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# The Self against the State: Valery Abramkin and the Destruction of Dissident Identity

MIKE WESTRATE

It saddens me when decisions are judged without due consideration for the circumstances. For example: A person killed another person. What does this say about the killer? Without the context – nothing. How did he do it? What did he feel? What were his motives?

– Valery Abramkin<sup>1</sup>

What was the context in which Soviet citizens dissented? What were their motives? What shaped their identities? With this article, I seek to suggest answers to these questions, using Valery Fedorovich Abramkin as an exemplary case of a dissident who was known but not famous, heard but not answered, a martyr but not a hero. I will describe his transformations from Soviet citizen to dissident, from hostage of the KGB to defendant in the courts, from prisoner in the gulag to post-Soviet Russian reformer. Through this lens, I seek to address two important issues. The first engages the historiography on dissidents; the second builds on recent historical writing that focuses on Soviet subjectivity and identity formation.

Some chroniclers of Soviet dissidence assert that “different thinkers”<sup>2</sup> were a cohesive movement, united by the ideas of human rights.<sup>3</sup> Others see two or three – often opposed – unifiers.<sup>4</sup> Both of these conceptions are unhelp-

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- 1 Valery Abramkin, “Gleb ochen’ otlichaetsia ot liudei,” February 3, 2001, <http://www.smi.ru/01/03/04/158854.html>, which is an opinion piece defending a longtime friend of Abramkin’s and fellow editor of the magazine *Quest*, Gleb Pavlovsky. If an author has published in English, I conform to the transliteration of the author’s name used previously.
- 2 I deliberately use “different thinker,” rather than “non-conformist,” in order to accentuate the uniqueness of the Russian term to which it corresponds.
- 3 Joshua Rubenstein, *Soviet Dissidents: Their Struggle for Human Rights* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980). See also Ludmila Alexeyeva, *Soviet Dissent: Contemporary Movements for National, Religious, and Human Rights*, trans. Carol Pearce and John Glad (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1985), pp. vii–x, 9–10, 267–300.
- 4 Robert Horvath, *The Legacy of Soviet Dissent: Dissidents, Democratization and Radical Nationalism in Russia* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2005). See especially p. 6, where Horvath develops “vectors of dissent,” which he labels “democratic” and “anti-democratic.” See also

ful in that they downplay the prismatic nature of “different thinking” in the Soviet Union, overemphasizing the effectiveness of dissident “movements.” This is true even of the latest and most sophisticated research, in which the ideas of civil disobedience are given center stage.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to the notions of unified dissent, the plurality of “different thinkers” was united only in the desire to exercise the right of uncensored expression – not by the content of those expressions.

My second historiographical contribution engages the notions of Soviet selfhood. In particular, I argue against those, like Jochen Hellbeck, who contend that “the primary effect on individuals’ sense of self” of Soviet government practice “was not repressive, but productive.”<sup>6</sup> In a recent article, Choi Chatterjee and Karen Petrone expertly trace the historiography of the methodological notion of selfhood: from its totalitarian school roots through the newest revisionist conclusions, from the revolutionary self of the subjectivity school to the banal self of recent literary critiques. Chatterjee and Petrone conclude that:

As long as we keep essentializing the Soviet self and ascribing to it a single set of identifiable characteristics, we will continue to reproduce the singular Soviet citizens of theoretical dreams rather than address the complex subject positions that they fashioned, inhabited, and exhibited...We need a methodology that integrates the notion of the authentic self, the domestic sources of affirmation, the larger frameworks of meanings, and the various sites of its performance.<sup>7</sup>

Chatterjee and Petrone also point out that it is a “rare” historian “who has simultaneously considered all levels of the self” – the biological, the socially

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Walter Laquer, *Black Hundred: The Rise of the Extreme Right in Russia* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), pp. ix, 160–166, and Boris Kagarlitsky, *The Thinking Reed: Intellectuals and the Soviet State, 1917 to the Present* (London: Verso, 1988).

5 Benjamin Nathans, “The Dictatorship of Reason: Aleksander Vol’pin and the Idea of Rights under “Developed Socialism.” Although Nathans notes “the diversity of their ‘other[different]-thinking,’” his article makes the case for a widespread “law-based” approach to studying the defense of rights in the late Soviet Union, emphasizing its “universal applicability.” This approach, I would argue, was neither as widespread nor as universally applicable as it seems in Nathans’ article.

6 Jochen Hellbeck, “Working, Struggling, Becoming: Stalin-Era Autobiographical Texts,” *Russian Review* 60 (July 2001), p. 341. See also Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck, “Rethinking the Stalinist Subject: Stephen Kotkin’s ‘Magnetic Mountain’ and the State of Soviet Historical Studies,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 44 (1996), pp. 456–463; Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2006); Jochen Hellbeck and Peter Fritzche, “The New Man in Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany,” in Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds., *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009).

7 Choi Chatterjee and Karen Petrone, “Models of Selfhood and Subjectivity: The Soviet Case in Historical Perspective,” *Slavic Review* 67:4 (Winter 2008), pp. 985, 986.

discursive, and the reflexive self-aware.<sup>8</sup> With this article, I attempt to consider all three.

In her most recent work, Anna Krylova argues that any version of Bolshevik/Stalinist/Soviet identity was particular to a time and place; thus any model of subjectivity has a short historical life and should not be treated as a “framework,” but rather as an historical category. This is especially true in the case of the Soviet Union, which produced a major socio-cultural transformation of society and continuously reproduced contradictory ideological stances that did not allow any Soviet subject to simply mirror or reject Soviet official culture.<sup>9</sup> The case of Abramkin serves to bolster this point.

