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**Manuscripts Don't Burn: The Master and Margarita as a Case Study of Samizdat in an Extra Gutenberg Culture**

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Manuscripts don't burn:  
*The Master and Margarita*  
as a case study of Samizdat  
in an Extra Gutenberg  
Culture

by

JULIA BOECHAT MACHADO

## ABSTRACT

New methods and theoretical approaches to the study of Samizdat - self-publishing and autonomous circulation of texts in the Soviet Union - have been challenging the traditional views that portray it as a mere form of dissident activity. Recently, a study by Historian Ann Komaromi classified it as an extra Gutenberg culture, distinct from “print culture” because it lacks its characteristics of standardization, dissemination and fixity. Samizdat, in comparison, was spontaneously copied and distributed, and even altered by anonymous volunteers, and was marked by its instability. Other oppositions for too long used in the study of Samizdat are also becoming obsolete: official publishers and culture versus dissidents, or Stalinism versus the Thaw. Bulgakov’s novel *The Master and Margarita* is an interesting case study for new perspectives in Samizdat because it was part of official and unofficial culture, being officially published, circulating as Samizdat, and becoming the inspiration of a collection of thousands of graffiti that appeared in Moscow. It was also relevant in different phases of Soviet history, from Stalinism, when it was written, to the late Soviet years when it gained cult status. When the novel was published, censors did not cut parts that showed an ideology opposite to Soviet ideas of religion, the part of the novel that could more easily be regarded as dissident, but references to the housing crisis and to nudity. When the novel started circulating as a Samizdat, with the censored parts taped to it, it made a mockery of the official institutions, showing the unreliability of its publication system, the existence of censorship and its pettiness, and how the same deficiencies the author satirized remained common in the Soviet Union twenty years later. The case study will therefore show how the new perspectives in the study of Samizdat give insight into the wider political implications of a work of fiction.

## INTRODUCTION

Samizdat and related practices were present in several different epochs of the Soviet Union, even if with different intensity and focus. The mere importance given to the censorship and publishing of literary and poetic text can be enriching in order to analyze Russian cultural history.

With this purpose, this paper is divided in three sections. The first one tells a brief history of Samizdat, focusing on its origins and development throughout the twentieth century. Even though the practice can be traced at least to the beginning of the Revolution, the self-publishing of literature became more common during the Thaw. At the same time that this brief phase of a politically liberalizing atmosphere allowed poet Evgueni Evtushenko to read his poetry in stadiums and young people to meet in Moscow under Pushkin's statue to read poetry, *Doctor Zhivago* was censored and then smuggled abroad to be published. The very event - considered to put an end to the Thaw - is related to the Samizdat publishing of fiction: the Siniavsky-Daniel trial, marking the first time writers were convicted for writing works of fiction since the show trials of the Stalinist era. Both were convicted under article 70 of the penal code, "Agitation and Propaganda with the purpose of subverting or weakening the Soviet regime," despite the fact that they protested their innocence. The retelling of the events in the

trial would soon also receive wide circulation as Samizdat.

The second part is dedicated to practices and examples in Samizdat through a literature review. Historian Ann Komaromi's work was one of the main sources, with special regard to her concept of Samizdat as an extra-Gutenberg culture, examining common characteristics it has with the beginning of "print culture", before the standardization, dissemination and fixity that we see as typical of print culture had occurred. I also look into the modern critiques to the opposition between the studies of Samizdat as an instrument for spreading literature and as a vehicle for dissident activity. Distributing censored literature can be seen as a political act, even if the novel itself is not overtly political, and for this reason the opposition is reductionist and has been challenged in more recent works.

