

## Talking Fish: On Soviet Dissident Memoirs\*

Benjamin Nathans

*University of Pennsylvania*

My article may appear to be idle chatter, but for Western sovietologists at any rate it has the same interest that a fish would have for an ichthyologist if it were suddenly to begin to talk. (Andrei Amalrik, *Will the Soviet Union Survive until 1984?* [samizdat, 1969])

All Soviet émigrés write [or: make up] something. Am I any worse than they are? (Aleksandr Zinoviev, *Homo Sovieticus* [Lausanne, 1981])

If I am asked, “Did this happen?” I will reply, “No.” If I am asked, “Is this true?” I will say, “Of course.” (Elena Bonner, *Mothers and Daughters* [New York, 1991])

### I

On July 6, 1968, at a party in Moscow celebrating the twenty-eighth birthday of Pavel Litvinov, two guests who had never met before lingered late into the night. Litvinov, a physics teacher and the grandson of Stalin’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs, Maxim Litvinov, had recently made a name for himself as the coauthor of a samizdat text, “An Appeal to World Opinion,” that had garnered wide attention inside and outside the Soviet Union. He had been summoned several times by the Committee for State Security (KGB) for what it called “prophylactic talks.” Many of those present at the party were, like Litvinov, connected in one way or another to the dissident movement, a loose conglomeration of Soviet citizens who had initially coalesced around the 1966 trial of the writers Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel, seeking to defend civil rights inscribed in the Soviet constitution and

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to foster greater openness in Soviet society. After the other guests had departed, Leonid Pliushch, a Ukrainian mathematician employed at the Institute for Cybernetics in Kiev, found himself alone with Vladimir Dremluga, a boiler-room operator from Saratov who had briefly studied history at Leningrad State University before being expelled for “unreliability.” “We struck up one of those typical Russian conversations,” Pliushch recounted a decade later, “about all the ‘eternal’ problems.”

Then we came down to sinful earth and told each other about our personal lives. Both of us were astonished to see how different we were. Different social origins, diametrically opposed activities as youths (in school and at university), radically different characters. And yet our paths had come together here. . . . Without coming to any kind of consensus, we agreed that it would be interesting to analyze by what paths a person in the USSR arrives at the struggle against the existing regime, and what in fact unites all of us—given the opposing views within the democratic movement.<sup>1</sup>

It was the autobiographical moment: the occasion, Pliushch recalled, when “the thought of writing this book first occurred to me.”

“This book”—*History’s Carnival*—first appeared in 1977, shortly after the arrival in the West of its author, whom Soviet authorities had forced to choose between continued confinement in a psychiatric hospital and emigration. The autobiographical instinct, the desire for self-definition that Pliushch traced to his encounter with Dremluga a decade earlier, would eventually find expression among a remarkable number of his fellow activists in the dissident movement. Indeed, whatever form or degree of individual introspection was achieved in a given dissident’s autobiographical text, such texts came to constitute a collective phenomenon and what we can now recognize as a distinct genre of writing. Shaped by the Kremlin’s persecution of their authors as well as by the Western (and not just Sovietologists’, *pace* Amalrik’s remark) fascination with unsanctioned texts from within the socialist world, Soviet dissident memoirs took on significance within the intellectual forcefield of the Cold War.

“A specter is haunting Eastern Europe,” the Czech playwright (and later president) Václav Havel famously proclaimed, “the specter of what in the West is called ‘dissent.’”<sup>2</sup> Most commentators have noted Havel’s marvelous twist on the opening sentence of *The Communist Manifesto* without noticing his self-distancing from the term “dissent,” which he treats as foreign to the milieu that it

<sup>1</sup> Leonid Plyushch [*sic*], *History’s Carnival: A Dissident’s Autobiography*, trans. Marco Carynnyk (New York, 1979), xv. I have lightly amended the translation. “Democratic movement” was one of several terms, along with “rights-defending movement” and “dissident movement,” used by contemporaries to refer to the ensemble of groups seeking nonviolent reform in the USSR.

<sup>2</sup> Václav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” in his *Living in Truth* (London, 1986), 36.

supposedly describes. It is one of the paradoxes of dissidents under Soviet-style regimes that many of those to whom the label was applied—first as a badge of honor by Western journalists, then by the regimes themselves, sensing an opportunity to stigmatize nonconformists by branding them with a foreign word—disliked the term and at the same time found it virtually inescapable.<sup>3</sup> To explore dissident autobiographies is thus to wrestle with texts that, like the term “dissident” itself, crossed the Iron Curtain and acquired unanticipated meanings in new settings.

“Postmodern skepticism notwithstanding,” Irina Paperno has wryly observed, “texts can be used even for their intended purposes.” The purpose of publishing an autobiography, she notes, is not merely to define the self but also to depict it for others, “to bring intimate experiences into the public realm.”<sup>4</sup> But which public realm? The history of memoirs by Soviet dissidents is particularly striking in this respect, insofar as until the USSR’s collapse, such works could only be published outside the country in which their narrative takes place, thus complicating Tzvetan Todorov’s dictum that “genres communicate with the society in which they are operative.”<sup>5</sup> Translated and brought into wide circulation by publishing houses outside the USSR, in many cases appearing exclusively or initially in Western languages, the dissident memoir became a transnational platform for the presentation of an alternative Soviet self on a global stage. “Today, between writers of one country and the readers and writers of another,” wrote Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his 1970 Nobel lecture, composed while he was still residing in the USSR, “there is a nearly instantaneous reciprocity.”<sup>6</sup> Within this reciprocity, however, Soviet dissident life writing faced a dual estrangement: from the author’s native land and from a Western readership eager to extract familiar Cold War lessons from the unfamiliar landscape of post-totalitarian socialism. To a typical

<sup>3</sup> Boris Shragin, *Mysl' i deistvie* (Moscow, 2000), 185 (“on the selection of terms”). Andrei Sakharov wrote in his memoirs: “I’ve never cared for this term [dissident], but it has entered into common usage,” to which his wife, Elena Bonner, added: “My husband is a *physicist*, not a dissident.” Sakharov, *Memoirs* (New York, 1992), 361 and xiv. In a private 1981 letter to President Ronald Reagan, Solzhenitsyn denied being either an émigré or a dissident: see Richard Pipes, *Vixi: Memoirs of a Non-Belonger* (New Haven, CT, 2003), 186. Havel’s critique was perhaps the most eloquent of all: “To institutionalize a select category of well-known or prominent ‘dissidents’ means in fact to deny the most intrinsic moral aspect of their activity. The ‘dissident movement’ grows out of the principle of equality, founded on the notion that human rights and freedoms are indivisible. . . . It is truly a cruel paradox that the more some citizens stand up in defense of other citizens, the more they are labeled with a word that in effect separates them from those ‘other citizens.’” “Power of the Powerless,” 80.

<sup>4</sup> Irina Paperno, *Stories of the Soviet Experience: Memoirs, Diaries, Dreams* (Ithaca, NY, 2009), xii.

<sup>5</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Les genres du discours* (Paris, 1978), 51.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, 1970 Nobel Lecture (delivered in 1975), [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1970/solzhenitsyn-lecture-ru.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1970/solzhenitsyn-lecture-ru.html).

American observer, Soviet dissidents appeared as “men and women who simply love freedom and know more about it than we could understand.”<sup>7</sup> Dissidents too sensed a gap in understanding, as for example in this recurring dream recounted in Vladimir Bukovsky’s bestselling autobiography *To Build a Castle*: “I rush into a large, brightly lit room. In English, I try to explain something very important to the people gathered there. They are polite, nodding their heads with sympathy, and periodically proclaim “Aha!”—as if only now grasping the sense of what I am saying. I see by their faces, however, that they have understood nothing. I begin from scratch, and again they say “Aha!” But it’s as if there’s a glass wall between us.”<sup>8</sup>

Things did not improve in this regard after Bukovsky’s arrival in the West: “What could be more awkward than suddenly to find yourself in the role of professional hero who gets dragged from city to city like a miracle-working icon?”<sup>9</sup> His second memoir, entitled *Letters of a Russian Traveler* in the Russian-language original, was published by the Hoover Institution under the decidedly more partisan title *To Choose Freedom*. Leonid Pliushch’s *History’s Carnival* was the victim of especially egregious editorial interventions. Presumably to promote its author’s spotless image in the West, the English edition excised the excessively honest sentence that immediately follows Pliushch’s description (quoted above) of how little he shared biographically with the boiler-room operator Vladimir Dremluga: “In our youth we had only one thing in common: antisemitism.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Paul Lyons, “Torture in the USSR,” *National Review*, December 16, 1969.

<sup>8</sup> Vladimir Bukovsky, *I vozvrashchaetsia veter . . .* (New York, 1979), 334. In his preface to Grigorii Pod’iapol’skii’s memoirs, Andrei Sakharov describes a similar scene: “To understand our society from outside is apparently extremely difficult. Anyone who tries to explain something in this vein to foreigners, even the most intelligent, well intentioned, and least prejudiced, time and again comes up against a tragicomic situation, in which, after hours of conversation, one’s interlocutor asks you a question which demonstrates that the entire preceding discussion was for naught. Something utterly self-evident for a person who has spent his life in our country, with a Soviet passport and a Soviet salary, turns out not to have been understood from the very beginning.” Sakharov, preface to Grigorii Pod’iapol’skii, *Zolotomu veku ne byvat’ . . .* (Moscow, 2003 [Frankfurt, 1978]), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Bukovsky, *Pis’ma russkogo puteshestvennika* (New York, 1981), 11.

<sup>10</sup> Leonid Pliushch, *Na karnivale istorii* (London, 1979), 7. Pliushch refers to his and Dremluga’s own antisemitism; neither was Jewish. These and other discrepancies between original Russian texts and their translations have led me to use and cite, whenever possible, original Russian editions of the memoirs. The impact of Western readers, translators, editors, and publishers (including émigré publishing houses) on the production and distribution of Soviet dissident memoirs lies largely beyond the scope of this article and deserves further research, not least in the archives of publishing houses that brought dozens of such memoirs to various publics. For examples of what can be done in this arena, see Ann Komaromi, “Ardis Facsimile and Reprint Editions: Giving Back Russian Literature,” in *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond: Transnational Media During and After*

Whatever the linguistic and geopolitical contexts that shaped the writing of life stories by Soviet dissidents, one fact leaps out: the extraordinary number and proportion who did so. My database of book-length dissident memoirs contains 144 titles published over the course of more than a half century in a dozen countries.<sup>11</sup> Even now, new memoirs continue to appear.<sup>12</sup> Soviet dissidents, it would seem, have been remarkably fertile producers of ego-documents—indeed, quite a

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*Socialism*, ed. Friederike Kind-Kovács and Jessie Labov (Oxford, 2013), 27–50; Friederike Kind-Kovács, *Written Here, Published There: How Underground Literature Crossed the Iron Curtain* (Budapest and New York, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> The database (available at <http://www.history.upenn.edu/people/faculty/benjamin-nathans>) includes only published memoirs that appeared as books, thereby passing over hundreds of shorter autobiographical texts published in journals, newspapers, anthologies, and other works. As to the vexing question of who counts as a “dissident,” here I have relied primarily on self-identification, a method with its own complications. On the one hand, many so-called dissidents disliked and tried not to use the term (usually without success). On the other, as the logician and satirist Alexander Zinoviev once quipped about his fellow émigrés, “many more dissidents arrived in the West than left the Soviet Union.” A leading reference work on Soviet dissidents, S. P. de Boer et al.’s *Biographical Dictionary of Dissidents in the Soviet Union, 1956–1975* (The Hague, 1982), lists nearly 3,400 individuals out of what it claims was an eligible pool of roughly 10,000 people. Selected for inclusion were authors of samizdat texts, members of civil and human right groups, signers of at least five collective letters or petitions, and victims of psychiatric abuse. While still an invaluable source of data, the *Biographical Dictionary* includes a number of prominent individuals who at best hovered at the edge of (and in certain cases kept their distance from) the dissident milieu, such as the nuclear physicists Petr Kapitsa and Igor Tamm, the poet Olga Berggolts, the writer Ilya Ehrenburg, the semiotician Yuri Lotman, and the science-fiction authors Arkadii and Boris Strugatskii. There are questionable omissions as well: the attorney Dina Kaminskaia, the geneticist Raissa Berg, and the computer scientist and Jewish activist Natan (Anatolii) Shcharansky. A more recent reference work, Aleksandr Daniel and Zbigniew Gluza’s *Słownik dysydentów: Czołowe postacie ruchów opozycyjnych w krajach komunistycznych w latach 1956–1989* [Dictionary of dissidents: Leading figures of the opposition movement in communist countries, 1956–1989], 2 vols. (Warsaw, 2007), offers more thorough and up-to-date information but on a much smaller number of dissidents; volume 2, on the former Soviet Union, includes extensive entries on 194 individuals. In the end I decided that self-description, together with independent confirmation of a given memoirist’s role in the dissident movement, were criteria as reliable as any. Neither in the database nor in this article do I include memoirs by the many participants in various Soviet ethnic and national movements, unless—and this is a substantial category—they also took part in the movement for civil and/or human rights (e.g., Shcharansky, Pliushch, Solzhenitsyn). On memoirs by Jewish refuseniks, see Stefani Hoffman, “Voices from the Inside: Jewish Activists’ Memoirs (1967–1989),” in *The Jewish Movement in the Soviet Union*, ed. Yaacov Ro’i (Baltimore, 2012), 227–49. My thanks to Pavel Suyumov, my research assistant, for his help with procuring many of the items listed in the database.

