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# Narrating Resistance: Ludmilla Alexeyeva and Paul Goldberg's *The Thaw Generation* (1990)

**Narrating Resistance:** Ludmilla Alexeyeva's and Paul Goldberg's *The Thaw Generation* (1990). The production and circulation of literary, documentary, and political texts were among the main activities of dissidents in the Soviet Union. Many of them also kept diaries or notebooks, wrote memoirs or engaged in other forms of life writing. While these texts more or less explicitly claim to authentically represent reality, they nonetheless arise as a construction based on literary strategies. The analysis of the latter in Ludmilla Alexeyeva and Paul Goldberg's *The Thaw Generation* is the subject of this article. We discuss the rhetoric of these memoirs focusing particularly on stylistic features and argumentative structures that are meant to grant the text credibility among American and Russian readers.

**Keywords:** life writing, Soviet Union, dissidents, Human Rights Movement, 1960s–1980s

## Introduction

The production and circulation of literary, documentary, and political texts were among the main activities of dissidents<sup>1</sup> in the Soviet Union. Many of them also kept diaries, notebooks, or wrote memoirs. While these texts make more or less explicit

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<sup>1</sup> In this article we use the term “dissenter” to designate a person in general opposition to the Soviet system, and to distinguish a “dissenter” from a “dissident,” the latter term referring more narrowly to a member of the Human Rights movement. By doing this we follow the Russian language, which distinguishes between *инакомыслящий* (other-minded person or dissenter) and *диссидент* (dissident).

claims to an authentic representation of reality and are firmly connected to their particular discursive environment, they nonetheless deploy certain literary strategies in their construction. Recent research on dissent in the USSR, such as that undertaken by Ann Komaromi<sup>2</sup>, has investigated the connection between subjectivity and modernist stylistics by looking specifically at uncensored dissident fictional literature. The literary strategies employed in non-fictional life writing, however, have rarely been subject to systematic research<sup>3</sup>. The aim of this article is to conduct further research in this direction. The present article is a part of a larger research project focused on the description of the life writing of dissenters from the 1960s through the 1980s as an aesthetic and socio-cultural phenomenon<sup>4</sup>.

Soviet dissent was a deeply heterogeneous phenomenon that spanned both genders and included not only nationalists and liberals but also a multitude of religious groups who stood, in variable forms and degrees, in opposition to the state. This heterogeneity is characteristic of Soviet life writing as well. In this article, we will explore a well-known, foundational text about the Moscow-based liberal branch of Soviet dissent, Ludmilla Alexeyeva's memoirs *The Thaw Generation*<sup>5</sup>. Ludmilla Mikhailovna Alexeyeva (born 1927) is a Russian historian, who for many years has been a member of the Human Rights Movement, first in the Soviet Union and later the Russian Federation. In consequence of her political activities, she was forced in 1978 to emigrate to the United States. It was there, in 1990, that she published her memoirs *The Thaw Generation*, written in cooperation with the American journalist Paul Goldberg. The dynamic changes occasioned by the *perestroika* movement that were then taking place in the Soviet Union meant that the Russian translation of the book, *Поколение оттепели*, was able to appear the same year.

*The Thaw Generation* quickly became and still remains one of the most frequently cited accounts of the birth of the Soviet Human Rights Movement, which arose among students who began to discuss their dissatisfaction with society. The

<sup>2</sup> A. Komaromi, *Uncensored. Samizdat Novels and the Quest for Autonomy in Soviet Dissidence*, Evanston, Illinois 2015.

<sup>3</sup> An important contribution to research in this field is B. Holmgren's *The Russian Memoir: History and Literature*, Evanston, Illinois 2003. The essays collected in this volume focus on Russian memoirs from the late 18th century to the present day, two of them dealing with the memoirs of Evgeniya Ginzburg and Elena Bonner.

<sup>4</sup> Important existing research into the field of Soviet life writing includes: I. Paperno, *Stories of the Soviet Experience: Memoirs, Diaries, Dreams*, Ithaca and London 2009; J. Hellbeck, "Russian Autobiographical Practice", [in:] *Autobiographical Practices in Russia (Autobiographische Praktiken in Russland)*, ed. J. Hellbeck, K. Heller, Göttingen 2004, pp. 279–298; idem, *Revolution on my Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin*, Cambridge 2006; F. Thun-Hohenstein, *Gebrochene Linien. Autobiographisches Schreiben und Lagerzivilisation*, Berlin 2007. For a discourse analytical approach on diaries of the Khrushchev-era see A. Pinsky, "The Diaristic Form and Subjectivity under Khrushchev", *Slavic Review* 73, no. 4 (Winter 2014), pp. 805–827.

