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SOVIET DISSIDENT HISTORIANS AS A SOCIETAL PHENOMENON OF THE POST-STALIN ERA (1956-1985)

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Summary

This article focuses on the phenomenon of dissident historiography in the post-Stalin era, which arose during the “Thaw” as a result of Khrushchev’s destalinization campaign, and persisted throughout the Brezhnev era, despite the repressions. Dissident historians freely endorsed the role of researchers of the Soviet past, in order to explore the “blank spots” of Soviet history left unexplored by official historians, in particular the history of Stalinism and political repressions. This article focuses on two cases, that of Roy Medvedev and Anton Antonov-Ovseenko, and examines the specific conditions that gave rise to this dissident historiography, but also the specificity of the position of dissident historians. We argue that this position implied both methodological limitations and opportunities to seize, giving these authors a unique place in the historiography of the Soviet era. Finally, the relations between these researchers and the broader Soviet society is analyzed.

Keywords: Soviet Union, History, Historiography, Stalinism, Thaw, Brezhnev era, Dissidence, Communism.

Introduction

For millions of recently-rehabilitated political prisoners who had fallen prey to the purges of the Stalin era, the official condemnation by General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party Nikita Khrushchev of the “Personality Cult” of Josef Stalin during the 20th and 22nd Party Congresses, in 1956 and 1961, was unexpected, and yet offered the hope for further great changes. The ensuing destalinization campaign, coupled with an easing of censorship in the literary and historiographical

fields – the so-called “Thaw”^[1] – made it possible to tackle some of the sensitive issues of the recent past, which had previously been shrouded in secrecy.

Nevertheless, state control over official history remained very tight, as shown by several resounding “affairs” opposing dissenting historians to rigid state censors and cliques of zealous Stalinist historians. In 1956, for instance, the journal *Voprosy Istorii* received a blame for going too far in its criticism of the past and misinterpreting the message of the 20th Party Congress.^[2] The 22nd Party Congress, however, seemed to bring official destalinization to unprecedented levels, as Stalin’s body was symbolically removed from Lenin’s Mausoleum on Red Square, and cities bearing his name were being renamed. In the literary field, a major step was taken in 1962, when Alexander Solzhenitsyn was allowed to publish *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, a novella on the daily life of a Gulag inmate, thus opening the way for an unheard of flow of publications on one of the recent taboo themes.

Yet Khrushchev could hardly tame ongoing struggles between anti-Stalinist and pro-Stalinist forces at the top of the Soviet leadership, and the Thaw ultimately proved short-lived. By October 1964, Brezhnev had replaced Khrushchev as General Secretary, and it became clear that the destalinization campaign would meet the same fate as its initiator. Indeed, the turn to a “more balanced” evaluation of Stalin’s crimes and “accomplishments” was perceptible in official discourse already in early 1965. While no full-scale rehabilitation of Stalin was ever undertaken, strong signals were soon sent to historians who failed to toe the line. In 1967, Alexander Nekrich, a historian who had published two years earlier a study on Stalin’s responsibility in failing to prepare the country to the German attack of June 1941, was subjected to heavy criticism, excluded from the Communist Party, and all available copies of his books destroyed.^[3] In the literary field as well, the initial wave of publications on the Gulag and political repressions was soon brought to a halt, and the once hailed author of *Ivan Denisovich*, by then a vocal critic of the regime, all but fell into disgrace. Thus the history of the Stalin era, pregnant with contradictory, and potentially explosive, interpretations, was left in the hands of professional historians, jealously guarding the keys of the past to make sure that no dissenting historical interpretation would be tolerated. Among Clio’s faithful wardens were both Stalinist historians convinced of the need to end with the “blackening” of the past and to place the emphasis on accomplishments of the regime, and timid critiques, who did not dare raise their voices and preferred to remain within the safe boundaries prescribed by state ideology and censorship organs.

It is to counter this situation and to give a voice to the multitude of victims of political repressions that a few individuals, non-professional historians with a keen interest in the past, decided to endorse the role of chroniclers and interpreters of the Stalin era. The most well-known of those amateur researchers is certainly Solzhenitsyn himself. *The Gulag Archipelago*, his groundbreaking oral history of the Gulag, which he self-defined as a “an experiment in literary investigation”, was based on several hundred testimonies of former camp inmates and sought to fill the “blank spots” left by official history, and to honor the memory of millions who had not returned from the camps. But Solzhenitsyn was by no means the only dissident to feel the need to make up for the lack of any truthful account of the Soviet past. In fact, as I will argue in this paper, this situation of acute divergence between popular memory and official history gave rise to the birth of a dissident historiography, produced by members of the intelligentsia who became underground historians through their self-assigned duty to uncover “historical truth”. This article will focus on two cases, which are less well-known than Solzhenitsyn’s, but as representative of this era of repressed memories, that of Roy Medvedev, the author, *inter alia*, of the monumental study on Stalinism *Let*

History Judge (1971) and Anton Antonov-Ovseenko, who published in 1980 *The Time of Stalin: Portrait of a Tyranny*.^[4]

In this article, I would like to touch briefly upon a number of questions concerning this phenomenon of dissident historiography. First, I wish to examine the methods of research of these historians, the specificity of their position, which entailed both limitations to overcome and opportunities to seize. Secondly, I am interested in the links between these researchers and the broader Soviet public for whom, and in the name of whom, they were writing. Which factors explain the rise of such a societal phenomenon as dissident historiography? How different was the position of dissident historians, from that of Soviet official historians, on the one hand, and Western Sovietologists, on the other? To what extent was this historiography politically oriented, and inscribed in the broader dissident movement seeking emancipation from the yoke of the Brezhnev-era post-totalitarian state?

In a first section, I will briefly introduce the two cases studied here, as concrete examples to illustrate my point, and then look at the methods used by these two historians. In the second section, I will examine the links of these historians to Soviet society and consider them in a wider perspective, that of Soviet dissidence.

Becoming a dissident historian: two trajectories

How does one become a dissident historian? One major impetus that stands out is a personal experience of Stalin-era repressions. Anton Antonov-Ovseenko (born 1920) is the son of the famous Bolshevik leader Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko, who led the storming of the winter Palace in Petrograd, setting off the October 1917 Revolution. While his mother committed suicide in prison and his father was executed in 1937 during the Great Terror, Anton spent thirteen years in the Gulag for being the son of an “enemy of the people”. After his rehabilitation, in 1957, he devoted himself, first to the task of rehabilitating symbolically his slandered father, and subsequently, to the denunciation of Stalin’s crimes.