<sup>12</sup> As of this writing (spring 2014), at least two figures from the dissident movement are preparing memoirs for publication: Pavel Litvinov and Zhores Medvedev.

few, including Andrei Amalrik, Elena Bonner, Vladimir Bukovsky, Viktor Krasin, Anatoly Marchenko, Raisa Orlova, and Vladimir Voinovich, produced multiple memoirs. It would be difficult, I think, to find another social movement in which such a high percentage of leading participants produced autobiographies.<sup>13</sup> By now, one is as inclined to ask why a given dissident did not write a memoir as to explore the reasons for the many who did. A published life story has become an expected accoutrement of the Soviet dissident life.

Until relatively recently, the profusion of memoirs helped foster a highly person-centered approach to the study of dissent under late Soviet socialism.<sup>14</sup> Other factors, too, have reinforced the focus on the individual. Dissidents often spoke of a quest for “inner freedom,” and their adopted language of human rights placed the individual at the center of moral thought.<sup>15</sup> The centrality of the person was grimly reinforced by the Soviet regime’s pseudodiagnosis of dissent as a form of mental illness and its use of mind-altering drugs against hundreds of dissidents imprisoned in psychiatric hospitals, an assault on individual agency at its most private, interior site.<sup>16</sup> The entire dissident phenomenon, in fact, appeared to many contemporaries as an unexpected eruption of unsanctioned individualism in the land that sanctified the collective.

Self-cultivation via diary—and memoir—writing was deeply embedded in Stalinist as well as prerevolutionary Russian culture going back to the 1830s. Alexander Herzen, Visarion Belinsky, and other prominent writers had established potent models of the Romantic quest for a “developed personality” (*lichnost'*), a higher form of consciousness that represented not just individual emancipation from surrounding despotism (autocracy and serfdom) but also a contribution to-

<sup>13</sup> In her article on memoirs by activists in the incomparably larger, indeed mass-scale American civil rights movement, Kathryn L. Nasstrom records roughly two hundred works published since 1958. See Nasstrom, “Between Memory and History: Autobiographies of the Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of Southern History* 74 (2008): 328, n. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Not surprisingly, biographies are prominent in the secondary literature on Soviet dissent. In addition to more than a dozen biographies of Solzhenitsyn and half a dozen of Sakharov, one could cite Martin Gilbert, *Shcharansky, Hero of Our Time* (New York, 1986); Feliks Roziner, *Anatolii Shcharanskii* (Jerusalem, 1985); Cécile Vaissé, *Russie: Une femme en dissidence; Larissa Bogoraz* (Paris, 2000); Martin Andre and Peter Falke, *Wladimir Bukowskij: Vom Sowjetkerker ins Weisse Haus* (Stein am Rhein, 1977); Emma Gilligan, *Defending Human Rights in Russia: Sergei Kovalyov, Dissident and Human Rights Commissioner, 1969–2003* (New York, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Nathans, “The Dictatorship of Reason: Aleksandr Vol’pin and the Idea of Rights under ‘Developed Socialism,’” *Slavic Review* 66, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 630–63, and “Soviet Rights-Talk in the Post-Stalin Era,” in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (Cambridge, 2011), 166–90.

<sup>16</sup> For early statistics on dissidents imprisoned in psychiatric hospitals, see Sidney Bloch and Peter Reddaway, *Psychiatric Terror: How Soviet Psychiatry Is Used to Suppress Dissent* (New York, 1977), 258–63 and 347–98.

ward Russia's own emancipation from historical backwardness.<sup>17</sup> And therein lay its enduring appeal to successive generations of the intelligentsia. "To conceive of oneself as a catalyst of historical processes," notes Jochen Hellbeck, "and to sculpt one's autobiography in order to make the self conform to the exigencies of historical progression, can be understood as a specifically Russian form of autobiographical practice." The Bolshevik revolution invested that practice with new significance. The state could now position itself as the preeminent instrument for moving history forward, rather than as a barrier to progress. For the first time, the state itself actively promoted autobiographical writing as a way to cultivate a specifically revolutionary consciousness. The act of "writing the word *I* in an age of a larger *We*," as Hellbeck memorably wrote, was meant to align the individual self with the historical task of building socialism and thus with the inexorable march of History.<sup>18</sup>

Written in the aftermath of Russia's revolutionary deluge, memoirs by Soviet dissidents absorbed some of these inherited autobiographical practices while leaving others behind. Heavily invested in a sense of continuity with the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia, dissidents embraced the ideal of self-emancipation, striving, as one memoir put it, "to live like free citizens in an unfree country."<sup>19</sup> Whatever one's objections to the Soviet system, however, it was difficult to construe the USSR after Stalin as historically "backward" in anything resembling the way critically thinking nineteenth-century intellectuals had understood tsarist Russia. This made it similarly difficult to link "inner freedom" or any other version of elevated consciousness to a larger project of pushing history forward. To paraphrase Lincoln Steffens, dissidents had seen the future, and it wasn't working. The profound absence of their prerevolutionary predecessors' confidence in historical progress informed not only their memoirs but also their favorite toast: "To the success of our hopeless cause."

This article attempts to map the corpus of Soviet dissident memoirs and to trace its development over time. While the corpus continues to expand, as former dissenters continue to write about their lives, enough is now available to allow us to recognize this body of work as historically distinct. The conclusion of Soviet history, moreover, opened up possibilities for reading dissident life stories in fresh ways, even as recent developments in Russia create new resonances for those

<sup>17</sup> On the history of the concept of "personality" in Russia, see Nikolai Plotnikov, "Ot 'individual'nosti' k 'identichnosti' (istoriia poniatii personal'nosti v russkoi kul'ture)," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, vol. 91 (2008). My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for the *Journal of Modern History* who brought this work to my attention.

<sup>18</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, "Russian Autobiographical Practice," in *Autobiographical Practices in Russia/Autobiographische Praktiken in Russland*, ed. Hellbeck and Klaus Heller (Göttingen, 2004), 14; Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), xi.

<sup>19</sup> Andrei Amalrik, *Zapiski dissidenta* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1982), 39.

stories. During the late Soviet era, when reliable, uncensored information about Soviet society and history was hard to come by, Western journalists and scholars often leaned heavily on dissident sources. “We loved the dissident story,” recalled James Jackson, who reported from Moscow for United Press International and the *Chicago Tribune* between 1969 and 1976, “because it was the only live story in town.”<sup>20</sup> Practically apologizing in 1981 for her research on officially approved Soviet novels, the literary scholar Katerina Clark noted that “It is considered far more worthy to write on dissidents.”<sup>21</sup> Skeptics suggested, by contrast, that rather than simply speaking truth to power (or to Western journalists), dissidents were distorting foreign perceptions of Soviet reality.<sup>22</sup> It was less a matter of generic suspicion regarding memoirs as sources of historical data—a suspicion occasionally acknowledged in dissident memoirs themselves, as illustrated in the epigraphs to this article by Elena Bonner and Alexander Zinoviev—than an intuition that dissidents were too few in number, too partisan, and too distant from the norms of Soviet society (“dissident” meaning literally “he who sits apart”) to constitute reliable sources.<sup>23</sup>

A quarter-century after its disappearance, the USSR no longer quite seems the “riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma” that Churchill once famously described. The recent flood of memoirs by former Soviet citizens and political elites, together with substantial if spotty access to previously closed archives, have done much to fill in some of Soviet history’s blank spots.<sup>24</sup> Less dependent on dissidents for basic data about that history, we are now in a sense free to read their memoirs specifically as memoirs, that is, as constructed narratives, and to pose different questions to them.<sup>25</sup> What kinds of devices and patterns govern the presentation of the former, “experiencing” self by the present, “writing” self?

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Whitman Bassow, *The Moscow Correspondents: Reporting on Russia from the Revolution to Glasnost* (New York, 1988), 243.

<sup>21</sup> Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago, 1981), x.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Peter Osnos, “Soviet Dissidents and the American Press,” *Columbia Journalism Review* 16 (1977): 32–37, and J. Arch Getty’s reflections on the (mis)use of émigré-defector memoirs on the 1930s, in his *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938* (Oxford, 1985), 211–20.

<sup>23</sup> See the discussion in Leon Aron, “The Moscow Interlude: Covering the Soviet Union for the American Elite Press, 1970–1980; A Study in the Sociology of News-making” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1986), chap. 9, “Sources: The Dissidents,” 255–68.

<sup>24</sup> On Soviet memoirs more generally, see Barbara Walker, “On Reading Soviet Memoirs: A History of the ‘Contemporaries’ Genre as an Institution of Russian Intelligentsia Culture from the 1790s to the 1970s,” *Russian Review* 59 (2000): 327–52, and Paperno, *Stories of the Soviet Experience*, esp. xi–56.

<sup>25</sup> Leona Toker makes an analogous point regarding Gulag narratives: during the Soviet era, the moral urgency of such documents often inhibited scholars from attending to their aesthetic strategies. Toker, *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors* (Bloomington, IN, 2000), 8.



How do the texts navigate between the autobiographical imperative to locate the self in a larger milieu and the otherness of “sitting apart”? What effects were generated by the uneasy combination of Western and Soviet reception contexts during the Cold War?

## II

The first memoir by a (future) participant in the dissident movement appeared in 1967, with the circulation in samizdat of Anatoly Marchenko's *My Testimony*. Born in the Siberian town of Barabinsk, Marchenko was arrested for brawling with exiled Chechens in a workers' hostel in 1958 and sent to Karaganda, a labor camp in Kazakhstan. After escaping from the camp, he and a friend were caught attempting to cross the Soviet border into Iran, resulting in a six-year sentence at a strict-regime camp in Mordovia. Marchenko began writing his memoir of the camp experience in the months following his release in 1966.

Themes of prison and exile run deep in the Russian autobiographical tradition, extending back at least as far as Herzen's account of his Siberian banishment in *My Past and Thoughts*. The immediate context for Marchenko's work, however, was the swell of autobiographical writing by survivors of the Stalin-era Gulag.<sup>26</sup> In 1963, following the appearance in *Novyi mir* of Solzhenitsyn's pathbreaking *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, one of the journal's editors noted that he had received “hundreds” of Gulag memoirs during the previous year alone.<sup>27</sup> Among them was Evgenia Ginzburg's *Journey into the Whirlwind*, which had already begun to circulate extensively in samizdat. In memoirs of the Stalin-era Gulag, the liminal experiences of the camps—extraordinary suffering and degradation, encounters with individuals distant from the protagonist's normal milieu—completely monopolize the narrative. With arrest typically understood as a more or less random event, the author's precamp life is construed as bearing virtually no relationship to the camp experience.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> The Gulag's role as incubator of autobiographical reflection was noted early in that institution's history: see David Dallin and Boris Nicolaevsky, *Forced Labor in Soviet Russia* (New Haven, CT, 1947), 313–19. The works cited by Dallin and Nicolaevsky date back to the 1920s and were published outside the Soviet Union by émigrés writing for foreign audiences or by foreigners with unusual itineraries who had been swept into the Stalinist punitive machinery before eventually finding their way back to their countries of birth.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Miriam Dobson, *Khrushchev's Cold Summer: Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform after Stalin* (Ithaca, NY, 2009), 203. Ludmila Alexeyeva cites a remark by Khrushchev, not known for understatement, to the effect that “ten thousand memoirs by former political prisoners” were submitted to publishing houses. Alexeyeva, *The Thaw Generation: Coming of Age in the Post-Stalin Era* (Pittsburgh, 1990), 99.

