Interstate narratives for local aspirations: The Soviet Baltic Republics' Samizdat on the War in Afghanistan

Yana Kitaeva[1]

Abstract

Dissident publications of Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian Samizdat were among the first to comment on the Soviet military involvement in the Afghan Civil War. Reflecting on the war situation in these unofficial texts, the publishers of the Baltic Republics used a particular Afghan conflict narrative to accomplish their own pro-independence national goals. Two open letters, analyzed in this paper, illustrate how the Samizdat authors equate the Soviet military operations on Afghan soil with the Stalinist invasion and annexation of the Baltic States in 1940. The Samizdat oriented the core of the message to the Helsinki Declaration's provision on the peoples' right for self-determination, which was more suitably applicable to the Baltic republics, as they were trying to garner support for independence.

Keywords: Soviet Republics, Samizdat, Afghanistan War, Baltic Republics, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia

Introduction

On Christmas Eve of 1979, a limited Contingent of Soviet troops crossed the Afghan border. By this time, groups of special forces of the KGB had stormed the fortified residence of the general secretary of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, Hafizullah Amin. As a result of the assault, Amin was killed, along with his family and his guards.[2] The Soviet Union justified these killings, by "patriotic forces inside

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[2] Vladislav Zubok, A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev, New Cold War History Series (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), p. 227.

Afghanistan,"[3] by claiming that Amin was a "butcher and an American agent."[4] The KGB delivered to Kabul and placed as the head of the party Babrak Karmal – an Afghan communist who had lived in emigration before this.[5] The Soviet-Afghan War had started.

Today, almost three decades separate us and the complete withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989, but the war in Afghanistan continues to be a hot topic for scholars. The dominant paradigm of historical narrative on the consequences and outcomes of the Soviet invasion of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan considers the war to have been a total blunder for both the international authority and the internal legitimization of the USSR. Regarding the external authority of the Soviet government, Vladislav Zubok called the Soviet state a "failed Empire." Additionally, the war escalated in Afghanistan following the fall of the Soviet status of international authority.[6] However, the significant decrease of Soviet authority was caused not only by the impossibility for the "superpower" of succeeding on the battleground of Afghanistan for almost 10 years and fully establishing a socialist regime in the state, but also by the legacies of the post-Helsinki era, as the invasion occurred four years after the Helsinki Accords were signed. In fact, when the Helsinki Final Act was adopted, thirty-five states undersigned to guarantee the sanctity of the Helsinki Decalogue (ten key principles laid down in the Helsinki Final Act), which included: non-intervention in internal affairs; respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief; and the equal rights and self-determination of peoples.[7] The USSR had signed the Helsinki Accords, therefore agreeing to abide by these points. The weakened authority of the "superpower," supplemented with the idea that the Soviet involvement in the Afghan civil war was a violation of the spirit of the Helsinki Agreements, raised interest in the subject on the side of activists in Baltic Soviet republics.

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[3] Petrov A. "K Sobytiyam v Afganistane [Towards Events in Afghanistan]," Pravda, 31 December 1979; HU OSA 300-80-1: 65/1; Afganistan: obsch'ee [Afghanistan: general]; Old Code Subject Files; Radio Liberty Research Institute: Soviet Red Archives; Records of Radio Free Europe; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

[4] "Soviet News Media and Overthrow of Hafizullah Amin," 29 December 1979. HU OSA 300-80-1: 65/1.

[5] Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress, eds., *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, Modern War Studies (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 2002). P. xxviii.

[6] Eight years before the book was published, this idea was partly addressed by Reuveny R. and Prakash A., 'The Afghanistan War and the Breakdown of the Soviet Union', *Review of International Studies*, (1999).

[7] Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE): Final Act of Helsinki, 1 August 1975, available at: http://www.refworld.org/docid/3dde4f9b4.html [accessed 24 March 2018].

Aside from the issue of international authority, the Afghan conflict affected the internal politics of both the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA)[8] and the Soviet Union. The latter aspect of the war is the focus of this paper as it directly influenced groups of activists in the Baltic Soviet republics, e.g., the Samizdat networks. The book by Grau and Gress claims that the collapse of Soviet internal authority occurred because of the incapacity of the Soviet leadership to frame the war in Afghanistan within Marxist-Leninist ideology to justify the invasion.[9]

Taking these facts into consideration, this paper is dedicated to analyzing the reactions to the situation in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion by Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian Samizdat networks. The paper is based on the OSA archives' collections, in particular on the Radio Liberty Research Institute's Red Archives and the Records of Samizdat Archives.[10] The research focuses on the post-Helsinki justification of the Soviet involvement in the Afghan civil war, and the Baltic Soviet republics' Samizdat publications' views on the war, raising the following research questions: How was Soviet foreign policy perceived from the perspective of the Baltic Soviet republics' underground literature, and in what contexts was the Afghan issue raised? In other words, how was the issue of the war absorbed and articulated among the Samizdat publishers?

