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Anti-Soviet Biographies: The Dissident Milieu and its Neighbouring Milieux

SOFIA TCHOUIKINA

Introduction

This chapter is about participants in the dissident movement that existed in the USSR from 1956 to 1985. From a biographical research perspective, analysis of the life paths of dissidents is particularly interesting since it offers an opportunity to analyse and to describe the ‘anti-Soviet biography’. ‘Anti-Soviet’ was a label the state in the late-Soviet period gave to people whom it considered to be political enemies of the regime – a label which did not always correspond with these people’s self-definition. A typical ‘anti-Soviet’ biography is characterised by discontinuities caused or stimulated by state interference. In describing the specificity of the ‘anti-Soviet’ biography in relation to an ordinary Soviet life path, I would like to mention the concepts ‘*social career*’ and ‘*career break*’ introduced by Robin Humphrey (1993). According to Humphrey, a *social career* is a ‘combination of interrelated careers’ (1993: 169), for example professional, moral, familial. A *career break* is a decisive biographical moment, a turning point, that ‘leaves marks on people’s lives by altering their fundamental meaning structures’ and ‘has such a powerful impact that the social career is knocked completely off trajectory and sometimes seemingly put into reverse’. A *career break* is evident in a life story when a single event changes both the form and the extent of a social career. An integral feature of a career break, then is discontinuity in a social career’ (1993: 172–3). A typical ‘anti-Soviet’ biography is characterised by two career breaks, and is therefore divided into three different ‘lives’. The subject lives the first life as an ordinary Soviet citizen, the second life as a dissident and a pariah in Soviet society, and the third life either as an ‘ex-dissident’ in a post-Soviet society or as an emigrant to another country. In this chapter I seek to provide an answer to the question, how were the

boundaries of the dissident milieu constructed by insiders and outsiders,¹ and how was this social construction of difference connected with discontinuities in the dissidents' biographies? The research on which this chapter is based consisted of in-depth biographical interviews with Leningrad participants in the dissident movement.²

A clandestine political, cultural, social opposition has always existed in the Soviet Union, even during the harsh Stalinist times (Iofe, 1982). Only with the beginning of the so-called 'thaw' of the mid 1950s–mid 1960s, however, did social life in general become more vigorous, and protest actions more numerous. The most characteristic form of protest during the initial stages of the dissident movement (from 1956 to the late 1960s) was revisionist Marxist criticism of the Soviet regime conducted by oppositional loners or participants of underground groups which were not connected with each other and whose actions were therefore not coordinated or synchronised. A more or less consolidated dissident movement came into being after 1968. The formation of this consolidated milieu in place of the scattered underground groups was related to the emergence of the periodically-issued information bulletin of the dissident movement, the *Chronicle of Current Events* (Alexeeva, 1984; Vaissié, 1999; Voronkov, 1993).

The majority of dissidents in the 1960s and 1970s belonged to the intelligentsia and had received higher education. After the late 1970s they were joined by others, who were in the course of receiving higher education when they became involved in protest actions and consequently were expelled from university. Sociological research shows that the intelligentsia formed the social base of the dissident movement and its main referent (Vaissié, 1999; Voronkov, 1993). In this sense dissidents in Russia were rather remote from 'the people' in comparison with dissidents in some other socialist countries (e.g. Poland) and in the national republics of the Soviet Union. Individual involvement in the dissident movement was usually motivated by one of the following: (1) a wish to protest against certain drawbacks of Soviet society or political events, or to spread one's own political ideas or programme; (2) 'relative deprivation' and a striving for self-realisation; (3) solidarity with other dissidents; or (4) a desire to emigrate (Tchouikina, 1996, 2000; Vaissié, 1999). The history, role and significance of the dissident movement are defined by its ultimate goal (freedom of expression and the breaking of a state monopoly on ideology), by its repertory of protest actions, and by its participants' agreement in

terms of methods of struggle (non-violence, transparency of actions, legacy). From the biographical perspective, however, it was mainly the *punishments dissidents received for their protests*, and not social background, education and ideas, which defined the specificity of the dissident biography as against an ordinary Soviet biography.