<sup>28</sup> Toker, *Return from the Archipelago*, 6. Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962), the first account of camp life to be published inside the Soviet Union,

With only a handful of exceptions, such texts remained unpublished inside the USSR, as Khrushchev's sudden removal from power in October 1964 signaled the beginning of the end of official de-Stalinization. Convinced that criticism of the Stalin era had already gone too far, Khrushchev's successors blocked publication of further accounts of the camps. "We're not going to pour salt on our wounds," declared Politburo member Mikhail Suslov, a key architect of Khrushchev's ouster. When publishing houses and journals that had been ordered to liquidate entire print runs of forthcoming camp memoirs complained about the impending financial losses, Suslov responded with a favorite maxim: "One doesn't economize on ideology."<sup>29</sup>

In this context, Marchenko's *My Testimony* was triply sensational. Not only did it pour large quantities of salt on "our" wounds (to use Suslov's inaptly collective term); it demonstrated that the Gulag still existed and was inflicting fresh wounds. A decade and a half after Stalin's death, Marchenko offered a nonfictional account of camp life every bit as chilling as *One Day*, but set in the present-day Soviet Union. The Gulag, he revealed, had survived the prisoner amnesties, the reforming Twentieth and Twenty-Second Party Congresses, and the Thaw, remaining (albeit in reduced form) an arena of lethal hunger, unregulated violence, and sexual brutality. And if that were not enough, *My Testimony* soon demonstrated its own distinct form of economizing: by 1973 Marchenko's royalties on sales of the book abroad had netted him some \$20,000, which he was able to access through surrogates in order to support his mother and family in the USSR as well as to subsidize the publication of additional works of *tamizdat* (literally, "over there publishing").<sup>30</sup>

That Marchenko's account took on a significance beyond its status as a memoir of the post-Stalin Gulag, that it helped inaugurate a new corpus of dissident

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offers perhaps the most extreme (literary) example of concentrated focus on the Gulag experience, here compressed into a single day with no more than a momentary flashback to the circumstances that landed the story's protagonist in the camps.

<sup>29</sup> Both Suslov quotations are from chapter 7 of Zhores Medvedev's unpublished memoir, "Opasnaia professiia," where he describes accounts of camp life used in the early 1960s by his twin brother, Roi, for the latter's *K sudu istorii* (*Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism* [New York, 1971]) as well as by Solzhenitsyn for his *Gulag Archipelago*. My thanks to Zhores Medvedev for granting access to the manuscript of his memoir.

<sup>30</sup> International Institute for Social History (IISH; Amsterdam), Alexander Herzen Foundation Collection, Correspondence of Karel and Jozien van het Reve, folder 35, letter from Karel van het Reve, December 1, 1973; letter from Larisa Bogoraz and Anatolii Marchenko, January 2, 1973. The Herzen Foundation was a nonprofit organization devoted to publishing Russian-language editions of samizdat texts outside the Soviet Union. It was established in Amsterdam in 1969 by the Slavist and writer Karel van het Reve (University of Leiden), the political scientist Peter Reddaway (London School of Economics), and the historian Jan Bezemer (University of Amsterdam). The Herzen Foundation maintained close ties with many Soviet dissident authors inside and outside the USSR.

life writing—in fact, that it was written at all—was largely due to accident, or rather, to the kind of unplanned social mingling that so often took place in the camps. For among the people whom Marchenko met in Mordovian Camp 11, several hundred miles southeast of Moscow, was the writer Yuli Daniel, sentenced to five years of hard labor at the conclusion of his notorious trial in February 1966. Marchenko's inherited assumptions about intellectuals like Daniel—that they “got paid for doing nothing” and lived a life of easy luxury—were still strong when they met.<sup>31</sup> And yet the circle of friends they formed in Camp 11 (another member, the engineer Valerii Ronkin, referred to the circle as one of his “universities,” echoing Maxim Gorky's account of his own extra-academic education among the downtrodden of late imperial Russia)<sup>32</sup> led Marchenko, following his release in November 1966, to establish contacts with circle members' relatives and friends. Several of them were participants in the nascent dissident movement, including Daniel's estranged wife, Larisa Bogoraz, a Moscow-based lecturer in linguistics. His new acquaintances encouraged Marchenko to transform his stories of camp life into a memoir, and Bogoraz in particular guided him through the process of writing the text that became *My Testimony*. She and Daniel divorced after his release from camp in 1970, and three years later she and Marchenko were married.

The process of composing *My Testimony*, as described by Marchenko in a later (third) memoir, *Live Like Everyone* (*Zhivi kak vse*, published posthumously in 1987), sheds valuable light on the emerging genre of dissident life writing. Initial drafts, composed in early 1967 while Marchenko was visiting his parents in Barabinsk, were full of attacks on camp officials and the Soviet regime that stood behind them:

I thought I had to call things by their own names, the harsher the better. “Nobody needs this; nobody's interested,” Larisa would say. “You have to supply the facts, and let the reader think what he will.” I argued with her, thinking that she was softening the book in order to protect me. . . . I remained defiant, and as I kept writing, I rarely resisted the temptation to hit the reader with all I had, just as we used to do in run-ins with camp authorities and visiting lecturers. “You aren't writing for them,” Larisa objected, once again crossing out the offending passages.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Anatoly Marchenko, *Zhivi kak vse* (New York, 1987), 6–7. A chapter of *My Testimony* is devoted to Daniel; similarly, Daniel's letters from camp during the same period often mention Marchenko. See Iulii Daniel, “*Ia vse sbivaius' na literaturu*”: *Pis'ma iz zakliucheniia, stikhi* (Moscow, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> Valerii Ronkin, *Na smenu dekabriam prikhodiat ianvari . . . Vospominaniia byvshego brigadmil'tsa i podpol'shchika, a pozzhe—politzakliuchennogo i dissidenta* (Moscow, 2003), 196–335. Unlike Gorky, Ronkin—a beneficiary of Soviet technical education—actually had a university degree.

<sup>33</sup> Marchenko, *Zhivi kak vse*, 74.

If “they”—Soviet authorities—were not the intended readers, it was not (yet) clear who was. Who were the unnamed readers who seemed uninterested in passionate attacks on the Soviet system and could be trusted to draw the correct conclusions on their own? With what sort of readers could one establish a connection simply by supplying “the facts” in a spare, understated style? To be sure, the kind of restrained empiricism that Bogoraz and others were urging Marchenko to adopt was hardly new.<sup>34</sup> Solzhenitsyn had employed a similar technique in *One Day*, having learned, as he subsequently put it in his memoir, that “by softening the sharp edges, a piece only gained and its effect was even heightened” (though he abandoned that strategy in his memoir and in *The Gulag Archipelago*, with their legions of CAPITALIZED WORDS, *italicized phrases*, and exclamation points!!!).<sup>35</sup> But *One Day* was a work of fiction, crafted to survive the censor’s red pen and be published in the Soviet Union, while *My Testimony* was conceived from the outset as an uncensored document for samizdat and *ta-mizdat*.<sup>36</sup> Marchenko’s reluctantly adopted idiom of emotional reticence strongly contrasted with the ardent moralizing—what the cultural historian Boris Groys calls the “sentimental ideological style”—that characterized much of Soviet public discourse.<sup>37</sup>

Readers in the USSR eagerly absorbed *My Testimony*’s laconic account of Soviet hard labor camps. In the spring of 1968, on the eve of his autobiographical epiphany at Litvinov’s birthday party in Moscow, Leonid Pliushch read a samizdat copy next to which, he concluded, Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day* “paled by comparison.” Upon returning to Kiev with the onionskin pages of Marchenko’s text, Pliushch purchased a typewriter and spent the next month typing extra copies for further distribution.<sup>38</sup> Within a few years, prominent publishing houses around the world began to bring Marchenko’s exposé to readers in English (Dell, 1969), German (Fischer, 1969), French (Éditions du Seuil, 1970), Spanish (Ediciones Acervo, 1970), Italian (Rusconi, 1970), and Japanese (Keiso Shobo, 1973); a Russian edition was also produced in West Germany by the émigré press *Posev*

<sup>34</sup> Anatoly Pinsky identifies an “empirical imperative” as central to diaristic and other writing of the Thaw era: Pinsky, “The Diaristic Form and Subjectivity under Khrushchev,” *Slavic Review* 73 (2014): 805–27, 808.

<sup>35</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Bodalsia telenok s dubom* (Paris, 1975), 17.

<sup>36</sup> The literary critic (and Gulag memorist) Lev Kopelev tried briefly to get Marchenko’s manuscript published in the leading Soviet journal *Novyi mir*, an act that his friends roundly criticized as potentially leading to the journal’s demise. See Raisa Orlova, “‘Rodinu ne vybiraiut: Ia vernus’ . . .’ Iz dnevnikov i pisem 1964–1988 godov,” *Voprosy literatury* 5 (2010): 286, n. 53. Orlova was Kopelev’s wife.

<sup>37</sup> Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism* (Princeton, NJ, 1992), 90.

<sup>38</sup> Pliushch, *Na karnivale istorii*, 220. According to Andrei Sakharov, *My Testimony* “played an important role in the formation of the human rights movement in the USSR.” Sakharov, forward to the English edition of Marchenko’s *To Live Like Everyone* (New York, 1989), vi.

in 1969. London-based Amnesty International used Marchenko's matter-of-fact descriptions of malnutrition in Soviet labor camps to advise its members on what to include in care packages sent to Soviet prisoners of conscience.<sup>39</sup>

Two similarly transitional memoirs linking the world of the Gulag to that of the dissident movement appeared shortly after *My Testimony*. Petr Yakir's *A Childhood in Prison* recounts the author's imprisonment in 1937 at age fourteen following the execution of his father, the charismatic Red Army commander Yona Yakir.<sup>40</sup> By the late 1960s Petr Yakir was a prominent voice for a group of descendants of Old Bolsheviks executed during the Great Terror and an emerging dissident leader. Like Marchenko, Yakir's dissenting activities began only after his first imprisonment. By contrast, Andrei Amalrik's *Involuntary Journey to Siberia* (1970) represents the first autobiographical account by someone whose nonconformism—distributing “anti-Soviet” plays in samizdat, sending works abroad, meeting with foreigners—preceded and indeed precipitated his arrest. Although Amalrik was formally charged (in 1965) under the Soviet Union's anti-parasitism law, his transgressions were paradigmatic for the dissident movement in the sense that they were carefully crafted so as not to violate the letter of Soviet law. Similarly paradigmatic was his sense of dissidents as bearers of the pre-revolutionary Russian intelligentsia traditions, a motif that would become firmly embedded in the memoir literature and beyond. With a nod to Aleksandr Radishchev's *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* (1790), famous for its indictment of Russian serfdom, Amalrik's *Involuntary Journey* unmasked Soviet collective agriculture as practiced on the Siberian kolkhoz to which he was banished. His second memoir, *Zapiski dissidenta* (Notes of a dissident, 1982), self-consciously invoked Petr Kropotkin's *Zapiski revoliutsionera* (1902), though in fact his deeper literary debt was to Gogol's panorama of Russian social “types” in *Dead Souls*.<sup>41</sup>

With Amalrik's *Involuntary Journey* we enter the era of the dissident memoir proper. Gulag memoirs continued to appear, to be sure, with their exclusive focus on the camp experience, usually during the Stalin era. By the 1970s it was becoming clear, however, that the most compelling representations of camp life, while grounded in autobiographical experience, were literary or quasi-literary in form.<sup>42</sup> Quite the opposite was the case with accounts of dissident lives: in that

<sup>39</sup> See the confidential Amnesty report “Parcels for Soviet Prisoners,” November 1970, at Columbia University, Butler Library, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Amnesty International USA Archive, Record Group II: Executive Director Files, 1967–97, Series 5: National Section Memos, box 9, folder 23, document 1.