Roy Medvedev (born 1925) followed a similar path, although Stalin era repressions affected him less directly. His father, a Red Commissar, was arrested in 1938 and died in a Gulag camp in 1941, and this stain on his personal biography followed him until the posthumous rehabilitation of his father. In spite of this childhood trauma, Medvedev joined the Communist Party in 1957 and devoted the rest of his life to the socialist cause. Nevertheless, this early experience had made him acutely aware of the imperfections of the Communist system as it had developed under Stalin, and the young Roy assumed that no real democratization of the regime was possible without an honest examination of the crimes of the past, and of the circumstances that had given rise to such “distortions of Soviet legality”. Emboldened by the 20th and 22nd Party Congresses, Medvedev began writing a monumental study of the “origins and consequences” of Stalinism, which he perceived as his personal contribution to the cause of socialist democracy.

Neither of the two subjects of this study was a professional historian. Antonov-Ovseenko had graduated from the history faculty of Moscow City Pedagogical Institute before his arrest, in 1940, but because of his subsequent fate, he had never had the opportunity to pursue his studies any further or find employment in his field. As he returned from the Gulag, he was initially compelled to live outside big cities^[5] and was employed as a cultural worker in sanatoria in the South; later on, he moved back to Moscow but did not seek or find any official employment, probably because of his invalidity (he was nearly blind).^[6] While he was familiar with methods of historical research, his

training was done mostly on a self-taught basis, as he started doing archival research to write his father's biography. The main impetus for embarking on this work was the feeling that the Bolshevik revolutionary, who had not yet been officially rehabilitated, was still the object of undeserved stigma, and that his memory should be cleared of it. By the time he had achieved this, however, Anton realized that a yet greater task stood before him: Stalin, the persecutor of his father and the man who was responsible for the broken lives of millions of Gulag prisoners, was the object of creeping official rehabilitation, while his victims' memory had not yet been properly honored.

Antonov-Ovseenko therefore dedicated the rest of his life to the denunciation of the crimes of Stalin, Beria and other perpetrators. In 1980, he published in New York his study on the Stalin era entitled *The time of Stalin: Portrait of a Tyranny* – a title stating from the outset the attitude of the author to his subject of study. His goal was to denounce the period he called “*stalinshchina*”, by underlining the “criminal essence” of the Soviet dictator. Such a denunciation, he felt, was “an act of justice”, one which must take place “first and foremost in Stalin's country”. “To write the truth about Stalin is the duty of every honest person. In the face of those who died at his hands. In the face of those who survived the night. Before those who will come after us.” (author's preface to *The Time of Stalin*) Antonov-Ovseenko emphasized his personal stake in denouncing the repressions, which had taken the lives of both of his parents and ruined his own youth, although he recognized that he had become aware of “Stalin's true place in history” very “late, shamefully late”. However, now that he had come to such a realization, he felt compelled to “fulfill his human duty” and speak up, for he considered that “keeping silent now means to betray”.^[7]

Roy Medvedev, despite being the son of an “enemy of the people”, managed to complete his studies at Leningrad State University and received a degree of “Candidate of Pedagogical Sciences” (PhD) in 1951^[8]. Initially restricted to work in the provinces, he saw the political sanctions against him lifted in 1957, upon rehabilitation of his father, and went on to occupy several positions in publishing and then in the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, in Moscow. However, despite a brilliant career in his field, he felt acutely the need to engage in historical research, to make up for the inadequacies of official history. As he stated in 1969, upon interrogation by the Party Control Commission:

If I felt that our history institutes really studied the nature and history of Stalinism and Stalin's crimes, I wouldn't have written my book. But I know that they don't do any research on that subject. [...] Look here, if Moscow's bakers stopped baking bread, then certainly home bakeries would sprout up everywhere, or people would begin baking their own. But no less than bread, our people needs the truth about our country's past; they must know why they suffered such tragedies. Therefore I had to search for the truth, but using the methods of a craftsman.^[9]

Years later, Medvedev acknowledged that many professional historians would have been in a better position to do the work that he did, in terms of professional skills and opportunities, but that they were not willing to accomplish such a work, although some of them did assist him with advice and historical material^[10]. Indeed, given the state's strict control over historiography, for a professional historian, taking the risk to undertake research on undesirable topics could trigger professional and personal sanctions, potentially leading to exclusion from the party and unemployment.

Medvedev was aware that he was under the threat of sanctions as well, but nonetheless decided, from the outset, to work openly on his history of Stalinism, submitting various versions of his manuscript to friends and acquaintances, ignoring all rules of conspiracy. In 1967, after one of the copies fell into the hands of the KGB, Medvedev submitted the manuscript to the Central

Committee for examination, pointing out that the text was still a draft.^[11] Writing a history of Stalinism, he claimed, constituted an essential task of self-examination that stood before the party on its path towards socialist democracy. This painful work of introspection and acknowledgment of past mistakes should be accomplished by the Party itself, lest enemies of socialism seize upon the dark deeds of the past to slander the regime, by equating Stalinism with Communism. He thus wrote in his introduction:

Truth was Lenin's and the Leninist party's essential arm in their struggle for the victory of socialism. And this implied that the truth be told not only about the enemies of the revolution, but also about our shortcomings and mistakes. Of course, our enemies try to take advantage of our self-criticism. This is one of the most serious consequences of Stalin's personality cult. But it can be overcome, not through silence, but through an honest exposure of truth.^[12]

This, however, was not the position of the Party, and sanctions were applied against Medvedev even before publication of his book in the West, in 1971. Initially, the manuscript aroused the interest of Iurii Andropov, head of the KGB, who recognized in 1968 that the book, "based on tententiously picked, but authentic data, accompanied with an astute commentary and catchy demagogical conclusions" might come to be circulated widely underground, eliciting "undesirable interpretations". The solution that he suggested was to call Medvedev to the ideological department for a talk, with the possibility of offering him to write under "appropriate Party control" a book "on the period of the life of our state that interests him". But the Central Committee decided otherwise, and by August 1969, Medvedev had been excluded from the CPSU for "views incompatible with membership in the Party", excluded for writing a manuscript which had not yet been submitted for publication anywhere.^[13]