It is important to stress that the research has some limitations. As the paper's source base consists of the Red Archives of the Radio Liberty Research Institute, the Samizdat Archives and also the Records of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, the image of the war may be subject to biased representation according to the needs of the organizations concerned – the creators of these historical sources. Moreover, the research will cover only the first half of the Soviet military operations of the DRA until Gorbachev's reforms, as the foreign policy of the USSR changed dramatically with *Perestroika*. In this period, Soviet political discourse, together with the international policy agenda, underwent a normative reorientation in terms of values

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[8] In the mid-1970s, Afghanistan did not have developed infrastructure and a public education system. It was an agrarian traditional tribal-based society, and the majority of the population was illiterate. The poor logistical groundwork of the Soviet Army and the inability to understand the ideology of the Mujahideen opposition (led by the Islamist Afghan guerrilla soldiers) both prevented the political elites of the USSR from arranging a proper propaganda policy towards the Afghan population, making the Soviet soldiers completely alienated and encouraging resistance. Ibid., pp. xx-xxii.

[9] Ibid., p. xix.

[10] HU OSA 300-80-1: 65, 70-71; Afganistan: obsch'ee [Afghanistan: general], 1979, 1982-1984; Old Code Subject Files; Radio Liberty Research Institute: Soviet Red Archives; Records of Radio Free Europe; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest; HU OSA 300-85-12: 14-17; Wars: [After 1945]: Afghanistan: General, 1979-1989; Subject Files; Samizdat Archives; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

voiced: towards peace, disarmament, "glasnost" (openness/transparency). This had a great influence on the Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian Samizdat publications, but a discussion of this transformation far exceeds the limitations of this paper.

Samizdat (and RL/RFE) as a public sphere

According to Habermas's definition of the public sphere, it is "a realm of social life in which something approaching public opinion can form."[11] In a regime intolerant to independent public discussions and other forms of information exchange, the ardour for self-expression manifested itself in quasi-legal or illegal practices. For successful information exchange and distribution among broader groups of people, the right tools had to be found. In the Soviet context, the mediator via which public opinion could be shaped independently of state control was *Samizdat*.

Any given definition of the notion of *Samizdat* will inevitably lead to oversimplification or generalization. Literarily, the term could be translated as "self-publishing." During and after World War II in the Eastern and Central European Socialist countries, *Samizdat* appeared in the form of a variety of ways in which authors published their own work, distributed typically in typewritten or printed copies passing from reader to reader by hand, avoiding government censorship.[12] It also involved copying of unapproved written (or other) materials produced both inside the country and abroad.[13] In each Soviet republic, *Samizdat* included a wide variety of documents: magazines, memoirs, appeals, open letters and news reports.

It is also important to mention that *Samizdat* was not only a tool of the intelligentsia or the dissidents because it went far beyond the binary opposition of dissent circles versus the state or even truthful information versus propaganda.[14] According to Ann Komaromi, *Samizdat* was an "exemplification of epistemic instability".[15] Inasmuch as unofficial texts were not automatically invested with authority, they were not the

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[11] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999), p. 10.

[12] Gordon H. Skilling, 'Samizdat: A Return to the Pre-Gutenberg Era?', in *Samizdat and an Independent Society in Central and Eastern Europe*, by H. Gordon Skilling (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989), 3–18.

[13] Ibid. p. 6.

[14] See Ann Komaromi, 'Samizdat as Extra-Gutenberg Phenomenon,' *Poetics Today*, 29 (2008), 629-666.

[15] Ibid., pp. 629-630.

mediators of trustworthy information but opinions, rather: ones, that at times reflected Cold War propaganda narratives present in Western media discourses.

