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The Evolution of Soviet Reaction to Dissent

Summary

After the signing of the Helsinki accords, several developments converged to heighten the concern of Soviet authorities about dissent in their society.

- The human rights provisions of Basket III became a rallying point for Soviet and East European dissidents.
- The Eurocommunists became much more critical of Soviet internal repression.
- Persistent food shortages in the Soviet Union resulted in isolated instances of active protest on a mass level.

The current crackdown against dissidents is the end-product of a gradual growth in the Soviet regime's anxiety over these related pressures. The initiation of the crackdown, although not its present scope, predates the change in US administrations. The initial impulse for it was probably the desire to silence the dissidents before the Belgrade review conference. The new US administration's public defense of Soviet dissidents apparently did reinforce and intensify Soviet anxieties. The net effect was to impel the leadership increasingly to conclude that harsher measures against dissidents were required.

The current campaign against dissidents is in part related to irritation over the lack of progress in other areas of US-Soviet relations, as well as to the Soviets' desire to keep dissent closely controlled during the Belgrade conference. At the same time, the more defensive and pugnacious tone of Soviet policy, both externally and internally, may also reflect aggravated tensions within the Soviet leadership. Recent policy difficulties may have strengthened the arguments of those leaders somewhat less inclined to conciliate the regime's opponents, both at home and abroad.

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The Evolution of Soviet Reaction to Dissent

When the Soviets signed the CSCE accords in August 1975, they took a calculated risk that their acceptance of the human rights provisions of Basket III would not create serious internal difficulties for them. After Helsinki and especially during the last year, however, several developments heightened the concern of Soviet authorities about dissent in their society. This increased anxiety has been gradually translated into increasingly tough stands on issues of ideology and social control, and has produced the current crackdown on internal dissent.

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I. The Dissident Problem

A. CSCE: A Rallying Point for Soviet Dissidents

The human rights provisions of Basket III provided a common ground for Soviet dissidents with a wide range of views and concerns, thus raising the specter for the first time in many years of a unified "opposition." The CSCE monitoring group, the most important dissident group to emerge in the Soviet Union since Helsinki, was organized by physicist Yury Orlov in Moscow in May 1976, and soon sprouted regional branches in the Ukraine, Lithuania, Armenia, Georgia, and Leningrad. These branches were tiny and the degree of actual coordination that existed between them is not known, but the emergence of a dissident organization with links throughout the country was unique in recent Soviet history. More important, the CSCE monitoring group, by espousing the causes of a wide variety of aggrieved religious and national minorities, established some claim to being the center of a broader protest movement.

Although this incipient support of religious and national minorities in itself potentially provided a mass base for human rights activism, the intellectual dissidents remain estranged from the bulk of the working class population. Working class discontent, which has basically economic rather than political objectives, thus did not converge with intellectual dissent.

B. Food Shortages and Unrest

Nonetheless, official apprehension that such a convergence could take place has evidently grown since the bad harvest of 1975. Although consumerism is not a potent political force in the Soviet Union, as it is in some East European countries, the Soviet population has come to expect a gradual improvement in the standard of living. The food shortages caused widespread grumbling, and over the last year and a half there have been reports and rumors of a number of instances of active unrest and protest.

-2-

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We know that last winter the Soviet leadership was quite worried about the mood in the country.

Although the recent instances of violence, some of them related to food shortages, were not perpetrated by human rights activists, the Soviet leadership may not always distinguish clearly between different sources of protest. Some reporting suggests that Soviet officials may vaguely sense some connection between intellectual dissent and popular discontent.

Soviet leadership feared that easing restrictions on dissidents could abet a trend of criticism in the country that could create an "explosive" climate.

C. Under Attack From the Eurocommunists

Since early 1976, the Eurocommunists, including the once docile French Communist Party, became more openly critical of the Soviet Union than at any time since the aftermath of the invasion of Czechoslovakia. The Spanish Party has gone furthest, but the larger French and Italian parties pose the more serious problem for the Soviets. From the Soviet perspective, the chief danger implicit in Eurocommunism is not that it has diminished Soviet influence in West European Communist parties, but that it offers a Marxist alternative to the Soviet model in Eastern Europe, and perhaps ultimately within the Soviet Union itself.

Moscow has thus been upset by Eurocommunist support to dissidents in Eastern Europe and the USSR. Particularly annoying to the Soviets in this regard was an unprecedented visit in late December of an Italian Communist delegation to dissident Soviet Marxist Roy Medvedev in Moscow. The Italians presented Medvedev with an Italian edition of one of his books and reportedly asked him to write articles for an Italian party historical journal.

