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Twenty Years of Clandestine Publishing in Czechoslovakia

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Epigraph

“Last time you said that words can create a new reality. What kind of reality did you have in mind: a social or cultural one?” I didn’t want to immediately reveal the trap I had devised for him. “Not only social and cultural,” he answered at once, avoiding the trap, “I also mean the real world around us, and I’m not saying that it is created by words. What I mean is that when a person finds the words to describe more aspects and features of the world, then the world expands and opens up to them.” (Karel Kosík, from Ludvík Vaculík’s *Czech Dreambook*)

Twenty Years of Clandestine Publishing in Czechoslovakia

A brief digression in place of an introduction

If we are to look back now, twenty-seven years on from the events which occurred in the former Eastern Bloc countries in 1989, and evaluate what we know about the phenomenon of samizdat and about samizdat publications of the period, the following observations can be made: firstly, more research and academic publications have tended to come out of foreign universities than from the Czech Republic; we also have at our disposal a number of monographs, specialist studies, conferences (e.g. *Samizdat and Underground Culture in the Soviet Bloc Countries*, Pennsylvania, 2006; *The Samizdat as a Symbol of European Culture. History, Borders, Perspectives*, Padua 2011) and organizations (the International Samizdat Research Association) which have defined and examined this specific phenomenon of 20th century book-publishing from various perspectives.

The academic contributions can be divided into several basic groups: in chronological terms, most of the early work after 1989 was devoted to the classification and taxonomy of samizdat (which gave rise to a body of work that could be used for research in the field of social sciences). Some of these contributions provided information about the differences in samizdat publishing in individual countries. Other studies emerged in parallel to this work which examined the theory and methodology of samizdat research. Their goal was to define the basic terms (what is samizdat, dissent, opposition, official and oppositional discourse, et cetera.) and to provide researchers with a broader interpretive framework for research into the creation, distribution and reception of samizdat publications.

At this juncture it is worth mentioning some of the most recent publications about samizdat: foremost amongst these is *Samizdat Novels and the Quest for Autonomy in Soviet Dissidence*, in which Ann Komaromi from the University of Toronto used her experience from her previous studies on the genesis of samizdat and its influence on society from the perspective of Darnton’s communication model and Bourdieu’s sociological theory of

cultural fields. The convergence of different approaches to the book, which is at the same time a text, a material object and, from a cultural perspective, a process of exchanging values, became the starting point for research and later also for the monograph *Alternative Culture*, which was written by experts from various fields and overseen by the Brno sociologist Josef Alan. Jonathan Bolton from Harvard, author of the third groundbreaking study, *Worlds of Dissent*, combines two approaches – those of literary studies and history. His book, originally written in English, was later published in a Czech translation.

Recent studies (for example by E. Dányi) have featured original insights into samizdat from the perspective of today's self-publishing on the internet, which reveal how the general principle by which samizdat operated can be understood and developed in new contexts. The very name of the organization, "Mattering Press", discussed in the study indicates that, unlike the "materialization" of the text in a samizdat, this is more a process of "assigning meanings" (of academic texts published on the basis of open-access books and evaluated by peer review). The principle of openness, on which samizdat was founded, is being transformed into the maintenance of openness, by which is meant a process of continuously preserving texts which is carried out by groups of individuals – a kind of collective work in progress.

Samizdat's place in history, the meaning of illegal texts

Disagreements regarding the importance of illegally published texts in the period 1969–1989 exist mainly because samizdat has often been viewed primarily as a political matter (whether in the form of resistance or a kind of civic engagement), both by the official authorities, who attributed this meaning to samizdat, as well as by the opposition, which in its conflict with the authorities, which took place mainly on an ethical level, presented its arguments through the discourse of human rights. One of the aims of the Communist authorities' rhetoric in the media was to discredit the opposition – in this case the authors of samizdat texts, for whom it created a negative public identity – the dissidents were pejoratively described as recreants, amoral, an underclass, henchmen, lackeys, agents of imperialism, and so on.