The history of *Samizdat* in the Soviet Union could be divided into three stages. Even though unofficial texts existed and were circulated in the USSR before Stalin's death, scholars mostly connect the rise of *Samizdat* as a significant network of alternative communication with the demise of Stalinism, occurring in the ideologically more relaxed atmosphere of the 1960s.[16] The second period was tied to the signing of the Helsinki Agreements of 1975, one of the points of which was "respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms." According to Peter Steiner, that made "a purely domestic affair a matter of foreign policy, which empowered Western governments to intercede on behalf of dissidents."[17] This boosted civic initiatives in almost all Soviet republics via the medium of unofficial texts.[18] The third stage in the evolution of the *Samizdat* networks occurred after 1985 with the Perestroika reforms, and will not be covered in this paper.

Before examining the case of the Soviet-Afghan conflict, which occurred during the second stage of the history of *Samizdat*, an overview of the Baltic republics' Samizdat may be necessary. Even though the network of unofficial texts was a common tool for manifesting dissent in all of the Baltic republics, their regional differences are essential. While the Moscow dissident underground publishing was the product of the secular intelligentsia, Lithuanian *Samizdat* activity showed a Roman Catholic orientation from the beginning of the Détente.[19] Together with a variety of Catholic journals, the unofficial religious literature was the most influential among all the other manifestations of organized opposition in Lithuania, right up till the rise of the Gorbachev reforms. On the other hand, Latvia's most prominent religious dissident group was Baptist. Even though Latvian underground literature, together with Lithuanian and Estonian, was the product of individual anti-regime dissidents, in Latvia there were a few interesting cases. A particularly interesting one was that of the Communist dissident groups writing open letters to Western Communist Parties stressing the Soviet violations of Marxist-Leninist ideology in the republic.[20] Following the same dissidents' themes as in the other Baltic

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[16] Peter Steiner, 'Introduction: On Samizdat, Tamizdat, Magnitizdat, and Other Strange Words That Are Difficult to Pronounce', *Poetics Today* 29, no. 4 (1 December 2008), p. 615.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid. p. 616.

[19] Romuald J. Misiunas and Rein Taagepera, *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence 1940 - 1990*, 2nd impr (London: Hurst, 2006), p. 254.

[20] The text in question was the "Letter of Seventeen Communists," dated July-August 1971, and addressed to Romanian, Yugoslav, French, Austrian and Spanish Communist parties, asking these parties for help to

republics, Estonian *Samizdat* was abundant with the narratives of the independent Estonian state and strived for a referendum on self-determination. An exception to this was the Estonian group of Naturalists who addressed anonymous letters to colleagues in Northwestern Europe, protesting against the ecological damage caused by the Soviet mining of raw materials in Estonia.[21] Dissidents of all three republics showed a pessimistic concern for the future of their nations, emphasizing various infractions of human rights and copiously referring to the Helsinki Accords of 1975.

As the Soviet military involvement in the Afghan civil war started after the Helsinki Agreement was already signed, the Declaration was an important tool for framing the Afghan-Soviet conflict as an unjust war. The document covered the issues of sovereignty and non-intervention, and also called for respect for human rights and peoples' self-determination.

When, four and a half years after signing the Helsinki Accords, Soviet troops crossed the borders of the DRA, one of the most famous Soviet civil rights activists, Andrei Sakharov stated that, in the context of the Helsinki Review Conference,[22] the West should "urge the political settlement of the Afghan issue – one that would include the withdrawal of the Soviet troops, a declaration of Afghanistan's neutrality and the holding of free elections."[23] However, it was not only Andrei Sakharov who rebutted the Soviet self-righteousness about the Afghan intervention.

After 1976, when the Helsinki group appeared in the Lithuanian SSR, the Baltic republics' activists started to use the *Samizdat* network as a tool of influence, including (post-1979) to shape public opinion on the issue of the Afghan conflict. In the following two years, similar groups appeared in the two other Baltic republics – these were usually referred to as "Helsinki Committee." The network of unofficial texts of Latvian, Estonian or Lithuanian republics was closely tied up with similar committees in other Soviet republics. Moreover, after 1978, when the Helsinki Watch group, a U.S. non-

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correct "certain actions and events that cause great harm to the Communist movement, to Marxism-Leninism, and to our own as well as other small nations." Ibid., p.262.

[21] Ibid., p.268.

[22] There were several Helsinki follow-up conferences: the most important of these were held in Belgrade, 1977–1978, and in Madrid, 1980–1983. On both of these occasions, the West criticized the Soviet Union and other Eastern-bloc countries for their violations of the human rights provisions of the Helsinki Final Act. The article by Arthur J. Goldberg states that, in this (i.e., the Helsinki) context, there was no legal basis for the Soviet Union and its allies to claim that such criticism was an intervention in their internal affairs. See: Arthur J. Goldberg, 'The Helsinki Final Act and the Madrid Review Conference: A Case Study of Political Non-communication', *Political Communication* 2, no. 1 (January 1982): 1–19.

