

Across the Nylon Curtain: Transnational Cultural Exchanges between Italy and USSR (1957-91).

The role of Italian Cultural Actors in the diffusion of Soviet *samizdat* and *tamizdat*.

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The research I have carried out at the Open Society Archives is part of a broader project devoted to analyzing the transnational cultural exchanges that took place between Eastern and Western Europe in the context of the so-called “Cultural Cold War” (Scott-Smith and Krabbendam 2003).

In 2004 György Péteri, referring to the divide that split Europe into two blocs in the 20th century, introduced the concept of “Nylon Curtain”, arguing that the Iron Curtain was extremely permeable to cultural objects and ideas: «The curtain was made of Nylon, not Iron. It was not only transparent, but it also yielded to strong osmotic tendencies that were globalizing knowledge across the systemic divide about culture, goods, and services» (Péteri 2004: 115). In order to demonstrate this permeability and the consequent globalization of knowledge across and beyond the Curtain (Kind-Kovács and Labov, 2013; Kind-Kovács 2014), my research focuses on the transnational flow of texts that took place between Italy and the Soviet Union (1957-1991). My analysis of the production, diffusion and consequent consumption of a particular kind of cultural object and symbolic good (Bourdieu 1985) –*tamizdat*¹– aims at overcoming the traditional representation of 20th-century European culture as divided into two opposing blocs, in the context of the Cultural Cold War.

I set my research aim as *tamizdat* because it was a transnational publishing practice that contributed significantly to the free circulation of culture across and beyond the Curtain, since the publication in the West of uncensored manuscripts smuggled out of the USSR was usually meant to be sent back clandestinely. Therefore –since *tamizdat*, together with the *samizdat*,² was not only the most peculiar editorial phenomenon of the unofficial Soviet culture, but also the most effective and powerful weapon of the ideological struggle– I found an interesting case study in its production and circulation between Italy and USSR (from 1957 to 1991). I decided to focus my attention on Italy, first, because this was the country where the first *tamizdat* ever published –namely, Boris

¹*Tamizdat* is a Russian acronym which literally means “published over there”, as to say abroad. This term refers to the cross-border publication of those texts that, censored and/or unpublished in the Soviet Union, were smuggled out of the USSR and published in the West.

² *Samizdat* is a Russian acronym which literally means “self-published, published by myself”. This term refers to those uncensored typewritten texts clandestinely circulating in the USSR.

Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1957)– was released in the West; and, second, because, subsequently Italy became an important center for the production of *tamizdat* and for the diffusion of so-called uncensored Soviet literature (*nepodtsenzurnaia literatura*) in the West and, clandestinely, even in Eastern Europe. In fact, although Milan –which has always been the Italian capital of the publishing industry– was the most important center for the production of such texts, Rome was a very important global hub for their clandestine dissemination beyond the Curtain, as evidenced by the fact that different Radio Liberty-funded “sponsors” that sent books to the USSR – such as the Italian Literary Association (Associazione Letteraria Internazionale, ALI)– were based there.

The main aim of this research is to:

- 1) highlight the transnational socialization of uncensored Soviet texts between Italy and the USSR – namely the negotiation of *tamizdat* by the various social and cultural actors who contributed to their publication and circulation in Western Europe and, clandestinely, also in Eastern Europe;
- 2) trace the routes of the free flow of these texts between Italy and the USSR;
- 3) reconstruct the network of relationships between the cultural actors (editors, translators, editorial advisers, literary agents, critics, journalists, etc.) and social actors (human rights activists, dissidents, diplomats, politics, religious personalities, etc.) of the “transnational community” (Kind-Kovács 2014: 81) that made possible the publication, circulation and reception of *tamizdat*.

After analyzing the production of *tamizdat* by different Italian publishing houses –namely Mondadori, Il Saggiatore, Jaca Book and La Casa di Matriona– for the purpose of reconstructing the micro-history of these publications and specifically to illustrate how the cross-border migration and circulation of these texts was realized, I investigated the role of the different socio-cultural actors, who contributed to the transnational circulation of *samizdat* and *tamizdat*. For this stage, the research I carried out at the Open Society Archives was very fruitful, because among the participant of this transnational community who made it possible to circulate and publish those texts, there were several Italians and Russian emigrés naturalized Italian citizens directly connected to Radio Liberty, such as Mario Corti, Yuri Mal'tsev and Irina Ilovaiskaia Alberti.

The Italian Mario Corti played a central cultural role in spreading *samizdat* and *tamizdat* on both sides of the Curtain. In 1975 –together with Yuri Mal'tsev, Giovanni Bensi, Sergio Rapetti and Giovanni Codevilla– Corti founded the Italian publishing house La Casa di Matriona, specialized in

publishing *tamizdat*, and also collaborated with the publishing house Jaca Book, for which he edited and translated several *samizdat* (sometimes under the pseudonym of Massimo Gori).³ From 1977 he contributed to organizing several Italian and international *samizdat* exhibits (Venice “Biennale of Dissent”, 1977; Turin, 1978; Washington, 1979; Rome, 1989). Starting in 1979, he collaborated with Radio Liberty, working first in the Samizdat section under the direction of Peter Dornan and, after Dornan retired, he became its director; from 1988 to 2003 he was deputy director and later became the director of the Russian Service broadcast of RFE/RL; and from 1990 to 1995 he also served as the deputy director and director of the Information Resource Department of the RL Research Institute. As RFE/RL collaborator, he was active in publicizing the work of Soviet human rights activists and dissidents. Between 1969 and 1978 he edited several books on dissent in the USSR; in 1977 he served as chairman of the Organizing Committee of the Second International Sakharov Hearings in Rome, and in 1979 helped organize the Third Sakharov Hearings in Washington.

