

Barbara Martin

Ann Komaromi. *Soviet Samizdat: Imagining a New Society*. Ithaca, NY: Northern Illinois University Press, an imprint on Cornell University Press, 2022. 318 pp. ISBN 9781501763601.

Barbara Martin, Department of History, University of Basel. Address for correspondence: University of Basel, Department of History, Hirschgässlein 21, 4051 Basel, Switzerland. barbara.martin@unibas.ch.

When we think of samizdat,¹ we usually have in mind dissident works painstakingly copied on typewriters to counter censorship and shared among friends in the 1970s Soviet Union. We think of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* or texts in defense of human rights that could only circulate underground or be published in the West. Only rarely do we imagine communities of nonconformists editing an underground rock magazine, a feminist Christian journal, or a thematic collection entitled *UFO*. Yet, as Ann Komaromi shows in her study *Soviet Samizdat*, dissident publics in the Soviet Union created, read, copied, and edited a broad range of periodicals covering a wide array of subcultures and religious and ethnic groups. Starting from the 1960s, Soviet samizdat texts were mostly known to the Western public and researchers through the collections edited by Radio Liberty. As valuable as they were, these collections were often ideologically slanted and conveyed to the West the expected image of political activism and religious resistance, leaving aside less political manifestations of nonconformist views. Since the end of the Cold War, however, the study of samizdat has undergone a shift from an emphasis on oppositional politics to a more anthropological view of the phenomenon. Komaromi's work offers a significant contribution to this field, through the first broad overview and analysis of Soviet samizdat journals. Until recently, most publications about samizdat were samizdat anthologies containing previously published primary sources but little analysis, such as Viacheslav Igrunov's *Antologiya samizdata v SSSR: Nepodtsenzurnaia literatura v SSSR, 1950-e–1980-e* (2005). The phenomenon of samizdat, tamizdat, and the history of Soviet dissent have been the subject of more research since the end of the Cold War, for instance Friederike Kind-Kovács's *Written Here, Published There: How Underground Literature Crossed the Iron Curtain* (2014) or Josephine von Zitzewitz's *The Culture of Samizdat: Literature and Underground Networks in the Late Soviet Union* (2020). While Komaromi's first monograph *Uncensored: Samizdat Novels and the Quest for Autonomy in Soviet Dissidence* (2015) engaged with samizdat literary works, her new book continues this theoretical reflection and further breaks with traditional schemes of interpretation.

Soviet Samizdat presents the findings of a fascinating project of cataloguing Soviet samizdat periodicals, the main output of which was a web portal entitled "Project for the Study of Dissidence and Samizdat" (samizdatcollections.library.uto-

¹ Samizdat means "self-published." Some of the samizdat texts were then published in the West—a practice called tamizdat (published "over there").

ronto.ca/) with an online database, electronic editions of 24 journals, and multiple primary sources, such as interviews. A Russian-language paper version of the catalogue was also published in 2018 under the title *Katalog periodiki samizdata 1956–1986* (coauthored with Gennadii Kuzovkin from the Memorial Society²). The paper version of the catalogue in English, presented as an appendix to *Soviet Samizdat*, will be a precious resource for historians of Soviet dissent and the “second culture.” With over 300 entries listed alphabetically, it is the most exhaustive systematization effort in the field of samizdat to date: each entry lists the years of samizdat publication, the number of issues known to researchers, the editors’ names, the language, subject, and the archival repositories or sources mentioning the periodical. As Komaromi emphasizes, she sought to include only publications intended as a series and with at least some public existence. Yet the very nature of samizdat, with its unstable format and fragility, means that any catalogue of this kind is bound to be incomplete, as many editions may simply not have been preserved or never have made it into an archival repository. Despite these limitations, the catalogue provides a snapshot of the Soviet underground press in various Soviet republics and regions, covering a great variety of genres and topics.

