9 The Café Saigon *Tusovka*: One Segment of the Informal-public Sphere of Late-Soviet Society

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Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to conceptualise the public sphere of late-Soviet society of the 1970s and 1980s, and to consider its spatial arrangement and the communication patterns that characterised it. It arises out of the fact that certain arrangements and practices of everyday life in the Soviet Union are quickly vanishing from the collective memory. Biographical research, however, is able to stimulate people to offer narratives relating to these things before they disappear completely.

Discussion and conceptualisation of the late-Soviet public sphere has not only a historical but also a political dimension. However vague the concepts ‘public’ and ‘private’ are, social scientists use them to reinforce the argument that, despite its lack of democratic traditions, Russian society has an opportunity to modernise politically and to develop public and civil institutions of the Western kind.

I elaborate here upon the construct of the late-Soviet public sphere – the realm of state-independent activities and communication – and its functioning in the large Soviet city. Segments of an informal-public sphere separate from the official public one began to develop in Soviet Russia from the end of the 1950s. Unlike previous decades in Soviet history, when communication had either been totally officially controlled or else had taken place in a private ‘kitchen’ setting, the ‘Brezhnev era of stagnation’ provided public space (in the form of legal public places) for
communication that escaped such total control. One example of such a public place was a city café that had regular visitors of a particular kind, and where certain communication patterns were maintained: the Café Saigon in Leningrad. This café represented a focus for communication between people opposed to the mainstream Soviet way of life.

The logic I employ to integrate my study of this café with discussion of the division between private and public realms in Soviet society is as follows. I argue that late-Soviet modernity formed a specific set of conditions for the flourishing of spontaneous collective activities and modes of communication not controlled by the state. To describe the specificity of this realm of informal Soviet activities I use the term 'informal-public'. This term is employed to emphasise the well-known fact that opportunities for state-independent activities and communication in Soviet society were limited. This term serves to capture the lack of political, ideological, economic and religious freedoms on the one hand and, on the other, the opportunities that existed for a certain degree of spontaneous activity. What was this informal-public sphere of late socialism? How can it be reconstructed from the vanishing memories of city residents? What were the rules of the game in this communication setting, and what were the milieux that maintained these rules of interaction and communication?

This study may also be important for an understanding of the social structure of late socialism, an area which is still unclear and which requires empirical research. Each social group has its own particular locales. Social groups and groupings occupy distinct places and mark them with their activities, types of interaction and symbolism. These places provide arrangements for communication, interaction and life-practices for those who ‘occupy’ them. As a result, if we consider the images and practices of a particular locale, we can see how the particular segment of the Soviet public sphere known as the informal-public was organised and which milieux appropriated that place.

There existed in Leningrad particular well-known locales for spontaneous or ‘initiative’ activities. These places were: alternative art exhibitions, home literary salons, dissident open houses, and certain city cafés. These city cafés were the meeting places and symbolic locales for people whose everyday practices were identified as representing an alternative to those accepted by the official public. Such cafés were the settings for social occasions which allowed ‘alternative’ persons to gather—those gravitating towards a certain lifestyle which was marginal in respect of officially-sanctioned public life. This is why I name settings of this kind ‘informal-public’, and the whole realm of activities that took place in such settings the ‘informal-public sphere’. The individuals inhabiting this realm, being socially marginal, were not sufficiently integrated into the Soviet way of life. This marginality of the café visitors expressed itself in their values, attitudes, political orientations and everyday life-practices (in the spheres of employment, leisure and family), as well as in their body idioms.

The Café Saigon, in Leningrad, was one such café. It was known both throughout the city and beyond its borders. It was the refuge of ‘alternative’ people for more than twenty years (from 1964 up until autumn 1991). It has become a symbol for that generation of the urban intelligentsia alive during the late-Soviet period. Today, we can see continuous attempts to commemorate this café in the Russian media, and in art, poetry, folklore and literature. Even in Jerusalem there is a Café Saigon, established by a Soviet émigré.

When we discuss the Café Saigon, we are discussing a form of ‘street life’ in the city, the existence of which had become known to the city’s inhabitants and which they still remember. The Café Saigon is a good research subject, because the café has been extensively discussed in the local media since the end of the 1980s. This popularity and constant attention is shown by the fact that a memorial plaque has been attached to the wall to commemorate the place. All these commemorative actions can be understood in terms of the popular recognised meaning and significance of this café as a symbol of freedom: in terms, that is, of the informal-public life of socialism. In examining this particular case, then, I am aiming to reconstruct one specific milieu of pre-reform Soviet society.

Although the Café Saigon existed for several decades, I focus here mainly on the second half of the 1960s and the 1970s. This was the period when the café flourished most strongly. The later Café Saigon of the 1980s and its own specific rock-culture have been described elsewhere (Cushman, 1995; Pilkinson, 1994; Shelepanskaya, 1993).

This micro-sociological approach will facilitate an exploration of how individual activities combined to make possible a collective identity. The research focuses on those interactive and communicative practices, and those rules and conventions, which constituted the lifestyle of the Café Saigon community.
The *Tusovka* as a Segment of the Soviet Public Sphere

I argue here that the 'public' element of late-Soviet modernity is 'informal-public' according to Habermas's concept of a bourgeois public (Habermas, 1989). Here I concentrate on one particular segment of the Soviet informal-public sphere for which an original term has been developed. This term is *tusovka*. The word is properly untranslatable, like the bulk of those names which form the core of cultural and societal specificity (Boym, 1994). Like such words as *spuntik*, *glasnost* and *perestroika*, *babushka* and *dacha*, which are essential for an understanding of everyday life in Soviet Russia, *tusovka* has become part of an international vocabulary. It is used by Russian and Eastern European researchers to signify particular patterns of interaction. The Café Saigon was a *tusovka* setting.

The etymology of the term *tusovka* is unclear. It began to be widely used in the second half of 1970s although it originated in the 1960s. The generation which made up the original core of the Café Saigon in the 1970s did not call themselves *tusovshchiki*. The word became popular later on, in the 1980s, whereas the first Saigonese generation took it over from their followers.

*Tusovka* is founded on face-to-face communication between those who enact it. Such actors are united by shared practices, attitudes and styles of individual conduct and interaction. The practices under discussion here consisted of creative work, shadow-economy activities, and various self-destructive behaviours. *Tusovka* presumes a certain type of individual: a liberal individual from the Soviet period, integrated to a minor extent into the life of Soviet officialdom and its *kollektivy*. A particular social contract allowed for the existence of the Saigon *tusovka* as the site of a counter-Soviet efflorescence in the heart of the Soviet city.

I wish to give the slang term *tusovka* the status of a sociological category embracing particular segments of the informal-public sphere of late-Soviet modernity. It represents a specific type of communication and interaction, characterised by a coherent amalgam of body idioms, place, activities and style of conduct. In my view, the essence of *tusovka* can be captured by Bourdieu's conception of the interpersonal *habitus* as incorporated class. I argue here that conceptualisation of the public sphere as a communication realm should embrace not only certain organisational forms and forms of face-to-face or mediated interaction, but moral, psychological and even bodily-expressed aspects of individual conduct and interpersonal communication. Public communication presumes a certain individual and interpersonal conduct: the *habitus* of an individual, in whose very posture a knowledge of his or her place in society is embodied. This posture - 'body idioms' in Goffman's terms - manifests in such forms as dress style, gait, tastes and practices, and the vocabulary of communication. *Tusovka* is characterised by a specific *habitus*.

What was the Saigon *tusovka* *habitus*? I am attempting to find this out from memoirs and interviews, using a phenomenological frame. I consider the micro-approach to be especially relevant for the theorising of communication in *tusovka*, and apply here Goffman's theory of 'communication places' (Goffman, 1963). Goffman argues that social arrangements and institutions in the everyday-life sense are those places - buildings, rooms, plants - where certain regular actions take place. These places constitute the architecture of everyday life. They provide communication space and opportunities for certain types of action. The type of communication appropriate to the place forms the *habitus* of the social milieu of that place. Goffman distinguishes between exclusive and open places. An exclusive place is one which is open only to a particular type of habitué. This *tusovka* was one segment of the underworld of the wider Soviet society, the exclusive place that was appropriated by this specific brand of habitué. My task here is to ascertain which activities constituted the life of the Café Saigon *tusovka* and its people in the 1970s, what the bonds were that connected the people of the *tusovka*, what the nature was of their attachments, and how they were maintained.

The chapter is organised as follows. First, I describe the Café Saigon as the location of *tusovka*, and present its regime, rules, common practices and symbols in the words both of those who frequented it and of ordinary city residents (insider and outsider views). I then turn to the individual life stories of the café habitué(s) in order to show whence they were recruited, what their *tusovka* experiences were vis-à-vis everyday life in the Soviet Union, and what the meanings were that they attached to the *tusovka* *habitus*.

