



DISSIDENTS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

Samizdat

The many and varied activities of the dissidents increased in scope and complexity over time. Chief among their activities was sharing information that would otherwise be subject to censorship and that could only be disseminated outside official channels. If a dissident found information of interest to others—for example, material on human rights abuses or examples of “nonconformist” literature or art—that person would produce several copies of it and share them with friends. This process, which became known as samizdat (self-publishing), emerged for two reasons. First, the only duplication tool available was the typewriter; by using very thin sheets of paper interleaved with carbon paper, a person could produce no more than ten copies of a document at one time. Second, the person who created such copies would give them only to close friends and trusted associates because distributing such material was considered a crime and as such strictly punished.

Although samizdat began with random documents of interest being distributed to a small circle of people, it gradually developed into a system of underground publication. Aleksandr Ginzburg published the first samizdat periodical, *Sintaksis*, a digest of independent poetry and prose. Although its contents were innocuous, the very fact that it was uncensored made its production a serious crime in the eyes of the KGB and eventually led to Ginzburg’s arrest and the first of his three prison terms in the Gulag.

Toward the end of the 1960s, Natal’ia Gorbanevskaja began another underground periodical, the *Chronicle of Current Events*, which became an important source of information on the dissident movement and human rights violations in the Soviet Union. The *Chronicle*, which produced more than sixty issues, survived persecution by the KGB for more than a decade.

Tamizdat

Another important means of distributing information was through publications produced abroad, known as tamizdat. Such works were published in the West and either smuggled into the Soviet Union by visitors from abroad or broadcast over Radio Liberty, the BBC’s Russian Service, or other broadcasters in the West and, as a result, became widely available to a broad audience throughout the country. The KGB reacted as zealously to counteract the influence of tamizdat as it did the internally produced samizdat. The first famous case was the unsanctioned publication in Italy in 1957 of Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*, a novel whose foreign editions were greeted with much acclaim, eventually leading to his being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1958 (an award that he was never permitted to receive, due to travel restrictions). A subsequent edition of Pasternak’s poetry was published with an introduction by Andrei Siniavskii, a young critic. Not long afterward, Siniavskii and Iulii Daniel’, a close friend and also a writer, were arrested for publishing their work abroad. Siniavskii was sentenced to seven and Daniel’ to five years in the labor camps. Their 1966 trial became a landmark event of the burgeoning dissident movement, with other authors and human rights activists publishing their work abroad. One such author, whose tamizdat editions led to literary acclaim in the West—as well as the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970—was Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Despite the vivid pictures of the Soviet prison system he evoked in novels such as *The First Circle* and *Cancer Ward*, the work that created a groundswell of support for Soviet dissidents was his three-volume history of that system, *The Gulag Archipelago*.

Organizations

By the 1970s the dissident movement within the Soviet Union had become well organized. In 1975 the Helsinki Accords, obliging signatories to observe and protect human rights in their countries, were signed by the Soviet Union, the United States, and thirty-three other countries. In response, a group of dissidents in Moscow created the Moscow Group to Promote the Implementation of the Helsinki Accords in the USSR, soon to be known as the Moscow Helsinki Group. Similar groups were created in Ukraine, Lithuania, Georgia, and Armenia, as well as in other communist-ruled countries such as Poland and Czechoslovakia.

Affiliates of the Moscow Helsinki Group focused on the problems of psychiatric abuse and the persecution of religious believers. The leader of the Moscow Helsinki Group, the physicist Yuri Orlov, as well as many members of similar groups throughout the country, was arrested and, along with the other activists, received a severe sentence; Anatoly Shcharansky (later known as Natan Sharansky) received the harshest sentence, thirteen years in prison. Despite the increased persecution, other dissidents joined the group. The Moscow Helsinki Group operated for six years, producing more than two hundred documents, many of which became key sources of information about human rights abuses in the Soviet Union.