

MASTERSKAJA 20

STUDI E RICERCHE SULLA RUSSIA

RUSSIAN STUDIES SERIES

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RUSSIAN STUDIES SERIES

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In questo laboratorio dalla vocazione interdisciplinare e multimediale si fondono tre anime: *Čitalka* (*Spazio lettura*), con contributi di divulgazione scientifica, *Igr@ slov* (*Gioco di parole*), che accoglie strumenti teorici e applicativi utili all'apprendimento, e *Zerkalà* (*Specchi*), dove si collocano le traduzioni.

La collana si rivolge ad un pubblico interessato alla disamina critica della Russia odierna, anche in relazione al dialogo con la cultura occidentale e con il contesto europeo centro-orientale.

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Free Voices in the USSR

Samizdat, Censorship, Tamizdat

edited by Marco Sabbatini, Cecilia Martino,
Sara Manzi, Marta Capossela



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In memoriam



Claudia Pieralli

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Samizdat and Its Afterlives. New Perspectives on the Reception of Unofficial Soviet Culture

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About the Project "Free Voices"

The present volume brings together contributions arising from the international conference *The Vicissitudes of Texts: Samizdat, Censorship, Tamizdat*, held at the University of Pisa from 5th to 7th December 2023. It is dedicated to the memory of Claudia Pieralli (1979-2023), co-founder of *Free Voices in the USSR*, whose research interests included Gulag literature. My collaboration with Claudia began in 2017, when an initiative she had been overseeing at the University of Florence was beginning to take form. The initiative became *Cultures of Dissent* ('On Both Sides of the Iron Curtain: Cultures of Dissent in Italy, France and the USSR and the Definition of European Identity, 1956–1991') and our work together on it gave rise to the idea of a joint project in the form of a web portal. In 2021 this idea came to fruition and *Free Voices in the USSR* (Pieralli, Sabbatini eds. 2021) was launched. We planned the 2023 Pisa conference together, and despite her failing health, Claudia remained deeply committed to ensuring that it took place. It was intended to be the first international conference organised within the framework of our project, bringing together specialists in dissent and samizdat to share innovative research while also giving us the opportunity to introduce our platform, conceived as a forum for scholarly exchange, to an audience of experts. I would like to use these introductory pages to offer a brief account of our original vision drawing on some of the material we used in the planning stages to link its conception to the present volume. I hope that this volume not only marks the culmination of our vision but also a new point of departure. This is why the website and the present publication share a part of their title.

Free Voices in the USSR: Independent Soviet Literature, Arts and Thought and Their Western Echoes (1953–1991) was conceived as a co-directed project overseen by Claudia Pieralli (University of Florence) and Marco Sabbatini (University of Pisa). Since 2021, it has been available in both Italian and

English on the Firenze University Press web platform¹. The project brings together historians, philologists, literary scholars and academics from related disciplines, alongside students and researchers, to create a forum for critical debate and comparative studies into dissent, samizdat and underground culture in the Soviet Union. It connects distinct yet interrelated strands of scholarship on independent voices within the USSR. Western reception of Soviet dissent has often been shaped by the rhetoric of Cold War anti-Soviet propaganda. Consequently, debates on freedom of expression, political responsibility and the pursuit of historical truth have tended to interpret opposition to Soviet ideology through a Western lens. The project focuses on giving the 'Italian' perspective within this field of study (Parisi 2013; Pieralli, Spignoli, Iocca, Larocca, Lo Monaco 2019; Sabbatini 2020) as, from the outset, the reception of samizdat and Soviet dissent within the Italian cultural sphere was identified as the area offering the greatest scope for original research.

