



SUPPORTING DISSIDENTS

The Importance of Support

Even given their considerable courage and sacrifices, the dissidents of the Soviet Union could not have withstood this intense persecution without the support of the international community, including many individuals and organizations in the United States, ranging from the highest levels of government to nongovernmental organizations, from celebrities to common citizens, as well as intellectuals, academics, and members of the media. Although news of the plight of Soviet dissidents was not widespread in the early years, international support gained momentum during the first wave of persecutions in the mid-1960s and grew from there. By the end of the 1970s, the treatment of Soviet dissidents had become an important issue in political and intellectual circles in the United States and in Europe, and the names Andrei Sakharov, Anatoly Shcharansky, Yuri Orlov, and Aleksandr Ginzburg were well known throughout the world.

From Gathering Information to Public Campaigns

International support for Soviet dissidents initially consisted of protests by individuals and small organizations in the West, calling attention to human rights abuses in the Soviet Union by gathering and disseminating information and circulating petitions. Eventually groups that documented human rights abuses throughout the world, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, took on the cause, as well as other groups that focused more specifically on prisoners of conscience in the Soviet Union, such as the Union of Councils for Soviet Jewry, Scientists for Sakharov, Orlov and Shcharansky, and the Center for Democracy in the USSR, many of which relied heavily on the assistance and experience of dissidents who had been exiled from the Soviet Union. At the peak of their activity, during the 1970s and 1980s, those organizations sponsored events to raise awareness of imprisoned dissidents, participating in congressional and parliamentary hearings, informing political leaders, including several presidents and prime ministers of the dissidents' plight, and lending support to official government protests against human rights abuses in the Soviet Union.

Linking Human Rights with Security and Cooperation

One effective strategy was linking the issues of human rights and the plight of individual dissidents with relations between the countries of the Soviet bloc and those of the West. In 1974, the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, passed by the U.S. Congress, sought to prohibit trade with countries such as the Soviet Union that restricted emigration. Groups such as Scientists for Sakharov, Orlov and Shcharansky organized scientific boycotts to link cooperation between U.S. and Soviet scientists with freedom for persecuted scientists in the Soviet Union. As the U.S. government took steps to make improved human rights a condition for better diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, the Soviet government began to feel the consequences of persecuting dissidents and violating human rights.

Reaching Behind the Iron Curtain

Because dissidents were unable to travel abroad, and their mail and telephone contacts with the outside world closely monitored by the KGB, their Western supporters had to travel to the Soviet Union to contact them. Such visitors ensured that information about imprisoned dissidents would find its way to the outside world; they also provided material support, such as food, clothing, and money, to dissidents and their families. Some human rights activists from the West traveled on their own; other times their trips would be coordinated by nongovernmental organizations, such as the Independent Exchange Program operated by the New York-based Center for Democracy in the USSR, which arranged for Western travelers to meet with Soviet dissidents during their visits. From the 1970s on, and even more so during the 1980s, political leaders from the West, including members of the U.S. Congress, sought to meet dissidents during official visits to the Soviet Union, as did foreign diplomats and journalists. A. M. Rosenthal of the *New York Times* visited the Perm-35 political labor camp in 1988 during a trip initiated by the Center for Democracy in the USSR. Soon afterward, the same organization helped arrange for a visit by two U.S. members of Congress, Frank Wolf and Christopher Smith, to the same camp.