



# FROM DISSENT TO DEMOCRATIZATION

## Success

Whenever dissidents gathered together, they toasted one another with “To the success of our hopeless cause.” To the astonishment of the world, and exceeding their own expectations, their cause turned out not to be so hopeless after all. As the cracks that had developed in the totalitarian structure of the Soviet Union widened, the small number of courageous dissidents began to realize that their dreams had prevailed at last in their struggle against a powerful and much-feared system.

During the 1980s, the Soviet Union began to collapse under the weight of its own inefficiency and the growing demands for freedom by its citizens. Mikhail Gorbachev, who became premier in 1985, sought to save the system by introducing *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring). Many dissidents were at the forefront of this wave of change, transforming *samizdat* publications into the first independent magazines and newspapers in the new era of openness. Small groups of dissidents and isolated rallies gave way to large associations and mass demonstrations. The small human rights movement was transformed into a much larger movement calling for democratic reform and, in some of the Soviet republics, for national independence as well.

## From Liberalization to Freedom

Under Gorbachev, however, complete freedom of speech and a truly democratic and open system of government did not prevail. Although Gorbachev sought to liberalize the official media and government institutions, he was not entirely comfortable with the notion of a truly independent press or the existence of nongovernmental organizations and sought to suppress both. During this time, the support of Western organizations and political leaders was still of much importance to Soviet dissidents. The Center for Democracy in the USSR, for example, offered to translate and publish key dissident publications, including *Glasnost News and Review*, a digest of articles from the Soviet independent press, and disseminate material from the independent news agency, Express-Chronicle (*Ekspress-Khronika*). The Center for Democracy also provided much-needed computer and information technology to miners’ trade unions and other independent political associations. By the end of the 1980s, a group of leading dissidents living abroad had formed a new organization, Democracy and Independence, which in the following years welcomed democratic leaders from Russia and the newly independent former Soviet republics to its ranks.