismantled by Vladimir Putin’s regime.

[6] As part of the “Wither Marxism?” conference at the University of California, Riverside.

[7] A periodical that circulated in Moscow from 1968–82.

[8] See Komaromi (2004) and Oushakine (2001).

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