From ‘first’ to ‘second’ life: entry into the dissident milieu

An event which marked the first career break was the loss of the status of ordinary Soviet citizen owing to voluntary or unplanned involvement in protest actions. This loss was usually marked by state interference in the person’s life and their subsequent punishment (the issuing of a search warrant, dismissal, arrest, condemnation to exile or to a prison term) and ultimate stigmatisation of themselves and their family as politically alien. A punished and stigmatised person could often not continue to live as before, and as a consequence more and more of their significant activities and contacts would take place in a dissident milieu. One woman I interviewed, a participant in the ‘Red Cross’ dissident social work movement in the 1970s, said the following:

When my husband was arrested – it is worth describing ... Because when a woman stays alone with children, and she is stepmotherly [badly] treated at her workplace ... And I must admit, one’s circle of friends narrows as well. I can’t say that all my friends disappeared, but the number of them decreased. Some stayed friends, but nevertheless, I suppose that everyone feels alone in his sorrow. And then, if some of my girlfriends, who do not know what it is to be the wife of an arrested person, if they did not pass through it themselves it is more difficult for them to understand it. It is very hard to live in one town with your husband knowing that he is in prison. Certainly, there were people who tried to encourage me, but I had a feeling that nobody could share my pain for him and my anxiety. They could only feel sorry for me. But the only people who could understand it and share it were those who passed through it themselves.

This woman gave three main reasons for feeling different after the punishment she received: ‘stepmotherly [bad] treatment’ by some colleagues at work, the narrowing of her circle of friends, and the need for the advice and encouragement of people who had had the same experience. Those belonging to the dissident milieu divided into ‘defenders’ and

‘defended’, the latter being those who had been arrested, exiled or dismissed and the former their relatives (usually wives) and friends who tried to help them. Every ‘defender’ could, after a time, become a ‘defended’ himself and vice versa. Thus the experience of political persecution – especially of one’s own arrest or of the arrest of a close relative – marked the initial difference between dissidents and others.

Mutual trust played a very powerful role in dissident activities, and so it was very important to distinguish between one’s own and strangers, and between ‘faithful’ and ‘faithless’. The ‘initiation’ represented by being persecuted for anti-Soviet activities or by attempts to defend a punished person was important for a person’s being considered ‘one of us’ in the dissident milieu. But the final sign of fidelity was conformity to certain unwritten rules of behaviour, the only ‘evidence’ for this being the dissident’s life as it was lived (Daniel, 1998). What made a dissident was a ‘harmony of one’s words with one’s life’ (Vaissié, 1999: 11). As Daniel shows, the life path of a dissident reflected the different stages of his or her dialogue with the state. In this dialogue, a dissident followed the ‘paradigm of protest’ and the state a ‘paradigm of repression’. Actually, the two sides never hoped to persuade each other, and the dialogue was in reality oriented towards the third, silent participant, public opinion (Daniel, 1998: 117–18). The role of ‘public opinion’ was enacted not by the majority of the population, which in general considered dissidents to be either alien or insane, but only by the sympathetic social milieux sympathetic to the goals of the movement.

The Dissident Milieu and its ‘Neighbours’

The boundaries of the dissident milieu can be defined in relation to ‘co-terminous’ social milieux: that is, milieux that were akin in terms of lifestyles and practices, but whose representatives at the same time identified themselves as being different from their ‘neighbours’. In the social layout of Soviet society the dissidents’ neighbouring social milieux were, on the one hand, the dissenting intelligentsia and, on the other, hippies and the people of the cultural underground, and the habitués of the Cafés Saigon, Rim, Malaia Sadovaia, Sfinks, Abbey Road: a marginal bohemia, thoroughly described in the chapter by Elena Zdravomyslova in this book. One participant in the dissident movement since the early 1980s, T. Andrey (b. 1961), commented in his interview as follows:

... dissident ideas found support in two strata. One of these strata was, first of all, the intelligentsia, namely a technical intelligentsia which occupied itself with humanitarian questions, not so much a humanitarian intelligentsia. And on the other hand, as in the song, the 'janitors' and porters' generation', i.e. an underground humanitarian intelligentsia – those who became janitors, porters and stokers and who in these steamships occupied themselves with humanitarian creative work.

