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**THE OFFICIAL AND THE UNOFFICIAL IN  
SOVIET CULTURE 1950-80**

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[Introduction](#) | [History of the Concept of the Unofficial](#) | [Conceptions of the Unofficial](#) | [Political Resistance](#) | [Autonomous Society](#) | [The Pushkin House by Andrei Bitov: The Story of a Double Agent](#) | [Viitteet](#) | [Kirjallisuus](#) | [PDF](#)

**I n t r o d u c t i o n**

The relationship between the centre and the periphery can be examined by taking the interaction of the official and the unofficial as the basic subject of the late period of socialism as an example. For these purposes, we will take the period between the mid-1950s and the events of Perestroika in 1985 as the timeframe for our examination.

The liberalization of Soviet society, beginning with the 'thaw' in the second half of the 1950s, brought with it the appearance of a cultural realm that existed without boundaries established by society. This includes the 'stilyagi' [\[1\]](#) and groups of literary figures that were orientated towards uncensored publishing and academic seminars taking place in apartments, unsanctioned by the authorized academic institutions. In the widening of the unofficial associations, the unofficial sphere became the main impulse for the history of late socialism's development, serving as the cause for that period's completion - the authorization or 'officialisation' of the previously unofficial and the destruction of the Soviet system. The out-of-favour academics became central political figures ([Andrei Sakharov](#)), banned authors were regularly printed in numerous publications ([Alexander Solzhenitsyn](#)), and rock music, which previously, in the best-case scenario, could only exist in the form of artistic-amateur societies at the houses of culture, was now broadcast on the major channels. Perhaps the most interesting feature of this period was to be observed in the interaction between the official and the unofficial - the centre and the periphery - which would alter radically in the second half of the 1980s.

A description of that feature is preceded by certain methodological and historical notes, which, primarily, concern the unofficial, as it is this factor that provides the motivating vector in the history of late socialism.

Firstly, we will review the history of the concept of the 'unofficial': its origin, development and dissemination.

Secondly, we will analyse the most characteristic conceptions of the unofficial - what, as a rule, is understood by this word.

Then we will deconstruct the relations between the official and the unofficial spheres in which the main events of late socialism took place, taking Andrei Bitov's novel *Pushkinskii dom* (The Pushkin House) as an example.

### **History of the Concept of the Unofficial**

The concept of the unofficial appeared in the second half of the 1960s. At the end of our first lecture,[\[2\]](#) we discussed the fact that it arose by being taken from the English language and can be seen as a symptom of the westernization of late-Soviet culture. At the same time, 'unofficial' is synonymous with dozens of other names for this sphere. Today, the number of designations is unusually large: unofficial, independent, secondary and non-conformist art, the art of the underground, the underground, 'podpolya' (a word of Russian derivation for 'underground', as opposed to the borrowed English word 'underground' which is also used), counterculture and certain others. We will describe, in its main form, the history of this collection of synonyms, which largely covers the conception that interests us.

The beginning of the nominative process and the formation of its milieu, took place in the literature of the 1960s. The first definitions were 'podpolnaya' literature and 'samizdat' ('underground' and, literally 'self-published', respectively). As with the concept of the unofficial itself, they came from without. 'Podpolnaya literature' first appeared on the pages of the émigré publication [Grani](#), which published texts sent from the USSR. From the beginning of the 1960s, these works were titled 'podpolny', despite the fact that in the Soviet Union nothing of the kind existed. One of the first typewritten publications described as 'podpolny', was *Feniks* (Phoenix, 1962)[\[3\]](#). One of the first typewritten publications in the USSR to be described as 'podpolny' was the series of *Sfinksy* (Sphynxes) almanacs by [Valery Tarsis](#). The designation would go on to be fairly widespread, though it would later be surpassed by other synonyms.

The history of 'samizdat' also owes much to emigration and the milieu of

sovietology. The concept was a later, shorter form of the neologism 'samsebyaizdat' ('publish-it-yourself'), thought up in the mid-1940s by the Moscow poet [Nikolai Glazkov](#). According to Alexander Daniel:

Glazkov [...] created small typewritten compendiums of his poems and prose, sewing them into brochures in the half-page format and giving them to friends. On the title page he put a word that he himself had come up with - 'samsebyaizdat' (Daniel, 1994; *Samizdat* 1997: 12, 372)[\[4\]](#).