<sup>40</sup> Pyotr [*sic*] Yakir, *A Childhood in Prison*, edited with an introduction by Robert Conquest (New York, 1973 [London, 1972; text dated 1971]).

<sup>41</sup> Andrei Amalrik, *Nezhelannoe puteshestvie v Sibir'* (New York, 1970) and *Zapiski dissidenta*.

<sup>42</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle* (New York, 1968), and *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation* (New York, 1974–78); Abram

genre literary texts were dwarfed, in quantity and intensity, by their nonfiction counterparts.<sup>43</sup>

Camps and prisons, of course, still feature prominently in dissident narratives, at least among those memoirists who spent time in them. They appear as a kind of grotesque variation on the theme of “going to the people,” the nineteenth-century intelligentsia’s attempt to cross conventional social boundaries for purposes of moral uplift and social justice on behalf of the downtrodden masses. Where educated Russians once sought out peasants and workers, “politicals” now mixed (involuntarily) with “criminals.” But as Leonid Pliushch’s account of the carnival-esque mingling within the dissident movement makes clear, the camps were no longer the sole or even the primary domain where individuals could encounter and experience some degree of solidarity with people different from themselves. “The Soviet corporative system was set up so that a person worked only among people of his particular social group,” noted the army general Petro Grigorenko in his memoirs, “lived only among them, shopped in stores only with them, and socialized with no one else.”<sup>44</sup> The presence among dissidents of a military man such as Grigorenko, an ethnic Ukrainian who campaigned on behalf of exiled Crimean Tatars, symbolized the new modes of sociability that emerged with—indeed, were constitutive of—the dissident movement.

### III

One can begin to discern the specificities of dissident autobiography by contrasting certain of its features with those of the larger corpus of Soviet memoir literature—even while acknowledging areas of overlap. Thus, for example, in her article on Soviet memoirs of the glasnost era (1985–91), the literary scholar Marina Balina describes their common project as the articulation of a dialogue between the “actual I,” the author’s lived identity, and an “alternative I,” an imagined version of the author’s self “who could have existed if the course of [Soviet] history . . . had not distorted the author’s character, had not forced him or her to live

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Tertz [Andrei Sinyavsky], *A Voice from the Chorus* (New York, 1976); Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales* (New York, 1980). An influential nonfiction exception to this pattern—inside as well as outside the USSR—was Evgenia Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind* (New York, 1967). For a superb analysis of the blending of literary and documentary modes in Gulag memoirs, see Toker, *Return from the Archipelago*.

<sup>43</sup> Among the handful of Soviet-era fictionalized accounts of the dissident milieu are Feliks Roziner, *Nekto Finkel'maier: Roman* [A certain Finkelmaier: A novel] (London, 1981); Aleksandr Zinov'ev, *Gomo sovetikus* [Homo sovieticus] (Lausanne, 1981); Evgenii Kozlovskii, *Krasnaia ploshchad'; Dissident i chinovnitsa* [Red Square; The dissident and the bureaucrat] (Paris and New York, 1982); and Vladimir Voinovich, *Shapka* [The fur hat] (London, 1988). More recently, see Liudmila Ulitskaia, *Zelennyi shater* [The green tent], 2 vols. (Moscow, 2011), forthcoming in English with Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

<sup>44</sup> Petro Grigorenko, *V podpol'e možhno vstretit' tol'ko krysy* . . . (New York, 1981), 400.

a life alien to his or her nature.”<sup>45</sup> By contrast, the dissident memoir (whether of the glasnost era or not) typically tells a story of public resistance to those same distorting forces, in the course of which the authorial self is realized, though usually at considerable personal cost.

At one end of the spectrum of dissident life writing are accounts that present the author as a born “other-thinker.” “I had always been in opposition to the regime,” Amalrik announced in his *Notes of a Dissident*.<sup>46</sup> Such memoirs often contain signs of an assumed foreign readership, whether in the form of explicit statements to that effect, or occasional explanations of various Soviet phenomena that only foreigners would require, or the inclusion in the text of foreigners posing foreign questions, as for example when a Japanese tourist asks Boris Shragin, “When did you become a dissident?” For Shragin, such queries served as a framing device, if only by negation: “It’s impossible to answer. Within the question itself lies a willful distortion of reality. Just as the ancient Sophists used to ask: ‘When did you stop beating your parents?’ If you stopped, that means you used to beat them. If you didn’t stop, that means you continue to beat them. But I didn’t beat them. Ever.”<sup>47</sup> At the other end of the spectrum are individuals like the literary critic Raisa Orlova, whose first of three memoirs (triggered by the resolution of the Twenty-Second Party Congress in 1961 calling for the building of a monument to the victims of the “cult of personality”) poses very different questions: “What did you believe in? How could you have believed in THAT? What do you believe in today?” Her *Recollections of a Time That Has Not Passed* takes the form of a “self-interrogation,” an admission that “up until 1953 I believed in everything, including the ‘doctors’ plot.’ I cried bitterly over the death of Stalin.” Burdened with remorse, Orlova reconstructs her lost beliefs for readers for whom “it is an almost indisputable truth that ‘it was impossible to have believed in such things.’”<sup>48</sup>

Most dissident memoirs fall somewhere between these two extremes, casting their authors as taking for granted, rather than actively believing, the central tenets of Soviet mythology. They deploy various narrative devices to depict the process by which the self-evident (i.e., unexamined) nature of those tenets began to crumble. Sergei Kovalev, a biologist and coeditor of the main dissident periodical *Chronicle of Current Events*, locates the first “collision” in a seventh-grade class

<sup>45</sup> Marina Balina, “The Autobiographies of *Glasnost*: The Question of Genre in Russian Autobiographical Memoirs of the 1980s,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 7 (1992): 18–19. The tension between the “actual I” and the “alternative I” is not to be confused with the tension between the “experiencing self” and the “writing self” that is implicit in the autobiographical endeavor.

<sup>46</sup> Amalrik, *Zapiski dissidenta*, 12.

<sup>47</sup> Shragin, *Mysl’ i deistvie*, 365–67.

<sup>48</sup> Raisa Orlova, *Vospominaniia o neproshedshem vremeni* (Moscow, 1993 [Ann Arbor, MI, 1983]), 7.

discussion of the Soviet Constitution. Asked to name the relevant passages concerning “Rights and Duties of Citizens of the USSR,” the young Kovalev dutifully recited Article 125 from memory: “In conformity with the interests of the toilers, and for the purpose of strengthening the socialist order, citizens of the USSR shall be guaranteed by law: freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom of street processions and demonstrations.” Asked to explain to the class what this means, Kovalev announced, “The lawgiver believes that the existence of these freedoms corresponds to the interests of the workers and serves to strengthen order. That’s why they’re guaranteed in Article 125.” His teacher, Elena Vasilievna, corrected him: “These freedoms are indeed guaranteed by law, but only insofar as they correspond to the interests of the workers and serve to strengthen order. If they contradict those interests, they are not guaranteed by the Constitution.” Kovalev, for whom the “logic of juridical formulae” resembled mathematical theorems, refused to accept his teacher’s interpretation, since it failed to indicate what was in the workers’ interest, what served to strengthen the existing order—and who decided. For this he was rewarded with a “one,” the lowest possible grade. At the next meeting of the class, when Elena Vasilievna asked him again to recite and explain Article 125, Kovalev refused to budge:

I was right; no one had disproved me. Naturally I got another “one.” And so it went: in every class the same question, the same answer, and the same grade. It never occurred to me that I was being tactless toward Elena Vasilievna and that I had gotten stuck in my oppositional fervor. She was unable, as I can now understand, to publicly concede that I was right. I had no idea that our theoretical battle had a thoroughly practical—and extremely dangerous—social and political background. She, on the other hand, understood that perfectly.

In the end, the school director offers Kovalev a compromise: his teacher will ask him only to recite Article 125, and if he does so successfully, the failing grades will be erased: “You must keep in mind that grownups have problems too. When you’re older you’ll understand. Don’t be so hard on Elena Vasilievna. At the end of the day, you’re in the seventh grade, and your job is to know the Constitution, not to interpret it.”<sup>49</sup> In this manner, the narrative plants seeds of “other-thinking”

<sup>49</sup> Sergej Kowaljow [Sergei Kovalev], *Der Flug des weißen Raben: Von Sibirien nach Tschetschenien; Eine Lebensreise* (Berlin, 1997), 19–22. The widely assumed interpretation of Article 125 held that the subordinate clauses “in conformity with the interests of the toilers” and “for the purpose of strengthening the socialist order” were meant to impose limits on the content of the various enumerated freedoms. In Kovalev’s creative (mis)reading, however, they are semantically linked to the phrase “shall be guaranteed by law,” suggesting that it is the singular act of granting civil freedoms to Soviet citizens—rather the ongoing interpretation of their content—that is supposed to conform to the interest of toilers and strengthen the socialist order.



that can lie dormant for years before blossoming into dissidence. The genealogy of dissent thus flows entirely within everyday Soviet reality, without recourse to the liminal experiences of the Gulag or various foreign influences. Kovalev's account, and others like it, subtly convey the message that dissenting attitudes emerged out of normal, not to say canonical, Soviet experiences, such as school lessons about the Soviet Constitution.

The most common such experience involved an even more canonical text: the works of Lenin. A remarkable range of dissident memoirs include a vignette in which the young protagonist, troubled by Khrushchev's revelation of Stalin's crimes, or by other symptoms indicating that all is not well in the land of socialism, seeks enlightenment by turning to Lenin. Thanks to its historic literacy campaigns and enormous, inexpensive print runs of Lenin's works, the USSR had realized the Protestant dream of unmediated access by the masses to holy writ. In many dissident autobiographies, immersion in Lenin's thought—now as a solitary adult reader rather than a pupil in a classroom run by the likes of Elena Vasilievna—proves a transformative experience. Marchenko turned to Lenin because "I wanted to learn to think for myself."<sup>50</sup> "My underlining and scribbling in the margins," reports Ludmila Alexeyeva about her encounter with Lenin after graduating from Moscow University, "made each page look like a battlefield":

Lenin was a gambler who thought in terms of "class struggle," "historical formations," and other Marxian abstractions invisible to the naked eye. The world he saw was orderly but barren. It had no place for real people. I could not detect an iota of concern for soldiers, workers, or peasants. Nor could I detect even a glimmer of doubt. He was convinced that he knew precisely what needed to be done at any given moment, and he was capable of vicious attacks on anyone who disagreed with him on even the most minute of points. . . . By the time I had read up to 1917, I realized that I had lost all respect for Lenin.<sup>51</sup>

Equally troubling, the Founding Father was repeatedly discovered contradicting himself. "Returning to Leninist principles" turned out to be impossible because, while Lenin emerged as a supreme tactician, he lacked principles. He condoned extreme violence and his language itself was violent. Poring over a memo in which Lenin had written that it was time to "rough somebody up" or "put someone up against the wall," the young writer Vladimir Voinovich had assumed that "perhaps Lenin was serious about the 'roughing up' part, but as for the wall, or 'execute as many as possible'—that was somehow meant figuratively. At some point I understood that no, it was not meant figuratively at all."<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Alexeyeva, *The Thaw Generation*, 148.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 74–76.

<sup>52</sup> Vladimir Voinovich, *Avtoportret: Roman moei zhizni* (Moscow, 2010), 289. For further examples see Anatoly Marchenko, *Moi pokazaniia* (Frankfurt, 1969), 210–14; Grigorenko, *V podpol'e*, 490–92; Valentin Turchin, *The Inertia of Fear and the Scientific Worldview* (New York, 1977), 66.