For the most part, members of the intelligentsia did not have direct, regular contact with dissidents, and may be considered 'free riders' in the dissident movement: groups sharing the goals of the movement, but not ready to take the risks involved in participation. In fact, only certain circles of these broad strata communicated closely with dissidents. Both dissidents and representatives of the dissenting intelligentsia pointed out in interviews (often without being asked) the differences between their circles. One of these was the attitude towards professional self-realisation that corresponded with self-identity. As Michael B., a person closely connected with dissident circles since the late 1960s, remarked:

I don't call myself a dissident, because for me it was not a profession. That is why I don't have the moral right to call myself that. They were professional revolutionaries. Although I was well-acquainted with many of them and kept company with them, I did not become this profession myself. I was standing next to dissent in that sense.

Dissidents themselves stress the predominance of their protest activities over their official professional duties and their importance in terms of self-realisation. One man (b. 1951) who was responsible for helping the families of political prisoners in Leningrad in late the 1970s recalls:

These activities – this was my life ... I occupied myself with all that for 80 per cent of my time, and occasionally 100 per cent. That was, so to say, my work. And on my basic work I, so to say, boiled the pot – made money.

The sacrifice of professional career in favour of the alternative lifestyle was a common trait in the biographies of dissidents and of 'non-conformist' artists (unacknowledged painters, poets and musicians). The lifestyles of the latter were in many ways different from normal Soviet lifestyles. For this reason some groups of dissidents, feeling these 'non-

conformists' to be kindred spirits and allies, tried, at the beginning of the 1980s, to persuade them to take part in protest actions. These attempts to commend to them dissident struggle were, however, for the most part not successful. Denying the validity of all social activities officially sanctioned by the state, the non-conformists claimed that 'politics is a dirty affair', that 'politics and art are incompatible', that the dissidents were 'bolsheviks in reverse', and so on. Unlike the dissidents, the people of the cultural underground did not intend to conduct a dialogue with the state: they wished to neglect the state and be neglected by it. Thus, the boundary between the dissidents and the marginal bohemian public was constructed on the basis of differential attitudes towards self-realisation through social/political activity.

Dissidents, then, were described by their neighbouring milieu as 'professionals', and this description accorded with their self-identity. From a sociological point of view, a profession can be defined as a lasting activity bringing an income to and defining the social status of an individual (Radaev and Shkaratan, 1996). So the question is, from a sociological point of view, can dissident activities be considered as representing a kind of profession?

Dissident Activities as a Quasi-profession

In their 'first life' as ordinary Soviet citizens, many future dissidents were successful in their profession. The most outstanding examples are the famous physicist and holder of the Nobel Prize in 1958, the academician Andrei Sakharov, and General Petr Grigorenko. Less famous, but still prominent in their fields, are the doctors of sciences, physicist Yuri Orlov, linguist Larissa Bororaz and biologist Sergei Kovalev, and the members of the Soviet Writers Union Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Alexei Kosterin, to mention just a few. For many such people, involvement in protest actions led to dismissal: thus participation in the movement could even put an end to work in one's own professional sphere, or at least to hopes of professional promotion. Professional career had to be, and was, sacrificed to dissident activity – this was one of the contexts of the dialogue these dissidents conducted with the Soviet authorities. The perspective which our interviews with these dissidents opened up on their everyday activities reveals what their routines were, and what were their main occupations and

the qualities these required. These routines consisted mainly of two types of activity: work with information, and 'social work'.

