The Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Ephemera Collection at Harvard Library

Citation

Permanent link
https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37367719

Terms of Use
This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, WARNING: No applicable access license found.

Share Your Story
The Harvard community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Submit a story.

Accessibility
The late Soviet and post-Soviet ephemera collection at Harvard Library

Anna Rakityanskaya, Americas, Europe, and Oceania Division, Harvard Library, Cambridge, USA

ABSTRACT

The Russian Ephemera Collection (late 1980s-1990s) at Harvard Library is a monumental primary source collection for the study of the late Soviet and post-Soviet era. It was acquired in the 1990s along with the collection of Independent and Post-Soviet Press, but remained “hidden” until 2013-2014, when it was catalogued and digitized. Digitization played a role not only in the preservation but also in the discovery of the collection. The ephemera cover various subjects, ranging from purely political (elections, the 1991 coup d'état attempt, rallies, political parties and politicians, independence movements, ethnic conflict) to cultural, religious and business-related topics.

KEYWORDS

ephemera; Harvard; Harvard Library; digital collections; digitization; archives; Soviet history; Soviet Union; Russia; Russian history; elections; politics

CONTACT

Anna Rakityanskaya, Americas, Europe, and Oceania Division, Harvard Library, Cambridge, USA, rakityan@fas.harvard.edu
The Russian Ephemera Collection (late 1980s-1990s) at Harvard Library is a monumental primary source collection for the study of the late Soviet and post-Soviet era. It contains materials related to political events, parties, movements and personalities that were part of a fateful and vibrant period in the Soviet/Russian history, bookended by Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms in 1986 and Acting President Vladimir Putin’s accession on December 31, 1999. This period saw the decline and ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union, the birth of democracy and capitalism, and revolutionary changes in virtually every aspect of the country’s social, economic, political and cultural landscape.

**Late Soviet/post-Soviet ephemera in context**

One cannot discuss late Soviet/post-Soviet ephemera without mentioning its close and symbiotic connection to the collection of Independent and Post-Soviet Press. This broad term is used to describe periodicals published initially by various independent (so called “informal”) and later, formal groups. Some of these publications were also short-lived, printed in only a handful of issues. In other words, they, too, were essentially “ephemeral.”

These independent periodicals and ephemera were part of the explosion of free publishing activity in the Soviet Union unleashed by the policy of *glasnost*. Introduced and promoted by Mikhail Gorbachev after his ascent to power in 1985, *glasnost* served as an instrument for the democratization of Soviet society and, in the words of Archie Brown, represented “a facilitating concept” for freedom of speech.¹ This policy was eventually formalized in June 1990 by the new Law on the Press and other Mass Media, which officially outlawed censorship.²

Librarians in Russia and abroad made special efforts to concurrently collect these often short-lived periodicals together with ephemera. For example, the Library of Congress set up a
Moscow acquisitions office for the purpose of collecting “ephemeral materials from the

glasnost’ and perestroika period, 1985–1991, specifically the 'independent' or informal press of
those times.” In addition to the Collection of Post-Soviet Ephemera at the Library of Congress,
significant collections of late Soviet and post-Soviet ephemera in the United States reside in
Harvard Library and the Hoover Institution, where processed ephemera are part of the larger
Russian Subject Collection. In Russia, several libraries and museums also have been collecting,
preserving, and promoting contemporary political ephemera on a regular basis. The State
Museum of the Political History of Russia, State Public Historical Library of Russia, and the
Library of the Memorial Society hold important ephemera collections.

The approaches to these collections vary in different libraries’ practices. In the U.S. the
independent press and the ephemera collections are usually treated as two distinctly different
collections, with periodical collections given a priority in description and curation, whereas a few
Russian repositories sometimes classify them as one collection of political documentation. These
different approaches might contribute to the variations in terminology used to describe
“ephemera” in Russian and the difficulty in finding exact equivalents to the Anglo-American
term. Aside from the definition through iteration, when it comes to naming these kinds of
materials as a whole, one finds ephemera being described in Russian as “printed materials of
short-term significance” (peчатные материалы кратковременного значения), “fleeting
publications” (летучие издания), “documents of the informal organizations” (документы неформальных организаций), “various sources on the activities of parties and social
movements” (разнообразные источники о деятельности партий и общественных движений),
“campaign literature” (агитационные материалы), “campaign literature and unpublished
documents of informal organizations, as well as ... a collection of fliers” (agitatsionnye materialy i neopublikovannyе dokumenty neformal’nykh organizatsii, a takzhe ... kollektsii listovok)\textsuperscript{14} and even “‘other’ types of printed output” («prochie» vidy pechatnoi produktsii).\textsuperscript{15}