For readers in the West, the most influential accounts of the intellectual exit from communism have undoubtedly been those penned by the luminaries of *The God that Failed* such as Arthur Koestler, André Gide, and Ignazio Silone. “The day I left the [Italian] Communist Party,” Silone wrote, “was a very sad one for me, it was like a day of deep mourning, the mourning for my lost youth. It is not easy to free oneself from an experience as intense as that of the underground organization of the Communist Party.”<sup>53</sup> With their shared metaphor of the death of faith, autobiographical narratives by Western ex-communists form a corpus that the philosopher Sydney Hook (himself an apostate from Marxism) dubbed “the literature of political disillusionment.”<sup>54</sup> Soviet dissidents, by contrast, typically depict their exit from communist ideology without a trace of mourning, let alone moral or spiritual crisis. For those born in the 1930s and 1940s, that exit commonly figures as a coming of age, a liberation, and in some cases a rebellion against the orthodoxies of their parents.<sup>55</sup> As Hélène Peltier, an acute observer of the emerging nonconformist scene while an exchange student at Moscow State University, observed, “The fathers were the revolutionaries, not the sons.”<sup>56</sup>

#### IV

Having listened to the Founding Father and found him wanting, the dissident autobiographer begins the search for an authentic voice. Not a collective voice—the dissident movement was too self-consciously pluralist, too wary and weary of the vaunted Soviet univocality (*edinoglasie*)—but rather the voice of the individual conscience. Finding one’s voice constitutes the central topos of dissident memoirs, which themselves serve as means and manifestation of that search. In some memoirs, the search for one’s voice assumes the form of overcoming “double-speak,” the pervasive Soviet “bilingualism” that led people to talk one way in public and another in familial and other intimate settings.<sup>57</sup> For others it

<sup>53</sup> Richard Crossman, ed., *The God That Failed* (New York, 1959), 100–101.

<sup>54</sup> Sydney Hook, “The Literature of Political Disillusionment,” *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* 35 (1949): 450–67.

<sup>55</sup> Here I take slight issue with Anke Stephan, who describes (female) dissidents’ exit from communist ideology in terms of a “conversion,” echoing nineteenth-century patterns of autobiographical writing, especially that of Herzen. See Stephan, *Von der Küche auf den Roten Platz: Lebenswege sowjetischer Dissidentinnen* (Zürich, 2005), 85–86. There were exceptions, of course, especially among guilt-ridden older dissidents who in their youth had taken part in the forced collectivization of the peasantry or other Stalinist campaigns. See, for example, Lev Kopelev, *Sotvoril sebe kumira* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1978).

<sup>56</sup> Hélène Zamoyska [Peltier], “Sinyavsky, the Man and the Writer,” in *On Trial: The Case of Sinyavsky (Tertz) and Daniel (Arzhak)*, ed. Max Hayward and Leopold Labedz (London, 1967), 50.

<sup>57</sup> Iurii Glazov, *V kraiu ottsov—Khronika nedavnego proshlogo* (Moscow, 1998), 72. The concept of Soviet bilingualism is elaborated in Glazov’s *The Russian Mind Since Stalin’s Death* (Dordrecht, 1985), 12.

found expression in abandoning the habit of whispering, or, even more common, silence—a step that required not merely courage but a transvaluation of values as well. Stalinism had conditioned many “other-thinkers” to regard “criticism via silence” (*kritika molchaniem*) as the most elemental form of moral self-assertion: a decision not to speak at a choreographed public meeting, not to sign a group letter, not to cast a ballot in an election. “Silence,” wrote Dina Kaminskaia, a defense attorney for several prominent dissidents, “had become the benchmark of a person’s courage and decency.”<sup>58</sup>

After the Twentieth Party Congress such assumptions began to erode. In a chapter called “Awakening,” Raisa Orlova quotes a verse by Pavel Antokolskii, composed shortly after Khrushchev’s extraordinary denunciation of Stalin: “We are all laureates of prizes, / Dispensed in his honor, / Having quietly passed through / A deadly age. / . . . And it is not the corpse we despise / But our own muteness.”<sup>59</sup> The newly felt inadequacy of silence was conveyed most powerfully in the pervasive metaphor of Soviet citizens as speechless fish, forever traveling together in a school. Whether in the *Gulag Archipelago*’s unforgettable opening vignette of labor camp prisoners discovering prehistoric fish frozen beneath an arctic riverbed in Kolyma,<sup>60</sup> or Andrei Amalrik’s image of Westerners responding to Soviet dissidents as an ichthyologist would to talking fish, or Joseph Brodsky’s early poem “Fish in Winter,” the fish metaphor encapsulated the condition of collective voicelessness (“mute as a fish,” as the Russian saying goes):

<sup>58</sup> Dina Kaminskaia, *Zapiski advokata* (Kharkov, 2000 [Benson, VT, 1984]), 142. See also Petr Vail’ and Aleksandr Genis, *60-e: Mir sovetskogo cheloveka* (Moscow, 2001), 181.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Orlova, *Vospominaniia o neproshedshe vremeni*, 214. The posthumously published version of Antokol’skii’s poem (dated 1956) ends with a different sensory metaphor: “But our own blindness.” This is also the version quoted by Efim Etkind in his memoirs, *Zapiski nezagovorshchika* (Moscow, 2001 [London, 1977]), 17. It is not clear whether Orlova misremembered an early (presumably samizdat) variant of the poem or whether Antokol’skii himself redacted the poem over time. Another verse (not quoted by Orlova) retains the theme of silence: “(We are all his comrades in arms, / Having remained silent while / From our silence / The people’s misery grew).” Pavel Antokol’skii, *Daleko eto bylo gde-to . . . : Stikhi, p’esy, avtobiograficheskaia povest’* (Moscow, 2010), 180.

<sup>60</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Arhipelag GULag 1918–1956: Opyt khudozhestvennogo issledovaniia* (Paris, 1973), 6–7. The vignette implicitly likens the prehistoric frozen fish—which the starving prisoners eagerly consume—to the prisoners themselves, whose frozen corpses will presumably be discovered deep below the ice in some distant future. Solzhenitsyn heightens the grotesque quality by eventually characterizing the fish as mollusks, despite the fact that the source on which the vignette is based speaks only of fish. See N. Formozov, “Metamorfoz odnoi metafory: Kommentarii zoologa k prologu *Arhipelaga GULag*,” *Novyi mir* 10 (2011). For a different interpretation of Solzhenitsyn’s fish metaphor, linking it to Freud’s return of the repressed, see Mark Lipovetsky and Alexander Etkind, “Vozvrashchenie tritona: Sovetskaia katastrofa i postsovetskii roman,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 94 (2008): 175. My thanks to Ilya Kukulin for bringing these texts to my attention.

Fish swim in winter,  
 grazing their eyes against the ice  
 There.  
 Where it's deeper.  
 Where the sea is.  
 . . .  
 Fish  
 are always silent,  
 for they are—  
 speechless.  
 Poems about fish,  
 like fish  
 stick in my throat.<sup>61</sup>

“Overcoming muteness” became Soviet dissidents’ version of Immanuel Kant’s enlightenment project, the “emergence of man from his self-imposed voicelessness.”<sup>62</sup> And just as Kant famously insisted that man’s preenlightened condition reflected not the absence of a voice but the lack of will to use it, so among dissidents one finds various strains of romanticism associated with the heroic struggle to overcome muteness. It was not only a military man like General Grigorenko who could claim, “I was prepared for the worst. I had no fear.”<sup>63</sup> Having emerged from the unofficial Mayakovsky Square poetry readings and the literary group SMOG (an acronym for “Boldness, Thought, Form, Depth” or, alternatively, “The Youngest Society of Geniuses”), Vladimir Bukovsky contrasted his own brazenness—“When the investigator called me in for interrogation I let him have it full blast. Yet I was still dissatisfied with myself when I got back to my cell”—with the silent passivity of Soviet citizens. “There they are, those Soviet people, a silent crowd flocking along the underground crosswalks of the metro, along the boulevards, past the newspaper stands, its eyes snatching the headlines, gnashing its teeth. They’re all silent, conducting their inner dialogue [with Soviet pro-

<sup>61</sup> Josef Brodskii, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy* (Washington, DC, 1965), 25–26.

<sup>62</sup> The phrase “overcoming muteness” is the title of the introduction to V. E. Dolinin and D. Ia. Severiukhin, eds., *Samizdat Leningrada: Literaturnaia entsiklopediia* (Moscow, 2003), 7. In Kant’s formulation—“der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit”—the last word has been variously translated as “immaturity,” “tutelage,” or “voicelessness,” referring to the status of being a minor, subject to parental authority, or otherwise unable to speak for oneself. Immanuel Kant, *Was ist Aufklärung? Ausgewählte kleine Schriften*, Philosophische Bibliothek, vol. 512 (Hamburg, 1999), 20.

<sup>63</sup> “I knew the creation of an organization that would be called anti-Soviet could cost me my life, but this did not frighten me.” Grigorenko, *V podpol’e*, 447, 498. To be fair, others too considered Grigorenko utterly fearless: see, for example, Aleksandr Nekrich, *Otreshis’ ot strakha: Vospominaniia istorika* (London, 1979), 183.

paganda]. They all raise their hands at meetings, vote in elections, and—most important of all—they do not protest.”<sup>64</sup>

Even the normally staid academician Sakharov displayed occasional flashes of bravado. As he recounts in his memoirs, his first work of samizdat included as an epigraph the following lines from Goethe, spoken by Dr. Faust to Mephistopheles:

He alone is worthy of life and freedom  
Who each day does battle for them anew!<sup>65</sup>

This was, to say the least, an odd sentiment for a defender of human rights, entitlement to which by definition requires no battles and no qualities beyond simply being human. Indeed, in his memoirs Sakharov took pains to neutralize the youthful elitism of this verse, noting that “Those who go into battle are not the *only* ones worthy of life and freedom.”<sup>66</sup> The publication in the West of programmatic texts under titles such as *Sakharov Speaks* and *Alexander Solzhenitsyn Speaks to the West* only reinforced the sense of a near-miraculous emergence of heroic individual voices.<sup>67</sup>

For still others, finding a voice took the form of escape from the underground. The physicist Grigorii Pod’iapol’skii grew up in a milieu governed by the “theory of catacombs,” according to which “the historical mission of the intelligentsia in the era of communist barbarism was to survive, in order to deliver its spiritual values to future generations in better times.” Boris Pasternak inhabited those catacombs; in a poem dating from the era of Russia’s revolutionary upheavals he had asked: “What century is it outside?” Several decades later, Pod’iapol’skii had begun to pose a different question: “What are these better times, and how are

<sup>64</sup> Bukovsky, “*I vozvrashchaetsia veter . . .*,” 64, 152.

<sup>65</sup> Original Russian text in *Arkhiv samizdata*, 30 vols. (Munich, 1972–78), 3: document 200; memoir reference in Sakharov, *Sobranie sochineniia: Vospominaniia* (Moscow, 2006), 1:616.

<sup>66</sup> Sakharov, *Vospominaniia*, 1:617. Sakharov reports that before they had ever met, his future wife, Elena Bonner, was “captivated by the youthful and romantic spirit” of the passage from *Faust*. The same verse was quoted by Revolt Pimenov in his closing statement at his October 1970 trial in Kaluga on charges of anti-Soviet propaganda.

