

### 3 Nonviolent resistance to Soviet repression

The Soviet Union provides an intriguing case history in nonviolent action and many of the issues relevant to it. The Union was largely born of nonviolent actions (along with parallel violence) in 1917, when strikes, factory occupations, demonstrations in the street, and other forms of resistance resulted in a *coup d'état* by the Bolsheviks. Ironically, street demonstrations and massive social resistance led to the defeat of another coup in 1991, signaling the end of the Soviet Union.

In between 1917 and 1991 (see chronology), there was much repression and the emergence of numerous strategies to deal with the repression in its varied stages. This chapter provides an overview of the forms and roles of dissent in the Soviet Union, focusing especially on nonviolent resistance to the 1991 attempted coup. It discusses how resistance differed during the different stages of repression that characterized the Soviet Union's years and poses possible reasons for the relatively low levels of action, before assessing what was and what might have been useful, what specific problems were faced, and how they might have been overcome. The role of international observers and supporters and their relative inaction through many of the worst times is also considered.

Three periods of particularly harsh repression stand out in the history of the Soviet Union: (1) forced collectivization; (2) the Stalin Terror; and (3) "re-stalinization" under Brezhnev. Each of these was met with resistance in some form but the impact of that resistance was not always even or clear. But before examining these three periods, we start with a discussion of the 1991 coup.

#### Chronology of significant events in the Soviet Union

February 1917: Dictatorial ruler Tsar Nicholas II abdicates under huge public pressure. A provisional government is established.

October 1917: The Bolsheviks (Communist Party), led by Lenin, seize power from the provisional government.

1918–1920: Civil war between the Bolsheviks and the anti-Bolsheviks (the Whites). The West supports the Whites.

1922: Stalin is elected General Secretary of the Communist Party. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) is formed.

1924: Lenin dies and is succeeded by Alexei Rykov as Premier of USSR. Zinoviev and Kamenev form triumvirate with Stalin to rule USSR.

1928: After outmaneuvering the left, then the right, Stalin becomes the nation's leader. The first Five Year Plan is established.

1929: Agricultural collectivization begins and, with it, terrorization of peasants.

1932: Second Five Year Plan begins. Death penalty degree passed for stealing from collectives.

1933: Famine devastates USSR, largely as a result of rural turmoil.

1934: Kirov — a possible challenger to Stalin's power — is killed. The Great Purges begin.

1936: Beginning of show trials of Party leaders, including Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin, and Rykov.

1941: Germany invades the Soviet Union, which undergoes huge losses and is crucial in the Allies' victory.

1945: Germany surrenders. Western leaders look to the Soviet Union to help defeat Japan but are worried at the prospect of the USSR "sharing" in the triumph of that defeat. To hasten Japan's surrender before full Soviet involvement, atomic bombs are dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Cold War commences building and continues until 1989.

1953: Stalin dies and is replaced by Nikita Khrushchev.

1956: The Twentieth Party Congress hears in a "secret speech" by Khrushchev that Stalin was responsible for genocide and terror, allowed by a Cult of Personality which had developed around him. Soviet troops invade Hungary. Emergence of a questioning sub-culture in the USSR.

1964: Khrushchev becomes the first Soviet leader to be dismissed. He is replaced by Leonid Brezhnev.

1968: Soviet troops invade Czechoslovakia. Soviet citizens are arrested for protesting and are sent to labor camps. Dissent becomes more organized, especially with first publication of the *Chronicle of Current Events*.

1979: Soviet troops invade Afghanistan.

1982: Yuri Andropov is elected General Secretary of Communist Party, following Brezhnev's death.

1984: Andropov dies and is replaced by Konstantin Chernenko.

1985: Michail Gorbachev is elected as leader, after Chernenko's death.

1986: Gorbachev introduces mechanisms for a more open society (glasnost) and for economic restructuring (perestroika).

1989: People power topples Eastern European communist regimes.

1990: Following growth of the Baltic nationalist movement, Lithuanians elect a pro-independence parliament and begin protesting strongly for independence. Boris Yeltsin becomes chairman of the Russian Supreme Soviet and declares that Russian laws take precedence over Soviet laws.

1991: In response to Gorbachev's announcement that the leaders of 10 republics have agreed on a new Union treaty, an Emergency Committee is formed and attempts a coup. Nonviolent action begins immediately. Several days later the coup is defeated but the event weighs heavily against Gorbachev and the Communist Party, bringing about the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union.

### Resisting the 1991 coup

In August 1991 a group calling itself the Emergency Committee detained Soviet President Michael Gorbachev in his Crimean dacha and attempted a coup. Headed by Vice-President Gennadi Yanayev, the coup was largely an effort to block moves by Gorbachev to decentralize the Soviet Union, with ultimate independence for the republics. However it also stemmed from apprehension by political conservatives about the new democratic terrain into which Gorbachev had led the USSR. Some top Communist Party officials and bureaucrats felt that power was slipping away from the party, from them personally, and from the Soviet government which had long tried to assert the Soviet Union as a leading nation in world directions and political thought.

The collapse of the Eastern bloc had been made possible by Gorbachev's declared

unwillingness to support the previously entrenched Brezhnev doctrine whereby the Soviet government intervened in the political affairs of its neighbors to ensure that its own interests prevailed<sup>1</sup>. This had led to the demise of the Cold War, which had propped up a great many myths, ideologies, and rationales in both the US and the USSR. These had lost their credibility with subsequent repercussions on the Soviet home front. But Gorbachev had also introduced a wide range of reforms domestically. After many years of stagnation under previous policies, these reforms did not run altogether smoothly, allowing conservatives to complain that the nation was in shambles.

Thus the coup leaders justified their August actions by reference to the troubled state of affairs throughout the Soviet Union. The Committee voided what it deemed to be “unconstitutional laws,” banned strikes, rallies, and demonstrations, closed down all liberal newspapers and those it felt it could not trust, dispatched columns of tanks to Baltic capitals and to Moscow and Leningrad, and announced the takeover of the media and many other facilities.

Among the first moves of the Emergency Committee was to put all military units on alert, ordering them to occupy Moscow and prepare for battle. Although an elite unit was ordered to arrest Boris Yeltsin, this was never carried out, probably due to divisions in the ranks of those ordered to make the arrest.<sup>2</sup> By 9am Moscow time, the first military units were taking up strategic positions in the capital, with a column of 25 armored personnel carriers, staffed with paratroopers, parked outside Moscow City Hall. The KGB (secret police) had been put on early alert and had

prepared a Moscow command bunker for use by the coup leaders if the need arose.<sup>3</sup>

On awaking to the news that Gorbachev was ill and that an Emergency Committee had taken over, many citizens realized that there had been a coup. Muscovites had the tanks in the street to further demonstrate that likelihood. Resistance started immediately, with many workers striking or simply staying away from work. This took place across the USSR, from the coal-mining regions of Siberia to the huge military-industrial complexes of Gorky.<sup>4</sup>

People gathered at major city points in Moscow, such as Manezh Square and outside the Russian Parliament. When the state-controlled television program *Vremya* showed an uncensored snippet of Yeltsin on a tank outside the Russian parliament, many more people were roused to join the protests.

Faced with huge opposition, the coup leaders issued plans for the demonstrations to be broken up. One factory was ordered to urgently send a quarter of a million pairs of handcuffs to Moscow in readiness for mass arrests. Vladimir Kruchkov, one of the members of the Emergency Committee and head of the KGB, ordered two floors of the Lefortovo Prison in central Moscow to be cleared. There is no question that the coup leaders intended to move forward with their plans but these became unstuck at the point of execution and even prior to it. For instance, the putschists’ plans were leaked to Yeltsin and demonstrators at the Russian Parliament were given fliers outlining the plans for how their resistance was to be crushed. Many wept and troops present had an opportunity to contemplate what role they might play for or against the coup as the orders came down. There was also the story of at least one KGB agent walking around the city, ensuring that he was incommunicado so that he could not be ordered to take part in the putschists’ plot.

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1 See Ralph Summy and Michael E. Salla (eds.), *Why the Cold War Ended: A Range of Interpretations* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995).

2 Monica Attard, *Russia: Which Way Paradise?* (Sydney: Doubleday, 1997), p. 175.

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3 Jeff Trimble and Peter Vassiliev, “Three days that shook the world,” *U.S. News & World Report*, Vol. 111, 18 November 1991, pp. 54–62.

4 Attard, *Russia: Which Way Paradise?*, p. 184.

A tense situation saw three people shot dead at Manezh Square on the second day of the coup when soldiers became frightened. The crowd expressed anger, fear, and grief. This may have led other soldiers to ponder what they would do in a similar situation. Many of them were already empathizing with the demonstrators. By the third day many of them were openly saying that they would not shoot the protesters. This was in fact the final blow to the coup.

In confrontations such as those between the protesters and the Soviet soldiers there are complicated dynamics at work. It is crucial to success that resisters, as much as possible, avoid a process whereby each party constructs an image of the other as enemy. James A. Aho has identified a number of ingredients in such a process. Among those relevant to encounters between soldiers and citizens are myth making that too easily categorizes the other party and expects certain negative behavior on their part to be inevitable and predictable. These can become self-fulfilling prophecies as each party responds to the other within ritualistic patterns that confirm their worst suspicions.<sup>5</sup> Those who view themselves as acting righteously — and each of the parties are likely to regard themselves so — “respond ‘appropriately’ to those they have designated as evil [or as enemy] — with secrecy, caution, cunning, and, if necessary, cruelty. To act in any other way would be imprudent.”<sup>6</sup> We would not expect nonviolent activists to act cruelly, of course, but soldiers who believe the worst of these demonstrators may still view them as threatening in other more subtle but poorly understood ways.

It is important, therefore, to treat soldiers with respect, appeal to their humanity and decency, and hope it has not been extinguished by military training and indoctrination.