<sup>5</sup> L. Alexeyeva, P. Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation: Coming of Age in the Post-Stalin Era*, Boston 1990.

book has become a central object of study for historians<sup>6</sup>. The literary features of the text, however, have been largely overlooked<sup>7</sup>. Our aim is therefore to draw attention to the self-conscious literariness of the text and to the elements of its style. We will show that its rhetorical structure was shaped by Alexeyeva's struggle to break free of the norms and restrictions in place during the Soviet regime. Her anti-Soviet attitude is achieved by rhetorical means. She often deploys irony to distance herself from Soviet culture and norms, counterposing her own life as an alternative model.

In this article, we begin by examining the influence of (19th-century) literature on Soviet dissent in general and on Alexeyeva in particular, paying close attention to how she represents herself. We then turn to the very structure of *The Thaw Generation* and highlight the literary choices that Alexeyeva makes in order to demonstrate her distance from the Soviet system. According to Alexeyeva's own account, her mode of dissent is less a political attitude than it is a way of living; in fact, she is explicit in stating that her intentions are not primarily political (130)<sup>8</sup>. She presents dissent as a lifestyle, crucially shaped by a dissenter's own conscience and the responsibility she assumes for her fellow dissenters. Therefore, we will explore the significance of social relationships in Alexeyeva's depiction of the dissident movement. Further, we will consider the way Alexeyeva presents her own and her fellow dissenters' interactions with representatives of the state. We will conclude by exploring the use of mimicry as a dissent strategy, showing how Alexeyeva, in depicting the mimetic strategies of her contemporaries, also deploys them to distance herself from Soviet norms.

## Literature and Soviet dissent

The dissident movement, as described in the life writing of its members, was fundamentally based in literature and textuality. In the *samizdat*, writers reproduced and disseminated texts that fell outside the ideological mandate of the state and were thus unavailable through official channels. Alexeyeva describes in detail both how *samizdat* was produced and just how time-consuming this activity could be (159).

She justifies the immensity of these literary undertakings by dissenters as follows: "We expressed our disagreement in a manner appropriate for people of our age and social status: in writing" (167). Written communication was thus elevated over direct

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, V. Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia*, Cambridge, Mass. 2009; B. Walker, "Pollution and Purification in the Moscow Human Rights Networks of the 1960s and 1970s", *Slavic Review* 68, no. 2 (Summer 2009), pp. 376–395.

<sup>7</sup> A. Stephan, *Von der Küche auf den Roten Platz. Lebenswege sowjetischer Dissidentinnen*, Zürich 2009, comments on the similarities between *The Thaw Generation* and Russian memoirs of the 19th century. In particular, she mentions Aleksandr Herzen's *My Past and Thoughts* (*Былое и думы*, 1868); however, she does not provide a detailed literary analysis.

<sup>8</sup> Quotations refer to L. Alexeyeva, P. Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation*, Pittsburgh, Pa. 1993.

action among the dissenters as a more appropriate form of political opposition than, say, public demonstrations or sit-ins, not least because it was a clandestine activity less likely to result in immediate detainment. Here again, we see the deep impact of the Russian 19th-century literary tradition on Alexeyeva and her peers: given strict controls over public space, the written word (often, but not necessarily a literary work) becomes the alternative stage on which political issues are raised and debated.

Alexeyeva also intensively describes her own literary socialization, how she was raised on 19th-century literature and how it fundamentally shaped her. She credits, first of all, her father for acquainting her not only with the works of Aleksandr Pushkin and Aleksandr Herzen but also with the novels of Alexandre Dumas and Jules Verne (15). She particularly admires Pushkin and Herzen, not only for their literary work but as political figures as well. Both men suffered repressions, censorship, and exile under the authoritarian rule of Tsar Nikolai I. In Herzen's work as editor of the oppositional Russian periodical *The Bell* (*Колокол*), Alexeyeva identifies the historical precedent that, for her, legitimates the endeavors of her own contemporaries to publish their work abroad (154). Alexeyeva traces a lineage from these historically politically active writers to her own present environment, claiming Moscow for Pushkin and Herzen and, by extension, herself — a city that is first and foremost a literary landscape (13).