In the Czechoslovak Communist Party newspaper of the time, *Rudé právo* [Red Justice], condemnatory editorials in a similar vein appeared on a regular basis:

This also includes the latest pamphlet by the so-called Charter 77, which a group of people from the morally bankrupt Czechoslovak reactionary bourgeoisie and the organizers of the

1968 counter-revolution passed on to certain Western agencies at the behest of anti-communist and Zionist organizations. It is an anti-state, anti-socialist, anti-people and demagogic libellous document, which grossly and falsely defames the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and the revolutionary achievements of the people. (Drop-outs and Usurpers, Rudé právo, 12 January 1977)

The attacks in the media presented the official discourse the appropriate penalties, ranging from exclusion from professional life to interrogation and prosecution.

“Do you know why you are here?” asked Major Fišer, lifting up the 59th edition of Witness, the so-called Prague edition. “I’ve no idea,” I duly replied. Major Fišer wanted to know how and why I had sent them an article, whether I had received a fee and whether I was aware that I was contributing to a magazine which ran hostile propaganda against our country. I replied that I had the right to write for any magazine in the world without being responsible for how someone evaluated it, but only for the lines I wrote. (The Czech Dreambook, p465)

After 1989 samizdat continued to be viewed from a political perspective which focused primarily on the content of samizdat publications, while the form or formal dispositives of samizdat influencing the appropriation of meaning, to paraphrase Chartier, remained outside the sphere of academic interest.

From the outset, the physical page of a samizdat was so different from that of ordinary books that it was impossible not to perceive the special connection between text and form. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to define this connection as an incarnation of sui generis. Unlike mass-produced books, which in many respects samizdat could not compete with, it provided the reader with the unusual experience of holding a hand-made piece of work, with samizdat copies bearing visible traces of this:

Spent the afternoon running around with books again. One package to transport to the author so he can sign the title pages, insert photographs into the text and then take them here and there to be bound. I guess that the guy doesn’t have money for materials: I give him six hundred up front.

It wasn’t just about the materials; apart from the carbon paper and the often illegible text with typos on the nth copy, there was the author’s signature, the initials of the copy typist in place of the imprint, the simple binding – mainly carried out, at some risk, by professional book-binders – and finally the traces left behind by readers. In response to the danger of detection and the possible penalties associated with it, these communities of readers

created for a specific purpose developed strategies and tactics which contributed to the perception of samizdat and the aura which came to surround it:

Karol said that Dienstbier's flat had been searched. I immediately began to go through what I had at home: a book by Černý ready to be bound, a box of presentation copies for Jan Trefelka...and several manuscripts to be read, the most sensitive being Tatarka's Písačky, and where was I going to hide away my own writings each night?" (p.9)

Darnton's "Communication Circuit"

A shift away from research focusing on the content of samizdat publications, which failed to provide a satisfactory explanation for such a complex phenomenon as samizdat, occurred after the appearance of Darnton's communication model – the Communication Circuit (1990), which tracked the life cycle of a book. CC offered researchers the necessary tool to follow the trajectory of a book from various perspectives as a complex of processes and relationships, both internally, among the individual agents of the circuit, and externally, through social, economic and political influences. According to some academics, Darnton's model only provides limited opportunities to explore such a specific phenomenon as samizdat, as some of the phases in the communication circuit are either absent in the process of creation, distribution and the reception of samizdat, or deviate so much from the standard model that it is very difficult to identify them with the individual agents of the circuit.

It appears that, in spite of the reservations which were voiced in the academic press, Darnton's model is flexible enough and that the asymmetry or breach of the circuit which occurs in samizdat publishing can be substituted by other processes or agents.

For example, in those parts of the circuit which relate to the economic aspects of publishing and distributing samizdat and which are of marginal importance for samizdat, these agents are replaced by others which compensate for economic profit:

That is why I have to give up this work, as I sometimes feel a shadow of suspicion upon me that I am making something from it. Someone of a different disposition might think: otherwise he wouldn't have done it for so long! The seventh year... (p.17)

So this was cultural capital as a substitute for economic profit. According to P. Bourdieu, author of a theory of symbolic capital, the author received a kind of cultural reward from the publication and acceptance of his work in samizdat. Although publishers of samizdat books employed some of the same practices as official publishing houses – e.g. reviews, abstracts

and bibliographies in samizdat journals – and subscriptions, as a form of prepayment or commitment to buy, were used to finance more extensive samizdat undertakings (dictionaries, collected works and so on), a whole range of normal professions, such as editors, art editors, typographers and even critics, were missing.