The Café Saigon and its Tusovka

*Café Saigon* operated in Leningrad from autumn 1964 until December 1991. One famous habitié of the café in the 1970s, a poet and literary critic, recollects:

The Café Saigon opened on the very day that I entered the University – on the first of September 1964. These days coincided. Before the Saigon there was a (coffee) place at Malaya Sadovaya Street. We had all been in a whirl there
and then moved to the Saigon. Since then I’ve come to the Saigon nearly every day for around twelve years.

Many artists and students of literature and art first came to Café Saigon when they were quite young, in their late teens or early 20s. The café became a hangout for bohemian youth. The core group of habitués had formed and consolidated earlier, in another small café, an earlier version of the Saigon, which somehow lost its popularity. The period 1964–76 represented the years of the first Saigon generation, the people of the 1970s who are the focus of this chapter.

Political Context of the Café Saigon Story

It is timely to mention here that in Soviet political history 1964 was the last year of Khrushchev’s rule and four years prior to the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. The period when the Saigon began and came to fullflowering was the end of the ‘political thaw’ and long period of stagnation that lasted from 1964 up until the 1980s. This was the time when a certain opening up of the political climate explained the existence of the alternative art, dissident groups, shadow-economy and alternative lifestyles that were officially condemned as marginal to the Soviet mainstream. It was also the period of the maximum development of corruption and of the Soviet double standard – Soviet schizophrenia, a divergence between the word and the deed (Levada, 1993).

Café Saigon people refer to this period in their life as ‘a timeless period where one day is similar to another and nothing happens for centuries …’ (GG). They perceived Soviet life at this time as ‘a corridor … which you enter and which slowly is leading you in a very senseless and ugly direction’ (VT). In their memories, this stagnation is marked by the following political events: the intervention of Russian troops in Czechoslovakia (August 1968), the exile of Solzhenitsyn (1974), and the arrests of Soviet dissidents (1965, 1968, 1980).

During these years, certain Soviet citizens learnt to live quite autonomously from the state, ethically, aesthetically, economically and politically. From the second half of the 1960s, the octopus of communication sites – cafés and clubs – ‘privatised’ by such people began to spread its tentacles over the city. A map for such places in Leningrad can be drawn up, and Café Saigon was the major such place.

The Topography of the Café Saigon Tusovka

Café Saigon was situated on the crossroads of two main streets of Leningrad: the Nevsky and Vladimirsy Prospects. Its location on the corner of two main streets in the city centre made it the most attractive meeting place for many, but especially for those who occupied and ‘privatised’ this territory. One respondent recalled:

I knew for sure that if I went there at a certain time (7 p.m.) I would meet the person I needed to see without a special appointment … You could meet your friends and acquaintances.

The place was tightly embedded in the culture of the city. It is often described in interviews as a specifically Leningrad phenomenon, which one could never encounter in any other Russian town or city – neither in Moscow nor in any provincial town. It was known among the intelligentsia far beyond the city borders. People came from Moscow to visit it; it was known abroad, and was part of the cultural mythology of Leningrad/St Petersburg. In the consciousness of its residents and among the Soviet population more generally there existed a myth concerning Leningrad/St Petersburg. It was a city with a mysterious soul and a tragic fate, an antithesis of the orthodox Soviet Slavic merchant capital, Moscow. The history of the city, founded by the first Russian emperor as ‘a window into Europe’, as well as its recognisably European architecture and air have engendered in public consciousness a stable image of a European city inhabited by a specifically democratically-oriented population which was victimised by Soviet rule and which came to embody cultural protest. The non-official poetry of the late-socialist period (Brodsky is the most distinguished figure here), underground art (Belkin, Gennadjev) and Leningrad rock (Leningrad Rock Club, the rock groups Kino, Alisa, Akvarium, etc.) are just a few examples of this cultural protest. All this informal Leningrad counterculture of the late-socialist era was made up of tusovki. These multiple tusovki had their territories in the town and their well-known addresses. Café Saigon was at the centre of the territory of the counterculture.

A whole number of small cafés and ice-cream shops in the Café Saigon area were appropriated for group frequenting. When Café Saigon came to prominence it spread like a spider and took over several public places surrounding it, such as the ice-cream café which was named ‘Adjunct’ by its habitués. The city toilets, as well as Central Moscow
railway station, were nearby. Liquor stores were also around, open until 7 p.m. and later 9 p.m. This city area was the habitat of bohemians and of literary and theatre people, and Saigon was at its crossroads. It was a comfortable meeting place to begin an evening that might consist of communicative meetings including group drinking sessions and informal humorous discussion and the arranging of events and performances. It was the site of face-to-face communication between people who knew each other, trusted one another and now shared the same lifestyle. The café was situated near the artistic Houses of Journalists and Actors and Leningrad Rock Club, which also had their more exclusive comfortable cafés and restaurants.

Symbolism of the café name. The naming of places by local residents tells us a great deal about the informal-public sphere, especially in the light of the official names that were given to monuments in the city, which either commemorated historical and cultural persons and events belonging to Soviet mythology or else had no specific connotations. The officially-named cafés at that time were the Landysh, the Nevskoe, and the Metropol. There were also places without any names. Initially, Café Saigon had no name.

Since the end of the 1960s folk toponyms had become a part of urban culture. The naming by residents of city monuments, and especially cafés, became common. These symbolic actions were the signs of a slightly liberalised climate. The counterculturalists marked their territory by giving new names to and labelling the places they inhabited. They thus symbolically defined the territory as belonging to them. These informal names never appeared as street signs although they were known throughout the city. Certain collective sentiments were articulated in the folklore and symbolism of folk-naming. The café names were indicative: 'Ulster', 'Rome', 'Abbey Road', 'Saigon', 'Bombay'. The ‘Ulster’ and ‘Abbey Road’ were situated downtown; ‘Rome’ and ‘Bombay’ were situated in other parts of the city. Each café attracted a different kind of habitué.

What might be the significance of such namings? There can be several theories about this. Basically, these informal names alluded to the West. The chosen and maintained names demonstrated an intention of sustaining certain associations – of expressing the fact that the atmosphere of these places was radically different from the Soviet one. For Soviet bohemians, the West was associated with non-authoritarian, uncontrolled protest, sometimes violent (‘Ulster’), and a youth culture (‘Abbey Road’) which had nothing in common with ‘official’ Soviet public life. Habitués started to call the central café the ‘Saigon’. Why this name was chosen and sustained for decades was a question I put to my informants.

Local legend provides the following story of the Café Saigon’s origins, one of many. In this café, smoking was forbidden. This official rule was, however, regularly violated by habitués. Once, a militiaman tried to re-establish order. He approached the smokers and said: ‘Why are you smoking here? It’s absolutely disgraceful. It’s so smoky here – you’ve made a real Saigon of the place.’ This was the time of the Vietnam War, and Saigon was perceived as a place where chemical weapons were used. After this, people adopted the name as a label for cultural disorder.

Value and Significance of the Café Saigon for its Habitueés

In discussing the attractiveness of this particular public place, its habitués focused on its role in their lives. They gave different explanations as to why they regularly visited the café in the 1970s–80s. First, there existed a need for an informal meeting-place where people could gather spontaneously:

> The very existence of the Saigon was caused by the fact that people strove to unite with each other. It may be that we had been socialised in such a way that it was necessary for us to come together ... But this gathering needed to be quite informal, because Komomol, TU, job, college – these are not what people wanted. (NG)

The need for informal communication and spontaneous gathering demanded public places. For young people, this was a period of intellectual ferment and there was an urgent need to share and to talk. These people badly needed a site where they could communicate and they chose this café from the available urban settings. The place was obviously under the control of the authorities. It was the state-owned catering enterprise affiliated to the ‘Moskva’ restaurant, and there were police stations and police posts in the area. This control, however, was not rigid. Modes of communication between the ‘Saigonees’, as I shall term them, ran strongly counter to all those practices that were approved by the state. Simply frequenting this place marked people out. It meant their acceptance in one milieu along with disconnection from their official milieu. This was the main boundary which separated the Saigonees from wider society – the informal-public from the official public.

Secondly, there was a perceived need to escape the ‘controlled’ privacy of Soviet homes:
And who had rooms of their own? When you described a person, his main merit was his apartment ... Mother, father and I occupied a room of 30 square metres in an apartment occupied by four families. While the slow repair-work was going on my father fenced off a corner for me made out of timber sheeting that did not reach the ceiling. When I was reading in bed I heard, from my parents' bed, 'Turn off the light. You're stopping us sleeping!' ... I not only slept and ate there when I came home very late, but sometimes, when my parents were away, I had female visitors ... I hung out in the Saigon practically every day from 1970 till 1984 ... until 1979, because then I got a room and so I could spend part of the day there ... (EV)

Young people felt a need to get away from the apartments which they shared with their neighbours (in the communal flat), either with their parents' family or with their spouse and children. In these overcrowded apartments their life was under constant surveillance and control, 4 Those who had the luxury of living away from them held salons and open houses. Everyday guests were typical in such 'open houses' (Tchoukina, 1996). Individuals belonging to this milieu also distanced themselves from the Soviet style of control of marital relations.