Furthermore, it seems to me that historians should fully and openly recognize that people like Hellbeck’s Leonid Potemkin, Benjamin Nathans’ Aleksandr Vol’pin, and Valery Abramkin – described here – represent not the entirety of Soviet society at any given time, but small groups within it.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, I am not suggesting that Abramkin’s case is “representative.” Rather, like Hellbeck’s Potemkin, he is a “symbolic life.” Unlike Potemkin, however, Abramkin did not shape himself in the regime’s mold; nor was he unaware of the implications of his words and actions.<sup>11</sup> Abramkin repeatedly and knowingly sacrificed himself not just for human rights, but in a desire for dialog between the disparate segments of his society. Despite the state’s reactions to communications by Soviet citizens, two-way *dialog* with its representatives was virtually impossible, and those who insisted on publicly defining themselves in opposition learned the hard way that this was not allowed. Sooner or later, many dissidents’ identities were defined by the representatives of the regime.

Some scholars of Soviet selfhood have recently argued against using “binary categories,” such as “oppression and resistance, repression and freedom, the state and the people,” pointing out that such binaries can reduce Soviet citizens to automatons with no real agency.<sup>12</sup> However, the case of Abramkin shows that it was possible for a Soviet citizen to *use* his agency to create his *own* binary battle in which he set himself against the state – and lost.

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8 Chatterjee and Petrone, “Models of Selfhood,” p. 967; categories are taken from Jerrold E. Seigel, *The Identity of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), pp. 3–44.

9 Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), pp. 13–26.

10 For example, even though Hellbeck puts Potemkin forward as the “paradigmatic New Man,” he also points out that Potemkin was ridiculed by his contemporaries for his zeal. Hellbeck and Fritzsche, “The New Man,” p. 325. Indeed, dissidents – even if lumped together – were a very small minority.

11 Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind*, pp. 73–74; Igal Halpin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003), p. 6.

12 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, Princeton UP: 2006), p. 5.

## COMRADE ABRAMKIN

Born in Moscow in 1946, Abramkin's story as a dissident begins in the 1950s of Khrushchev's thaw. While still in his teens, Abramkin matriculated at the Moscow Institute of Chemical Technology, where he studied nuclear engineering. In the Soviet Union of the time, higher education was an attractive path for many inquisitive young people. In the retrospective view of one of Abramkin's contemporaries: "You could not find answers to many simple questions. You could not, in fact, ask some of them, because they were forbidden. There was false history, false geography, false statistics...science was the only area of knowledge in Russia that did not lie, and this is why it attracted the country's brightest minds."<sup>13</sup> "For many of us," Natan Sharansky, another of Abramkin's contemporaries, wrote, "the scientific-technological revolution arrived at precisely the right time, with the world of science as a kind of castle where you could protect yourself from the shifting winds of official ideology."<sup>14</sup> These "castles" had been formed by the post-war accommodation given to the scientific sphere by the political elite.<sup>15</sup>

As he came of age, Abramkin was soon involved with bard music.<sup>16</sup> Simultaneously with, but different from, folk and rock music's unifying force in anti-establishment movements in the West, bard songs became a method of rebellion against communism for many Eastern European teens, especially college students – Abramkin included.<sup>17</sup> The dynamic nature of bard lyrics appealed to young people whose "different thinking" was expressed by the bards in song and circulated by *magnitizdat* [tape publishing].<sup>18</sup>

Drawn by the revolutionary tone of some of the bard songs, Abramkin became an active participant in the Moscow Club of Self-Generated Songs (*Moskovskii klub samodeiatel'noi pesni*), or KSP. He performed as part of a small group

13 Yuri Tarnapolsky, *Memoirs of 1984* (Lanham, MD: UP of America, 1993), p. 9. Tarnapolsky was Abramkin's age; he would later be imprisoned during the same years.

14 Natan Sharansky, *Fear No Evil*, trans. Stefani Hoffman (New York: Random House, 1988), p. xii.

15 Especially in the wake of "the Lysenko mistake." See Alexei B. Kojevnikov, *Stalin's Great Science: The Times and Adventures of Soviet Physicists* (London: Imperial College Press, 2004), pp. 297–300.

16 "Sud nad Abramkinym," *Khronika tekushchikh sobytii* (KTS) no. 58 (1980), <http://www.memo.ru/history/diss/chr/index.htm>. KTS was the most accurate and complete contemporary periodical on the repression of dissidents. This article describes Abramkin's background, arrest, and trial in great detail. See also George Selinsky, "Russian Bards: The Voice and the Guitar is Mightier than the Sword," <http://www.stseraphimchurch.org/wemagazine/statyi2005/russianbards.html>.

17 KTS, no. 58. See also Christopher Lazarski, "Vladimir Vysotsky and His Cult," *Russian Review* 51 (January 1992), pp. 58–71.

18 This is not a literal translation, because this word is slang and seems deliberately modeled on the word "*samizdat*."

and organized hiking trips for the purpose of anti-regime agitation. For young Abramkin, defining himself as a “different thinker” meant “agitating” for the downfall of the current regime.<sup>19</sup> The KSP meetings provided the material for Abramkin’s first foray into the underground world of *samizdat* [self-published literature].<sup>20</sup> Abramkin wanted to share the products of these meetings with a wider audience, so starting in 1975, he and some of his friends created *Voskresenie* [Resurrection], an anthology of lyrics and musical criticism named after the “forest branches” of the KSP.<sup>21</sup> With this anthology, the elements of bard music fused with those of uncensored literature, and Abramkin had taken an important step towards being officially labeled a “dissident.”

However, although young Abramkin was initially drawn to dissent because of his frustrations with the regime, as he got older he was even more inspired by the unifying power of dialog. “In the beginning,” Abramkin later wrote, “I was a radical anti-Soviet, but later I stopped being of this type...I realized one simple thing...if the person is good, then you can work with him, no matter what views he holds.”<sup>22</sup>

Abramkin’s change in focus from revolt to dialog was induced by his first run-in with the KGB, in 1976. His anthology had come to the attention of the authorities, and he was warned to stop his “anti-Soviet” activity. When he did not, he was fired from his job as a research scientist.<sup>23</sup> His professional scientific career was over, and so was his self-conception as a “radical anti-Soviet.” As with many other “different thinkers” in the 1970s and 1980s, the regime rewarded his rebellion by taking away his public status and professional identity. From then until his first arrest in 1979, Abramkin worked as a woodcutter for geological expeditions, supplementing this meager income with other jobs as a boiler-room coal man and a security guard.<sup>24</sup> He still thought of himself both as “comrade” and as “different thinker” – a combination that, for him, was not a contradiction. However, from the perspective of the establishment,

19 “Sud nad Abramkinym,” KTS, no. 58.

