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Dissidence in the USSR []

The Soviet regime's behavior toward dissidents since the highly publicized trials last July has been a mixture of selective repression and guarded tolerance. The regime apparently continues to view the various dissident groups as a serious political problem. But rather than incurring the costs of draconian policies to root out all dissenters, the regime has adopted a twofold strategy to contain the dissent. This entails harassment and at times severe punishment of leading activists, while also permitting increased emigration of Soviet Jews and exercising a cautious flexibility toward other religious and ethnic minorities. The regime's approach has been only partly successful. Although dissident groups remain generally isolated from one another, they have maintained contact with sympathizers in the West, and the spectrum of dissent is somewhat broader than it was six months ago. []

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Morale among most dissident activists and religious groups dropped in the wake of the trials last July. The branches of the Helsinki Monitoring Group have been particularly hard hit. Two of the dissidents sentenced in July, Anatoliy Shcharanskiy and Aleksandr Ginzburg, were members of the Moscow branch, and the group's specialist on governmental psychiatric abuses, Aleksandr Podrabinek, was sentenced to five years of domestic exile in August. At a press conference in September, spokesmen of the Moscow branch told of threats received by persons friendly to the group. They reaffirmed their intention to remain active even though only six of the group's active members were free at that time. []

Branches of the organization in Armenia, Georgia, and Kiev fared no better. Robert Nazaryan, a member of the Armenian branch, was sentenced to a total of seven years confinement and domestic exile for anti-Soviet activities, and Avandil Imnadze, an associate of a member

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of the Georgian branch, received sentences totaling nine years for distributing anti-Soviet literature. The founding member of the Kiev organization, Oles Berdnyk, was picked up by the KGB in December and questioned. Two other members of the Kiev group received sentences for engaging in a strike at their place of employment. []

Last November, various members of the Helsinki Monitoring Group circulated a petition against a new Soviet law that makes it relatively simple for the regime to deny citizenship to dissidents, but in general the group has been relatively inactive in recent months. []

Dissident Soviet physicist Andrei Sakharov, one of the strongest voices for human rights in the USSR, publicly contradicted the Soviet court's verdict against Armenian Nationalists S. S. Zatikyan and two accomplices who were convicted of perpetrating the Moscow subway explosion two years ago and were executed. According to the Western press, Sakharov said that Zatikyan was not even in Moscow at the time of the incident. []

Sakharov, who had been warned a number of times in the past by the authorities not to make such statements, visited the US Embassy recently and gave his impressions of human rights issues in the Soviet Union. Despite reports to the contrary, Sakharov said he was not pessimistic about dissident efforts to foster human rights in the USSR and asserted that authorities will not be able to eliminate the movement or stop its work. []

Moscow's treatment of Soviet Jews is the one clear indication of the regime's willingness to grant limited concessions to some active dissidents. The total number of Jews permitted to emigrate in 1978 exceeded 30,000 and may average 5,000 a month for at least the first part of 1979. This approximates the rate during the peak year of 1973, when nearly 35,000 Soviet Jews emigrated. The backlog of Jews in Odessa applying for exit permits reportedly led the government to open a large, new office to handle the processing. In explaining the higher emigration figures, Soviet Jews point to the Jackson-Vanik amendment, to the larger number of applicants and, increasingly, to a desire by the regime to get rid of "malcontents" before the 1980 summer Olympics in Moscow. []

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The status of the Jewish "refuseniks" (those previously refused exit permits) may also be improving. []

[] some persons formerly denied emigration because they at one time held security clearances will now be permitted to leave. In addition, refusenik scientists held an international scientific conference in December, with three US scientists present, even though authorities had seized some of the conference documents from the residence of one of the organizers and denied visas to five other US scientists who wanted to attend the event. []

The regime's attitude toward various Protestant groups appears to be somewhat ambiguous. The All-Union Council of Evangelical Christian Baptists, for example, was given permission to import 25,000 Russian Bibles; this is the first time a Soviet government has permitted a significant influx of Bibles since 1947 when 10,000 copies were imported. On the other hand, Soviet media continue to inveigh against "Bible smugglers," terming them "paid agents of Western intelligence." []

The US Embassy in Moscow has been deluged with requests by Pentecostals and Baptists to emigrate. Representatives of these groups in the Ukraine, Byelorussia, Lithuania, and the cities of Leningrad and Nakhodka submitted lists containing nearly 2,000 names of members wishing to leave the country. Spokesmen for the groups contend that Soviet emigration officials have told them that their "only hope" is that President Carter will raise the issue with President Brezhnev during the signing of a SALT agreement. A religious activist from a town near Moscow was sentenced to a year in prison for organizing a seminar on the "defense of rights of believers in the USSR." In the Kirgiz Republic two citizens were sentenced to three years in a labor camp for conducting a children's Sunday school. An 84-year-old member of the Seventh Day Adventists, Vladimir Shelkov, is being tried in Tashkent for illegal religious activity because he wrote an eight-volume treatise condemning the "dictatorship of state atheism." Shelkov could get as much as five years imprisonment or internal exile and confiscation of his property if convicted. []

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The spectrum of dissent seems to be broadening once again. In October, an independent "trade union" surfaced in Moscow. Calling itself the Free Inter-Professional Union of Workers, the group focuses on worker grievances ignored by the official trade unions. Reports indicate that the organization lacks internal cohesion and is plagued by diverse interests. On those rare occasions in the past when dissidents have tried to organize Soviet workers, Moscow has reacted quickly and sternly. Although several members of this group have been arrested and one of its leaders has been confined to a state psychiatric hospital, the "union" has not yet disbanded.

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On another front, a new journal called Metropol appeared in January. The avowed intention of its publishers is "literary excellence" rather than political debate. The first issue, however, contained articles critical of Soviet literary restrictions.

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Despite official Soviet denials concerning nationalities problems--most recently in Premier Kosygin's discussion of 6 February with President Carter's science adviser--several ethnic areas continue to prove troublesome. Last August Crimean Tatars sent two petitions to Brezhnev requesting permission to return from Central Asia to their ancestral homeland. The government, as usual, made no direct response; one report claimed authorities in the Crimea have bulldozed the houses of illegal returnees and deliberately stirred up local antipathy toward the Tatars. As a result, one of the leaders of the dissident Tatars, Mustafa Dzhemilev, publicly renounced his Soviet citizenship and applied for permission to emigrate to the United States.

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Unrest in the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic (administratively a part of the Soviet Republic of Georgia) that surfaced last spring is still causing problems for Moscow. The Georgian party leader recently warned the Abkhazi leaders that they were not dealing firmly enough with "nationalist chauvinism." Although Abkhazis make up only about 10 percent of the population in their own

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autonomous republic, they are Muslim, and current unrest among their coreligionists in nearby Turkey and Iran may have made the leadership in Moscow especially uneasy.*

In general, the Brezhnev regime is ready to punish individual dissidents harshly on occasion, and seeks in various ways to divide and demoralize all of them. But the leadership is avoiding recourse to draconian measures, not only out of concern for both its international image but also because of its own perception of what is required to maintain the stability and cohesion of the Soviet administrative machinery. In recent months, for example, a reported directive from Moscow party chief Grishin cautioned officials against firing Jewish "refuseniks" lest they spread their "contagion" to their new places of employment. Because the regime refrains from using the harshest measures to deal with protests, and because the reasons for political protest continue, at least some of the dissidents are encouraged to persist in their activities.

*Because of their relatively high birthrate, Muslims in the year 2000 may, according to recent projections by some Western academicians, number about one-third of the total Soviet population.

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