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Dissent and Religion in the USSR

Dissidents are individuals who publicly protest regime actions or express ideas that the regime finds contrary to its interests. They do not constitute an organized opposition seeking political power. Intellectual dissidents involved in the human rights movement challenge the regime in the realm of ideas but not in the realm of politics, at least not so far. Other forms of dissent--the emigration movement, religion--basically represent attempts to escape authority rather than to change the system.

Intellectual Dissent

Intellectual dissent began in the early 1960s, when Khrushchev's move toward destalinization gave rise to false expectations of a wider internal liberalization. Khrushchev's ouster in 1964 represented the victory of conservative reaction within the Soviet leadership; repression of dissent increased, especially intensifying after the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. Human rights dissent revived on a smaller scale in the mid-1970s, when detente and the signing of the CSCE Accords once again stimulated hopes that strictures on basic human rights would be relaxed. Instead, the Kremlin moved forcefully against the small groups that were attempting to publicize regime violations of the CSCE human rights provisions. Today the human rights movement is at a low ebb and Sakharov, its most prominent and articulate representative, is isolated in the provincial city of Gorky.

Although these human rights dissidents are well known in the West, they command little support in the USSR itself. Many people see them as a self-interested, unpatriotic lot that serve the purposes of Western intelligence services. The regime has had considerable success in exploiting popular anti-

Semitic feelings as a weapon against the dissidents. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] groups such as the CSCE monitoring group are commonly viewed as little more than devices for Jews wanting to leave the country. Sakharov is something of an exception. In some intellectual circles his confinement in [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] most Soviet artists admired him as a noble figure.

More influential than the human rights dissidents are a group of intellectual writers who have a strongly nationalist orientation. While taking care to avoid criticizing the regime directly, they call for a moral regeneration of Russia on the basis of traditional values and Russian Orthodoxy--much as Solzhenitsyn does. These nationalist writers reportedly have become cultural heroes who articulate the discontent of large numbers of people with the Soviet system as a whole.

Also influential are the growing number of cultural figures who have emigrated--such as the prominent writer Vladimov, who left in 1983, and the avant garde theater director Liubimov, who departed in 1984. Many intellectuals remaining in the USSR have become "inner emigres" who follow the affairs and writings of the emigre community with great interest through the medium of Western radio broadcasting. This has in effect created an alternative Russian cultural center that many Soviet intellectuals find more vigorous and appealing than the stultifying official Soviet culture. The renewal of jamming of Radio Liberty has reduced the access of Soviet intellectuals to news from the emigre community, but some broadcasting still gets through.

Soviet leaders appear keenly concerned that the ideas of the small group of active dissidents could have resonance within the intelligentsia as a

whole. Their public statements suggest they are worried about the political reliability of the intelligentsia, and [REDACTED] apprehension that the popularity of the nationalist writers could turn Russian national feeling into anti-regime channels. Above all, the leadership probably fears that conservative Russian nationalism appeals even to many elites--perhaps especially within the military--who are concerned that the party has become too effete and corrupt to rule the country effectively. EO 12958 1.6(d)(1)>10<25Yrs (S)

[REDACTED] some leaders fear that popular grievances over living conditions could converge with the protests of intellectual dissidents about human rights abuses. As early as 1977, for example, during a period of tight food supplies, [REDACTED] Soviet leaders were "acutely aware" of countrywide criticism of food shortages, and [REDACTED] the leadership feared easing restrictions on dissidents could abet a trend of criticism in the country and create an "explosive" climate. Since the late Brezhnev years, [REDACTED] concern within the elite that unrest could become widespread. Events in Poland probably increased leadership sensitivities about the possibility of coordination between Soviet intellectual dissidents and worker dissidents--who since the late 1970s have made several attempts to organize unofficial trade unions. There has in fact been little such cooperation to date. EO 12958 1.6(d)(1)>10<25Yrs (S)

### Religion

By far the most dramatic development in Soviet dissent in recent years has been the extraordinary burgeoning of religion. The most important reason for this phenomenon seems to be simply that many citizens are seeking spiritual refuge from what they see as the drabness and moral emptiness of contemporary Soviet life. The growth of religion is of concern to Soviet authorities for several reasons:

-- In many areas religion reinforces anti-Russian nationalism. In Lithuania and the western part of Ukraine, where probably a majority of the population is Catholic, the church has historically been associated with strivings for independence from Russia. Similarly, in Soviet Central Asia the Islamic religion has provided a rallying point for those resisting Russian domination--as, for example, during the Basmachi revolt of the 1920s, which took many years for the regime to suppress.

