

Go west, comrade

The Soviet Union's loss of fine minds and great literature

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TAMIZDAT

Contraband Russian literature in the Cold War era
YASHA KLOTS
330pp. Northern Illinois University Press. \$49.95.

DEFECTORS

How the illicit flight of Soviet citizens built the borders of the Cold War world
ERIK R. SCOTT
328pp. Oxford University Press.
£26.99 (US \$34.95).



Rudolf Nureyev in Moscow, 1987

The tsarist empire was known in its heyday as the “breadbasket of Europe”, thanks to the exceptionally fertile black earth of its southern, mostly Ukrainian, provinces. When the Bolsheviks took over this sprawling agro-state, they all but ruined it, transforming a once mighty exporter of grain into a needy importer plagued by periodic famines. By way of compensation they made the Soviet Union a petro-state whose export of oil and gas became, and has remained, its principal source of wealth. Today, western sanctions notwithstanding, the Russian Federation annually earns hundreds of billions of pounds feeding the world's hunger for hydrocarbons.

For many observers, however, Russia's most notable export products over the past century have been not grain and oil, but people and texts. Soviet citizens (“émigrés”, “refugees”, “exiles” or “renegades”, depending on your - and their - politics) came to the West in three distinct waves. The first arrived shortly after 1917, fleeing the ravages of revolution and civil war. The second emerged from the chaos of the Second World War, many of them former Soviet PoWs or slave labourers in Hitler's Germany. The third formed in the 1970s, when détente opened ever so slightly the USSR's carefully guarded borders, especially for Soviet Jews, ethnic Germans and Armenians. Together the three waves conveyed an astonishing array of human talent westwards: Isaiah Berlin, Nina Berberova, George Balanchine, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Joseph Brodsky, Sergey Brin, Svetlana Boym. And those are just the Bs.

No less remarkable were the novels, poems and memoirs that made their way out of the Soviet Union and into twentieth-century world literature, having failed or in some cases not even tried to pass through the gauntlet of Soviet state censorship. Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, Anna Akhmatova's *Requiem*, Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*, Andrei Platonov's *The Foundation Pit*, Eugenia Ginzburg's *Journey into the Whirlwind* and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* all found clandestine paths to publishers and readers abroad, with help from western diplomats and journalists stationed in Moscow, as well as western intelligence services, long before permission was granted to publish them at home. In 1987 my teachers in Leningrad asked me, an American exchange student, to purchase copies of *Doctor Zhivago* for them at a special store for foreigners where only western currencies were accepted. I was thrilled to serve as conduit of a celebrated Russian novel to its intended audience - and sickened by the unnatural spectacle

of Russians relying on a foreign student for access to their own literary patrimony.

Tamizdat is a Russian neologism meaning “published over there”, a variant of the earlier neologism *samizdat* (“published by myself”), itself a play on *gosizdat* (“published by the state”). Yasha Klots's monograph aims to bring all three modes of making texts public - official, underground, foreign - into a single analytic framework, though its emphasis is squarely on the last. Based on pioneering research in a dozen archives in multiple countries, *Tamizdat: Contraband Russian literature in the Cold War era* analyzes the redaction and reception by Russian émigrés in the West of key works of fiction by Solzhenitsyn, Akhmatova, the less well-known Lydia Chukovskaya and the still underappreciated Varlam Shalamov.

The central topic of *tamizdat* literature was the Gulag - not surprisingly, given the nearly blanket refusal by Soviet censors to permit open discussion of Stalin's vast network of forced labour camps. Roughly 18 million Soviet citizens, one-sixth of the adult population, spent time there, of whom two to three million perished from disease, malnutrition and overwork. Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn were among the survivors, as was Akhmatova's son. (Her husband, like Chukovskaya's, was executed shortly after his arrest.) The secrecy surrounding the USSR's punitive apparatus, along with fierce anti-Soviet sentiment, led Russian émigrés to read fictional accounts of the Gulag in what Klots calls a “factographic” mode, as documents of life under Communism rather than as works of art reflecting on the human condition. In some cases émigré journals such as *Novyi zhurnal* (New York) and *Grani* (Frankfurt) pruned *tamizdat* manuscripts of elements that diminished their utility as weapons in the Cold War, making it easier for readers to find what they were looking for.