20 According to Mayakovsky Square veteran Naum Korzhavin, “The word ‘*samizdat*’ was coined by my friend, the poet Nikolai Glaskov, who published his own little books, in which he wrote at the bottom: ‘*sam sebia izdat.*’ Later, ‘*sebia*’ was dropped, leaving ‘*samizdat.*’” Naum Korzhavin, interview by Vladimir V. Kara-Murza, “Oni vybirali svobodu. Chast’ pervaiia: Probuzhdenie.” *RTV International*, December 1, 2005, MPEG, <http://www.newsru.com/russia/01dec2005/film.html>.

21 “Sud nad Abramkinym,” KTS, no. 58. See also Moscow Center for Prison Reform (MCPR), “About the Director.” <http://www.prison.org/english/mcprdir.htm>.

22 Abramkin, “Gleb ochen’ otlichaetsia.”

23 “Sud nad Abramkinym,” KTS no. 58.

24 “V zashchitu Valerii Abramkina,” (December 1979) *Golosa iz sovetsskoi epokhi: iz tsentra dokumentatsii, “Narodnyi arkhiv,” Moskva, Rossiia* (NA-GSI) [Microfilm], f. 173, op. 1, d. 4, l. 10. This is a two-page, typed letter, signed by 64 people, including all of the editors of *Quest*. It is included in a list of six similar letters, all typed, and all likely circulated as *samizdat* and/or sent abroad. See also “Sud nad Abramkinym,” KTS no. 58.

this was a dangerous contradiction, and he was therefore labeled a “dissident,” someone whose self-expressions set him apart from common social norms and acceptable mental structures.

### DISSIDENT ABRAMKIN

Abramkin’s dissident identity was attributed to him because of his forays into publishing outside of official channels, or *samizdat*. Used at one time or another by literally every group interested in uncensored dissemination of ideas, *samizdat* became the primary vehicle of communication for: Trotskyites, Baptists, Bukharinists, Catholics, anti-Communist Socialists, youth groups, nationalists of every stripe from Estonians to Crimean Tartars, Pentecostals, Stalinists, Seventh-Day Adventists, those who wanted to emigrate (including Germans and Zionists, for surprisingly similar reasons), poets, novelists, fetishists, human rights advocates and, as we have seen, rebel musicians and their fans. Meanwhile, and unsurprisingly, the prismatic nature of the movements came to the fore. There was infighting among the groups and clashes between them.<sup>25</sup>

The more *samizdat* expanded, the more the diversity – and divisions – of the Soviet Union’s “different thinkers” became apparent. The Muscovite dissidents often glossed over these divisions, but when Abramkin joined the central Moscow *samizdat* circle, he wrote about what he saw as an unhealthy disunion, while simultaneously embracing diversity. When he began the publication of his journal *Quest (Poiski)*, he wrote:

For the past several years, the “rights-defending” movement has shifted toward impatience, painful separatism, and dispassionateness in the various branches that make it up...[which were] built by different types and by different routes. [While the current infighting is harmful], there is no harm in diversity. On the contrary, it would be pernicious to try to bring the broad spectrum of approaches into one narrow, monotonous line.<sup>26</sup>

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25 Alexeyeva, *Soviet dissent*, passim. See also F. J. M. Feldbrugge, *Samizdat and Political Dissent in the Soviet Union* (A. W. Sijthoff, 1975), passim. A “dissident” was one who “sits apart” from society – and the members of any of the incredibly diverse groups mentioned in the above paragraph fit the description. However, in Russian, there are two, more precise terms. One of them translates well, and the other does not have a precise translation. “*Pravozashchitnyi*,” or “rights-defending” is an adjective, but it can also be a verb (*zashchishchat’ prava*), a noun referring to a concept (*pravozashchita*), or a noun referring to a person (*pravozashchitnik*). For the other important term, “*inakomyслиe*,” translation is more difficult. Literally translated, it means “thinking differently,” “other-thinking,” or “different thinking.” Most scholars correctly translate it in uncomplicated sentences, but they sometimes err when the word comes in a sentence like “He stands for ‘*inakomyслиe*.’” Unfortunately, some translate this as “He stands for the defense of human rights,” when it should be “He stands for the defense of different thinking.” This can cause important misunderstandings.

26 Abramkin, letter from Butyrskaiia Prison (October 8, 1980), NA-GSI, f. 173, op. 1, d. 4, l. 29. This typewritten, 5-page letter, part of a group of 11 letters from Butyrskaiia Prison, some

The example of *Quest* serves as evidence against the argument that *anything* unified Soviet dissent, particularly not specific sets of ideas – “rights-defending,” nationalist, or otherwise. Had dissent been as unified as has been depicted in much of the historiography, there would have been no need for *Quest*.

Abramkin’s journal was fundamentally different from other *samizdat* periodicals in that it was not a human-rights magazine. Instead, the goal was dialog between the divided branches of the dissident movements. The editorial board had members from several of the currents of anti-establishment “different thinking,” but it also included pro-regime reformists. Together, they consciously strove to include a wide range of opinion. As Abramkin later put it, “If we are not ready for dialog, the only thing we can do is shoot each other.”<sup>27</sup>

In the face of repression, if *Quest*’s editors were not using the journal to defend human rights, what were they doing? According to Ludmila Alexeyeva:

There were two ways to become rights-defending activists. On the one hand, declare that a person has rights here [in Russia], enumerate those rights and work to uphold them. On the other hand, one could actually exercise those rights. This was the idea behind *Quest* – actually exercise the rights of freedom of speech and the press.