Finally, people were looking for adventure. 'Life was interesting there - that was the main thing' (VT). Café Saigon was appreciated as a site for adventures - its habits felt the demand for adventure strongly. The surprise nature of the happenings that took place there was extremely important for the tusovka - for those people who considered Soviet reality unbearably boring in its false seriousness. This sense of boredom, or spleen (tostka), was a feeling expressed by almost all my informants, who were suffocating in the airless atmosphere of officially-sanctioned public life in the 1970s. Café Saigon became the symbol of an 'air vent' for those who felt alien elsewhere - at home with their families and in official institutions.

There was no other place in the city except this one in the centre of the tusovka area where one could kill time and show oneself off. Here one could meet friends and, inspired by conversation fuelled by alcohol, begin some adventure or other. One such adventure was the military-archaeological trip to the countryside, where young people dug out Second World War artefacts. Another might be a love affair ... One informant remarked:

I've always hated having guests at home or visiting people, because it was easy to predict what would happen. I knew the play from the very beginning to the end. But at the Saigon the situation was open. When I went there I couldn't say whether the night would be crazily boring or intensely happy. I couldn't say who I might meet - whether we'd end the night at the militia station or at the Hotel Europe bar. The night could be unpredictable, and all the worries and adventures of the drunken night streets were there for you to experience. (VT)

In addition, Café Saigon held an attraction as the centre of bohemian life in Leningrad. It was the meeting place for those who practised the alternative art of the late-Soviet period. Not without reason was this territory occupied by all the different clubs of the official professional arts associations. The tusovka of the 1970s was of an extremely bohemian blend. The cultural and educational attractiveness of meetings in Café Saigon is well-attested by the café's former visitors. It 'created' the writer and the poet who was read by everybody in the milieu - the film everybody had to see, the exhibition everyone attended. The charisma of the 'alternative' artist was strongly felt there:

This company ... was an extremely prestigious one in our eyes. It was a reference group that we looked up to. I had to develop the skill of quick verbal reaction; I had to develop my poetic skills to be accepted there. (NG)

Summing up all the arguments in favour of the place one informant concluded: 'Thank God we had this tusovka. It is always good, it educates a person ... If it weren't for the Saigon I don't know what would become of me. Probably I would kill myself' (VT).

Regime and Atmosphere of the Café Saigon Tusovka

The term 'regime' is used here to signify official and unofficial rules of behaviour. The official regulations governing café life were as follows. Working hours were from 9 a.m. until 9 p.m., with a break for dinner from 3 till 4 p.m. Café Saigon was a self-service café. The café area was divided into three sections. The first was a bar, where one could buy spirits and other drinks. This area was not crowded; not many people used this bar. The second section was the main one. It was a coffee shop with five or six espresso machines. It was overcrowded: there were regular queues for the coffee, which was known to be among the best in Leningrad. The third section consisted of a buffet, where one could buy cheap hot meals. The interior was poorly decorated. There was only one table for sitting down at; customers were supposed to drink their coffee standing at the high coffee tables. Despite this, the coffee was regarded as the best in the city.
Neither smoking nor the consumption of alcohol was allowed in the café: these prohibitions were set out on notices attached to the walls. There were no toilets in the café, a situation which was typical of all small public catering venues with the exception of restaurants.

Nearby was the 'Café Gastro'. (It was named after the stomach ailment which the cheap and badly cooked meals could cause.) Its official name was Café Automat. There, hungry Saigonese could eat very cheaply, for just 40 copecks.

Basically, the Café Saigon was quite uncomfortable. The interior was not conducive to long talking sessions or relaxation. Nevertheless, the place was popular. People would spend hours there, standing in the entrance or in groups around the tables, or else sitting on the window-sills. (This was also forbidden, though official regulations were widely disregarded.)

The real regulations attaching to café life were often contrary to the official ones. Café Saigon had a different character during different periods of the day. In the morning it functioned as a normal coffee shop, while in the afternoons and evenings it provided a space for the meetings of several tushovki. After 7 p.m. people from a whole number of social groups met there: bohemians (poets, actors, artists and rock musicians formed separate groups), people involved in the shadow economy, deaf-mutes. One frequent visitor to the café recalled:

In the morning there were few visitors – they were either occasional visitors or people such as I, suffering from an awful hangover, withdrawing from early drinking, going there to kill time, who had coffee there … This was one Saigon. It was quite clean … At that time it was a quiet place where you could calmly discuss something with a friend. After twelve, from the beginning of the 1970s, the Saigon was full of book dealers, who had their modest breakfast there, spending, I reckoned, about three roubles on it – two sandwiches with red caviar, one sandwich with something else and adding a cake to this, drinking this coffee or even taking a glass of juice. They were the richest until a certain moment … Between 12 and 1 p.m. they crowded into the Saigon and discussed something and then they went to stand somewhere near the Old Book [an antique bookshop] or somewhere else – they had their work-places there. After that, the Saigon was willy-nilly filled by the casual public who naturally had their coffee there until around 4 p.m. (EV)

The real crowds came a little later, during the staff dinner-and-cleaning break after 5 p.m., when the regular visitors added to the 'occasional' public and changed the character of the place by their styles of behaviour. In fact, there were two different crowds there: 'normal', occasional visitors and the regulars, or locals. These latter considered it their right to be served coffee without queuing, and this caused indignation. There were minor wrangles that ended inconclusively. The waitresses whom the regulars knew by name always served them first.

Smoking was commonplace in the café, as was the consumption of cheap, low-quality wine which the regulars brought with them. Sometimes they shared their bottle with a well-known invalid nicknamed 'Koleso' ('Wheel') who worked there as a cleaner. Cheap, low-quality Moldavian port was the hallmark of the place, though many people preferred dry wine.

A meeting at the café was regarded as the starting-point for a night of conviviality. The standard charge for sharing wine in a group was 70 copecks per person. Someone needed only this much to participate. Group leaders usually paid double the standard charge. At this time, this amount of money could provide drinks for a company of five. Women were not obliged to contribute: usually they were paid for by men. A moneyless habitué could beg for funds in some artistic fashion. One informant recollected that he used to approach good-looking young women in the queue, addressing them in an over-polite way like this: 'Could you kindly afford to lend money without any hope of getting it back?' Startled young women would give him up to 25 roubles. Sometimes he paid them back, sometimes not.

One further advantage of the Café Saigon was that it offered a solution to the problem of where to urinate. Street-life in Leningrad was not comfortable as regards physical needs. One regular recalled:

Polite People solved this problem [of urination] by not pissing on the staircases. First, it was disgusting. Secondly, it was frightful. By giving 10 or 20 copecks to the doormen one could use the rather dirty WC at the Moskva restaurant. Then I found the restaurant at the Actors House, which is much more decent and which one didn’t have to pay for. There you could even wash your hands with soap, and even though there were no towels, there was paper to wipe yourself with – newspaper in the cubicles, sometimes it could be toilet paper – once in half a year it appeared there. (V)

The atmosphere of the Café Saigon tushovka was determined by the rules of conduct that applied in the place, along with the practices of the people who made up its milieu. These behaviour patterns were decidedly 'symbolic'. This symbolism signified cultural protest against the normative Soviet way of life. The Café Saigon underground compensated for the negative aspects of Soviet existence. Among those which the café regulars
felt particularly acutely were: the lack of any possibility for personal and artistic expression; a shortage of information and books; and a dearth of individuation. Generally speaking, this lack of liberal public discourse was something that was acutely felt by talented people first. The core of the Saigon’s visitors consisted of underground poets, artists and musicians. Cultural text, evolved by a Soviet ‘bohemia’, was the ‘capital’ which gave one authority in this milieu. This cultural text included not only works of alternative art, but also the violation of official rules of conduct. The language-codes were also partly different.

Many places used nicknames, designed to demonstrate ‘difference’. (‘In our place, we use names that we give to ourselves, not those given by the “oldies”, our parents’, commented one informant.) Many such names were styled in the Western way (Kol, Bol, Molly, Kit, Marianna, Sandy). Many of them originated in the milieux from which the Saigonees were recruited, for example in the language schools where teenagers learnt English or in youth clubs.

In the 1970s, so linguists maintain, hippie slang emerged, and it was widely used in the Café Saigon milieu. According to professional estimates the dictionary of Russian hippie slang includes 600 words (Rozhanski, 1996). Hippie slang was based on borrowings from various sociolects. Researchers identify as the sources for such borrowings the English language (sometimes with a change of meaning), musicians’ jargon; farisa slang, youth jargon, drug addicts’ jargon. Counterculturalists would, in their casual conversations, combine slang, vulgar obscenities and sophisticated quotations from philosophers and poets. Such communication codes were valued and recognised.