Nonetheless, Medvedev still took the risk to send the manuscript abroad for publication, prompted by the creeping rehabilitation of Stalin taking place in the anniversary year of 1969 (the 90th anniversary of Stalin's birth). Although there had been hints that his professional situation would not be threatened, unless he opted for publication, Medvedev assumed that such a step, on the contrary, would protect him from potential repressions.^[14] And indeed, after quitting his position at the Academy and publishing at once three books^[15] in the West in 1971, Medvedev settled into the career of an independent historian, publishing in less than two decades over a dozen historical and political studies, translated into several languages. Not employed anywhere in the Soviet Union, he received his income from Western publishers through the intermediary of his brother Zhores Medvedev, another well-known dissident, deprived of his Soviet citizenship in 1973, who settled in London thereafter. Although the KGB did not quite leave him at peace, bothering him with house searches, anonymous letters and harassing him in several ways, he did enjoy a rather privileged position for a prominent dissident who was giving regular interviews to Western newspapers and publishing on sensitive historical, literary and political issues in the West. The failure of the KGB to arrest him, however, seems to have been due both to the moderation of his views – he remained faithful to his Communist creed, even after the crushing of the Prague spring, in 1968 – and to the favor that he enjoyed with Andropov, head of the KGB (1967-1982), later on General Secretary (1982-1984).^[16]

Antonov-Ovseenko, similarly, was initially harassed by the KGB for publishing his book abroad, and he lost, during a house search, most of the material he had been collecting for a new study on Lavrentii Beria. Contrasting this experience with the trials he had experienced under Stalin, he remarked:

"Possibly the most striking impressions I got [in my life] were from the house searches in my

apartment in the 1980s. I once read about a historian from Kiev: during a house search, his whole archive was confiscated, and he hung himself. I can easily understand him. Because I found myself in a similar situation. In 1982 and 1984 they completely "cleared" my apartment, taking away everything that was needed for my work: manuscripts, documents, "forbidden literature" published abroad, from which I extracted every scrap of necessary information."^[17]

However, probably because of his invalidity and tragic personal fate, but also perhaps thanks to his glorious name, Antonov-Ovseenko was not arrested and was able to continue his activity as an independent historian, although his subsequent publications had to wait for a more serene climate, during Perestroika. This activity, he claimed, was both his civic and professional duty as a historian. A duty also deriving from the fact that, as a former prisoner, he had been in a position to listen to and record the testimonies of many former Gulag inmates and felt a personal obligation to share them with the world, regardless of his old age, which seemed to call for a more appeased mode of living.

How many bitter fates passed in front of my eyes in the camps! And as I became a kind of living safekeeper of these memories, I do not have the right to keep these memories to myself. I do not have the right to leave the past and those tragic fates to rest, so as to devote myself to the pleasures of a quiet life [...].^[18]

Therefore, Medvedev and Antonov-Ovseenko turned to history both for political and personal reasons. They felt compelled to write by the fact that professional historians had failed to tackle subjects that were of utmost concern to the Soviet people, and many historians had become accomplices of the state in the "concealment of historical truth"^[19]. Finally, they felt a personal duty to rescue these painful pages of the past from the dust of oblivion and to counter the official attempts at partial rehabilitation of Stalin, which were constant after 1965 and intensified around anniversary dates^[20].

Pressured by the state and KGB organs to give up an activity perceived as openly political and therefore harmful to the regime, Medvedev and Antonov-Ovseenko became dissidents *de facto*, without initially engaging in more politicized forms of protests. Yet their activity was far from being purely scientific in nature, for the very decision to engage in historical research independently represented in itself the first step on their path to dissidence. The very motives that prompted them to do so were political, and their conception of historical research was a militant one: history was a tool for denouncing past crimes, rather than being restricted to mere academic concerns. As such, their position was quite different from that of dissenting official historians, such as Alexander Nekrich or Mikhail Gefter^[21], who sought to test and expand the limits of what was tolerated by censorship, but could not go too far beyond the strict boundaries set by the state, for fear of losing their positions.

Moreover, dissident historians did not only differ from official historians in terms of their motives, but also in terms of their methods of research, which derived from their specific position.

Methods of research

Historians work with archives, so the common wisdom goes. So how can historians produce reliable accounts of the past, when denied access to the "objective truth" contained in archival documents? Solzhenitsyn's answer was to give a voice to the voiceless, and to use several hundreds of the thousands of testimonies that had reached him after the publication of *One Day in the Life of*

Ivan Denisovich. Medvedev and Antonov-Ovseenko followed a parallel path, although they did not have the means of reaching out to the multitude of witnesses of the past that Solzhenitsyn had. Yet oral testimonies were central to their work too, as they provided the factual basis for new accounts of the Stalin era, going beyond the myths of official historiography.

Historical facts that lay buried in dusty party and state archives had been known and remembered by the actors of historical events, and these people, many of whom had spent years in the camps, were now willing to testify, so that history might not be forgotten. Old Bolsheviks, who had participated in the Revolution, the Civil War, and had occupied high positions in state and party organs in the 1920s and 1930s, had for the most part fallen victim to the Great Terror of 1937-8. After rehabilitation returned them to public life, in the late 1950s, some of them had become staunch anti-Stalinists and hoped for the advent of a democratic socialism. Emboldened by the 20th and 22nd Party Congresses, they had hoped for a consistent denunciation of Stalin's crimes, but the turn to conservative ideological politics under Brezhnev had disappointed them. Medvedev, whose own father had been repressed, and whose party membership and socialist reformist views were moderate enough to inspire trust, was therefore able to reach out to many of these old Bolsheviks, and benefitted from their benevolent support. This help took the form of oral testimonies, written memoirs, or historical documents. Similarly, Antonov-Ovseenko took advantage of the admiration that many prominent actors of the Revolution had for his father, and of the trust inspired by his own personal experience of the Gulag, in order to collect testimonies and materials.^[22]

Medvedev thus describes his method of work:

“I didn't work underground, I worked openly. All my friends knew that I was writing a book on Stalin. And many of them asked to read it. Then writers asked as well. I didn't force anyone [to read] it, but answered requests. And my work method was the following: I would take my manuscript, for example, to Old Bolshevik Snegov^[23]. I would ask him to read it and to make additions, remarks, [express] wishes. And after he had read, I would come to him [with] a Dictaphone [...]. I would chat with him, he would make some remarks, some additions, and, usually, I would record this. Then I would go home and insert [this new material] into my work, expand it. Every six months I would write a new version. People who had read the manuscript knew that it was not the final version. Many of them were willing to share their knowledge, their thoughts.”^[24]

Oral history, however, was not devoid of pitfalls and potential traps. Antonov-Ovseenko was criticized, both by Western Sovietologists^[25] and by other Soviet dissident historians^[26], for failing to distinguish mere Gulag rumors from historical facts, for instance accepting at face value a witness's account of Stalin's murder of his wife^[27], while most historians take for granted that she committed suicide. The temptation was great, when dealing with the evil deeds of a dictator, to accept uncritically as evidence convenient testimonies adding to his bloody record. To be fair, it should be acknowledged that Western Sovietologists using oral history have also occasionally been the target of similar criticism.^[28] Medvedev, however, sought to avoid these pitfalls by a careful scrutiny of testimonies, a comparison of various versions, a confrontation with other available sources, so that, over time, from the sea of unconfirmed allegations and doubtful claims would emerge a kernel of verified, plausible facts.^[29]

Indeed, here lay one of the tensions and ambiguities of the specific position of dissident historians: although they were not professionals, in practice, they still sought to be recognized as serious researchers abiding by scientific standards and producing reliable accounts of the past. The ambiguity, however, was not easy to overcome: Antonov-Ovseenko, in particular, while consistently

describing himself as a historian, occasionally recognized the non-scientific nature of his work, which he described as “an original conglomerate of different genres and various approaches to the past”.^[30]

I emphasize: this is not a strictly scientific research work, although I bring here many documentary testimonies. I can say just one thing: all of this went through my soul, was born from the pain of life itself. (*vystradano samoi zhizniu*)^[31]

And his subjective tone was justified by the fact that he had a first-hand experience of the repressions:

I am not an academic shut in his ivory tower, I did not collect these facts cold-bloodedly from books. [...] And I know about Stalin’s machine of pressure and extermination of human personality not just from hearsay.^[32]

Nevertheless, this particular position, and the possibilities it gave to these historians, allowed them to use unique sources, hitherto unexploited by Western Sovietologists and Soviet historians alike. As Antonov-Ovseenko emphasized:

Admittedly, we did not have access to foreign literature, to many archival materials. But foreign authors could not talk with the people who survived the *stalinshchina*, they had no access to memoirs of Old Bolsheviks, who surely do not hurry to share their life stories with foreigners. On the contrary, even those who had been imprisoned for 17-20 years remained [faithful] patriots and, generally, did not want at all to provide the West with any information, even about the Stalin era.^[33]

In 1980, Stephen Cohen, an American Sovietologist and a friend of both dissident historians, wrote to Medvedev to ask him to put him into contact with old Bolsheviks, whom he wanted to fill in questionnaires about Stalin-era repressions. Medvedev answered that such a thing was impossible, not only because the old Bolsheviks whose testimonies had provided the basis for his own research in the 1960s were dying out at a steady rate, but also because those who survived would never agree to fill in questionnaires in writing, let alone for an American researcher.

To this day they still fear any [written] documentation. One can talk with them without any papers, repeatedly, but they don’t like writing, and many of them are still afraid. It is impossible for a foreign researcher to do this, for an American or anyone else. [...] The majority of the rehabilitated people did not emerge from detention as bold people, eager to put up a fight. The overwhelming majority of them were broken people, just longing for peace and quiet. They did not turn into fighters for truth.^[34]

The dissident historians’ position was therefore unique, and at a time when most Soviet archives were open neither to foreign nor to Soviet historians, oral sources represented a unique replacement for written documents. They were not, however, the only sources available. Both Medvedev and Antonov-Ovseenko also relied on newspaper articles published during the Thaw and before, when a limited amount of truthful information still filtered through the wall of official censorship. Medvedev also used countless memoirs and manuscripts, circulated underground at that time or handed over by writers and journal editors who regretted not being able to publish them and wished to see them put to a good use.^[35]

Foreign books also became accessible to dissident historians, especially starting from the early 1970s, when foreign correspondents became crucial links between Soviet dissidents and the West. A major limitation, however, was the lack of knowledge of foreign languages, as neither historian could read English, and both had to rely on translations made by friends. A few books, however, were translated into Russian, for instance Robert Conquest’s study on the Great Terror^[36], a book both historians got access to. This provided them with some useful impetus, although both

remained suspicious of “bourgeois historiography” and found that Conquest’s study lacked objectivity.^[37]

It is probably not a coincidence that both historians became friends with Stephen Cohen, who criticized the totalitarian school of Soviet studies, dominant at that time in the United States, and emphasized that Soviet history could have taken a wholly different turn, had Bukharin, instead of Stalin, taken power after Lenin’s death.^[38] Such a vision accorded well with Medvedev’s view of Stalinism as being radically distinct from Leninism and with Antonov-Ovseenko’s view of a Stalin-criminal, who had betrayed the revolution for which old Bolsheviks had valiantly fought.

Their view, it would seem, was strictly in line with the condemnation of Stalin that had resounded at the 22nd Party Congress, and far from the so-called “extremism” of Solzhenitsyn’s anti-Communist views. Yet the mere fact of producing independent accounts of the past had already exposed these historians to the wrath of the regime. As the 1970s unfolded, with the succession of political trials and the relentless call for emigration, occupying a middle ground between the regime’s ever stricter orthodoxy and its most vocal opponents became increasingly hazardous. Still the need for such moderate advocates of change was felt throughout Soviet society, and as Perestroika would later on demonstrate, their message was one that held appeal, even after the cold shower of August 1968.

Links to Soviet intelligentsia

Were dissident historians merely isolated voices, or were they the spokesmen of the multitude? Did their struggle for “historical truth” matter to Soviet society at large and did it have an impact on the Soviet people’s views of the past? Can we associate dissident historians with the wider dissidence movement that occupied the center of the stage, starting from the late 1960s? As tempting as it would be to answer these questions with an unconditional “yes”, it seems that reality was less unequivocal than this.