What shocked me most was that they all put their signatures on the material they published...It was like signing their own verdicts.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, Abramkin and the other editors of *Quest* used their agency and made the conscious choice to go to prison by exercising the right of uncensored communication. Like others who made the same choice, they felt that their sacrifice would highlight that “the government had now become the lawbreaker.”<sup>29</sup>

Although he agreed with the above, Abramkin also had another reason to openly dissent. In a series of letters from prison in 1980, he explained that the real merit of *Quest* was that it showed fruitful collaboration by people who were very different. Including both aged Bolsheviks and very young liberal revolutionaries, *Quest* aimed to cover the entire spectrum of “different thinking.”<sup>30</sup> As Abramkin wrote, “the authorities have once again atomized society

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handwritten and some typed, appears to have been written over several days or weeks and smuggled out of the prison. The date seems to indicate the date of smuggling, and the fact that it is typed suggests that it was circulated as *samizdat* and/or sent abroad. Indeed, this is corroborated by the court in Abramkin’s second case. “Prigovor” (April 4, 1983), NA-GSI, f. 173, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 1-6. This is a typed copy of the verdict in Abramkin’s second trial in the Court Assembly for Criminal Cases of the Altai Region.

27 Abramkin, “Gleb ochen’ otlichaetsia.”

28 Ludmila Alexeyeva, interview with *Radio Liberty*, November 11, 2003, <http://www.svoboda.org/programs/hr/2003/hr.061103.asp>.

29 Memorial website article, “Istoriia sovetskikh dissidentov,” <http://www.memo.ru/history/diss/index.htm>.

30 Dan Fisher, “A Different Kind of Dissident: Soviet Activist’s Painful Awakening,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 1979. See also Anthony Austin, “Soviet Suppressing Dissident Journal,” *New York Times*, October 22, 1979.

and that made *Quest's* mission important."<sup>31</sup> "We realized that something important was going on...[that] you can develop and maintain a dialog."<sup>32</sup>

Upon discovering the magazine, the KGB quickly began disciplining the *Quest* editors.<sup>33</sup> After several searches of Abramkin's apartment and multiple interrogations, in April of 1979 the KGB brought him to the office of the General Prosecutor in Moscow. Abramkin recounted how, at that meeting, "They told it to me really straight: 'Once the next issue of *Quest* is published, you will go to prison.'"<sup>34</sup>

At the next meeting of *Quest's* editors, Abramkin recalled, "Everybody knew that basically I was a hostage...everybody was just looking at me! I had to decide. 'Well,' I said, 'even if they decide to execute me, who cares? We make the decision to publish not because of their threat but rather because we are listening to what our duty - our conscience - tells us.'"<sup>35</sup> Abramkin had agency, and he had made his choice: the next issue was published and his fate was sealed. In December, he was arrested.

#### DEFENDANT ABRAMKIN

From the official warning in April until his arrest in December, Abramkin and his family lived as KGB "hostages." They knew that arrest was coming, but they did not know exactly when. In her contemporary diary notes, Abramkin's wife, Ekaterina Gaidamchuk, explained what this was like: "The words 'search' and 'arrest' invaded our life and became things you use all the time - empty, dead. We were trying to get away from these words, send them away. We were flying above these words to our world - the world of life and art - and then falling back again to these horrible words."<sup>36</sup> Even though Ekaterina was expecting the arrest, she and their two-year-old son Al'ka were not prepared

31 Abramkin, Letter from Butyrskaiia Prison (October 8, 1980), NA-GSI, f. 173, op. 1, d. 4, l. 27.

32 This quote is a retrospective view, decades later. Abramkin, "Gleb ochen' otlichaetsia."

33 KTS no. 53 (August 1, 1979).

34 Valery Abramkin and V. F. Chesnokova, *Tiuremnyi mir glazami politzakliuchennykh, 1940-1980-e gody* (Moscow: Izdatel'skii dom "Muravei," 1998), p. 256. On the details of the arrest, see KTS no. 53. See also Sof'ia Kalistratova et. al. "Moskovskaia gruppa sodeistviia vypolneniiu Khel'sinskikh soglashenii v SSSR, document 145, 'Sud nad Valeriem Abramkinym'" (October 10, 1980), NA-GSI, f. 173, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 18-20; Petr Abovin-Egides et. al. "Zaiavlenie redaktsii 'Poiskov'" (December 6, 1979), NA-GSI, f. 173, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 12-13; "Soviet Underground Editor Receives Suspended Term," *New York Times*, October 2, 1980; "Two Editors Detained by Soviet Police," *Los Angeles Times*, December 6, 1979.

35 Abramkin and Chesnokova, *Tiuremnyi mir*, p. 256.

36 Ekaterina Gaidamchuk, diary excerpts, NA-GSI, f. 173, op. 1, d. 4, l. 1. Emphasis added. These appear to be contemporaneous diary entries. That they are typed suggests circulation in *samizdat* and perhaps abroad.

for the abandonment it entailed.<sup>37</sup> Ekaterina's diary entry from that day speaks volumes: "They took him away...After our home was abandoned, our little son went to pack and go to his papa, waited by the door for Papa, left part of his dinner for Papa..."<sup>38</sup>

In many ways, Abramkin's trial was similar to most later dissident trials.<sup>39</sup> However, in three important areas, Abramkin's trial was different. First, the court allowed Abramkin to bring in defense witnesses – and several actually came and testified. Second, this was an early instance of the prosecution using "ideological assessments" by specialists from professional institutes of higher learning. Third, and largely because of the first two factors, Abramkin thought that he had "a tiny hope for dialog" – and he acted upon that perceived opportunity.<sup>40</sup>

"The questioning of witnesses on October 2nd – what a happy day!" Abramkin wrote from prison:

Even the trained [as in, trained animals] public could not keep appropriate faces and laughed out loud at the trial process...what exactly did they have against us? Nothing. The criminal nature of *Quest* was determined, as [defense witness] Rubacheva stated, "by smell" ...this was a complete fiasco, an unconditional crush of our prosecutors, and I have every right to congratulate us on victory, my friends!<sup>41</sup>

The next day in court, Abramkin's enthusiasm was quickly dissolved. The experts with whom he wanted to converse did not appear as planned. He had read their assessments, and he wanted to refute, in person, the arguments that they had made. Included in the record was the Moscow Philosophical Institute's "Assessment and Analysis of Almanac *Quest*" and an historical expert's "Assessment and Analysis" of Abramkin's dissident activities, including a

37 Abramkin also supported an ex-wife, Irina Malinovskaya, who lived elsewhere with their teenage son. KTS, no. 58 (1980).