### ***The Thaw Generation: Genesis and structure***

In the preface to *The Thaw Generation*, Alexeyeva and Goldberg describe their collaboration as follows:

The voice in this book belongs to Ludmilla Alexeyeva, the writing to Paul Goldberg. From the outset, we decided to write a book that would find the English-language equivalent of the spirit and energy of modern Russian narrative. [...] Thus, while one of us argued that it is not in the tradition of Russian memoirs to discuss the sort of intimate details American readers (and editors) crave, the other championed the interests of the American readers by letting the characters come alive and trying to shorten the sort of lengthy, detailed analysis and annotation that a scholar of Russian history relishes. (ix–x)

*The Thaw Generation* is thus the product of intercultural cooperation, a hybrid phenomenon that negotiates between speech and writing as well as two distinct literary traditions, including the different life writing traditions of each. It certainly provides the reader with a mediated view of Soviet life and is shaped by American rhetorical traditions and conceptual frameworks. The very title of the memoirs, with its reference to a certain “generation”<sup>9</sup> as bearer of a particular set of experiences

<sup>9</sup> “Generation” as a key concept for understanding social change is a quintessential feature of Western sociology. For an overview of the concept, see S. Biggs, “Thinking about Generations: Conceptual Positions and Policy Implications”, *Journal of Social Issues* 63, 2007, no. 4, pp. 695–711, in particular pp. 701–704.

and attitudes, may have been coined in order to make the dissenters' actions more comprehensible for an American audience. Nonetheless, in Russia, too, the book was a great success and is now considered a prime example of late- and post-Soviet self-description. We consider therefore *The Thaw Generation* — even though it cannot itself be considered a “purely” Russian text — a very interesting narrative and a very special case that can grant us insight into the rhetorical structure of dissenters' life writing in general.

*The Thaw Generation* is structured chronologically. Alexeyeva locates in the detailed description she gives of her childhood the roots of her later engagement in the dissident movement. Special emphasis is placed on the influence of the grandmother who raised her, on her early and passionate interest in 19th-century literature, and on the uneasy impression Alexeyeva had from early childhood on that she was rather ill-fitted to the system (12). In the following chapters she describes her time as a history student at Moscow State University, where she increasingly aligned herself with alternative circles. Descriptions of the dissident movement from its inception to its dissolution occupy the main part of the book. Alexeyeva concludes her memoirs with the story of her departure from the USSR and a brief depiction of her life in US exile.

The text is written in a colloquial and quite often humorous style, which allows the reader to follow Alexeyeva's life story with ease, even though much of this story is marked by need and persecution. Her colloquial tone can be understood as a declaration of independence from official political and administrative discourse in the Soviet Union: it reads in striking contrast with the highly formalized language of the Communist regime<sup>10</sup>.

The composition of Alexeyeva's narrative is episodic. The subdivision into short, dynamic episodes is graphically underlined by asterisks between paragraphs. The episodes are arranged roughly in chronological order, though they are not necessarily causally interconnected. *The Thaw Generation* thus can be read as a written simulation of a conversation among friends. This technique is reminiscent of sentimentalist literary traditions that also strongly influenced Russian autobiographical writing of the 19th century. For Alexeyeva, Aleksandr Herzen's *My Past and Thoughts* (*Былое и думы*, 1868) is arguably the most important template. His multi-volume memoirs, written in political exile, were crucial in the development of Soviet historical identity: the left-wing Russian Imperial intelligentsia to which he belonged were viewed as predecessors to the Bolsheviks in their struggle to create a new social order. Alexeyeva mentions Herzen and his memoirs, comparing several aspects of her own life with his. Not only was Herzen a native of Moscow, where she also lived, but Herzen's friendship with Ogarev — a deep feeling that united them not only personally but also in their political struggle against tsarist oppression — prefigures Alexeyeva's own close circle of friends and political allies. Of particular significance in estab-

