



THE HISTORY OF DISSENT

From Lenin to Stalin

Despite the extensive restrictions on Soviet citizens, and the severe punishments for violating them, certain people throughout the history of the Soviet Union refused to conform to the communist system, risking their lives and their freedom by openly defying it. The Red Army and the Cheka, the forerunner to the KGB, brutally suppressed the initial resistance to Bolshevik rule in the years following the revolution. Some who survived the ensuing civil war (1921–23) managed to flee the country; countless others perished in the GULag that evolved under Lenin (1918–24) and Stalin (1924–53).

The decades of Stalin's rule saw perpetual purging and eradication of any potential, suspected, or even imagined opposition, resulting in enormous numbers of murders—up to 100 million by some estimates. Yet, even during the worst years of the Stalinist terror, there were those who would not bend and would try to oppose communist rule. The names of most of them are still not known; they were devoured by the GULag before their voices could ever be heard. The memory of others, however, has been preserved, thanks to anecdotal evidence collected, preserved, and shared by fellow prisoners. Even so, there were surely many more dissidents than those whose names and stories have been passed down to us.

Khrushchev's Thaw

Nikita Khrushchev, who succeeded Stalin as general secretary of the Communist Party on Stalin's death in 1953, introduced more freedom and openness into Soviet society. His reforms, known as the "thaw," had an especially liberating effect on the younger generation. Despite some relaxation of censorship, which allowed the publication of authors such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, some young people decided that even these steps were not enough. Unsanctioned poetry readings began taking place in Moscow—with the most famous occurring at Mayakovskii Square beginning in 1958—as well as in other cities. Several participants later became prominent dissidents, such as Vladimir Bukovskii and Eduard Kuznetsov. The young journalist and poet Aleksandr Ginzburg published the first independent magazine, *Sintaksis*, an anthology of samizdat publications; several student groups created organizations opposing communist rule. These marked the beginnings of the dissident movement in the Soviet Union.

Although Khrushchev had brought about the "thaw," he had little tolerance for dissident activities of this sort, as evidenced by the "Pasternak Affair" surrounding the publication abroad of Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*. Prisons and labor camps began to fill once again with a new generation of independent thinkers. In place of the sections of the criminal code that had been revised or deleted following Stalin's death, new sections containing articles directly addressing political dissent were now introduced.

Brezhnev

Unhappy with Khrushchev's reforms, in 1964, a group of hard-liners within the Communist Party staged a coup removing him from power and replacing him with the more conservative Leonid Brezhnev, who instituted new restrictions against the dissidents. Many intellectuals who had found and enjoyed a limited measure of freedom during Khrushchev's thaw were now faced with either retreating from public life altogether or openly defying the new restrictions and stepping over the prescribed boundaries. Two young writers, Iulii Daniel' and Andrei Siniavskii, who had begun publishing their works abroad under the pseudonyms of Nikolai Arzhak and Abram Terts, respectively, were arrested in 1965 and given severe sentences. Aleksandr Ginzburg, who had been imprisoned in 1962 for two years as a result of his work with *Sintaksis*, obtained transcripts and other documents related to the 1966 trial of the two men, which he published in 1968 as *The White Book*, one of the first accounts of a Soviet political trial in the modern era.

The event that galvanized the dissident movement, however, was the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. That action, taken in response to the "Prague Spring" popular uprising and accompanying governmental reforms, was intended not only to suppress newly won freedoms in Czechoslovakia but also to serve as a warning to those who wished to introduce such reforms in the Soviet Union. Soviet citizens were forced to pledge their loyalty and support of the invasion; anyone who refused was automatically branded a dissident. The ranks of the opposition, however, were strengthened by the addition of its most prominent representative, the physicist Andrei Sakharov, who published his first political work at this time.

Another high-profile dissident, the decorated World War II veteran General Petr Grigorenko and one of the most prominent victims of the notorious system of psychiatric hospitals, along with fellow dissident Vladimir Bukovskii, did much to publicize the atrocities committed in those institutions. When longtime dissident Aleksandr Esenin-Volpin suggested that human rights be the movement's unifying concept, the majority of dissidents made it their personal cause.