Historical Perspectives on Scholarly Communications: Tamizdat Then and Now

Discussion published by Yelena Kalinsky on Wednesday, October 20, 2021
A post from Feeding the Elephant: A Forum for Scholarly Communications.

In this series of historical perspectives on scholarly communications, we engage with literary scholars, historians, and others who think about publishing and scholarly communications in other times and places, under different political and economic conditions, and through various technological media of print and distribution. By taking up different perspectives, we hope to open up new vistas onto scholarly communications as they are practiced today or might be in the future. In this first installment, the Elephant speaks to Yasha Klots, assistant professor of Russian and Slavic studies at the City University of New York, Hunter College about his recent work on tamizdat *literature and the circulation of manuscripts across borders.*

Feeding the Elephant: Let me start with the definition of *tamizdat* that you offer in your chapter in the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Soviet Underground Culture*. You write that "*tamizdat* comprises texts that have crossed the state border twice, on the way out as a manuscript and on the way back in as a publication." I think this definition is interesting in part because it acknowledges that texts have material, temporal, and territorial lives as manuscripts that require people and institutions to launch and sustain. We are not just writers at our desks, but there is a whole infrastructure of the university press system that handles the life of our texts.

Could you talk a little bit about this infrastructure in the case of Soviet *tamizdat*? Were the networks of people ad hoc? What was their mission?

Yasha Klots: This infrastructure originates with the texts themselves in the metropolises inside the countries where they are produced. Obviously, there has to be an impulse, whether political or personal, for the manuscript to be sent out, to set out on a journey elsewhere, and it really depends on which period we are talking about. We can talk about the mid-19th century and Alexander Herzen, who calls on his brethren in tsarist Russia, *send me your manuscripts and I will publish them. And then, we will circulate them among even the peasantry.* And that was his mission. Then we have the period of the 1920s when it was not reprehensible to publish in Berlin and at the same time in Petrograd. That ended with the cases of Boris Pilnyak and Evgeny Zamyatin, who were, to different extents, persecuted, expelled, and ostracized for having their works printed by the émigrés in Berlin or in Prague. Then we do not have much during the Stalinist era, and it all not so much resumes as sprouts back up in 1957 with the publication of *Doctor Zhivago*, conventionally considered the first proper example of *tamizdat* in the post-Stalin era.

Elephant: And *Zhivago* is published by an existing publisher, not a publisher established to publish *tamizdat* literature?

Klots: Correct, and that is more often true than not. There were a few new publishing houses whose mission was to publish contraband manuscripts from the Soviet Union, but most had existed earlier

Citation: Yelena Kalinsky. *Historical Perspectives on Scholarly Communications: Tamizdat Then and Now*. The H-Net Book Channel. 10-20-2021. https://networks.h-net.org/node/1883/discussions/8687384/historical-perspectives-scholarly-communications-tamizdat-then
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as émigré book publishers or periodicals. It's very interesting to see when these periodicals shifted their focus to the Soviet Union, sometimes at the expense of their own émigré poets and prose writers. By the late 1950s, the literary life of the Russian diaspora was dwindling, while the reforms and other freedoms of the Thaw era inside the Soviet Union came to make up for this pretty discharged literary scene. Then in the 1970s, the generation of the older émigrés was rejuvenated by the so-called Third Wave of the Russian emigration, who arrived abroad bringing with them not just their own and others' new manuscripts, but also a very different kind of political component to publishing: they wanted to establish themselves, partly because of their Soviet upbringing and dissident ideology, to be independent of state institutions, a stance that was very often simply rhetoric. Although at least one example, Ardis Publishers, is unique, because not only was it independent, it was not even a university imprint (even though they were affiliated with the University of Michigan), and on top of that, they were not even Russian émigrés!

Elephant: You mentioned that the authors who were allowing their manuscripts to travel abroad were not actually writing for that readership, but would rather be writing for readers at home. What were their expectations for their manuscripts? When we talk today about sending out a book proposal, there is all this advice about imagining your reader. What kind of reception were the *tamizdat* authors envisioning? What did they know about what was going to happen to their texts?

Klots: This kind of mindset—whether they had any idea at all, even about what would happen to their texts once they were written down—is what distinguishes *tamizdat*, in my view, from émigré literature. Nabokov knew perfectly well what would happen: his books would eventually be published, even *Lolita*, as scandalous as it was. The Thaw allowed a glimmer of hope that authors still in the Soviet Union might see their works published at home, and that changes everything. This is why Akhmatova, whose "Requiem" had previously existed only orally, in the memory of the author and her closest friends, finally wrote it down in 1962. And when she did so, she addressed it to the émigrés: in the epigraph, she articulates that she's not with "those who had found themselves under foreign wings." Of course, she didn't know it was bound to be published in *tamizdat*; she hoped it would be published at home. Nonetheless, this kind of alternative audience is already there in her mindset. Then, since the major event of the publication of *Doctor Zhivago*, this audience abroad was inalienable from the *tamizdat* authors' idea of their future readers. But it's a different story when it comes to reactions to the physical print editions that, sooner or later, reached them back in the Soviet Union, especially if they never authorized the publication or even knew about it. It almost always elicited mixed feelings. Although an author wants to get published probably more than anything else, there is at the same time a kind of sacred status attached to the manuscript. It is the holy scripture of sorts, not to be interfered with or changed or edited.

Elephant: And do we know about changes and edits publishers made?

Klots: We do, unfortunately, yes. We know that some texts were edited and sometimes very, very heavily and sometimes for the same ideological reasons, that is, for the opposite ideological reasons as they would be censored in the Soviet Union. This is what happened with Shalamov, for example, the saddest case.