The third part presents the mentioned case-study, the publication of the novel *The Master and Margarita* decades after it had been written. The novel quickly became part of the official culture, being published in a magazine just after the Siniavsky-Daniel trial, and unofficial culture, circulating as Samizdat and inspiring popular expressions and thousands of graffiti in Moscow. Because of the complex history of its publication, the novel is not only a case study in an extra-Gutenberg culture, but also a challenge to common portrayals of Samizdat.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF SAMIZDAT

The origins of the practice of sharing typed uncensored texts in Soviet Russia are difficult to trace. According to prominent dissident writer Siniavsky, it started as a mass practice in the 1950s with the copying of the poetry of writers such as Anna Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak, that had become inaccessible in the published form.<sup>1</sup> But the term Samizdat has since been used retroactively, referring to texts published and distributed autonomously during Tsarist times. Other authors prefer to refer to these as proto-Samizdat. The neologism Samizdat is attributed to poet Nikolai Glazkov, who typed his poetry in notebooks and distributed it to friends during the 1940s with the imprint “samsebiaizdat”, roughly translatable as “myself publisher”. The term Samizdat became common among Moscow’s elite in the 1950s and gained a wider usage in the 1960s, when references to it started appearing in the official press.<sup>2</sup> A related practice was Tamizdat, “over there publishing”, smuggling manuscripts out of the Soviet Union to be published abroad. As with Samizdat, the word has been used to refer to previous events, specifically about the works of Boris Pilniak and Evgueni Zamyatin, published

abroad in the 1920s to avoid Soviet censorship.

According to Peter Steiner, the production and distribution of Samizdat increased much after the fall of Stalinism.<sup>3</sup> In February 1956, Khrushchev gave his famous speech called *On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences*, in which he denounced Stalin for having distorted Leninist principles and establishing a cult of personality. The speech was often read in meetings of the Communist Party and the Komsomol, but it was not meant to be distributed widely. However, it soon started circulating as a Samizdat and it was also smuggled abroad and published in the Western press. There was unrest following the speech, with reports that members of the audience reacted with applause and laughter whenever it was read, while others were reported to have suffered heart attacks or attempted suicide. It provoked strong reactions, and “Nowhere did the cry for liberalization sound more loudly than in literature”.<sup>4</sup> Writers became bolder in exposing the Soviet Union, the crimes committed by the State, and the miseries of everyday life that undermined the notion of a communist paradise. However, in the same year limits were made clear when Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* was denied publishing and smuggled

1 Serguei Oushakine, “The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat,” *Public Culture* 13, no. 2 (2001): 191-214, doi:10.1215/08992363-13-2-191

2 Ann Komaromi, *Uncensored: Samizdat Novels and the Quest for Autonomy in Soviet Dissidence* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 132.

3 P. Steiner, “Introduction: On Samizdat, Tamizdat, Magnitizdat, and Other Strange Words That Are Difficult to Pronounce,” *Poetics Today* 29, no. 4 (2008): 613-628, doi:10.1215/03335372-079.

4 Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000) 211.

abroad as a Tamizdat in 1957. Dmitri Pospelovsky understands that event as the impetus for the birth of Samizdat as we know it today, as a parallel culture to the official press.<sup>5</sup> Pospelovsky sees a double influence that the whole affair had on aspiring writers: to show the challenges of being published in the official press, even for a recognized writer like Pasternak, and on the novel's own critique of the Revolution and the establishment of communism in Russia.

In 1958, a monument to futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky was inaugurated in Moscow, and famous poets were invited to read their works in the ceremony. Volunteers from the crowd followed them, also reading poetry. The atmosphere of relative openness attracted others, that started meeting in the square to read poems from repressed or forgotten authors. Many of the students involved were soon expelled or blacklisted from universities, and a few were arrested and tried under article 70 of the penal code, agitation and propaganda with the purpose of subverting or weakening the Soviet regime. Two students, Vladimir Osipov and Eduard Kuznetsov, were sentenced to seven years in labor camps, while a third one, Iliia Bokshetyin, was sentenced to five years. Aleksandr Ginzburg and Yuri Galanskov, two students

who also frequented the meetings, were afterwards arrested for creating and distributing Samizdat journals dedicated to poetry.