Although the term “ephemera” conveniently exists in the Western library tradition, defining it has always been a challenge. Many attempts have been made, but the most successful ones inevitably define the term through iteration. For example, the European Commission’s Expert Advisory Group on Language Engineering Standards text typology defines ephemera as “leaflets, pamphlets, brochures, local fliers, junk mail.”\textsuperscript{16} However, defining ephemera by their format often proves insufficient because of the constantly evolving nature of the materials and production methods. When it comes to ephemera, the only constant seems to be their function: to serve an immediate, short-term purpose, which can be informational, inspirational, or administrative in nature. At the Harvard Library, librarians classify ephemera in broad terms, including not only paper items but also objects made of fabric, plastic, metal, and other materials, such as campaign buttons, plastic bags, pens, apparel items, etc. While one may question whether such objects belong in a library or in a museum, what makes such ephemera perfectly suitable for an academic library collection is the explicit and implicit information they carry by means of text or symbols, as well as their variety and the manner in which they support the constantly growing interest of researchers in material culture.

**Provenance and history**

Harvard Library acquired the bulk of its Independent and Post-Soviet Press Collection (1,797 periodical titles) and its Russian Ephemera Collection (Late 1980s-1990s) directly from Russia at
approximately the same time these materials were being produced, purchasing most through commercial vendors and individual agents and receiving others via donation in-kind. The periodicals collection was cataloged and made available for research soon after its acquisition, but the ephemera collection remained virtually “hidden” for almost 20 years, during which it was neither processed nor described. From 2013 to 2014, the Slavic division of Harvard Library processed and digitized the ephemera collection thanks to special grant funding from the library.

**Access and preservation**

When approaching the task of processing a large quantity of ephemeral materials the following factors were considered:

- Human resources (very limited).
- Time restraints (one fiscal year as stipulated by the grant).
- Accessibility (library users needed to have a clear understanding of the collection’s structure and have reasonably easy access to its contents).

Processing a 15-20-year-old archival collection required substantial human resources. The materials had been stored in envelopes inside eleven boxes, with no information about the contents other than year ranges written on envelopes. We discovered some duplicate items and some items that did not quite fit the definition of ephemera. For example, we found several books and periodical issues, which we added to the library’s circulating print collections. Other discoveries led to the creation of separate special collections: for example, a collection of eight handmade books of Russian poetry and a small collection of Soviet ephemera from the 1970s.
One of the most important and difficult decisions involved the level of detail needed to describe the collection. Following careful consideration of the available time and human resources, the amount of material, and the research and teaching needs of users, in consultation with Imaging Services staff we determined that a detailed, collection-level cataloging description, accompanied by digitization of individual items, offered the quickest and most effective way to open the collection for research while addressing its preservation needs at the same time.

Digitization was done in house by Widener Library Imaging services. Over the course of a year and a half, a total of 12,682 images were produced, all of which are viewable via Mirador, a platform for digitized content. Each image is available for download in four sizes ranging from small (300-407 pixels) to extra-large (1200-1625 pixels). The physical state of the materials in the collection was relatively good. As expected, some items were fragile, torn, or previously stepped on, while others bore ink markings (Figure 1) and notes in pencil, and some had fragments cut out or pieces of paper glued in.

There was an occasional handwritten document (Figure 2), or copy of a handwritten or hand-printed document (Figure 3) or a “blind” copy of a typescript.

