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The alternative Russian press, 1987-2000: a British Library Collection

One of the most striking features of the period in Soviet and Russian history which was inaugurated by Gorbachev's policies of perestroika and, more pertinent here, glasnost, was the transformation of the press. It has been argued with justification that the press (and newspapers in particular) was one of the most significant influences on the change from a one-Party, one-ideology state to a multi-party pluralistic society. The policy of glasnost, announced at the January 1987 Plenum of the CPSU, resulted in a flood of 'alternative' publications and broke the stranglehold of the Communist Party and the state-controlled press. Later, Gorbachev was to complain that glasnost had got out of hand, but the genie was already out of the bottle.

The alternative press has continued to exist after 2000. I have chosen the date-span which reflects the British Library collection of about 2500 titles which have been mounted on an Access database and will be available on the web later in this year (at <http://www.cocorees.ac.uk/>)

Nature of publications

For the early period (1987-ca. 1990) the alternative press consisted mainly of primitively produced 'publications' produced in few copies and intended for distribution among a relatively narrow circle of like-minded people. These could be seen as the direct descendants of the 'samizdat' which circulated clandestinely in the 1960s-1980s and at the time were variously called 'new samizdat', 'non-traditional press', 'informal publications', 'press not submitted for censorship' (*nepodtsenzurnaia pechat*). This early material is easy to categorise and there is a sufficiently small range of titles for a library with good connections and reasonable resources to be able to build a reasonably complete collection.

With increased ownership of personal computers and following the Law on the Press (a key component of glasnost) which came into force on 1 August 1990, more and more titles were produced through desk-top publishing or using conventional print. Many of these, however, were still, rather rough artefacts and many had quite small print-runs. For the second half of the 1990s the most predominant format was and still is the newspaper format, some broadsheet, some tabloid and some smaller. This later type of material is not easy to categorise; the line between what can easily classed as 'alternative' and what forms part of the mainstream press is much more blurred. (A minority of the titles in our collection could arguably classed as mainstream.) In general, the word 'alternative' will here be applied to material which either expresses the point of view of a minority grouping or which reflects particular local interests.

Subject-matter of publications

In its early years, the alternative press was striking for its discussion of previously neglected topics, such as feminism, gender issues, ecology, human rights, etc. Some topics, such as ecology, in spite of the fact that it later became possible to air them in the mainstream press, persist in alternative publications throughout the decade, focussing in particular on regional and local concerns. Especially strongly represented in the early period, anarchist, monarchist and religious groupings continued to produce 'alternative' publications throughout the 1990s.

In political terms, the majority of titles in the late-1980s/early 1990s espoused pro-democratic and pro-reform views. After the break-up of the USSR (which occurred notwithstanding the results of the 17 March 1991 referendum), as the Russian population began to feel the full effect of loss of contact with the other republics and the impact of economic reform, there was a steady increase in alternative publications of communist and nationalist flavour. In their most extreme manifestation, many were overtly anti-semitic and some self-proclaimedly fascist. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation, was founded in 1993, is now one of the most influential parties, and Zhirinovskii's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, founded in 1990, has gained enormous ground. There are also a multitude of newspapers produced by various splinter groupings of Marxist, Marxist-Leninist, Stalinist, Trotskyite persuasions.

Geographical spread of publications

Post-1994 there was a huge growth in the number of local publications of both the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, and a mushrooming of regional publications in general.

Difficulties for bibliographers, cataloguers and librarians

The material which I have described as the alternative press poses huge problems for bibliographers, cataloguers and librarians in terms of: identifying and acquiring; cataloguing; preservation and, generally, making it known and available to potential researchers.

Identifying and acquiring

It is in the nature of this material, published in small print runs by fringe groups, that it is elusive, hard to find out about and time-consuming to acquire. This was particularly true of the publications of the early period and it is the early material that has been seen by libraries as being the most interesting and desirable. In Russia, the main collectors at the time were either committed individuals or groups of individuals who set up fringe archives and libraries, independent from the state and not well funded.¹

One of the very few large state institutions to realise very early on the value of these ephemeral publications was the State Public Historical Library of Russia. At this time too,

¹ See for example: D.K. Ravinskii and V.V. Ialysheva, 'Independent libraries in Leningrad', *Solanus : international journal for Russian & East European bibliographic, library and publishing studies*, n.s., 9 (1995), pp. 24-29. On the Moscow archive 'Moskovskoe biuro informatsionnogo obmena', see the paper by Marina Razorenova on 'Problems of collecting, sources of supply', given at the Conference on the bibliography of Soviet samizdat, April 1997 St Antony's College, Oxford, 30 September - 4 October 1991 (<http://www.osa.ceu.hu/archives/Samizdat/>). On the Archive of the Non-Traditional Press, see Aleksandr Suetnov, *Istoriia odnogo arkhiva. O popytke sozdaniia bibliograficheskoi sluzhby samizdata.* (http://www.russ.ru/ist_sovr/99-04-16/suetnov.htm)

other institutions in the West began to collect, notably Hoover, Stanford, Library of Congress, the Forschungstelle Osteuropa at Bremen University, the Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine at Nanterre. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Munich probably had one of the most interesting and complete collections outside the Soviet Union.