One of the main events that marks the history of Samizdat is the Siniavsky Daniel-trial, in February 1966. Andrei Siniavsky was a main Soviet literary critique, close to Pasternak, while Yuli Daniel was a schoolteacher and translator. They both smuggled works of fiction abroad to be published under pseudonyms, respectively Abram Tertz and Nikolai Arzhak. When exposed, they were the first people to be tried for writing works of fiction since the show trials of the Stalinist era, and many dissidents were afraid that it meant a comeback to that level of repression. In the 1930s, prominent writers had been prosecuted for counter-revolutionary activities and accused of being spies for foreign countries or for Trotsky, or even for both. Poet Ossip Mandelstam had been sent to the Gulag on such charges, where he died in 1938, while short story writer Isaac Babel had been shot in prison in 1939, and novelist Boris Pilnyak had been executed in 1937. The Siniavsky-Daniel trial, a few decades later, was new however in several regards, specifically on the fact that both of them pleaded innocent. Soon after their arrest, mathematician Aleksandr Esenin-Volpin organized the "Meeting of Openness", when two hundred people gathered in the Pushkin Square in Moscow demanding a fair trial for the two writers. The strategies developed by Esenin-Volpin in the

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5 Dmitri Pospelovsky, "From Gosizdat to Samizdat and Tamizdat," *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 20, no. 1, Conference Papers 1977 (March 1978): 44-62, 48.

campaign would often be used in the next few years, including the writing of open letters written in the occasion. Around 80 intellectuals signed a letter in support of Siniavsky and Daniel, 60 of them being members of the Moscow Writer's Union.<sup>6</sup> Esenin-Volpin always made appeals for the law to be upheld, quoting from Soviet law books. That was also a common strategy in the following decades, not to question the principles of the political order, but whether these laws were being implemented correctly, using juridical arguments. In the following year, 25 intellectuals, including physicist Andrei Sakharov and composer Dmitri Shostakovich, wrote a letter to Brezhnev asking him not to rehabilitate Stalinism. The letter later circulated in Samizdat. However, the authorities could never find any ground to report it as anti-Soviet, anti-communist or anti-government, perhaps, as Serguei Oushakine argues, because the "discourse so closely matched their own".<sup>7</sup>

In 1966, new laws were created to deal with the phenomenon of underground publishing, including article 190-1, about slander against the Soviet system, and 190-3, for public meetings that disturb peace. Article 70, the one used against the students in Mayakovsky Square, Siniavsky, and Daniel, required proof of anti-Soviet intent, while article 190 only required proof of "defamation", "discreditation" or "false fabrication".

With these new tools Article 70, while still in place, was not invoked nearly as often. It also created differences under the law between producing and distributing material.<sup>8</sup> In the following year, there was the Trial of the Four, in which Aleksandr Ginzburg, Yuri Galanskov, Aleksei Dobrovolsky and Vera Lashkova were arrested in connection with the publication of the *White Book* in Samizdat, an account of the Siniavsky-Daniel trial. They were sentenced to time in labor camps. Other such books soon appeared, reporting on their trial, and their attorneys' closing statements also circulated in Samizdat.

In the West, there was a concerted effort to spread Samizdat writings, but they were mostly portrayed in simplistic terms as an example of dissident activity. The result in the Soviet Union was an increase in repression during the 1970s, with increasingly harsher sentences being carried out against those accused of writing and distributing underground literature. Several prominent authors were expelled from the country, including Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Joseph Brodsky, Vladimir Voynovich and Siniavsky himself after his release from the Gulag. In the meanwhile, Samizdat became more overtly political. According to Oushakine, Samizdat became dominated by political documents, with a high

6 Komaromi, *Uncensored*, 44.

7 Oushakine, *The terrifying mimicry*, 198.

8 Gordon Johnston, "What is the history of Samizdat?," *Social History* 24, no. 2 (1999): 115-133, 123.

circulation of “letters, petitions, commentaries, and transcripts of trials, pamphlets and so forth.”<sup>9</sup> Finally, Aleksandr Etkind shows how in the Glasnost in the eighties, Russian readers finally gained access to books by Nabokov, Pasternak, Vassili Grossman, Platonov, Anna Akhmatova, and Brodsky, among others, that were finally published in the official press. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant the appearance of non-State controlled publishing houses, and the end of the state’s monopoly on publication.

