

Belarusian samizdat (1960s — early 1980s)

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Belarusian samizdat was less numerous and far less influential than Russian, Ukrainian or Lithuanian. However, it existed and played certain role in political and cultural life of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Literature not intended for publication never seized to exist in Soviet Belarus, like elsewhere in Soviet Union. It is well-known that Nikolai Glazkov, Russian poet who coined the word “samizdat”, circulated his typescripts in late 1940s – early 1950s. At the same time Nil Hilevič (then student of Minsk Pedagogical College) wrote his poem *Paboišča (The Battle)* describing students’ group fight with young workers (Hilevič 2008: 89-93). The poem was definitely unprintable, but nevertheless popular among his fellow students. Later students’ milieus continued to serve as active producers of “not-for-publication” poetry: in 1962, a collection of erotic poetry called *Novyj dekameron (The New Decameron)* was created by several students of the Belarusian State University; in late 1960s Ivan Klimiankoŭ versified his experiences of the same university.

There was no long-standing periodical in Belarusian samizdat like *Khronika tekushchikh sobytij (The Chronicle of Current Events)* or *Lietuvos katalikų bažnyčios kronika (The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania)*. Periodicals lasted no longer than a couple of years. The earliest one was, probably, handwritten *Padsniežnik (Snowdrop)* produced by Mikoła Jermałovič in 1963-1964. In 1975-1976 Jermałovič renewed his samizdat activities, this time his publication was called *Hutarka (The Talk)*, and it was distributed in some copies made by artist Jaŭhien Kulik. In many cases samizdat publications were confiscated by KGB and never returned to their creators or owners. Such is the case of a handwritten almanac from Navapolack named *Blakitny lichtar (Blue Lantern, 1971-1974)* all issues of which disappeared in KGB (authors were threatened with persecution unless they stop their activities; Mudroŭ 2005: 6-42).

There was significant rise in literary samizdat, including periodicals, in very late “stagnation” years (1982-1984). We may name *Mistyka (Mystics, Hrodna, 1982-1983)*, *Idiot*

(Viciebsk, published from 1983), *Nabojni* (Slonim, 1984). All of these publications had very little print run and were distributed between circles of friends, so their authors escaped KGB persecution.

A catalogue of Belarusian samizdat periodicals was published in 1998 (Łaŭryk and Androsik 1998). Most probably, this catalogue is very far from being complete. General lack of research on Belarusian samizdat resulted e. g. in total absence of religious samizdat in the first part of this catalogue (dedicated to years 1971-1987). Jewish Belarusian samizdat is not noted in the catalogue as well (although there is a possibility that Jewish samizdat in Belarus of the period was represented only by non-periodical publications).

If we are to look at most influential books of Belarusian samizdat, we have to name *Pa sladach adnaho mifa* (*Tracing One Myth*, 1968) by already mentioned Mikoła Jermalovič, *Polozhenie v Belorusi. 1974 god* (*Situation in Belarus, 1974*) by Hienrych Rakutovič (real name Zianon Pazniak), *Pis'mo ruskomu drugu* (*Letter to a Russian Friend*, 1977, circulated anonymously, English translation published in London in 1979) by Alaksiej Kaŭka and *Rodnaje slova i maralna-estetyčny prahres* (*Native Speech and Progress in Morals and Aesthetics*, 1984, published in 1985 in London) by Aleh Biembiel. Authors of these works waged fights for either Belarusian history (Jermalovič), arguing against its real or imagined falsifications, or Belarusian language (others), defending the language from erasure and arguing in favour of schools and books in Belarusian.

Several shorter papers were circulated in samizdat by the most well-known Belarusian dissident Michaś Kukabaka. However, most of Kukabaka's readers lived in Russia or in the West, not in Belarus, and his works were little known inside the country during 1970s.

Probably the most popular work of literary samizdat was *Skaz pra Łysuju haru* (*Tale of the Bald Mountain*, 1970s) by Nil Hilevič (circulated anonymously). This satiric poem describes *dachas* (summerhouse colony) of members of the writers' union based in Minsk. The poem is filled with politically safe jokes on how certain writers arranged their plots of land. Still, the work was unpublishable in Belarus until late 1980s (Hilevič 2008: 209-216).

Poetry of Łarysa Hienijuš was in part unpublished and circulated in samizdat, although the poet had official publications as well. Łarysa Hienijuš also wrote her autobiography, describing in great detail her time in GULAG; however, this autobiography had very limited circulation before its official publication in 1990.

Like periodicals, non-periodical literary samizdat experienced some upsurge in very late "stagnation" years. Thus, Aleksandr Kozik (later known as Aleś Arkuš) produced in Žodzina a book of his verses *Dykhaniya* (*Breathings*, 1983; cf. Arkuš 2007: 3-4) and Aleksandr Romanov published in Hrodna his collection of ironical short stories *Proletarii dukha* (*Proletarians of the Spirit*, 1984).

Like with periodicals, with non-periodical samizdat we have to consider separately religious and Jewish samizdat; no systematisation of these have happened to date. An outstanding example of religious samizdat was a (very thick) book *Svidetel'stvo obvineniya (Witness of the Prosecution)* written by an Orthodox Deacon Vladimir Rusak. The book described persecution of Russian Orthodox Church by Bolsheviks. The book was written in and disseminated from Moscow, but Rusak was born and raised in Belarus, and served there as a priest in 1982-1984. In 1986 Rusak was sentenced for his book, and spent two years and a half in prison.

Individual samizdat documents either produced in Belarus or produced elsewhere but describing situation in Belarus are relatively abundant, one may look for them in the collection named *Arkhiv samizdata Radio Svoboda (Radio Liberty Samizdat Archives)*.

Both *The Chronicle of Current Events* and *The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania* reported on Belarusian situation quite often. There were other contributions related to Belarus in publications produced for dissemination in all parts of the Soviet Union.

Alongside with local samizdat, Russian samizdat circulated in Belarus quite widely. Among those who organised copying of Russian samizdat we may name Mikoła Jakimovič (Minsk, from 1975 on) and Naum Nim (Viciebsk, late 1970s and early 1980s).

Ukrainian samizdat had some influence as well. For instance, work of Ivan Dziuba *Internationalism or Russification* (1965, published in London in 1968) made great impression both on Nil Hilevič (Hilevič 2008: 194-198) and on the group of intellectuals in the Belarusian Academy of Sciences.

Apart from periodicals and books, other kinds of publications circulated in samizdat. For instance, artist Uładzimir Krukoŭski created postcards which later were reprinted in tamizdat by Belarusian emigration.

In March 2018 Belarusian researcher Tatsiana Astrouskaya defended in Greifswald (Germany) her PhD thesis *Between Dissent and Conformity, Between Uncensored and Official. The Intelligentsia, Samizdat, and Nonconformist Discourses in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (1968-1988)*. As soon as thesis will be published as monography, we will learn more on Belarusian samizdat of the period (Astrouskaya 2019).

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