- 3 -

25X1

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D. Unrest in Eastern Europe

At the same time, CSCE had a catalytic effect on East European dissent, which became a movement cutting across national borders. Dissidents from different East European countries have reportedly coordinated their activities to a limited degree. Last winter some Soviet leaders were evidently genuinely alarmed that post-Helsinki conditions were creating an unstable situation in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland, and to a lesser degree in East Germany and Czechoslovakia.

The growth of unrest in Eastern Europe increased chronic Soviet fears of a spillover into the Soviet Union itself. Soviet authorities have always been alert to the danger of a political "virus" from Eastern Europe spreading into the polyglot borderlands of the Soviet Union, which have historically been susceptible to influences from that quarter. The fear of such a domino-effect was evidently a factor in the Soviet decision to invade Czechoslovakia in 1968.

E. The US Human Rights Initiative

The new US administration's human rights "campaign," and especially the personal involvement of President Carter in public appeals on behalf of Soviet dissidents, further disturbed Soviet authorities. Many Soviet officials, already fearful of being put in the dock at Belgrade, reportedly regarded the campaign as a deliberate attempt at subversion by the US. At the same time, US protests about Soviet repressions temporarily emboldened Soviet dissidents to make more vigorous protests and to channel their appeals directly to the US administration.

II. The Soviet Response

It is largely as a response to all these related pressures that the current crackdown against dissidents must be seen. It is clear that at least the initiation of the crackdown, although not its present scope, predates the change in US administrations. The original factor of greatest importance in the minds of the Soviet leaders at the

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outset of the crackdown was probably the desire to clean house and silence the dissidents before the Belgrade review conference was convened. Indeed, some dissidents have charged that the climate in the Soviet Union deteriorated immediately after, and as a direct result of, the signing of the Helsinki accords. [redacted] among others, claimed that conditions in his prison "tangibly worsened" after Helsinki. In 1976 there were a few trials of dissidents, balanced by occasional regime conciliatory gestures.

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The first clear evidence that a crackdown might be underway did not come, however, until late December 1976, seven months after the formation of the Orlov group in Moscow. In December Soviet authorities moved in a limited way against the CSCE monitoring group, by conducting searches of apartments of the members of its subgroup in the Ukraine. But there is no evidence to indicate that at this early date the Soviets intended the crackdown to assume the major proportions it did in the spring. Rather, it seems likely that they intended to continue "carrot and stick" tactics aimed at controlling dissent by a careful combination of coercive and conciliatory measures, while holding in reserve the option of intensifying repression if circumstances warranted.

The new US administration's public defense of Soviet dissidents apparently was a major factor which reinforced and exacerbated the related Soviet anxieties about the coming Belgrade CSCE meeting, the situation in Eastern Europe, the behavior of the Eurocommunists, and the food situation at home. The net effect was to impel the leadership increasingly to conclude that harsher measures against the dissidents were required. Since February the Soviets have moved to suppress the Orlov group and its regional subgroups, by arresting leading members and encouraging others to emigrate. Moreover, in the spring the Soviets began to make greater and greater efforts to limit the access of Westerners in Moscow to the dissident community, and to link the dissidents with espionage activities.

Two incidents in June were particularly indicative of the changed atmosphere in Moscow: the interrogation of newsman Robert Toth (the first such case in the detente era), and the surfacing of further suggestions that dissident Shcharansky is under investigation for treason. If Soviet authorities do charge him with treason, Shcharansky

- 5 -

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may become the first intellectual dissident since Stalin's day to be tried for this serious crime. Meanwhile, since Toth's departure, the Soviet media have expanded insinuations that he was engaged in espionage.

Conclusions

The Soviets originally believed that they could afford to permit their citizens greater contact with the West, or they would never have signed the Helsinki accords, allowed greater movement between East and West Germany, or stopped jamming some Western broadcasts to the Soviet Union in 1973. The events of the last year, however, have given them pause and reason to reassess their policies. Many Soviet officials have probably decided that acquiescence on Basket III was a mistake.

Objectively, Soviet dissent does not appear to pose a serious threat to the Soviet system, but Soviet officials evidently perceive a greater danger than exists in fact. Both Russian history and Leninist ideology impel them to exaggerate the potential importance of opposing groups, however small. They have always been preoccupied with problems of control. The importance that the leadership attaches to dissent can be seen by the fact that decisions about individual dissidents are sometimes made at the Politburo level.

It is not merely intellectual dissent that disturbs the Soviets. They fear that the "freer movement of people and ideas" which they conceded on paper at Helsinki, and which to a certain extent the circumstances of a modern technological world force upon them, will open their society to a whole host of ideas and influences from the West that are, in their view, not only politically subversive but socially disruptive and morally unhealthy. Identifying Western concepts of liberty with license, they are apprehensive that extensive contact with the "decadent" West will expose the Soviet people not only to alien political ideas but also to crime, terrorism, pornography, and drugs, which could combine to produce a general breakdown of order and discipline. To the extent that they are concerned about the stagnation of their economy, the Soviets may also fear that consumer dissatisfaction will become a more serious political problem in future years.