Dissident historians were part of a small group of dissenting intellectuals, who could be considered as the spiritual heirs to the traditional concept of the Russian intelligentsia^[39]. From this group eventually emerged the kernel that came to form the dissidence movement (the so-called *pravozashchitniki*, or human rights defenders), but its broader base was constituted by more moderate circles of the cultural and scientific intelligentsia that identified with the liberal values of Alexander Tvardovskii’s literary journal *Novyi Mir*^[40]. Within this small stratum of Soviet society, dissident historians held a certain degree of influence, and their works reflected the preoccupations of numerous dissenting intellectuals, many of whom had written or signed protests against the rehabilitation of Stalin in the late 1960s, sent to the Soviet authorities and subsequently circulated underground^[41]. This group did not, overall, intersect with that of old Bolsheviks, who provided dissident historians with testimonies, but their assistance and support also proved crucial.

Here a distinction should be made between the two cases studied here. While Medvedev was very closely connected to this social stratum and benefitted from the active support of numerous writers and intellectuals, who supplied him with materials and actively collaborated with him, Antonov-Ovseenko, on the contrary, lacked to a great extent this large network of contacts and remained more isolated, occasionally even shunning collaboration with other historians.^[42]

It could be argued, therefore, that in a post-totalitarian society such as the Soviet Union under Brezhnev, where communication across the nascent civil society was limited to a bare minimum because of censorship and the lack of access to official media and publication organs, the

role of individual personality was crucial. Solzhenitsyn and Medvedev were thus able to federate around themselves whole clusters of helpers and collaborators and became known to the West, not only for their writings, but also as representatives of their respective political and ideological currents within the Soviet dissidence. From 1964 to 1970, Medvedev produced a monthly samizdat^[43] journal, later on published in the West under the title *Political Diary*^[44]: written almost single-handedly by Medvedev, it benefitted from materials and insider information from a broad circle of friends^[45], and was read by up to 40-50 carefully handpicked readers.^[46] In the late 1970s, he repeated the experience with a historical almanac, *XX vek* (20th century), two volumes of which were published in the West^[47], containing articles on political, societal and historical themes by various members of the Socialist intelligentsia. Finally, it could be added that Medvedev's methods of work were also collegial, as he sought to circulate his manuscripts to broad circles of acquaintances, expecting feedback and insights in return.

By contrast, a somewhat more solitary character like Antonov-Ovseenko remained much less known to the wider public in the Brezhnev era, and the contacts that he maintained were mostly a result of the official publication of his earlier work, his father's biography. But the easing of censorship during Perestroika gave him access to the official media and allowed him to reach a wider audience. In those times of great political changes, his glorious family name and his unique fate attracted the attention of a public, whose thirst for historical knowledge was commensurate to the degree of secrecy that had surrounded the past until then.^[48]

It would be excessive to claim that the works of dissident historians contributed to the ultimate fall of the Soviet regime, although they did, to a certain extent, contribute to undermining the power of official propaganda, by showing the Soviet past in a more truthful light and discrediting Stalin. But such an influence could only be felt after 1987. Indeed, Medvedev himself recognizes that, overall, his book was mostly read in the West, while in the Soviet Union it was not widely circulated before the Perestroika, and could therefore not have much of an impact on public opinion.^[49] This was also the case for Antonov-Ovseenko's book, which was published quite late, at a time when the dissident movement had been all but put down and the samizdat-reading public had for the most part emigrated^[50].

Dissident historians and the Human Rights Movement

A final question to be asked is that of the connection of dissident historians to the wider Soviet dissident movement. First of all, it should be noted that the term "dissident" is one that has been given many definitions, none of which has ever elicited a consensus^[51]. The definition of dissidence used here is one of four alternative definitions offered by A. Daniel' and L. Bogoraz and encompasses "any conscious act in opposition to the regime and violating certain [...] 'given' limits of social behavior. The criterion here is the possibility of repressive [...] reaction on the part of the authorities."^[52] This definition includes "any act in the sphere of culture, arts, literature, personal life, triggering (or that could potentially trigger) repressions"^[53]. Furthermore, besides the criterion of repression, I would add that of the moral, rather than political, dimension of the struggle waged^[54]. Such a definition allows us to describe the subjects of this study as dissidents, since they acted, based on a moral urge, and disregarding the repressions that their activity made them incur.

Admittedly, this understanding of dissidence is wider and more encompassing than that, which was commonly used by the Western media in Soviet times, when most of the attention was focused on a limited number of charismatic figures and on a small hard core of activists, or

pravozashchitniki, forming the so-called “human-rights movement”^[55]. But this is to a great extent a construction of the media, due to the very limited information that filtered through the Iron Curtain, and restricting the dissidence to this sole group would be too reductive. In the 1960s, the Soviet liberal intelligentsia was still a tightly-knit social group, sharing a number of goals and values, but by the end of the decade, divisions had emerged, as a result of an increasing confrontation with the state and with the turn, on the part of a kernel of activists, to a human rights rhetoric. By the 1970s, a number of groups and individuals with various ideological and political orientations could be identified, aggregating around national, religious, political or cultural lines. Besides the Western liberal current advocating human rights also existed a more traditionalist, Orthodox and nationalist current, whose most vocal representative was Solzhenitsyn, but also a reformist Marxist current, to which Medvedev belonged.

