
From alienation to solidarity: communes and zines as new forms of underground cultural infrastructure

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THE RIGHT TO SPEAK

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine was (and remains) a mind-changing tragedy for many in the Russian opposition, including independent publishers and artists.

As literature has always been a valuable cultural medium for Russophone culture, it could not help but respond to the invasion with the tools at its disposal.

At the time, the literary agenda was fully dedicated to covering the tragedy, and no cultural or symbolic space remained in the underground artistic community for their artworks that tried to reflect on events sensitively. More importantly, after the initial affective artistic expressions and subsequent repression had transpired, the Russophone literary community had to reckon with their right to create their art in Russian – the official language of aggressor state.

After continuous silence, we realised that, as artists, we can't keep silent as long as we're still alive, so we recalled the experience of dissident artists who managed to preserve underground culture even under past Soviet totalitarianism.

(IR)RELEVANT INSPIRATION

In the history of uncensored Soviet-era poetry, some underground cultural societies have united creators from very different fields. An outstanding example is the Moscow Conceptualist artistic movement founded by Ilya Kabakov, Viktor Pivovarov and Dmitry Alexandrovich Prigov. They experimented with postmodern combinations of pop-art, performance and visual poetry, problematising Soviet realism and the meaning of art itself.

Beyond Conceptualist literature, samizdat was a unique cultural medium and alternative mode of expression for underground authors, such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn; Boris Pasternak; Mikhail Aizenberg; Elena Shvarts; Chuvashian poet Gennadii Aigi; the progenitors of barracks poetry, which revealed the horror of Soviet poverty; Yan Satunovsky; Igor Kholin; Genrikh Sapgir and dozens of others. Their texts would never be officially published in the Soviet Union, although their multicultural heritage significantly shaped modern Russophone art.

With these impressive forbears in mind, we began to imagine ways of preserving underground culture. However, the current political situation differs much from that in the Soviet Union in two key respects. First is the escalation of Russian fascism, for which we too are responsible. Second, how cultural infrastructure works in Russia has changed greatly.

Anarchist poetry against imperialist narratives

In response to the first challenge, we sought to critically rethink the influence of so-called 'classical' Russian literature, its core figures and narratives. Government agencies have carefully curated this canon, gradually amplifying the imperialistic propaganda. The results of our critical reflection needed to be presented in new literary texts and literary critique.

We address the second challenge of cultural infrastructure by creating new underground venues and forms of textual representation.

Currently, as the right and possibility of preserving Russophone underground culture is seriously imperilled, poetry connected to anarchist currents is a cultural space where independent minds can still continue the tradition of dissident art, reflect on their personal responsibility for the ongoing violence of the Russian government and support its victims.

And here, as in the gd:c summer school, I wish to share the ideas and findings of my friends – artists whose bravery I admire and who inspire me to struggle for peace and freedom.

Literary strategies to address xenophobia

One of the main trends of modern uncensored and unconventional Russophone poetry is a desire for intermediality and multilingualism. And it is more than a literary fad. The scariest consequence of the authoritarian regime suffered by ordinary residents is (self-) isolation, which (artificially) feeds xenophobia and exacerbates isolation. The only way to overcome it is to find the Other in oneself and to break the artificial boundary between friend and foe. That is why young poets and artists from Russia and Belarus, despite political persecution, work collectively and combine cinematic, poetic and artistic elements to overcome the isolation of a particular cultural field.

In such conditions, the lack of cultural infrastructure is especially acute.

Where do we exist?

Safe spaces for mutually enriching dialogue among professional creators, investigators and people interested in modern culture; problematising governmental policy; and searching cooperatively for ways to express political opinions are vitally important functions of non-governmental cultural infrastructure, especially in authoritarian regimes. Although activism under the oppression of arbitrary state violence seems almost impossible, artistic practice remains one mode of struggle for personal identity and against those for whom any identity seems to be dangerous.

After the war began, a few free and safe places remained for creators to maintain dialogue with poets and artists inside and outside Russia and to organise underground anti-war charity events and conferences. The venues were diverse: independent bookshops, theatres, cultural centres, libraries, galleries, pubs, university lecture halls. But now most of them are closed or under governmental control.

However, the poetic flow has produced its own forms of free expression.