In view of the problems the Soviets confronted in the winter and early spring, some sort of domestic crack-down was to be expected. The intensity and duration of the Soviet response, however, is not entirely explained by objective circumstances. Some of the pressures on the Soviets in fact seem to have diminished since the February-March period. The tense situation in Eastern Europe has eased, and the food supply in the Soviet Union itself, while still a subject of considerable concern, seems to have improved somewhat. Meanwhile, Soviet attempts to muffle internal and external criticism have paid off to a considerable extent. Although occasional outbursts of protest continue to take place, the more prominent dissidents have been effectively silenced. Nevertheless, Soviet repression of dissent continues to intensify.

It is true that even now the picture is not one of unrelieved repression. Two prominent Jewish activists, for example, were recently allowed to emigrate. And Orlov, the key figure in post-Helsinki dissent, has been charged with the relatively minor offense of anti-Soviet activity. There are still some restraints on Soviet behavior toward dissidents; the Soviet leadership has no desire, if indeed it has the power, to move in the direction of reinstituting the Stalinist terror apparatus. Nevertheless, the current campaign against dissent in the Soviet Union has become the toughest of this decade.

This increase in the relative harshness of Soviet policy is to some extent a natural partner of the more defensive and pugnacious tone the Soviets have displayed recently in many facets of foreign policy--particularly regarding the Eurocommunists and the United States. The recent expansion of Soviet actions against dissidents is doubtless thus partially related to irritation over the lack of progress in other areas of US-Soviet relations, as well as to the Soviets' desire to keep dissent closely controlled during the Belgrade review conference. At the same time, the exaggerated sensitivity of Soviet policy, both externally and internally, may also reflect aggravated leadership tensions. A confluence of policy difficulties, coming at a time when Brezhnev's health is uncertain, may have strengthened the arguments of those within the leadership somewhat less inclined to conciliate the regime's opponents, both at home and abroad.

- 7 -

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CHRONOLOGY

- August 1975 CSCE accords signed.
- 1976 A few trials of less well-known dissidents continue, despite Helsinki accords.
- May 1976 Formation of Soviet CSCE monitoring group.
- late
December 1976 Apartment searches of members of CSCE monitoring groups in Kiev; visit of Italian communists to dissident Roy Medvedev in Moscow.
- January 8, 1977 Three bomb explosions in Moscow--Moscow rumors attribute to discontent over food shortages.
- February 3, 1977 Solzhenitsyn associate Aleksandr Ginzburg detained in Moscow.
- Two Ukrainian monitors of CSCE detained in Kiev.
- February 10, 1977 Yury Orlov, chairman of CSCE monitoring group detained in Moscow.
- March 2, 1977 Leaders of French, Italian and Spanish communist parties meet in Madrid in the first summit of Eurocommunist leaders.
- March 4, 1977 Izvestia article charging Jewish refusnik Shcharansky and others by name with working for CIA, three U.S. Embassy officers charged by name with having recruited them.
- March 13, 1977 Pravda article warned that the human rights issue could disrupt Secretary of State Vance's impending visit to Moscow.

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March 15, 1977 Shcharansky arrested.

March 16, 1977 Joint "press conference" with western news-
men held by representatives of broad
spectrum of dissent--intellectuals, Jewish
refusniks, Pentecostals, CSCE monitoring
group and others.

March 28, 1977 Soviet-US talks on SALT opened in Moscow.

April 27-29, 1977 Conference in Prague of Soviet, East
European and West European communist parties;
Soviet effort to establish common line not
notably successful.

June 1, 1977 Shcharansky's parents reportedly notified
that treason charges being prepared against
him.

June 11, 1977 Los Angeles Times correspondent Robert Toth
questioned by KGB for allegedly accepting
state secrets on parapsychology from Jewish
refusnik Valery Petyukov.

June 15, 1977 Belgrade review conference on CSCE opened.

June 17, 1977 Toth permitted to leave the Soviet Union.

June 27, 1977 Orlov charged with anti-Soviet activity--
maximum penalty three years prison.

July 4, 1977 Ginzburg reportedly charged with anti-Soviet
propaganda--third "offense," maximum penalty
up to seven years prison plus five internal
exile.

July 12, 1977 TASS statement charged Toth used press card
as cover for intelligence work, hinted at
disclosures to come. Petyukov reportedly
told no action to be taken against him be-
cause he had cooperated in exposing an
"arch-intelligence agent."

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