<sup>67</sup> Andrei Sakharov, *Sakharov Speaks*, edited and with a foreword by Harrison E. Salisbury (New York, 1974); Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Alexander Solzhenitsyn Speaks to the West* (London, 1978). See also Cornelia Gerstenmaier, *Die Stimme der Stummen: Die demokratische Bewegung in der Sowjetunion* (Stuttgart, 1971), translated as *The Voices of the Silent* (New York, 1972). On the extraordinary Western reception of Sakharov’s first samizdat work—translated and printed in full by the *New York Times* (July 22, 1968) and subsequently published as a book that sold over 18 million copies in a dozen languages worldwide—see Charles Rhéaume, *Sakharov: Science, morale et politique* (Laval [Canada], 2004), 91–123.

they suddenly going to appear while we're sitting in the catacombs?"<sup>68</sup> Musing in his autobiography *Dangerous Thoughts* on how the USSR resembled a gigantic madhouse, the physicist Yuri Orlov corrected himself: "No, it's not a madhouse. It's the psychology of the underground. The entire country has been chased underground."<sup>69</sup> From this perspective, not the dissidents but Soviet society itself lived in a closed, conspiratorial world. "Underground is where you expect to find revolutionaries," begins Solzhenitsyn's memoir *The Oak and the Calf*, "but not writers."<sup>70</sup> Foreign observers might refer to samizdat as "underground literature" and to the dissidents as an "underground opposition," but their principal technique, decades before Mikhail Gorbachev popularized the term, was glasnost (transparency): to rise to the surface, to return, in Solzhenitsyn's words, "to breathing and consciousness."<sup>71</sup>

To Petro Grigorenko, emerging from the underground meant disavowing his own Bolshevik instincts. Shortly after the Second World War, in which he had distinguished himself as a division commander, Grigorenko came into contact with a member of the "Union of True Leninists," a conspiratorial group whose system of "chains" came directly from the prerevolutionary playbook: each member was permitted to communicate only with the person who had recruited him (or her) and with those whom he (or she) had recruited.<sup>72</sup> Although he chose not to join, Grigorenko was inspired by the fellow veteran who had tried to enlist him, and years later, in the fall of 1963, he helped found the "Union for the Struggle for the Rebirth of Leninism." Similarly organized according to the "chain" principle, the Union was a multicity network whose chief activity during its brief existence consisted of surreptitiously distributing hundreds of anonymous leaflets describing the Communist Party's alleged betrayal of Leninism, the deadly assaults on protesting workers in Novocherkassk, Temir-Tau, and Tbilisi, and the need to combat bureaucracy.

It took less than a year for the KGB to unmask the Union. Following his arrest, Grigorenko had ample time while awaiting trial in the Lubyanka Prison (and subsequently as an involuntary patient in the Serbsky Psychiatric Institute, where he was transferred in lieu of a trial) to ponder the tactical and ethical limitations

<sup>68</sup> Pod"iapol'skii, "Zolotomu veku ne byvat' . . .," 36–37. The line in Pasternak's 1917 poem "Pro eti stikhi" reads literally, "My dears, what millennium is it outside?"

<sup>69</sup> Yuri Orlov, *Opasnye mysli* (Moscow, 1996), 107.

<sup>70</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Bodalsia telenok s dubom*, 6. I have used the English translation by Harry Willetts, *The Oak and the Calf* (New York, 1979), 1.

<sup>71</sup> Solzhenitsyn, "Na vozvrate dykhaniia i soznaniia," in Solzhenitsyn, ed., *Iz-pod glyb* (Paris, 1974), 7–28.

<sup>72</sup> For a fresh look at the conspiratorial subculture of the Russian revolutionary movement, see K. N. Morozov, "Fenomen subkul'tury rossiiskogo revoliutsionera nachala XIX veka," in *Chelovek i lichnost' v istorii Rossii konets XIX–XX vek*, ed. Jochen Hellbeck, Nikolai Mikhailov, et al. (St. Petersburg, 2013), 134–48.

of the conspiratorial life. Just months before, standing nervously outside the “Hammer & Sickle” metallurgical factory on the outskirts of Moscow, he had succeeded in handing a dozen typed leaflets to workers on their way home. With only one exception, however, neither they nor he had felt comfortable enough to strike up a conversation. Those workers who took leaflets did so without stopping as they exited the factory gate. Keen to extend his “experiment” to a broader public, but wary of the extreme risk to which he had exposed himself at the “Hammer & Sickle,” Grigorenko decided upon a different method. Dressed in full military uniform—trying, as it were, to visually inhabit his official public identity—he sat down on a bench in Moscow’s Paveletskii train station, took out a single copy of “A Reply to Our Opponents” (the Union’s most elaborate brochure to date), and silently pretended to read it. During the commotion of passengers boarding and exiting a newly arrived train, he left the brochure on the bench and moved to the opposite end of the hall to observe what would happen next. Within a short time, a young man and woman sat down together and, taking note of the brochure, began to glance through its pages:

They started a heated conversation about something, stood up, and headed in my direction. I was reading *Ogonëk* and pretended not to notice them.

“Comrade General,” the young man addressed me, “isn’t this yours?” He held out the brochure.

“No, not mine,” I replied firmly.

“But . . . we . . . we thought we saw you reading it,” he said with some awkwardness.

“Yes, I was reading it. But it’s not mine. I read it and left it where it had been before I arrived.”

They walked away in a state of confusion. Then the young woman (practically a girl) tore herself away from her companion and, thoroughly embarrassed, ran up to me.

“Comrade General! Perhaps you have another copy? We’re heading in different directions, and we’d both like to take a copy with us.”

“I’m sorry, my dear girl,” I smiled sympathetically. “Honestly, there aren’t any more!”

“Well, in that case, excuse me” —and off she went.<sup>73</sup>

This experiment convinced Grigorenko that “the people want the truth.” As he sat in the Serbsky Institute contemplating his fate, however, he could not help but note that the several hundred anonymous leaflets distributed by the Union for the Struggle for the Rebirth of Leninism had produced no visible effect, certainly nothing like that of the speech he had given at a district Party conference in September 1961, warning of Khrushchev’s emerging cult of personality. “The entire country learned [about the speech] almost instantaneously,” Grigorenko declared in his autobiography, whose Russian title, *In the Underground You Can Meet Only Rats* . . . , invoked another silent animal noted for its clandestine habits.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Grigorenko, *V podpol’e*, 502–4.

<sup>74</sup> The English edition of Grigorenko’s autobiography bears the generic title *Memoirs* (New York, 1982).

After the conference, people had come up to him on the street to shake his hand, and former army buddies wrote notes of congratulation from as far away as the Pacific coast. “Open speeches attract new forces,” Grigorenko concluded, while the clandestine distribution of anonymous texts had produced no human contacts, indeed had inhibited human contacts and led him to lie and dissimulate in an unsuccessful effort to avoid arrest.

Strangely enough, confinement in the Serbsky brought this lesson home with unanticipated clarity. For it was there that Grigorenko met and befriended Vladimir Bukovsky, who had also been declared mentally incompetent after helping to organize the December 1965 glasnost demonstration on behalf of the arrested writers Yuli Daniel and Andrei Sinyavsky. It was an encounter nearly as improbable, under normal Soviet conditions, as that between Yuli Daniel and Anatoly Marchenko in Mordovian Camp 11. And, like the latter, it appears to have helped launch an autobiographical project, in this case Grigorenko’s.<sup>75</sup> More immediately, however, the encounter between the fifty-nine-year-old army general and the twenty-four-year-old bohemian highlighted the way zones of incarceration—whether labor camps or psychiatric prisons—fostered linkages across social and generational boundaries and, even more consequentially, served as imagined prototypes for what might be possible in society at large. In the Serbsky, Grigorenko found political prisoners “from different places, different strata, different professions” who had

acted in isolation . . . but when circumstances brought them together, they immediately understood each other. It was clear to me that if they had met outside [*na vole*] they also would have found a common interest. But they didn’t meet there. Why? Above all, because the conditions of life do not allow people to recognize like-minded individuals. In ordinary life, the lie reigns supreme, people don’t dare to express their disagreements with the ruling elite for fear of repression. So they use leaflets to search for the like-minded. . . . But in the underground you won’t find them. IN THE UNDERGROUND YOU CAN MEET ONLY RATS. . . . Whoever wants to struggle against arbitrariness must destroy in himself the fear of arbitrariness. He must take up his cross and climb Golgotha. Let people see him, and in them the desire to take part in this procession will awaken. The people will see those who march, and they will approach them.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>75</sup> According to Andrei Amalrik, by November 1968 Grigorenko had begun to plan his memoirs. See IISH, Alexander Herzen Foundation archive, folder 24, letter from Amalrik to Karel van het Reve, November 1968, p. 1. In 1969 Grigorenko circulated in samizdat his first quasi-autobiographical text, a prison diary under the title *O spetsial’nykh psikhiatricheskikh bol’nitsakh* (‘Durdomakh’) [On special psychiatric hospitals (‘looney bins’)], in which he recounted his experiences in the Serbsky Institute and other psychiatric hospitals. This text was included in Natalia Gorbanevskaja’s collection *Polden’: Krasnaia ploshchad’* (samizdat, 1969; Frankfurt, 1970); abridged English translation in Gorbanevskaja, *Red Square at Noon* (New York, 1972).

<sup>76</sup> Grigorenko, *V podpol’e*, 519–20.



While considerations such as effectiveness of outreach and probability of arrest were certainly in play, dissident memoirs rarely if ever construe exit from the underground as a purely tactical maneuver. At its core is a psychological and ethical transition to a new landscape of social relations, a new sense of self, a new mode of communication.<sup>77</sup> Even in Grigorenko's strikingly Christological version, the transition resembles less a conversion narrative than a story of self-mastery and self-liberation. It enacts on a biographical plane the larger drama of the dissident movement's break with the prerevolutionary legacy of underground conspiracy, a legacy hallowed in both official Soviet culture and the hundreds of variations on the "Union of True Leninists" that secretly formed in the post-Stalin era.<sup>78</sup> Glasnost was not just a central dissident demand vis-à-vis the Soviet state; it became the self-proclaimed (if sometimes selectively practiced) *modus operandi* of the movement itself, with its public demonstrations, its open letters featuring signatories' full names, addresses, and occasionally telephone numbers, and its conspicuous sending of key opposition documents directly to the KGB. Transparency, or at least the removal of obstacles separating public from private ethics, became a cardinal feature of dissident subjectivity—the latest variation on the ideal prerevolutionary intelligentsia persona as well its immediate successor, the "Soviet person." Insofar as writing a memoir is about "bring[ing] intimate experiences into the public realm," dissident autobiographies were meant to (selectively) perform that transparency for their readers.

## V

Because the condition of voicelessness, for Kant, was "self-imposed," his version of the Enlightenment's belated coming-of-age drama was enacted on an interior stage, within the individual, rather than as a struggle against external repression. Only "laziness and cowardice" could explain "why such a large portion of mankind, even long after nature has emancipated them from external guidance, happily remain voiceless, and why it is so easy for others to set themselves up

<sup>77</sup> Several memoirs (e.g., Alekseeva, Aleksandr Daniel's introduction to Ronkin, the autobiographical sections of Turchin's *The Inertia of Fear*) assert that novel forms of sociability (the *kompaniia* in particular, but also new forms of social trust and adult friendship) were the dissident movement's most important contribution to Soviet society, more significant than ideas of rights or the rule of law, which were often construed as merely "catching up" to Western norms.

<sup>78</sup> For a pioneering statistical analysis of the number, duration, and orientation of unofficial (including "Leninist") organizations in the post-Stalin era, see Gennadii Kuzovkin and Lev Krylenkov, "Materialy k istorii nezavisimykh soobshchestv v poslestalinskom SSSR, 1953–1987" (paper delivered at the April 2014 conference "Subjectivity in the Late Soviet Union (1953–1985)" at the European University in St. Petersburg). My thanks to the authors for sharing their paper.

as their spokesmen.” In the Soviet setting it would have been folly, of course, for dissidents to invoke the idea of voicelessness without acknowledging the role that external, state-sponsored repression played in its genesis and perpetuation. In their memoirs, it is invariably fear that explains muteness: fear of the authorities, fear of losing one’s career or privileges, fear of being sent to the camps, fear of exile, fear of reprisals against family members. Even intrepid dissidents like Amalrik could admit to certain forms of fear, as in this description of the early history of dissent: “In those days, we all feared that people who were afraid of the regime would take us for provocateurs, and we [too] feared provocateurs.”<sup>79</sup> When he was stripped of his professorship at the Herzen Pedagogical Institute in Leningrad, the literary scholar Efim Etkind—who had had the temerity to assist Brodsky and Solzhenitsyn—pondered why, at the April 25, 1974, meeting of the Academic Council, not a single one of his colleagues had bothered to ask a question before voting for his dismissal. His conclusion: “It was out of soul-chilling, brain-numbing, silencing, familiar and insurmountable, shameful and terrible FEAR.”<sup>80</sup>

Yet despite their radically different historical contexts, the dissident account of the persistence of voicelessness bears certain striking similarities to Kant’s. In the late 1960s, a theoretical physicist turned computer scientist named Valentin Turchin wrote an essay called *The Inertia of Fear*, which circulated widely in samizdat.<sup>81</sup> Later expanded and published in *tamizdat* as a book, Turchin’s work—which contains only occasional autobiographical references—noted that, in contrast to the Stalin era, extrajudicial punishment was becoming an exception, incomparably fewer people were being executed, and, perhaps most important, the state no longer applied its coercive power in random fashion. Like Kant’s voicelessness, therefore, much of the fear experienced by Soviet citizens was a psychic “leftover” from an earlier era rather than a calibrated response to current realities. The system was living, Turchin maintained, on inherited intimidation.<sup>82</sup> Or, as the epigraph to the geneticist Raissa Berg’s memoirs put it:

From what is your shell made, turtle?  
I asked and received a reply:

<sup>79</sup> Amalrik, *Zapiski dissidenta*, 11.