## PRACTICES AND EXAMPLES: A LITERATURE REVIEW

In her influential article “Samizdat as an Extra-Gutenberg phenomenon”, Ann Komaromi studied Samizdat as a textual culture opposed to modern print culture, not merely as a mouthpiece for dissidence. This perspective is informed by Anna Akhmatova’s famous commentary that the Soviet Union was “pre-Gutenberg”, since people relied on memorization and declamation when writing was too risky, and conceptualist Lev Rubinstein calling it an extra-Gutenberg culture. Komaromi references Adrian Jones’ *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making*, that highlights the instability of the book in the beginning of the print and applies it to Soviet times. She also uses

Elizabeth Eisenstein’s claims that after the invention of the press, print has been characterized by three features: standardization, dissemination, and fixity. Those characteristics would be typical of what Eisenstein calls print culture, and are the ones that Komaromi opposes to Samizdat when calling it an extra-Gutenberg culture characterized by “epistemological instability”.

Samizdat was not under centralized control, and for that reason, not standardized. There are numerous instances of passages being excised or changed by typists who were tired or honestly felt they were improving it. One of the most famous examples of this is Leon Uris’ book *Exodus*. In some instances, the translators cut parts of the book for brevity, in others, they cut a whole plot, the romance between a Jewish man and a Christian woman. The resulting text was about 150 pages long, one quarter of the original. Another version resulted from a man who had heard the story in the Gulag, retold by another prisoner who had read the book in English, and who typed it when he was released. That version had around eighty pages, and variations of it appeared not long after.<sup>10</sup>

Another example is that of Varlam Shalamov, who disavowed his works published in Samizdat and Tamizdat in 1972. His prose in the 1970s would be written exclusively “for the desk drawer”,

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9 Oushakine, *The terrifying mimicry*, 194.

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10 Komaromi, *Uncensored*, 635.

with no intention of publishing it.<sup>11</sup> *The Kolyma Tales*, his works about the almost two decades he had spent in Gulags, had been smuggled abroad and published as Tamizdat. Not until 1978, however, the *Tales* would be published as a single volume, as the author judged it to be of vital importance, and previous publications were selections of stories, often arranged around topics and ideas chosen by editors. In Samizdat also he had no authorial control of how the tales were published. Typists did not only often select the tales or change their order, but they did make constant alterations. In the short story "How it Began", Shalamov left a word unfinished as a reference to British writer Lawrence Sterne and to highlight the narrator's exhaustion, and in Samizdat the word was often completed by typists, who probably judged it a mistake made by a previous typist of the work. Repetitions, contradictions and ambiguities purposely included by the author as marks of the novel's authenticity were often seen as mistakes and changed in an attempt to correct them.<sup>12</sup>

Dissemination was also an issue. It was too difficult to make several copies of a text to be distributed. On a typing machine, writers used carbons and papyrus paper to make seven or eight copies

at once, but the last one of the bunch would be almost unreadable. Taking pictures of the paper and printing it in photographic paper was also an option, but it generated a book that was very thick, expensive and that tended to curl. With the number of copies being so limited, the work had to be constantly retyped by different people, with no centralized control. Copies could also be lost or seized, as was the case with the Samizdat translations of Jorge Luis Borges and Eugène Ionesco and with Venedikt Erofeev's lost novel *Dmitri Shostakovich*.<sup>13</sup>

Fixing a Samizdat text meant in most cases that the text had been smuggled out of the Soviet Union and had been officially published in the West. This only happened to a small proportion of books, and a novel could also be brought from the West and then distributed as Samizdat, as was the case with Leon Uris's *Exodus*.

Samizdat was portrayed in the West as a rebirth of free speech in the Soviet Union, and scholarship has largely studied it as either an instrument for dissidence or for distributing literature, not as a culture by itself. This opposition has been challenged since then.<sup>14</sup> An opposition commonly seen on the press is that between Gosizdat, officially published texts, and Samizdat or Tamizdat, underground autonomous publishing

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11 Leona Toker, "Samizdat and the Problem of Authorial Control: The Case of Varlam Shalamov." *Poetics Today* 29, no. 4 (2008): 735-758, doi:10.1215/03335372-083: 736.