The concept of samizdat came into more popular use in the 1960s. Wolfgang Kasack dates the birth of samizdat to the beginning of 1966 (Kasack, 1988: 344). Formed in the USSR, it gained a wide distribution thanks to the émigré sovietological publications in which the concept became fairly broad: samizdat covered the dissemination of not only literary works but also various other forms of text distributed in typewritten copies or photocopied (Dolinin, 1993)[\[5\]](#). From the 1970s, the word 'samizdat' is capitalized, having been given a central role in the relations between the authorities and the critically-minded intelligentsia (Daniel, 1994)[\[6\]](#).

'Neofitsialnost'' ('unofficial') belongs to the second generation of synonyms that appeared at the end of the 1960s. Analogous to 'podpolya' and samizdat, it spread thanks to influences from without. Unlike them, however, it is a translation of a term popular in European and American artistic criticism - 'unofficial art/culture', now applied to Soviet circumstances.

The Soviet 'unofficial' first appeared in a book by American critics Paul Sjeklocha and Igor Mead, *Unofficial Art in the Soviet Union* (Sjeklocha & Mead, 1967). This translated term would be taken up by the Russian critics of the third wave of emigration. In the course of the 1970s, it would be employed in a series of articles by Igor Golomstok and Alexander Glezer (Glezer, 1976). In 1977, a monograph by Golomstok was published entitled *Unofficial Art of the USSR* (Golomstok, 1977).

From art history, the concept of the unofficial would pass into the dictionaries of foreign and émigré literary criticism. It seems that the leader in this trend was the compiler a collection of 'unofficial Soviet lyrics', [Liesl Ujvary](#), titled *Freiheit ist Freiheit*, published in 1975 in Zurich. It contained the works of Igor Kholin, Vsevolod Nekrasov, Genrikh Sapgir, Vladislav Len, Vagrach Bakhchanyan and [Eduard Limonov](#) (Freiheit, 1975). Limonov - like Golomstok and Glezer, a representative of the third wave of emigration -

was the most active promoter of the unofficial. In his article *Neoficialnaya literatura* (Unofficial Literature), he maintained that this was the superior designation amongst many others that had already compromised themselves (Limonov, 1975a). Another representative of the third wave of emigration, Konstantin Kuzminsky, also preferred 'unofficial' to all other designations (Kuzminsky, 1980).

During the same period (the second half of the 1970s), the concept of the unofficial flourished in the USSR. It can be found in articles published in the typewritten magazines (*Chasy*), or in almanacs and anthologies. It can be found, for example, on the pages of the Ostrova anthology of unofficial Leningrad poetry (Ostrova, 1982: II). It would go on to join many other such synonyms: independent, uncensored, dissonant, undercover, secondary, third culture, the culture of the underground, unde(r)ground, podpolya, resistance, counter-culture and certain others.

Thus, the notion of the unofficial, as with the majority of these synonymous designations, comes from without, through direct contact with the émigré or sovietological medium. It came from the glossary of art criticism, coming into use, first and foremost, within the third wave of emigration, and providing evidence of the westernization of that medium. With certain drawbacks, it can also be interchanged with a series of synonyms.

## Conceptions of the Unofficial

### Political Resistance

One of the most popular conceptions of unofficial culture has it being seen as political resistance or a struggle against the Soviet authorities. The myth that this sphere is a political movement arose and developed in its contact with émigré society. Primarily, it arose in the literary sphere, being directly linked with the concept of 'podpolya' or the underground. At the end of 1956, the magazine *Grani* published *Appeal of the Anti-Communist Publishing House 'Grani' to Literary, Artistic and Scientific Activists Enslaved in Russia*, calling for texts that could not be published in the USSR, due to their being unable to meet the demands of censorship, to be sent or handed in.

The Russian *revolutionary* [the italics are mine] publishing house 'Posev' is prepared 'to provide them with that opportunity' ([Appeal](#), 1956)[71].

It is possible that this 'revolutionary' call gave birth to the myth of underground workers and underground literature - the traditions of the revolutionary-liberation movement that arose in the Russian emigration of the 1860s (Mogilner, 1999). It is interesting to note that shortly before the publication of *Appeal*, *Grani* published *Underground*, the first part of *Notes From the Underground* by Fyodor Dostoevsky (*Grani* 29, 1956. C.5-26). It should be remembered that this text also criticizes the teachings of socialism, and that the author, prior to the writing of the work had been a member of the Petrashev underground circle.