The symbolism of poverty was important for the bohemian core of the Café Saigon. Most of those attending the café were not well-off. The place symbolised contempt for Soviet consumerism as an expression of a ‘Soviet’ career path. According to one informant:

The Saigon was a very uncomfortable place … But it was cheap. One could of course go to the restaurant for the same purposes. It was not that expensive, but restaurants were not for Saigonees, they were for mazhors.

It was the countercultural milieu that, in the 1980s, introduced the term mazhor as a label for consumption-oriented Soviet young men. People visiting the Café Saigon symbolically rejected material prosperity. The demonstrative poverty indicated by their dress may be deciphered as a symbol of generational protest.

A humorous, light, casual style typified Café Saigon communication. Seriousness, the grand style, was inappropriate in this milieu. Nothing was taken seriously: neither life nor death; neither duties nor beliefs; not family, nor politics, nor careers. I take this emphatic unseriousness as one more sign of alienation from the false seriousness of the life of the common Soviet man and its collectives, a life whose ‘rights’ and ‘duties’ were regulated by the party-state and the credentials it required: state holidays, collective meetings, reports on activities, registered marriages, passports, labour books, housing registration, official street decorations in the form of portraits of party-state officials, and endless restrictions. This bitter, absurdist humour can, along with other practices, be read also as a disguise for the quasi-suicidal orientation of these people, their wish for self-destruction — as a kind of gallows humour. The forms this humour took were various: they were apparent in the oral story-telling (in telegi, in the slang of the later hippie generation, and in the culture of anecdotes) that was imbued with absurd, occasional epigrams, as well as in the happenings that took place and in the extravagant garbs that were worn. References to unpublished texts of the Leningrad absurdist literary school the OBEREU of the 1920–30s (Daniel Kharns and Alexander Vvedensky) were respected in this milieu. I see this specific humour as an essential practice that gave charm to Café Saigon discourse. This humour was a means of ignoring and escaping from the wider society and from one’s personal life with all its troubles and insufficiencies.

People’s broad perceptions of this tusovka were ambivalent. On the one hand it had the flavour of human detritus, of the bottom and margins of society. This is how it was understood by lay people. This view was partly shared by the habitués themselves. On the other hand the tusovka provided an atmosphere of individuality, of creative work, artistic improvisation, and the expression of cultural freedom. This ambiguity is probably typical of bohemian places elsewhere. One informant gave me a clue as to how the totality of the Café Saigon atmosphere might be grasped. ‘The main idea here’, he observed, ‘was the idea of pose.’ Pose here is a metaphor used to describe a style, including body idiom, attitudes, behaviour-patterns and modes of interaction. The ‘pose’ of a Saigonee was that of a lonely, single, independent individual confirmed in his or her appearance, facial looks and smile, mode of talking, dress and gait, and essential practices. All these small behavioural features distinguished the conduct of a Saigonee from that accepted in the wider society. Informants still claim that they could recognise a Saigonee by their appearance. The symbolism of the pose has
major importance for an understanding of the late-Soviet informal-public sphere. The Saigonese, like the Saigon itself, is conceived of by former habitués as representing an *embodied* protest. This protest was not an open taking up of arms, but a mode of comprehensive cultural opposition.

**Social Structure of the Café Saigon Tuskovka**

The informal-public realm of *tusovka* activities and the official public realm of late-Soviet society were mutually supportive, because Café Saigon functioned as an ecological niche and as a channelling opportunity for the Soviet underground. Here, individuals were allowed to express themselves with a certain amount of freedom, experiencing only minor repression while being well-observed and controlled by officialdom. On the one hand, here one could be oneself - this was a so-called ‘free place’. On the other, the ecological density of the marginals in the café area made it easier for the authorities to control them. ‘Mutual blindness’ characterised the contract that operated between the Café Saigon and the wider society. The Café Saigon milieu was silenced in the official-public sphere; it was voiced in the Western or *samizdat* media and in countercultural performances.

The café can also be considered as a setting for the alternative youth culture of late-socialist society in the 1970s and 1980s. The bohemian intelligentsia spent their formative years in this environment. It is possible to differentiate the Café Saigon generations: the core group of bohemians dominated until the end of the 1970s, and was then gradually replaced by the rock generation of the 1980s. As regards the official public realm, however, both generations shared the same sense of alienation and rejection.

The *tusovka* was not homogeneous. Informants distinguish the following groupings: poets, ‘academics’ (people from Café Academichka in the university area), artists, book dealers and shadow-economy people, the group of deaf-mutes. Everybody knew each other on the level of ‘Hi’ and ‘Bye’. The place was large enough to include several groupings. Newcomers were mainly recruited elsewhere and later introduced to the *tusovka*. Every group was engaged in its own activities, and the groups were not contiguous. The core Café Saigon milieu was made up of bohemians and their admirers, fans and supporters. The bohemians – or ‘unrecognised geniuses’ – were united by the same experience: these talented people were not accepted in the official professional milieu, because its restrictions were unbelievably rigid. Soviet officialdom squeezed out many talented people who did not conform to Soviet standards of loyalty. For several decades, only underground settings for performance were available for the Café Saigon’s artists, poets and actors. *Samizdat* publications, salon (flat) exhibitions and home performances were the main settings for Soviet bohemians. The social network of the bohemians did not resemble that of the Soviet collectives. It was based on the solidarity of independent singulars – individuals who negated the Soviet way of life and were involved in alternative art.

Many of these people were not accepted in their professional associations for ideological reasons. Their art was considered ‘ideologically unhealthy’: it did not fit with the patterns of socialist realism, the official mainstream of Soviet art; it did not fit with the dogmas of orthodox Marxism-Leninism; it did not fit with the *habitus* of *Homo Sovieticus*. In the late-Soviet period, however, such people got their opportunity to create niches for professional artistic communication between artistic creators and their audience. The *tusovka* was united by deliberate negation of the wider society, but it also developed its own rules of professionalism, its own rules of the game and of taste: its own public sphere. These people themselves chose the way, which led them to the margins of ‘official’ society.

Bohemian artists attracted a specific audience. This public included people with diverse marginal life experiences. There were people who had been released from prison and did not have a place to live. There were people of brutal psychology who could beat and kill. There were homosexuals and invalids. Around Café Saigon, lay people felt the air of criminality. Several Saigonese involved in the shadow economy were arrested, and there were those who were persecuted as hooligans or spouters. Café Saigon offered a space for all kinds of marginality that were considered to be an expression of freedom. The boundaries of Soviet ‘normality’ were expanded there. A certain undemanding humanism was flourishing there, a certain openness and support for the marginal – it was a performance of compassion and complicity.

Although there was no hierarchy among the *tusovka*’s groupings, each company was strictly stratified. Discussing this internal hierarchy one informant observed:

At the Saigon the sense of status was extremely important – this was part of Saigon socialisation .... One always had a sense of one’s place, an understanding of who is lower, who is higher – are you a lieutenant or a colonel? It was a horrible male ‘horn-fight’, which compensated for something else.
Thus, EV called himself a 'commander' of the Saigon, and the local invalid, K, was humorously called a 'commissar'. Both were always present there, and are remembered as personified symbols of the place. K worked as a cleaner and always had a chance to get his free drink in this or that group. The system of rank functioned there as elsewhere. One visitor observed: 'I was just the Sancho Panza of T, whom I accompanied everywhere.'

The main principle of stratification in the tusovka, however, was not physical force, nor appearance or financial assets, but officially-neglected talent and particular social skills. Each group had a recognised male leader. One of the stratification criteria in this bohemian milieu was so-called 'word capital'. A knowledge of literature, of word play, a talent for story telling were highly appreciated and became pivotal for communication in the Saigon tusovka. Both female and male habitués from the younger generation recall those group leaders as irresistibly charming and attractive because of their beauty, knowledge, talent, artistic demeanour and aura of autonomy, independence and superiority. One of the younger Saigonese observed:

I remember this generation of 1969 as a generation of titans. I had never seen such beautiful people; seriously I had never seen [such people] before. They were free people; I was a mother's boy and they were absolutely free guys, who disposed themselves in a very different way. (LL)

However different they were from each other, the Saigonese were unified by the common marginality of their practices, which I describe more fully below.

Practices of the Café Saigon Tusovka

Doing 'Otherwise'

I use the term 'practice' here to describe the conduct that people of the Saigon tusovka considered 'decent'. I shall focus on the habitual practices that made a Saigonese acceptable in the tusovka. Among these practices are activities in the public and informal-public spheres of official employment, politics and leisure.

The idea of decent behaviour is important for every community. This concept has different meanings for different milieux and generations. People use this category to describe the appropriateness of certain conduct and its acceptability. So my question here is: which activities were considered decent and indecent in the Café Saigon tusovka?