12 Toker, "Samizdat and the Problem," 743.

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13 Komaromi, *Samizdat as an Extra Gutenberg Phenomenon*, 636.

14 Oushakine, *The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat*.

of uncensored literature. However, many texts published in Samizdat had been published officially before. Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* had been published in 1963 by a literary journal, and even ran for the 1964 Lenin Prize in the field of arts. It was only distributed as Samizdat after it had been banned in 1974.<sup>15</sup> Even when the two versions, the official and unofficial, had the exact same text, however, they should not be seen as versions of the same book. Having a Samizdat was still considered subversive and punishable by law, and "no seasoned reader from the region would have failed to distinguish between the two and have confused, so to speak, Pierre Menard's *Don Quixote* with Cervantes's identically worded novel. For, as Borges did not neglect to tell us, they are a function of very unlike contexts".<sup>16</sup>

### **THE MASTER AND MARGARITA: FROM GOSIZDAT TO SAMIZDAT**

The late publication of Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* makes for an interesting case-study on Samizdat. It belongs to several different Soviet periods: to the Stalinism of the late 1920s and 1930s, when it was written, to the 1960s, when it was printed for the first time and caused a sensation among Moscow's intelligentsia, most

of whom only knew Bulgakov as a playwright and had no reason to expect that the new publications of his work would reveal a major novel, and to the seventies and eighties, when it gained cult status in the Soviet Union. It also belongs not only to the official press, since the book was officially published in the *Moskva* newspaper, but also to Samizdat. It received literary criticism in the official sources after its publication, but it was also successful with the intelligentsia and became part of popular culture. It was difficult to classify: Stephen Lovell enumerates several different genres attributed to it by Soviet critics: "satire, menippea, parody, fantastic tale, adventure story, science fiction - and a number of compound descriptions".<sup>17</sup> Its own existence and convoluted publication history seems to challenge some of the aforementioned oppositions.

The novel portrays a visit of the devil to Moscow in the 1930s, during Stalinist persecution of religion. The devil first appears in the Patriarch Ponds in Moscow, under the name Voland, talking to poet Bezdomni and head of literary bureaucracy Berlioz. He interrupts their discussion on atheism by stating that he knows what really happened between Jesus Christ and Pontius Pilatus, claiming to have witnessed these events. The two men consider him a madman, but they both soon realize that he

15 Oushakine, *The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat*, 202.

16 Steiner, *On Samizdat*", 614.

17 Stephen Lovell, "Bulgakov as Soviet Culture," *Slavonic and East European Review* 76, no. 1 (January 1998): 28-48, 30.

has supernatural powers. Through these characters and a few others, the novel satirizes the bureaucratic organization of Soviet writers. One of the main events of the first part is the magic show organized by Voland in a variety theatre, satirizing the vanity, greed and gullibility of the Soviet public. Voland is accompanied in these efforts by his assistant and translator, Korovyev, a talking black

cat called Behemoth, a fallen angel called Azazello, and a succubus called Hella. Other main characters are the Master, who has written and burnt a manuscript about Pontius Pilatus, the text of which we read as a novel inside the novel, and his lover Margarita, who searches for him and is invited to attend a Walpurgis Night ball organized by Voland.

Until the publication of *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov had been known mainly for his work on the theatre during the twenties. His play *The Days of the Turbins*, about the members of a Kiev family involved in the White Army, gained him instant fame. Stalin liked it so much he saw it fourteen times in the theatre. But in the following years Bulgakov was often targeted by censorship and could not get his plays on stage. In 1929, he decided to write a letter directly to Stalin. On it, he asked for permission to emigrate abroad, since the attacks by critics connected to the Communist Party made it impossible for him to find work. The answer was a personal phone call from Stalin the following year, who got him a job in the Moscow Art Theatre.<sup>18</sup> Despite the climate of persecution, Bulgakov kept working in a novel he had started in 1929, about the devil visiting Soviet Moscow. In the beginning, he had briefly held the illusion of publishing it, even sending a chapter to Nedra publishing house,



FIGURE 1

A sign placed in the Patriarch Ponds in Moscow warning people of one of the novel's mottos: "запрещено разговаривать с незнакомцами", "it's forbidden to talk to strangers". April 2018. Personal archive.