[23] "Intro Helsinki (New Story)" – Dissident sources in Moscow (Andrei Sakharov), 12 August 1980; HU OSA 300-85-12: 14.

governmental organization, was established for the monitoring of human rights'
violations in Eastern Bloc countries, the *Samizdat* texts of the Helsinki Committees
became even more popular publishing material abroad than they were during the first part
of the 1970s.[24] This entangled the internal Soviet *Samizdat* network with the Western
media discourses even more closely. Thus, if not via the *Samizdat* network inside the
republic, information on violations of human rights during the Soviet presence in
Afghanistan reached the Soviet citizens via Radio Liberty.[25] This gave all topics related
to human rights abuses during the war instrumental value as influence tools to shape
public opinion on the Soviet involvement in the Afghan civil war in both the USSR and
around the globe.

The Soviet Baltic Republics' *Samizdat*

The distinguishing feature of the Baltic republics' *Samizdat* is that even as the topics of
the publications represented the national desires of the republics, they were never limited
to only Latvian, Estonian or Lithuanian questions.[26] Each republics' citizens participating
in the work of the committees maintained ties with similar groups in other parts of the
USSR and were connecting their statements on human rights' violations with issues of
broader international concerns. I will discuss this feature of the texts of Estonian, Latvian
and Lithuanian dissidents, focusing on two cases of their early activity, arising right after
Soviet troops went into action in Afghanistan.

One of the earliest examples of the Baltic republics' *Samizdat* which served the
national interests via international discourse was that of two open letters, dated the 28th
of January 1980. A report in the collection of the Radio Free Europe Research Institute,
from United Press International (UPI, news agency), says that the messages, in the form
of open letters, were received by the correspondents of the U.S. *Cristian Science Monitor*
and the British *Daily Telegraph* in Moscow on the 29th of January 1980 – a month after
the invasion occurred.[27] These open letters, which commented on the Soviet invasion in
Afghanistan, were signed by "at least twenty Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian

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[24] Ibid. P. 235. See also H. Gordon Skilling, 'A Second Polity: Contrasting Patterns of Reality', in *Samizdat and an Independent Society in Central and Eastern Europe*, by H. Gordon Skilling (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989), p. 177–218.

[25] Which collected this information from the very beginning of the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan in December 1979 via Radio Liberty Research Institute and Records of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights.

[26] Misiunas and Taagepera. P. 258.

[27] 'Intro Baltics (New material),' UPI report, Moscow, 29 January, 1980; HU OSA 300-85-12: 14.

activists,"[28] and unofficially printed copies of it had been released by an Estonian scientist, Juri Kukk.[29] Another document, an internal report of the Radio Liberty Research Institute of the 6th of March 1980, specifies that in the letter there are eighteen Lithuanians, three Estonians and a Latvian enlisted.[30]

Advocating pro-independence national goals, the first open letter was addressed to the Communist Party leader Leonid Brezhnev with the demand to withdraw the Soviet troops from the DRA, and compared the military campaign of the USSR with the "annexation of the Baltic republics in 1940."[31] The text of the letter, provided in the RLRI internal report, says that "the incursion of the Soviet army contradicts the USSR-Afghanistan treaty [called] "On the Definition of Aggression," signed in 1933,"[32] by which any military involvement in the partner country's domestic politics qualifies as an act of aggression no matter what the reasons for this may be. In the following paragraph, the message compares that agreement between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan to the similar treaties of friendship and cooperation with the Baltic republics signed in 1940, claiming that "the Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian nations are well acquainted with the purposes and the results of such actions."[33] It is crucial that this open letter referenced the treaty of 1933, but not the subsequent "The Afghan-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation,"[34] which appeared to have greater importance after 1978. In the light of this agreement, the Soviet penetration of the Afghan borders at the end of 1979 was presented in the official Soviet narrative as a response to Afghan request

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[28] Ibid.

[29] Within a month after delivering the open letters, Juri Kukk was arrested for "distribution of anti-Soviet propaganda" and sent to a labor camp in Vologda, where he died on the 27th of March 1981, after several months of being on a hunger strike. The example of this professor of chemistry is striking because it shows that in the first part of the 1980s the Soviet regime had no driving force to transform into a more liberal system. Rein Taagepera, *Softening without Liberalization in the Soviet Union: The Case of Jüri Kukk* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984). P. 253-255.

