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'To Build a Castle': The British Construction of Soviet Dissent

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The human rights violations that occurred in the Soviet Union are among the most barbarous and cruel of all persecution in the twentieth century. Horrific forms of physical and mental torture were utilised on a mass scale by the Soviet authorities to suppress political dissenters. The threat of persecution forced ordinary citizens into living a double life. By day, the ideals of the *Homo Sovieticus* – the ideal Soviet citizen – were to be sought by individuals intent on progressing in the Soviet system. However, by night the underground reading of *samizdat*¹ materials sharpened their dissenting interests. Expressions of religious belief were also suppressed forcing the most faithful into practising their religion in a covert manner in an attempt to avoid the threat of state atheism. There were, however, a collection of non conformists who, in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's (1974) words, refused to 'live by the lie'.

Dissidents such as Andrei Sakharov, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and Sergei Kovalyov amongst many others played a substantial part in the collapse of the Soviet Union and in the construction of new sets of norms and values in the post-Soviet nations. Whilst the efforts of these individuals are now internationally recognised as being of great importance, their position was not always acknowledged by commentators in the West. Indeed, it could be argued that dissidents in the Soviet Union were virtually unknown in Britain before the early 1970s. So much so that in the context of the Cold War, some

¹ *Samizdat* was the underground literature used by the Soviet dissident movement. The term is a play on the name of the Soviet publishing house *Gosizdat* and literally means 'self published'

commentators in Britain doubted their very existence, suggesting their work was an elaborate hoax by the Soviet security apparatus (D.A.N. Jones, 1970). Yet by the mid 1970s, Soviet dissidents occupied a central role in international relations, placing huge amounts of pressure on the Soviet authorities with the support of both Western governments and human rights activists from around the world. This was a dramatic shift in international authority for this community of activists, and one that has yet to be accounted for in historical scholarship.

This paper will assess the construction of the British discourse on Soviet dissent, seeking to identify how dissidents came to occupy such a position within such a short period of time. It will assess how Soviet dissenters were publicly recognised in British society, shifting from an imagined community to one that held significant influence. It will also consider how this transition occurred, highlighting the role played by British human rights organisations in publicising their plight. It will be argued that this development was one of a slow evolution, concluding that the British discourse on this community formed in a series of layers over a long period of time, rather than in populist swells accompanying a few highly publicised events.

In the 1960s the Soviet Union was undoubtedly seen as mysterious country by many people in Britain and other Western countries. The Iron Curtain that had descended over Europe after the Second World War had cut off Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union from the West. Information on daily life in the Soviet Union was limited to reports from Western journalists, who were based predominantly in Moscow, and official Soviet sources. Both of these had clear limitations, with the Soviet authorities censoring all information that left the Soviet Union through official channels. Journalists had to avoid displeasing their hosts so they could keep

their visas, preventing them from asking the most probing questions and from publishing controversial material whilst they were in the Soviet Union. These restrictions meant that internal opposition to the Soviet regime was largely unreported in the West throughout the 1960s.

The first instance of political opposition being publicly acknowledged in the Soviet Union was the November 1962 publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day In the Life of Ivan Denisovitch* in the Soviet literary journal *Novy Mir* (Solzhenitsyn 1963).² This novella described the single day of a prisoner in a Gulag, a Soviet labour camp, and was based on Solzhenitsyn's personal experiences. The story was published with the direct approval of Nikita Khrushchev, the General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party and *de facto* Soviet leader. It became a significant part of the de-Stalinisation process instigated by Khrushchev that sought to remove the cult of personality created by Joseph Stalin. The novella was very well received in the West, leading to Solzhenitsyn attaining much literary acclaim for his work, for which he was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1970. Whilst the response to this work from the West was positive, its publication did not lead to an extensive questioning of the contemporary issues regarding human rights abuse in the Soviet Union, focusing instead on previous abuses by the regime under Stalin.

This position was largely maintained in the West throughout the 1960s, with criticisms of the Soviet Union's record on human rights focusing on misdemeanours of the past, rather than the abuses of the time. Interest in the position of human rights in the Soviet Union was reignited in 1968 when the New York Times published

² Solzhenitsyn's work was first published in an English translation by Ralph Parker in 1963 for the New York publishing house Dutton, now part of Penguin.

an essay by Andrei Sakharov (1968), a prominent Soviet nuclear physicist, on human rights in the Soviet Union. *Reflections on Progress, Coexistence and Intellectual Freedom* explored Sakharov's hoped development of the Soviet Union, holding the prominence of freedom of conscience and intellectual thought at the very centre of his argument. Sakharov's essay was met with international acclaim, leading to him becoming the third most published author in the world that year, somewhat ironically only behind Vladimir Lenin and Mao Zedong (Sakharov 1990, p.288). Sakharov was also later awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975 for his efforts to promote peaceful coexistence between the Soviet Union and the US.