<sup>10</sup> The formalized official language of the Soviet period has been studied frequently. Among the pioneering works is F. Thom, *La langue de bois*, Paris 1987, a more recent discussion can be found in A. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More*, Princeton 2006, esp. pp. 129–130.

lishing the status of *The Thaw Generation* as a work of literature is the fact that, like Herzen's *My Past and Thoughts*, Alexeyeva and Goldberg's text was written and published abroad, while in exile, though both memoirs were nonetheless addressed to the readership "back home". We thus see that Alexeyeva accomplishes a sly rhetorical and ideological move: She turns a highly canonical piece of Soviet identity-establishing discourse into a key witness in the defense of her own activities, thereby disputing the prerogative of the Soviet state to declare itself as Herzen's heir, instead presenting the dissenters as the authentic inheritors of a particular tradition. Alexeyeva, however, does not stray far from the official narrative either when it comes to the mythic role of sentimental friendship in the political realm and/or in the desire to establish continuity between the 19th-century intelligentsia and 20th-century Soviet elites.

### Social relationships among dissidents

Alexeyeva describes the impact of Stalinism in shaping her childhood relationships. During this period she did not develop any close bonds of friendship and trust with anyone outside the family. The children in her neighborhood observed the aloofness and suspicion with which the adults around them regarded one another and replicated this in their own everyday interactions:

That year [1937] I found that other children didn't want to play or talk with me. It could have been something about me, but just as easily it could have been the spirit of the year. Everyone's parents were being careful. Adults weren't talking to each other, and children took their cues from the adults. (14)

Alexeyeva here stresses the social isolation of people living under Soviet rule, an isolation brought on by the fear that a thoughtless word could lead to denunciation and punishment. Sociologists have already investigated this phenomenon, among them Oleg Khakhordin<sup>11</sup> and Boris Dubin<sup>12</sup>. Dubin conjectures that this type of anxiety-driven isolation continued through the 1970s and beyond. Through close readings of two autobiographical texts from the 1970s, Dubin paints a picture of isolated Soviet individuals, their relations restricted almost exclusively to vertical hierarchies, who, due to a generalized distrust among fellow citizens, maintain only a minimum of intense social contacts.

Alexeyeva presents the overcoming of this radical distrust and the solitude it occasioned as a major achievement of the dissident movement, an essential component of the true sense of community that she, like so many other dissenters, values so highly. In her narrative, Alexeyeva claims that making the acquaintance of her fellow student Natalya Sadomskaya (later likewise a member of the Human Rights

<sup>11</sup> O. V. Khakhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices*, Berkeley, Ca. 1999.

<sup>12</sup> B. Dubin, "Von der Unmöglichkeit des Persönlichen. Zum Problem der Autobiographie", [in:] *Diskurse der Personalität*, ed. A. Haardt, München 2008, pp. 497–508.



Movement) was a turning point of her life. Sadomskaya introduced her to a network of loosely connected private circles, or *kompanii*, who would often gather in one another's apartments (83–84). These private meetings had no explicit political intentions. According to Alexeyeva, they were “primarily an opportunity [...] to dance to jazz, drink vodka, and talk until dawn” (83).

Initially, then, deviation from Soviet social norms was restricted to a certain segment of youth culture. Diminishing political pressures and social controls enabled new opportunities for and new ways of socializing during the Thaw. Alexeyeva considers these non-political social gatherings as both generative of the dissident movement as well as its proper locus of activity (317). This allows us to understand the impetus behind the colloquial style of *The Thaw Generation*, a style that rhetorically simulates the amicable atmosphere out of which these memoirs grew, in contrast with the anonymous, formalized style that was typical of the straightforward political memoirs published in the mass media.