The British Library began collecting in 1989 partly by accident. In that year an article appeared in the journal *Sovetskaia bibliografiia* entitled 'Samizdat - a new source for inclusion in bibliographies', describing the 'new samizdat' or 'informal' publications which were beginning to appear.² I wrote to the author, Aleksandr Suetnov, asking if he would write something for *Solanus*, the journal which I edit. This led not only to an article³ but also to a proposal from him to supply the British Library with 'new samizdat'. He had his own 'informal' archive - the Archive of the Non-Traditional Press. This arrangement (a somewhat chaotic one) lasted for several years. Later, we set up an arrangement for receiving material as part of our exchange with the State Public Historical Library of Russia, selected by its extremely knowledgeable staff responsible for collecting material for the library's own Collection of non-traditional press. This arrangement continued throughout the 1990s. Sadly, in 2000, we felt that we no longer had the resource to catalogue or store such a large body of material and stopped collecting. In general there was a dramatic decrease of interest and of collecting by libraries in the period when 'new samizdat' publications gave way to more mass-produced newspapers. Because the latter have been seen to be less rare and unusual they may end up becoming more rare than the earlier material.

For the post-1993 period, as well as the early one, the largest collections of material in Russia are in Moscow at the State Public Historical Library of Russia, whose collection of the 'non-traditional press' now numbers over 5000 titles, mostly from the period 1985-2000. The library of the 'Memorial' society⁴ also has substantial holdings. It inherited the collection early material of M-BIO (Moskovskoe obshchestvennoe biuro informatsionnogo obmena). A large collection, amassed in St Petersburg by Andrei Alekseev (Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences), went with him when he retired and is no longer open to researchers.

At present only the Historical Library sets out to collect systematically a wide range of titles from the alternative press. Memorial also collects but with an emphasis on human rights publications. The Russian State Library and the National Library of Russia also acquire some titles but depend largely on those which come in through legal deposit. Only the large political parties and their regional headquarters deposit their publications. Those who are most assiduous are the communists and Zhirinovsii's 'Liberal Democratic Party'. Most of the regional publications and even some Moscow publications are picked up by staff of the Historical Library at the headquarters of the various organisations or at certain vending outlets (e.g. the Lenin Museum sells Communist and Nazi press) or at public meetings.⁵ Because of failure to deposit, many titles do not feature in the Russian National

² A. Suetnov, 'Samizdat - novyi istochnik bibliografirovaniia', *Sovetskaia bibliografiia*, 1989, no. 2, pp. 26-32.

³ Aleksandr Suetnov, 'Samizdat glazami bibliografa', *Solanus :international journal for Russian & East European bibliographic, library and publishing studies*, n.s., 4 (1990), pp. 50-66.

⁴ The Memorial Society was founded in 1988 by leading elements of Russia's democratic intelligentsia, such as Andrei Sakharov. Branches were set up in many cities of Russia, as well as other countries of the former Soviet Union. The central aim of the society in its early years was to recognise the millions of Soviet citizens whose lives passed through (and often ended) in the Gulag, to document their experiences, and to provide support for those still living and their families. It has an extensive and remarkable library.

⁵ My thanks to Mikhail Afanas'ev, Director of the State Public Historical Library of Russia, for providing information on this question.

Bibliography. All new publications with a print-run of more than 1000 are required to be registered with the Ministry for the Press and Mass Media, but there are ways of avoiding this, e.g. by printing 999 copies.