To what extent did dissident historians interact with and/or support this movement? I would argue that they were both part of it and external observers of this phenomenon. As stated by Medvedev:

Some historians talk about the dissidence of the 1960s-1970s as a united movement. It is an illusion. Of course, we almost all knew each other, met and talked. All of us protested against the rehabilitation of Stalin, for democracy and transparency (*glasnost*), against political repressions. We helped each other in the diffusion of samizdat and there were also various forms of material assistance to each other. But the positive programs and goals of the movements were different for each group.^[56]

If we understand dissidence as a broad societal phenomenon encompassing samizdat-reading and other manifestations of an alternative culture, then dissident historians certainly actively participated in it: they read and collected samizdat and “forbidden literature”, were in contact with and part of the dissenting intelligentsia. However, if we restrict our understanding of “dissidence” to the small group of human-rights defenders, then another picture, less harmonious, emerges. While Antonov-Ovseenko does not seem to have had much contact with that group, Medvedev did take a keen interest in the doings of those activists at first, but soon condemned what he considered as the extremist attitude of such dissidents as General P. Grigorenko or P. Iakir. Throughout the late 1960s, Medvedev observed the growth of the dissidence movement in his *Political Diary*. For instance, in October 1968, commenting on the trial against Natal’ia Gorbanevskaia and the other participants of the August 1968 demonstration on Red Square, he notes: “We see that, as a result of political trials and other repressions [...] a particular kind of political movement has emerged and is growing in the country [...], attracting an increasing number of people.” This movement, he observes, is evolving “from a struggle against isolated acts of abuse by the authorities into a political opposition to the regime”. Medvedev identifies in it elements of “neo-anarchism”, although he acknowledges its “democratic” and “progressive” character. But he deplores the fact that, as a result of this anarchic character, all kinds of individuals are able to join the movement, including the most “suspicious people”. In addition, he condemns what he perceives as the “anger” and “irritation” that seem to dominate at times some participants of this movement, which leads them to pick forms of struggle and slogans that are inadequate, too extreme, and therefore fail to appeal to a broad audience.^[57]

This rather negative attitude to the dissident movement did not improve over time, even as Medvedev came to be designated in the West as a dissident himself, in the 1970s. As he comments on political trials, throughout the decade, Medvedev invariably condemns abuses of power, but does not seem to feel much empathy for the condemned, and often seems to lend credence to some of the accusations made by state propaganda.^[58] On several occasions, he did speak up against political repressions: this was the case, not only following his brother Zhores’s incarceration in a mental

hospital in 1970^[59], but also after Solzhenitsyn's arrest, in 1974^[60], in spite of increasing divergences between them. Nevertheless, on the whole, his attitude to the dissidence movement remained highly distrustful. In 1978, finally, his rupture with the movement took a decisive turn, as he wrote an open letter to his friend Raisa Lert to condemn the attitude of Aleksandr Ginzburg, who was then facing trial for managing Solzhenitsyn's assistance fund for political prisoners in the Soviet Union.

Unfortunately, among our dissidents, a totally false system of values has become increasingly common. People begin to judge a person not by what he did for the movement, but by how many times he was subjected to interrogatories, searches, how many years he spent in the camps, in exile, in prison or in the psychiatric hospital.^[61]

This act of "dissent", unacceptable to most actors and sympathizers of the dissident movement, definitely placed him in the position of an outcast. Following this letter, a number of former friends and acquaintances openly broke with Medvedev. In emigration, his brother Zhores had been encountering similar hostility on the part of former dissidents, now émigrés in the West, clustering around émigré journals that frequently vituperated against the "Medvedev brothers".

While such internal strife was frequent within the dissidence movement, it should be underlined that the general rules of conduct, ethics and even "code of political correctness"^[62] elaborated by the actors of the human rights movement over time were alien to Medvedev's frame of mind. Moreover, his own political views, which remained staunchly Communist, failed to find understanding within a movement, which had resolutely turned away from Socialism.

Conclusion

The two cases presented here exemplify a phenomenon that I have designated under the term of "dissident historiography", born from the specific conditions of the post-Stalin era. These conditions were characterized by a relative relaxation of repressions and of censorship, followed by a swift reversal of the official policy of destalinization after 1965. The 20th and 22nd Party Congresses and the "Thaw" had provided the initial impetus for the appearance of this historiography, and such works as *Let History Judge* and *The Gulag Archipelago* were initiated precisely in the wake of the official destalinization campaign. But it was the reversal of this official course under Brezhnev that gave urgency to such publications and prompted these historians to go to any length to see their works published, even if this meant publishing abroad; it was this reversal, finally, that placed them in a position of illegality and dissidence and exposed them to repressions.

The specificity of this historiography was to rely largely on oral testimonies of former Gulag prisoners, which provided a useful replacement for archival documents, which were not available. Although this type of sources was not devoid of pitfalls, it allowed dissident historians to make a valuable contribution to the historiography of the Stalin era. In the course of their work, Medvedev and Antonov-Ovseenko benefitted from the benevolent support of numerous witnesses of the Stalin era, who provided them with, not only oral testimonies, but also written memoirs and other documentary sources. They also maintained contacts with the scientific and creative intelligentsia, arguably the most liberal stratum of Soviet society, and a nest of silent sympathizers and active supporters of the nascent dissident movement. But their struggle for "historical truth" did not really overlap with the human rights struggle, and both by their methods, their political orientation and their values, they sometimes found each other at odds with the broader dissidence.

Two historians have been analyzed in details here, while a third case, that of Solzhenitsyn, was mentioned only in passing, but it should be underlined that other less prominent cases also

existed. In the late 1970s, a group of young historians close to the human rights movement created a samizdat historical almanac, *Pamiat'* ("Memory"), five issues of which were published in the West, before the head of the editorial committee fell prey to repression, in 1981^[63]. The crimes of the past did matter to the Soviet people at large, and not only to the narrow fringe of the Soviet intelligentsia that had protested against the rehabilitation of Stalin in the late 1960s. The lifting of censorship during Perestroika would demonstrate this, as shown by the success of the organization "Memorial", whose local branches sprouted up throughout the country in the late 1980s, with a call for the commemoration of the millions of victims of Soviet-era political repressions.^[64]

^[1]The term was coined based on Ilya Ehrenburg's 1954 novel « The Thaw » and came to symbolize the whole post-Stalin era until Khrushchev's fall.

^[2]Nancy Whittier Heer, *Politics and History in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge Mass: The MIT Press, 1973), 87–89.

^[3]See Aleksandr Nekrich, *Forsake Fear: Memoirs of an Historian* (Boston ; London: Unwin Hyman, 1991). For a critical account of the Nekrich Affair, see Roger D Markwick, *Rewriting History in Soviet Russia: The Politics of Revisionist Historiography, 1956-1974* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 209–219.

^[4]Anton Antonov-Ovseenko, *Portret Tirana* (New York: Khronika, 1980); Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*, Revised and expanded ed (Oxford ; New York [etc.]: Oxford University Press, 1989).