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5 James A. Aho, *This Thing of Darkness: A Sociology of the Enemy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), pp. 29–30. See also Sam Keen, *Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).

6 Aho, *This Thing of Darkness*, p. 31.

By late morning of 21 August the tanks that had been patrolling the Kremlin had been recalled. The putschists tried to escape but were arrested in a sure sign that the coup had failed. Several top officials and party heads who had supported the coup suicided, at least one also killing his wife.<sup>7</sup> These suicides/killings probably constitute the bulk of the deaths related to the coup (though they are of course much less celebrated than the deaths of protesters at Manezh Square).

If the coup leaders made one crucial mistake, it was thinking that the Soviet citizenry would simply go along with the fate decided for them at higher levels. It seems they also misjudged the amount of military support they would get, although this itself was, arguably, connected with the strength of the resistance which signaled to the armed forces that this was not a coup to be supported. The air force in particular was anxious not to become involved in an attack on Soviet citizens and many mayors and other leaders were appealing directly to the military to defy the Emergency Committee’s orders.

The resistance could be seen as a mixture of indignation, ingenuity, and hardened resolve to reject a return to repression. It bore the signs of a people having had a taste of freedom under glasnost and not wanting to retreat, as illustrated by one Muscovite who joined the protests, declaring that “... for years nothing but obedience and inertia was pounded in to my brain.” But now that a government that she had help elect was under threat, she vowed to ignore the curfew and let tanks roll over her if necessary.<sup>8</sup>

Also evident were signs of the re-emergence of previously used techniques of underground organization, such as publication of underground newspapers and people pulling their old short-wave radios out of mothballs. Citizens commented that they hadn’t used

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7 Attard, *Russia: Which Way Paradise?*, pp. 197–202.

8 Gladys D. Ganley, *Unglued Empire: The Soviet Experience with Communications Technologies* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1996), p. 144.

these for years but were pleased not to have got rid of them. The experience from earlier days of dissent served the resisters well and the fact that short-wave radios were plentiful was of further benefit to the struggle.

However, if dissidents of previous eras had come largely from the intelligentsia, albeit with a diversity of interests, concerns, and ideologies but all with the common desire to express their opinions freely, those who resisted the coup appeared to have come from a more diverse background. While the intelligentsia and middle classes made up a large proportion of the resistance, workers also joined the demonstrations and played their own role. The trade union movement in Leningrad was particularly strong in the resistance, with calls for strikes widespread on workers' placards at the large demonstration in Palace Square, where at least 100,000 people gathered. The city's Kirov tractor factory, with 30,000 workers, became a strong center of resistance, using its fax machines to transmit speeches of defiance and support. Workers at that factory spoke openly and enthusiastically of a campaign of civil disobedience.

Media workers played their own role and were involved in ways that had not been possible during the pre-glasnost days, using ploys of broadcasting and reporting details and information which surely went against the coup initiators and constantly showed them to be on shaky ground. In a threatening situation such as a coup, especially if there is a background such as the Soviet Union had, many people inevitably lie low and see which way the wind blows, fearing that, if there is a new wave of repression, the regime may retaliate against open opponents. The part played by media workers served to embolden those who, even though ideologically opposed to the coup, may otherwise have been inclined to lie low.

The nonviolent actions undertaken by the resisters warrant discussion, both for their having been shaped, to some extent, by the history of resistance in the Soviet Union, as we shall later see, and for what they tell us about how coups may be resisted generally. Resistance fell into the categories of organizational,

symbolic, supportive, and designed to influence others. Some of these categories obviously overlap. For instance, when the crowd at Moscow's Manezh Square joined hands to block the entry of armored personnel carriers, this fell across all categories, being highly visible, obviously nonviolent, displaying and invoking group solidarity, and making it psychologically difficult, though certainly not physically impossible, for the armed troops to proceed. Overlap of categories is also seen in leaflets and posters, which involved organization in terms of getting them produced, reproduced, and disseminated but which were also aimed at gaining support of others and influencing those who were wary about joining the actions.

Strikes, although usually of an organizational nature with their economic ramifications and political potential, can be highly symbolic. This was certainly the case with the one-person strike conducted by Vladimir Petrik, chief of an assembly division at a factory implicated in military equipment.<sup>9</sup> Petrik, at risk of jeopardizing his job, was determined to oppose the passive acceptance evident at his factory and to show that a person can take an individual stand on issues.

One of the most active groups was the Memorial Society, established to assist victims of Stalin. Members collected all the paper they could gather from offices and elsewhere, produced a vast number of leaflets, and distributed them on the streets. One distributor expected trouble when he was approached by two policemen. But it turned out that they were eager to have the leaflet to keep abreast of the news, suggesting the widespread support for the resistance.<sup>10</sup>

Communication was paramount, from the slogans and hastily made placards demanding "No to the Fascist Junta!" to the 20,000 copies

9 Vladimir Petrik, "Moscow's MV Khrunichev machine-building factory reacts to the August coup," in Victoria E. Bonnell, Ann Cooper, and Gregory Freidin (eds.), *Russia at the Barricades: Eyewitness Accounts of the August 1991 Coup* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1994), pp. 111–119.

10 Ganley, *Unglued Empire*, p. 156.

of Yeltsin's decrees run off by the Mayor of Ryazan, to the ham radios that kept events alive. It was not just about convincing trusted friends, as had so often been the thrust of the communicative efforts of previous Soviet dissidents. Photocopies announcing the demonstration at the Russian White House were pasted up on the Metro walls and at least one woman heading towards the demonstration begged people heading the other way to join the demonstration.<sup>11</sup> Those opposing the coup knew they had to act swiftly and decisively to maximize the effectiveness of their efforts. They had to convince great numbers of total strangers, including, perhaps most importantly, the soldiers who had been sent to oppose them. In convincing the soldiers of the worthiness of their cause, or at least that there were no real grounds for animosity and that the soldiers should not shoot if ordered to do so, the demonstrators had several advantages, ironically linked to militaristic and imperialistic policies of the Soviet Union.

One was that, due to the Soviet Union's program of national (military) service, most troops were conscripts who did not have the strong commitment to their job that might generally be expected of those who join the armed services voluntarily. Opponents therefore felt they could appeal to them more convincingly. Additionally, many civilians had their own experience of military service which provided insights into how best to apply pressure to the troops. Secondly, the Soviet government, with a somewhat imperialistic attitude towards many of the smaller and further flung republics, had a history of trying to "Russify" the country. As part of this process, Soviet leaders gave heavy priority to having the Russian language taught and understood as widely as possible. This meant that protesters could converse with most of the troops, regardless of where they were from.

Of course, the bulk of the armed forces sent to the Russian White House were Russian and this itself was important. Boris Yeltsin had

only recently been popularly elected as President of Russia and many soldiers were thought to have voted for him. As he clambered on the tanks and spoke forcefully against the coup, many of the soldiers would therefore have considered him to represent the voice of legitimate Russian authority.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the discussions initiated and pleas made directly to the soldiers by the demonstrators, who sought to identify with the soldiers and seek a show of humanity, seem to have been crucial. Numerous nonviolent struggles, especially against repressive regimes, have succeeded or failed largely on the basis of whether they have been able to overcome the image of themselves as the enemy in their encounters with armed forces. Arguably, this was a telling factor in Burma in 1988 when, despite the determined efforts of nonviolent protesters who knelt before soldiers and pleaded with them to join their cause, the soldiers massacred the demonstrators.<sup>13</sup> Soviet citizens seem to have been more successful, even without any prominently outspoken leaders of nonviolence. This suggests that the issue of seeking solidarity with soldiers who might otherwise see resisters as enemies is a delicate and complex one. Some of the protesters sought to define the moral grounds of the encounter, with one woman asking a soldier: "Do you know what you're doing?" When he shook his head, she responded "Then go back to your barracks like a noble Soviet soldier and leave us in peace!"<sup>14</sup>

As well as pleading, arguing, and joking with the soldiers, protesters shared sweets and cigarettes with them and tried to find common grounds for a relationship in which they could not easily be perceived as enemy. A row of women held a sign: "Soldiers! Don't shoot

11 Jeremy Gambrell, "Seven days that shook the world," *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 38, No. 15, 26 September 1991, pp. 56–61.

12 Geoffrey Hosking, "The roots of dissolution," *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 39, No. 1–2, 16 January 1992, pp. 34–38.

13 Alan Clements, "Introduction," in Aung San Suu Kyi, *The Voice of Hope: Conversations with Alan Clements* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1997), pp. xi–xx, at pp. xiii–xiv.

14 Attard, *Russia: Which Way Paradise?*, p. 181.

your people.” These sorts of appeals may well have reached their target as, when a foreign reporter climbed on to a tank and asked a commander if he would shoot, if ordered, he stopped and thought before replying “You know, I’m Russian, just like all of them. I think I’d rather go to jail for treason than shoot at my own people.”<sup>15</sup>

Discussing the issues with soldiers was not confined to the barricades, although that was a telling point of the encounter between potentially opposed forces. Moscow-area Supreme Soviet deputies organized themselves to visit military bases and installations in their region to acquaint armed forces personnel with Yeltsin’s address and decrees and to win support. The All-Union Soviet of the Parents of Military Personnel tried collective parental persuasion in calling on all officers, soldiers, and sailors to oppose the coup.<sup>16</sup>

The barricades took on important functional and symbolic roles. In Leningrad a caravan of water trucks blocked approaches to the Palace Square, an activity that was self-generated, as many of the activities were.<sup>17</sup> Taking a more offensive approach, Leningrad taxi drivers, using their taxi radios to coordinate their movements, organized themselves into a fleet to scout around the suburbs looking for tanks or other early signs of attack so that prior warning could be given to demonstrators. In Moscow, couriers on bikes sped through the city and around the obstructions, bringing news and messages to and among resisters. A hot line was set up so people could report troop movements in their neighborhoods and give information on where stations could be heard, to overcome jamming.<sup>18</sup>

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15 Attard, *Russia: Which Way Paradise?*, pp. 182–83.