Yuri Mal'tsev was a Soviet dissident who emigrated to Italy in 1974, where he too greatly contributed to the circulation and publication of *tamizdat*. As mentioned above, Mal'tsev was one of the founders of the publishing house La Casa di Matriona and worked as Radio Liberty's correspondent from Rome. Among RL's Rome correspondents there was also another emigrant who became a naturalized Italian citizen, Irina Ilovajskaja Alberti. Alberti collaborated also to the RL's book distribution program based in Italy: in the 1970s she was one of the Italian Literary Association's collaborators engaged in diffusing *tamizdat* in Eastern Europe, both through person-to-person distribution and by taking part in the so-called mailing program. From 1967 until 1976 – when she became Solzhenitsyn's closest collaborator and moved to Vermont– she also broadcast a program on Radio Liberty. In 1979 she became editor-in-chief of the Russian emigré newspaper «Russkaia Mysl'», which she directed for over twenty years.

To highlight the role of these cultural actors, the research I carried out at OSA focused mainly on the Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute collections.

The analysis of the Soviet Red Archive series was helpful for gathering biographical information about some of the important socio-cultural actors involved in the transnational circulation of *samizdat/tamizdat*, while the documents of the Samizdat Archive's Administrative Files series gave me an overall insight on the many activities promoted by RL's Samizdat section for the diffusion of

³ Massimo Gori, *La lunga strada di un'alternativa nell'URSS, 1968-1972: Sei documenti del samizdat politico*, Milano: Jaca Book, 1972; A. Nekrič, *Popoli deportati [The Punished Peoples]*, ed. by M. Corti, trans. by M. Corti and E. Corti, Milano: La Casa di Matriona, 1978;

samizdat and in support of human rights in the USSR. Moreover, my analysis of the well-documented Corti's correspondence allowed me to get an exhaustive overview of the contacts existing not only with the other RL collaborators, but also with other institutions and personalities external to it and in various capacities engaged in the diffusion of *samizdat* and *tamizdat*. These documents were later useful for a partial reconstruction of the routes that the clandestine manuscripts took in order to be processed and subsequently disseminated by RL's various departments. The memoranda and reports contained in this series are valuable documents that outline not only how the manuscripts that arrived clandestinely from the USSR were processed by the Samizdat section of the Research Institute (that is, how their authenticity was verified, how they were transcribed and archived), but also how they were disseminated both in written form (through the publication of the "Samizdat bulletin", a periodical edited by the Research Institute of RL and distributed to subscribers) and oral form (through the readings of *samizdat* broadcasted by Radio Liberty). Examining the documents of RL's Rome Bureau series was also helpful in enabling me to get an overview of the work that RL collaborators carried out there.

I also did an extensive examination of the Alfred Reisch collection, which, although it deals exclusively in the book distribution programs coordinated by RL/RFE in the Eastern countries of the Soviet bloc, was useful for getting an exhaustive overview of the ways in which the dissemination of *tamizdat* took place on the two sides of the Curtain. Of particular interest, for example, are the book lists distributed in Poland, Hungary, the Baltic countries and Romania, because they allow us to understand the purpose of the distribution of single titles in relation to specific ideological and political messaging. For example, it is surprising to note that the massive distribution of Russian, Polish, Hungarian and Romanian translations of George Orwell's novels, distributed with the aim of exposing the brutalities of the socialist regime, paralleled that of fashion magazines (*Vogue*) and women's magazines (*Marie Claire*) with the equally ideological objective of propagandizing Western lifestyles in Eastern Europe. This collection also allowed me to insert the RFE/RL's book distribution programs in the broader context of the various activities financed by the Free Europe Committee in the context of the Cultural Cold War, and so get an insight into the distribution activities based in Italy.

Archival material consulted at OSA

HU OSA 300 Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute

- HU OSA 300-1 General Records
 - Rome Bureau (boxes 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 20, 21)
- HU OSA 300-80 Soviet Red Archive
 - USSR Biographical Files (boxes 208, 315)
 - Non-USSR Biographical Files (boxes 3, 35, 39)
- HU OSA 300-85 Samizdat Archives
 - Published Samizdat (box 5)
 - Biographical Files (boxes 31, 40, 63, 151, 182, 205, 220, 221, 222, 223, 224, 237, 276, 299, 302)
 - Administrative Files (boxes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18)
- HU OSA 300-120 Western Press Archives
 - Italian Communist Party: Biographical Files (boxes 1, 2, 3)

HU OSA 312 Alfred Reisch Collection

- HU OSA 312-0-1 Personal Files (boxes 1, 2)
- HU OSA 312-0-2 Publications (boxes 1, 2)
- HU OSA 312-0-3 Correspondence (boxes 3, 4, 5)
- HU OSA 312-0-4 Copies of Archival Materials (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13)
- HU OSA 312-0-5 Archival Reference Materials (boxes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6)
- HU OSA 312-0-6 Reference Subject Files (1, 3, 6, 7, 9, 10)

To conclude, I would like to express my gratitude to the Visegrad Fund, Central European University and Open Society Archives for supporting my research. Having the opportunity to work on the valuable archival materials stored at OSA was an extremely important and fruitful occasion not only to get an insight into the contribution of RFE/RL to the transnational circulation of *samizdat* and *tamizdat*, but also to mature professionally in such an inspiring environment. A special thanks to the OSA staff, which helped me explore the archival collections and made my stay in the research room pleasant and productive, and to the colleagues with whom I have shared this experience.

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- SCOTT-SMITH and KRABBENDAM 2003. Giles Scott-Smith, Hans Krabbendam (eds.), *The Cultural Cold War in Western Europe 1945–1960*, London: Frank Cass, 2003.