

To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause: The Many Lives of the Soviet Dissident Movement

Benjamin Nathans

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Comprehensive and analytical, Benjamin Nathans's *To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause* vivifies the Soviet intellectuals at the complex heart of the human-rights-oriented dissidence movement in the USSR.

In the aftermath of the terror that Joseph Stalin inflicted, Nikita Khrushchev promised a new Russia. The political absurdities, contradictions, and abuses of power that allowed Stalin to terrorize Russians remained nonetheless. Mathematicians, writers, scientists, and students who wanted more published clandestine plays, novels, essays, and articles criticizing the government; Andrei Remizov, a librarian, wrote plays that “called out ... the ‘petty tyranny’ of Khrushchev’s incipient cult of personality.” No matter how quiet or secret their work, though, these dissidents could not evade the watchful eyes of USSR leaders: they encountered myriad “stumbling blocks.” Too often, they wound up in jail.

Drawing on the dissidents’ published literature and even their more intimate journals, Nathan details the formation of their movement as well as its subsequent demonstrations—and the arrests, interrogations, and trials that followed. The list of times that the Soviet Union stood in the way of freedom, evaded humane behavior, and set off “chain reactions” of protests is lengthy, and this record runs long as well. It introduces a bevy of relevant figures in context, even including information about their families and upbringings, giving additional life to their particular revolutionary acts. But despite its length, it assumes a natural flow, even as its volume of names and organizations gathers, moving from poet Joseph Brodsky to activist Vladimir Bukovsky and from information on the KGB to facts about the NKVD (the interior ministry).

A meticulous history of a principled movement, *To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause* addresses efforts to protect human rights within the context of the Soviet Union.

BEN LINDER (July / August 2024)

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