-- Unlike intellectual dissent, religion has a mass base even in Russian areas. Protestant fundamentalism is growing in newly industrialized areas of the Russian republic, and Russian Orthodoxy is attracting adherents in the older cities of the Russian heartland.

-- Increasingly, religion cuts across class and generational lines. Religion is growing among blue collar workers as well as among the educated classes. And, for the first time since 1917, religion is attracting large numbers of Russian youth. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] many Soviet young people were turning to religion as a way of expressing dissent.

-- Religion opens the door to external influences. The election of a Slavic Pope served as a stimulus to religious activity in the Western borderlands of the USSR, where the Catholic clergy has long maintained clandestine ties with the church hierarchy in Poland. The resurgence of Islamic Fundamentalism in the Middle East, and the war in

Afghanistan, have raised Muslim consciousness in Soviet Central Asia, leading to several incidents of unrest there.

Most religious believers in the USSR are members of "registered" or "official" churches who abide by the regime's strictures on religious activity--such as the ban on proselytizing and on religious instruction for children--in exchange for being allowed to worship in peace. Clergy for these churches must be approved by the regime and some of them serve as propagandists for regime policy--using their sermons to preach the party line regarding foreign policy, for example. The regime attempts to use these official churches to keep the activities of religious believers under close surveillance and supervision. It especially uses the official Russian Orthodox Church as an instrument of imperialism, by giving it special privileges (more Bibles, more church buildings) to enable it to lure believers away from churches associated with anti-Russian nationalism.

Similarly, the regime exploits the visits of well-intentioned foreign religious leaders such as Billy Graham. Such visits assist the regime in publicizing the existence of "religious freedom" in the USSR. And, by allowing visiting ministers to preach at official churches but not to outlawed congregations, the regime enlists their tacit sanction for the official churches as the "legitimate" ones. Despite the fact that the regime attempts to use the official churches for its own purposes, however, the growing numbers worshipping in these churches testifies to the failure of Marxist ideology in competing with old-fashioned religion for the "hearts and minds" of the Soviet population.

More significantly, the number of unofficial congregations of all faiths appears to be increasing. Many of these groups have developed clandestine

communications networks that enable them to collect thousands of signatures on a country-wide basis for petitions, and regularly to publish illegal literature (samizdat).

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-- In Ukraine a semi-secret Catholic church organization reportedly has [REDACTED] priests conducting services illegally. Since the summer of 1984, ten issues of a new samizdat "Chronicle of the Ukrainian Catholic Church" have appeared.

-- In Lithuania, a Catholic Committee for the Defense of Believers' Rights has been active in petitioning for an end to repressive legislation against religion. The "Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church," which first appeared in 1972, remains one of the most vigorous samizdat journals in the country.

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-- The unregistered Protestant sects--especially the Baptists and Pentecostals--are attracting large numbers of rural, factory and white collar workers throughout the country. Many of these groups are zealous to the point of being fanatic in protesting such regime measures as "accidental" burnings of churches and forcible removals of children from parents' homes to prevent their receiving a religious upbringing. They respond to repression by engaging in mass civil disobedience --such as burning internal passports and resisting induction into the military. One isolated [REDACTED] village is virtually at war with the regime. It has engaged in continuing protests for several years, including [REDACTED] community hunger strikes. Thousands of Pentecostals continue to apply for emigration visas

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despite the regime's absolute refusal to grant them. With the assistance of some registered Baptist congregations, the unofficial Baptists publish [redacted] samizdat journals, one of which is printed in a thousand copies monthly.

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-- [redacted] in Muslim areas of Central Asia and the Caucasus a fully developed underground religious structure exists. [redacted] illegal seminaries are educating mullahs who teach Islam to children in unofficial mosques. [redacted] [redacted] Soviet Central Asians are demanding more power for the Muslim clergy at the expense of the party.

Regime Repression

During the 1980s the regime has resorted to harsher repression of dissent than it has employed since Stalin's day. 1979 was a watershed year. With the invasion of Afghanistan, Soviet leaders became less concerned to avoid antagonizing Western leaders and public opinion. With the outbreak of unrest in Poland, they became more concerned to crack down on dissent inside the USSR itself.