38 Gaidamchuk, journal excerpts, NA-GSI, f. 173, op. 1, d. 4, l. 1. See also KTS, no. 58, which largely corroborates the Gaidamchuk narrative cited here. See also Abovin-Egides et. al. "Zaiavlenie redaktsii 'Poiskov'" NA-GSI, f. 173, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 12-13.

39 It was formally "open" – but only to "approved" members of the public, those who had been selected for this duty by the KGB. The investigation materials ran to thousands of pages, as they usually did, and Abramkin was given that text to read – but only for brief periods and certainly not for long enough to prepare a defense. As usual, the verdict was read *at the opening* of the trial. The verdict itself "did not depart much from the customary model" used for defendants tried under Article 191-1. Kalistratova, "Sud nad Valeriem Abramkinym," NA-GSI, f. 173, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 18-20; Abramkin, letter from Butyrskaya Prison (October 8, 1980), NA-GSI, f. 173, op. 1, d. 4, l. 24. See also "News in Brief," *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 1980 and "Dissident Editor Sentenced," *Washington Post*, October 6, 1980.

40 Abramkin, letter from Butyrskaya Prison (October 8, 1980), NA-GSI, f. 173, op. 1, d. 4, l. 25.

41 Abramkin, letter from Butyrskaya Prison (October 8, 1980), NA-GSI, f. 173, op. 1, d. 4, l. 27. Emphasis in the original.

handwritten summary with recommended punishment. The philosophers had written quite a bit of “psychoanalysis,” including: “They are political shameless maniacs. Their literature looks like it was written by a person with obvious psychological illnesses. From this point of view this almanac [*Quest*] should be of interest for specialists from the psychological field.”<sup>42</sup> This illuminating quotation goes far towards explaining how so many dissidents disappeared into insane asylums. The historian’s assessment was more of the same, but it also included recommendations on how to fully “liquidate” the dissident elements of Soviet society:

There is an evaluation in the magazine of a deep crisis within the “dissident movement” ...in our opinion, more constructive analysis [of *Quest*] can serve the future uncovering and liquidation of the remains of this so-called “movement,” which undermines the basis of the Soviet state and discredits the USSR in the world arena.<sup>43</sup>

Abramkin very much wanted to discuss these “assessments.” The fact that their authors did not appear at court was a serious disappointment for him, as a dialog with the ideological representatives of the state was the major reason he had agreed to participate in his trial. His chagrin comes into sharp relief once one realizes that most of the dissidents convicted in the latter 1970s had mocked or stood mute at their trials – few had in any way participated. Indeed, just a few weeks before his arrest, Abramkin himself had ridiculed the trial process and implied that he would not participate.<sup>44</sup> In the issue of *Quest* that had appeared in August, two months before his trial, Abramkin had written a scathing article that detailed “the pros and cons of participating in the pathetic judicial farce.”<sup>45</sup> In a letter smuggled out of the prison a few days after the trial, he wrote:

For the first time, government assessors were used in addition to regular staff...offering a tiny hope for dialog...In that situation, I could not, did not, have a moral right to refuse this dialog, this discussion...*Quest* was started with a similar naive step: the possibility of a search for understanding between the polar, far opposite powers of our society. Well, the trial is over, and I have discovered that my naive hopes were in vain. We have been shown once more that dialog with those in power in our country is fundamentally impossible.<sup>46</sup>

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42 “Assessment and Analysis of Almanac *Quest*,” NA-GSI, f. 173, op. 1, d. 8, l. 1. This is a 14-page assessment of Abramkin’s case and *Quest*, including opinions from the Moscow Philosophical Institute, the Historical Institute, and the Institute of International Work, Academy of Sciences, USSR.

43 “Assessment and Analysis of Almanac *Quest*,” NA-GSI, f. 173, op. 1, d. 8A. l. 9. Emphasis added.

44 Horvath, *The Legacy of Soviet Dissent*, p. 94. See also KTS, no. 53; and KTS no. 56 (April 30, 1980).

45 KTS, no. 58.

46 Abramkin, letter from Butyraskaia Prison (October 8, 1980), NA-GSI, f. 173, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 26–27. See also KTS, no. 58. Robert Horvath does Abramkin a disservice by mentioning his apparent hypocrisy. This is regrettable, but understandable, for here Horvath was only

In his last letter from Butyrskaiia Prison before he was sent to Siberia, Abramkin, now a convicted criminal, admitted his failure and disillusionment: "I am not the first – I am not the last – that is on his way to the islands of the Archipelago. It is just that I was not dreaming about 'victories' like this when we started our *Quest*."<sup>47</sup> Abramkin's expressions of disillusionment are emblematic of the larger currents of dissident thought at this time, when many of the leaders of the various movements were exiled – either internally or externally, by choice or by force – or imprisoned.

### ZEK ABRAMKIN

You become part of the prison world. The first feeling you get from being in prison is that of a house of the dead, a grave, that you are buried alive. Second, you start to understand that you are not the only one...You start to see, distinguish, and feel other people that were also buried...I realized that I had a different purpose – different from what I had when I was a dissident.<sup>48</sup>

As a prisoner, Abramkin's everyday life was little different from that described by others; that part of dissident history does not need to be retold here. However, Abramkin's story does show us that the larger narrative should be supplemented. This section will focus on two areas of Abramkin's story that serve to complement what has been written previously about gulag experiences – the transformation of his identity and the consequences of that change both while he was in prison and what came after.