<sup>80</sup> Etkind, *Zapiski nezagovorshchika*, 50. English translation by Peter France: Etkind, *Notes of a Non-Conspirator* (Oxford, 1978). Etkind notes that of the twelve faculty members who spoke at the meeting (none of whom questioned the charges or the evidence), he was unacquainted with eight. It seems likely that he was similarly unacquainted with the majority of the remaining forty-five faculty members who attended the meeting but did not speak. Curiously, after emphatically ascribing their silence to fear, he speculates about entirely different motives: “fulfilling their Party task, staking their claim to be kept on after retirement, to get an apartment, or to go to Japan.”

<sup>81</sup> The samizdat text can be found in the archive of the Memorial Society in Moscow, f. 102 (Leningrad Collection), op. 1, d. 5.

<sup>82</sup> Valentin Turchin, *Inertsiiia strakha* (New York, 1977).

“It’s from the fear I’ve accumulated;  
Nothing in the world is more durable.”<sup>83</sup>

The inertia of fear was how Viktor Krasin explained the KGB’s success in breaking him psychologically after his arrest in 1972. Krasin had first been arrested in 1949 as a student at Moscow State University and spent five years in Kolyma (where his father had perished following his own arrest in 1937) and in other camps before being released and rehabilitated. “We were old *zeks* [prisoners],” he wrote in his 1983 confessional memoir, “who grew up in Stalinist slavery. We tried to rebel against it, but we retained forever our fear of the state security’s punitive apparatus.” This “humiliating, mystical fear . . . remains in the human soul forever.”<sup>84</sup>

While fear was not (originally) self-imposed in the Soviet case, overcoming fear was understood as a fundamentally personal struggle, a form of work on the self. In a 1968 open letter circulated in samizdat, the high school teacher Anatoly Yakobson described the public protests that began during the trial of Sinyavsky and Daniel as “a precious tradition, the beginning of people’s SELF-LIBERATION from humiliating fear.”<sup>85</sup> In his samizdat debut that same year, Sakharov characterized himself and his fellow Soviet citizens (quoting Chekhov) as “squeezing the slave out of ourselves drop by drop”—a more intimate version, according to Sakharov, of the Soviet Union’s project of “cleansing itself of the pollution of ‘Stalinism.’”<sup>86</sup> The parallel nature of these projects—personal and collective—was subtly captured in Amalrik’s remark that “the first Marxist revolution took place in our country, and it is in our country that the process of overcoming this ideology from within has first begun.”<sup>87</sup> The process was taking place “from within” not only in the sense that the Soviet order had given birth to its own indigenous form of resistance, distinct both tactically and intellectually from Western anti-communism, but also in the sense that the process of overcoming had to begin

<sup>83</sup> Raissa Berg, *Sukhovei: Vospominaniia genetika* (New York, 1983). The verse is an excerpt from a poem by Lev Khalif, quoted in Vasily Grossman’s *Life and Fate*. Vladimir Voinovich quotes a slightly different version of the same verse in *Avtoportret*, 245.

<sup>84</sup> Viktor Krasin, *Sud* (New York, 1983), 6 and 85. In addition to the fear that lingered from his time in Kolyma, Krasin writes that his KGB interrogator threatened to charge him under Article 64 (treason) rather than Article 70 (anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda), and to demand the death sentence. His wife, Nadezhda Emelkina, considered that threat unrealistic. *Sud*, 15–17.

<sup>85</sup> Anatoly Yakobson, “Pis’mo v zashchitu demonstrantov na Krasnoi ploschadi, 18 sentiabria 1968 g.,” *Arkhiv samizdata*, 2: document 146. The letter begins with a quotation from Herzen: “Begin by liberating yourselves!”

<sup>86</sup> Andrei Sakharov, “Razmyshleniia o progresse, mirmom sosushchestvovanii i intelektual’noi sovobode,” in his *Trevoga i nadezhda* (Moscow, 1990), 27. The “drop by drop” passage comes from a famous 1889 letter from Chekhov to his friend and publisher Aleksei Suvorin.

<sup>87</sup> Andrei Amalrik, text of a speech made on receiving an award in 1976 from the International League for Human Rights, reprinted in Amalrik, *Will the Soviet Union Sur-*

with personal transformation. For recovering neo-Leninists like Grigorenko (born in 1907), Raisa Orlova (born in 1918), and other self-described former believers, this meant that “we had to outlive our communism inside ourselves.”<sup>88</sup> For Amalrik (born in 1938) and others of a younger generation, the inner conquest of fear involved a peculiar act of imagination, or perhaps make-believe, a strategy “simple to the point of genius—in an unfree country, to behave like free people and thereby to change the country’s moral atmosphere and its governing tradition.”<sup>89</sup>

More is going on here than simply the idea of setting a good example. Confronted with their movement’s failure to inspire a mass following (much less achieve any significant political reforms), some dissidents took solace in a notion that was very much part of the governing tradition, going back through socialist realism to the great Russian literary critics of the nineteenth century, namely, that certain individuals, whether in life or in art, could achieve transpersonal significance and become “guides to life” (as Chernyshevsky put it) for others. “There are people whose destiny it is,” wrote the dissident mathematician Igor Shafarevich in 1975, “to go far beyond the limits of their biography or background. They generalize many people’s experiences and become symbols. The name of General Grigorenko has been such a symbol. The same is true of the mathematician Leonid Pliushch.”<sup>90</sup> Grigorenko himself had suggested as much: “The people will see those who march, and they will approach them.”<sup>91</sup>

The idea of individual dissidents as bearers of an extrapersonal identity has obvious religious overtones, hearkening back to the Christian martyrs who embodied the collective conscience—and bore the sins—of their contemporar-

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*vive until 1984?* (New York, 1981), 195. As Havel put it, the dissident movement in Soviet bloc countries was “a natural and inevitable consequence of the present historical phase of the system it is haunting,” just as Marx’s proletariat was a natural and inevitable offspring of capitalism. “The Power of the Powerless,” 36.

<sup>88</sup> Grigorenko, *V podpol’e*, 570. In a diary entry for April 18, 1968, Orlova wrote, “The main thing is to liberate oneself. The soul is free territory—that’s where one begins.” Orlova, “Iz dnevnika i pisem 1964–1988 godov,” 290.

<sup>89</sup> Amalrik, *Zapiski dissidenta*, 39.

<sup>90</sup> IISH, Amnesty International Archive, Index Documents on the USSR (EUR 46), folder 455, “A Message from Professor Igor Shafarevich for International Pliushch Day (23 April 1975).”

<sup>91</sup> See note 76. The “Author’s Note” in the English version of Grigorenko’s memoirs contains the following sentence: “Why should I confess in public? It is because my life had outgrown the bounds of ordinariness and become a social phenomenon.” While this sentiment is entirely in tune with Shafarevich’s assessment, it appears nowhere in the Russian version of Grigorenko’s memoirs, nor was I able to find it in various manuscript drafts housed in the Grigorenko Family Papers at the Center for Russian Culture at Amherst College. Grigorenko’s son, Andrei Petrovich Grigorenko, stated that his father would never have written such a sentence (personal e-mail communication, July 12, 2011).

ies.<sup>92</sup> But it was also capable of being expressed in scientific terms. Perhaps the most explicit formulation of the dissidents' potentially extrapersonal significance comes from Turchin, who in the 1970s translated the idea into the language of cybernetic modeling: "The significance of the dissidents for societal life within the USSR consists in the fact that they are creating a new model of behavior which, by the mere fact of its existence, influences every member of society. The phenomenon of dissent reflects a forced exit from the system. But the fate of the system depends, in the final analysis, upon those who remain within it. Small changes in the thinking and behavior of many people—that is what is most needed today."<sup>93</sup> For Turchin and many others, Andrei Sakharov was the preeminent avatar of this process, "one of the few titanic personalities (*lichnosti*) of our time."<sup>94</sup> Sakharov provided Raisa Orlova an "unparalleled example of how a person can behave under Soviet conditions. I shall go on feeling, to the very end, that inimitable, irreplaceable emanation that is Sakharov."<sup>95</sup> Sakharov himself once obliquely described how it felt to inhabit this role: "My fate was, in a sense, exceptional. It is not false modesty but the desire to be precise that prompts me to say that my fate proved greater than my personality. I only tried to keep up with it."<sup>96</sup>

The theory of behavioral modeling extended beyond the influence of individual dissidents; it held that forms of sociability within the dissident world were also harbingers of a new kind of society. Human communities, Turchin argued, evolve toward ever higher techniques of cybernetic control, from physical violence to economic necessity to the realm of spiritual culture. The Soviet Union, temporarily stuck in a (post-Stalin) steady-state form of totalitarianism, would be best served not by developing a multiparty democracy but by expanding the Communist Party into a pluralist, all-inclusive network of relationships. The highest form of ties between human beings, which Turchin called valence bonds (by analogy with the bonds between atoms), were personal and individualized, based on mutual understanding, trust, friendship, and creativity. Such bonds were in the process of being realized, he claimed, tentatively and under difficult conditions, by the dissident movement. Valence bonds were "the most human mode of social intercourse," the one in which "what is properly human unfolds to the full." The West's multiparty, adversarial political systems, in which all manner of decisions

<sup>92</sup> See Philip Boobbyer, *Conscience, Dissent and Reform in Soviet Russia* (London, 2005), 75–149.

<sup>93</sup> Turchin, *Inertsia strakha*, 294.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 254–55. In the English version, this phrase is oddly rendered as "the full extent of his influence will be revealed only in the future." *The Inertia of Fear*, 249.

<sup>95</sup> Raisa Orlova, *Memoirs* (New York, 1983), 363. This passage does not appear in any of Orlova's Russian-language memoirs.

<sup>96</sup> Quoted in Sydney Drell and Sergei Kapitsa, eds., *Sakharov Remembered: A Tribute by Friends and Colleagues* (New York, 1991), 248.

were made by majority rule, had simply replaced one form of coercion (fighting) with another (voting). “The kind of work that must be done to solve complex social problems,” Turchin insisted, “can *only* be done among a small group of people” connected by valence bonds. Voting is “a kind of weapon,” whereas valence communities are “a tool.”<sup>97</sup>

In one way or another, of course, every autobiographical text attempts to establish a framework of significance larger than the single life of the author. Dissident memoirs published before the fall of the Soviet Union found that task complicated by their double displacement: of the author from the Soviet order (even while living in the USSR, or via emigration or expulsion) and of the autobiographical text from the indigenous ecosystem of publishers, critics, and readers (and often from the indigenous language itself). One of the factors, it seems to me, that made the idea of transpersonal identity and iconic models of behavior not just plausible but also persuasive (indeed, a source of hope) was the widespread assumption among dissidents that they were saying out loud what large numbers of Soviet citizens were thinking. This was certainly consistent with the topos of the silent fish, of Soviet citizens as suffering not from brainwashing—did anybody really take official propaganda seriously anymore?—but from fear, or rather the inertia of fear. When Larisa Bogoraz urged Anatoly Marchenko to remove the thundering condemnations of Soviet officials from his stories of camp life, to stick to the facts and “let the reader think what he will,” it was presumably because she was confident that readers would draw the proper conclusions on their own, just as Efim Etkind was confident that those who had attended his lectures at the Herzen Institute “were never in need of commentaries. . . . Soviet people know how to read and they know how to listen.” When Revolt Pimenov was asked by a KGB official why he had given an inflammatory speech at a Komsomol meeting, he replied, “It seemed to me that almost everyone thought the way I did, but was afraid to speak out.”<sup>98</sup> As Petr Yakir’s son-in-law, the bard Yuli Kim, put it in one of his widely quoted songs,

Among the thousand academics and academics-in-waiting,  
Among the entire legion of the cultured and educated  
Was found this mere handful of feverish *intelligenty*,  
To say out loud what the healthy million were thinking!<sup>99</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Turchin, *Inertsia strakha*, 195 and 202.

