

A Policy Perspective on Dissent and Repression in the Soviet Union

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In this commentary, Allen Lynch examines the process of dissent and repression in the Soviet Union from the point of view of American foreign policy. He argues that American human rights policy is doomed to failure as long as it continues to emphasize support for the politically insignificant Soviet dissident intelligentsia. In order to achieve true progress in alleviating Soviet repression, the author argues, the United States must work through organizations considered legitimate by the Soviet government. He concludes that the best way to do this is through a policy of détente.

Many Americans view Soviet dissidents as outspoken representatives of a disenchanted Soviet populace. According to this theory, the dissident intelligentsia speaks the mind of — and is secretly admired by — the majority of the Soviet citizens. American policy-makers tend to share this perception and have, therefore, based U.S. human rights policy on public support for these intellectuals.

Yet the Alexander Solzhenitsyns and Andrei Sakharovs are but a tiny minority. The nature and extent of Soviet dissent must be viewed in the perspective of those citizens who are not dissidents; George Feifer speaks of the 99.9 percent who abstain from dissent.¹ In fact, he must be speaking of the 99.9 percent of the Soviet intelligentsia who abstain from dissent since the 0.1 percent of Soviet citizenry remaining would yield a figure of 260,000 dissidents, a number which is universally conceded by Western specialists to be far too high. It is in this context that demonstrations and dissent in the Soviet Union must be viewed. The much-publicized August 1968 demonstration in Red Square, for example, coming after the crushing of the “Prague Spring,” involved a total of only seven people.

The numerical isolation of the dissident intelligentsia is reinforced by that intelligentsia's deep sense of despair over the possibilities for the kind of social and political change which most dissidents feel is consonant with a society responsive to the most rudimentary criteria for the observance of human rights. It is significant that the principal source of the pessimism

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1. George Feifer, “No Protest: The Case of the Passive Minority,” in *Dissent in the USSR*, ed., Rudolf Tokes (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 420.

both of the dissidents and of the intelligentsia in general lies "not in the government's ability to crush dissent but in the nation's ability to sustain it."² In other words, the dissidents worry less about being arrested by authorities than about being forgotten by their fellow citizens. Referring to the practice of psychiatric repression, one Soviet doctor noted:

Look, it's one thing that dissidents are treated as mad by the government. Maybe some Politburo types genuinely believe they're mad — which, of course, is worse. But the worst of it, the truly terrible thing, is that *the people*, too, are convinced that the dissidents are crazy or out to cheat them. The poor, oppressed people for whom the dissidents think they're sacrificing themselves³

The exile of noted Soviet physicist Andrei Sakharov further underscores the isolation of the Soviet dissidents. Although loud protests surfaced in Western countries, the Soviet citizenry seemed unaffected, even uninterested. One Russian nationalist told a Western journalist:

You shouldn't be surprised when almost no one speaks up when a Sakharov is sent into internal exile in Gorky. Instead, you should be amazed when one in a thousand is able to recognize that this is a gross injustice — not just the punishment of a traitor.⁴

Faced with a popular consensus among the citizenry that increased food deliveries and prevention of war are sufficient criteria of political performance, and with knowledge of the inevitability of administrative retribution in the case of publicly articulated dissent, the Soviet dissident intelligentsia remains an extremely small group of men and women whose dominant characteristics are extreme courage and corresponding despair. In response, many of the intelligentsia, who are indeed to some extent disaffected from the prevailing political culture, attempt to create a private world of carefully guarded pleasures insulated from the painful world of political reality; political participation as such is branded as essentially corrupting and thus to be shunned. Such a condition has led Karl Birnbaum to observe that the immediate political relevance of the rather fragmented democratic "movement" in the USSR "seems to have been very limited."⁵

Since the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, both dissent and repression

2. *Ibid.*, p. 422.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 423.