^[5]This was a provision of the system that banned recently released prisoners from living in a number of cities: those, like Antonov-Ovseenko, who had the category "minus 39" on their passports were banned from 39 cities in the country. (Interview of Antonov-Ovseenko, June 29, 2012).

^[6]Antonov-Ovseenko, *Portret Tirana*, "Avtor o sebe."

^[7]Ibid., "Ot avtora".

^[8]N. Krotov and M. Kholmkaia, "Politicheskii portret: Roi Aleksandrovich Medvedev," *Obozrevatel' - Observer* no. 23 (1993), http://www.rau.su/observer/N23_93/23_05.HTM (accessed June 19, 2013).

^[9]Roy Medvedev, *On Soviet Dissent* (Columbia University Press, 1980), 29–30.

^[10]Roy Medvedev and Zhores Medvedev, *1925-2010. Iz vospominanii*. (Moscow: Izd. "Prava cheloveka," 2010), 277. He cites for example V. Danilov, A. Nekrich, M. Gefter, Ia. Drabkin, L. Petrovskii (Interview, June 19, 2012).

^[11]Medvedev, *On Soviet Dissent*, 25.

^[12]Roy Medvedev, *Le Stalinisme: Origines, Histoire, Conséquences, Combats* (Paris: Seuil, 1972),

41.

[13]Roy Medvedev, “KGB i Bratiia Zhores i Roi Medvedevy,” in *Andropov* (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 2006).

[14]Ibid.

[15]« Let History Judge »; « A question of madness » (coauthored with his twin brother Zhores Medvedev) and « Socialist Democracy ». Each of these books was translated and published in various countries.

[16]In his biography of Andropov, Medvedev mentioned a conversation with a former KGB agent, in 1990, during which the latter confessed “We wanted to arrest you, but Andropov was against [the idea].” Medvedev, “KGB i Bratiia Zhores i Roi Medvedevy.”

[17]Liudmila Fomina, “Teatr vremen Otsa Narodov,” *Moskovskaia Pravda*, May 15, 1995.

[18]Interview of A. Antonov-Ovseenko “Bez maski”, *Vzgliad*, 21 December, 1988.

[19]This is the title of General P. Grigorenko’s samizdat opus in defense of A. Nekrich’s book on World War II (1967): Petr Grigor’evich Grigorenko, *The Grigorenko Papers: Writings and Documents on His Case* (Boulder Colorado: Westview Press, 1976), 12.

[20]In particular around the anniversary of Stalin’s birth (1969, 1979) and the victory in World War II (1965, 1975).

[21]Mikhail Gefter (1918-1995) was part, according to E. Iliukhina, of the phenomenon of “academic dissidence” (*akademicheskoe dissidentstvo*), which she defines, based on A. Bezborodov’s understanding of the concept, as “the departure of a scientist from the framework of scientific research that is officially sanctioned”. (Elena Iliukhina, “M. Ia. Gefter: Istorik, dissident” (PhD Dissertation, University of Rostov-na-Donu, 2011), 16.)

[22]It should be noted that several of these Old Bolsheviks, who had a keen interest in making “historical truth” known to the Soviet people, provided assistance to both historians and some of them to Solzhenitsyn as well: e.g. A. Snegov (see next note) and O. Shatunovskaia helped both Medvedev and Antonov-Ovseenko; M. Iakubovich testified both for Medvedev and Solzhenitsyn.

[23]Aleksei Snegov (1898-1989) was a crucial witness, whose testimony was used by both historians. He had known Khrushchev and Mikoyan before being repressed in the 1930s, and had played a major role in influencing these Soviet leaders’ views of the crimes of the Stalin era, prompting them to denounce the Personality Cult at the 20th Party Congress. After Khrushchev’s eviction, he became ever more vocal in denouncing Stalinism, making himself highly undesirable to the regime; as a result, he was excluded from the Party in 1971. (See for instance Mikoyan’s son account about Snegov’s role in the destalinization process: Sergei Mikoian, “Istoricheskaia publitsistika. Aleksei Snegov v bor’be za ‘destalinizatsiiu’,” *Voprosy Istorii* no. 4 (April 2006): 69–84.)

[24]Author’s Interview with Roy Medvedev, 19 June 2012.

[26]M. Dovner, “Lubok vmsesto istorii,” *Pamiat’: Istoricheskii sbornik* 4 (1981): 442–455.

[27]Antonov-Ovseenko, *Portret Tirana*, 154.

[28]See for instance John A. Armstrong review of Robert Conquest’s *The Great Terror: Stalin’s purges of the thirties* (1968) in *Russian Review*, Vol. 28, n°3 (Jul. 1969), 344-345. Although he gives a very positive assessment of the book, he criticizes Conquest for interpreting sometimes uncritically émigré accounts.

[29]Interview with Roy Medvedev, June 19, 2012.

[30]“Poedinok so vremenem,” *Vecherniaia Moskva*, July 1, 1989.

[31]“Otets, syn, pravda istorii,” *Moskovskaia Pravda*, November 7, 1988.

[32]“Poedinok so vremenem.”

[33]Ibid.

[34]Letter of Roy Medvedev to Steve Cohen, September 10, 1980. (TsMAMLS Archives, Fond n° 333, sd. Op. n°9, usl. d. n°252.)

[35]Medvedev mentions in particular A. Tvardovskii, the editor-in-chief of *Novyi Mir*, and K. Simonov, the appraised Soviet writer, who both shared such manuscripts with him. (Interview with Roy Medvedev, 19 June 2012 ; Medvedev and Medvedev, *1925-2010. Iz vospominanii.*, 65.)

[36]Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties* (1968).

[37]Interview with Antonov-Ovseenko, June 29, 2012; for Medvedev’s position (prior to reading the book), see [Roy] [Medvedev], *Politicheskii Dnevnik II. 1965-1970*. (Amsterdam: Fond imeni Gertsena, 1975), 464–5. In a letter to his brother dated November 13, 1974, he declares that the book is “quite superficial and it contains a lot of inexact facts, although Western readers can also get a lot of important information from it.” (TsMAMLS, Fond n°333, sd. Op. n°10, usl. D. n°2)

[38]See for instance Stephen F Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History Since 1917* (New York ; Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985).