The answer to this question can be summed up in the following generalisation. Among the Saigonese, it was considered indecent to follow the norms of the official public sphere — in work, in politics, in family life and leisure. Doing otherwise was the uniting principle of the diverse tusovka practices. Countercultural artistic work produced and performed by Saigonese was supplemented by their marginal positions in official society and their self-destructive practices of heavy drinking and (later) drug-taking. There were professional qualifications and statuses that were incompatible with the tusovka. Obviously, CPSU members, military officers, mothers with many children and people who did not drink could hardly be accepted there. Of course there were exceptions, but they only served to maintain the rule. Thus for example, one informant explained the shared hatred felt towards a former Saigonee as follows:

The hatred felt towards MY by the Saigonese was caused by the fact that he started to be published in the official editions and became co-opted [by the establishment]. A Saigon person should on principle not publish his works and should not exhibit his pieces in official galleries. Because they were not published they came to the conclusion that it was indecent to be published. And indeed it was. (KG)

For its habitué Café Saigon was at the heart of their lifestyle. They spent their lives in this place — this was their job and their leisure, their public and their private. What were those marginal activities that were possible for the Café Saigon tusovka? For many, the venue was one they frequented for no other purpose than to obtain time and find a place away from the long arm of the state. It was a site for informal conversation, information exchange, drinking; a meeting place from which to set out for the underground concert, flat exhibition or philosophical seminar. In describing activities at the Saigon, one informant remarked:

What were we doing there? We drank, but not only that. We exchanged information, we read books, visited home exhibitions, we shared information which had a limited circulation. Saigon activity was communication, it was a tusovka, which was useful for one's intellectual development — for sure, because discussion of literature and the arts in general issued there on a high level, which was quite unknown for me at the time. Besides, it was a place where speed of intellectual reaction was valued — mental sharpness was
refined though this communication ... The Saigon offered gymnastics for the intellect. But it was also hard drinking and ugliness. (NG)

This combination of freedom and self-destruction, excitement and disgust is typical of the ambiguous nature of the bohemian Saigon tusovka:

But what is Bohemia if one thinks about it? It is a certain way of spending time ... I am partly a bohemian myself, but when I see a so-called bohemian person I feel disgust and I shudder and I feel horror. You understand? Imagine some ... I don’t know – M. Glinka would spend his time in this way and not write his opera Ruslan i Ludmila. He would be simply a composer Glinka, a drunkard.

Information Exchange

One of the main modes of interaction in the tusovka was the exchange of information (both oral and printed), which functioned as a glue in the milieu. Information about underground events of an intellectual or artistic nature was disseminated through face-to-face contact. Such events included flat and club exhibitions by the vanguard artists, philosophical and poetic seminars, and underground poetry readings. The addresses of the open houses were given out in the café, and people met there to go to these private-public places.

During this period the information deficit was something intellectuals felt keenly. Literature- or word-centred communication was at the core of the Saigon tusovka. One informant (VU) remarked: ‘One could never understand the cultural idiom of the Saigon if one could not understand what a book shortage meant for cultured people.’

The books and manuscripts that circulated in the tusovka came from different sources. One of these was family libraries. Many Saigonees came from the families of the intelligentsia, with large home libraries, some of them built up over several generations and containing editions that were not available publicly. In the state libraries, these books were preserved in special collections and were not available to ordinary readers.

Samizdat (self-made) production and exchange were common among all the generations of the Soviet intelligentsia owing to the book shortage and to rigid Soviet censorship. Even politically loyal citizens collected in their home libraries hundreds of printed or hand-written pages of poetry and prose (from Pushkin and Lermontov, certain passages of whose writings were officially considered pornographic, to Brodsky and Galich, who were considered anti-Soviet). This meant that almost every family could be persecuted for the dissemination of illegal (unpublished by Soviet publishing houses) literature. Samizdat literature circulated in the milieu mainly not in book form, but in the form of manuscripts retyped on private typewriters from books published abroad. There were also so-called samizdat books (books published abroad), mainly obtained via foreign visitors to the city: tourists, students, researchers and diplomats.

Another source of illegal literature was the dissident milieu, with which the Saigonees were loosely connected. One informant recalled how in 1977 he read for the first time Solzhenitsyn’s novel Gulag Archipelago. A couple brought him a book which they had borrowed for one night from another friend. Four friends – two couples – spent the night sitting round the dinner table and passing printed pages (in the form of a difficult-to-read fourth carbon copy) among themselves.

Many habitués of the Saigon had connections with the ‘second’ economy. They were engaged in the book or art business. They would first sell family libraries or their own books in order to obtain money, and then later buy the books again to fill their libraries. They did this via book-dealers who had their meeting-place also in the Café Saigon. Then there were those who were involved in the illegal trade of icons and pictures. Several of them could not escape arrest and spent time in prison for counterfeiting icons and selling them, for violating currency regulations, or for speculation.

Saigonees’ employment Employment is one of the main indicators of one’s social position. As for the Café Saigon people, their socio-economic status was low and unprestigious. This was mainly their deliberate decision – they wanted to have as few connections with the Soviet ranking system as possible. Involvement in the Saigon tusovka demanded a considerable amount of time, which was available to the jobless and to those with flexible working hours as well as to single people. Explaining why he wasn’t able to visit the Café more often one informant remarked:

... I worked because I had three kids. I had to work at my trade as a locksmith. Students, people of free professions or those who belonged to the so-called generation of watchmen and gas-boiler mechanics were regulars there.

Similarly, one female habitué observed:
I stopped going to the Saigon when I started a regular job. Fixed working hours and duties prevented me from being at the Saigon at night – in the morning I had to be at my workplace strictly on time.

The café regulars were mainly people who were not employed permanently or full-time in the Soviet economy, and thus were not fully integrated into the major patterns of Soviet living. Moreover, their attitude towards normative Soviet career patterns was one of total rejection. Thus, for example, one Saigonee who worked as a librarian stated:

I did not want to work there. There was no way to force me. I did not want to work anywhere, but at this place I categorically did not want to work. (NG, a writer)

In this case, in order to avoid a compulsory three-year work-term at the library as a young specialist the informant escaped to a mental hospital, hoping to get a medical certificate which would later help him to be discharged.

The Saigonees' earnings were not permanent ones, and they were obviously small and irregular. Students often lived on stipends, which many got on a daily basis from their parents. Actually, however, everything that was available at that time was cheap and their material needs were trifling.

Turning to the official job positions held by the Café Saigon people, among their occupations we find the following: librarians, guides, watchmen of all kinds, students. The phenomenon of the 'philosopher at the stoke-hole' is well-known in late-Soviet counterculture. The 'generation of watchmen and street cleaners' is commemorated in the songs of the famous Russian rock musician Grebenshchikov, the leader of the group Akvarium.

The job of watchman was considered the best available in the milieu. The following account describes this work:

... this was the greatest of all Soviet sinecures ... This was actually leisure for which one was paid 70 roubles a month. The schedule was one shift every four days. One just had to put up with some bosses and visitors, and after 6 p.m. one's own life started and lasted until morning, and one could do whatever one wanted – study, drink, have guests or just sleep. (EV)

The following is an extract from a personal diary in which one Saigonee describes his working life:

I've worked since the age of 17, with breaks. I've worked in many places, where I was called a stevedore, a plumber's mate, a supervisor of watchmen, a boat-watchman, an assistant at the research centre, a typist. The main problem was getting to the workplace, if possible, on time ... There were several explanations for such difficulty. The first was that I came home late and hadn't had enough sleep, the second was the fact that I didn't feel any material need to work until my mum died, since she had maintained me. The third reason was more specific: I refer to the night vigils with friends, wives and girlfriends, who had flexible work schedules and were not strictly tied to the beginning of the working day. By the mid-1970s many of them had graduated from college ... many worked as watchmen or had settled in the gas boilers after finishing training courses ... (EV)

Soviet law prosecuted people for sponging. Not working was a sufficient reason to get arrested. Every person had to be at some fixed workplace. At the end of the 1970s the KGB launched a campaign against sponging, and this bore on the life of the Café Saigon tusovka. Everyone was duly required to get a job for reasons of personal safety. The same café regular describes how he managed to find a job with the help of friends. Social networks, as ever, proved helpful from the point of view of survival:

Half a year after being dismissed from my previous work I was taken to the militia station from the café where I was drinking. After I'd spent the night there a strict officer checked my labour book (I didn't have either a passport or a military pass, because the first was lost at another militia station and the second was taken from me by a major after we'd had a fight in the Metro) and made me sign an official declaration that I'd got a job in two weeks. It was the beginning of Andropov's anti-sponging campaign ... Everything led to imprisonment under Article 191 of the Criminal Code ... My acquaintance – the son of the famous NTSI member – helped me to find a job as nightwatchman at the Research Institute ...

The job of watchman was a common one for Soviet pensioners and for bohemians. It was not demanding, did not require a qualification, and did not involve responsibility. It did, however, confer a great deal of autonomy. Saigonees used their working hours for reading and for writing their poetry and prose – they took typewriters there and worked at night. Saigon people were often dismissed from their jobs. There were numerous reasons for this: they missed the beginning of the working day, turned up drunk at the workplace, ruined the equipment, or just disappeared. But according to their own reports their supervisors were often understanding and tolerant towards young people. One informant (KT) confessed how he left his job:
‘It is not that I was fired. I just got a feeling that it was time to leave the job so as not to test the patience of my boss.’