Activities of the first type included creative writing (of essays, ideological programmes, pamphlets, analytical articles, leaflets, collective protest letters, information bulletins, translations from foreign languages), along with the editing and typing of these texts, the spreading of them in circles which would disseminate them further, and communication of the new information to the West. Among the dissidents there were many professional writers and linguists (Vaissié, 1999). In fact, the dissidents' main goal was to remedy the 'information gaps' in their society and to influence that society's memory of its past and present. Presentation to the public of unknown facts about Stalin's time, and the recalling of 'repressed' names, was considered especially important. Researchers regard the creation of an 'independent information field' as being the main goal uniting dissident groups of different ideological orientations (Daniel, 1998). The multi-faceted role played by unpublished Russian and Western literature in the process of creating this independent information field and of forming independent public opinion was considerable (Vaissié, 1999). As Aucouturier (1996) argues, the originality of Russian political dissent as a movement lies in its roots in literary activity. If we turn now to the problem of the boundaries of the dissident milieu, we can view the boundaries constructed between dissidents and neighbouring social milieux, no less than those between 'professionals' and 'non-professionals', as similar to those constructed between, on the one hand, writers, journalists, editors and booksellers and, on the other, readers. Indeed, both the dissenting intelligentsia and the non-conformists were interested consumers of the information spread by dissidents.

'Red cross' social work in a dissident milieu consisted of assisting political prisoners along with their elderly parents and their wives and children – sending parcels to camps, collecting second-hand items and giving them to those in need, providing other practical help, and collecting money and distributing it among the families of political prisoners. Material help often came from friendly milieux: for example, in some cases the colleagues of an arrested person collected money in the workplace and gave it to the family of a political prisoner. There were also a certain number of anonymous donors among the intelligentsia. Only after 1974 did the dissident milieu have its own money to distribute among political prisoners, as a result of the foundations created separately in the

West by Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn (Vaissié 1999). Again, the difference between the dissidents and the friendly milieux lay in the regularity of help. If, for dissidents, helping political prisoners and their families was an everyday routine, for the other milieux it was a mainly episodic and highly underground activity.

I turn next to quasi-professional dissident activities and the social space in which they occurred. This space has been described via the terms ‘quasi-public sphere’ (Zdravomyslova, 2002), ‘private–public sphere’ (Voronkov and Chikadze, 2002), ‘alternative public sphere’ (Hankiss, 1988), ‘alternative sphere of socio-political interaction’ (Hankiss, 1988). Other terms have also been employed, describing the same phenomenon from different standpoints (Rotkirch, 2000). All these concepts relate to the same characteristic of a socialist society – that the official public sphere was under state control, and that all informal/unsanctioned social activities had therefore to take place in ‘locales of quasi-public communication’: cafés, literary salons, dissident ‘open houses’, exhibitions (Zdravomyslova, 2002). The alternative, or quasi-public, sphere was part of a *second society* (Hankiss, 1988). This latter concept defines all those economic, social, cultural and political activities which for different reasons were not subject to state management. All those living in socialist countries were to some extent involved in *shadow* activities in a *second society*, which included a *quasi-public sphere* (Hankiss, 1988; Voronkov and Chikadze, 2002). In this sense, dissidents were different from those inhabiting the neighbouring milieux, and indeed from all their contemporaries, in two respects. First, they were consciously breaking the informal code (cf. Voronkov and Chikadze, 2002) – the unwritten knowledge all Soviet people shared of what could and could not be said or done in the public and private-public spheres. That is why the discussions of the intelligentsia in their ‘kitchens’, as well as gatherings of hippies, artists, ‘non-conformists’ and shadowy small businessmen in city cafés, were tolerated by the regime, whereas dissident activities, which aimed at the dissemination of suppressed information, were prohibited. The breaking of the informal code of Soviet behaviour was the only thing that could reveal the ‘mystical’ nature of Soviet power, the rigidity of the regime and its imperviousness to change. In this, Vaissié (1999) argues, it was successful.