18 J. A. E. Curtis, *Bulgakov's Last Decade: the Writer as Hero*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 18.

which were refused. Soon he realized that he would be unlikely to publish it in his lifetime, and subversive themes started to appear more often. Even if he no longer held illusions of publishing the novel, it was a dangerous task, and Siniavsky has argued that if Stalin had suspicions about his work, it would have been destroyed and Bulgakov would have been killed.<sup>19</sup> Bulgakov burnt the manuscripts several times, but repeatedly restarted the novel. He would read his unpublished works to friends in his apartment, turning it into a literary salon. He died in 1940, of a hereditary disease, leaving the manuscripts to his wife, Yelena Shilovskaya. She kept it for the next twenty-five years, showing it only to a few friends.

Many of Bulgakov's works were finally published in Russia during Khrushchev's Thaw, when he was formally rehabilitated. Seven plays and four novels that were kept by his wife were published between 1962 and 1967.<sup>20</sup> *The Master and Margarita* was published in the journal *Moskva* in two issues of the magazine, the first in November 1966 and the second in January 1967. The last versions of the novel dictated by Bulgakov contain a few inconsistencies, and Shilovskaya altered the manuscript in 1965 to correct them, and that was the basis of the published version.<sup>21</sup> It was a

strange time for the work to come out, since the Thaw had been waning for a few years. The Siniavsky-Daniel trial had taken place in the beginning of the year, an event that many historians point out as the end of the Thaw. Until the publication, the fate of the book was uncertain, however the publication was maintained as scheduled. The novel was censored, though surprisingly most of the Biblical plot regarding Pontius Pilatus was untouched, even though the Soviet regime was officially atheist. The biggest cuts were in references to the housing crisis, the descriptions of Griboedov House and Margarita's nudity while flying around Moscow. Griboedov House is the seat of the MASSOLIT, a literary organization and a parody of Herzen House, the seat of the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), receiving even a Soviet-style abbreviation. According to Michael Curtis, the Griboedov episodes were already included in the first drafts of the novel.<sup>22</sup> Comparing this to Pospelovsky's assessment of RAPP that in the liberal post-Stalin era it deteriorated and became even more bureaucratized, it is not difficult to imagine why this parody became a target for censorship.

The publication of this first edition was an event for the Moscow intelligentsia. According to Stephen Lovell, having a copy was considered

19 Curtis, *Bulgakov's Last Decade*, 131.

20 Kalpana Sahni, "The Tragic Irony of Fame" in *Bulgakov: Novelist Playwright*, ed. Lesley Milne (Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995), 205-214.

21 Mikhail Afanasievitch Bulgakov, "A Note on the

Text and Acknowledgements," *The Master and Margarita*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 9-10.

22 Curtis, *Bulgakov's Last Decade*, 131.

as a minor display of dissidence.<sup>23</sup> It was a shocking work, and there was very little literary criticism on Bulgakov's works as a guide to the reader. Again according to Lovell: "Readers accustomed to a diet of Soviet classics were ill-equipped to interpret the novel's complex network of symbols and plot levels, its unusual treatment of time, its use of irony and the fantastic, and its references to Christianity and myth".<sup>24</sup>

The official version would soon start to circulate with the censored parts typed and taped to it, "thereby calling into question the authenticity of the official Soviet version".<sup>25</sup> Circulating the official copies with censored parts added to it made a very visual way to show that censorship affected not only overtly political writings, but those capable of revealing the everyday miseries of life in the Soviet union. Without it, people may not even realize the text had been censored, but the fact that a part had been manually added to an edition circulating hand to hand made it obvious. It showed why there was a need for an extra Gutenberg culture, since the official press couldn't be trusted to fix a text. This also relates to the novel's own plots regarding the writers' association, seen as a group of sycophants and mediocrities. The novel's most often quoted phrase, "Manuscripts don't burn", refers in *The Master and*

*Margarita* to the Master's manuscript about Pontius Pilatus, that the devil pulls from the fire and that we read as a novel inside the novel. But it was also used to reference Bulgakov's novel itself, that he had burned and then rewritten repeatedly, that had been hidden and censored, but kept reappearing.