Despite the prominence of Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov in the West, the concept of Soviet dissent was still only on the periphery of public knowledge in Britain at the end of the 1960s. At the turn of the decade, some commentators were still sceptical about the claims made by Soviet dissidents, and even of their existence itself. Most notably, the journalist D.A.N. Jones claimed in a letter to the *Spectator* that Andrei Amalrik, a prominent Soviet dissident, was a KGB construction, and that his famous essay *Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984* was in fact a hoax. Jones (1970) noted that:

it must be obvious to *any* reader that this book is some kind of cruel hoax. A fictionalised autobiography of a spiv, a crook, a liar.

The early 1970s saw a dramatic change in the concept of Soviet dissent in the West, mainly due to the high profile cases of Zhores Medvedev and Vladimir Bukovsky which provoked an explosion of Western interest in Soviet dissenters. Medvedev, a biologist who was deeply critical of the Soviet regime and its support of the dubious theories of the geneticist Trofim Lysenko, was incarcerated against his will in a *psikhushka*, a high security psychiatric hospital, in May

1970. This imprisonment was seen as a direct response to Medvedev's denunciation of Lysenko's theories, and a clear attempt by the Soviet authorities to silence dissenting views. The imprisonment of dissenters in psychiatric institutions under the guise of suffering from the very suspiciously defined 'sluggish schizophrenia' had become a common tactic of the Soviet authorities in this period. Sluggish schizophrenia was a form of mental illness that was noted by Professor Harold Merskey and Bronislava Shafran (1986, p.247) as being 'virtually limited to the Soviet Union', raising suspicions that it had been manufactured as a political tool for the Soviet authorities to utilise in suppressing dissent. This political use of psychiatric treatment was arguably one of the most barbaric tools utilised by the KGB. It was an extreme form of mental and physical torture for the imprisoned dissidents, who were both forcibly treated with anti-psychotic drugs with horrific effects and kept in close proximity to patients suffering from an array of psychiatric disorders.

Medvedev was released in June 1970 after a campaign on his behalf placed pressure on the Soviet authorities to do so. This campaign, whilst international in scope, was driven mainly by scientific colleagues based in the Soviet Union. There were bold declarations in support of Medvedev by leading Soviet dissidents. At an international symposium at the Soviet Institute of Genetics on 30 May 1970, Andrei Sakharov asked for signatories to appeal on behalf of Medvedev, something which was criticised by the head of the Institute Nikolai Dubinin, and which could have had significant repercussions for Sakharov himself (Sakharov 1990, p.310-312). Solzhenitsyn's appeal for Medvedev's release was notably powerful, claiming his treatment to being a 'variation on the *gas chambers*' – a clear reference to the Holocaust (Medvedev 1971, p.135-137). Their efforts were recognised by Zhores' brother Roy, who, in his

foreword to *A Question of Madness* (1971 p.IX), the account of Zhores' incarceration, offered his:

most profound gratitude to all those friends, acquaintances and strangers, at home and abroad, who by protesting in various ways against the inhumane use of medicine for political purposes, created a climate of opinion which meant freedom for him and hope for others illegally confined in psychiatric hospitals.

The response to Zhores' incarceration, although predominantly driven by Soviet intellectuals, was the first indication that pressure on the Soviet authorities from the international community could lead to the release of a prisoner of conscience. This can be seen as a watershed moment for human rights activists around the world, proving that their efforts could lead to a release. From this point on, human rights organisations had little hesitation in directly petitioning the Soviet authorities for the release of political prisoners.

In 1971, Vladimir Bukovsky, a Soviet human rights activist, compiled a set of documents outlining the dubious psychiatric diagnosis of a series of dissidents. Among these 150 pages of documents were medical files, and pieces outlining the psychiatric diagnosis of six dissidents.³ Bukovsky sent these documents to The International Committee for the Defence of Human Rights, a small French human rights organisation, along with a letter appealing for psychiatrists to study these documents and express their opinions on them; asking specifically if the documents contained enough scientifically-based material to diagnose mental illness and, on this basis, whether these people needed to be isolated from society (Working Group on the Internment of Dissenters in Mental

³ These were the cases of Vladimir Borisov, Viktor Fainberg, Natalya Gorbanevskaya, General Petro Grigorenko, Viktor Kuznetsov, and Ivan Yakhimovich.