Years later, Abramkin was asked the following question: "When you started...Could you predict what would happen? Not in the sense that you would end up in prison, but rather that you would pay such a terrible price?" When Abramkin answered "No," the interviewer queried, "So, you thought that it would be easier than it was?" Abramkin's answer is illuminating, both of his motivations and of his prison experience:

Not harder, not easier, but rather different [from my expectations]...the fact is that prison is a completely different world – a hell world – and this I could not imagine...In terms of physical suffering, the daily routine, etc., I could expect everything in advance. But there are things that you can't really imagine before you have actually had experience with them...I had read *The House of the Dead*, *Archipelago*, Marchenko...but that was just information...in essence, in main content, I did not find anything like what I had read about. Do you understand? Nothing.<sup>49</sup>

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working from the materials contained in the *Chronicle of Current Events*, where Abramkin's motivations for changing his mind are not spelled out explicitly. Horvath, *The Legacy of Soviet Dissent*, p. 94. When combined with the record found in the *Chronicle*, Abramkin's story does make sense, and the fact that so many prominent dissidents participated in the trial suggests that they agreed with his change in tactics.

47 Abramkin, letter from Butyrskaiia Prison (October 8, 1980), NA-GSI, f. 173, op. 1, d. 4, l. 28.

48 Abramkin and Chesnokova, *Tiuremnyi mir*, pp. 292, 265.

49 *Ibid.*, pp. 256–257.

In the words of dissident Anatoly Marchenko, "Whoever hasn't been in a camp can never understand the actions and behavior of a con."<sup>50</sup>

Almost from the beginning, Abramkin was not a typical political prisoner – he "landed" in the general population. There, within the system of official rules and regulations, another unofficial system – another world – existed. Together, the official and the unofficial systems of the gulag made up the "prison world" described in Abramkin's book by that name. Abramkin spent his first term in a camp in the Altai region, then a second term in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia. Throughout, he was forced to learn the ways of the *zek* [prisoner]:

The average local *zek* was a young man, strong, roughly hewn, resourceful, cruel, and proud of being a *zek* – at least that was the impression a *zek* was supposed to give...it took a newcomer like me a certain period of adaptation to see in rough, ugly, cruel, wrinkled, sallow faces the diversity of personalities distributed along the universal human pattern.<sup>51</sup>

The above description, taken from the memoir of one of Abramkin's contemporaries, effectively captured the image many convicts projected and the difficulty a political prisoner had adapting to the prison world. It is similar to Abramkin's perspective: "It takes some time to find those points of normal contact, understanding, something that is interpersonal...For example, if you approach a man with help or advice, he will think that you are trying to con him or take advantage of him. It is very hard for him to understand that people are capable of altruistic actions."<sup>52</sup>

Eventually, Abramkin found some "points of contact," for the other convicts gave him special status: "In the general population, a lot of things depend upon your status. I had an unusual status for that world – the status of a political prisoner." That standing was formed by three elements in the minds of the prisoners that surrounded Abramkin. First, there was the myth about political *zeks*: that the authorities would undoubtedly kill them. This engendered respect and a certain kind of sympathy. Second, "politicals" like Abramkin were respected for the fact that they "had gone to Golgotha for the truth and had been ready to pay for it with your blood and your life." Third, and more practically, the prisoners discovered that he was educated and willing to read their verdicts and write petitions for them.<sup>53</sup> This was the beginning of Abramkin's transition from dissident to prison reformer. Before that transformation was complete, however, Abramkin was "broken."

Looking back, Abramkin has placed that life-changing event in 1983. At first, Abramkin had continued to think like a dissident. For example, while he

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50 Anatoly Marchenko, *My Testimony*, trans. Michael Scammell (London: Pall Mall Press, 1969), p. 398.

51 Tarnopolsky, *Memoirs of 1984*, p. 5. "Zek," or z/k, is short for "zaklyuchennyi," or "prisoner." It is how gulag prisoners described themselves.

52 Abramkin and Chesnokova, *Tiuremnyi mir*, pp. 257–258.

53 *Ibid.*, pp. 258, 285, 289.

was in Butyrskaiia Prison, he was sent to an isolation room, and what he felt there was an incongruous sense of liberation: “[That] was the happiest time in prison...I did not need to hide.”<sup>54</sup>

While in this first stage as a prisoner, Abramkin still had the support of his friends and family as well as communication with the outside. His letters from Butyrskaiia Prison are replete with stories of how these contacts allowed him to continue as a dissident, even while imprisoned. Once, he saw one of his friends in the corridor of the prison; several times he heard friends shouting his name from outside the prison walls. Once a friend threw a bouquet of daisies over the wall to him; he was briefly able to communicate with another imprisoned editor of *Quest*. Throughout his letters from 1980, he repeatedly stressed that he “felt the help and support” of family and friends. He wrote: “I am very proud that I was born and belonged to such a group of people.”<sup>55</sup> But by the time of his release, Abramkin had become a different man: “I got out as a completely different person – completely different. *Like I had been born twice*. I read my letters from Butyrskaiia Prison and I see – I am not him any longer. My period of tragedy lasted until 1983 – then I died.”<sup>56</sup>

Like many other political prisoners, Abramkin was convicted again in April of 1983, and received a second term in the gulag. According to the verdict that began his second trial: “On October 8, 1980, [Abramkin] wrote a letter [in which] he knowingly slandered the Soviet societal structure and regime. He stated that the USSR is a totalitarian country, people are divorced from governmental rule, and are subject to repressions and devastation.”<sup>57</sup>

Proving Abramkin’s point, the authorities sent him back into the gulag for another three years. Shortly before the trial, when he had only four days to go until the end of his first term of imprisonment, the KGB had asked him, “Would you like to leave and go to the West?” The agents told him that all he had to do was publicly admit the slanderous nature of *Quest*. His answer was “no.” In Abramkin’s words: “I could not have said [yes]...I went back to prison.”<sup>58</sup> According to Abramkin, this was his last act as a dissident. Afterwards, he was “born” again – as a *zek* – and the official representatives of the Soviet state affected this rebirth. In Abramkin’s words:

The worst people in the prison zone – demonic – are the cops. “Demons” – that’s the cops, the Administration. The cops have agents and snitches. There are provocateurs that incite all sorts of conflicts between prisoners. There are also “pressers”: a “press-house” [as in, apple pressing for cider] is a cell where these “pressers” – prisoners specially motivated and prepared by the Administration – are put in with men who must be broken. There are a variety of

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54 Ibid., p. 290.

