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'SAMIZDAT' TODAY — A REVIEW

"I write it myself, censor it myself, print and disseminate it myself, and then I do time in prison for it myself!" Vladimir Bukovsky.

A little less than 200 years ago, a respectable and well-placed Russian gentleman named Aleksandr Radishchev was condemned to death for treason and incitement to rebellion against the Imperial state. His offence had been to write, print and circulate 31 copies of a book entitled A Journey from St Petersburg to Moscow — a stinging, if rather pretentious, attack on the social injustices of his day. This draconian sentence was later commuted to 10 years' exile, but it had the desired result of smothering a subversive voice when it mattered. Effectively so, because within two years of his return from Siberia, Radishchev had committed suicide.1

Radishchev's story has an emblematic quality. It could represent the fortune which has befallen countless other Russian writers and publishers who tried to go their own way, and were treated by the state with a similar harshness. Illicit publishing in Russia has long been a tool for the promotion of innovative political ideas, as well as of national and religious views. Unofficial literature has resisted arbitrary governments, and a tradition of censorship which goes back to the early 18th century, and has provided outlets for an apparently irrepressible stream of independent thought: literary, political, philosophical and religious. And in the late 19th century it supported and nurtured movements which later led to social and political transformations of astonishing and terrifying proportions.

The Soviet system of censorship, established after the Revolution, has been more pervasive and efficient than its predecessor in Tsarist Russia ever was. When the state body for censorship Glavit was set up in 1922, it took a firm hold on the activities of writers, to a degree which virtually ruled out the circulation of private manuscripts until after Stalin's death in 1953. It was only in the mid-sixties that unsanctioned publishing again assumed a wider

scale, and acquired the curious name by which it has since been known all
over the world. Samizdat means 'do-it-yourself publishing'; it is a playful and
challenging dig at the acronym Gosizdat, short for State Publishing House. The
term caught on with a spontaneity which brought the real need it reflected
sharply into the public eye. Within a few years it had perforce gained official
recognition: "This so-called samizdat", General Malygin of the KGB said in
1969, "is composed at the direct instigation of western intelligence and is
actively supported by it". The official Soviet press has found it expedient
since to reintroduce this line at intervals, even (to a lesser degree) under
glasnost'.

Since the spring of 1987, a flurry of relatively unimpeded samizdat activity has
offered an apparently insatiable readership unprecedented variety of uncensored
pamphlets, newspapers and journals. There are thought to be over 200
unofficial publications circulating in the Soviet Union at present, about 70 of
them in major cities (Moscow, Leningrad, Riga, Kiev, Sverdlovsk and L'viv).
The range of views and persuasions expressed in them points to the concerns
of a whole spectrum of national, political and religious groups which have
surfaced over the past two years in all parts of the Soviet Union. Journals are
being produced by the Ukrainians, the Armenians, the Crimean Tartars and the
Latvians no less eagerly than by the Russians. Secessionists, Russian national-
ists and oppositionist Marxists vie for the attention of an ever increasing
readership.

All this is the unexpected issue of labours undertaken ten and 20 years ago
by small groups of human rights activists for which 12 years imprisonment or a
spell of punitive psychiatric treatment was the likely reward. It seems
particularly ironic that the ideas expressed by so many underground writers in
the 1960's and 1970's should now be splashed over the pages of party
newspapers with scarcely a nod in the direction from which they originated.
The more so since those who undertook the dangerous task of laying the
foundations for glasnost' and perestroika are still sitting over their ancient

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2 'Shackled Existence for Unofficial Soviet Press', The Times, 4 July 1988. This report
indicates that there are at least 220 unofficial publications in circulation in the USSR. Vitali
3 Help and Action Newsletter, autumn 1988, p.15.
4 See Lyudmilla Alexeyeva Soviet Dissent (Connecticut, 1985) for a full survey.