The project explores expressions of independent thought and culture in the Soviet Union from the end of Stalinism in 1953 to the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. It investigates the cultural implications of this interpretative framework, while critically examining the media practices and political mechanisms that shaped the production, circulation and reception of dissent in the West. Rather than limiting its scope to comparisons between Soviet writers, artists and intellectuals and their Western counterparts, the project examines the processes of dialogue, assimilation and reinterpretation that unfolded during the second half of the twentieth century. It explores how these exchanges enabled dissenting voices within the Soviet Union to contribute to cultural and intellectual life in Europe and beyond. Western commentators have historically been prone to privilege voices in opposition to Communist Party ideology and oversimplify a cultural landscape in which many alternative voices articulated aesthetic or social, rather than explicitly political, opposition. Although the artists and writers involved often regarded their work and actions as forms of protest, they by no means spoke with a single voice: significant generational differences intersected with divergent literary, artistic and philosophical perspectives. As Khrushchev's programme of de-Stalinisation lost momentum and promises of greater freedom receded, Soviet institutions increasingly regarded independent voices as hostile and subjected them to censorship. From the mid-1970s onwards, expressions of dissent became more pronounced, and an alternative cultural scene took shape over the following decade. Sustained by networks of *samizdat* circulation, the

1 *Voci libere in URSS. Letteratura, pensiero, arti indipendenti in Unione Sovietica e gli echi in Occidente (1953–1991)*/ *Free Voices in the USSR: Independent Soviet Literature, Arts and Thought and Their Western Echoes (1953–1991)*. Ed. by Claudia Pieralli and Marco Sabbatini, Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.36253/978-88-5518-463-2> website: <https://vocilibereurss.fupress.net/en/>

'Second Culture' developed into an organised and systematic counterpoint to official Soviet culture. At the same time the third wave of cultural emigration helped sustain channels of communication with the West and facilitated the publication of Russian works beyond the Iron Curtain through *tamizdat*. The clandestine circulation of almanacs, literary journals, individual works and collections extended from Moscow and Leningrad to smaller towns. Seminars, exhibitions, conferences and lectures were held in independent settings, alongside but outside institutionally sanctioned structures. With the advent of Gorbachev's *glasnost* in the 1980s, alternative voices began to enter the public sphere, and many representatives of independent thought became involved in emerging processes of democratisation.

The project seeks to engage an international scholarly community by making research resources available online and encouraging further inquiry and collaboration which could provide a foundation for seminars, roundtables and joint publications. It serves both as a research resource for students, doctoral candidates and scholars, and as a platform for publishing and integrating new findings.

The structure of the portal is organised around two main areas: 'Free Voices in the Soviet Union' and 'The Reception of Soviet Dissent in the West'. 'Free Voices in the Soviet Union' explores the diverse manifestations of independent culture and dissent in the USSR between 1953 and 1991 in three sections: 'Samizdat and unofficial art', examining independent literature, music and visual arts, including texts reproduced and circulated unofficially and audio recordings distributed outside official channels (*magnitizdat*); 'Underground places and groups', introducing the principal centres, groups and individuals associated with unofficial Soviet culture, with particular emphasis on Moscow and Leningrad; 'Facts and phenomena', examining civil rights campaigns and protests in support of those persecuted for dissent and how independent culture reached its audiences through meetings, exhibitions, festivals and concerts. The second area, 'The Reception of Soviet Dissent in the West', traces the circulation and reception of Soviet dissent and underground culture within Western publishing and intellectual circles, again in three sections: 'Tamizdat' presents Soviet works published abroad, both in Russian and in translation, and examines the role of Western publishers and journals in connecting Soviet writers with readers in the West; 'Case studies' explores the international impact of works such as Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, with particular focus on their reception in Italy; 'Italian publications and catalogues' investigates how Italian publishers and journals introduced unofficial Soviet voices to their audiences and shaped debates on Soviet dissent. The portal also provides research tools for students and other interested readers: 'Where' maps the principal centres of independent Soviet culture; 'Chronology' highlights

key events between 1953 and 1991, situating Soviet dissent in relation to its reception in the West; ‘People’ introduces major figures in unofficial Soviet culture, alongside the Western intellectuals who helped disseminate their work abroad.