16 *Coup in the Soviet Union. Day 1. 18–19 August 1991. A Minute-By-Minute Chronology*, <http://artnet.net/~upstart/1819aug.html>.

17 Valerii Zavorotnyi, “Letter from St Petersburg,” in Bonnell, Cooper, and Freidin, *Russia at the Barricades*, pp. 147–157, at p. 155.

18 Gambrell, “Seven days that shook the world.”

The symbolism of the barricades was evident by the piles of rubble and material taken from unfinished buildings, plentiful around Moscow.<sup>19</sup> The hastily torn-up roads and fragments of reinforced concrete sent sure signs that behind them stood those who were willing to resist. Following initial confrontation with soldiers, there were flowers adorning the tanks at the barricade and children climbing over them, playing, giving evidence of the nonviolent nature of the resistance and the likelihood that their actions had almost certainly been successful. This military equipment had been transformed, “if not into ploughshares, then into a heavy-duty tenement jungle gym.”<sup>20</sup>

Organizational aspects were just as prominent with a mobile medical treatment center established at the large Moscow demonstration and ambulances on standby in case of the attack that was expected. People were instructed in how to best deal with gas attacks and makeshift equipment towards this end was shared around. Some set up stalls where coffee and other refreshments were dispensed free to the demonstrators to keep up their morale and physical strength. Strategies were employed to protect the demonstrators and the broadcasting equipment on the White House. All the lights at the White House were turned off at night, so that they would not illuminate the broadcasters and make them easy targets for snipers who were reported to have been set up across the river in the Ukraine Hotel.<sup>21</sup>

These examples show how diverse the resistance was in terms of both action and deliberate non-action. It included physical obstruction, graffiti, slogans, pleading with soldiers, defying curfews, refusal to obey orders, compromising and re-interpreting orders, seeking outside support, and attending to the physical needs and morale of demonstrators. It also seems very likely to have included some intentional inefficiency. While

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19 Gregory Freidin, “To the barricades,” in Bonnell, Cooper, and Freidin, pp. 71–77, at p. 74.

20 Freidin, “To the barricades,” p. 74.

21 Gambrell, “Seven days that shook the world.”

Martin Malia claims that "... the cabinet, the Party leadership, the three high officers of the KGB and the Army ... had to be capable of ineptitude and miscalculation on a Homeric scale,"<sup>22</sup> it seems more plausible that at least some of these displayed "deliberate ineptitude," something much closer to disobedience.

For instance, although the KGB did close Radio Moscow, they did not arrest Yeltsin, as ordered. Indeed they provided positive support, a network of informers passing on to him intelligence on the plotters' plans.<sup>23</sup> It is difficult to separate ineptitude from noncooperation, much more again to guess the motivations for noncooperation. This is especially the case since some in the KGB, and especially in its upper echelons, may have had more sinister motivations than those of the protesters who essentially wanted democracy to prevail. There are many conflicting claims about whether an order for Yeltsin's arrest was issued and, if so, whether it was rescinded or ignored. Victor Karpukhin, Commander of the KGB's special Alpha Team, claims that he was responsible for seeing to Yeltsin's arrest but boasts "I did everything I could to do nothing," a good recipe for noncooperation, even if his intentions were not clear.<sup>24</sup>

Likewise, there were examples of the military both acting against and for the coup, confirming ambivalence in the upper ranks. Some television and radio centers were closed down while others were left open, especially in further out towns such as Irkutsk and Tomsk, where political leaders opposing the coup appeared on television denouncing the putschists and inviting people to join demonstrations. Mayor Sobchak of Leningrad attributed the KGB's and military's reluctance to

throw their weight behind the coup to the presence of a strong civilian resistance.

Even where television centers were closed down or their broadcasting severely curtailed, media workers, as mentioned, contributed to a tide of anger against and ridicule of the coup. The ridicule included careful attention to showing Yanayev's shaking hands at the press conference called by the putschists, as well as several embarrassingly blunt questions being put.<sup>25</sup> These would have been an encouraging sign to those who wanted to openly oppose the coup. There was also feigned inability to edit from the press conference those pieces that the coup leader requested be cut, as well as subtle selection of music to accompany the television blackout. For instance, a concert hall production of Boris Godunov, "an operatic blast at regicides, silent majorities and pretenders" was among these.<sup>26</sup>

Newspaper workers also took a stand, including workers for those few newspapers that were officially allowed to remain operating and that the Emergency Committee felt it could trust. Printers at *Izvestia* refused to print the paper unless it contained Yeltsin's anti-coup declaration. Meanwhile, journalists from suspended radical newspapers immediately started producing makeshift newspapers and leaflets. When workers from the independent newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, banned by the Emergency Committee, prepared a four-page proof for Monday's edition, only to find that the state printing office, fearing repercussions, would not print it, the edition was faxed to France for translation and publication there. *Liberation* of Paris faxed the *Gazeta* workers, urging them to "keep up the good work."<sup>27</sup> Twenty-five *Gazeta* workers then stayed at the office through Monday night, putting together a new edition of *A Chronicle of Events of August*, a play on the name of the samizdat publication of the Brezhnev era. One thousand copies were posted in prominent places around

22 Martin Malia, "The August Revolution," *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 38, No. 15, 26 September 1991, pp. 22–27.

23 Trimble and Vassiliev, "Three days that shook the world."

24 Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski, *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms: Market Bolshevism against Democracy* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001), p. 205.

25 Reddaway and Glinski, *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms*, p. 214.

26 Freidin, "To the barricades," p. 72.

27 Ganley, *Unglued Empire*, p. 155.



Moscow, along with other newsletters, many of which had been published by other banned newspapers.

Also acting in the tradition of samizdat, journalists from prohibited newspapers illegally edited and published a paper called *Obshchaya Gazeta*, translating as *United Newspaper*. It was distributed all over Moscow, free of charge, and played a strong part in keeping the population up to date with events and resistance to the coup.<sup>28</sup> The staff of *Rosier* set themselves up at the Russian White House, from where they produced one edition of their newspaper and 42 different leaflets, as well as duplicating dozens of Yeltsin's appeals and decrees.

Efforts to maintain broadcasts were another area where resisters needed to outwit the plotters. The independent radio station Moscow Echo continuously transmitted Yeltsin's declarations, despite being closed down by the junta several times. Ham radio operators, to stay on air, had to constantly change frequency to circumvent jamming, further outwitting the would-be jammers with use of jargon.<sup>29</sup> The whole resistance movement was remarkable for its ability to think creatively and improvise, as had often been the case in a country where people adapted available materials to meet their needs, including making their own satellite dishes and using the emulsion of discarded x-ray plates to make recordings.

Not that new technologies were scorned or forgotten, at least not by resisters. Although e-mail and fax facilities were recent to the Soviet Union and still scarce, people took great advantage of these wherever they were available, sending messages overseas and asking for international support, as well as

passing on information within the country.<sup>30</sup> GlasNet, a dial-up network and joint international venture commenced in the glasnost and perestroika era, provided information on events in Moscow and Leningrad via news feeds from CNN and the BBC. The volume of traffic became so heavy that networkers were asked not to flood the lines with questions but to leave the lines open for posting vital information.<sup>31</sup>

RELCOM, a provider of e-mail and news and linked with EUnet, the European UNIX network, also proved useful. One resister, who was busily using this service while others were out at demonstrations, commented "... Thank Heaven, they don't consider RELCOM mass media or they simply forgot about it."<sup>32</sup>

Clearly, a wide array of strategies were used and available technologies, while certainly not as advanced or as widespread as in many countries, appear to have been used to their maximum. There were far more Soviet citizens with technical know-how than there was sophisticated equipment, yet for communication purposes the will to communicate and the ability to think of ways and means to do this most effectively, including overcoming jamming and circumventing other obstacles, is probably much more important than the technology itself.

The West appears to have played a relatively minor role in the resistance, except in the area of communication where its involvement may have been crucial. Even prior to the coup, US intelligence agencies had been helping Yeltsin improve his personal security arrangements and the security of his communication system. During the coup the

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28 We thank Valentin Bazhanov (personal communication, July 2000) for this information.

29 Anton Rebezov and Dima Guskov, "The 'White House' Operation," *QST* (official monthly journal of the American Radio Relay League), November 1991.

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30 Bob Travica and Matthew Hogan, "Computer networks in the X-USSR: technology, uses and social effects," *Proceedings of the ASIS Annual Meeting*, Vol. 29, 1992, pp. 120–135.

31 Travica and Hogan, "Computer networks in the X-USSR," p. 128.

32 David Alan Bozak and Larry Press, "The Internet as an information resource," <http://www.funet.fi/pub/culture/russian/politics/coup/papers/BozakPress>.

US Embassy sent a communication specialist to the Russian White House with portable telephone equipment to enable Yeltsin to make secure phone calls to military commanders and others. The US National Security Agency, in a rare display of its everyday monitoring skills, made available to Yeltsin real-time reports of calls made by members of the Emergency Committee on their special government telephones.<sup>33</sup>

While this information possibly contributed to defeating the coup, it must be stressed that Yeltsin had access to it only because the US government had by then deemed it to be in its own interests. Nonviolent activists cannot normally count on such assistance and may even have cause to worry about the motivations of those who provide such information.

