

OSA Final Report

August 3, 2017

Tatsiana Astrouskaya

Universität Greifswald

My research visit to the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives took place in July 2017. The initial purpose of the visit was to realize the follow-up project supplementing the PhD thesis that I have written in the years 2013-2017 at the University of Greifswald, within the frames of the International Research Training Group “Baltic Borderlands: Shifting the Boundaries of Mind and Culture in the Borderlands of the Baltic Sea Region.” The dissertation was supervised by Prof. Dr. Mathias Niendorf (Greifswald) and by Assoc. Prof. Bo Isenberg (Lund University).

In the dissertation, devoted to the nonconformist intelligentsia and samizdat in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (afterward: BSSR) between 1968 and 1988, I aimed at reconstructing the dissent at the “most docile” and “socialist” among the Soviet republics, and particularly amidst its most educated, active and the publicly visible part – the creative intelligentsia. Even considering the limitations of the public sphere, the intelligentsia maintained the connection to the audience, and was the advocate of the unrepresented, as for instance, the peasantry, in the Belarusian case. Moreover, it was constantly involved in the process of negotiation with authorities, considering what was truth and what was false, what deserved or not to be presented to the public, and in this regard even though partly, was fulfilling the function of an intellectual, as it was understood by Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas or Edward Said. My main research questions was how and to what extent the nonconformism of the intelligentsia was possible in a society with the feeble national awareness (which, in most cases, in Eastern and Central Europe, was the main foundation for the consolidation of cultural opposition) and in the situation of the predominant loyalty of the Belarusian population to the Soviet rule. I have discovered (still unsystematized) collections of samizdat gathered by the Belarusian non-conformist groups, and in the archive of the Forschungsstelle Osteuropa in Bremen, and followed the traces of dissent in the official publications, including the Soviet periodical press, and in the correspondence and recollections of the intelligentsia.

While writing the history of nonconformism in Soviet Belarus, I have noticed that the expressions of dissent (which did occur even though with a comparatively lesser intensity than in some other Soviet republics) were mostly unnoticed in the Russian dissident publications, such as, for instance, the Chronicle of the Current Events. Recollecting the events of 1974,

when the so-called nonconformist “Academic Circle” in Minsk was dispersed by the authorities, its member, historian and activist Michas’ Čarnjaŭski complained about the feeble reaction of the Soviet intelligentsia and the Western public to the suppression of Belarusian scholars. Nevertheless, the preliminary overview of the émigré periodicals (for instance, Russian *Posev* or Belarusian *Bac’kaŭščyna*) pointed at the certain circulation of information in regard of Belarusian nonconformism. This circulation can be understood in the sense of recent studies on the interactions of the actors and/or ideas across the Iron Curtain (Autio-Sarasmö and Humphreys, 2010; Labov and Kind-Kováč, 2013).

Therefore, in the follow-up project provisionally entitled as “‘As if we disappeared from this world forever.’ Tracing the (lost) connections of the Belarusian intelligentsia in the Soviet Union and beyond,” my purpose was to search for responses and reactions that Belarusian non-conformism could have summoned and which I hoped to find in the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives.

During the one-month work in the OSA archives, I was interested in the records of the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute, which concerned Soviet Belarus. I have studied the bibliographical files of the Red Archives, and Samizdat Archives of the RFE/RL. The additional question that ripened, while I was researching the archival holdings, had been: according to the which principle the RFE/RL was collecting and sorting out the information about the Soviet Belarus, which materials were accumulated, and which were left out.

Regarding the Red Archives’ biographical files, I have focused on the names that have a connection to the BSSR. The extensive list of bibliographical files contains about a dozen devoted to the Belarusians. Among these names, the largest archival files were compiled for two Belarusian writers – Vasil’ Bykaŭ and Ales’ Adamovič, a political prisoner Michas’ Kukabaka, who actually was perceived as an exemplary Soviet dissident and was not much associated with Belarus, and surprisingly, for the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Belarusian Communist Party Petar Mašeraŭ. Regarding the time span, there appear sources dating from the 1970s, this especially relevant in Kukabaka’s case, yet there are rather few. The majority of sources cover the period of perestroika (and especially after 1987), I will dwell more on the possible reasons of this below.

In the Samizdat Archives I was hoping to come across of the unknown samizdat publications, originating from Soviet Belarus, yet did not find any that could be issued by the intelligentsia. However, the extensive samizdat collection on the religious opposition in the

BSSR, as well documents of Jewish refusniks (*otkazniki*) could be a substantial background for further research projects.