Thus we can see that for the bohemians their ‘true’ occupation was their creative work and the task of sociability in the Café Saigon milieu. Their official employment was only a disguise for the activities that allowed them to escape the article of the Soviet criminal code that condemned sponging.

Self-destruction, heavy drinking and drug use were commonplace in the Café Saigon tushovka. There are many possible explanations for these practices. Here, I conceive them as being a consequence of the lack of adequate perspectives for these people in Soviet society. The available strategies for self-expression were self-realisation in countercultural salons, and self-destruction through heavy drinking. Another was emigration; in the 1970s and afterwards many Saigonees emigrated on the basis of Jewish origins or other pretexts:

At the Saigon we met, had the first drink and then went to someone’s place — some salon or open house. So this was a meeting-place, where ZV always stood at the entrance smoking. It was 19.30 exactly. We didn’t have money, but there was only a small fixed charge — it was 70 copecks. If you had 70 copecks you had a right to go to the Saigon. This was the price of a half-litre bottle of wine. And then things depended on how the situation unfolded.

Describing their habitual heavy drinking, Saigon habitués recalled how they had had their first drink when teenagers, and how pleasant it was for them to be drunk and how drinking was an essential element of communication patterns in the milieu. Intense heavy drinking served to differentiate Saigon people from the pro-dissident circle: ‘My world view and interests were in a way continuous with theirs [dissidents’], but we differed in our attitude to alcohol. We drank, they did not’ (KV). The alcohol was usually cheap and low-quality, and was consumed in large amounts with small snacks.

Drugs could easily be bought in the environment of the café — they were part of the everyday life of the place. The core group of bohemians in the 1970s, however, were not on hard drugs. Almost all of them tried drugs, but the majority preferred wine. Mass drug use came later, in the 1980s, with the last generation of Saigonees who were closely connected with rock culture (Cushman, 1995). Speaking about her attitude to drugs, KV observed:

There were people in the circle who were on drugs. But I was not among them. It was politically wrong to be a drug-addict. One could be very dependent and used by the authorities for information if one needed a drug badly. And I knew from my childhood that they [people from the ‘official’ society] must not know anything about this [unofficial world].

One story about the circulation of drugs may serve to illustrate the regular routine. Once, two friends were looking round an empty apartment because the municipal authorities wanted them to move there. They found three ampoules of heroin there and decided to sell them immediately to their regular barman for three pints of beer each. They took the heroin to the bar, and when the other barmen asked ‘What are you selling?’ they answered that they were selling books. The deal was done. They obtained wine for the drugs.

The Saigonees’ life stories contain plenty of cases of suicide attempts. Nowadays they recall these with amusement, as juvenile conduct that had been accompanied by feelings of ‘general unhappiness, without real reason’, reinforced by regular heavy drinking.

Sexual practices The Saigon is spoken of as being the site of a revolution in sexual behaviour (Rotkirch, 2000). In such milieu, the sexual ignorance of the wider society, which Kon (1995) has called ‘sexophobia’, was rejected in favour of the practising of sexual freedom. Partners were easily changed and exchanged there; marital or procreative sex was not the norm. The ‘scripts’ of sexuality were various: Temkina (q.v., in this collection) characterises them as — inter alia — romantic, communication-related or market-related. One informant observed:

There were no constant partners there. The whole atmosphere became erotic when women appeared. But no serious romances took place there.

Another informant offered another picture of his sexual youth as he experienced it in the Café Saigon:

We were young and we impatiently looked for a sweetheart. Many of the serious affairs of my life started at the Saigon.

Promiscuous sex is regularly spoken of in connection with the milieu. But for many, sex was not an isolated pleasure — it was the culmination, so to speak, of communication between the sexes, which complemented drinking, the reading of poetry, the singing of songs. Sexual practices were
combined with the consumption of alcohol, admiration for underground art, involvement in the illegal information exchange.

One Saigonee recalled how he visited the student dormitory to meet a well-known loose young woman, who told him: 'Excuse me, I am extremely busy now. I have a book here - they gave it to me just for a night. It is Doctor Zhivago by Pasternak.' At the time this Nobel Prize-winning novel was on the list of proscribed books. The man waited until she had finished reading and afterwards they made love.

Competition over women was part of the intra-group dynamics of the Café Saigon men, and the 'horn-fight' (as one informant called it) provided potential compensation for a lack of other achievements and for anxieties bound up with unfulfilled masculinity. For women, sex provided access to this basically male tusovka, which they appreciated as the setting for liberated sexual practices.

The Saigon tusovka included homosexuals. They were largely disliked in the Saigon as being too 'marginal' even for this place, although levels of sexual tolerance were gradually increasing. KV observed:

I had a couple of gay friends. People from my circle always wondered why I communicated with them. They did not treat them badly - they just avoided them. Now it is different - now my friends and the homosexuals and gays are mutually supportive. Heterosexuals became more tolerant after that period.

Liberated sexual practices in the Saigon milieu also represented one dimension of the cultural protest taking place against Soviet public life, and Soviet norms of family life.

Politics and the Saigonees

There was no articulated political dissent among the habitués of the Saigon:

There was no special political outlook ... it was just a protest ... a demonstration of being different from - were are different, not the same as those belonging to the formal Soviet structures. We do not want to have anything in common with them, neither in work, nor in leisure and consumption, nor in sexuality. (OL)

Nevertheless, the everyday practices of the Saigonees were clearly anti-Soviet. They were constructed as a negation of normative Soviet practices. The people of the Café Saigon had links with late-Soviet dissident groups, were involved in networks which disseminated anti-Soviet literature, and several times attempted collective street actions. One informant characterised his attitudes and conduct as pro-dissident. There was, however, a mutually-felt barrier separating the café people from the dissidents. One of the café regulars observed:

There was a mutual rejection on the part of two groups belonging to the same generation. The traditional dissident was not a habitué of the Café Saigon. He considered this place disgusting. For the dissidents, Café Saigon people were dirty drunken idlers, though sometimes outstanding persons. Dissidents treated Saigonees with contempt as being bohemians - they thought it was necessary to do something [i.e. to be socially active] ...)

Despite this negative perception, almost every Saigonee could be charged with disloyalty towards the regime. Cultural protest too can be conceived of as political in a closed polity.

There were several stories relating to the political involvement of the Saigonees. One informant recalled how he wrote anti-Soviet leaflets with an older friend from the Saigon in his final year at school (1968). His father - a history professor - found this out and stopped it, by telling him that his friend could be a KGB agent provocateur. A Polish sociologist told another story. When he came to Russia for the first time at the end of the 1970s he was supposed to bring and disseminate religious literature, which was also forbidden at that time as being tamizdat. He did not have any acquaintances in Leningrad, but in Poland he was advised to go directly to the Café Saigon, where he would find the appropriate people, and this is what he did. Another story tells of how a family affiliated to the Café Saigon tusovka hid away a copy of the Dissident Archive (literature, self-published or published abroad, denouncing Soviet rule), but did not actually see this as a dissident act. The informant recalled how he had found out that the family had had the Archive under their sofa - the cat urinated on it, and his wife was comically shouting at this wretched cat which had destroyed the Archive. Still one more story reports the attempted public demonstration on the anniversary of the Decembrists' uprising of 1825. The Decembrists (the revolutionaries of noble origin) had a symbolic meaning for those who protested against Soviet authoritarianism. On 14 December 1975 a group of Saigonees went to Decembrists Square for a rally. On their way, many of them were arrested for being drunk or on a similar pretext.

One of my informants, K, recalled that he had had a photo of Solzhenitsyn on the wall of his room in the 1970s. His mother was afraid that visitors would recognise the famous dissident writer. The lady argued: 'It's OK with you. You will just be imprisoned for doing this, but I will be
fired – it is much worse.’ She relaxed when one of her distant relatives, looking at the photo, remarked: ‘K is very like his grandfather, isn’t he? ’

As regards political attitudes in this milieu, I wish to emphasise that among the core Café Saigon tushovka there were no Communist Party members – or if there were, they preferred to conceal the fact. One informant summed up this attitude as follows: ‘A simple feeling of prudery made me avoid membership of the CPSU.’

