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INTRODUCTION THE CULTURE OF (NON)CONFORMITY IN RUSSIA FROM THE LATE SOVIET ERA TO THE PRESENT

KLAVDIA SMOLA, MARK LIPOVETSKY
GUEST EDITORS

klavdia.smola@uni-greifswald.de
University of Greifswald, the University of Constance
mark.lipovetsky@colorado.edu
University of Colorado, Boulder.

Abstract

The present collection of papers is the first attempt to juxtapose the late Soviet and Putin eras in Russian nonconformist culture. The contributors examine shifts as well as zones of transition along the axis between conformity and nonconformity from the 1960s to the present. This focus on the exchange between the unofficial and official responds to the growing claim in recent scholarship, that it is necessary to approach late socialism and its countercultures as larger interacting discursive fields, and thus to complicate the previously assumed dichotomies. Moreover, the investigation of the hybridity of late socialism in the first part of the issue allows us to explore and understand the nuanced and even contradictory nature of (non)conformity after 2000 in the second part.

Keywords: *(Non)Conformity; Underground; Russian Counter-Cultures; Public-Private Spaces; Arts And Politics*

This special issue of *Russian Literature* examines shifts in Russian culture along the axis between conformity and nonconformity from the 1960s to the

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present. In the course of its history nonconformist culture passed through several periods of transformation, undergoing important modifications, and experiencing a lengthy interruption in the 1990s. The present collection of papers is the first attempt to juxtapose and compare the late Soviet and Putin eras in Russian nonconformist culture.

We employ the term “nonconformity” as a cross-context designation for the culture that evades, undermines and thwarts both the state-accredited cultural canon and the mainstream that supports it. Regardless of their political implications, artistic and literary phenomena belonging to this culture question the realm of conformity based on sociocultural and political consensus. Terms such as “unofficial culture”, “second culture”, “uncensored culture”, “underground” and others¹ function as related synonyms here and are contextualized in each particular case; the term *Samizdat* in contrast refers to the cultural production of a specific institution in the late Soviet era, and must be seen in correlation with its counterparts *Gosizdat* and *Tamizdat*.

The institutions, practices, and history of the cultural underground in the late Soviet period have been at the centre of much research from the last two decades.² The sphere in-between the official and the non-official, as well as the zones of transition and exchange between them have been less examined. Our approach to the investigation of the nonconformist culture of the 1960s-1980s is focused on this in-between. This focus responds to the growing claim in recent scholarship, that it is necessary to approach late socialism and its countercultures as larger interacting discursive fields, and thus to complicate the previously assumed dichotomies. From the beginning of the new millennium onward, many publications have looked at the unofficial culture’s practices in the Soviet Union as a subsystem of the complex and differentiated sociocultural life of the 1970s (see, for example, Zorkaia et al., 2001). Accordingly, the underground is conceptualized as a specific niche developing in constant interaction with other social spaces such as the semi-official and the official, on a broad scale from canon to anti-canon, and subject to permanent shifts. Mikhail Berg (2000) uses Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological theory to determine the underground’s reference group in relation to other *centers of power* in the late Soviet Union. In the editors’ introduction to the encyclopedia *Samizdat Leningrada* (Leningrad Samizdat; Severiukhin 2003), there is a strong focus on the second culture’s institutionalization and (dis)integration in its social context – they discuss social background, behavior, communication channels, meeting points and joint activities (cf. Dolinin, Severiukhin 2003: 15-35). Stanislav Savitskii (2002) explores the collective aesthetics of Leningrad unofficial literature on the assumption that it was the product of communicative structures in late socialism. As a result of the interest in this period’s system fields and the high degree of mobility of its social structure, the focus in recent years has been on the interspaces – spaces of transition and mediation. The repre-

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