

Final Report – Visegrad Fellowship at the Open Society Archive

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Project Title: “Seen as Threat by Soviets”: Leningrad Youth Movements and Ambiguities of Gorbachev’s Reforms

Overview of the Research Project

My research investigates how the Leningrad youth attempted to shape urban politics during the perestroika era by bringing the issues of heritage preservation and environmental protection to the forefront of the public realm. In late Soviet Leningrad, where political control was rigidly enforced and non-party engagement was limited, cultural activities became vital for the grassroots expression of discontent. During the late 1950s, the first “islands of freedom” emerged in the form of small university literary associations which served as platforms for engaging in poetry discussions and offered a social space for young individuals to gather. However, as the Thaw period gradually declined, the authorities tightened their control over literary circles, thereby compelling them to operate covertly. Subsequently, in the early 1970s, the “second culture” movement emerged, comprising avant-garde writers, futurist poets, and painters who would convene in private apartments to partake in seminars, readings, and artistic exhibitions. Despite the discreet nature of these activities, they did not go unnoticed by the KGB. Instead of employing outright suppression, the KGB opted for a strategy of co-optation, aiming to regulate independent activities within the confines of the official realm. This strategic shift eventually culminated in the establishment of Klub-81 in 1981, which served as a controlled structure specifically designed for unofficial writers and poets.

By the beginning of perestroika, sociocultural amateur clubs started to emerge in the city in an atmosphere of less restricted grassroots activities that was also stimulated by the declining authority of the Komsomol. The Klub-81 played a pivotal role in establishing the groundwork for the cultural movement, from which *Spasenie* Group emerged. During the period of late 1986 and 1987, this group orchestrated a series of public demonstrations to express their discontent against the demolition of pre-revolutionary historical buildings and Orthodox churches. These demonstrations served as a platform for raising awareness about the

importance of preserving cultural heritage and garnered public attention to the issue at hand. Consequently, cohesive communities emerged, giving rise to umbrella organizations to coordinate activism, engage with state institutions, and address matters about urban development, the preservation of historical heritage, and environmental protection.

However, the response from the Leningrad authorities following the initial successes of the activist groups revealed a contradiction in Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of "democratization". Firstly, while the central newspaper *Izvestia* showed sympathy towards the sociocultural groups of Leningrad, local journalists launched an incriminating press campaign to discredit the activists. Secondly, as early as May 1987, just two months after the three-day demonstration against the demolition of Angleterre Hotel, the Leningrad Executive Committee imposed regulations that severely restricted the freedom of assembly for meetings and demonstrations. These regulations were aimed at discouraging the growing grassroots activism by granting extensive administrative power to public officials. The further strategy involved the infiltration of informal associations, primarily by Komsomol and the KGB officers, intending to exert influence from within. This process included the "re-education" of activists and the imposition of tighter control over them through the Komsomol committees. As a result, certain group leaders were recruited by the KGB which resulted in the breakdown of these associations, ultimately leading to the fragmentation of umbrella organizations in Leningrad. Finally, the authorities took the initiative to establish alternative clubs to oppose influential independent groups. These clubs were specifically formed with the backing of conservative representatives from the Party apparatus, a development that occurred after the spring elections of 1989.

Hence, on one hand, the grassroots initiatives undertaken during the perestroika period reflected the stated principles of Gorbachev's reforms. However, the experiences of the activists involved in these grassroots movements revealed the non-linear nature of perestroika policies. It suggests that while the central government may have supported certain aspects of grassroots activism, the local authorities employed repressive measures to restrict it. This inconsistency in the response to grassroots initiatives underscores the complexities and contradictions within the perestroika era.

This aspect has been largely overlooked in academic research, which still in its turn hinges primarily on the persona of Mikhail Gorbachev. Late Soviet sociologists and journalists categorized civic (youth) initiatives for ideological purposes, while post-Soviet scholars viewed them as a quasi-civic society under totalitarian rule, a preservationist movement, or evidence of youth politicization. Consequently, there have been no academic efforts to explore

the emergence and evolution of grassroots networks in the dynamic political context without constraining them within specific themes or disciplinary frameworks. This dissertation aims to bridge this gap by not only examining diverse grassroots groups and their activities but also delving into the complex dynamics of state-society relations during the period. By utilizing a combination of archival primary sources and oral histories, this project attempts to revise the existing historiographical understanding of perestroika and illuminate the interplay between the top-down reforms and the grassroots initiatives that shaped the sociocultural landscape of the time.

Working in the Archive

Following a conventional keyword search on the archive's website, I intended to gain insights into the structure and arrangement of documents within the collections. To achieve this, I manually examined the description of boxes in the collections of the Soviet Red Archives and Samizdat Archives. Within the Red Archives, I selected and reviewed the records under the categories of "youth cafes", "informal associations", "perestroika", "foreign and Soviet press", "protection of nature", "Leningrad", and "samizdat". In the Samizdat Archives, I examined documents related to "informal groups", "legislation", "perestroika", "protests", and "samizdat". Both collections contain a mixture of content, primarily consisting of B-wires, newspaper clippings, research papers, monitoring materials, and occasionally, fragments of an independent press.