Saigonees report that they did not conceive their anti-Communist stand and their dissemination of anti-Soviet and illegal literature as political protest, for two reasons. One was the fact that, unlike the dissidents, they were not involved in open political action. The second reason was the general unseriousness of the tushovka, which rejected any kind of public demonstration of feeling and pretended to be distanced from vulgar politics. It was this lack of public political involvement which, they reflected, made it impossible for them to identify themselves with the laconic arguments of the earnest fighters for human rights:

I was not afraid of any imprisonment, because I was a stupid, naive and infantile man and never thought of such things. And I still think, just as I thought at that time, that I never participated in dissent. Well, there were cases – Jakir, Krasin, Sinyavskii, Daniel – but those people really did something. They disseminated literature, wrote something. I was loyal to the regime because I was not involved in any protest action and I wrote scripts for the mass performances. (K)

I was not even arrested. And I think that was because they don’t arrest chatterboxes such as we were. They knew that it was not serious. (G)

In spite of what they said, many Saigonees were considered political dissidents by the authorities. There are several accounts of the interrogation of Saigonees by the KGB. It was usual for the KGB to charge them with dissemination of illegal literature and to demand that they would inform on people from the Café Saigon milieu or on other suspicious contacts.

Café Saigon and the Public

In this section, I focus on perceptions about the Café Saigon tushovka held by residents of the city – ordinary Soviet people. Outsiders’ attitudes clearly demonstrated the boundaries that existed between countercultural milieux and wider Soviet society. Most Leningrad citizens considered the Saigon dirty and ugly, even dangerous, and obviously unfriendly. The rules of decent behaviour in the Café Saigon tushovka can be reduced to one main principle: to have as few bonds with the wider society as possible, to be separated from it in as many ways as possible. On the other hand, ordinary Soviet people considered it indecent to visit the Saigon or to have contacts with the marginal tushovka:

‘Decent’ was [for EV’s family and its milieu] quite a broad concept, including not only moral image. The charge of indecent behaviour, or the phrase itself, was quite heavy. It alienated the person and put them among a crowd which included all indecent people, who did not know either limits or tact, who did not have serious concepts of real life, who were ignorant and badly educated. In his youth [EV here speaks of himself, in the third person], V. was often on the border between decent and indecent in the opinion of his parents. (EV; unemployed poet, b. 1945)

Thus we can conclude that, for ordinary Soviet people, decent behaviour was incompatible with Café Saigon affiliation. One female informant vividly expressed popular attitudes towards the Café Saigon tushovka:

I did not like to go to the Saigon – all my life, I don’t know why. I got to know about the place quite early, when still at school … Everybody knew that the other youth met up there – weird people, different people. I can’t say in what sense … Maybe my negative perception of the place was in the tradition of our upbringing, the upbringing of the positive kids living in this neighbourhood – that it is not a really a den, but something horrible, that something bad is coming together at this place. No, I don’t mean anti-Soviet, not at all … How to explain? … It was something not good, not very clean. Now we use words such as drug-addict, drunkard, prostitute, God knows, something like that … I was afraid of getting dirty there. (IT)

For this woman as for many others, the café was an indecent place, occupied by those on the margins of society.

Many informants recall how their relatives tried to isolate them from the bad influence of the Café Saigon milieu, that was addicting them to an immoral, dangerous lifestyle. Spouses and parents, militia and Komsomol tried to normalise the lifestyle of the people of this tushovka. All in vain: they were already marginal, and official sanctions did not work for them. Thus, NG recollects how his misbehaviour (absenting himself from lectures, drinking in the university, keeping bad company) was discussed and condemned at the Komsomol bureau. The bureau officials voted to fire
him from the Komzomol, and were greatly surprised when they found out that he had never been a member of the Communist Youth Organisation.

Parents tried to prevent their children from going to Café Saigon; affiliation to the tusovka could cause family conflicts. One informant (KV) recalled: 'I brought my new friends home occasionally, but I never told my parents where I had picked them up. And I was afraid of my mamma. I always told her lies.'

The Café Saigon generation demonstrated their distance from their parents, the sixties generation. Informants described to me their complex attitude towards the older generation, who on the one hand were critical of Soviet officialdom but on the other were well integrated into Soviet society and often held official posts within it. Many Saigonees belonged to the well-established, high-status families of the Soviet intelligentsia, who were involved in leading hypocritical 'double lives'. On the one hand, they were well integrated into Soviet public life as university professors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, doctors. On the other, many of the parents were involved in the 'shadow-life' of this society: they read and disseminated samizdat, visited underground exhibitions, seminars and poetry events, and used the strategy of informal favours to get scarce goods.

One informant recalled that when she had entered school at the age of seven, her mother had warned her never to tell in school what she had heard at home, or else the whole family would be in trouble. The burden of hypocrisy lay heavily on future Saigonees. From 'family knowledge' and from samizdat they learnt the truth about the regime, and did not want to follow the hypocritical path of their parents. The double lives of the Soviet intelligentsia – the discrepancy between official-public and private-public spheres (Voronkov and Chikadze, in this volume) – were condemned by their children. Thus the younger generation constituted an 'alternative' segment of the public sphere, and 'lived by passion' (Rotkirch, 2000). Indicative in this respect is the confession of one informant, NG, whose family had belonged to the Soviet intelligentsia for three generations: 'To tell the truth I've always been ashamed of my family. I couldn't see how they could manage to live safely through the entire Soviet period and never suffer repression. It was strange and unbelievable. It meant that something was wrong about them.'

The research shows that the informal-public sphere, and the Saigon tusovka as a segment of it, had a strong influence on the wider society, and gradually penetrated it. The rock culture of the later generation of Saigonees was especially important here. By the end of the 1980s this had become an urban mass culture. One informant reflected:

Komsomol leaders of the 1970s and '80s listened to Viktor Zoi and Boris Grebenshchikov, and gradually the second culture imposed its values on the first. It was a total offensive of the second culture on the first, which led to its overthrow. I would say that all the evils and virtues of Café Saigon are reflected in contemporary life. (OL)

Encounters with the Militia

Habitués of the Café Saigon often had encounters with the militia. Regular militia raids searched for drunks and drug-addicts – this was a common practice, a regular part of Saigon life. There were two main reasons for the Saigonees' conflicts with the militia: their sponging (joblessness), and their drinking and hooliganism. When they were threatened on the charge of sponging they managed to find a job in a couple of days. Regular raids in the Café Saigon area searched for speculators and drug-dealers. In recalling these encounters, however, respondents report that militia officers were often quite friendly towards drunks, often letting them go and even helping them to reach their apartments. The fines were pretty low: official information about detention at the sobering-up stations was sent to the workplace and was supposed to bring about such sanctions as public condemnation by the work collective, or a cut in monthly bonuses. Such a record could be bad for one's career. The Saigonees did not care much about the latter, however. They were not oriented towards upward mobility; they tried to avoid work in the Soviet collectives, and their record of drunkenness and hooliganism in public places did not influence their lowly occupational status.

The Demise of Café Saigon: The Saigonees Today

The Café still functioned, but fewer and fewer people of my age visited it. By the end of the 1970s there were a great many young people of a younger generation whom we regarded with contempt, and they probably reacted in the same way. (VT)

Café Saigon enjoyed almost three decades of history, and there were both similarities and certain differences between the tusovka generations. The similarities were structural: the people of the café belonged to the margins of society, both in the 1970s and the '80s. They can be looked upon as
members of an underclass in late-Soviet society which had been consolidated by a common marginality and by the opportunities offered by the tusovka life.

The exodus from the Café Saigon had different causes. First, the first generation of café dwellers was forced out by the new Saigonese. These were the hippies and the young people of the Soviet rock generation. (They called themselves ‘the people of the System’.) The ‘Silver Age’ poetry, the dissident literature, were outside their field of interest. They created their own urban art, which was not appreciated by the Saigonese of the 1970s, who considered it unprofessional, provincial, and insufficiently refined.

As for the Saigonese of the 1970s who are the focus of this chapter, we can observe how, with the passage of years and the social changes it brought, they flew away from the Café Saigon territory. Some of them died; others emigrated; others again became integrated into the wider society, leaving their youthful protest behind. In certain cases their occupational status did not allow them to hold to a marginal tusovka — they became ‘decent’ people. Still others maintained their lifestyle, but more privately, without visiting this group territory any more. By the mid-1980s, the tusovka of the 1970s had finally dissolved.

When we consider the untimely demise of the notable Saigonese we have to recall Sergi Charnyj, who died in 1995 at the age of 39 from a drug overdose; Leon Karamyan, who died in 1990 in a car accident in the Crimea aged 34; and ‘Kit’, who was killed in a street fight in 1981 at the age of 32.

The democratic protests of perestroika brought many Saigonese back on to the city streets, which focused their minds better than any sobering-up station. Their future in post-Soviet times was different from their past. One informant quipped that it depended very much on the ‘influence long-term vodka consumption and promiscuous sex had on one’s organism’. Many managed to escape final self-destruction — more or less successfully, they developed coping strategies during the chaos of transformation. During the reforms, those Saigonese who had survived and had not emigrated followed different careers from before. Some of them became professionally successful, since the previously unsalable alternative art now appeared to be marketable. Nevertheless many others remained part of a bohemian underclass. Those people who had been involved in the Soviet shadow economy later created their own small businesses. One such, for example, is now head of the Business Corporation of St Petersburg. Another famous Saigon figure, K, became completely marginal, though he had been expected to gain a new lease of life during the transition. Among the former Saigonese we may mention EV, who felt so uncomfortable in the new climate that he did not step over the threshold of his apartment for almost ten years, although during those same years he had two collections of his poetry published. His best friend, KB, meanwhile, organised political theatre in the late 1980s and became a theatre director supported by the newly democratic authorities of Leningrad. During the same period, former underground artists opened galleries and studios.

