



TEARING THE IRON CURTAIN

Ideology and Propaganda

The Soviet leaders knew that they could not keep their hold on power by relying only on the repressive means of the KGB and the GULag. From the outset, they poured enormous resources into brainwashing the Soviet people through an omnipresent system of ideology and propaganda.

Control of Information

Realizing that propaganda could be most effective when alternative sources of information and ideas were absent, the Soviet leaders ensured that the citizens were isolated from all independent channels of communication, either within their own country or from abroad. The KGB and other Soviet institutions guarded against any such unauthorized dissemination of information; even economic and demographic data, as well as information concerning health statistics and natural disasters, were declared secret. Thus citizens were unable to know the budget of their own country, the availability of goods and services throughout the land, or statistics on life expectancy or infant mortality. When the nuclear reactor in Chernobyl suffered its catastrophic meltdown in 1986, citizens of the regions affected by this disaster did not learn its true extent until after it had become widely known in the West.

Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence

Perhaps the dissident movement's main achievement was to break the conspiracy of silence, collecting information from such isolated places as labor camps and other remote locales where dissidents had been banished. Although their aim was to document human rights violations, because almost all aspects of everyday life in the Soviet Union were linked to that issue, the documents compiled by the dissidents also contained a wealth of information about otherwise unavailable facets of life.

Soviet authorities, terrified of being exposed by newly available information about themselves and their country, used any and all means to stop the gathering and dissemination of such unauthorized information, mercilessly punishing anyone involved in those activities. Despite such persecution, however, the dissidents would not keep silent and gradually developed a system for gathering facts from the most inaccessible places, including labor camps and psychiatric prisons.

Dissident Information: From Labor Camps to Capitol Hill

Information was smuggled out of the labor camps, eventually reaching human rights activists in Moscow and other major cities. Whenever possible, these activists would verify and compare their information with other sources and then issue a document or article, which would be disseminated within the country as samizdat publications or printed in the underground human rights periodical *Chronicle of Current Events* (*Khronika tekushchikh sobytii*). Those documents would then be smuggled out with the help of visitors to or foreign correspondents based in the Soviet Union. The above steps were very risky; dissidents who were caught doing any of them could face severe punishment.

Once reaching the free world, the information was disseminated in a number of ways. The same foreign journalists who obtained the documents in the Soviet Union might then publish them in Western newspapers. Alternately, such documents were distributed to human rights organizations in the West who translated them and sent them to the media and to government officials or used them in their own campaigns on behalf of imprisoned dissidents. The documents might then find their way into governmental reports, publications, or congressional hearings, thus becoming a tool used by Western governments as well as nongovernmental organizations to pressure the Soviet government to stop violating human rights and release political prisoners.

Eventually, the information would be obtained by Radio Liberty, Voice of America, and other Western radio broadcasters transmitting to the Soviet Union; through such means, it would then be shared with millions of people inside the country.