Book Review

The Culture of Samizdat: Literature and Underground Networks in the Late Soviet Union by Josephine Von Zitzewitz explores the readership of samizdat (unofficial publications) in the late Soviet Union. In the stagnation era (1964–85), strict policies of censorship meant that only certain state-approved texts could be published and circulated: this gave rise to whole networks of samizdat typists and distributers who unofficially circulated texts outside state control. While scholars have widely analysed the content and material form of samizdat texts, *The Culture of Samizdat* aims to understand the 'ordinary reader' in the late Soviet Union and the informal networks which were crucial to samizdat's existence (8). The book's arguments are primarily based on the testimonies provided via an online survey of 122 respondents, carried out by Von Zitzewitz and Gennadii Kuzovkin in 2017–18, as well as a series of narrative interviews. Through this research, Von Zitzewitz provides valuable insight into the complex workings of samizdat production, distribution, and institutionalisation in the last decades of the Soviet Union.

The main strength of *The Culture of Samizdat* lies in Von Zitzewitz's challenge to the dominant perception of samizdat as a dissident activity,

showing instead that many samizdat texts and their readers did not directly engage in politics. Von Zitzewitz argues that the literary processes of samizdat networks did not develop in isolation from official publishing, but instead they were 'enmeshed and interdependent' on its organisational structures (14). She also highlights that samizdat readership was not limited to intelligentsia circles. As one respondent put it, by the early 1980s, 'Practically everybody had some samizdat at home' (11). From her study of samizdat networks, Von Zitzewitz draws broader conclusions about the nature of Soviet dissent, arguing that the cultural underground should be defined as a series of networks and communities rather than as political opposition. *The Culture of Samizdat* greatly contributes to scholarship that challenges the perception of a strict division between state-sponsored 'official' culture and underground 'unofficial' culture in the 1970s and early 1980s (e.g., Yurchak; Komaromi; Fürst; Fainberg & Kalinovsky). Von Zitzewitz thus provides a timely new interpretation of samizdat as a phenomenon which was rooted within the specific cultural context of the late Soviet Union, rather than as a non-Soviet or dissident activity.

In chapter one, Von Zitzewitz provides an overview of the phenomenon of samizdat and introduces key theoretical concepts that underpin her study of Soviet unofficial culture. She emphasises a lack of sources as the primary obstacle to studying samizdat readership, which she overcomes with new qualitative research. The chapter is particularly compelling in its identification of the various and often overlapping functions of the reader, who acted as both 'publisher and printer' within underground networks (16). Thus, Von Zitzewitz stresses the imperative of her own study, since it was the reader who determined which texts could be reproduced and circulated in the absence of institutional intermediaries.

Chapter two showcases the methodology and findings of the online survey. Von Zitzewitz recognises the limitations of her use of a 'small self-selecting sample', advertised through social media and Russian online media, although more could have been done to ensure a varied range of respondents (29). Von Zitzewitz productively uses the survey's responses to draw conclusions about the interaction between unofficial

and official realms in the late Soviet Union. However, as Von Zitzewitz acknowledges, there were 'no dedicated research questions' behind the survey's design (29). The survey's length, at sixty-three questions, suggests the unfocussed nature of the study. The chapter makes numerous observations about the nature of samizdat readership, which tend to be overly descriptive and dilute the book's central arguments about the relationship between Soviet unofficial and official culture.

Chapter three discusses the role of typists in the manufacturing of samizdat texts. Von Zitzewitz explores the ways in which samizdat typists participated in both official and unofficial culture, using both their 'professional skills and private connections and convictions' to carry out samizdat reproduction (69). For example, typists sometimes carried out reproduction of samizdat texts in the workplace, thus blurring the borders between public and private spaces. Given the dominance of patriarchal attitudes within underground intellectual circles, Von Zitzewitz sheds an important light on the crucial role of women, who represented the majority of typists, to samizdat production, and rightly suggests the need for future study into the role of typists within a feminist framework.

Chapter four explores the phenomenon of samizdat libraries which appeared in the late 1960s or early 1970s – these were personal networks which organised the collection and circulation of samizdat texts. Von Zitzewitz convincingly argues that through more sophisticated processes of distribution, samizdat evolved from an informal subculture to a parallel culture which was modelled on official cultural systems. By analysing case studies of two special samizdat collections and the review journal *Summa*, Von Zitzewitz moves away from an understanding of samizdat as an oppositional cultural practice, demonstrating how it became increasingly professionalised by the mid-1970s. This chapter provides a successful new conceptualisation of how samizdat occupied an ambiguous position outside, yet fully dependent on, the official cultural sphere.

In chapter five, Von Zitzewitz carries out case studies of prominent Leningrad samizdat journals and their editors, revealing how samizdat networks became increasingly 'mature' and 'professional' in the 1970s

and 1980s (121). She explains how journals provided a platform for writers to express themselves outside the constraints of official culture, yet there was always a 'gap between aspiration and reality' as official structures continued to place limitations on samizdat networks (148). Chapter six goes on to consider the increasing entwinement of samizdat networks and official literary institutions, conceptualising samizdat networks as 'communities of practice' which both reflected and opposed official structures (149). These chapters challenge the notion that underground networks strove to maintain a sense of exclusivity, instead illustrating how they actively sought to broaden their circles and access a wider readership. At the same time, samizdat networks sought to maintain their position within an 'alternative cultural sphere' and were always limited by their refusal to conform to official ideological pressures (155).

The Culture of Samizdat therefore provides an excellent new examination of samizdat readership which contributes to debates on the increasingly permeable borders between official and unofficial culture in the late Soviet Union. Given the study's reliance on aural histories, it could have been enhanced by some engagement with recent scholarship on the role of memory and nostalgia in shaping perceptions of the Soviet era (e.g., Gerovich; Kalinina; Smith). Nonetheless, the study addresses a crucial gap in scholarship by demonstrating how the production and distribution of samizdat texts was contingent on underground networks. Von Zitzewitz also looks beyond the repressive context of stagnation, considering how Gorbachev's policies of glasnost and perestroika, which allowed greater cultural and economic freedoms in the late Soviet Union, effectively caused samizdat to disappear. The fact that samizdat culture so closely mimicked official culture meant that many people involved in the production of samizdat texts could find work within new official contexts. This transition of samizdat networks into official literary culture in the late 1980s and 1990s will provide a fruitful area of future scholarly enquiry.

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