Editor’s Introduction

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At the center of the ninth issue of SISC is the question of alternative cultures, which usually exist in the margins of, within, or as a subset of official, mainstream culture. Some scholars may see alternative cultures as a modified continuation of this main culture; some scholars argue that it usually has some mode of resistance against or animosity toward the dominant cultural forms. Some alternative cultures appear as a way of adapting and surviving in changing social and ideological conditions; other alternative cultures offer their own unique modes of expression and representation. Even the definition of alternative culture (unlike counterculture) implies not only a possibility of choice and of pluralism, but also indicates that, in one way or another, these choices are accepted or tolerated by the mainstream culture. Slavic alternative cultures can be an interesting and yet at the same time, a challenging subject of study for historians and Slavists, as well as scholars of literature and cultural studies. Records regarding unofficial and underground cultures may not be available to researchers, or may become public many years after the cultural event. These concerns are especially relevant in the case of former Soviet and Eastern European countries, where the dominant cultural history was constructed and polished, and all data and cultural artifacts not in compliance with socialist ideas and values were destroyed, censored, concealed, shelved, or recast. The ninth issue of SISC is interested in reconstructing, reinterpreting, and reevaluating these cultural texts. Scholarly approaches to alternative cultures may utilize different strategies. Some focus on the question of how an alternative culture perceives and presents itself (“an internal approach”); others explore how alternative cultures are represented by outsiders, by people who do not belong to this specific group or community (“an external approach”). The four essays in the current issue of SISC use these different strategies of academic inquiry in the study of Slavic alternative cultures.

Andrea Gullotta’s essay, “The ‘Cultural Village’ of the Solovki Prison Camp: A Case of Alternative Culture,” follows the history of the Solovki prison camp and describes the intellectual culture that
flourished in its early years of existence. Gullotta takes an “internal” approach, relying on documents produced by camp inmates, as well as on memoirs, poems, and other artistic works produced later, but dealing with the camp experience.

Erin Alpert’s essay, “Survival and Community in Memoirs of the Holocaust in Poland,” elaborates some of the issues raised by Gullotta, exploring the alternative communities of the concentration camps and the ghetto’s survivors in Poland during the 1930s. Alpert’s “internal” approach studies memoirs by Jewish survivors who share their traumatic experience with readers many years after leaving the walls of the concentration camps. She gives a detailed analysis of the specificity and characteristics of these alternative communities, and explains how participating in everyday ritualistic events as a member of such communities helped many inmates to survive their difficult years of imprisonment.

In her essay, Holly Myers also explores the historical period of the 1930s, however, she chooses an “external” academic approach for her study of Central Asian cultures and their representations in a popular 1931 book, *Zolotoi telenok* by Il’ia Il’f and Evgenii Petrov. Myers discusses how Il’f and Petrov’s use of satirical devices lets them subtly talk about the impact of Soviet modernism on national cultures of Central Asia.

The final essay in the volume, Sasha Hedges Steinberg’s essay, “Russia’s LGBT Community in a ‘Time of Slavery’: An Alternative Dialogue,” continues the “internal” academic approach in examining the current Russian LGBT community through the lens of race theory. Relying on current writings and interviews, Steinberg describe how current LGBT-identifying individuals view themselves, as well as how they position themselves in relation to mainstream society.

The uniting element of all four papers is a study of cultures not previously examined or satisfactorily elucidated. The authors’ intentions are to fill some of the gaps in Slavic cultural studies by offering their unique and rich analyses of different phenomena of varying alternative cultures: a cultural inheritance of intellectuals in the Solovki in Russia, alternative Jewish communities in Polish concentration camps, representations of the Oriental “Other” in popular Soviet literature, and a self-portrayal of contemporary Russian queer groups on the Internet. The authors of these papers rely on a variety of cultural and scholarly sources: memoirs, poetry, press, popular literary genres, critical articles, web-sites, and personal interviews.