Soviet Samizdat, however, is much more than just a documentary resource; it brings us into direct contact with the captivating world of dissident communities through a closer analysis of the history of some of these journals. Moreover, in line with Komaromi’s previous theoretical work on samizdat, it offers a deep, nuanced, and innovative reflection on the role of samizdat periodicals and the dissident publics around them in late Soviet society. In the author’s own words, she “treats samizdat as an alternative textual culture that facilitated the formation of new public communities in the Soviet Union after Stalin” (p. 3). Far from regarding samizdat as a purely oppositional phenomenon, she insists on its close relationship, and at times entanglement, with official Soviet culture. Although the search for “truth” in all realms of life was central to samizdat, this truth was not monolithic, and samizdat publics held a variety of political views, spanning nearly the whole spectrum from opposition to conformism. What samizdat offered was an alternative space, where different ideas that did not find an outlet in the official realm could be expressed. Yet the boundary between this underground sphere and the official one was permeable: samizdat authors could also publish officially, and readers engaged with both censored and uncensored literature. Finally, the distinctive distribution processes of samizdat offered the possibility of reaching out to like-minded strangers beyond one’s immediate social circle. Building on Charles Taylor’s concept of modern social imaginary, Komaromi shows how samizdat allowed readers to extend the boundaries of their social imagination by seeing themselves as belonging to a group, whether religious, ethnic, social, or generational, serving as an intermediary between their self and Soviet society and history.

² In 2014 the Russian government deemed the Memorial Society a nonprofit organization operating as a foreign agent; Memorial was dissolved by the decision of the Russian Supreme Court in December 2021.

Divided into four chapters, Komaromi's study eschews traditional thematic categorizations of samizdat, concentrating instead on key functions of samizdat periodicals: redefining the historical self, giving voice to truth, imagining alternative time horizons, and creating new spaces of sociality. To illustrate these notions, the author brings up the history of several samizdat journals covering a broad range of orientations.

In the first chapter, Komaromi analyzes the way samizdat responded to such historical shifts as de-Stalinization and the Thaw and allowed readers to inscribe in new ways their sense of self, both individually and as a group, within Soviet society and world history. Because censorship still constrained any reexamination of Soviet history, samizdat offered an outlet to those authors who wished to voice their truth about the past. While official and unofficial discourses were tightly entangled, the nature of the revelations of the Twentieth Communist Party Congress led Soviet citizens "to dissociate themselves from the interests, scripts and language of this regime, to seek new forms of expression" (p. 24). In times of instability, samizdat publics engaged with the past to heal Soviet society's traumas and reexamined their own roles as Soviet subjects and their relationship to history. Through samizdat, dissidents reconnected with the prerevolutionary intelligentsia and could "help their society resume its role in world history" (p. 29) in a Hegelian sense. This could take the form of information about human rights activism, giving voice to alternative historical truths, reinforcing a community's ethnic, religious, or national consciousness, or strengthening a sense of belonging to a subculture, within and beyond Soviet society.

In chapter 2, Komaromi examines the rise of alternative voices in samizdat and the function of truth-telling characteristic of uncensored texts. These new voices could emerge in the official realm through poetry, but when the limits of what could be told in official print were reached, voicing truth meant publishing abroad or in samizdat. Telling the truth about the history of Stalin-era repressions was a central concern for such authors as Solzhenitsyn, but as repressions continued into the post-Stalin era, samizdat periodicals informed readers about political trials of Baptist believers or Crimean Tatar activists. These alternative voices also came from the "second culture," where poets and bards carved spaces of their own, sheltered from the official sphere and yet non-politicized. In this context, samizdat periodicals played a key role in connecting these individual voices to communities sharing their spiritual values and modes of expression.

In chapter 3, Komaromi uses Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of chronotope to examine the peculiar ways in which samizdat readers imagined time and space, far from the standardized concept of modern time of the late Soviet era. Whether through literary or avant-garde artistic projects, through religion or human rights activism, with an orientation toward the past, the present, the future, or the "great time" of culture, the alternative chronotopes of samizdat periodicals "introduced hybridity and heterogeneity into social imagination" (p. 87).

Finally, chapter 4 examines the alternative public spheres created around samizdat periodicals, within both editorial collectives and their readership. These communities could develop around human rights concerns, national or religious issues,

or they could be closely entangled with the official sphere. Samizdat publics could also create new spaces of their own, centering around common subcultural, artistic, religious, or social concerns. These alternative public spheres could only exist as long as repression did not strike, and yet the state's authoritarian control was also key to their existence. Ironically, the freedom brought by perestroika dealt a fatal blow to samizdat periodicals, which were replaced by the more politicized and commercial editions of the "informal press."

All in all, *Soviet Samizdat* is a must-read for historians and literary and cultural scholars specializing in the late Soviet era with an interest in the "second culture" and Soviet dissent. While the author's deep theoretical reflections make for a dense reading experience, and the nonthematic structure of the book can at times be confusing, her innovative approach offers precious new insights into samizdat culture and the place of samizdat publics in late Soviet society.