There is a clear difference in the production quality of the materials in the collection. The bleak fliers of the late 1980s, produced using a typewriter and carbon paper, stand in sharp contrast to the glossy posters, badges, and other professionally designed and mass-produced items of the late 1990s. The use of color follows the same pattern: printed ephemera from 1987-1990 are almost exclusively monochrome; some color appears in items from 1991; and beginning in 1992 the amount of color in the materials grows steadily over time.
Description of the collection

The *Russian ephemera (late 1980s-1990s)* collection at Harvard Library is comprised of seven individual sub-collections. Two of those have a general scope:

- *Russian Political Ephemera 1987-1999*

Four sub-collections are dedicated to specific events:

- *Soviet Coup d' État Attempt Ephemera, 1991*
- *Russian Parliamentary Election Ephemera; Moscow Legislative Election Ephemera; Constitutional Referendum Ephemera, 1993*
- *Russian Parliamentary Election Ephemera, 1995*
- *Russian Parliamentary Election Ephemera; Moscow Mayoral Election Ephemera, 1999.*

The last sub-collection does not have any political content, but remains, nevertheless, part of the series, being naturally connected to the period by chronology, provenance, and as an indirect reflection of the political situation:


The sub-collections contain items in many formats, including fliers, special issues of periodicals, campaign brochures, posters, photographs, campaign miscellanea (calendars, stickers, envelopes, notebooks with party symbols), photographs and non-paper objects.

The geographical scope of six out of the seven sub-collections covers mostly Moscow and (to a lesser degree) Saint Petersburg, with a few documents from other major cities. Documents directly related to events in the republics and countries of the former Soviet Union comprise a separate collection. Each of the seven ephemera sub-collections are described in detail below.
Russian Political Ephemera 1987-1999

This sub-collection contains documents related to political events, movements, parties, congresses, personalities, elections, and rallies that took place or were active between 1987 and 1999. It is organized by subject within a chronological framework, and covers such events as the 1990 election to the Congress of People’s Deputies, the first presidential election in 1991, the 1993 April government referendum (Figure 4) and October constitutional crisis, the 1996 presidential election, and various congresses of People’s Deputies. In addition to these major events, the collection also has ephemera produced for other events, groups, and movements.

Documents from the earliest years in the collection testify to the popularity of various citizens’ discussion clubs in 1989-1990. They include items such as a typewritten report on the interregional meeting of the activists of the People’s Fronts in Leningrad in 1988; copies of documents produced at various citizens’ meetings and new political organizations; fliers announcing protest actions and rallies (Figure 5), etc. Of special interest are draft copies of the news bulletins by M-BIO (“Moskovskoe biuro informatsionnogo obmena”), created with assistance from the Culture Research Institute for collecting information about the “informal” movements: Chernyi TASS, Obzor nezavisimoi pressy SSSR and Sluzhba ezhednevnykh novostei.

The sub-collection also includes food rationing cards (Figure 6) and documents related to labor unions, patriotic and religious organizations, environmental movements and pro-monarchy groups. One popular ephemera genre in this collection is a flier containing a satirical verse and/or a caricature created in response to current events (Figure 7).

This sub-collection reflects political events, ethnic conflicts, and independence movements in the Soviet republics, and, subsequently, the countries of the Former Soviet Union (except Russia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan) and smaller ethnic regions in the late 1980s-1990s. Included are materials produced in those territories as well as in Russia, in local languages or in Russian.

The Belarus section includes documents related to the popular front “Renaissance”, social democrats, independence movements, but also fliers reminding people about some “forgotten” historical events (e.g. the history of the independent Belarusian People’s Republic in 1918).

Documents from the Baltic States predominantly illustrate the independence movements in all three countries. The Estonia section contains documents of the Communist party from the late 1980s but also those of the People’s Front and other new “informal” organizations, such as: a brochure from the pro-democracy NGO Jaan Tõnisson Institute, or a copy of a draft of the Supreme Soviet of Estonia’s resolution on Estonian national independence. Among the Latvian documents, there is a copy of the declaration of independence of Latvia (1990) and other items related to this event. Lithuanian ephemera address the Soviet military intervention after the Act of the Re-Establishment of the State of Lithuania in January 1991. A special set of documents covers common actions by all Baltic states and includes photographs from the meeting of the representatives of the People’s Fronts, copies of collective declarations of the governments, etc.

