

An Economy Falters

Throughout his almost two decades in office, Brezhnev struggled to rejuvenate the Soviet economy. As in foreign policy, he made some gains, but overall his policies failed. He maintained economic growth for a time, but the rate eventually dwindled toward zero. He built the Soviet economy into the second largest in the world, but its inefficiencies multiplied and a fifth of the GNP was devoted to military production. As he toiled to shore it up, the economy fell farther behind those of the United States, Western Europe, and Japan. He improved his subjects' standard of living but not fast enough to keep pace with their rising expectations. Compared to people in other advanced industrial societies, Soviet citizens lived spartan lives. Increasingly, they became aware of the disparity.

Brezhnev concentrated on several key issues in his drive to upgrade the Soviet economy. As under Khrushchev, agriculture remained a particularly irksome problem. Despite investment, a rise in acreage under cultivation, seed innovations, and added fertilizer, crop yields responded listlessly. Output grew only modestly and lagged behind consumer demand. The slow growth hampered Brezhnev's other economic measures. In poor harvest years, he was forced to purchase grain with precious foreign exchange better used to acquire advanced technology. Worse, he had to scramble to maintain the modest rise in living standards that he had promised the Soviet people and that provided vital motivation for Soviet workers.

Brezhnev and his colleagues resorted to an array of measures to boost agriculture. Besides suspending Khrushchev's restrictions on private plots, they established a guaranteed annual income for collective farmers. In 1965 they raised procurement prices for livestock without increasing retail prices, with further hikes in 1970 and after. These price boosts improved meat production but drained the national budget; livestock subsidies totaled 23 billion rubles by 1979. To eliminate marginal or impoverished *kolkhozes*, Brezhnev and his colleagues continued to amalgamate collective farms and to convert collectives into state farms. They pushed investment in agriculture from 19 percent of total investment in 1961–1965 to 26 percent in 1971–1975.

None of these antidotes had much effect, owing to intrinsic and intractable problems plaguing Soviet agriculture. First, the unreliable climate has always handicapped food production. Because the Russian lands lie so far north, the growing season on much of the arable acreage is short. Rainfall passes from west to east, making the amount reaching east central Russia, west Siberia, and Kazakhstan unpredictable. Drought and bad weather frequently damage harvests. No commissar can control these natural conditions.

Second, Brezhnev had committed himself

to maintaining agriculture's organization into collective and state farms. Ideology forbade private land ownership and private agricultural production, except for collective farmers' household plots. Yet socialized farms provided little incentive to produce, for farmers neither controlled nor profited directly from the crops or the animals that they tended. Indeed, productivity on individual household plots far exceeded that of collectives. In 1977 these tiny plots, although composing only about 2 percent of total agricultural acreage, produced 27 percent of all output, including half the vegetables and potatoes and 34 percent of all livestock products.

Besides climatic and ideological restraints, a cultural bias worked against agricultural abundance. The old quandary, "How're you gonna keep 'em down on the farm?" fit Soviet society as it modernized after World War II. Ambitious and talented people fled rural society for the bright lights and opportunities of the city. The spread of primary education to the villages accelerated this flight, as many skilled young people opted to leave. The pattern of male emigration set in the nineteenth century persisted, whereas traditional family values and patriarchal attitudes kept many women at home and undereducated. In the 1970s, the labor force on most farms consisted of two-thirds women, who had more interest in tending to their families and private plots than in performing compulsory work for the collective or state farm. The remaining third of farm laborers were aged or unproductive men and older teenagers.

Last, despite sporadic efforts to decentralize decision making, ponderous central control hamstringed the agricultural system. Officials made ill-considered decisions about crop selection and work schedules and falsified output figures. When one Soviet observer asked an agricultural planner why dairy farming was practiced in regions clearly unsuited to milk production, the official replied, "Economic indices, profitability, and law of cost don't mean anything here. There is not enough milk; it must be produced everywhere, in the largest amount possible, and at any price."³

Brezhnev also focused his economic policies on the administration of industry. After abolishing Khrushchev's regional economic councils, the new Soviet leader recentralized economic management in Moscow and restored the authority of Gosplan. Yet he also espoused devolution of economic decision making to the individual factory. Named after their original proponent, economist Evsei Liberian, these new policies held local enterprise managers accountable for meeting profit criteria and achieving sales quotas, to prevent unsold goods from accumulating in factory storehouses. The Liberian reforms also gave factory administrators limited control over production decisions and over wage and bonus funds. In certain cases, managers could reassign or even fire surplus or unproductive workers.