Meanwhile anti-coup activists sought a different sort of assistance from the West and used available communication technology towards these ends. As the coup perpetrators moved to close down the liberal media and jam short-wave radios, Soviet resisters found it helpful to directly tell their story outside of the Soviet Union, hoping that this would not only bring pressure to bear from the West but that, probably more importantly, the news would find its way back in to a multitude of recipients. This seems to have worked well and there is no doubt that the resistance was pleased to have the ear of the outside world. However, there was no direct overseas support for the resistance. It was mainly psychological support and complementary media support. At a US college a Chinese student with experience of the protests in Tiananmen Square summed it up: “Western sympathy amounts to little in changing the situation. The Soviet people are their own savior.”<sup>34</sup>

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33 Reddaway and Glinski, *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms*, p. 203. Reddaway and Glinski point out that the National Security Agency opposed sharing intercepted information with Yeltsin, fearing it would compromise future surveillance.

34 Rogers Cadenhead, “Computer networks kept information flowing during coup,” 22 August 1991,

Some of the lessons which can be drawn from the success of the resistance relate to the possible vulnerability of the military forces for any group staging a coup; the volatility of situations, so that initial, well organized resistance can gather momentum and force the coup organizers to retreat; the importance of symbolism; and the benefits of thinking innovatively and planning ahead.

Years before the Soviet coup, Adam Roberts made the point that coups have a certain vulnerability, not least among the armed forces, and that this might be even more so where the military forces have a large component of conscripts.<sup>35</sup> There is an irony in that nonviolent activists are usually opposed to conscription, yet here, as with the forced use of Russian language throughout the USSR, opponents were able to use this to their own advantage.

It is clear that symbolism, where used, enhanced the resistance efforts. One of symbolism's contributions can be to provide a succinct sense of what the problem is and what needs to be done, where censorship, physical obstructions, and time restraints might stop the full gamut of arguments from being put. The throngs with their arms linked bravely as they confronted the tanks that might run them down, the flowers decking the tanks, and the posters pasted over the normally scrupulously unmarked walls of the metro stations exclaimed loudly that a resistance was underway and nonviolent in nature. Where symbols clearly expressed that nonviolence, they may have been even more effective.

Even from the successes, we can see how things might have been done better. One of our areas of discomfort about the remarkable and praiseworthy defeat of the coup was that Yeltsin appears to have been too strong a focus. There are several problems with this. Had he been arrested — and perhaps it was only by some stroke of fate and a particular

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<http://www.funet.fi/pub/culture/russian/politics/coup/papers/Cadenhead>.

35 Adam Roberts, “Civil resistance to military coups,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 12, 1975, pp. 19–36, at p. 31.

personality in the KGB that he wasn't — could the protesters have rallied in the same way? We will never know, of course, but it makes good sense not to be too reliant on a particular personality. The transmission of his decrees appeared to have taken up a great deal of the energy and direction of the underground media. It would be nice to think that, without these decrees, they could have put together strong and powerful arguments of their own. Their case certainly deserved that.

Another of the problems with the appeals to and reliance on Yeltsin is that much of what he said was nationalistic, directed at replacing the Soviet Union as the “motherland” with Russia. This was not the root of the problem and at times it seems that there was a risk of confusing the issues of democracy and patriotism. Moreover, history has shown Yeltsin to be a perpetual opportunist with little commitment to democracy, despite the rhetoric he used at times.<sup>36</sup>

Historically the Russian people have frequently expected and even turned to strong leaders and there can be some advantages to this. A strong nonviolent leader can be critical to the success of a campaign, providing direction, eliminating confusion, and becoming a symbol of resistance that aids mobilization. However, Yeltsin was neither Gandhi nor Martin Luther King and appears to have used the mobilization for his own purposes. Activists need to be watchful of emerging leaders and to constantly reassess their commitment to the cause and to nonviolence, for leaders' prominence and status can be used as fast lanes to their own self-interested goals.

One of the major lessons is about preparedness. It is a characteristic of coups that the resistance is usually not prepared for them. Soviet citizens, despite the warning of ex-Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze several months earlier that a coup was in the offing, were still largely caught by surprise. However, while they might not have been mentally or organizationally prepared, nor were they caught as short of preparation as some others

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36 Reddaway and Glinski, *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms*.

might be in similar circumstances. They at least had some experience of the sorts of measures introduced by the Emergency Committee and some sort of equipment and knowledge of how to move into underground mode. One resister boasted how quickly they had been able to “shift to underground,” having organized “reserve nodes, backup channel and hidden locations. They'll have a hard time catching us!”<sup>37</sup> This ability to move swiftly to new modes of operation may have considerable advantage. It is an advantage that nonviolent activists can work towards with forethought and preparation.

Another major lesson is about aiming for inclusiveness of as many groups as possible and taking notes of their strengths, talents, and weaknesses. Resistance may come from some sections of the population more than others and in the case of the Soviet coup it was more widespread among the intelligentsia and middle classes. There can also be considerable geographical variations. Leningrad was by far the most outspoken city against the coup, perhaps partly because of the influence of Mayor Sobchak but mainly because of its strong revolutionary tradition.<sup>38</sup> Preparation for nonviolent action might then include consideration of the strengths, weaknesses, and possible roles of different regions and cities, particularly those where it seems that support for nonviolent resistance might be strongest, for instance where the trade union movement has been heavily involved in social as well as industrial issues and where there is civic pride about that social consciousness.

Perhaps Mayor Sobchak best summed it up: “... it might have been a successful coup, with far-reaching implications, *had the people remained silent.*”<sup>39</sup>

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37 Bozak and Press, “The Internet as an information resource.”

38 Joseph Scholmer, *Vorkuta* (New York: Henry Holt, 1954), p. 256.

39 Ganley, *Unglued Empire*, p. 134. Emphasis in the original.

## Early cases of resistance to Soviet power

At many times in the USSR's history, a great many people have been silent and others have spoken out, sometimes at great cost. These periods tell us something about successful resistance and the reason for a relative dearth of action. The first period of marked oppression was when forced collectivization took place.<sup>40</sup>

The history of the Soviet Union was beleaguered by agricultural crises. An old joke quipped "What are the four greatest problems facing Soviet agriculture?" The answer: "Winter, spring, summer, and autumn." The joke gives evidence of the common belief that the problems were other than (or at least additional to) the largely inhospitable climate of much of the region which made up the Union, and that Soviet leaders had a penchant for blaming anything but their own policies. This was certainly the case with Stalin's forced collectivization and his accusation that the kulaks were the source of all agricultural woes.

During most of the 1920s there were debates among the Bolsheviks as to whether agricultural collectivization should be pushed ahead rapidly or whether it should be a slower process, taking into account the anxieties of peasants and trying to educate them rather than force them into collectives against their wishes. The peasants had already had a bad time of it during the Civil War which followed the Revolution when Soviet power was challenged from both within and from abroad, and the "Scissors Crisis" which was the name given to the situation resulting from the prices paid to peasants for their surplus having been kept low while the price of materials they needed to purchase rose dramatically. Because the USSR had no foreign sources of financial credit, the government sought to maximize

grain for sale abroad in order to generate foreign currency to support its plans for rapid industrialization. The peasants, already feeling squeezed, resisted these attempts and became generally less supportive of the Bolsheviks and their program, though many of them had previously been enthusiastic about the Revolution.<sup>41</sup> However, rather than ease the pressure, Stalin launched attacks on the agricultural sector and especially the kulaks, the better-off peasants. The leaders of the Soviet Union had a vision for agriculture, heavily influenced by rationalist ideas and notions that bigger is better, and they conceded little to the peasantry in terms of acknowledging their experience and in-the-field knowledge of agriculture.<sup>42</sup>

Part of Stalin's speech to agrarian Marxists in 1929 hints at his callousness and willingness for terror: "Taking the offensive against the kulaks means preparing for action to deal the kulak class such a blow that it will no longer rise to its feet. ... When the head is off, one does not grieve for the hair." He further went on to question whether kulaks should be allowed to join collective farms, answering his own question: "Of course not, for they are the sworn enemies of the collective farm movement."<sup>43</sup> This meant the kulaks could neither continue farming privately nor join collectives. Instead they were deported, along with others who resisted collectivization, to labor camps in the far north and in Siberia. Kulaks were almost completely liquidated in the course of 1930.<sup>44</sup>

Collectivization did not affect all parts of the USSR equally. Stalin used the policy to intimidate Ukrainians and give them their

40 For a full account of the forced collectivization and its impacts, particularly the resulting famine, see Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (London: Hutchinson, 1986).

41 Jerry F. Hogan and Merle Fainsod, *How the Soviet Union is Governed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 72.

42 James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 193–222.

43 Martin McCauley, *The Soviet Union, 1917–1991* (London: Longman, 1993, 2nd ed.), pp. 81–82.

44 McCauley, *The Soviet Union, 1917–1991*, p. 82.

“come-uppance.” The Ukraine was one of the more productive agricultural regions so the particularly harsh treatment meted out there resulted in seriously decreased production, contributing greatly to the ensuing famine. Another particularly affected area was Kazakhstan where a large nomadic population with no knowledge or experience of cereal cropping was forced into collectivized cereal farms with disastrous results. Between 1.3 and 1.8 million Kazakh nomads are estimated to have died through this collectivization.<sup>45</sup>

It is not surprising that there was resistance. Historian Sheila Fitzpatrick has noted that Russian peasants had a tradition of violent rebellions against landowners and officials.<sup>46</sup> Much of the resistance to forced collectivization was of a limited and short-term nature, aimed at making the new collectives unworkable. The feeling among the resistant peasants was that, if they weren't allowed to keep their livestock and implements, then they would ensure that the collective would not get them either. There are stories of peasants breaking their implements, slaughtering all their livestock and gluttonizing on the meat of their kill. “The peasants had a feast. Between 1928 and 1933 they slaughtered 26.6 million cattle or 46.6 per cent of the total Soviet herd.”<sup>47</sup> Such behavior was an invitation to famine, an impact that they perhaps thought would stop the government in its tracks. Unfortunately, Stalin did not abound with rationality, humanity, or common sense. A serious famine did occur, the collectivization continued, and that part of the protest — to the extent that it was a protest — seems to have been largely ineffective in halting the program, although Stalin, in his usual erratic way, did relax the collectivization efforts for some time in 1930, at least to allow the spring sowing.