The underground and the tradition of the revolutionary-liberation movement in the USSR was far from radicalism in the form in which it arose. From a *Grani* publication we learn that in 1966, in Moscow, the publication of the magazine *Russkoye slovo* (The Russian Word) is renewed - "a publication of the radical democratic movement, expressing the popular-revolutionary world view of the intelligentsia and the 'raznochintsy', the so-called 'nihilists' of the 1860s. Its new founder, the Ryleyev Club, has been in existence since 1964, as an heir to the Decembrist literary Society of the Russian word, one of the leaders of which was [Ryleyev](#)." From the editorial article of the first issue, we learn that the magazine was "the only one in which the Ryleyev Club revealed itself in over two years of its existence." In the summer of 1966, its existence became active. On July 13, "on the 140th anniversary of the criminal execution of the sources of Russian freedom - Ryleyev, Pestel, Muraviev, Bestuzhev-Ryumin and Kakhovsky", the assembly of the Ryleyev Club decreed:

1. To consider the foundation of the activities of the club to be the poem [Citizen](#) by Ryleyev and the article *Culture and Man*;
2. To elect the leadership of the Ryleyev Club;
3. To carry out its work under the slogan: "Culture, truth, honesty!"

(*Russkoye slovo*, 1967).

In this way, the uncensored sphere of culture included the *Grani* magazine in the context of a struggle against the Soviet regime, recreating the same revolutionary-liberation tradition of the underground of the 19th Century, which itself led to the creation of that regime. In the USSR, the politicization of the unofficial sphere did not, in fact, take place. Dissidence and bohemianism were isolated from each other. The participants in the

exhibits of the [gaza-nevsky \[8\]](#) movement did not pursue political aims. According to one of the organizers, Petrochenkov, the only result of the exhibition was that half of those artists showing their works emigrated.

### Autonomous Society

Another equally widespread conception of unofficial culture is that of an autonomous society, independent of Soviet society. It is believed that in the years of stagnation, a cultural community was formed that was opposed to and independent of the official society. One could say that this was a social association on the basis of one's profession. It comprised those that could not find their places, such as writers, critics and intellectuals. There are, however, serious doubts about whether, in reality, this was an entirely independent environment, free of contacts with officialdom. Can we, for example, using the terminology of the British researcher Dick Hebdige, dub this a subculture, which is to say a social-cultural space entirely cordoned off from the institutions of official society (Hebdige, 1979)?

The political analyst, Oleg Kharkhordin, in his book *The Collective and the Individual in Russia*, expresses justified doubts about the adequacy of describing the unofficial milieu of late socialism with the aid of Hebdige's terminology. In his opinion, during the period of late socialism, one could only talk of subcultures if one ignored the fact that this phenomenon was a part of the official society (O. Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia. A Study of Practices*, Berkeley, 1999. P.315-317). Thus, the literary associations at the houses of culture and 'Club-81' (a cultural association created in 1981 at the Dostoevsky House Museum, under the patronage of the KGB), did exist within the state social space. Unofficial society cannot be termed a fully-fledged society in its own right that is isolated from official society.

The most usefully employed conception, in terms of defining its status, is that of Alexei Yurchak[9]. Taking a broad overview of the unofficial culture of late socialism as oppositional (Cushman, 1995: 8), he convincingly demonstrates that there were no two societies isolated off from each other - the cultural, social and economic spaces were divided into two spheres: the official and the parallel, in which the inhabitants of the central cities existed simultaneously (Alexei Yurchak, *The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, Pretence and the Anecdote. Public Culture*. v.9. n.2. 1997. P.161-188). In another work he develops this model, examining

spheres such as the officialised-public and the personalized-public practices, coexisting in interaction in one space and context[10]. Their relations are described through Bakhtin's conception of the 'hybrid' - a mutual overlapping and crossing (Yurchak. *Entrepreneurial Governmentality and Postsocialist Russia. A cultural investigation of business practices*. Forthcoming in: Bonnell, Victoria and Thomas Gold, eds. *The New Entrepreneurs in Europe and Asia*. N.Y.).

