

## **Whatever Happened to Samizdat?**

by Theodore Plantinga

*Samizdat* is a Russian word for illegal underground literature. Many people in the West are not aware of the fact that various writings about Russia which we have read in the West were not able to be published in the old Soviet Union but were published instead in the West and circulated in clandestine fashion in the Soviet Union. But things have changed over there. The Soviet Union has dissolved, and Communism no longer holds sway. The possibilities for above-ground publication are much greater today.

As a supporter of free speech and a free press, I have always admired the brave folks in the Soviet Union who risked imprisonment and worse to circulate ideas in written form. As a salute to them, I named a former periodical publication of my own after their underground tradition. That is to say, I used to publish *Samizdat* as an illegal, on-campus periodical (usually a single sheet of small print) at Redeemer College.

Note carefully: *at* Redeemer College. I did not do so at the College's request, nor did I seek the College's permission or use its resources or equipment. I produced the paper at home on my own computer and ran off multiple copies on my own laser printer. Those copies were then distributed to some -- not all -- Redeemer faculty, staff and students. I invited them to pass the paper on. Only rarely did I mail out a copy or two; in fact, I turned down many requests for subscriptions. Now and then a periodical would reprint something I had written (after obtaining my permission, of course). A reprint would usually lead to new inquiries: people would want to know how often the paper came out, how they could subscribe, etc.

The element of illegality needs to be explained. The folks in the Soviet Union who circulated samizdat writings were thereby risking the wrath of the KGB. Some of them wound up in the GULAG. Perhaps it was cheeky on my part to compare myself to them in any respect while I was comfortably ensconced in Canada. I called the paper illegal because the College maintained an on-again, off-again regulation to the effect that nothing was to be posted and/or

distributed on campus without the prior consent and stamp of approval of the administration. One was supposed to bring materials for scrutiny to the Student Life Department. This regulation never got discussed at any faculty meeting that I can recall; it was just trotted out now and again.

I regarded such a regulation as unwise and unwarranted; I maintain that one of the reasons we have Christian colleges is to combat the sort of thinking that underlies such a regulation. Christians have a vested interest in free speech and a free press and should be in the front ranks of its defenders. And so I tried to teach by example.

The Soviet Union has eased up, and so has Redeemer College. In one respect, then, there ceased to be a point to the publication of *Samizdat*. But the paper also ceased publication because of a general decline of interest. At its best, *Samizdat* stimulated on-campus discussion. At a certain point, when very little response was forthcoming, I decided to halt the press, so to speak. I suspected that one day I would resume, but in a different format and under a different name.

The sheer convenience of the new electronic possibilities is a factor in luring me out my journalistic retirement. There was a fair amount of work, and a bit of expense, involved in the old operation. The current one also involves some work (learning HTML, for example), but it is pleasurable. And I now enjoy the satisfaction of knowing that absolutely anyone who expresses an interest can help himself to the material, either by reading it directly on-line or by downloading it.

If you are in the category of people who sometimes wonder, "Whatever happened to *Samizdat*?" now you know the answer. Visit this site from time to time and see whether there is anything here of interest or help to you.

*Samizdat* used to be fairly heavily focused on the Redeemer scene, and it included certain allusions that only Redeemerites would understand. Perhaps that local focus was a bit unhealthy. In this journal I will from time to time make observations about Redeemer, and I will post material drawn from the classes I teach there, but my aim will be to talk about this wide, wonderful world as such.

How can you get involved? I hope you will read some of this stuff, and that you will respond from time to time. Perhaps you also have a journal or format to place your ideas. If so, I might be willing to publish its electronic address. There are already various places on the web where Christian resources and

philosophy sites are listed; I have consulted such lists and visited some of the sites, but I'm always eager to hear of more, and I would be happy to serve as a link. In this regard, the new format can transcend *Samizdat*, since the entirety of this wide, wonderful world is the arena in which we are to serve God. I hope to run into you sometime in real space, or, if that should prove impossible, in cyberspace. **[END]**