The Central Asia region is represented by documents from the independence movement and People’s Front of Kazakhstan; recommendations from human rights monitoring groups to
the government of Tajikistan; and newspaper clippings from the central Soviet newspapers *Pravda* and *Trud* containing coverage of the ethnic pogroms in Fergana (Uzbekistan) in May-June 1989.

The collection of ephemera from the Caucasus region features photographs from rallies demanding investigation of the Sumqayit pogroms in February 1988; documents discussing the Nagorno-Karabakh issue; and the 1990 Armenian pogrom in Baku. Documents from Georgia highlight the tragic events of April 9, 1989, when Soviet armed forces dispersed an anti-Soviet opposition demonstration. Other documents relate to human rights and political struggles in Georgia as well as aspects of the conflict in Abkhazia.

The collection also includes documents related to the events in the Dniester Moldovan Republic, such as press releases and appeals by the local government.

**Soviet Coup d’État Attempt Ephemera, 1991**

This sub-collection contains materials produced in connection with the attempted coup d’état in the Soviet Union on August 19-21, 1991. These materials include copies of decrees and appeals to citizens issued by the Russian president Boris Yeltsin, the mayor of Moscow, religious leaders and other officials, as well as communications from the Moscow strike committee and various political and citizens’ groups. A special section is dedicated to documents related to the putschist GKChP (State Committee on the State of Emergency), such as its statements, arrest warrants for protesters, and caricatures. The collection also contains special emergency newspaper issues, news bulletins by the RIA news agency and statements by the Memorial Society, documents of emergency meetings of various regional organizations expressing local reactions to the events in
Moscow (Figure 8) and finally, a collection of photographs depicting the events of August 19-22 in Moscow and Leningrad.

**Russian Parliamentary Election Ephemera; Moscow Legislative Election Ephemera; Constitutional Referendum Ephemera, 1993**

The sub-collection covers State Duma elections, Moscow Duma elections, and the constitutional referendum that took place in Russia on December 12, 1993. It contains campaign materials for all thirteen parties on the State Duma ballot and various candidates for both the state and Moscow legislatures. The General Elections Materials section contains documents that are related to election administration, such as a referral letter for an election observer, a protocol of a local election commission for recording voting results and voting misdemeanors, a blank application to replace a spoiled ballot, etc. Also included are documents directed at voters in general, ranging from the Central Electoral Commission’s printed information sheets and memos for the observers, to independent fliers asking citizens to boycott the elections.

**Russian Parliamentary Election Ephemera, 1995**

This sub-collection includes documents related to State Duma elections in Russia held on December 17, 1995. All forty-three parties that were put on the ballot are represented in Harvard’s collection (Figure 9), as well as some of the parties that did not end up on the ballot (e.g. Democratic Russia and Free Trade Unions, People’s Salvation Front, Russian Association of Investors and Stockholders – Liberal-Conservative Union, Union of Patriots Bloc, etc.). The collection also includes campaign materials for the independent candidates.
A large portion of the collection is made up by general election materials, with the majority of them issued by the Central Electoral Commission, and includes official lists of candidates, various instructions for election officials and candidates’ campaigns, a pocket calendar with election reminders, a flier announcing the local voting location with the address written in by hand, tallies of election results, blank election ballots and reporting forms, etc.

**Russian Parliamentary Election Ephemera; Moscow Mayoral Election Ephemera, 1999.**
This sub-collection contains materials produced in connection with the Russian Parliamentary and Moscow Mayoral elections, both of which took place on December 19, 1999. The collection offers documents from thirteen out of twenty-six parties on the Duma ballot and from three out of the eight candidates on the Moscow mayoral ballot (Iurii Luzhkov, Pavel Borodin and Dmitrii Vasil’ev). A section on general election materials contains informational publications issued by the Central and district electoral commissions.