The arguments of both researchers are convincing. Oppositionality and isolation in social and cultural spheres that are outside the framework of competence of the state authorities are far from being manifest. The artistic environment, to a greater or lesser extent, was included in official life. The artist worked as a designer in a film theatre, whilst creating canvasses for home exhibitions. The writer worked on translations or in journalism, while hiding away the real literature that he created. An actor earned his keep in the state theatre, whilst also performing in amateur studios. Creative people did not always "work according to their speciality": rock musicians could undertake research in academic-scientific institutes, many literary activists worked in boiler houses or as street cleaners. The unofficial nature of the central events in the lives of the unofficial community - the Nevsky and Gaza exhibitions in the House of Culture - was suspect in the view of some members of this community who refused to take part in them. In their opinion, it was a compromise, a giving in to Soviet officialdom. The same motives lay behind the actions of the literary activists who staid away from Club-81. The two interpenetrating spheres of official and unofficial created the social and cultural space in which the representatives of unofficial culture existed.

### ***The Pushkin House by Andrei Bitov: The Story of a Double Agent***

Historically, these spheres were formed and took on their clear social forms at the end of the 1960s. The development of this process can be easily demonstrated by taking the example of the creation of Andrei Bitov's novel *The Pushkin House*. Work on the novel began at the same time as the formation of these spheres and the author would go on to make use of every opportunity to balance between them.

Bitov's belonging to unofficial literature is established, first and foremost, by two facts - *The Pushkin House* being distributed in samizdat and issued

by the American publishing house [Ardis](#) (only after Perestroika in the USSR) and the writer's participation in the Moscow almanac of independent writers *Metropol* (1979). At the same time, for unofficial writers, he was to some extent an outsider as he was a member of the Union of Writers and had been regularly published since the 'thaw'. Bitov's 'unofficial career' began when the unofficial became a fully-fledged sphere, at the turn of the 1960s-1970s. At that time he was already well-known as a Soviet writer, a graduate of the literary association of the Soviet Writer publishing house and the author of four books. A more than successful beginning and a total absence of even a hint of the cultural underground.

Originally, *The Pushkin House* was planned as an official text. In 1964, Bitov began work on a short story that would soon develop into the novel. Four years later, he applied to the Leningrad branch of the Soviet Writer for the novel to be published. The writer received an advance, and a deadline for the completion of the novel, which was to be a year later. An epic of publishing intrigue, which was to run for many years, began.

A year later, not having finished his novel, Bitov asked for an extension in order to complete the work. The publishing house gave him another year. The same situation then repeated itself. Having received several extensions, the author only handed in the text of the novel in the autumn of 1971. Kira Uspenskaya, the editor in charge of the book at Soviet Writer, once again helped to avoid problems. The author was allowed to rework the text and present the final version no later than in nine months time.

Bitov, meanwhile, had developed the idea of writing a commentary on the novel and he tried to set the book up at other publishing houses, such as Moscow's *Sovremennik*. After a certain amount of time, the Soviet Writer gave him a final extension, after which a full stop would be placed in the story of the non-publication of *The Pushkin House*. In 1974, Bitov and Uspenskaya proposed replacing the publication of the novel with a reprint of an older work. This was one of the popular tricks of Soviet publishing practice: to publish, instead of an uncompleted new work, a new print of an already published work. As a result, *Sem' puteshestvii* (Seven Journeys), a major book, was republished. *The Pushkin House* was carefully taken back from the publishing house, bypassing the management and avoiding any editorial amendments.

At the same time, the novel began to live a full-fledged unofficial life. From the beginning of the 1970s, typewritten copies of extracts from the text



were being passed round in samizdat. The manuscript was then sent abroad, and Bitov established an acquaintanceship with the editor-in-chief of the émigré publishing house Ardis, Karl Proffer, who agreed to publish it.

As the American edition of *The Pushkin House* was being prepared, events were developing just as stormily in the official sphere. Extracts of the novel were published in Soviet periodicals - the *Zvezda*, *Avrora*, *Druzhba Narodov* and *Voprosy Literatury* magazines. It developed new stories and texts. The characters of the unpublished novel featured in them, the novel being published in self-contained, independent extracts. From these extracts, develops the official version of *The Pushkin House* - a unified novel cycle, *Molodoi Odoyevcev. Geroi romana* (Young Eyewitnesses. The Hero of the Novel), which is included in Bitov's book *Dni cheloveka* (The Days of a Man). The entire novel, however, cannot be published. Publishing houses and magazines refuse to publish it. The manuscript is rejected at the *Sovremennik*, *Novy Mir* and *Druzhba Narodov*.