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45 Robert Service, *A History of Twentieth Century Russia* (London: Allen Lane, 1997), pp. 201–202.

46 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 20.

47 McCauley, *The Soviet Union, 1917–1991*, p. 83.

Resistance at times took on a more pointed and spectacular form, not always nonviolent. For instance, 30,000 fires were registered in Russia alone during just one year of the forced collectivization and many, perhaps most, of these were attributed to arson as many peasants set fires of destruction as part of their protest.<sup>48</sup> Among the campaigns of protests were actions by peasant women, referred to as *bab'i bunty*, loosely translated as “women's riots.” These often took the form of what was judged to be “female hysteria, irrational behavior, unorganized and inarticulate protest, and violent actions.”<sup>49</sup> However, L. Viola has made a strong case that the women were taking advantage of gender stereotypes, particularly via the greater leeway given to women protesters.

The nature of one *bab'i bunt* in the Ukraine illustrates how women dealt with the day-to-day realities of forced collectivization being forced upon them:

A crowd of women stormed the kolkhoz [collective farm] stables and barns. They cried, screamed, wailed, demanding their cows and seed back. The men stood a way off, in clusters, sullenly silent. Some of the lads had pitchforks, stakes, axes tucked in their sashes. The terrified granary man ran away; the women tore off the bolts and together with the men began dragging out the bags of seed.<sup>50</sup>

Viola claims that the *bab'i bunty* demonstrated a significant degree of organization and conscious political opposition and that they may well have played an important role in the

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48 L. Viola, “Bab'i bunty and peasant women's protest during collectivization,” in Chris Ward (ed.), *The Stalinist Dictatorship* (London: Arnold, 1998), pp. 213–231, at p. 214.

49 Viola, “Bab'i bunty and peasant women's protest during collectivization,” p. 213.

50 Viola, “Bab'i bunty and peasant women's protest during collectivization,” p. 224.

amendment of policies and practices.<sup>51</sup> Certainly, they posed problems for the local cadres whose task it was to put Stalin's collectivization plans into practice.<sup>52</sup> There were instances of women peasants bringing their children to protests with them, thus causing further headaches to the cadres, and also of the women laying down in front of tractors to block collectivization. They were also often nominated by the men as the spokespeople of the movement against collectivization, with men insisting that the women would simply make a larger din if they were not allowed to voice their opposition. Women also took advantage of the tendency for women not to be prosecuted under the relevant article of the criminal code when their opposition led to court actions.<sup>53</sup> It was often the women who would initiate that opposition and they would take it through particularly those parts of the resistance process where women were thought to have less vulnerability than men. Once more they were taking advantage of gendered stereotypes whereby women were not presumed to play such a key role in opposition but nor were those who were meant to quell opposition always culturally prepared to deal with them as they would deal with men.

Traditional means of communication appear to have played important roles. "Heated discussions took place in village squares, at the wells, in the cooperative shops and at the

market,"<sup>54</sup> all the normal meeting places where peasant women would meet and exchange news and views and keep abreast of local events. To be equipped with as much knowledge as possible about what had been happening and the issues at stake and to have the opportunity to discuss possible strategies against unwelcome events proved as useful for the peasant women as for any group of people setting out to resist policies to which they object.

Nevertheless, successes seem to have been small, sporadic, and short-term, and pale against the overriding trend. Although there were common forms of resistance such as foot-dragging, "failure to understand instructions," and refusal to take initiative, these appear to have eventually given way to passive and active accommodation, suggesting resignation.<sup>55</sup> Resistance appears to have worked best when it was thought through and had some achievable goal, as in re-securing confiscated grain and equipment. By comparison, simply killing off livestock and breaking implements appears to have been ineffective and, with its contribution to the horrific famine that ensued, seems to have added to the tragedy that was forced collectivization.

One of the problems was that, though the brutality was widespread, Ukrainians had little in common with Kazakhs (other than their obvious victimization), some peasants may have happily joined in the campaign against the kulaks while others did not, and generally there were divisions and confusion. As well as there being a lack of the necessary solidarity, access to information seemed relatively poor in this case. Both these factors — solidarity and access to relevant information — stand out as momentous advantages in nonviolent resistance,

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51 Viola, "Bab'i bunty and peasant women's protest during collectivization," p. 227.

52 Not that the cadres alone were in charge of enforcing collectivization. According to Service, *A History of Twentieth Century Russia*, p. 180, men from the factories, militia, and the Party were called to venture into the villages to enforce collectivization. They were given neither limits on the use of violence nor detailed instructions on how to distinguish the rich, middling, and poor peasants from each other.

53 Viola, "Bab'i bunty and peasant women's protest during collectivization," pp. 224–225.

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54 Viola, "Bab'i bunty and peasant women's protest during collectivization," p. 217.

55 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 5–10.

## The Stalin Terror

There can be little doubt that “the Terror” unleashed by Stalin in the mid 1930s was the most vicious and all-encompassing of all the periods of repression faced in the Soviet Union.<sup>56</sup> Between 1935 and 1941 more than 19 million people were arrested, seven million of them shot and the remainder sent to the Gulag (the term used for a state of exile, which could take place in numerous areas, most of them bitterly inhospitable), where many of them died.<sup>57</sup> Following World War II and up until the time of Stalin’s death in 1953, there was another wave of mass arrests, directed often at Jews.

The years of terror under Stalin were, in many ways, an intensification and expansion of what he had done to the peasants in his efforts to collectivize agriculture. The expansion of terror was extraordinary in that it targeted highly placed party and government officials as well as ordinary people. Indeed, so many bureaucrats were liquidated during the terror that the period was noted for high social mobility, as those killed left gaps into which others could move, creating career opportunities. This is one of the reasons that many people did not want to acknowledge “the Terror” or their own tenuous positions.

As well as shootings — often of highly placed officials — and the running of “show trials” involving those who had been in the forefront of the Revolution, there were massive intakes into labor camps of people across all different social strata. Stalin’s secret police — the NKVD, a forerunner to the KGB — unleashed and directed a campaign of severe

repression and terror.<sup>58</sup> While most of those in the upper echelons, including the Politburo and the Central Committee, survived, members of the Sovnarcum (the Council of People’s Commissars) were decimated, as were the upper ranks of the army. During the Great Purge of 1937–38, two-thirds of the army’s marshals, corps, and division commanders were arrested.<sup>59</sup>

In the republics, many party and state leaders disappeared, as did many managers of the economy. Diplomats or anyone who had contact with the West, whether through friends, colleagues, or relatives, were immediately under suspicion on that premise alone.<sup>60</sup> Among the officials shot or sent to Siberia, for instance, was the Foreign Ministry’s head of protocol who was under suspicion for “connections with foreigners” which was, of course, his job.<sup>61</sup> In the lower classes, as in the upper strata, people were cajoled to spy on one another and inform on the slightest suggestion of ideological non-conformity or aberration. One woman who dreamt that she had sexual relations with the Commissar of Defense was taken to a labor camp after mentioning the dream to a friend who reported her to the NKVD.<sup>62</sup>

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56 Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin’s Purge of the Thirties* (London: Macmillan, 1968); Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *The Permanent Purge: Politics in Soviet Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956).

57 Adam Hochschild, *The Unquiet Ghost: Russians Remember Stalin* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1994), p. xi.

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58 NKVD was the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs, which combined the secret police and interior commissariat. Ironically, it was modeled partly in the secret police of Ivan the Terrible. A full description of its role in the Terror can be found in Robert Conquest, *Inside Stalin’s Secret Police: NKVD Politics, 1936–39* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985).

59 Mark Galeotti, *Gorbachev and his Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 8.

60 Meanwhile, diplomats from other countries were often cautious not to mix with local people for fear that they might be “responsible for an innocent Russian’s death or exile”: Harold Eeman, *Inside Stalin’s Russia: Memories of a Diplomat 1936–1941* (London: Triton, 1977), p. 45.

61 Hochschild, *The Unquiet Ghost*, p. 110.

62 Andrei Sinyavsky, *Soviet Civilization: A Cultural History* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1988), p. 90.

Under such conditions of terror, within a culture where all people were encouraged to inform and where there was great adulation of Stalin, organizing any form of open resistance was something akin to suicide. Opponents were picked off and shot — along with a great many others who were not even opponents — before any significant level of organization could be accomplished. Even opposition to the Terror inside the Party is difficult to piece together since Stalin operated with tight secrecy and few were willing to risk breaking ranks from the silence. At the 17th Party Congress in 1934, before Stalin's repression moved onto its most bloodthirsty phase, there was a push for relaxation of both economic development and of party discipline, though the stenographic reports of this secret congress were not published. Opposition to Stalin's excesses had its center in the Party in Leningrad, with Sergei Kirov emerging as the leader of this more liberal faction. At the congress it was proposed that Stalin be stripped of his General Secretary status and given a less embracing role, with Kirov taking up Stalin's other duties. Stalin no doubt perceived this as a slight.

In December 1934, Kirov was assassinated, a killing that was generally thought to have been on Stalin's orders, though recently released documents suggest otherwise. In any case, this eliminated the person whom Stalin feared as a possible rival. Subsequently, Stalin used Kirov's death to step up the terror and to launch a ferocious political campaign against his enemies.

With such ruthless determination to eradicate all opposition, even within the upper echelons, it is apparent how difficult it would have been for ordinary Soviet citizens to organize full-scale and effective resistance. Citizens could be taken for interrogation anywhere or at any time. There were secret, unmarked doors in train stations and other places and people recall that by-standers would look the other way if someone was taken through one of these doors.<sup>63</sup> Sometimes interrogators gave assistance to those they

were interrogating and were themselves dragged off to labor camps.