4. Andrew Nagorski, "A Dark Tunnel of Fear," *Newsweek*, 18 October 1982, p. 48.

5. Karl Birnbaum, "Human Rights and East-West Relations," *Foreign Affairs* 55 (July 1977): p. 784.

in the Soviet Union have undergone significant changes in character. The liberal pragmatic kind of dissent characteristic of the protest against the trial of the authors Daniel and Sinyavsky in 1966 has been transformed into a type of dissent which seems to be satisfied with no less than systemic transformation within the Soviet Union. This tendency has been represented most dramatically by the various "Helsinki Watch Groups" that developed in the Soviet Union in response to the signing of the Helsinki Accords in August 1975. Although the Watch Groups assume a nominally legalistic stance, that is, they claim to be simply ensuring that the law of the land be respected, their public appeal to essentially foreign audiences *a priori* excludes them from any effective influence within the Soviet political order. The intensely partisan nature of this enterprise is indicated by the groups' sole focus on principle VII in the accords — "Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief" — to the exclusion of other competing principles, such as non-intervention in internal affairs. It also excludes principles where it would be difficult to prove direct Soviet noncompliance such as "respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty," "inviolability of frontiers," or "territorial integrity of States."⁶ It would thus appear that Soviet dissent has been undergoing a transformation from an instrumentalist, pragmatic movement concerned with affecting changes within the established political order to one that inevitably challenges the very *raison d'être* of the state.

The pattern of Soviet repression, at least on the most visible level, has been undergoing a corresponding change. Since 1976 Soviet policy with respect to the most vocal and prominent dissidents seems to have departed from a low visibility, "containment" policy characteristic of the early détente period and returned to a high visibility, "eliminationist" strategy similar to that of the 1966-1970 period; the trial of Anatoly Shcharansky in 1978 was probably a turning point.⁷ His trial, and that of Yuri Orlov which followed a period of strong American protest against Soviet repression, led to even louder protests at the highest levels of the American government. Yet Dimitri Simes argued that "there has been no dramatic increase in Soviet repression [since 1975] that justifies such a strong American reaction."⁸

To what extent was this assertion borne out by the policies of the Brezhnev government? Just as, by focusing on the dissidents, one misreads the temper of Soviet society, so one similarly misconstrues the thrust of

6. A text of the Accord is found in Robert Woito, ed., *International Human Rights Kit* (Chicago: A World Without War Publication, 1977), pp. 101-06.

7. Robert Sharlet, "Dissent and Repression in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe Since Khrushchev: Changing Patterns," *International Journal* 33 (Autumn 1978): pp. 763-95.

8. Dimitri Simes, "Detente, Russian Style," *Foreign Policy*, no. 32 (Fall 1978), p. 56.

the policies of the Brezhnev era by focusing on the government's treatment of the dissidents. Part of the problem is that judgments about the Brezhnev period have been formed by a nostalgic view of the Khrushchev era. This nostalgia affects intellectuals both within the Soviet Union and within the Western academy and represents a serious constraint upon our conceptions of the social and political tendencies of the past seventeen years. Notions of a Brezhnev "regression" following a Khrushchev "thaw" should take into account the fact that dissidents such as Brodsky, Dobrovolsky, Grigorenko and Tarsis were originally subject to persecution not in the Brezhnev period but under Khrushchev.⁹ Khrushchev's campaigns against the private agricultural plot and religion also tend to be forgotten.¹⁰

In fact, it seems indisputable that in the time since Khrushchev's ouster the tolerance of the Soviet government for critical ideas has grown immensely. Whether we speak of the possibilities for economic reform, the noxious effects of the indiscriminate application of ideology or of legal reform, there is every indication that a broad spectrum of views appears, if not in *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*, in the professional newspapers and journals. Even certain aspects of foreign policy have been subject to increased scrutiny.¹¹ There is more discussion of the victims of the Stalin period in the republican newspapers than there was under Khrushchev, and the debate over the new Soviet Constitution yielded a plethora of diverging and meaningful intellectual commentary.¹² As Soviet society modernizes and differentiates according to social and economic function, the need for consultation with experts and thus the exposure to experts' opinions obviously increases. As long as such opinion does not assault the foundations of Soviet rule, a wide range of critical opinion is permitted and even encouraged.

The Brezhnev period witnessed a progression away from Stalinist tendencies in many aspects of Soviet life. These developments arose from three long-term factors originating in the immediate post-Stalin period: the elimination, either by purge or natural causes, of the core of the Stalinist old guard from power and a mass freeing of political prisoners; the permitting of a wide stream of information and people from the West to enter the Soviet Union and the mass inclusion of young intelligentsia at the lower and middle levels of the Soviet bureaucracy; and the beginning of open political activity of dissident individuals and groups.