Alexeyeva aptly describes a contradictory equilibrium between openness and closure as characteristic of the interactions among members of the Moscow *kompanii*. In fact, the identification of like-minded people posed a crucial challenge for later dissenters. This is all the more true for communication in the public realm. Alexeyeva describes the following situation:

The light blue cover of *Novy mir* sticking out of a coat pocket could be interpreted as a sign of a liberal intellectual. A stranger spotted reading *Novy mir* on a bus could no longer be regarded as a stranger. It was natural to ask him if the new issue had finally come out. If you talked for a few minutes you discovered you had mutual friends. (96)

Here Alexeyeva reveals a certain perception that she has of herself as well as her conception of the dissident movement generally: One was not only evincing an interest in literature by reading this journal (that was known for publishing daring works) in public; this reading practice actually enabled people to connect on a personal level, the journal itself serving as a code for social and ideological belonging. This concept of community is nonetheless essentially a pre-modern one, because it is based on personal acquaintanceship rather than (anonymous) ideological affinity or political alliance. Again, this connects Alexeyeva's vision of the new Soviet intelligentsia with that of the 19th century, although in places she also critically reflects on this rationale (96).

Self-identification by means of texts is a true *leitmotiv* that runs throughout *The Thaw Generation*. The collaborative production of texts in the form of petitions or the composition, reproduction, and dissemination of typewritten *samizdat* significantly strengthened the social cohesion of the group, according to Alexeyeva. Typically, petitions were passed among friends, who signed them if they agreed with the contents; as Alexeyeva insists, no peer pressure was ever exerted (167). Drawing on the example of petitions, Alexeyeva returns repeatedly to a *topos* of dissenters' life writing: political involvement is presented as a matter of conscience, and thus linked to freedom and to the subject's free will (168, 175).

Apart from these overtly political activities, private practices also served to strengthen social cohesion<sup>13</sup>. Birthday gatherings, for instance, attained ritual status as the making of political toasts became a popular practice. This practice persisted and gained in significance as government pressure on dissenters increased throughout the 1970s, when members of the Human Rights Movement were imprisoned in greater numbers or in exile and toasting became an act of remembrance and commemoration of absent friends (244–245). This ritual is but one example Alexeyeva offers in her description of the dissent movement as a parallel society with its own literature, etiquette, and traditions that she claims was so detached from the rest of society that she terms it a “ghetto” (244).

Alexeyeva emphatically juxtaposes the dissenters’ sense of community with the surrounding society’s general isolation; and though she mentions conflicts within the group, these she grants considerably less space in her narrative. One important matter causing controversy among the members of the dissident movement concerned the question as to whether organizational structures, which imply hierarchies, ought to be established. Alexeyeva herself rejects the idea of hierarchical structures; they appear unnecessary to her and, she believes, would most likely lead to increased risks for members (251). About these conflicts at the personal level, however, Alexeyeva remains largely silent, though at times she permits the reader a glimpse of just how much went unspoken in these talkative circles. She recalls a conversation with Anatoly Yakobson, concerning her reasons for not joining the Initiative Group in Defense of Human Rights in the USSR:

A few days after the Initiative Group was announced, I told Tosha Yakobson, a group member, that initially I’d been sorry that the group’s letter went out before I was able to sign it. “But I am no longer sorry”, I said. “Not everyone should come to the square. Some of us must work in the shadows”. Yakobson looked at me with scorn. I knew what he must have been thinking: I hadn’t joined the group because I thought it would be too dangerous. And he just may have been right. (252–253)

In this passage, we get an impression of the extent to which the sentimentalist portrayal of soulful friendship is a literary stylization. The reader is in fact provided with some insight into Alexeyeva’s own psychology, though empathy with the feelings and motives of her fellow dissenters is strikingly lacking. This disaffection is further evinced in her decision to quit her activities for the Red Cross. Alexeyeva admits her depression in view of the accusations she faced (embezzlement, privileging certain inmates over others), but she remains silent about fights and tensions with particular persons.

<sup>13</sup> The relation between public and private life of dissenters is almost impossible to determine. Initially, the only place for disagreement and dissent was the private sphere, the “kitchen”. But soon the public sphere became an important site of activity, not least due to the influence of Western media. Komaromi states that the split between the private and public in the USSR arose “as a result of dissimulation”. In this hidden sphere, though, alternative forms of public interaction were explored; see A. Komaromi, *op. cit.*, p. 5.



## *As if they were free men*

The dissenters did something geniously simple: in an unfree country they started to behave like free people and thus change the moral atmosphere and the country's ruling tradition. Of course this revolution of the mind could not be quick<sup>14</sup>.