Yet we know that there were at least some activists who took the grave risks involved. Suzanna Pechuro was part of a group of six teenagers who, unlike so many others who were arrested, were actually involved in strategies against Stalin. Pechuro makes light of what the group did: "What did we manage to do? Practically nothing. We issued two leaflets. We developed a program."<sup>64</sup> Such actions were brave in the context of what was happening in the Soviet Union at that time. The group refused to continue participating in a literary group where they were not allowed to read out poems unless the director had first checked them. Instead the teenagers formed their own group, setting themselves assignments to read, making synopses, and meeting to discuss their findings and views. Though they had to be extremely careful, they would also raise issues with other friends. Pechuro notes that, although the period is known as a time of mass betrayals and cowardice, none of her group was ever betrayed by their friends.

The group realized that, if each person spoke to others about what they knew and what they had learned and those in turn told other trusted friends, then a process of questioning would be underway. "Our task was to get the process going," Pechuro has explained. She claimed group members knew it was imperative that they not be intimidated, even though each of them knew the risks involved.<sup>65</sup> The group of six was eventually arrested and charged with plotting against Stalin, as were eleven of their friends who were under suspicion by virtue of their friendships. Of the six, three were shot and the others sent to labor camps. In the labor camps, Pechuro had the chance to resist in smaller and different ways. Her fellow prisoners taught her a number of strategies for survival and for communication, involving tapping on the wall

63 Hochschild, *The Unquiet Ghost*, p. 129.

64 Hochschild, *The Unquiet Ghost*, p. 31.

65 Hochschild, *The Unquiet Ghost*, p. 32.



to the next cell, using a code to spread messages to other prisoners.<sup>66</sup>

Clearly the obstacles faced by resisters under Stalin's reign of terror had much more to do with betrayal, fear, and trauma than with the actual technology of communication. Nevertheless it is interesting to see that Pechuro's group of resisters made a hectograph, a primitive printing machine, a description of which they found in the memoirs of a nineteenth-century revolutionary. With this they were able to print 250 copies of anything needing to be circulated, although 250 copies may arguably have been an optimistic number to have circulated in those days of mass informing and NKVD terror.

Some of the resistance to Stalin took the form of just trying to escape being arrested and thus avoid falling victim to his pogrom, though this is obviously not a strategy that initially involved actively confronting the regime. One couple developed a special way of ringing the doorbell, so as to ensure the other that it was not the NKVD coming to take them away.<sup>67</sup> A few others who thought that the NKVD might come for them changed their names and kept on the move. This could be quite successful, especially since it has been noted that the forte of the organization was inspiring terror and it was often quite poor at detective work.<sup>68</sup>

These conditions were among the most difficult for nonviolent activists. Not only was arrest and execution a constant threat — and the continual disappearance of so many was a reminder of this — but the culture of Stalinism would have made resistance seem as futile as it was dangerous.

The very symptoms fed into the structures which made it so difficult to oppose or even question dominant views. Stalinism was a cult inspired by massive propaganda and a state-promoted image of Stalin as loving, all-wise, and deserving of his power. The leader was deified, with believers suppressing normal

critical judgments and even intuitions. Censorship and state control went hand in hand with the mass arrests. If ever there was a strong case for carefully planned and orchestrated pressure from outside of the country, this would seem to be such a case. The part played internationally will be discussed later.

### **Relaxation born of resistance**

Although Stalin died in 1953, there was no automatic release of political prisoners from the labor camps. On the contrary, there were slow and tedious re-evaluations of prisoners, with many questions asked, many details taken, and a bureaucratic process undertaken to decide whether each particular prisoner might have been arrested and exiled “mistakenly.” One survivor of the camps explained that, had all the political prisoners been declared innocent, “... it would be clear that the country was not being run by a legal government, but by a group of gangsters — which, in point of fact we were.”<sup>69</sup> However, there were also economic reasons for the continuation of the camps which had been set up in the 1920s and greatly expanded under the reign of Stalin. He had used this cheap and involuntary labor for projects such as railway and canal building, tree felling, and mineral extraction. Some of the most inhospitable areas of the Soviet Union were rich in minerals, including uranium which posed another threat to the inmates of the labor camps, some of whom suffered severe radiation exposure.

The period following Stalin's death, with its ongoing repression for masses of political prisoners in camps, brought strong resistance. At first, news that the dictator was dead was kept from the prisoners, but it eventually trickled through. There were rebellions involving thousands of people in some of the largest camps.<sup>70</sup> In Kengir prisoners took over

66 Hochschild, *The Unquiet Ghost*, p. 36.

67 Hochschild, *The Unquiet Ghost*, p. 96.

68 Hochschild, *The Unquiet Ghost*, p. 276.

69 Hochschild, *The Unquiet Ghost*, p. 223.

70 A brief account of the strike is found in Michail Baitalsky, “Rebellion in the Northern Camps,” in Stephen F. Cohen (ed.), *An End to Silence:*

the camp complex for 40 days, setting up their own newspaper and theatre. News of these rebellions reached other camps via such methods as desperate messages chalked on the inside walls of freight cars by inmates in other camps who had loaded or unloaded them. The methods of Stalinism were still in force. In Kengir women rebels were driven from their barracks and ridden over by Red Army tanks, with 700 prisoners killed. In Norilsk the camps were bombed and in Vorkuta the inmates were shot, en masse.<sup>71</sup>

On paper the rebellions looked like failures but one inmate of one of the camps that was involved in the strike at Vorkuta throws a different light on this. Joseph Scholmer, a German prisoner in Vorkuta Camp 6, claims that the strike “destroyed the myth that the system was unassailable.” He points out that the strike enjoyed the support of the 10,000 prisoners directly involved and much of the civilian population who quickly learned of the strike. Scholmer claims that most of the soldiers were sympathetic, as were the local peasantry.<sup>72</sup>

The Vorkuta strike lasted for several weeks, with organizing committees being set up and pamphlets and slogans used to achieve the fairly modest demands of the activists. Scholmer claims the strike could not have been possible without the prior existence of underground resistance groups. Nevertheless, there was little direct experience the strikers could call on, a factor which he claims led to its demise. As soon as the strike was over, the resistance groups began analyzing their actions, seeking to understand what might have been done better. It was felt that a better and more effective campaign might have been run from inside the pit, “the exclusive preserve of the prisoners.” Instead the prisoners were in the camps where the NKVD were able to “sort out, isolate and remove the most active elements in the strike.” In any case, Scholmer

notes that the strikers were generally dealt with much less harshly than many of them expected, though this is clearly relative. Having already endured a great deal, many had grave anticipations about their fate. One of the important factors in their having some negotiating power was that these Vorkuta prisoners were a crucial cog in the Soviet economy, providing much of the energy requirements for Leningrad, which was quickly plunged into a power shortage during the strike.

One reason that the strikes should not be considered failures is that from them sprang Khrushchev’s relaxation which in turn gave rise to the Soviet dissident movement. This movement is usually dated from 1956 when Khrushchev read his speech to the Twentieth Party Congress condemning the cult of Stalin and acknowledging, to at least some extent, that there had been terror.<sup>73</sup> However, at least one inmate from the camps at the time of the rebellions believes that Khrushchev’s relaxation was directly related to the resisters’ refusal to cooperate. She explains:

All the 1956 reforms and the shutting down of the camps were caused by those rebellions! It was no longer possible to keep this army of people in obedience. When the camps rebelled, coal-mining output dropped, timber-cutting also. Nobody was at work. Gold and uranium — no one was working. Something had to be done. Nikita Khrushchev released us. What else could he do? *We managed to make them release us.*<sup>74</sup>

In this way the dissidence should be perceived as ongoing, although certainly going through different phases and taking different forms. Also from the time of Khrushchev’s speech dissent grew among a new sector of people, who had not been in the camps, particularly intellectuals. The speech gave the impetus around which people could express

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*Uncensored Opinion in the Soviet Union* (New York: Norton, 1982), pp. 98–100.

71 Hochschild, *The Unquiet Ghost*, pp. 38–39.

72 Scholmer, *Vorkuta*, pp. 234–269.

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73 Sinyavsky, *Soviet Civilization*, pp. 227–28.

74 Susanna Pechuro, cited in Hochschild, *The Unquiet Ghost*, p. 39.

their disgust but it was also a point of conflict because the party was not taking any of the blame that dissidents felt it should.<sup>75</sup> The loosening of repression gave rise to networks of people, *kompanii*, who would gather regularly to socialize and discuss issues. These were the breeding grounds for *inakomslayashchie*, as dissidents were known, though the Russian word has a meaning not precisely the same as dissident.

Dissident Ludmilla Alexeyeva claimed that it was these *kompanii* which in turn gave rise to samizdat. In the mid-1950s a poet folded blank sheets of paper and typed poems on all four sides, then sewed the pages together as in a booklet and wrote *samsebyazdat*, an acronym for “I published myself” on the front. This was a parody of *gozpolitizdat*, the name of an official publishing house in the USSR.<sup>76</sup> The practice became popular not just in the Soviet Union but throughout the Eastern bloc and the name became shortened to samizdat. Samizdat was used to publish first poetry and memoirs, particularly of those who had been in labor camps for political reasons, but later it was used for translations and for circulating banned writings, petitions, and various documents.<sup>77</sup> Using the humble typewriter, carbon paper, and very thin paper, dissidents would type up as many copies as would be legible. These would be circulated to others who often would themselves type multiple copies and distribute these.