Given the breadth and diversity of cultural dissent in the USSR and the complexity of its reception in the West, the project does not claim to offer comprehensive coverage. It seeks, however, to provide a structured account of the phenomenon and a clear definition of samizdat and tamizdat in epistemological and ontological terms.

Recent years have seen a remarkable output of monographs and edited volumes on these topics. A by no means exhaustive list would include J. von Zitzewitz (2020), A. Komaromi (2022), and Ya. Klots (2023), the volumes edited by K. Smola, I. Kukulin, and A. Bachmaier (2024), I. Kukuj and B. Obermayr (2026), and C. Ciepiela, A. Komaromi, and I. Kukuj (2026), as well as the monumental *The Oxford Handbook of Soviet Underground Culture* (Lipovetsky, Engström, Glanc, Kukuj, Smola 2024). In addition, there is Luba Jurgenson’s project on the reception of the Gulag at the Sorbonne in Paris, and online initiatives such as the *Project for the Study of Dissidence and Samizdat*, directed by Ann Komaromi at the University of Toronto—the leading active project in this field—and the *Tamizdat Project. Banned books from the Cold War to the Present* directed by Yasha Klots (Hunter College – New York).

In light of this flourishing scholarship and publishing activity, the *Free Voices in the USSR* project hopes to continue benefiting from open dialogue and collaboration with related projects in Paris, Toronto, and New York. Five years on, despite the practical and emotional difficulties occasioned by the loss of our colleague, the project’s framework remains sound in relation to its original aim. It recognises the need to devote greater attention to the western reception of Soviet dissent and underground literature and points to Italian historical and publishing archives as a principal avenue for advancing its original contribution to this field. In this respect, the present volume, the first tangible outcome of the aspirations outlined above, offers an opportunity to reflect on the project’s aims, achievements to date and future possibilities.

The Vicissitudes of Texts and Their Authors

With contributions in Russian, English, and Italian, this edited volume explores the interplay between censorship, independent cultural production, and the transmission of texts across the Iron Curtain. How did writers and readers negotiate the constraints imposed on literary expression in the Soviet Union? What forms of authorship, community and exchange emerged beyond official publishing institutions? How were texts transformed as they crossed geographical, linguistic and political borders? How did censorship

and police surveillance shape the lives and work of writers and artists? How did they alter their personal trajectories and constrain their artistic development? Bringing together literary analysis, archival research and studies on publishing networks, the contributions collected here approach these questions from different but complementary perspectives.

The volume is organised into four sections: Censorship, Samizdat, Tamizdat and Mirrors which represent interconnected areas of study rather than self-contained domains. Their arrangement invites readers to trace relationships between institutional constraints and creative practices, domestic circulation and publication abroad, and between Soviet cultural experiences and their subsequent reinterpretation.

The first section, *Censorship*, has three articles. In the opening contribution, Evgenia Abeliuk (I.1) draws on case studies and documentary sources, including previously unpublished materials, to examine the workings of Soviet theatre censorship in the late 1960s. Her analysis illuminates the practices and negotiations that shaped censorial decisions. Tat'iana Levchenko (I.2) explores the literary critic and editor F. M. Levin's struggle with censorship through materials preserved in his archive and RGALI. She focuses on the publication of Platonov's first posthumous collection of short stories (1958) and the first monograph on Babel (1972). In the third article (I.3), Cecilia Martino situates David Samoilov on the margins of official Soviet literature, neither orthodox nor dissident. Her reading of *The Poet and the Citizen* reveals how the text illuminates both his response to censorship and key moments in his ideological and literary development.