In 1982 the regime tightened the screws even more. The intensification of repression coincided with the political ascendancy of Andropov, and there has been no let-up under Gorbachev. The crackdown on dissent is consistent with his overall effort to shore up discipline, reassert party control in various areas of life, increase ideological purity, and heighten vigilance against "alien" ideas. The current head of the KGB, Chebrikov, [redacted] reportedly an ally of Gorbachev, has been in the forefront of those taking a hard line against dissent. Chebrikov [redacted]

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[REDACTED] and has been actively involved in supervising repression of dissent. [REDACTED]  
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Since 1979 several new tactics have been employed: the arrest of dissidents on various false criminal rather than political charges; planting drugs and other incriminating evidence in the residences of dissidents to provide the basis for such charges; the resentencing on trumped-up charges of dissidents already serving terms to prevent their release on schedule; increased confinement in psychiatric hospitals; increased harassment of foreign contacts of dissidents and other actions designed to curtail dissident communication with foreigners, such as changing the legal code to broaden the definition of what constitutes a "state secret," which would make it easier to bring treason charges against dissidents who talk to foreigners; inducting dissidents into the military; increased use of violence both against political prisoners and against dissidents still "at large."

Regime brutality has intimidated many dissidents into a complete cessation of activity, but others have merely been driven underground. Some of these--seeing no prospect for change within the system, having no dreams for the future, and disillusioned about the effectiveness of Western support--are advocating more radical tactics of protest, such as the formation of opposition groups with political action programs. Last year several dissidents were arrested for setting up a Social Democratic Party that called for a multi-party democracy. Other dissidents report a "kamikaze" attitude among some embittered youth, a tendency to glorify personal sacrifices made for the sake of the cause. A spirit of despair and a readiness to become martyrs is even more pronounced in some Christian communities--especially the persecuted Pentecostals, Baptists and Ukrainian Catholics, who seem to take



the view that they have "nothing to lose but their chains." At the same time, with the door to emigration all but closed for Soviet Jews, many of them have also become bolder and more active in pressing for cultural freedoms for Jews EO 12958 1.6(d)(1)-10<25Yrs (S)  
inside the USSR.

Over the past several years there have been a few [redacted] terrorist incidents in the USSR. [redacted] guns are now available on the black market [redacted]

[redacted] In an environment of harsh repression, the possibility cannot be discounted that opposition to the regime might assume more violent forms--especially in areas such as Ukraine that have traditions of armed resistance to Russian rule.

Thus, the Gorbachev leadership confronts a dissident community that is small (except for the religious believers) and demoralized. But a new breed of dissident may be developing that is more hardened, more inclined to engage in extreme forms of protest, and in this sense perhaps more of a problem for the regime.

At the Summit

Soviet leaders probably really do believe that what they do inside their own country is none of our business. They certainly believe that the adversary's internal problems are fair game for propagandists, but probably take the view that injecting criticism of internal policy into high diplomacy is nothing more than a cheap political maneuver.

It is true that for a time in the 1970s, the Soviets were responsive to US overtures on behalf of dissidents, especially with regard to Jewish emigration. But the internal repercussions of detente policies have given many Soviet leaders second thoughts, creating a political climate that is not conducive to internal liberalization. Jewish emigration stirred up other

disaffected minorities who wanted to leave. The departure of prominent intellectuals to the West served as a magnet for those left behind. More generally, in the view of many Soviet officials, the increase in contacts between Soviet citizens and foreigners in the 1970s had a negative effect on the attitudes and behavior of the population. [REDACTED] in 1982, for example, that middle and senior level party officials believed that the economic benefits of detente had been bought at a dangerous political price and that the USSR must now protect itself from being "swamped" by Western ideas by cutting back on social, cultural and political contact with the West.

The US sanctions following the invasion of Afghanistan and the declaration of martial law in Poland also had an effect on the psychology of Soviet officials. Gorbachev himself has seemed especially concerned to avoid becoming vulnerable to US pressure of any sort.

With these practical and psychological factors at work, Gorbachev will probably be extremely unreceptive to appeals on behalf of dissidents. The incentives would have to be powerful for him to consider "concessions" in this area. In any event, any major decision--such as a decision to allow Sakharov to return to Moscow--would probably require consultation with other Politburo members. [REDACTED]