The 1965 version of the novel was smuggled out of the Soviet Union and published in Switzerland by Scherz Verlag in 1967, by Possev Verlag edition in Frankfurt in 1969, with the censored parts in italic, and by YMCA in Paris in 1969.<sup>26</sup> It was also the basis for a translation published in Estonia in 1969, the first official edition of the book in the Soviet Union. The first uncensored version of *The Master and Margarita* was published in 1973, but editions were infrequent and small by Soviet standards, meaning that the book remained difficult to find.<sup>27</sup> In 1988, it was the 12<sup>th</sup> book in the list of longest waiting queues in Moscow's public libraries.<sup>28</sup>

Bulgakov's works also became an object of cult in the later decades of Soviet Union. The apartment building where he briefly lived in Sadovaya Street - and where the Devil stays in Moscow - was often visited by fans of the novel, who wrote quotes and references to it on the walls of the staircase. Historian John Bushnell wrote an article in 1988 about this graffiti, claiming that

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23 Stephen Lovell, "Bulgakov as Soviet Culture," *Slavonic and East European Review* 76, no. 1 (January 1998): 28-48, 34.

24 Lovell, *Bulgakov as Soviet Culture*, 31.

25 Komaromi, *Uncensored*, 139.

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26 Bulgakov, "A Note on the Text and Acknowledgements," 9-10.

27 Lovell, *Bulgakov as Soviet Culture*, 31.

28 Lovell, *Bulgakov as Soviet Culture*, 45.

according to the residents it started appearing in 1983, and that in a year that were already between eight hundred and a thousand different inscriptions. In the following years, the walls have been whitewashed semi-annually and the stairs were closed with a combination lock to prevent fans from entering the building, with little success: fans kept gaining access to the stairs and graffitiing the walls. He points out that the recurrence of the graffiti shows the very unusual admiration dedicated to the author: “There is no similar cluster of graffiti on any other subject in Moscow, no graffiti collection devoted to any other Soviet or Russian writer or to any writer anywhere in the world, so far as has been reported. There is no other museum, official or unofficial, in



FIGURE 3  
Graffiti with one famous quote from the novel, “запрещено разговаривать с незнакомцами”, “it’s forbidden to talk to strangers”, the same sentence from the sign put in place in the Patriarch Ponds. April 2018. Personal archive.

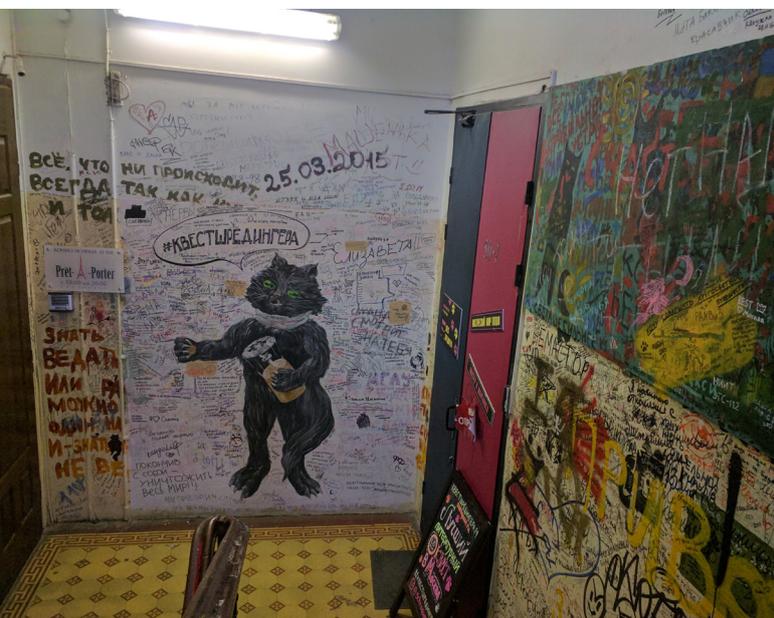


FIGURE 2  
Cluster of graffiti in the staircase of Bulgakov’s apartment. April 2018. Personal archive.