9. Jerry Hough, "The Soviet System: Petrification or Pluralism," in Jerry Hough, ed., *The Soviet Union and Social Science Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 27.

10. For an account of repression in the Khrushchev period see Roland Gaucher, *Opposition in the USSR 1917-1967* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1969), pp. 425-501.

11. Jerry Hough, "The Evolving Soviet Debate on Latin America," *Latin American Research Review* 16 (1981): 124-43.

12. Hough, "The Soviet System: Petrification or Pluralism," p. 26.

Consequently, all individuals and some groups have received a variety of new opportunities. For example, first, second and third generation professionals and intellectuals can now advance to the highest levels of government without facing the kind of discrimination that formerly favored heavily persons of worker or peasant background. The ordinary worker can appeal to his "trade union" in order to resist being fired from a job (unless it is done for political reasons), for buying cooperative housing with his own money and for obtaining better social benefits for illness and old age. It is now possible to listen to Russian and Soviet nationality language foreign broadcasts, to receive foreign language literature from abroad (as long as it does not criticize the essentials of the Soviet system) and to publish works abroad and receive royalties therefrom (after going through the censorship and the Soviet copyright agency). Cultural, commercial and scholarly exchanges with the West are now common, as is travel to the West (for a select group). There is greater freedom of movement both within the Soviet Union and Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe. Emigration for Jews, Germans and some dissidents has been allowed, sometimes in large numbers. It is also no longer the case that one can be arrested, as in Stalin's time, without actually having done something that one knows will bring unfortunate consequences.¹³ And while some might consider the criteria employed by the Soviet government as abhorrent, the mere existence of such criteria represents a tremendous improvement over earlier practice. For the intellectuals especially, this imparts a sense of stability to their lives, a not insignificant factor when considering the processes affecting the quality of life in the Soviet Union.

Finally, heretofore undreamed of possibilities for reading, publishing and distributing underground literature in Russian have emerged, as have opportunities for becoming involved in political activities of which the authorities do not approve. There is, of course, the corresponding probability of losing a well paying job, being forced to emigrate or being imprisoned (but without the direct threat of capital punishment).

Despite these developments, the Soviet government, as a consequence of highly public denunciatory human rights policies by the American government (especially under the Carter administration), "found itself being put on the spot as a celebrated human rights abuser, partly as a result of the modest liberalization that allowed dissidents to organize and protest the injustices of the Soviet system" in the first place.¹⁴ As one noted observer has remarked, "The present dissidents . . . are treated . . .

13. See the statement of Boris Rabbot in U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Perceptions: Relations Between the United States and the Soviet Union* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1978), pp. 121-24.

14. Simes, "Detente, Russian Style," p. 57.

with a liberality which in Stalin's day would have been unthinkable. . . . What we have before us today, compared with what existed forty years ago, is progress."¹⁵ Yet, the fervor of Western protest in the recent past is matched only by the silence of the 1930s. George Kennan has wondered if the Soviet leadership, faced with such a reaction, might not conclude that Stalin was right after all, "that the only way to maintain a firm Communist dictatorship and to make the Western world accept it is to punish dissidence as Stalin did: with such prompt and fearful terror that the Western press never even hears about the sufferings and fate of the victims."¹⁶

Finally, the question of criteria for comparing Soviet "progress" in the field of human rights ought to be discussed. For both the Soviet people and leadership, the present is compared not with some Western ideal or practice but with the Soviet and Russian past.¹⁷ Therein lies both the source of the stability of the present socio-political order and the frustrations which the leadership must surely feel at Western admonitions on human rights violations. By any standard, the distance between the Stalinist past and the Soviet present exceeds any imaginable gap between the Soviet present and a hypothetical Western reality. It is absolutely critical to Western efforts grappling with the problem of dissent and repression in the Soviet Union that this point be understood. Otherwise, the West will only be capable of constructing policies which are likely to damage those very people it wishes to help.

The key criterion for influence in Soviet political life is the principle of "institutional," rather than "associational" participation. In terms of political process, this is the critical distinction between authoritarian systems of the Soviet type and the Western pluralistic systems. Political status must be sanctioned by the prevailing political culture in order to be recognized as a legitimate participant. Thus, the USSR Academy of Sciences is a potentially legitimate and effective political actor (providing that it is effective in defending its interests), while the Helsinki Watch Committees, an associational grouping of individuals independent of the authorities, are not.¹⁸

15. George Kennan, *The Cloud of Danger* (Boston: Atlantic, Little, Brown and Co., 1977), pp. 213-14.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 214.