There could be two things that could happen. The more the manuscript circulated in *samizdat* [within the USSR], the more prone it became to mistakes and memory aberrations by the scriptor, who

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retyped and multiplied it, sometimes from memory. Everyone believed they knew "Requiem" by heart, but when it came to retyping it on their own typewriters, memory sometimes failed—if not entirely, then on the level of a few typos. And sometimes these deficient, unauthorized, stray manuscripts made their way abroad first, before the authorized one.

So that was one case, which is kind of innocent and almost inevitable, I guess. But there were other cases, as with Shalamov. His manuscript, which was authorized and given by the author to a foreign Slavist in Moscow before he went back to New York, was simply edited out of both the ideological and aesthetic tastes and considerations of the publisher, the editor of the émigré journal where it was serialized. This story is rather shocking. You can see entire paragraphs were thrown out. The institution of editing was very different from what we know it is today. There was no such thing as peer review for manuscripts from the Soviet Union. Most often, it was just the will of the editor or publisher without considering the original designs of the author.

Elephant: Another kind of mismatch of expectation and reality seems to be with remuneration. How many authors thought they were going to be getting royalties as a result of sending their work abroad, and what was the reality of the publishing industry where they were sending their texts?

Klots: Sometimes you have the impression that the more the idea of personal income was denigrated in Soviet society, the more it rebounded for the authors of *tamizdat* publications. The expectations were very high. That was very much the case for Shalamov. When they finally showed him the book of *Kolyma Tales* (first published in London in 1978, twelve years after its pirate serialization), his first question was, "Where's the money?" Sometimes, a foreign bank account would be opened for this or that author remaining back in the Soviet Union. That was the case with Andrey Sinyavsky, for instance, and it so happened that he did emigrate having served his prison sentence, and as far as I know, the money was waiting for him. And then, people came to the Soviet Union from abroad, graduate students, academic exchange scholars; they were sometimes asked or given those amounts and asked to pass them on to the authors.

Elephant: Do we know the scale of those amounts?

Klots: It very much depended on the book, but it was probably substantial. Of course, you have to be Solzhenitsyn, for instance, to really make it big. *The Gulag Archipelago* has no equals in terms of its sales worldwide. But Akhmatova's "Requiem," a small brochure-like book edition, was published in 1963 at a substantial profit. And because it was not possible at the time to stash this money for her, it was used as a subsidy to support an émigré journal, edited by the printer of her "Requiem."

Elephant: And she was aware of this?

Klots: No, but when she came to England and then to Paris in June 1965—for the first time since she had been abroad in half a century—her publishers wanted to meet with her and some of them did use this occasion to finally bring her the money that was due. Others, while still wanting to meet the author whom they had published, pretended they did not owe her anything. So she called them sharks. And then when she would be asked, *What sharks do you mean?*, she would say, half in jest, *sharks of capitalism, of course.*

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Elephant: And what about the idea of remuneration through reputation or exposure?

Klots: *Tamizdat* was driven, among other things, by the conversion of symbolic capital into economic capital. That's how it worked. So manuscripts came for free, no one paid the authors or even the smugglers anything for delivering a manuscript. It was kind of an act of courage and honor very often. But obviously, they were sold in bookstores, to the libraries. They were very often printed on commission from the CIA. The CIA would come and say, *Why don't you print this book in a print run of, say, 5,000 copies, and we will buy it all. You print, we buy, and then it gets circulated.* It was very largely state-sponsored, of course. And as the joke goes that even though it's called *tamizdat* [published abroad unofficially], it is not that different from *gosizdat* [published officially by the state], or perhaps it should even be called *gosdepizdat*, like the Department of State-*izdat*.

Elephant: I was just thinking about how some university presses, in addition to not being profit-driven, have articulated a larger mission of representing diverse voices and expanding what we see as public scholarship. I wonder if we can draw any parallels or lessons from *tamizdat*. We know that *tamizdat* publishers were able to publish authors who were blocked from doing so in the Soviet Union, but was there a more diverse dimension to this group of authors, or did *tamizdat* reproduce the system that existed?

Klots: That’s very interesting, I actually haven't thought about this enough. The first thing you immediately think of when it comes to marginalized or underprivileged or deprived authors are the ones who are serving prison terms. Prison narratives were the hottest topic, not only because prison was the quintessence of Stalinism in the eyes of *tamizdat* publishers, but also because it was very much about victimhood and atoning for the author’s victimized status by way of their manuscripts. Another marginalized type of author would be scholars. Because of the rather monarchist and kind of right-wing ideology of the older immigration, I probably wouldn't be too wrong in saying that I cannot think of a single LGBT edition of *tamizdat*. It wasn't channeled in the way we are now used to thinking about it when a publishing house might have a series on African-American narratives or LGBT themes or a queer poetry series. It was not as diverse, and the reason is very interesting, because obviously, it's not something that did not exist, right? It’s a matter of how much it existed above ground as opposed to underground, on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Yasha Klots teaches Russian literature at Hunter College of the City University of New York. His research interests are Russian and East European émigré literature and book history, contemporary Russian poetry, translation, Gulag narratives, urbanism and city mythology in Russian literature. He is the author of several articles and books, including Tamizdat, the Cold War and Contraband Russian Literature, *which is forthcoming. He is also the director of [Tamizdat Project](), an online archive of documents on “contraband” Russian literature.*

Have something to say on this topic? Reply to this post! Or email the Elephant about writing for us. We welcome submissions from stakeholders on all sides of scholarly publishing. Find us on Twitter @HNetBookChannel and use the hashtag #FeedingTheElephant.

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