The unofficial fate of the novel developed successfully, however. In 1978, the book was published by *Ardis*. From the publisher's forward, actually written by Bitov himself, we learn that the novel has been published without the author's knowledge. On the basis of this foreword, the author of *The Pushkin House* creates a cunning alibi for himself, removing the chance of any accusations that may be thrown at him by the KGB. Translations of the novel appear long before it is published in the USSR. The first was Swedish, published at the beginning of the 1980s, and then *The Pushkin House* was published in German, English (simultaneously in America and England), and in French. The full version of the novel, complete with commentary, was only published in the USSR in 1989.

The history of *The Pushkin House* played itself out in two spheres. Extracts of the text of the novel were printed in periodicals and passed round in samizdat. The author tried to publish the work in the USSR and worked with foreign publishing houses. He found himself in the position of an unofficial author, though at that time he was published and managed to publish other works. Bitov played his game between these two spheres and with the arrival of perestroika he turned from a fashionable author with a reputation for being unofficial into an acknowledged, official writer. *The Pushkin House*, along with *Doctor Zhivago* and *The Gulag Archipelago*, were amongst those forbidden texts, the publication of which after perestroika was of a principled importance. Bitov's journey was characteristic of the history of late socialism. This period formed the

unofficial sphere, developed it into a powerful cultural phenomenon, ending with that which was only recently unofficial being replaced by the officialdom of the late Soviet decades. The history of Bitov's novel is a central historical theme of the last decades of the last century.

Nevertheless, one can maintain that Bitov provides an example that proves just the opposite. He belonged to the liberal officialdom, whilst a real opposition and independence was in existence. It shouldn't be forgotten, however, that an autonomous society in the unofficial artistic milieu cannot be identified in the 1960s, when it was divided and disconnected. Nor can it be found at any later time - in the second half of the 1970s-1980s, when the Club-81 was created, with the assistance and participation of the people from 'the big house', the popular term for the KGB offices in Leningrad.

Bitov, like the members of Club-81, and even like the artists that didn't join it, was involved in an interaction between the official and unofficial spheres, the latter being neither a political opposition nor a social autonomy. This interaction was a cultural symbiosis or a form of mutual cultural parasitism. Despite the fact that the concepts of unofficial (and other synonymous words) were formed from without in order to designate independent, alternative communities, the spheres of officialdom and the unofficial were interlinked and dissolved into one another. During the period of late socialism, the centre was out of focus. The relations between them are difficult to describe as either oppositional or autonomous. The centre was dispersed about the periphery.

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## Viitteet

[1] Stiljagat (suomalainen vastine voisi olla "lättähatut") olivat nuorisokulttuurin varhaisia edustajia Neuvostoliitossa, esiintyivät kaduilla ja tanssipaikoissa. Stiljaga-älyköt harrastivat mm. Hemingwayn kirjallisuutta.

[2] Ks. Savitski, S. "[Dada ja surrealismin myöhäissosialismin epävirallisessa kulttuurissa](#)".

[3] *Fenix* oli kirjoituskoneella tehty runoantologia, yksi ensimmäisistä samizdat-teoksista, ks. esim. [Juri Galanskov](#).

[4] Daniel' 1994; Samizdat 1997: 12, 372.

[5] Dolinin 1993.

[6] Daniel' 1994.

[7] Ko. linkki sisältää siis viitteen v. 1965 julkaistuun "obrashtshenieen", kun alkuperäinen (josta on puhe) julkaistiin siis v. 1956. *Granissa* julkaistiin esitystä miltei samansisältöisenä vuosi vuoden perään.

[8] Gaza-Nevski -kulttuuriksi kutsutaan epävirallisten taiteilijoiden liikettä, joka järjesti näyttelyt

Dom Kultury Gazassa (1974) ja DK Nevskissä (1975).

[9] Ks. Cushman 1995, 8.

[10] Yurchak 1997, 161-188.

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