[39]In Marshall Shatz’s definition: “the educated critics of the Russian political and social order” (Marshall S. Shatz, *Soviet Dissent in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge; London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980), 13.)

[40]More than simply a literary journal, *Novyi Mir* was a landmark of Soviet literary life in the post-Stalin era, in particular when A. Tvardovskii was editor-in-chief (1958-1970). For instance, was *Novyi Mir* that published *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, in 1962.

[41]Among the intellectuals who wrote such letters, one could mention Ernst Genri (1965), Grigorii Pomerants (1965), Lev Kopelev (1967), Piotr Grigorenko (1967), Lidia Chukovskaia (1968), Piotr

Iakir (1969), Raisa Lert (1970), and others. Medvedev himself authored a letter of protest to the journal *Kommunist*, published in France in 1969 (Roy Medvedev, *Faut-Il Réhabiliter Staline ?* (Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1969). Antonov-Ovseenko was among the signatories of a 1967 “Letter of 43 children of Communists unjustly repressed by Stalin” to the Central Committee of the CPSU.

[42]This was the case, for example, with the failed attempt by a group of young dissident historians from the historical journal *Pamiat*, to achieve a collaboration with Antonov-Ovseenko (Interview with Dmitrii Zubarev, January 15, 2013).

[43]« Samizdat » was a term coined in Russian around this time on the model of the acronym « gosizdat » (state publisher) and means « self-published ». It designates those writings that were circulated underground, copied on typing machines by the readers themselves, who would then circulate further copies of the works.

[44][Roy] [Medvedev], *Politicheskii Dnevnik. 1964-1970*. (Amsterdam: Fond imeni Gertsena, 1972); [Medvedev], *Politicheskii Dnevnik II. 1965-1970*.

[45]Medvedev cites a number of Old Bolsheviks, in particular E. Frolov, scientists such as V. Pavlinchuk and V. Turchin, writers such as E. Drabkina, A. Bek or B. Iampol’skii. (Medvedev, Roi « Kak sozdavalsia ‘Politicheskii Dnevnik’ », in Medvedev and Medvedev, 1925-2010. *Iz vospominanii.*, 260–261.)

[46]Ibid, 262.

[47]Roy Medvedev, ed., *The Samizdat Register* (London: Merlin Press, 1977). The first volume was co-edited with Raisa B. Lert, but following a dispute between them, Medvedev was the sole editor of the second volume.

[48]This was the time when Antonov-Ovseenko’s works, along with Medvedev’s, were published for the first time in the Soviet Union. And both became known overnight, as their interviews filled the newspapers’ pages.

[49]Interview with Roy Medvedev, 19 June, 2012.

[50]Starting from the early 1970s, Jews benefitted from simplified procedures of emigration and began leaving the Soviet Union in increasing numbers; crucially, Jews represented a large proportion of the dissenting intelligentsia, and this movement, coupled with the imprisonments and expulsions of prominent dissidents, greatly contributed to undermining the human-rights movement in the Soviet Union.

[51]For instances, see A. Daniel’s and L. Bogoraz’s account of the discussion on this subject during a conference organized by “Memorial” in 1992 (Aleksandr Daniel’ and Larisa Bogoraz, “V poiskakh nesushchestvuiushchei nauki (Dissentstvo kak istoricheskaia problema),” *Problemy vostochnoi Evropy* no. 37–38 (1993): 142–161.)

[52]Ibid., 147.

[53]Ibid.

[54]“The dissidence movement of the 1960s and 1970s presented itself first and foremost as a moral and ideological, rather than a political movement, aiming to seize power in the country.” (Roy Medvedev in “Dissidenty o dissidentstve,” *Znamia* no. 9 (1997): 182.

[55]According to Daniel’, this confusion between the human-rights movement and the dissidence as a whole “is not coincidental: human rights defenders were the ones who proposed to society a new personal and social model of conduct in relation to the authorities, and they were the ones who, at the turn of the 1960s, became the kernel around which other dissidents became aggregated (*konsolidirovalis*)” (Aleksandr Daniel’, “Dissidentstvo: Kul’tura, uskol’zaiushchaia ot opredelenii?,” *РОССИЯ / RUSSIA*, Vol: “*Semidesiatye kak predmet istorii russkoi kul’tury*”, no. 1(9) (1998): 113.)

[56]“Dissidenty o dissidentstve,” 182.

[57]Political Diary, October 1968. (Archive of Memorial Society *Arkhiv Istorii Inakomyслиia*, Fond 128, Box 1)

[58]For example on March 20, 1977, Roy told his brother that he could not protest the arrest of Galanskov, Ginzburg and Shcharanskii before “the accusations are known and the trial happens” (Letter of Roy to Zhores Medvedev, March 20, 1977, TsMAMLS, F. 333, sd. Op. 10, usl. d. 5).

[59]About this episode, which ended in a retreat by the authorities in the face of overwhelming opposition by the whole Soviet intelligentsia, including A. Sakharov, the two brothers wrote a book: Zhores A Medvedev, *Kto Sumasshedshii?* (London: Macmillan, 1971). (in English: *A question of Madness*)

[60]Roi Medvedev, « Zaiavlenie dlia pechati », February 13, 1974, in *Slovo probivaet sebe dorogu: Sbornik statei i dokumentov o A.I. Solzhenitsyne: 1962-1974* (Moscow: Izd-vo “Russkii put’,” 1998), 458.

[61]Letter of R. Medvedev to R. Lert, September 9, 1978 (TsMAMLS, Fond n°333, sd. Op. n°9, usl. d. 250).

[62]A critique of these rules can be found in Maria Rozanova (Siniavskaia)’s appraisal of dissidence (“Dissidenty o dissidentstve,” 187.

[63]Specifically, it was the arrest of A. Roginskii and his condemnation to 4 years of camp that caused an interruption of the publication. Upon his liberation and during Perestroika, Roginskii and some other former editors of the journal took part in the creation of the society “Memorial”, which to this day studies the history of political repressions in the Soviet Union.

[64]Probably the best account of the creation of Memorial can be found in Kathleen E. Smith, *Remembering Stalin’s Victims: Popular Memory and the End of the USSR*, 2nd edition [1st ed: 1996] (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

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