Cataloguing

For the early period, described above, a number of institutions made attempts to compile catalogues of holdings. In October 1991 at a conference in Oxford⁶ great plans were made to set up an arrangements for compiling an international database, to include the holdings of the major institutions. Participants included representatives from most of the major collecting libraries in the West and from unofficial archives in Russia. There were, unfortunately, no representatives from Russian state libraries. The idea was that the database should be compiled by the Russian bibliographers and that the Western partners would find funding to pay for the work and to maintain the database. This on the face of it very promising scheme came to nought mainly because our Russian colleagues moved away from the field after the break-up of the Soviet Union. A follow-up conference held in Moscow in October 1992 did include representatives from state libraries, some of whom later collaborated to produce web-based union catalogue of holdings of nine of the largest collections of samizdat and the new press in Moscow and St Petersburg⁷ as they stood in 1992. The staff of the Historical Library also published some excellent catalogues.⁸ Some institutions in the West also described their holdings but, ironically, all of their catalogues were themselves in a form that could almost be described as samizdat, produced as computer printouts. {See appendix for a list of catalogues}. Virtually no electronic descriptions were made for these titles. There is, as far as I know, absolutely no catalogue or bibliography of the more disparate and more difficult to categorise titles of the alternative newspapers of the period roughly from 1993 onwards.

The British Library holdings remained uncatalogued and inaccessible throughout the 1990s. Only during the last two years, special retroconversion funding has enabled us to describe them and to make them accessible on the web. At a later stage we hope to add the holdings of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, the Bodleian Library and Glasgow University Library. Entries consist of title, sub-title, place of publication, date and issue numbers and very broad subject tags, either labelling the political orientation of the publication (e.g. anarchist', nationalist, Orthodox Christian, communist), the interest group about which it is about (e.g. Cossacks, Afghan veterans, women, students) or its subject-matter (e.g. human rights, ecology, Chechnia, etc.)

The publications present a number of cataloguing problems and need to be described by someone with a good knowledge of the material and of Russian politics and culture. To mention some of the problems:

Many publications have the same main title (e.g. 14 called *Iskra* (The Spark), 13 called *Edinstvo* (Unity), 23 with the title Information bulletin, 6 called *Glasnost'*, etc.). They come

⁶ Conference on the bibliography of Soviet samizdat, April 1997 St Antony's College, Oxford, 30 September - 4 October 1991 (<http://www.osa.ceu.hu/archives/Samizdat/>).

⁷ Samizdat i novaia politicheskaia pressa; po materialam kollektzii Moskvyy i Sankt-Peterburga; Svodnyi katalog periodicheskikh izdaniy. http://www.auditorium.ru/books/470/sam_p3_1-100.htm

⁸ For example, M. Paskalova, E. Strukova, S. Solov'eva, *Samizdat i novaia politicheskaia pressa (po materialam kollektzii Moskvyy i Sankt-Peterburga)*. Moscow, St Petersburg, 1993.

out very irregularly and periodicity is often hard to establish (an extreme example is the paper *Russkii sobor* where the publisher omitted issue no. 13 for superstitious reasons) and to know when/if a particular title died. Issuing bodies are very complex, some in the mould of Soviet times, with endless layers of sub-bodies. Others are strange and jokey. Place of publication is often absent, misleading, buried in small print or fictitious. For example, the paper *Razbuzhennaia respublika* (about elections in Belarus) was printed in Tallinn in Estonia, but the editorial board is in fact located in Grodno in Belarus, and the anarchist newspaper *Klassvoia bor'ba* which has the imprint Vorgashor (in the Komi Republic) was in fact published in Moscow.

Changes of title are frequent. A striking example is the newspaper *Limonka*, founded by the writer and enfant terrible Eduard Limonov (President of the National Bolshevik Party), banned when Limonov was arrested, ostensibly for terrorist activities and possessing firearms. The paper then was re-registered under a new bland title '*General'naia liniia*'. The first issues of the 'new' paper are in exactly the same format and the same typography and layout as *Limonka*. At the top, the new title '*General'naia liniia*' appears in tiny letters above the word 'Limonka' in huge block capitals followed by the sentence 'Has not been coming out since September 2002' (a reversal of the normal formula which appears on newspapers 'Has been coming out since...'). The old numeration for *Limonka* features much more prominently than the new numeration for *General'naia liniia*. So, the would-be purchaser of *Limonka*, seeing it on a news stand, would not even notice that it had been renamed.

Preservation

The earlier 'new samizdat' was produced on many different types of paper, all of bad quality. Many were stapled. All of these are important as artefacts and not suitable for microfilming or digitisation. Later publications are generally very bad newsprint, brittle and acid. All British Library titles are being stored in preservation-approved cardboard boxes. Publications in newspaper format will be housed at our Newspaper Library in Colindale, North London and journals will be available in the British Library at St Pancras (for the latter full MARC records have been created).