Gruša has a tendency to really edit the manuscripts: he completely changed Sachr's "Bloody Easter". But we simply cannot do that! I just correct errors, standardize the spelling of foreign words, change a word or two, put a few questions in the margins and give it to the author to sort out. We're not an editorial board; that would be a full-time job which we'd get sod all for. (The Czech Dreambook, p.39)

Towards a history of samizdat in the former Czechoslovakia

Although the term samizdat can be interpreted in different ways, there are authentic testimonies to the inception of samizdat in Czechoslovakia following the August invasion of 1968:

It's been seven years since Ivan (Klíma) and I asked Zdena, who had just been fired from her job, to copy out manuscripts for us. We paid for the work, and because that kind of thing is always expensive for the author, we gave away any spare copies at cost price to anyone who was interested. It was a spur-of-the moment idea with no plan behind it. It then caught on with other friends of ours. The name came a year later in a tram, just before Christmas, when I was looking at a poster advertising a certain publishing house: the "Key" series, apparently opening up a treasure trove of Czech literature. "Bullshit!" I thought. (The Czech Dreambook, p.473)

As we move away chronologically from the first post-revolution reflections, which were affected by first-hand experiences and could lead to a certain simplified, almost black-and-white view, relativizing tendencies have increasingly featured in interpretations by some contemporary historians, particularly when these relate to the everyday life of the majority of society under the former regime. According to these historians, the discourse of the Communist authorities was perceived by the majority of society as a harmless "ritual" which no-one took seriously. Meanwhile the opposition, as has been described above, bore all of the consequences of freely expressing their opinions, as is typical of totalitarian systems. In order to reach more objective conclusions we would need more detailed sociological

research which would provide us with the requisite quantitative indicators for further interpretation.

The following excerpt from Vaculík's Czech Dreambook demonstrates that the discussion on whether opposition activities had any meaning also took place within the community:

My article has a purpose which is not entirely within the words, namely to step out of the circle of "dissidents". I would also like it to reach people who have somehow accepted the situation but are sickened by it, who have a guilty conscience but silence it. What good is it if we have a group of resplendent unbowed warriors on the one hand, while on the other the whole of society falls into complete disarray... (The Czech Dreambook, p.25)

Although samizdat did not necessarily wield the authority that the official culture had lost, it did acquire at least some of it from the mere fact that it was free, unfettered creative work, in contrast to the prevailing constraints which official book publishing was subject to.

A significant part of samizdat's authority also came from the author's name (in many cases these were important writers from the pre-Normalization period), either in the form of information on the title page or a signature legitimizing the publication. The authorization of the work not only provided a samizdat book with credibility; at the same time it offered protection against spontaneously emerging copies, which often led to deviations from the original text.

The publication of samizdat works by the press after 1989 meant that unofficial as well as official literature became part of the standard literary machine and were subject to assessment under the same conditions and criteria. The difference arising from the transfer from the specific social space of opposition to normality is expressed by the acceptance of the works by literary critics and their inclusion in the literary canon. The acceptance of samizdat works by the reading community occurred in two phases and constituted different sets of readers. If the restricted number and distribution of samizdat copies prior to 1989 meant that readers formed specific communities based on opposition to the regime and shared codes and conventions, then after 1989 texts written and published in samizdat form became subjected to a wider reading community, whose interests, competencies and patterns of use were very diverse.

Therefore, just as one of the functions of the digitalization of cultural heritage today is to preserve collections which are at risk, from the outset samizdat offered a new life to texts

which would have ended up as pulp or confined to a drawer. And even if that is only one of the meanings of samizdat, it remains a significant one.

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