17. This thesis is borne out throughout Hedrick Smith's *The Russians* (New York: Quadrangle, 1976).

18. See, for example, Joel J. Schwartz and William R. Keech, "Group Influence and the Policy Process in the Soviet Union," *The American Political Science Review* 62 (September 1968): 840-51; H. Gordon Skilling and Franklyn Griffiths, eds., *Interest Groups in Soviet Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971); and Jerry Hough, "Centralization and Decentralization in the Soviet Administrative System," *The Soviet Union and Social Science Theory*, pp. 159-70.

During the entire post-Stalin period, power — while remaining ultimately in the hands of a relatively small group of leaders — has been dispersed among a variety of essentially occupational groups participating in policy deliberation and implementation. The fact, for example, that since Stalin's death top party leaders like Brezhnev and Podgorny have been chairmen of the Supreme Soviet reflects the growing importance of the increasingly differentiated state bureaucracy in the political life of the Soviet Union. This trend in turn reflects the increasing complexity and scope of governmental functions accompanying economic and technological development. The party apparatus and ministerial bureaucracy thus have a substantial capability to exercise influence, help determine decisions and even at times obstruct their fulfillment.¹⁹

The definition of goals formally remains the responsibility of the party leadership but, except for ensuring that the Marxist goals in social policy are pursued, the leadership is not to act with "voluntarism" (of which Khrushchev was accused and convicted). That is, the leadership should generally follow the advice of experts representing specialized institutional interests in their respective policy areas, limiting itself to a mediation of the conflicts that arise among them. In practice, policy-making power informally comes to be delegated to many of these "complexes" of institutional interests.²⁰

This process of diffusion of power and structural differentiation is significant because it creates the possibility for an American human rights policy that is essentially functionalist in approach. Such a policy would be based upon the proposition that the structural framework of Soviet-American relations defines and limits the variety of possible policy outcomes. A functionalist approach would seek to influence factors that are outside the strictly political realm of the Politburo and higher party apparatus. It would attempt to concentrate on technical and "noncontroversial" aspects of Soviet-American relations (such as trade, academic and other exchanges, and certain joint economic and scientific enterprises) which are obviously valued by the Soviet government, seeking in the process to weave increasingly larger webs of interdependency so that the decisions the Soviet leadership has to make concerning actions threatening the continued existence of such programs become more difficult. The hope is that by working through the noncontroversial needs one can "sneak up" on the question of the observation of certain human rights which are within U.S. capacity to

19. Frederick Barghoorn, *Politics in the USSR*, second edition (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1972), pp. 248, 250.

20. Jerry Hough, "The Party Apparatchiki and Interest Group Theory," in Hough, *The Soviet Union and Social Science Theory*, pp. 71-108.

influence, thus introducing some norms of universal behavior into the relationship.

The assumption here is that the differentiation of Soviet society affords significant opportunities for the promotion or, perhaps more realistically, the preservation of those human rights which currently do exist through a policy based upon functionalist premises. Without détente, however, such efforts to raise the incentives (and disincentives) which the United States is able to offer to the Soviet Union would not be possible. Efforts which the Soviets can be expected to perceive as threatening the very legitimacy of their social and political order, such as support for the Helsinki Watch Groups, may be morally quite satisfying (and legally impeccable) but in all probability will be devoid of real results.²¹ Indeed, the *de facto* code of détente, implying the legitimacy of the parties involved, would be violated.

At any rate our potential influence in promoting human rights in the Soviet Union is quite limited, perhaps only extending to the preservation of those precarious rights which were implicitly recognized in the late Brezhnev period. If the West focuses on the treatment of the dissident intelligentsia, it may well mislead itself as to the real sources of change in the Soviet Union. As the dissident Soviet historian Roy Medvedev notes, the impetus for change in the Soviet Union must come from within.²² An intelligently formulated American policy can at least render those choices which the new Soviet leadership now faces concerning the observance of human rights more difficult to make than they have been in the past.

21. Walter Clemens, Jr., *The USSR and Global Interdependence: Alternative Futures* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1978), p. 107.

22. Roy Medvedev, *Detente and Socialist Democracy* (New York: Monad Press, 1976), pp. 140-41.