Drawing upon my prior experience working with newspaper collections at the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg, I have found the OSA to be an invaluable resource for my research, offering convenience and ease of access for scholars. Comparatively, at the National Library, researchers are tasked with hand-selecting specific newspapers for a given year, which can be a laborious and time-consuming process. Handling such extensive volumes often tested my patience and energy, particularly when attempting to analyze how informal groups were covered by regional and central newspapers for six months in 1987. Fortunately, the collections available to me at the OSA, specifically the archival box 224 in the Samizdat Archives dedicated to protests and demonstrations, proved to be a time-saving asset as it encompassed diverse central newspapers within a single unit. This significantly facilitated and expedited my research endeavors.

The inclusion of numerous B-wires in my research has proven to be beneficial, particularly concerning my analysis of the press. Of particular significance are the B-wires that provide summaries of content from Soviet newspapers. To ensure accuracy and

comprehensiveness, I also cross-referenced this information with the original newspapers using the EastView database.

The collection of analytical articles prepared by the research department of Radio Liberty within the Soviet Red Archives holds substantial value for my study. These articles offer a balanced perspective on the social and political dynamics of the perestroika period. In contrast to other sources that I have consulted, including materials from state sources in Saint Petersburg and those produced by the activists themselves, these analytical articles provide insights that extend beyond the narratives presented by these sources. As a result, they contribute a “view from the outside” to my research, enhancing the breadth and depth of my source base.

One such scholarly article authored by Vera Tolz and titled “Informal Groups and Soviet Politics in 1989,” explores the implications of Gorbachev’s call for increased cooperation with informal groups. In this source, Tolz references a survey conducted by Soviet sociologists, which revealed that a significant number of members belonging to socially and politically active informal groups expressed their willingness to collaborate with the Soviet leadership within the framework of Gorbachev’s reforms. Drawing from the survey findings, the sociologists proposed the establishment of Popular Fronts as a means to exert control over the activities of existing informal groups. However, the article emphasizes that the sociologists failed to anticipate how swiftly the popular fronts would deviate from their intended purpose. Instead, these popular fronts themselves began advocating for more radical demands and initiated independent political initiatives. This suggests that while the creation of popular fronts was initially a strategic move by the authorities, it ultimately led to unexpected outcomes and a loss of control over the political dynamics of the informal groups.

Another discovery pertains to the New Code Subject Files, which shed light on the activities of the Soviet Cultural Foundation. Established in November 1986, the Soviet Cultural Foundation served as an innovative non-governmental organization with branches in many big cities across the Soviet Union. In addition to its efforts in safeguarding architectural landmarks, the Foundation actively promoted amateur cultural activities, with a particular focus on the preservation of rural and urban heritage, including the endeavors of activists in Leningrad. It is worth noting, however, that a significant gap exists in the available documentation about the Foundation, particularly regarding its regional branches, even within the archives of Russia. The records held at the Open Society Archives also offered only limited insights into the Foundation’s establishment and operations.

In the “Published Samizdat” collections of the Samizdat Archives, a notable discovery was an article in *Posev* journal (1977) discussing the Cultural Democratic Movement in Leningrad, which passed its name to the perestroika activists. Although the article offers an overview of the movement, it sheds light on the distinct identity its members carved out, setting themselves apart from dissidents. This finding is valuable since, until now, my understanding of this period has largely relied on a few published memoirs. It is striking how few historical documents are available on this movement, not only in the OSA or the Western archives but also in non-governmental archives in Russia, let alone the state ones. Even in the 1987th issue of “Index on Censorship,” which I also consulted in the OSA, an interview with Leningrad poet Victor Krivulin sheds light on Klub-81 as a previously little-known literary group in Leningrad. The interview also highlights the tactics employed by the KGB and other authorities to co-opt independent social initiatives: “But the KGB was beginning to change its tactics. They couldn’t simply get rid of us - we were too influential. They aimed to try to accommodate us within the system. They wanted to find out who we were, what we were doing – give us a kind of official identity. That was the point of the Club. It was their idea, not ours.”

Based on these observations, I assume that the approach employed by the KGB and other authorities before the perestroika era to co-opt independently emerging social initiatives reemerged as a strategic response to counter the rise of new grassroots movements during perestroika. This continuity in the authorities’ tactics suggests a persistent effort to suppress the growing influence of grassroots activism, even in the face of “democratic” political reforms.