Moscow or anywhere else in the Soviet Union, apparently, that has been opened as a direct response to popular demand”.<sup>29</sup> Several quotations from the novels were often written on the building, and became common sayings in Russia, such as “no document, no person”, making fun of Soviet bureaucracy, or “there’s only one degree of freshness, the first, which makes it also the last”, a joke with the low quality of groceries. The apartment

29 John Bushnell, “A Popular Reading of Bulgakov: Explication des Graffiti,” *Slavic Review* 47, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 502-11, 506.

had become, as he shows, an object of pilgrimage. Today, new graffiti still appears constantly in the staircase.

The case-study of Bulgakov's last novel, *The Master and Margarita* is enlightening for its diversity. It is a part of both official and unofficial culture, or of Gosizdat and Samizdat, while its convoluted publication history reflects several different epochs of the nation's history. It is also illustrative of the studied authors' perception of Samizdat as more of a mere mouthpiece for dissidence, since the book is a work of fiction, both adored and targeted for its parody of everyday Soviet life, but not expressing any specific disagreements with the political system. The parts that were censored, and that resonated with the public decades after the novel had been written, when it circulated as a Samizdat, were about low quality groceries and communal apartments. Even though these were serious problems during the USSR, this kind of parody is still not the archetype for dissident literature. The characters that act in the most controversial acts, such as accepting foreign money, are being led by corruption and self-interest, and are mocked by the author for it. The only character who expresses nostalgia for the days before communism is the devil himself. Despite the fact that it could have led Bulgakov to the Gulag, it would be difficult to characterize it merely as a dissident work.

## CONCLUSION

The study of Samizdat is based on oppositions, like the one between different epochs and focuses ascribed to Samizdat in each one and the opposition between official and unofficial press. *The Master and Margarita* was, however, part of several different epochs and of both official and unofficial press. By showing the system's shortcomings and that the official press tried to censor these mentions, it also highlights that they were still way too resonant to Soviet readers decades later. More than that, it became a part of popular culture, and just by being quoted it ridiculed the very own necessity of the existence of an extra-Gutenberg culture to express daily concerns about the quality of groceries and the miseries of living in a communal apartment. For allowing all these different approaches, the novel is an interesting case study in an extra-Gutenberg culture.

The end of the Soviet Union has not allowed the text of *Master and Margarita* to be properly fixed in a book. Should the 1965 version be considered the standard, or other versions prepared taking the Bulgakov archive, now available, as basis? Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, translators of the book to English, point out in their preface to the 1997 Penguin edition that "Given the absence of a definitive authorial text, this process of

revision is virtually endless.”<sup>30</sup> Being published in an extra-Gutenberg culture, the book could not be standardized during the author’s life – and now the process is infinitely more complex.

As the decentralization of the production and distribution of knowledge becomes commonplace in the age of the Internet and social media, the methods of Samizdat may seem outdated. However, in countries where state Internet control and censorship are the norm, webpages trying to escape it have been called Samizdat blogs. When analyzing their influence on the Kyrgyz Revolution, authors Svetlana Kulikova and David Perlmutter go as far as comparing them to the tavern meeting groups of the pre-revolutionary United States, in that they create their own communities.<sup>31</sup> There are also similarities of Samizdat with digital media in that both transform readers into self-appointed editors, with the possibility of altering a text and reproducing it without mention to the change made, creating several versions of it. In this way, the study of ways in which Samizdat – and the alterations done to a novel in particular – challenged modern print culture can be relevant today.

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30 Bulgakov, “A Note on the Text and Acknowledgements,” 9-10.

31 Svetlana V. Kulikova and David D. Perlmutter, “Blogging Down the Dictator? The Kyrgyz Revolution and Samizdat Websites,” *International Communication Gazette* 69, no. 1 (2007): 29-50, doi:10.1177/1748048507072777.