Akhmatova, one of the great poets of the twentieth century, was unhappy with the reception of her elegiac *Requiem* west of the Iron Curtain. “You can read what a martyr I am, how much I've suffered, how I'm alien to everything and everyone in today's Russia”, she complained to an émigré critic in 1965. “Let them forget about my suffering ... You don't have to make me your banner or mouthpiece.” Shalamov, author of the searing *Kolyma Tales*, condemned their “deceitful manner of publication”, which stripped them of philosophical depth and effaced their experiments with rendering the unspeakable in a distinctive literary language. “I am writing about the camps”, he protested in his diary, “no more than Saint-Exupéry wrote about the sky or Melville about the sea.”

“**I am writing about the camps no more than Saint-Exupéry wrote about the sky or Melville about the sea**”

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“Poor Russian emigration!”, lamented the writer Victor Shklovsky of his fellow refugees in Berlin in the 1920s. “Our batteries were charged in Russia; here we keep going around in circles and soon we will grind to a halt.” Indeed, exile communities in the West have often been known for their toxic brew of free expression and collective impotence. Klots's own readings of *tamizdat* literature are subtler and more interesting than those of the Russian émigrés he studies. His analysis of Cold War reading habits might be even richer were it to expand beyond the rather hermetic exile community to encompass the redaction, translation and reception of *tamizdat* literature by wider western readerships. But that would be a topic for another book.

Escaping the Soviet Union was easier for texts than for people. Human cases were sometimes spectacular, as when Rudolf Nureyev, on tour in 1961 with the Kirov Ballet, performed a *grand jeté* into the arms of French policemen at a Paris airport, requesting asylum, or when Svetlana Alliluyeva, Stalin's daughter, slipped into the US embassy in New Delhi while visiting India in 1967 and was whisked off to New York, where she gave a press conference denouncing the Soviet regime. A public relations firm couldn't dream up better advertising for the free world.

Such “celebrity defectors” do not particularly interest Erik R. Scott. Just as Klots calls into question Cold War readings by Russian émigrés of texts smuggled out of the USSR, so Scott is sceptical of Cold War narratives that celebrate freedom-loving escapees from Soviet totalitarianism. *Defectors: How the illicit flight of Soviet citizens built the borders of the Cold War world* probes the complex motives that drove not just acts of defection, but also the treatment of asylum seekers by western governments, as well as their reverberations back in the Soviet Union, where unauthorized exits were classified as treason. In many cases personal and financial woes propelled defectors as much as ideological apostasy. More often than one might imagine, defectors - including Alliluyeva - subsequently decided to return to the Soviet motherland. (Two years later she changed her mind again and moved back to the US.) At the height of the Cold War the CIA ran an operation codenamed REDCAP, which targeted Soviet embassies, military bases and visiting delegations for potential high-value defectors - individuals with insider knowledge of the Soviet system. Most runaways, however, fled on their own initiative and brought little in the way of intelligence value.

Scott uses the phenomenon of Soviet defectors to illuminate a larger story involving not just Cold War propaganda and intelligence coups, but also the rise of a global system of constraints on human mobility “co-produced” by the two superpowers. “During the Cold War”, he writes, “border technologies grew more advanced, screening measures more extensive, and spaces previously beyond the reach of state control more thoroughly regulated by law ... Defectors were both the catalysts for the delimiting of previously open spaces and the most visible representatives of the consequences of enclosure.”

If Erik R. Scott's description of the tightening of border controls during the second half of the twentieth century is persuasive, his account of *why* it happened is not. His book's subtitle highlights the illicit flight of Soviet citizens, but as the author notes, the overwhelming majority of defectors from the socialist world came not from the USSR, but from Hungary (after the crushed uprising in 1956) and East Germany (in the decade leading up to the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961). His analysis is further muddied by its treatment of “defectors” and “migrants” as interchangeable, as a result of which *Defectors* lacks a clear sense of its topic's borders. Even if lumped together, defectors from Eastern Bloc countries would still be eclipsed, in terms of numbers as well as explanatory significance for the enactment of restrictions on global mobility, by the millions of migrants and would-be migrants from the recently decolonized countries of the Global South. That story, of course, predated and outlasted the Cold War, and is very much alive today. ■