<sup>98</sup> Etkind, *Zapiski nezagovorshchika*, 25–26. Pimenov quoted in Benjamin Tromly, “Intelligentsia Self-Fashioning in the Postwar Soviet Union: Revolt? Pimenov’s Political Struggle, 1949–57,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 13 (2012): 158.

<sup>99</sup> Iulii Kim, “Podrazhanie V. Vysotskomu” (1968), [www.bards.ru/archives/part.php?id=6178](http://www.bards.ru/archives/part.php?id=6178).

In the absence of public opinion polls or any other remotely reliable information on what Soviet citizens were thinking, it was all too easy for dissidents to imagine that others privately shared their views and to dismiss public expressions of support for the official line as little more than ritualistic formulas (which they often were). Contemporary *anekdots* confirm this tendency. In one, Brezhnev allows an opposition party to form but the Soviet Union remains a one-party state—because everyone joins the opposition party. In another, a dissident stands in a public square, handing out leaflets. People take them, walk away, and discover that nothing is written on them. One turns around and walks back: “Hey, these don’t say anything.” To which the dissident replies, “What’s to say? Everyone knows.”<sup>100</sup> The idea that “everyone knows,” and that everyone agrees about what everyone knows, is difficult to reconcile with the dissident movement’s self-image as socially, ethnically, and intellectually diverse, a coalition of autonomous voices. And yet that image, nourished by so many first-person accounts, lay at the heart of the claim that the dissident world constituted the embryo of a new civil society.

## VI

A distinguishing feature of the dissident autobiographical texts analyzed in this article—their implicit or explicit orientation to Western audiences—all but disappeared during the perestroika era. Their pattern of publication, as illustrated in figure 1, helps explain why. By 1989, publication outside the Soviet Union, whether in Western languages or in Russian, was in precipitous decline, even as publication inside the (soon to be former) Soviet Union was taking off.<sup>101</sup> We are thus dealing with two distinct generations of Soviet dissident autobiographies: the first (slightly over two-thirds of the existing corpus) appeared prior to the USSR’s disintegration; the second came after.<sup>102</sup> The second generation is an almost entirely Russian affair in both senses—geographic and linguistic. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the shift in place of publication across the two periods.

<sup>100</sup> The first anecdote appears in Jussi M. Hanhimaki and Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts* (New York, 2004), 574; the second in Bruce Adams, *Tiny Revolutions in Russia: Twentieth-Century Soviet and Russian History in Anecdotes* (New York, 2005), 102.

<sup>101</sup> The graph disaggregates 144 book-length Soviet dissident memoirs into three trajectories of publication over time: (1) outside the USSR in Western languages, (2) outside the USSR in Russian (by émigré or other presses), and (3) inside the former Soviet Union in Russian. Some memoirs appeared in all three modes at various times, others in just one or two. My thanks to Mitch Fraas and Anuradha Vedantham of Van Pelt Library at Penn for helping to design the visual presentation of data in the graph and pair of maps that follow.

<sup>102</sup> Anke Stephan notes a similar divide in her *Von der Küche auf den Roten Platz*, 50.

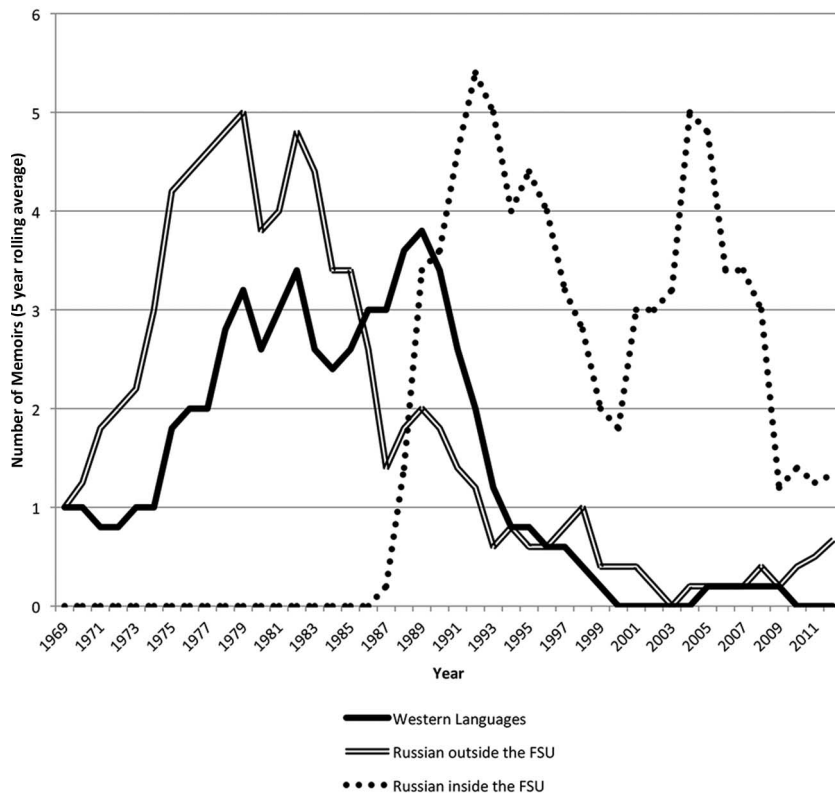


FIG. 1.—Average number of published dissident memoirs by language over time. A color version of this figure is available online.

As the ecosystem of publication shifted from transnational to national—an ironic consequence of the end of the Cold War—so did the assumed audience for dissident life stories. In the years since the USSR's implosion, Russian attitudes toward the dissident movement have fluctuated wildly, from admiration to indifference to contempt—or worse. After a burst of pride at having allegedly helped to topple the Soviet behemoth (Ludmila Alexeyeva's *Thaw Generation* representing the most triumphant example), second-generation memoirs adopted a noticeably more complex and occasionally critical stance vis-à-vis the individuals who comprised the dissident movement, reflecting widespread disillusionment with Russia's post-Soviet experiment with democracy and a growing nostalgia—nourished by the Kremlin—for the stability and superpower status associated with the Brezhnev era. Whereas first-generation memoirs engaged





FIG. 2.—Dissident memoirs by place of publication, 1969–89. A color version of this figure is available online.



FIG. 3.—Dissident memoirs by place of publication, 1989–2014. A color version of this figure is available online.

in various forms of reticence in order to protect protagonists who remained in the USSR, such concerns faded following the Soviet Union's demise. Second-generation memoirs such as Nina Voronel's *The Uproar That Was* (*Sodom tekhn let*) (2006) and Vladimir Voinovich's *Self-Portrait* (*Avtoportret*) (2010) have felt freer to expose personal tensions within the dissident milieu, subject its participants' motives to greater scrutiny, and settle old scores. While most early memoirs presented themselves as lone voices testifying to the injustice and hypocrisy of the Soviet system, later memoirs often invoke their predecessors, making explicit the intertextual conversation that now marks Soviet dissident memoirs as a distinct corpus within the larger history of autobiographical writing.

With hindsight, many of the tropes and motifs of the late Soviet memoirs—the lion's share of the corpus—take on a new hue. It turns out that Soviet fish were not quite as silent as they seemed, that what they were saying was often quite different from the dissident discourse, and that in the years after Stalin's death the USSR was gradually ceasing to be a closed society, much less a gigantic underground.<sup>103</sup> Post-Soviet memoirs written by former dissidents faced with a belated flood of autobiographical writing by nondissident contemporaries are much less likely to make assumptions about what the rest of Soviet society was thinking. They often display a pronounced skepticism vis-à-vis notions of extrapersonal identity or models of behavior, not to mention the quasi-hagiographic tones that typically accompanied them. "Why am I writing this?" asks Nina Voronel at the beginning of the chapter in her memoir about her involvement in the Sinyavsky/Daniel affair: "Andrei is no longer alive. Neither is Yulik. They are receding ever further from us, and their human qualities are fading, becoming cloudy and pale as they are transformed into some kind of generalized pseudo-heroic characters. . . . Is it necessary to preserve the real truth about those who are no longer with us? Not about mythological figures, but about living people with all their virtues and flaws? I don't know."<sup>104</sup>

In fact, she does know. Voronel proceeds to offer a scandalous portrait designed to reveal the all-too-human qualities of iconic dissidents. Hers is a particularly vitriolic exposé, aimed especially at other women in the movement. But the fading of the moral imperative for reticence, along with Western readers' hunger for antitotalitarian heroes, is characteristic of many post-Soviet autobiographies.

<sup>103</sup> For a glimpse into recent studies along these lines, see B. M. Firsov, *Raznomyслиe v SSSR, 1940–1960-e gody* (St. Petersburg, 2008); B. M. Firsov, ed., *Raznomyслиe v SSSR i Rossii: Sbornik materialov nauchnoi konferentsii 15–16 maia 2009 goda* (1945–2008); V. A. Kozlov and S. V. Mironenko, eds., *Kramola: Inakomyслиe v SSSR pri Khrushcheva i Brezhneva 1953–1982* (Moscow, 2005); Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ, 2006); Sergei Zhuk, *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City: The West, Identity, and Ideology in Soviet Dnepropetrovsk, 1960–1985* (Washington, DC, 2010).

<sup>104</sup> Nina Voronel, *Sodom tekhn let* (Rostov-na-Donu, 2006), 116.

Thus we learn of Petr Yakir's alcohol-infused decision-making process at the height of his influence, of instances in which people's names were added without their permission to "open letters" of protest, of ambitions for power despite a professed hostility to the cult of leadership, and various other human weaknesses in a milieu ostensibly dedicated to transparency and high ethical standards. Vladimir Voinovich's memoir urges readers to distinguish between those who became dissidents for reasons of conscience or because of a commitment to truth and others who, whatever their sacrifices, were driven by "vanity, political ambition, careerism, or the desire to settle in another country."<sup>105</sup> Grigorii Pomerants offers his own inventory of shortcomings, including Don Quixotism and the arrogance of reason willfully ignoring history.<sup>106</sup>

What is remarkable about these revelations and (self-)criticisms is the degree to which their authors choose not to use them to call into question the dissidents' larger ideals and accomplishments. Transpersonal identities and behavioral modeling, transparency and the alignment of public and private ethics are no longer the governing concepts on which dissident lives depend for their meaning, as if the magic Russian circle binding ideas to their realization in the personal lives of their bearers has been broken, or at least given some slack. Post-Soviet memoirs detach their dissident protagonists from their iconic personae and embrace their apparent ordinariness. Regarding Pavel Litvinov's sudden catapulting to world fame in 1968, Voinovich observes that "history was made right before my eyes: . . . ordinary people, who yesterday were utterly unknown and unremarkable, suddenly became historical figures."<sup>107</sup> The physician Leonard Ternovskii, one of the founders (in 1969) of the Initiative Group for the Defense of Human Rights, reports that "dissidents gave society an example of non-violent resistance to evil" while assuring his readers that "they were ordinary people, not at all 'knights without fear or reproach.'"<sup>108</sup> Having outlived the Soviet state as well as the West's Cold War appetite for exemplary crusaders against communism, the dissident story, as Leonid Pliushch and Vladimir Dremluga began to imagine it on that July evening in 1968, has "come down to sinful earth."

<sup>105</sup> Voinovich, *Avtoportret*, 480.

<sup>106</sup> Grigorii Pomerants, *Zapiski gadkogo utenka* (Moscow, 2003), 287.

<sup>107</sup> Voinovich, *Avtoportret*, 481.

<sup>108</sup> Leonard Ternovskii, "'Zachem' ili 'pochemu?'" in his *Vospominaniia i stat'i* (Moscow, 2006), 287.