Publicising and academic usage

A recent dissertation on 'The alternative Russian periodical press and its role in the formation of a multi-party system in Russia (1987-1996)⁹', in reviewing the previous literature on this topic, points out how very little the publications of the alternative press have been used by Russian researchers, and states that over half the titles cited in the dissertation have never been cited in any academic work. The same neglect of these valuable sources holds true for the UK. The reason for this is partly because these publications are scarce and difficult to access, but also because they are generally little known by academics. Apart from a handful of titles, individual publications are not well known. It is as a body of material that they are invaluable as a research resource, rather than for the specific content of particular titles. This was one of the main reasons that made us decide not just to give them records for our general library catalogue (where they would have got lost among millions of other items), but to create a database.

⁹ E. N. Strukova, *Alternativnaia periodicheskaia pechat' i ee rol' v stanovlenii mnogopartiinosti v Rossii (1987-1996 gg.)*. *Avtoferat dissertatsii*. Moscow, Moscow State University, 2002. The abstract of this dissertation has been invaluable for the preparation of this paper. Elena Strukova is responsible for the Collections of Non-Traditional Press at the State Public Historical Library of Russia)

Research topics

Study of the growing power and autonomy of the Russian regions and of grass-roots society and politics outside the capitals has become an increasingly popular topic of research. This collection is invaluable for such study. Although the overwhelming majority of titles in the British Library collection are Moscow imprints (about 1000) there are publications from a total of about 250 places ranging, from cities to small villages. As evidenced by Strukova's dissertation this material is a prime source for studying the transformation of Russia from a one-party into a multi-party state. It also offers wonderful material for the study of, for example, nationalist, anti-semitic, monarchist, anarchist and other groupings. Small but very interesting clusters of titles chronicle the growth of the Cossack movement. These are just a few examples.

Conclusion

Only time will tell just how important they will be for future scholars in research on this period of social and political change in Russia. It is already evident that they are important for the way that they complement the mainstream press. One Russian scholar, when discussing the influence of the alternative press on changing political processes in Russia, affirms that 'the alternative press manifests itself at a time when the political system is unstable and when it does not adequately pick up the signals of the environment in which it operates, and disappears when the political system becomes stable.'¹⁰ The second condition has certainly not yet come about in Russia, so it is to be hoped that some libraries will continue to collect this material, in spite of the problems which it poses.

Christine G. Thomas

The British Library

Appendix

Existing catalogues of library holdings

Samizdat i novaia politicheskaiia pressa; po materialam kollektzii Moskvyy i Sankt-Peterburga; Svodnyi katalog periodicheskikh izdaniy.

http://www.auditorium.ru/books/470/sam_p3_1-100.htm

Includes holdings of nine of the largest collections of samizdat and the independent press of Moscow and St Petersburg as they stood in 1992.

Novye politicheskie i obshchestvennye organizatsii: bibliograficheskii ukazatel' po materialam kollektzii netraditsionnoi pechati GPIB Rossii, compiled by E. N. Strukova.. 3 pt. : *Politicheskie i obshchestvennye organizatsii Rossii (1983-1993)*. Moscow, GPIB, 1991-92, pts. 1-3; *Politicheskie i obshchestvennye organizatsii Rossii*. Moscow, GPIB, 1997.- . pts. 1-2.

An expanded electronic version of the second edition of this catalogue and an existing database based on 'Pro-Cite' is currently being migrated to the 'Liber' programme.

Library of Congress

New Soviet and Baltic independent serials at the Library of Congress: a holdings list. Compiled by Eric A. Johnson and Michael E. Neubert, with the assistance of Bohdan Yaskinsky. Edited with an introduction by Harry Leich. May 1991.

[Printout from database.](#)

¹⁰ L.N. Timofeeva, *Alternativnaia pechat' kak fenomen kachestvennykh izmenenii v politicheskom protsesse v Rossii (seredina 80-kh - 90-kh godov)*. Avtoreferat dissertatsii. Moscow, 1997. Cited in Strukova , p. 5.

Hoover Institution

Dwyer, Joseph D., Natalie Koretsky, and Georgy Tarala, comps. *The Opposition Press of the Former Soviet Union, 1987—Present: Holdings at the Hoover Institution (Computer Listing of the Nearly 3,000 Titles Available at the Hoover Institution)*. Updated regularly.

Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe

Katalog periodicheskikh i prodolzhaiushchikhsia neformal'nykh izdaniy na russkom iazyke, 1986-1990. [Compiled by Gabriel Superfin.] 2 pt. Munich, Radio Liberty, Radio Free Europe Archive. Reproduced from computer printout as part of *Materialy samizdata*, 1991.

Uncatalogued serials of the Former USSR. A. *Russian Federation* and *Uncatalogued serials of the Former USSR*. B. *Peripheral republic* [compiled by Gregory Walker]. Oxford, September, 1995. Computer printout.