55 Abramkin, letter from Butyrskaiia Prison (October 5, 1980), NA-GSI, f. 173, op. 1, d. 4, l. 23.

56 Abramkin and Chesnokova, *Tiuremnyi mir*, p. 265, emphasis added.

57 “Prigovor” (April 4, 1983), NA-GSI, f. 173, op. 1, d. 1, l. 2.

58 Abramkin, “Gleb ochen’ otlichaetsia.”

reasons. Sometimes they do not even want to know about the crime he committed, or about his partners in crime. Sometimes they want to know the location of the criminals' money. Sometimes, they just need to break the person, and it is totally unclear why...I will say nothing about the process they use to break people [in the "press house"].<sup>59</sup>

In the "torture zone" of the "press house," the ideological imperatives of the state were imposed on the prisoners by force. The inner, reflexive self was modified by torture of the biological self. "People are sent there in order to break their will and have the desire for justice crushed out of them."<sup>60</sup>

In this context, Abramkin has mentioned Natan Sharansky, who became a hero for his resistance to the destructive effects of Soviet interrogation and imprisonment. Arrested in 1978 and released in 1986, Sharansky has always claimed that the KGB and the gulag were not able to "break" him. Abramkin learned of this claim years later. His response leaves little doubt about his perspective: "If somebody is not 'broken,' this does not mean that you defeated 'them.' It means that they did not want you to break. They talked on TV about Sharansky like he was the only hero who did not break. I think that they just lost interest in breaking him."<sup>61</sup>

After "breaking" – after his "rebirth" – Abramkin was totally cut off from the outside world (like many others, he was denied even the few letters and visits the criminal code allowed). His life had little to do with anything other than the world behind the wire. Yet, always the communicator, Abramkin eventually opened new lines of communication. He wrote petitions for his new, less-educated prison mates, and became known for this activity.<sup>62</sup>

After his release in 1985, and like many other political prisoners, Abramkin was sent into internal exile until 1989. During this time, he lived in the Tver' region, where he was still under state surveillance. There, he was able to see his family and friends for the first time since his "rebirth."<sup>63</sup> They noticed that he was not the same person. In 1998, Abramkin wrote of his transformation, and how it was still affecting his relationships: "It is very hard, for there are people who knew me before my arrest – they notice this scary thing in me."<sup>64</sup>

While still in exile, Abramkin again utilized his skill for communication. He established his Moscow Center for Prison Reform in 1988, and perhaps because Abramkin considered himself broken, its first activity was research

59 Valery Abramkin, public lecture at Café Bilingua (March 10, 2011), [http://svoboda.utorai.ru/?page\\_id=27](http://svoboda.utorai.ru/?page_id=27)

60 Ol'ga den Besten, "Rossiiskie pravozashchitniki o nasilii v tiur'makh," <http://www.russian.rfi.fr/rossiya/20100929-rossiiskie-pravozashchitniki-o-nasilii-v-tyurmakh>; see also Abramkin and Chesnokova, *Tiuremnyi mir*, p. 293.

61 Abramkin and Chesnokova, *Tiuremnyi mir*, p. 260.

62 Ibid., pp. 268–269.

63 MCPR, "About the Director."

64 Abramkin and Chesnokova, *Tiuremnyi mir*, p. 265.

– especially into what kept people from breaking under the conditions of the gulag.

One of the main things that we wanted to find out: to understand what mechanisms helped people to preserve their selfhood [*sokhraniiaut lichnost'*, or “preserve their individual identity”]. And the fact that our Russian prisoners could preserve their selfhood was something that we saw from the first interviews. First, we held interviews with former political prisoners, and it was clear: people were initially able to preserve their selfhood because they fought for the truth, and this idea could (this was not the only thing) keep them supported and allow them to respect themselves or, in extreme cases, they knew that their memory would be respected...The terrible conditions are meant to break people (in prison everything is part of the breaking process, in all countries). If a person survives unbroken, that means they preserved their selfhood.<sup>65</sup>

Although Abramkin was unable to preserve his own selfhood, he has dedicated the remainder of his life to helping those who are struggling with this problem while in prison. Just after his release, he began work on his self-help book, *How to survive in Soviet prison: A prisoner's aide*, published in 1992. Today, Abramkin is a board member of several NGOs, and he continues to give interviews and lectures, even though he suffers from the effects of both his identity transformation and the tuberculosis he contracted in the gulag.<sup>66</sup> He is still hard at work promoting dialogue – but today, his identity is that of the *zek* reformer which he became after his “rebirth” in prison camp.

## CONCLUSION

In 1966, dissident Anatoly Marchenko wrote about a conversation with his prison guard: “One day Captain Usov said to me: ‘Marchenko... what have you ever done to make things better? All you wanted to do was run away and nothing more!’ If, after writing [*samizdat*], I come under Captain Usov again, I shall be able to say: ‘I have done everything that was in my power. And here I am – back where I started.’”<sup>67</sup> After repeated re-arrests, imprisonments, and other repressions, Marchenko died in prison in 1986. Like Marchenko and Abramkin, there was a very small number of people in the late Soviet Union who were determined to publicly define themselves against the political elite – but they soon discovered that they could only do so for a short time before they landed in the gulag. In Abramkin’s words:

I joined the human rights movement and imagined that it was an opportunity to bring tragedy back to Russia...Tragedy always entails the opportunity to

65 Valery Abramkin, “Menta tiur'ma korezhit kruche arestanta: Real'nyi tiuremnyi mir v nepeal'nom prostranstve 'obshestva' i 'gosudarstva',” public lecture at Café Bilingua (March 18, 2006), <http://www.prison.org/nravy/ponyat/doc005.shtml>.

