CHAPTER 8

Samizdat and Ethnic Mobilization

Assessing the Parameters of Mobilization

“...In 1985, when Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev came to power,” wrote A. Motyl in 1990, “the Soviet state was stable by any standard. Party rule was perceived as legitimate, the population was quiescent and generally satisfied, and open opposition to the regime was minimal... [By 1990] the condition of the Soviet state had experienced a 180-degree turn. The Party was thoroughly delegitimized, ... the population was in the streets, and open opposition was the order of the day.... Who or what pushed the USSR onto this slippery slope? The answer, quite simply, is Mikhail Gorbachev.”

1 Predicting a “breakdown or a crackdown,” 2 as extreme variants of political developments, Motyl remarked: “I still doubt that the non-Russians, who may increasingly want to rebel, will be able to do so successfully.”

In 1979, long before perestroika began, Estonian dissident M. Nikluss wrote an essay devoted to his trip to Lithuania. 4 The author noted that the Lithuanian people were highly politicized, adhered to national cultural values, and committed to independence. Based on his own analysis, the author concluded that Lithuania would be the first of the Soviet republics to achieve independence. He was right. In 1990, the Lithuanian parliament made the unprecedented decision to secede from the USSR. This was more than just a coincidence. Beyond any doubt, samizdat proved to be the most significant indicator of ethnic revival in the USSR from Stalin’s death until the rise of perestroika.

Due to the lack of any “conventional” means of championing ethnic politics—through parliamentary means, political parties, communal ethnic...
organizations, the mass media, and so on—*samizdat* became a social institution for the formation of ethnic politics and, at the same time, a means of conveying political ideas. During the period of stagnation, this social institution served both to mobilize ethnic groups and promote the emergence of a new ethnic elite. In itself, the appearance of ethnic *samizdat* can be considered one of the most significant manifestations of ethnic politicization.

Overly modest figures for the number of active members in dissident groups under totalitarian conditions cannot be taken at face value. Ukrainian dissident Bohdan Rebryk stated in his final plea: “Millions of Ukrainians share my views. It is only the fear of repression that keeps them silent.”

This statement seems to be far more authentic than any assumptions of mass satisfaction with the Soviet regime.

Having made this statement, we are expected to provide some proven statistic data concerning the dynamics of participation and constituency of the nationalist movements. Specifically, we have to answer how many people took part in the ethnonationalist movements, how many “passive” supporters did they have, how many people were involved in preparing (including writing, typing, editing, and disseminating) the *samizdat* materials, and finally, how many readers did the *samizdat* have?

Alas, all these questions can hardly have definite answers. The figures of active participants can potentially be estimated by the use of references to their names in various, *samizdat* and non-*samizdat* sources. In this respect, an instructive attempt of quantitative estimation of national dissident activities between 1965 and 1981 has been undertaken by Th. Smith and Th. Oleszczuk in their study “The Brezhnev Legacy: Nationalities and Gorbachev.” Thus, counting references to nationalist dissident activities found in *Arkhiv Samizdata* and *The Chronicle of Current Events*, the two major sources of information on dissident activities, the scholars reached, for example, the conclusion that the Jewish movement practically stopped its activity in 1980, since there were zero reported cases by these sources. Meanwhile, 1980 should be recognized as one of the most “productive” years of the Soviet Jewish dissent. The list of *samizdat* activities alone, in this year (based on the data from *The Jewish Samizdat*), includes not less than eight periodical and non-periodical issues (five titles), which contain at least thirty-five names of their authors and editors. I do not mention here the mass gathering of nonofficial Hebrew teachers in Crimea, the collective hunger strike during the Olympic Games in Moscow, and individual and collective petitions counting dozens of signatories. It is not necessary to say that every additional “lost” or “found” activity or name will dramatically change the results of quantitative analysis in this case.