**Russian Cultural, Religious and Business Ephemera, 1987-1999.**
This sub-collection is dedicated to ephemeral materials that represent the cultural, religious, and business environment in the Soviet Union and Russian Federation in the years 1987-1999. In the Cultural Ephemera section we find materials related to literature (Figure 10), music, theatre, art, publishing, libraries, film, higher education and academia, tourism, museums, charitable foundations, but also miscellanea like the “Russian America” festival (1990) or “The movement for cosmic self-programming.”
A sizeable portion of this collection constitutes the Humor, Satire, and Poetry section. Here we find various non-traditional formats of poetry collections, such as Nina Iskrenko’s Zharkoe leto 1991-go: zhelezye stikhi as a newspaper cut-out fold-up, or a carbon-copy typewritten collection of poems by Anatolii Osenev (A.K.A. Anatolii Luk’ianov, the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in 1990-1991); or another carbon-copy collection of political poems typewritten on store-bought stationery paper by Violetta Bogdanovich (recommended as “the voice of Arbat” and “the Red Square poet”); a photocopied collection Stikhi na predvybornye temy professional’nykh i samodeiatel’nykh avtorov; and other self-published poetic brochures. In addition to these poetry collections, there are also numerous individual fliers with satirical poems, like “The Russian leader” (“Rossiiskii vozhd’”), describing in detail someone by the name Pokhmel’tsin Alkash Propivaevich (Figure 11), or a group of various-sized pieces of paper with three different paraphrases of the lyrics of the famous Second World War song “The sacred war” (“Sviashchennaya voina”), pointing to the current government as the enemy, etc.

The section on Religious Ephemera reflects the descent of missionaries of various religious denominations and cults upon Russian society at a time when the newly acquired freedoms also translated into freedom of religion. We find materials produced by Christian groups, such as the Church of the Last Testament, Church of Christ, Baptists, International Biblical Society, brochures by World Missionary Press, fliers from Billy Graham and other preachers, an invitation to celebrate Easter 1991 in the Kremlin with American Evangelical musical groups, a flier from Saint Petersburg’s Petrikirche (German Lutheran church) as well as documents related to the Russian Orthodox church. Also represented are Bahá’í, Krishnaites, as
well as Mariia Devi Khristos (Figure 12), the Church of the Last Testament, and Aum Shinrikyo
cults.

The Business Ephemera section includes materials on money management, commerce, and running a business – a subject still very new to Soviet life in the early 1990s. Among the materials are instructions on how to use privatization checks, documents by the Trade Union of Medium and Small Business Employees, the Moscow Small Business Support Foundation, various investment foundations, a directory of St. Petersburg banks and informational brochures for various enterprises and associations.

The value of the collection

The late Soviet /early post-Soviet ephemera collection at Harvard is an unparalleled primary source for research and study in the political and social history of the Soviet Union and Russia at the pivotal moment of the end of one political system and transition to another. Moreover, because of the collection’s rich and multidimensional content, its value reaches well beyond political science or history. In this collection researchers will find material for the study of the region’s culture, language, rhetoric, literature, and design during the described time period.

Bringing the Harvard Russian Ephemera (late 1980s-1990s) collection to light through bibliographic description and digitization was an important contribution to scholarship in late Soviet and post-Soviet history and culture. However, because of its collection-level cataloging solution, the collection presents a number of opportunities for discovery and further description via scholarly and bibliographic projects.
Finally, when discussing the value of the collection of late Soviet and post-Soviet ephemera at Harvard, one more aspect should be taken into consideration. In 1993, curators from the State Public Historic Library and the Memorial Society Library published an album *Listovki Belogo doma*, which contained a selection of fliers produced and collected just a few weeks earlier, between September 22 and October 4, 1993, during the constitutional crisis that resulted in the confrontation between then president Boris Yeltsin and his parliament, climaxing in the bloody storming of the “White House” (the parliament building). In the preface, the authors explained the unusual urgency of publishing this album—they felt that the chances for these “ephemeral” documents to be destroyed were very high at the moment, especially for those produced by the opposition. Being aware of these concerns, one can argue that a Russian ephemera collection at a Western university library plays an important role in preserving these materials in an environment that is not dependent on shifts in the political balance in its country of origin.
Figure 1. An informational flier by a Moscow district electoral commission, 1999. *Russian Parliamentary Election Ephemera; Moscow Mayoral Election Ephemera*, 1999.