The Dissident Movement

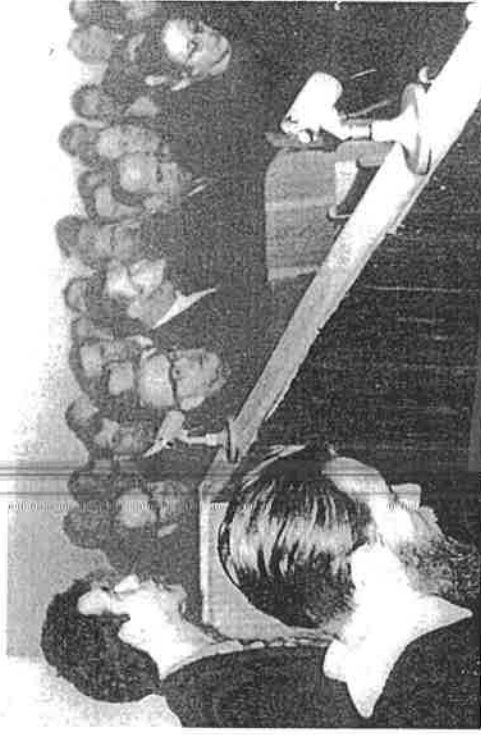
During the twenty-year stretch from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, a courageous group of Russian and non-Russian intellectuals struggled to defend their creative and civil rights. The dissident movement arose partly out of frustration with the oscillations of cultural and intellectual policy that followed de-Stalinization and the initial thaw in the mid-1950s. A decade later, whiplashed by alternating government repression and toleration, a dedicated core gathered to plead the cause of human rights in the U.S.S.R. The rising level of sophistication and expectations along with increased contact with Western ideas and individual Western artists, scientists, and scholars after 1958 intensified the climate of dissent. Brezhnev's armed intervention in Czechoslovakia in August 1968 galvanized the fledgling movement.

Although the secret police had harassed a few cultural figures in the early 1960s, the arrest and trial of Sinyavsky and Daniel in late 1965—early 1966 marked the dramatic start of a long clash between the regime and its intellectual critics. The trial and convictions ignited a furor among the educated elite, evoked public protests, and prompted formation of the first informal groups committed to protecting the right of free expression. Concurrently, the government acted to suppress nationalism in Ukraine, arresting twenty Ukrainian intellectuals in late 1965. Sixty-two prominent writers petitioned the Twenty-third Party Congress, which met in spring 1966, for artistic freedom. The Congress ignored them, and in a separate speech, Brezhnev threw down the gauntlet.

Unfortunately, one also encounters those tradesmen in the arts who, instead of helping the people, select as their specialty the denigration of our system and slanders against our heroic people. . . . The Soviet people cannot overlook the disgraceful activity of such individuals. They treat them as they deserve.⁸

Most 1960s dissidents still believed in socialism and made their case on moral and cultural, not political, grounds. They wanted the system to observe the guarantees of the UN charter and the Soviet Constitution and to live up to the democratic promises of socialism. In short, they sought to reform the regime, not to overthrow it. After the Sinyavsky-Daniel trial, as the government tightened cultural controls, intellectuals increasingly resorted to *samizdat*, or self-publication. In manuscript form, they circulated stories, articles, poems, and plays that the censors would not permit in the government press. In some cases, writers sent works abroad for publication, a move that infuriated Brezhnev's cultural commissars.

In the late 1960s, the opposition organized into committees for the defense of human rights, and the renowned physicist Andrei Sakharov joined the movement. Sakharov had withdrawn from work on nuclear weapons after growing disenchanted with the regime's goals and foreign



Writers in the Dock Dissident authors Sinyavsky and Daniel at their 1966 trial for purveying anti-Soviet views in their works.

policy. In 1975, after the Soviet government approved the Helsinki Accords, a clause of which guaranteed civil liberties to citizens of the signatory countries, the dissidents set up Helsinki Watch committees to document and publicize regime infringements on human rights. An underground journal, *The Chronicle of Current Events*, regularly denounced state abuse of civil freedoms.

The human rights activists also took up the cause of religious dissenters, as we have seen, and of nationalist oppositionists. *The Ukrainian Herald*, an illegal publication similar to *The Chronicle*, soon emerged in Ukraine. Human rights advocates protested the persecution of Ukrainian nationalists Ivan Dzyuba and Viacheslav Chernovil, along with Georgian writer Zviad Gamsakhurdia (who would rule Georgia autocratically for a brief period in 1991–1992). Former Soviet general Peter Grigorenko supported the efforts of the Crimean Tatar community, exiled to Central Asia in 1944, to return to their homeland on the Crimean peninsula. Finally, in the 1970s the dissident movement defended the right of Soviet Jews to emigrate. Prominent refuseniks such as Yuri Orlov and Anatoli Shcharansky cooperated with human rights leaders to advance this freedom.

The government countered the campaign for human rights with a harsh program of harassment. It expelled dissidents from jobs and housing, arrested them, exiled them at home and abroad, imprisoned them, and confined them in mental hospitals. Solzhenitsyn was forced from the Writers' Union in 1969 and forbidden to accept the Nobel Prize in literature in 1971. Three years later, after he published abroad *The Gulag Archipelago*, a monumental condemnation of the labor camps, the regime deported him. Other talented writers who chose or were compelled to leave included Joseph Brodsky, Vasily Aksyonov, and Vladimir Voinovich. Among others who emigrated because they could not pursue their artistic goals were ballet stars Natalia Makarova and Mikhail Baryshnikov, musician Mstislav Rostropovich, film director Andrei Tarkovsky, and chess champion Boris Spassky. Sakharov was exiled to Gorky in 1950 to stifle his contacts with Western scientists and journalists.