The second and most substantial section, *Samizdat*, includes nine contributions whose thematic and methodological diversity reflects the complexity of the phenomenon. They explore the boundaries of samizdat, addressing the relationship between writing and circulation, the making of dissident texts, and the overlapping roles of authors and readers. In his theoretical and sociological contribution, Stanislav Savitski (II.8) revisits the concept of marginalisation, moving beyond the traditional heroic portrayal of nonconformists to examine the sociocultural marginality of underground writers and samizdat authors as a distinctive form of social experience. Marta Capossela's article (II.1) examines the legacy of underground visual art through the work of Ol'ga Florenskaia, a former member of the Mit'ki group. Focusing on selected works, Capossela explores how Florenskaia brings together painting, sculpture, literature and audiovisual media to create a distinctive artistic language. Mario Caramitti (II.2) concentrates on a very different aspect of unofficial literary production: writing "for the desk drawer". His contribution examines writers who declined to participate in official Soviet literary life, writing instead for future generations or simply for themselves. Despite their differences, many shared a fear of repression

that deterred them from circulating their work. Two contributions explore Soviet rock music. Iurii Domansky (II.3) examines the aesthetic development of Soviet rock in the 1980s across four distinct regional scenes: Leningrad, Moscow, Sverdlovsk and Western Siberia, while Sara Manzi (II.6) focuses on Aleksandr Bashlachev's poetics through a close reading of one of his most emblematic texts, *Vremia Kolokol'chikov*. In particular, she analyses the symbolism of bells and the troika, showing how Bashlachev reworks these traditional motifs in an original poetic framework. Poetry in samizdat is also the focus of Iuliia Valieva's contribution on Mikhail Eremin (II.9). Drawing on materials from the poet's personal archive and a special issue of the almanac *Syntaksis*, she examines the principal samizdat sources of his poetry, including a previously unknown typescript collection. Also focusing on Leningrad poetry (Brodsky, Krivulin, Shvarts, Petrov, Mironov et al.), Kseniia Kostomarova and Pavel Uspenskij (II.5) examine how archaisms shaped a distinctive poetic language. They highlight the role of archaic language in unofficial verse in creating an elevated poetic register, enabling stylistic play and resisting official Soviet poetic discourse. Ann Komaromi (II.4) examines Eduard Kuznetsov's *Prison Diaries*, written during his imprisonment in the early 1970s, and Olga Rosenblum (II.7) examines two periodical projects of a Russian-language journal outside the USSR, initiated (in 1968) or supported (in 1973) by Pavel Litvinov in Moscow; the article is based on letters outlining these projects along with archival materials and interviews conducted by the author.

The third section, *Tamizdat*, shifts attention towards transnational networks and the role of publication abroad, especially in Italy. Iris Karafillidis (III.1) examines the editorial reception of the 'religious renaissance' in the Soviet context. By reconstructing these early developments, the article highlights the close ties between emerging Catholic study centres, journals and publishing houses, particularly "Russia Cristiana". These initiatives laid the foundations for an extensive publishing network that played a prominent role in Italian cultural life from the early 1960s to the early 1980s. In her article, Valentina Parisi (III.2) reassesses the editorial dynamics of tamizdat through Alberto Mondadori's role in disseminating uncensored Soviet literature at Il Saggiatore. Focusing on the publisher's 1968 edition of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward* (*Rakovyi korpus*), the author challenges traditional scholarly views regarding tamizdat as a passive reflection of samizdat or an unmediated transition to Western markets. The third section concludes with Mikhail Talalay's study of samizdat historian and dissident Yurii Maltsev (III.3). Drawing on Mal'tsev's personal archive, preserved by his widow, Tatiana Noskova, the article offers new insights into his life and creative processes.

The final section, *Mirrors*, broadens the volume's perspective with Pavel Arsen'ev's contribution on contemporary poetic practice (IV.1) and with a

distinctive tribute to Elena Shvarts by her Italian translator, Alessandro Niero, accompanied by a bibliography on the poet compiled by Riccardo Mini (IV.2). The volume closes with an autobiographical account by the Odesa writer Boris Khersonsky (IV.3), prompted by his recent reading of a KGB report concerning an undercover agent. The report reveals an unsettling truth: his colleague, the psychiatrist Lanovoj, had acted as an informant, reporting on Khersonsky himself. This discovery prompts the poet to reflect on his painful relationship with his own past and the need to reassess his memories, demonstrating once again how “unpredictable” the Soviet past can be.

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