Summary

The history of the Leningrad underground is one of the key themes of late socialism. Samizdat, ‘black humour’, religious syncretism, dissidence, apolitical bohemianism, the pathos of freedom of individuality and the mechanics of literature are closely interlinked with the cultural mythology of this passed epoch. Describing conceptions that, when taken together, form the contemporary understanding of unofficial culture, the author creates a historical portrait of this environment. Amongst the central figures here, there are well-known writers (Bitov, Brodsky, Dovlatov, Khvostenko, Krivulin) and literary activists who still await recognition. The analysis of works, many of which were only distributed in typewritten publications in the 1960s-1980s, gives a preliminary definition of the key factors that united the authors of the unofficial community.

The book begins with a critique of the identification of the Soviet underground with political dissidence or with a society living in autonomous independence with regard to the state. Describing the historical development of the various names for this environment (the underground, samizdat, unofficial culture, podpolie and others), the author follows the genesis of the community from its appearance, in the years of ‘the Thaw’, through to perestroika, when it dissolved. Taking the history of the publication of Bitov’s ‘The Pushkin House’ as an example, the concept of the unofficial is interpreted as a risky interaction with the authorities. Unofficial culture is then viewed as a late Soviet reflection of the Western underground in the 1950s-1960s. Unlike the radical-utopian-anarchistic source, it proclaimed a liberalist and democratic ideology in the context of the destruction of the socialist utopia.

The historical portrait of the community is built up from the perceptions of its members regarding literature practice and rhetorical approaches, with the aid of which these perceptions are expressed. Taking typewritten publications as source material, four main representations are given: privacy, deviancy, criticism and irrationality. An understanding of literature as a private affair, neo-avant-garde deviancy in social and literary behaviour and the pathos of the critical relationship with officialdom and irrational message of literary work, comprise the basis for the worldview of unofficial authors, as well as the poetic system, genre preferences and dictums. An analysis of irrationality, based on the texts of Khvostenko and Bogdanov, leads to a review of the cultural mythologies that were crucial to the unofficial conception of the absurd.

Absurd is an homonym. It contains ideas that are important for the worldview of unofficial authors and the poetics of their works. The irrationality of the Soviet order is reflected in the documentary nature of the satirical prose of Dovlatov. The existential absurd of Camus is perceived here as the pointlessness of social realities and the ontological alienation of man, while existentialist practices for consciousness in the ‘atmosphere of absurd’ remain bracketed off. The third homonym of absurd – the conception of reality as an illusion – is a clear demonstration of religious syncretism, where neo-Christian ideas are interweaved with a modernized version of Hinduism, as taken from Rolland’s books on
Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. The unofficial community was influenced by the ideology of westernization. Even ‘the East’ arrived here via French retellings and accounts.

As a whole, unofficial Leningrad culture can be understood as a neo-modernist phenomenon which, unlike the western neo-modernism of the 1940s and 1950s, arose in the years of the Thaw and ended its existence in the mid-1980s.