[30] 'Baltic Activists Condemn the Invasion of Afghanistan,' RLR report, Munich, 6 March 1980; HU OSA 300-85-12: 14.

[31] Intro Baltics (New material),' UPI report, Moscow, 29 January, 1980; HU OSA 300-85-12: 14.

[32] 'Baltic Activists Condemn the Invasion...' RLR report, Munich, 6 March 1980; HU OSA 300-85-12: 14.

[33] Ibid.

[34] "Dogovor o druzhbe dobrososedstve i sotrudnichestve mezhdu SSSR i Demokraticheskoj Respublikoj Afganistan" was signed on the 5th of December 1978. It was a bilateral interstate agreement that presupposed closer political, economic and military cooperation between the USSR and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan on the basis of the closeness of the ideological positions of the leaderships of both countries. Signed in Moscow by Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev and Nur Mohammed Taraki. See: Договор о дружбе, добрососедстве и сотрудничестве между Союзом Советских Социалистических Республик и Демократической Республикой Афганистан, Известия, 6 декабря 1978. [Dogovor o druzhbe dobrososedstve i sotrudnichestve mezhdu SSSR i Demokraticheskoj Respublikoj Afganistan, Izvestia, 6 December 1978].

for "immediate help and assistance in the fight with external aggression."[35] Thus, by supporting this narrative of the condemnation of the foreign military invasion together with the United Nations General Assembly resolution on the Afghan war,[36] the Baltic Republics served their own pro-independent national agenda, which they presented through the case of Soviet involvement in the Afghan civil war.

The second open letter had the same aims. It was signed by the same people but addressed to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and to the Olympic Committees of the U.S., Canada, Britain and other countries. The message claimed that the Olympic Games of 1980 should be moved from Moscow.[37] The letter says that since the Olympics symbolizes peace, the IOC and various national OCs "that n-o-t recognize the Soviet annexation of the Baltic republics"[38] should work together for the removal of the 1980 summer Olympic Games from the USSR. The main emphasis of the protests was on the yachting competition as the Estonian capital was selected for these events. In this manner, the war situation was used to underline issues different from the Afghan conflict, seeking international support for the recognition of the independence of the three Baltic republics.

Conclusion

Since Christmas Eve of 1979, when the Soviet Union began military operations in the territory of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, the issue of the Afghan war was articulated among the Baltic republics' *Samizdat.* The topics of the unofficial texts signify how the international language of criticism with regards to the issue was used by the Baltic republics' dissident publishers to further pro-independence national aspirations. Without taking into consideration the subsequent Brezhnev-Karmal agreements, the authors of both open letters equated the Soviet military campaign in Afghanistan with the annexation of the Baltic States in 1940 under Stalin. Even though, after 1975, Helsinki Committees emerged throughout constituent republics of the Soviet state, based on the sources found in the OSA archives' collections, only members of the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian groups published joint open letters underlining the exclusiveness of their position on the issue and accentuating shared goals.

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[35] Petrov A. "K Sobytiyam v Afganistane [Towards Events in Afghanistan]," Pravda, 31 December 1979; HU OSA 300-80-1: 65/1.

[36] In the resolution of the United Nation General Committee, adopted on the 15th of January 1980, 104 against 18 states voted in favor of the immediate withdrawal of the all foreign troops from Afghanistan.

[37] 'Baltic Activists Condemn the Invasion...' RLR report, Munich, 6 March 1980; HU OSA 300-85-12: 14.

[38] Intro Baltics (New material),' UPI report, Moscow, 29 January, 1980; HU OSA 300-85-12: 14.

The first letter articulated the Helsinki Accords' provisions, and the implications thereof regarding the Afghan war, e.g., on the issues of sovereignty and non-intervention, additionally calling for the respect of human rights. The real focus of the message is in the meantime on the Helsinki Declaration provision on the right for peoples' self-determination, suitably applicable to the Baltic republics. As noted before, the Samizdat network, together with Western media organizations such as Radio Liberty, could influence public opinion both within and outside the Soviet Union. Having said that, an assessment of the impact of the Baltic republics' *Samizdat* on the broader dynamics of the Cold War is beyond what can be gauged on the basis of the sources used in this paper.

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