The life course of a Saigonese in transition depends on the capital resources they have left after their years of shadow-practices in the tusovka, which had presumed heavy self-destruction with only partial opportunities for self-realisation. These people had the experience of being autonomous from the state protection afforded the members of the Soviet collectives, and they knew that they had to rely exclusively on their own initiative as regards their achievements. When they had enough energy, and were not destroyed by habitual heavy drinking or by psychological self-destruction, they managed to find their place in the emerging post-Soviet order of the unsubsidised market and democratic openings. At the end of the 1980s they entered the emerging public sphere and stopped frequenting the Café Saigon.

By the end of 1991 the coffee shop had closed down and had been converted into a store selling toilets made in Italy, which the Café Saigon public saw as a symbol of the drastic social change taking place and of the vanishing of the Soviet underground. In the early 1990s there was much discussion in the mass media about the fate of the Café Saigon as a symbol of late-Soviet cultural protest: people wanted to commemorate their tusovka.

The story is not finished. In general, the stories of communities never come to an end. In this case, they live in the memories and destines of the Saigonese. New stories will, I believe, be told about other places in the city that formed the sites of whatever freedom was enjoyed during the Soviet period. But the charm of the bohemian ambience, the joyful absurdity of bohemian practices, will never be as strong as they were in the habitus of the Café Saigon. Let me end this chapter with one of the last stories told about the Saigonese. What its moral may be I do not know. There is a true story told about EK, who at one time seemed to have become utterly lost. The last time (1994) I met him, near the central market-place, he was unrecognisable in comparison with how he had looked in his young years: he was drinking with the beggars and street-vendors at the church gate.
Now, rumour has it that he has won the LOTTO-bingo lottery and has changed his lifestyle completely.

Conclusion

The Café Saigon tusovka has been considered in this chapter as a segment of the informal-public sphere of late-Soviet society. The Saigon tusovka is characterised by ambiguous practices of, on the one hand, creative, artistic production and, on the other, self-destruction. The key feature of the Saigon style is an absurdist humour, which symbolised the distance between the tusovka and the ‘official’ public life of Soviet society. The network of Saigonees did not constitute a Soviet collective. They were an ephemeral community of individuals united by everyday cultural protest against the officially-approved Soviet way of life. Opportunities for the tusovka opened out in the late 1960s. On the one hand, without a certain degree of political liberalisation, a bohemia is not possible. The tusovka as a social milieu presumed exclusionary communication in the informal-public sphere, either via face-to-face encounters or else mediated by the exchange of information in the form of books, samizdat, tamizdat, magnitizdat, gossip and anecdotes.

Representing as it did the cultural idiom of the late-Soviet public realm, the Café Saigon tusovka has no possibility of existence in today’s Russia. Political liberalisation and market reforms drastically change social arrangements. With glasnost, it became possible to articulate one’s political views, to fulfil oneself via creative art. As people now say: ‘If you want to say that your President is stupid, just do it, wherever. You don’t need a special place to do this.’ Former Saigonees now have differing political orientations: the spectrum ranges from radical right to social-democratic. The marketisation and monetarisation of everyday life are not conducive to the Saigon lifestyle:

In this society, people of the underclass and artists affiliated to them cannot survive, because even the cheapest coffee is pretty costly. If you don’t have a regular salary then you either whirl about, which means that you don’t have time for meditation and philosophy, or you are totally lost – you go to the bottom, psychologically and in psychiatric terms. (TK)

The character of bohemia is rapidly changing in the post-Soviet conditions, and these people are now dependent on sponsors.

Why was the Saigon, being a site of cultural protest, not suppressed by the Soviet authorities? Why was this informal-public sphere of tusovki allowed to exist? I have here tried to show that the Saigon tusovka was an essential part of the division of late-Soviet society, which included official and non-official (or informal-public) spheres. One informant put it as follows:

The Saigon was not destroyed by the authorities, because you could show it off as the bride shows to the folk of the village the bloody sheet after the first marriage-night. It was meant to convince people that we also had freedom. It was part of the institutionalised double standard and hypocrisy. It was a telling demonstration of the Soviet type of freedom which said to the outside world, ‘Look – there is a gang of dirty anti-Soviets who run their club in the very centre of town, just two steps from the Big House [the KGB building], and we are tolerant. We consider it normal.’ (GO)

All the attitudes and practices that have been described above served to distance the Saigon tusovka from the ‘official’ Soviet public. The life-story analysis shows that the Saigonees did not develop any upward mobility strategies. They did not earn money, conform to ideological patterns, undertake family responsibilities; their lives were wasted, useless and self-destructive in the eyes of the wider society – they did not have any normative perspectives. The freedom they enjoyed was the freedom of marginal existence, marginal activities. This was the freedom of cultural protest against the Soviet way of life, freedom for partial self-realisation via underground art, freedom for psychological self-destruction. The people of the Café Saigon tusovka did not adhere to the usual schizophrenic ‘double standard’ upheld by regular Soviet citizens: their life was a comprehensive social protest, and there was no divergence between their lifestyle and their values of negation. Their group practices and their individual conduct united incompatibles. On the one hand, we can see here the first signs of the emergence of the independent individual who opposes the system in every possible way – especially at the symbolic level, and even at the level of body idioms. A Saigonee was an autonomous individual who rejected the normative social bonds of the Soviet collectives. On the other hand, this protest was combined with long-term experience of marginality and self-destruction. The longer a person of the Saigon tusovka was engaged in their marginal lifestyle, the more complete was their self-destruction, and the fewer the opportunities they had to exploit the new opportunities opened up by the reforms.
Notes

1 Viktor Voronkov and Elena Chikadze, in this volume, claim that late-Soviet society was characterised by a split between official-public and private-public spheres, which were arranged according to two different sets of rules: written law regulating behaviour in official-public settings, and common law regulating non-official settings. The informal-public sphere which I discuss here represents the same phenomenon as the private-public sphere so named by Voronkov and Chikadze. I focus here mainly on the spaces and rules of a particular version of this sphere – the life of the *tušovka*. A similar realm of shadowy non-official activities carried on in late-Soviet societies despite party-state control is discussed by Shlyapentokh, Ionin, Yanitskii and others using different terminology (Ionin, 1997; Ledeneva, 1998; Rotkirch, 2000; Shlyapentokh, 1989; Yanitskii, 1993).

2 Richard Stites, Thomas Cushman and Hilary Pilkington have already introduced the term *tušovka* to the Western reader. Cushman offers the following description: ‘Common-sense interpretations trace the word *tušovka* from the verb ‘*tušovat*’ meaning ‘to shuffle’ in ‘to shuffle cards’. The slang usage of *tušovat* is ‘to gather’, ‘to get together’’ (Cushman, 1995, p. 226). Stites (in Cushman) defines *tušovka* as ‘a hangout, crash pad or happening among hippies and rock fans’. This definition captures the essence of the *tušovka* as either ‘a happening’ or a specific place where those engaged in a similar type of collective action ‘hang out’ (Cushman, 1995, p. 365). Cushman writes: ‘The word is used to describe a number of phenomena. First, it describes a group of people who are simply united by the common interest in something. The second sense of the word *tušovka* describes a discrete happening, event, or gathering … I would like to argue that the idea of *tušovka* best describes the sense of collectivity which musicians feel as a result of their common activity as counterculturalists’ (Cushman, 1995, p. 168). He continues: ‘The very idea of *tušovka* connotes an alternative collective, a meeting of individuals who are united by common interest in something which is not part of the official Soviet world.’ Pilkington (1994) applies this term to the youth culture of the 1970s and 1980s, relating it to such groups as the *sylyagi*, the *gopniki* and the *pinki*.

3 Soviet toponymics, including the names of theatres, streets, plants, shops, restaurants and cafes, were not given arbitrarily, but had to be affirmed by the party-state bodies. The café I am discussing here was affiliated to the restaurant Moskva.

4 Housing conditions in Russia, in Leningrad in particular, have been very spartan for the majority of the population. At the beginning of the 1980s, 40 per cent of families lived in communal flats. The presence of multi-generational families brought about a literal absence of private space. One should add that there were very few sites for informal public communication either (Geraimova, 1999).

5 In calling this breakfast ‘modest’ the narrator is here being ironic: three roubles is a large sum in this context.

6 The term ‘atmosphere’ is used here to signify the *habitus* of this place, which is difficult to categorise but which can easily be felt, smelt and recognised, both by insiders and outsiders.

7 I aim to explore the gender structure of the Saigon community in a future publication.

8 NTS: an anti-Soviet organisation with headquarters in the USA.

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