With these words, Andrei Amalrik in his memoirs *Записки диссидента* (*Notes of a Dissident*, 1982) describes the Soviet dissidents' strategy: systematic refusal to fulfill expressed and unexpressed public expectations. This strategy is aesthetic at its core, because the dissidents' actions unfold their full meaning only when they are "read" against their broad socio-historical context. Alexeyeva in her memoirs found a very suitable way to convey this complex semantic strategy — she assembles large passages of her text in the form of a series of anecdotes recounting individuals' encounters with the state. It should be noted that as "natural" and authentic as these might seem, they are in fact an act of narrative composition and, as such, will always imply a certain degree of fictionalization. It would be neither possible nor desirable to determine the truth of these accounts; instead, we should interpret them as strategies of self-expression and self-presentation, which is no less meaningful. The arrangement of these short episodes, each with a narrative arc and culmination of its own, on the one hand fittingly models the strategy of double semantics — the "as if" that Amalrik mentions. On the other hand, in these anecdotes Alexeyeva also reproduces the humorous and ironic way in which dissidents related their clashes with the state at their meetings.

Alexeyeva intersperses *The Thaw Generation* with many episodes of her own personal experiences with representatives of the state. These episodes follow a regular pattern: Officials harass her on account of her non-conformist actions. Often she is able to defuse the situation through skillful acting or at least to embarrass the officials by debunking their hypocrisy, narrow-mindedness, or stupidity.

These situations are at times presented in short scenes reminiscent of absurdist drama. Take, for instance, Alexeyeva's report of the following phone call:

"I am calling you from the regional committee", said the voice on the phone. "We would like you to return your party identification".

"Why should I?"

"Because you have been expelled".

"But if I have been expelled, why do I still have my party identification?"

"Because you have not turned it in".

"I didn't turn it in because I was not present at the meeting where I was expelled, which means my expulsion was invalid, which means I am entitled to hold my party identification".

"In that case, you are being ordered as a party member to come to the regional committee and turn in your party identification". "But I no longer have to take orders from the party. You've expelled me".

"Under what conditions would you be willing to turn in your party identification?"

"You could send your Leonid Ilych Brezhnev to fetch it for you". The phone went dead. (189)

<sup>14</sup> A. Amalrik, *Zapiski Dissidenta*, Ann Arbor, Mi. 1982, p. 39.

In this episode, Alexeyeva's encounter with state officials takes the form of a linguistic play of sorts; it is as if here Amalrik's "as if" has become an end in itself; at the very least, here humor outsmarts politics, as Alexeyeva refuses to accept her expulsion from the Communist party. We can conclude that this passage above all presents Alexeyeva as an independent subject, *chelovek s iumorom*, her humor being her strategy to distance herself from official assaults. The operative *topos* here is that of a courageous individual who, through shrewdness and determination, opposes the overbearing regime; this *topos* applies not only to Alexeyeva's own perception of herself but also to the Human Rights Movement, generally.

This anecdotal structure is also crucial to Alexeyeva's portrayal of group interactions. For instance, she describes a scene in which Larisa Bogoraz is recounting to her peers the KGB inquiry to which she was submitted in the wake of her husband's arrest. During the proceedings, she protested that her husband must not be deemed a criminal prior to the actual trial. The episode culminates twice: first when Larisa Bogoraz is asked by her fellow dissidents "What did he say? — Nothing. His jaw dropped" (119), and for the second time when, in spite of the officer's admonitions that she "behave" or else she would "encounter unpleasantness", she does not give in, leaving the officials nearly speechless in astonishment. Alexeyeva has Larisa laconically conclude: "'They are not used to that sort of thing.' Larisa laughed and so did everyone else" (119).

At the level of the narrative, this episode again illustrates the crucial role of acting "as if" — behaving like the rule of law obtained in the Soviet Union. Moreover, it shows the role that these narratives played in promoting group cohesion. Alexeyeva emphasizes that Larisa's reports to her acquaintances are delivered calmly and slightly sarcastically, without exuberance or much affect at all. Larisa's behavior toward the KGB officer seems almost professional or, as Alexeyeva has it, as if Larisa had been struggling already all her life in precisely such a manner with the KGB. This portrayal of Larisa's behavior in confrontation with an overwhelmingly powerful adversary is also an indirect portrayal of Alexeyeva's own persona and so functions as self-affirming in two ways: first, as the situation is recounted by Larisa, and second, in view of the English reading public to whom Alexeyeva is addressing herself. The reader then faces a paradoxical situation: On the one hand, the episodic and anecdotal structure of the narrative is in fact mimetic with regard to the social conventions among the Moscow dissidents, but, on the other hand, it is quite obviously a rhetorical strategy that solicits the reader's sympathy and at the same time grants the author credibility.