Figure 3. A flier announcing a protest rally after the Moscow government’s dispersal of a nationalist picket on June 22, 1992. *Russian Political Ephemera, 1987-1999.*


По призыву Президента РСФСР Б.Н. Ельцина митинг, состоявшийся в Волгограде 20 августа 1991 года, принял решение о начале всеобщей беспрецедентной забастовки с 0 часов 21 августа 1991 года. Создан забастовочный комитет, который располагается на

ул. Порт-Саида, 6

Бастующим предприятиям необходимо выделить в забастовке по одному представителю, на каждом предприятии создать забастовочный комитет. Цель забастовки — добиться бессрочным путем ухода самозваной хунты. Бастовка проводится в рабочих местах. И все, к аботе не приступают, проводятся собрания, митинги, доводятся последние известия.

В забастовке не участвуют предприятия связи, транспорта, медицинские службы, торговля, предприятия хлебо-булочной и молочной промышленности, городского коммунального хозяйства и предприятия непрерывного цикла, работники сельского хозяйства.

Областной забастовочный комитет.

Figure 8. A flier from the city of Volgograd strike committee calling a general strike in support of President Yeltsin, 1991. *Soviet Coup d'État Attempt Ephemera, 1991.*

https://iiif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:48609870$293i.

Figure 10. A mailing envelope with portrait of O. Mandel’shtam, issued in commemoration of the poet’s 100th anniversary, 1990. *Russian Cultural, Religious and Business Ephemera, 1987-1999.*

Российский "Вождь" Словесный портрет

Э.И.О. ПОХМЕЛЬЦИН АЛКАШ ПРОПИВАЕВИЧ
Национальность – псевдорусский
Образование – волейбольное
Профессия – пароход
Должность – надсмотрщик в сырьевой колонии Запада
Деятельность – преступная
Цели – антинациональные
Средства – фашистские.
Стратегия – заокеанская
Внешняя политика – западно-холуйская
Внутренняя политика – антирусская
Эконом. политика – грабеж голодного народа
Попечение о людях – лицемерное
Забота о барыгах и мародерах – искренняя
Борьба с привилегиями – временная
Страсть к привилегиям – постоянная
Цены – возвышенно-динамичные
Популярность – стремительно падающая
Геноцид – способ общения с народом
Образ жизни – беззаконное
Главное занятие – попрание Конституции
Гласность – с удавкой на шее
Демократизм – палочный
Сакральная миссия – агент влияния ЦРУ
Обещания – лживые
Заявления – безответственные
Убеждения – циничные
Начитанность – нулевая
Духовность – минусовая
Мышление – ублюдочное
Речь – косноязычная
Пристрастие – алкогольное
Реакция на самолётное шасси – мочегонная
Внешность – дебильная
Нравственность – деградирующая
Позорный титул – палач Союза
Сатанинское призвание – могильщик России
Клятвы – Оху́мельцын, валютная Ельцинутка и др.
Звание – алкоголическую

БРАТЬЯ И СЕСТРЫ!!!
Страшный Суд произойдёт
24 ноября 1993 года.

ГОСПОДЬ МАТЬ МИРА
МАРИЯ ДЭВИ ХРИСТОС - Ваш
спаситель и утешитель, Мессия на
Земле! Только она Вас спасёт, без
неё Мучительная Смерть от
Антихриста.
Она даёт Вам людям последний
шанс на спасение, кто не примет её
своим сердцем и не ПОКАЕТСЯ
в своих грехах - попадёт в АД!
Кто поклонится САТАНЕ, который
уже вошёл в полную силу и ходит
по Земле под именем ЭММАНУИЛ
и примет его денежную систему
“666” попадёт в АД!!!
Пока не поздно примите живую
Мать Мира Марию Дэви Христос.
ПОКАЙТЕСЬ в грехах своих, ибо
времени у Вас осталось совсем мало!

Figure 12. A Maria Devi Khristos cult flier, [1993]. Russian Cultural, Religious and Business
Notes


12 Grigor’ev, Politcheskaia Rossiia, 3.


18 Strukova, “Neformaly i vlast’ v gody perestroiki,” 524.