Accompanying his censure of Stalin, Khrushchev took a more flexible stance on literature, urging writers not to “bother the government” but to decide among themselves the worth of their peers’ manuscripts. Of

course writers did not want to bother the government but previously they had had to submit their works to the government censor.<sup>78</sup> This change resulted in a flux of works critical of the Soviet Union being published overseas, including a number by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn whose *The Gulag Archipelago* described the conditions in some of the worst camps.<sup>79</sup>

Khrushchev, under pressures from conservatives, later retreated on some of these reforms. Criticism of Stalinism was curtailed and relations cooled between the leader and some of the dissenting artists and writers whom he had encouraged.<sup>80</sup>

### Consolidation of repression

Khrushchev was ousted in 1964. Under Leonid Brezhnev, who was president from then until 1982, there were serious moves away from liberalization and some signs of restalinization. This period was characterized by a tightening of censorship, introduction of new laws that put dissidents at greater risk, and harsher persecution of political and religious dissidents. Brezhnev also halted the rehabilitations of *Gulag* victims that Khrushchev had commenced. Under the new head of the KGB, Yuri Andropov, who was later to become leader, the KGB took on a more sophisticated approach to dissidents, which included many of them being locked up in psychiatric hospitals or even deported from the country.<sup>81</sup>

But the period of relaxation had allowed dissidents to grow more knowledgeable and to resolve that there would be no return to the past. The resistance that the new clamping down met was more mature and became better organized, especially around 1968, with several significant events. Sovietologist Peter Reddaway notes that about this time people

75 Donald Filtzer, *The Khrushchev Era: De-Stalinisation and the Limits of Reform in the USSR, 1953–1964* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 29.

76 Ludmilla Alexeyeva and Paul Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation: Coming of Age in the Post-Stalin Era* (Toronto: Little, Brown, 1990), pp. 97–98.

77 Alexeyeva and Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation*, pp. 97–99; Marshall S. Shatz, *Soviet Dissent in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 128.

78 McCauley, *The Soviet Union, 1917–1991*, p. 256.

79 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956* (London: Collins, 1975).

80 Filtzer, *The Khrushchev Era*, pp. 28–29.

81 Galeotti, *Gorbachev and his Revolution*, pp. 24–25.

dared to think and act independently of authorities.<sup>82</sup> This was a time when there was a significant protest and push for social change around the world and dissidents in the USSR no doubt took heart from this. Dissidents created formal and semi-formal associations and began to intercede on behalf of persecuted individuals and groups. They also formed networks to help dissidents in prison or in psychiatric hospitals and to assist their families.

On 25 August 1968 Pavel Litvinov led a small group of Soviet dissidents in a demonstration in Red Square against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. One woman pushed a baby carriage and had two banners written on strips of cloth, one written in Czech and proclaiming “Long live free and independent Czechoslovakia!”, the other “To your freedom and ours!”<sup>83</sup> Less than twenty minutes after their demonstration began and the banners were unfurled, the protesters were taken away by the KGB, put on trial, and sentenced to three years in prison camps. The next day an editorial of the *Literarni Listy* newspaper in Prague declared “Those seven people on Moscow’s Red Square are at least seven reasons why we will never be able to hate the Russians.”<sup>84</sup> The Czechoslovaks were not the only people to admire the bravery of the seven dissidents. According to Alexeyeva, members of the national liberation movements in the Ukraine and Baltic states spoke of their admiration “... when you go out protesting in the open, without weapons, just seven of you against the world, well, that takes a special brand of courage.”<sup>85</sup>

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82 Peter Reddaway, “The development of dissent and opposition,” in Archie Brown and Michael Kaser (eds.), *The Soviet Union Since the Fall of Khrushchev* (London: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 121–156, at p. 126.

83 Alexeyeva and Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation*, p. 219

84 Alexeyeva and Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation*, p. 220

85 Alexeyeva and Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation*, p. 222.

Another significant event occurred in 1968: the first publication of the *Chronicle of Current Events*, a samizdat journal committed to reporting on events relating to human or national rights. Editorial policy was to avoid value judgments and to keep readers abreast of new works being circulated in samizdat. It contributed hugely to systematically documenting human rights abuses in the Soviet Union and enjoyed considerable credibility both among those Soviet citizens who came into contact with it and among concerned groups overseas.

Samizdat as a method of communication may seem laborious and time-consuming compared with printing, mimeograph and, later, photocopying. However, it had some advantages in that it gave rise to particular forms of writing. Hungarian George Konrád noted that samizdat “is not an appropriate vehicle for lengthy analyses and descriptions; the samizdat cannot afford to be boring. ... Samizdat is a medium, and perhaps a genre as well. It is not cheap, it is relatively difficult to read, one cannot prattle, it has to be worth one’s while.”<sup>86</sup> The conciseness that was essential for samizdat, for the typists’ benefit, also served the medium well in that writing which is to the point and does not waffle probably encourages a larger and more attentive readership, including readers who are very busy and who are unable to read through voluminous material. Samizdat works were widely circulated and discussed during the 1970s. Even some members of the bureaucracy and political leadership were among the readers. Arguably, this contributed strongly to glasnost,<sup>87</sup> which will be discussed later.

Slightly more sophisticated technologies further enabled dissidents to communicate news and views that would not have otherwise been given an airing. As cassette players became more available, they were used in a

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86 George Konrád, “Informing on ourselves,” *The Nation*, Vol. 244, 28 February 1987, pp. 237–239.

87 Stuart Anderson, “Gorbie’s choice: Perestroika’s dissident roots,” *The New Republic*, Vol. 200, No. 16, 17 April 1989, pp. 11–12.

samizdat fashion, with people making tapes, then making copies for others, who would then copy the cassettes in turn.<sup>88</sup> This allowed satirical songs and other protest music to also be circulated, known as magnitizdat. A huge demand for tape recorders grew in the Soviet Union during the 1960s and the state happily satisfied the demand, believing that the uses to which the technology was being put were more “innocent” than was the case.<sup>89</sup> Short-wave radios were hugely important and became very popular from 1968 when dissidents used them to listen to groups in Czechoslovakia and to hear about what demonstrations were taking place in the USSR.<sup>90</sup> Their popularity remained after the reformist period known as the Prague Spring had been squashed and contributed to the dissent that demanded and brought the next period of relaxation.

As well as sending information to the editors of the *Chronicle of Current Events*, dissidents similarly gave material to foreign journalists, tourists, and diplomats in the hope of spreading their cause and gathering support for their push for human rights. Reddaway claims that it was also about this time that Soviet citizens started to listen systematically to foreign radio stations and circulate information thus obtained and to propose to authorities carefully drafted proposals for law reform. Clearly these activities signaled a new level of activism. Dissidents were now being much more than victims. They were active protagonists of change.

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88 Shatz, *Soviet Dissent in Historical Perspective*, p. 129.

89 Gene Sosin, “Magnitizdat: uncensored songs of dissent” in Rudolf L. Tökes (ed.), *Dissent in the USSR: Politics, Ideology, and People* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), pp. 276–309, at p. 278.

90 Alexeyeva and Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation*, p. 222

## Glasnost

As mentioned, samizdat and the ideas of the dissidents played a crucial role in glasnost, introduced by President Gorbachev in the mid 1980s. Even the term glasnost was taken up by Gorbachev after being used by some dissidents as a key demand for a new sort of society. Indeed Gorbachev not only pushed ahead with many of the political and economic reforms that the dissidents had argued for, but he used remarkably similar terms and arguments, suggesting that he had been significantly influenced by them. A number of the ideas in a United Nations speech he made in December 1988, for instance, had appeared in dissident Andrei Sakharov’s 1968 samizdat work *Progress, Co-existence and Intellectual Freedom*.<sup>91</sup>

Under glasnost, Gorbachev not only allowed but encouraged a diversity of views. Not that repression died out under his leadership. There were several instances of disturbing state repression, much of it revolving around the increasingly vexed question of independence for the republics that had been under Russian rule for decades and sometimes centuries. Eighteen people died when commandos stormed first the Lithuanian TV center and then the headquarters of the Latvian Interior Ministry. Nor was the repression all the state’s doing. In some of the republics tensions arose and prejudices overwhelmed social relations so that national groups, impassioned by the nationality issue being on the agenda, fought each other, with loss of life and increasingly disharmonious relations.

Gorbachev also found that his encouragement to criticize was sometimes turned against him. In the May Day march of 1991 some placards demanded his resignation. The road to political freedom was not going to be smooth, nor did it enjoy wholehearted support. This became most obvious when the democratization process threatened to come to a halt with the 1991 coup. With one fell swoop, repression was restored.

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91 Anderson, “Gorbie’s choice: Perestroika’s dissident roots,” p. 11.

## The role of international support for resistance

International support for Soviet resistance movements has not always been what it might have been. The period of most success was from 1968 and through the years of the Brezhnev era, when dissidents placed heavy reliance on international efforts to make the Soviet government abide by its human rights obligations. Much of the dissidents' energy was aimed at getting information to the West and hoping that that strategy would both put pressure on the Soviet government and also allow the information to come back into the country via short-wave radio and communications from foreigners. This appears to have worked well.

However, at other periods international support was minimal and sometimes even misdirected. The main problems seem to have been:

- Western foreign policy was linked less with concern for the people of the Soviet Union than with Western governments' own perceived political interests;
- there was a misplaced belief in militarism as the best form of diplomacy;
- both the right and left held to their own rigid ideologies;
- little reliable information came out of the USSR, a problem to which ideological supporters of the Soviet Union and foreign diplomats there themselves contributed.