While working with these archives, I have observed that despite its name, the Samizdat Archives at OSA do not primarily contain samizdat journals, especially those related to the cultural movement in Leningrad of the perestroika period. This is not an issue for me as I have already gathered the sociocultural samizdat production important for my study in other archives. Instead, OSA’s collection includes documents related to samizdat or independent publishing activities which are no less valuable. This comprises not only press observations of independent publishing, mostly of foreign origin but also documents related to the conference of grassroots editors that took place in October of 1987. The outcome of the conference was the creation of a collaborative volume called the “Journal of Journals,” which I also found in the OSA. The publication served as a database of the informal press, aiming to document all published information from Samizdat journals and periodicals.

Furthermore, I have noticed that during that time, the archivists at the OSA did not distinguish significantly between the terminology of “samizdat” and “independent press.” At the same time, during the perestroika period, the boundaries between these phenomena became

blurred. 1988 witnessed gradual samizdat's transformation mainly because of the loss of the subversive and underground framework that had defined it before. On one hand, samizdat publishers started gaining visibility and recognition from the official Soviet press. On the other hand, independent press editors still faced challenges, such as limited access to copying resources and difficulties in publishing their manuscripts in official periodicals. Despite Gorbachev's promises to continue implementing glasnost' through the press, most of the Leningrad samizdat journals had not been legalized by the end of the Soviet Union. This phenomenon was referred to by an editor of one Leningrad samizdat journal as "strange samizdat" to describe its paradoxical public accessibility and visibility to the official mass media, while the regime hesitated to approve a law on independent publishers.

Finally, I delved into the Western Press Archives, specifically focusing on youth and Komsomol during perestroika. This proved to be incredibly valuable to me, considering the scarcity of secondary and primary sources available on ambiguities of Komsomol during perestroika. I discovered a report titled "Concerns about Independent Youth Groups by Komsomol," which was published in "Novoe Russkoe Slovo" and summarized a message from Bill Keller, a Moscow correspondent for the renowned "New York Times". He obtained a classified document from the propaganda department of the Central Committee of the Komsomol which outlined a proposal to establish Komsomol's control over the emerging independent political groups that had surfaced in response to Mikhail Gorbachev's call for the democratization of Soviet society. Indication of the date enabled me to find the original document.

In conclusion, the time I spent at OSA proved invaluable, as it allowed me to discover new documents, incorporate additional sections into my dissertation, and strengthen my arguments. Moreover, it confirmed my hypotheses and highlighted the significance of scholarly interest in the groups by the contemporaries. Moving forward, my focus will be on writing my dissertation, basing on the groundwork I have laid using sources from various archives. Through synthesizing these sources, I aim to create a captivating portrayal of the complex period of Perestroika.

Consulted Records

205-4-210:112 The Former Soviet Union Archives; Information Services Department; Records of the Open Media Research Institute

300-80-1: Old Code Subject Files; Soviet Red Archives; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio

Liberty Research Institute

559 Youth Cafes

623 Informal associations

652-653 Perestroika

657-658 Press

692-693 Human rights

721-722 Nature protection

850-851 Russia: geopolitical structure: Leningrad, 1961-1992

879-880 Samizdat, general

300-80-2: New Code Subject Files; Soviet Red Archives; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio

Liberty Research Institute

14 Mass Media and Culture: Cultural Institutions: Cultural Foundation, 1986-1991

15 Mass Media and Culture: Cultural Policy: Monuments, 1987 - 1988

28 Politics: Perestroika

300-80-7:198 Likhachev, Dmitrii Sergeevich; USSR Biographical Files; Soviet Red Archives;
Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute

300-81-9 Video Recordings of Soviet and Russian Television Programs; Monitoring Unit;
Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute

77:7 Po svodkam MVD

99:3 V press-tsentre Leningradskogo obkoma KPSS

99:8 Piatoe koleso

300-85 Samizdat Archives; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute

2 Subject Card Index to the Published Samizdat

9 Published Samizdat

74 AS 2866. On Leningrad Intellectuals, 1976

141 AS 5998. Chairman of the Club-81, Letter to the RSFSR Supreme Soviet
Presidium, 1987

154 AS 6538. Perestroika: Power and Opposition, 1990

12 Subject Files

63-69: Informal groups

75-77: Informal groups

98-99: Legislation – on youth, meetings, and assemblies, public organizations

205-206: Perestroika

220, 224: Protests

253: Samizdat Journals

270-271: Social Groups and Phenomena - Youth

315: "Russian Thought"

37 Registered Unpublished Documents

1-10

43:1 Subject Files Relating to Political Parties

300-120-3 Subject Files; Western Press Archives; Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
Research Institute

296-301 Youth

301-0-5:2-3 Publications; Records of Index on Censorship

Books

Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, *From Below: Independent Peace and Environmental Movements in Eastern Europe and the USSR*. New York: U.S. Helsinki Watch Committee, 1987.

Sergei Iushenkov, *Neformaly: sotsial'nye initsiativy*. Moskva: Moskovskii rabochii, 1990.