Hospitals, 1971 Appendix 1). Bukovsky also asked for psychiatrists to place the issue of the Soviet abuses, and the outcome of these documents, on the agenda of the next international congress of psychiatrists. This appeal was taken up by a number of concerned individuals in Britain who formed the Working Group on the Internment of Dissenters in Mental Hospitals, led predominantly by the Sovietologist Peter Reddaway. This Working Group translated Bukovsky's documents, and publicised the material on a wide scale in British society, with his letter of appeal appearing in translation in *The Times* (Reddaway & Bukovsky, 1971).

These documents have been described by Dr Sidney Bloch and Peter Reddaway (1977, p.79), two contemporary academics researching the Soviet abuse of psychiatry, as the most persuasive body of evidence regarding the Soviet psychiatric abuses in the early 1970s. Whilst the significance of Bukovsky's documents were recognised by a large portion of British psychiatrists, including those such as Dr Gery Low-Beer who joined the Working Group, there were several individuals who doubted his claims of Soviet abuse. Gwynneth Hemmings, the Honorary Secretary of The Schizophrenia Association of Great Britain was particularly vocal about these materials. In a letter to the *New Scientist* (1972, p.419) she criticised 'arts degree people' for denying 'madness in their heroes', arguing that they had been 'egged on by men such as Bukovsky'. She goes onto claim that she had no doubt that Natalia Gorbanevskaya, a dissident involved with the *samizdat* journal *The Chronicle of Current Events*, was a schizophrenic, and that claims of the political abuse of psychiatry in the Soviet Union were 'nonsensical'. This was a bold claim considering that Hemmings had not met Gorbanevskaya and that she was not a qualified psychiatrist herself. Whilst this letter does not explicitly deny the existence of these

dissidents, her complete dismissal of claims of the unethical use of psychiatry in the Soviet Union contain similarities to the assertions of journalists such as D.A.N. Jones. By denoting a prominent dissident as mentally unstable, Hemmings was effectively questioning the validity and authority of the wider dissident community in the Soviet Union. Hemmings' letter to the *New Scientist* betrays how elements of British society were dismissive of Soviet dissenters and their claims of human rights violation, despite the increasing flow of information to the West in the early 1970s.

In accordance with his request, the Bukovsky documents were brought to the attention of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) in both 1971 and 1977 by human rights activists and concerned psychiatrists. The WPA responded in vastly differing ways at each meeting, illustrating the shift in Western discourse on Soviet dissent in the 1970s. In 1971, the claims set out in these documents were largely dismissed by the WPA which failed to seriously consider reports of political abuse of psychiatry in the Soviet Union. However, by its next conference in 1977, it is clear that Soviet dissent had become an issue that it could not avoid. Indeed, dissidents themselves had established an authority in the West that meant their claims could not be ignored. Bukovsky's profile in particular had become entrenched in British discourse in late 1976 after he was involved in a high-profile prisoner exchange with Luis Corvalan, a Chilean Communist leader. This exchange was the first recognition that the Soviet Union held political prisoners, and following Solzhenitsyn's exile in 1974, was the event that proved without doubt both the existence of Soviet dissenters, and the persecution of them by the authorities. It was reported extensively in the Western media, and marked a shift in the Soviet treatment of political dissenters.

The Chairman of the Working Group on the Internment of Dissenters in Mental Hospitals Dr Allan Wynn (1987, p.101-102) noted that by the 1977 WPA conference, Bukovsky 'had achieved a recognition that made it impossible for his appeal to be dismissed as just another attack on psychiatry by a disaffected person'. This was a position that would have been impossible for a dissident to have occupied a decade previously, and is indicative of the entrenchment of these individuals in British discourse. This position, and the efforts of British human rights activists, led the accusations of the political abuse of psychiatry in the Soviet Union to be taken up by the WPA and the Royal College of Psychiatrists, both of whom formed committees to deal directly with reports of these abuses. That these prestigious organisations recognised and responded to the petitions of a dissident shows the shifting opinion of these bodies, that six years previously had seemingly ignored Bukovsky's appeals.

How did this development occur?

Soviet dissenters shifted rapidly from an envisaged community in the 1960s to one that had become very real in British discourse and society by the mid 1970s. The short period of time over which this took place may lead to historians highlighting specific events, such as Medvedev's incarceration, as points where this discourse was constructed. This, however, is an erroneous view. It must be remembered that development of discourse occurs in a cumulative fashion, with the information seemingly 'snowballing' into bursts of activity. Due to this, it appears as if the development in public discourse occurs in a very rapid fashion, from negligible understanding of events in the mid-1960s to public outpourings of protest in the 1970s. This could be misconstrued as an individual event, such as the publication of the Bukovsky papers, being the

catalyst for Soviet dissidents becoming a reality in British discourse. This is not the case.