66 Kevin Krajick, “The troubles multiply, but a reformer still finds room for hope” (Summer 2001) MCPR, <http://www.prison.org/english/article1.htm>. See also MCPR, “About the Director,” and the publisher’s blurb in *Tiuremnyi mir*.

67 Marchenko, *My Testimony*, p. 4.

choose...And when there is no choice, there is no tragedy...The democratic movement began the development of tragedy, bringing us the opportunity to make choices – for all of us...For me, this meant that the democratic movement was more than “rights-defending” activities. It was a fight for the expansion of space for tragedy...it now seems that we did not make choices. We simply filled roles that *they* wanted us to fill.<sup>68</sup>

Abramkin’s identities were formed by a combination of his own actions and the reactions of the state. He was given at least three chances to reform himself. He was not merely a victim; the state was hard, but not capricious. Abramkin had agency, and he used it. It was not beyond his capacity to affect his fate, not even after an early life spent in outright, public opposition. Indeed, he was a self-conscious martyr. The second layer of his self – that which Chatterjee and Petrone define as “a self that is deeply implicated in the social discourses and cultural codes of its origin”<sup>69</sup> – was formidably influenced in Abramkin’s case by reading Solzhenitsyn, Marchenko, Orwell, and others who had written about “the power of truth” deployed against a “totalitarian” state. Indeed, Abramkin’s self-expressions are imbued with such tropes. As a reflexive self, he had internalized an anti-Soviet set of discourses, and identified with them so strongly that he was willing to martyr his biological self for a cause he believed in – not unlike many Bolsheviks under Stalinism.<sup>70</sup>

Abramkin was a dissident, but he was not a “liberal subject”<sup>71</sup> – nor has he ever seen himself as part of any “Western” identity. Rather, he is yet another radical *intelligent* in a long, Russian-German line of idealist martyrs which includes Bolsheviks as much as it does dissidents.<sup>72</sup> However, Abramkin was both an opponent and a mirror-image of the Communist “true believers.” Following Solzhenitsyn’s call to “Live not by Lies,” Abramkin made his choices – but his choices were closely delimited by the representatives of the regime.<sup>73</sup>

68 Abramkin and Chesnokova, *Tiuremnyi mir*, p. 261. Emphasis in the original.

69 Chatterjee and Petrone, “Models of Selfhood,” p. 967.

70 This helps to demystify confessions: they were the “metaphysical preference” not just of the state, but also of the confessors. See Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), pp. 130–131 and Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind*. This was first pointed out by Artur Koestler in *Darkness at Noon*, trans. Daphne Hardy (New York: Bantam Books, 1984).

71 Anna Krylova, “The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1:1 (Winter 2000), p. 146.

72 As Hellbeck and Fritzsche have argued, “Intellectually the radical intelligentsia stood in the tradition of German idealism...The principal task of the intelligentsia was to educate and enlighten, to raise individuals to the stature of true ‘human beings,’ (*chelovek*) and critically thinking ‘personalities’ (*lichnost*)...” Hellbeck and Fritzsche, “The New Man,” p. 306.

73 Like Solzhenitsyn had predicted in 1974, two years before Abramkin’s arrest: “For young people who want to live with truth, this will, in the beginning complicate their young lives very much, because...it is necessary to make a choice.” Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “Live Not by Lies,” first printed in *samizdat*, February 12, 1974. This quotation taken from *The Washington Post*, February 18, 1974.

As a young man, Abramkin became a scientist in order to enjoy what freedom of thought was allowed within the system; once he began openly expressing his thoughts, the regime made him into a woodcutter. As a woodcutter, he continued expressing his thoughts in the best way he knew how, from the pages of *Quest*; the regime quickly made him into a defendant. As a defendant, Abramkin decided to use his new identity to express his thoughts; once he had his “day in court,” the regime turned him into a prisoner. Paradoxically, it was as a prisoner that Abramkin actually felt the most freedom – at first, this was because it was no longer necessary for him to hide his dissident identity or worry about the consequences. Later, it was because the regime had “broken” him and more fully *made him into* a prisoner. Rather than simply destroying his public “rights-defender” identity, the regime had finally broken through and altered his inner dissenting selfhood.

And yet, even as a prisoner – whether in prison, the gulag, exile or after, Abramkin did not stop his desire to converse with his fellow human beings. Even as a defeated *zek*, he did not stop making connections and did not stop working to turn those lines of communication into tools of change. Through that process, he turned into a prison reformer – for along with “different thinker,” “prisoner” had become one of Abramkin’s identities.

Then, after prison, when the regime did express interest in the opinions of its dissident leaders, Abramkin was allowed his long-awaited conversation – first with the leadership of the failing USSR, and then with the reformers of the transitional period. And yet, under the current regime, once again there is no one listening but the censors, although Abramkin – never one to stifle his own end of the conversation – is still talking. At least from his perspective, one important characteristic of his country has reverted to the way it was under Brezhnev.

Well, the trial is over, and I have discovered that my naive hopes were in vain. We have been shown once more that dialog with those in power in our country is fundamentally impossible.

– Abramkin the Soviet Prisoner, Oct. 8, 1980.<sup>74</sup>

Dialogue between the State and society under the present circumstances is impossible. We are speaking with the authorities, but each side is speaking in a different language.

– Abramkin the Russian Reformer, July 3, 2011.<sup>75</sup>

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74 Abramkin, letter from Butyrkaia Prison (October 8, 1980), NA-GSI, f. 173, op. 1, d. 4, l. 25.

75 Valery Abramkin, interview by Okhrana.ru, July 3, 2011, <http://okhrana.ru/analytics/2857/>. This is a published interview by an unnamed reporter.