Artist communes

One format consists of performances followed by conceptual video artworks in the modern communes. They are produced by young people who continue to oppose the regime through art practices. Such performances mostly aim to raise money for political prisoners and refugees.

In such structures, poetic and political values are often united, meaning solidarity, cooperation, horizontal connections and overcoming anthropocentrism.

K is one such structure.¹ It is an independent cooperative that unites manufacturers, anarchist/libertarian thinkers and artists who refuse to collaborate with the government and corporate marketplaces. Their primary aim is to connect autonomous professionals to underground societies. All members take important decisions about the manufacturing process collectively and voluntarily choose their roles in it.

Their principal aim is to attract donations to support non-commercial initiatives, such as venues for underground art festivals, activist projects, human rights organisations and crisis centres. Beyond this, they also try to preserve the independent underground initiatives that do still exist in modern Russia.

In addition to their active manufacturing process, K's residents contribute to the development of underground cultural processes, including writing and filmmaking. Apart from providing a free platform for cultural events, including poetry readings, book launches, performances and so on, they have set up a publishing house that prints modern anarchist/libertarian zines as well as poetry books and cinema journals. Its founders claim that samizdat as a form of cultural infrastructure is valuable and necessary in authoritarian regimes; it is also the medium with the greatest artistic freedom and independence. It inspires artistic experiments and innovations with its bravery. For example, European black-metal and dungeon-synth fanzines as well as American libertarian science fiction and anarchist samizdat fascinate with their unique designs and unexpected content.

The cheaper, the freer

However, for samizdat production no publishing house is needed, as long as the authors can manage with the simplest materials and publication facilities. Samizdat zines have become one of the most accessible forms of cultural infrastructure, where diverse cultural, social and political narratives come together. Zines are becoming another venue for artistic dialogue and reflection.

One example is *Burning*, a poetry zine by modern poet, videographer and performer M. The zine is based on a poetic cycle directly connected with current political events in Eastern Europe. The latter addresses the issue of breaking with one's parents because of radically different political views. One of the author's touchstone books about this problem is *Powers of Horror*

¹ The single-letter pseudonyms are to protect the organisations and individuals involved from persecution.

by Julia Kristeva.² Its key metaphor, which significantly influenced the zine, refers to the milk foam that children in Soviet pioneer camps had to eat with hot milk, although most found it disgusting. Kristeva compares the act of vomiting this foam to emancipation from parental desire, which means obtaining subjectivity. The zine probes childhood as an uncomfortable and unsafe space, despite the kitsch view of childhood as a carefree paradise. All in all, the zine is about catastrophe, in the face of which all the opposition members are equal. That is why the zine aims to transcend the deification of the author, whose putatively privileged vantage point might let them communicate some special truth to the readers. This idea is expressed through the format of zine and its content.

The zine consists of six poems and imitates the design of an official document. This design reflects the feeling of being swallowed by violent governmental machine, where a person's life and death are determined by a signature on senseless paper, such as a draft card. The images, digitally composed and edited, contain simulated mugshots of the authors' friends.

The layout was printed on a risograph, which is how the cheapest issues are produced. This technical decision helped to stylise the zine according to the author's aim of self-elimination. Apart from the great number of artefacts, such as erased faces and torn paper, left by the risograph, the author used the simplest font available: Times New Roman. Finally, the design communicates the eerie feeling that children in Soviet (and modern) Russian kindergartens and schools experience.

Samizdat zines are normally limited to print runs of 100 copies and distributed through independent bookshops (that is, those that sell uncensored literature) and social networks.

Common sensitive topics, the desire to express one's genuine political views and the cheapest publication process unite modern dissident poetry culture with Soviet samizdat culture.

These projects and processes are important to me, although there are other valuable issues and performances beyond such manifestations of modern Russian dissident culture. Obviously, local resistance to the repressive policy of the fascist government may not make much difference on a global scale, but it does affect interpersonal relations. Modern underground culture lets us preserve the solidarity that the state's authoritarian violence seeks to take from us.

However, all these intentions are insufficient without transitional resonance, and I'm eager to maintain connections with artists

2 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

from different cultural backgrounds who share similar aims.
Xenophobia and alienation are not national problems, so we need
sincerity and courage to face them all together.

We believe that the world shifts each time we choose solidarity
instead of fear and open dialog instead of violence.

Bibliography

Kristeva, Julia. Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection. Translated by Leon
Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.