Discourses are constructed in layers, with responses to previous stimuli – be it events, persons or publications – creating another segment on top of previous developments. This is a continual process, occurring over many years. Thus, whilst events such as the response to Medvedev's incarceration in 1970, Solzhenitsyn's exile in 1974, or the Bukovsky-Corvalan exchange in December 1976 might be construed as the moments when Soviet dissenters became entrenched in British discourse, they must be considered as points in a development rather than an end in themselves.

Although these key events brought attention to the plight of dissidents on an international scale, the real development in British discourse occurred with the more subtle and continual efforts of British human rights organisations. Their activism and continued pressure on bodies in the Soviet Union and the West alike not only brought about substantial changes in the treatment of individual dissidents, but it also publicised their cases to the wider public in Britain.

The influence of these human rights organisations first occurred with the reception of the Bukovsky documents in the West. As noted above, the Working Group on the Internment of Dissenters in Mental Hospitals was formed in direct response to these documents, and over the following decade went on to play a key role in publicising the political abuse of psychiatry in the Soviet Union. The efforts of individuals involved with this group was so significant that it would not be an overstatement to claim that without this organisation, bodies such as the Royal College of Psychiatrists would not have played the role they did in putting

pressure on the Soviet authorities. The first motion brought to the Royal College's membership regarding the political abuse of psychiatry was instigated by Dr Gery Low-Beer and Professor Harold Merskey – two individuals keenly involved with the Working Group and other human rights organisations. The influence of human rights activists in the Royal College continued into the 1980s, with the membership of Special Committee on the Political Abuse of Psychiatry, the group formed in the Royal College to deal with reports of abuse, being dominated by members of the Working Group.

The influence of human rights activists can be noted in many areas of the construction of British discourse on Soviet dissent in the 1970s. The Centre for the Study of Religion and Communism (later known as Keston College), was formed in 1969 in response to the state endorsed religious persecution in the Soviet Union. Keston was a predominantly academic organisation driven by religious principles to document the religious persecution of the Soviet regime. Keston produced an array of regular publications and a news service that documented the most up-to-date information on the position of religion in the Soviet Union. This was utilised by journalists, academics and government officials alike, and led to Keston acquiring a reputation of expertise and authority in this area. Keston's founder Canon Michael Bourdeaux was involved in Foreign Office consultations on the Soviet Union at the direct request of the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, showing not only the influence that this organisation held but also the reception that their work had at the highest levels of the British government. Whilst Keston did not attain widespread public recognition, much like the Working Group, its activities clearly influenced both official government policy in Britain towards the

Soviet Union and assisted in the development of British discourse on Soviet dissent.

Human rights groups also ensured that the plight of Soviet dissenters was kept in the mainstream news in Britain and other Western countries. Among them were the Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry, also known as the 35s, who worked predominantly on behalf of *refuseniks*, Soviet Jews who were prevented from emigrating to Israel by the Soviet authorities who refused to grant them exit visas. The 35's became quickly renowned for their media-friendly protests, demonstrations and stage invasions of cultural events, which drew the attention of the national media and placed the plight of Soviet dissenters in the mainstream news. Amnesty International supplied a constant stream of information regarding Soviet dissenters through their publications, and requesting that their members and supporters write to prisoners of conscience in the Soviet Union. The group produced a lengthy report on the position of dissenters in the Soviet Union entitled *Prisoners of Conscience in the USSR*. This was first published in 1975, with a second extended edition appearing in 1980. Amnesty also published translations of the *Chronicle of Current Events*, a prominent *samizdat* journal which documented both the plight of dissenters and the response of the Soviet authorities towards them. This was used by human rights activists and journalists alike, and was a regular source of up-to-date information used by British newspapers regarding Soviet dissenters. Bernard Levin in particular was full of praise for Amnesty's publications on the Soviet Union, dedicating several of his articles to discussion of them (1973, 1975a, 1975b).

To conclude, although the construction of the British discourse on Soviet dissent occurred alongside events that thrust individual dissenters into the international media limelight, this

development occurred over a longer period of time. The efforts of human rights activists ensured that when the media's attention was caught by an event involving a dissident, such as the Bukovsky-Corvalan exchange in December 1976, the tools needed to construct this discourse were already in place. Their subtle efforts played a significant part in the British reception of Soviet dissenters, and their actions deserve more attention in the wider historiography on the Cold War and the Soviet dissident movement.

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