A brief history of shadow libraries

In and outside of Russia
Shadow Libraries
Access to Knowledge in Global Higher Education
MIT Press, 2018

open access
The rise and fall of legal digital libraries

Project Gutenberg (1971), archive.org, google books, Hathi Trust

The digitization and online circulation of printed works requires right holder authorization.

From 1990’s onwards many western library project moved underground
There are many shadow libraries

Illegal text collections serving scholarly learning, literary communities
- local: SLP (HU), Chomikuj (PL), lib.ru (RU)
- Thematic: Aaaargh, monokop, comics
- Platform-specific: #ICanHazPDF, r/Scholar, IRC, torrent trackers, calibre / MotW
- Defunct: Gigapedia...
But two stand out in reach, visibility and catalogue

Library Genesis - ~3.2M academic books
Sci-Hub – ~88M journal articles
Both projects originated in and operate from post-Soviet contexts.

why?
Copyright tradition

Soviet IP protection prioritized knowledge import, spreading and access (free translations, no foreign © till 1973)
Copyright history and present

Soviet/Russian IP protection frameworks have historically been detached from the international IP frameworks, and to a certain extent this is still the case. A relatively lax and selective enforcement environment
literary tradition / community

Soviet U/Russia as a reading nation, proud of its literary traditions

strong norms of commonality and of knowledge sharing, which developed in opposition to Soviet era censorship and supply problems
Political legacy

Samizdat culture: skills and practices of producing, circulating, collecting books through clandestine networks
Institutional history

Soviet/Russian higher-ed and research institutions had access to computers, but lacked access to knowledge

Produced huge scientific digital text collections, both Russian and English which circulated on CDs, DVDs, and later online.

Gigapedia grew out of the English section of Kolkhoz, the biggest such scientific collection.
Social norms around the balance of community interests and authorship

No post-WWII history of private, corporate encroachment of public interest, and enclosure of public domain

successful (moral) entrepreneurs in the informal digital domain, who contributed to the development of strong social norms around informal text digitization, collection and archiving in the post-Soviet era.
Technological legacy

Limited access to photocopy tech meant print culture went straight digital
Present

A unique alliance between center and periphery:

Academics at the center (with and without access) team up with academics at the periphery. Center provides content, periphery provides freedom.