## Mimicry

Amalrik's acting "as if" resonates with the destabilizing potential ascribed to repetition in the postcolonial concept of mimicry, as theorized by Homi K. Bhabha. Serguei Oushakine<sup>15</sup> has discussed this strategy as a common form of adaptation to the regime with regard to political *samizdat*. In his essay, he shows how the dissidents appropriated "Soviet" discourse when disseminating their ideas. His thesis is that the dissidents were indeed unable to develop their own discursive field independent of official discourse; instead, they employed mimicry and startled the regime by breaking up the state monopoly on "standard discourse", thus undermining its totalizing claims. But the drawback of this duplication of Soviet discourse is the "terrifying" persistence of totalitarian axioms in *samizdat* texts. Alexeyeva was acutely attuned to this problem. She addresses it in a passage in which she discusses the Helsinki Committee — the organization that, in its desire for legitimacy, sought in effect to resemble the state. She describes the Committee's *Principles and Regulations of the Committee for Human Rights in the USSR* as a most amusing text, as she anticipates how state officials would react to the imitation of their own discourse:

I laughed at every sentence, imagining the look on the face of some KGB operative the morning Valery's Principles and Regulations were placed on his desk. (254)

She supposes that the author must have read an immense number of legal documents "to emulate their language and give them a creative spin" (255). Alexeyeva personally encountered the Committee's likeness to the state when she herself tried to submit a petition. She describes at length which conditions had to be met before the Committee would even give her a hearing and the extremely formal behavior of her fellow dissenters during the meeting. Alexeyeva's description of the scene is laced with irony and the mimetic approach of the Committee is shown to be ridiculous.

For weeks, I entertained my friends with the story of my wondrous journey into that inner sanctum of Alek-Esenin-Volpinism. (257)

Alexeyeva explains that the logic behind the Committee's appearance of formality and its strict compliance with state procedures was to preclude the state from fabricating any excuse to dissolve the Committee or to arrest its members. But the significance of the scene she presents lies therein, that in her encounter with this group she felt quite similar to the way she did when encountering the machinery of the Soviet state. One could argue that the farcical representation and the ironic distance expressed in these passages function crucially to dramatize her estrangement and to set the narrating subject, as the bearer of dignity, apart from her counterparts.

<sup>15</sup> S. Oushakine, "The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat", *Public Culture. Bulletin of the Center for Transnational Cultural Studies* 13, 2001, no. 2, pp. 191–214.

## Conclusion

We have, then, determined there is a direct connection between Alexeyeva's (and Goldberg's) "literary" choices — in terms of stylistics, narrative composition, and rhetorical shape — and the text's meaning, as testimony from a witness-participant in the "thaw generation". In reading these memoirs, we quickly recognize that Alexeyeva is struggling to overcome the restraints of Soviet discourse. She does so, first, by choosing Aleksandr Herzen's *My Past and Thoughts* as the model for her own memoir, rather than following the Stalin era's standard patterns of autobiographical writing<sup>16</sup>. Alexeyeva's depiction of the dissidents movement as a circle of friends constitutes a striking contrast to the image of an "atomized" Soviet society. Thus, she positions her (and other dissidents') way of life as a countermodel to Soviet norms. Her colloquial style and episodic narrative structure are intended as a compelling alternative to Communist *langue de bois* (Thom, see fn 10). Most importantly, her humorous style and attitude characterize Alexeyeva as someone with enough strength to distance and maintain herself apart from an oppressive environment. The literary and rhetorical techniques of *The Thaw Generation* thus simultaneously express and constitute the process of a dissenter's individualization and self-emancipation.

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<sup>16</sup> These patterns are discussed in K. Clark, "The History of the Factories as a Factory of History: A Case Study on the Role of Soviet Literature in Subject Formation", [in:] *Autobiographical Practices in Russia*, ed. J. Hellbeck, K. Heller, Göttingen 2004, pp. 251–277.