The world in brief

Opening the archives

The USSR’s voice of opposition

At their gatherings Soviet dissidents would share an ironic toast while raising their glasses, “To our hopeless cause!” This reinforces the common view that opponents of the Communist regime were often intelligent people who did not expect their activities to change the system.

Such an assessment is confirmed by the fact that no opposition figure from before 1985 occupied a position of power in Russia or in the states that succeeded the USSR. The opening and sharing with western academics of certain official Soviet archives further supports the view that only the authorities were changing the direction of the USSR, and did so, most famously, under Mikhail Gorbachev.

These assumptions are challenged by A Chronicle of Current Events, a periodical that, against the odds, kept going from April 1968 until December 1982, documenting the Soviet regime’s violations of human rights, the growing opposition throughout its regions and the wide variety of unofficial publications that were being circulated. It is now available for the first time in English, at chronicle6883.wordpress.com, offering an alternative source for the history of the post-Stalin USSR. Its dissemination as carbon copies, passed on and retyped repeatedly, is a reminder of the hold exerted by a regime that controlled printing presses, radio and television. Yet by the late 1970s the Moscow-based Chronicle was publishing reports from Ukraine, the Baltic, the Caucasus, Siberia and all over Russia, recording what was happening to religious communities, to those who wanted to emigrate, and to those incarcerated in prisons, camps or psychiatric hospitals.

Naturally, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Andrei Sakharov and other familiar names occur frequently within its pages. Yet a systematic index of the periodical contains the names of 10,000 individuals and numerous other publications, and its scope extends far beyond Moscow. Some of the stories it relates, such as the incarceration of dissidents in psychiatric hospitals, have thankfully not been repeated more recently. Others, such as the Crimean Tatars’ battle to return to their homeland, are ongoing.

Most striking testimony to the significance of the Chronicle is provided by Gorbachev’s brief period in power. Many of the key criticisms of the Soviet regime by the Chronicle and its contributors were taken up (without attribution) by the new leader – above all the demand for glasnost, first raised by dissidents in the mid-1960s. Before these good intentions could be presented, however, the Chronicle had to be shut down and those involved in its production and distribution forced to emigrate or be imprisoned. The leadership of the day most certainly regarded this unique and determined publication as a real and present danger.

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