Both Red Archive bibliographical files and samizdat collections are compiled of two major groups of the documents– the newspaper clippings and the RFE/RL reports. The first category, the newspaper articles are, of course, available from other sources, but they can spare time at the initial stage of research. However here too the unexpected materials can appear. In the case of the BSSR, quite many clippings originated from the periodicals of other national republics, and especially from the Baltic republics, for instance from such newspapers as *Sovetskaya Latvia* (Soviet Latvia), *Sovetskaya Molodež'* (Soviet Youth, Estonian newspaper), and also from British and German newspapers. In this light, the connections between nonconformist communities in the national republics can be treated as well established. However, this, I would like to underline, became visible only at the height of perestroika, when the press in the Baltic republics could operate more freely, and the periodicals in the Soviet Belarus were still very conservative.

The RFE/RL reports again do not provide much of additional information; they are repetitive, and intentionally or not sometimes mistaken in expounding of facts and in the conclusions. Yet they broaden our understanding of which information reached the Western audience, and which facts summoned the attention of the Radio Free Europe's Research Institute. To provide an example from the Belarusian history: at the height of perestroika a daily *Večernij Minsk* (Evening Minsk, founded in 1967), an organ of the Minsk City Committee of the Belarusian Communist Party was notorious because of its reaction. In every issue, it fiercely blamed the rising cultural and political opposition. Quite unexpectedly, as one of the RFE/RL reports mentioned, the newspaper was not available outside Belarus. Arguably, the conservative party elites were careful enough and did not let their methods of work and their reputation to spread across the borders of the republic.

In general, during the post-war period, Soviet Belarus did not receive much attention from the research services of Radio Free Europe, for as one of the analysts put it “ ‘[...] Belorussia [...] was regarded as a republic where national sentiment was weak and russification had made its greatest inroads.’”¹

Yet in the last years of perestroika, the situation changed radically: reports on the BSSR appear on the regular basis, and it is clear enough that the researchers among them Kathleen

¹ Bohdan Nahaylo, “Political Demonstration in Minsk Attests to Belorussian National Assertiveness,” *RFE/RL*, November 26, 1987. OSA 300-85-12: 72 of 31.

Mihalisko and Bohdan Nahaylo were very well informed and accurate in their deductions. It seems that the RFE/RL observers were pleased (and surprised) to encounter the “resurgence of Belarusian national assertiveness” at the middle of the 1980s. They treated it predominantly as rooted in the Michail Gorbachev’s policy of perestroika, whilst the previous appeals of the Belarusian intelligentsia for the national revival remained rather discounted. Simultaneously, political movement and repressions toward it attracted much more attention than cultural revival, and the negative developments were arguably exaggerated. For instance, the events of October 30, 1988 in Minsk when the peaceful demonstration was violently dispersed by the authorities persistently appeared both in the press and in the reports.

To sum up, after one month in the OSA it became obvious to me that the “lost” connections of the Belarusian intelligentsia were firmly re-established during the perestroika period and were even more intensive than I could suspect. For the period of Brezhnev Stagnation (1964-1982), on the contrary the tendency is rather opposite. This period, however, still requires more research work, which I hope to conduct during my future visits to Budapest.

Finally yet importantly, I would like to thank all employees of the OSA Archivum, and particularly to the archive’s managing director Katalin Gádoros and to my research consultants Anna Mazanik and Oksana Sarkisova, for their friendly and in every way supportive attitude during the whole period of my stay. Special thanks also to the Visegrad foundation for the financial support, which made this visit possible.

Appendix 1. The list of consulted archival holdings.

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

❖ **HU OSA 300-80 Soviet Red Archives**

▪ **HU OSA 300-80-7 USSR Biographical Files**

OSA 300-80-7:6

OSA 300-80-7:62

❖ **HU OSA Samizdat Archives 300-85**

▪ **HU OSA 300-85-12 Subject files**

OSA 300-85-12:71

OSA 300-85-12:72

OSA 300-85-12:180

OSA 300-85-12:250

▪ **HU OSA 300-85-13 Biographical Files**

OSA 300/85/13:54

OSA 300/85/13:159

OSA/300/85/13:188

OSA/300/85/13:343

OSA/300/85/13:343

OSA/300/85/13:348

▪ **HU OSA 300-85-46 Unpublished Samizdat: Documents Sorted**

Chronologically

HU OSA 300-85-46:1

HU OSA 300-85-46:2

HU OSA 300-85-46:3

HU OSA 300-85-46:4

HU OSA 300-85-46:5

HU OSA 300-85-46:7