Secondly, dissidents’ activities in the ‘second society’ predominated over their activities in the first. They sought self-realisation mainly in the second society and were publicly banned and punished in the first. Because

the second society was, as Hankiss (1988) points out, characterised by 'diffuseness instead of differentiation and integration', and because it was 'not governed by a consistent set of organisational principles', the quasi-professional activities of dissidents in the 'second society' were characterised by a weak division of labour and by interference in these activities in their private lives. Loose and diffuse as they were, journalistic and Red-Cross dissident activities still seem more 'professional' than amateur occupations, since they defined the dissidents' social status both in the first and in the second society, were enduring, required special skills, and created capital which made possible a way of life. The money and material goods received by the wives of political prisoners via the help-networks represented only a small addition to their modest official salaries, but they still helped mothers with small children to make ends meet. Even more important than material help was the 'capital' represented by ties of friendship. Mutual trust, and mutual aid and support, were in the dissident milieu the only counter-force the dissidents possessed against the repressive force of the state, and so these comrades-in-arms were used to helping each other with everything, including with the problems of everyday life (Tchouikina, 1996; 2000).

In their 'third life', after their exit from the dissident movement on account of emigration or the arrival of *perestroika*, some dissidents returned to or continued with their first profession. Others used their participation in protest actions as political capital and went into politics; many others again used the skills they had acquired in the dissident movement as professional knowledge. There is a certain continuity between the type of a dissident's activities and that of their professional occupation afterwards. But what disappeared or diminished with the end of the movement was that 'diffuseness' typical of the second society, along with the overlapping of professional and family roles. Exits from the dissident movement not infrequently led to the breakup of families. The interviewees themselves explained this by the fact that their family lives prior to the breakup had been centred on their dissident activities, which called for different relationships between spouses from those that applied in ordinary everyday life (Tchouikina 1996). As a result many families did not survive the transition, where professional and social activities were not so tightly bound, and not focused so sharply on defence against hostile external surroundings.

Conclusion

Research investigating the dissident movement in Soviet society has contributed to our knowledge of that society's 'underlife' (Zdravomyslova, 2002). In this chapter I have attempted to analyse the biographies of participants in the dissident movement with a particular focus on: (1) their specific life courses, which are characterised by *career breaks* (Humphrey, 1993); and (2) the socio-structural consequences for late-Soviet society of the persecution and stigmatisation of oppositionists. My research has shown that, in the context of late-Soviet society, breaks in their social careers caused by state interference forced persecuted oppositionists to seek self-realisation in the second society (Hankiss, 1988). Adapting to their marginal official status, they developed their own subculture, their own status symbols, and their own ideas of suitable behaviour. This group of people had, by the beginning of the 1970s, formed a distinct milieu inside Soviet society, for which the 'open homes' of the participants in the movement served as 'public places' (Tchouikina, 1996, 1997, 2000). In the broad structure of Soviet society the social milieux adjoining the dissident milieu were the milieu of the dissenting intelligentsia and the marginal bohemian milieu. Analysis of the dissident milieu in relation to its neighbours not only sheds light on anti-Soviet biographies, but also illustrates the limits of the possible involvement by an ordinary Soviet citizen in activities unsanctioned by the state.

Notes

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- 1 For my language of description of the everyday life of dissidents (e.g. the terms 'milieu insiders', 'milieu outsiders', 'neighbourhood') I am indebted to Richard Grathoff. In his 'methodological note' (Grathoff, 1989: 433–40) Grathoff describes the possible stages and methods of phenomenological investigation of a social milieu which addresses the following problems: the boundaries of a milieu; the biographical situation of its inhabitants and the duration of their residency; its 'spatial order' (i. e. private and public spheres in the milieu); the discourse characteristic of the milieu; and political and economic relations between the milieu and wider society.
 - 2 The interviews with participants in the dissident movement from Leningrad were conducted by me in 1995–6 as part of the project 'Women in the dissident movement' sponsored by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, Germany. I also used interviews from the archive of the Centre for Independent Social Research, conducted by Victor Voronkov and Elena Zdravomyslova in 1993–5 for the project 'Dissent in the USSR as a social

movement', interviews from the archive of the SIC 'Memorial' conducted by Tatiana Kosinova and myself in 1992–4, and the interviews of Christina Leiser (FU Berlin) conducted in 1994–5. Full information about the history of the dissident movement in Moscow and the biographies of its participants is given in Vaissié (1999), and a general history of the dissident movement in the USSR may be found in Alexeeva (1992).