The building of the Soviet system took place under extraordinary isolation. Internationally, there was a great deal of hostility towards the Bolshevik regime from the beginning. Several Western governments supplied money and guns to the counter-revolutionaries in the Civil War that ensued in 1918 to 1920.<sup>92</sup> This was despite workers in many of these countries, and particularly the UK, feeling strongly that the new Soviet regime should be given a chance to implement its programs. Allied troops were also sent: British troops landed in Archangel and

Murmansk in 1918; US, Serbian, and Italian troops were stationed in the north; US, British, Japanese, and Czech troops were in Siberia; British troops were in the Caucasus; and French troops were in the Crimea. Although these troops seldom engaged in direct battle against the Reds,<sup>93</sup> their very presence and the postures of hostility by their home governments set the stage for an acrimonious relationship. Thus, as historian McCauley notes, "The Bolshevik regime was fashioned by the exigencies of Civil War."<sup>94</sup> The party's internal disagreements about freedoms and open dissent tended to be set aside as the more pressing question of survival took precedence. This was in contrast to the early days of the Revolution, when there was popular participation, workers' control, and considerably greater tolerance for disagreement.

Although the Red Army had been set up in keeping with the spirit of the revolution, the hostility directed towards the Soviet Union from outside drove the army towards a different model. In 1917 there had been soviets of soldiers and a move away from the rigid hierarchies of the Czarist army, but this was reversed as Trotsky took control and reorganized the army along more traditional hierarchical lines. Tens of thousands of former Czarist officers were put into positions of command. This effectively brought about a militarization of the revolution, which in turn impacted on the society which was emerging in the newly formed Union. The conventionally organized army could be used to repress challenges to the increasingly centralized Bolshevik rule.

As further crises arose, important questions of liberty and open criticism were habitually put on the backburner so that, in the years between 1926 and 1929 especially, Stalin was able to amass more power than many in the party wanted him to have. Lenin had earlier warned of this power accruing to Stalin but the hostility from outside worked against it being addressed.

<sup>92</sup> Service, *A History of Twentieth Century Russia*, p. 117.

<sup>93</sup> McCauley, *The Soviet Union, 1917–1991*, p. 28.

<sup>94</sup> McCauley, *The Soviet Union, 1917–1991*, p. 30.

Ironically, the disastrous agricultural policy of the USSR during the 1920s and early 1930s was related in no small way to attempts by foreign governments to crush the Soviet Union. By supporting the counter-revolutionaries and cutting off access to many raw materials, intervening governments gave the Soviet leaders cause to feel under siege. There was a fear that the West would attack. The only answer was seen to be rapid industrialization, at which point increasing pressure was put on the peasantry, as discussed earlier.

Hostilities against the Soviet Union took many forms and surfaced numerous times. Such was the strength of the suspicion and hostility that in the build-up to World War II the British government saw the Soviet Union as a larger threat than fascism. Some even felt that fascism had some benefits in that it might be able to squash Communism.<sup>95</sup>

Following initial military intervention in the Soviet Union in the early days, there were further encounters of a militaristic nature, with the result invariably being that the Soviet government would strengthen its own military capabilities. This was particularly the case in the earlier years of the Cold War and also of the period in the 1980s when US President Ronald Reagan engaged in constant aggressive posturing, as well as “upping the nuclear ante.” Of course, during both the 1950s and 1980s the US government itself used the increased militarization of the Soviet Union to justify its own increased expenditures on weaponry and on the military sector generally. Each military escalation would justify the other’s paranoia about its objectives, thereby plunging each into a spiral of increased risk of war. While both the East and West paid dramatically in terms of loss of social welfare and other more useful programs to which the expenditure could have been redirected, the Soviet Union, with its constantly troubled economy, arguably paid a greater price with little left over for much needed social im-

provements. This gradually resulted in loss of popular support for the Soviet government.

We should not assume, however, that it is only governments that can influence outcomes in other countries. The international movement against apartheid, in response to the actions and requests of the people of South Africa, shows otherwise. Groups of activists and individuals, especially if they are well-known and enjoy notoriety, can have a significant impact on swaying public opinion or in boosting the morale of those facing problems in their home countries. Unfortunately, people in such a position, for the most part, failed badly in regard to what they might have done in respect to repression in the Soviet Union, particularly during the years of Stalin’s rule.

Many writers, social commentators and others who had an interest in international politics and who were of a left persuasion, chose to believe that Stalin was something akin to the god-like figure painted of him in the USSR. They had a view of how they wanted the Soviet Union to be and they preferred to make their beliefs fit the ideal rather than to see the country for what it was. This included a great many people who traveled to the Soviet Union during some of its most repressive and disruptive years and yet saw only what they were allowed to see, what they were told by those who organized their visits, and what they wanted to believe. David Caute has written of many of these “fellow travellers” as having had “commitment *at a distance*,” the distance being not only geographical but emotional and intellectual.<sup>96</sup> The Soviet Union, during its darkest years, made good use of such people, pointing out that their objectivity was beyond question since they usually belonged to no political party, or at least not the Communist Party.<sup>97</sup>

But, as Adam Hochschild points out, the split between those who saw clearly and those who chose to deny did not always lie along

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95 D. F. Fleming, *The Cold War and Its Origins, 1917–1960, Vol. 1*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961).

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96 David Caute, *The Fellow-Travellers: A Postscript to the Enlightenment* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), p. 3.

97 Caute, *The Fellow-Travellers*, p. 7.

ideological lines. He identifies two of the worst deniers as being major US establishment figures. *New York Times* correspondent Walter Duranty and US ambassador Joseph Davies each sent home messages from the Soviet Union that all was well there. Acknowledging that there had at least been some sort of purging, they both agreed that this had been necessary and served the country well by cleansing it and ridding it of treason. Moreover, these men were not tourists. They lived in Russia and must have had more first hand knowledge than some who simply flitted through the country, being shown what was deemed that they should see.<sup>98</sup>

Others who chose to overlook the situation in the Soviet Union during its terrors of forced collectivization and the Great Purge were believers in the ideal of communism. They wished to see the Soviet Union as a country moving forward with the blessing of all its citizens. The reality was so far different from their constructed view that they chose to ignore it. Some of these had good reason to know about the reality, whereas others may have had less understanding of the situation. Many reports about the Soviet Union were presented from an anti-communist perspective, giving supporters of the Soviet government some reason — though not necessarily sufficient reason — to doubt what they heard. Others chose not to know.

Directly after the Second World War, when the Soviet government geared up for a new wave of terror, similar to that unleashed in the late 1930s, there was much ill feeling in the Western world about socialism and those who wished to defend it in principle felt that, in the polarized ideological environment, they must defend it also in practice, no matter what warped practices came from socialist states. Among the pro-Soviet left in the West, there was little honest and free discussion and apparently no strategy to promote greater freedom in the Soviet Union.

There were, in essence, two polarized blocs in the West, one saying that there could be nothing good about the Soviet Union and

the other that there could be nothing bad about it. This polarization stifled any possible understanding of the real situation there. It also fed into the Cold War and the military build-up both in the Soviet Bloc and elsewhere. If we speak of relatively low levels of action in opposition to repression in the Soviet Union, then part of the responsibility lies with Western governments and the Western left.

Only during the Brezhnev years, as mentioned, did the West prove useful to Soviet dissidents and even then it was often the enemies of socialism who took up the cause while left wingers preferred to close their eyes to Soviet repression or at least insist that it was a low priority on the scale of global oppression. The role of the West faded somewhat under glasnost as the nation was liberalized, although US leaders often liked to think that the liberalization was due to the history of Western belligerence rather than despite it.

## Conclusion

The Soviet people may have been their own savior in the defeat of the 1991 coup but repressed people around the world request, expect, and deserve assistance in their struggles. The end to apartheid came because of the struggle of the South African majority but, arguably, it came more quickly due to the solidarity shown on the international stage — and probably would have come more quickly again had that support been greater earlier. Solidarity strikes us as being one of the major factors in social struggles.

Glancing back at the different periods of Soviet repression, we can glean that networks, where and when they existed, were particularly useful, and that actions with well thought through goals had the best chance of success. If one ingredient for resistance was missing more than any other during the Stalinist Terror, it was networks of resistance. The NKVD had formed a massive and powerful apparatus of repression, while individuals lived in either fear or denial, both seriously isolating frames of mind. Often family members dared not speak among themselves of their concerns, for fear that children might

98 Hochschild, *The Unquiet Ghost*, p. 271.



report them to their teachers or unwittingly repeat something said at the dinner table. Both networks and open communications had obviously broken down at their most fundamental level.

Networks of dissidents, the *kompanii* founded in the 1950s, were among the most important developments in the Soviet dissident movement. From them grew widespread samizdat, international pressure for human rights, and an imposing dissident literature that laid the foundation for glasnost. Glasnost itself played an important role in providing psychological preparation for resisting the coup.

Another lesson comes from dissident Vladimir Bukovsky who recommends using systems against themselves. Pointing out the extremely bureaucratic nature of the Soviet system, he has described how even those in Soviet prisons could turn the system against itself. He and his fellow prisoners nearly brought their prison to a standstill with an avalanche of complaints which, under Soviet law, they were entitled to make. Because of the highly bureaucratized rules and rituals surrounding the receipt of complaints and dealing with them, this caused huge problems.<sup>99</sup> The message is to know each system and its weaknesses and to think creatively about how these might be utilized towards one's goals.

Nonviolent goals should always involve nonviolent means to their achievement. It is telling that, during the 1991 Soviet coup, the three deaths of protesters in Moscow were at a venue where Molotov cocktails (home-made explosives) had been thrown. For even just a few people to use violence can create fear and confusion and hinder the winning over of guards, soldiers, or other potential oppressors.

But perhaps the greatest lesson is about the nature of social struggle. Both 1917 and 1991 can be seen as successes for nonviolent action. Yet they remind us that, following social change brought about by mass actions (whether violent or nonviolent) major chal-

lenges can lie ahead. Social struggle is clearly an ongoing process. Citizens of the ex-Soviet Union are today trying to come to grips with a society with very different sorts of problems. They can be both proud of their 1991 achievement and bewildered that they must start afresh, finding new ways of having a voice.

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99 Vladimir Bukovsky, *To Build a Castle — My Life as a Dissenter* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1978), pp. 35–39.