The Role of Women Dissidents in Creating the Milieu

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Introduction

In this paper I present the results of the study 'Women in the dissident movement (1956-1986)'.[1] Of the many different studies of the dissent in the former Soviet Union (Alexeeva, 1984; Babst, 1991; Voronkov, 1993, etc.), none has so far concentrated on the role of women.[2]

Analysing the autobiographies of dissidents reconstructed from interviews conducted by the researchers of SIC 'Memorial', CISR in 1988-1993, I found that women and men had different functions and activities in the dissident movement. Women dissidents also had other motives and developed different notions about their involvement than men did. The study of women's roles is of great importance, highlighting the phenomena of women's participation in underground political activities. It is necessary in investigating the dissident movement itself and for reconstructing the dissident milieu.

My research for this essay has relied heavily upon oral biography. The main source of information and analysis has been 16 detailed interviews with former participants, mainly women, conducted in St. Petersburg throughout 1994. I have also drawn on memoirs and other historical documents.

In the interviews I have concentrated on the following: the ideology, the reasons for involvement in the dissident movement, the roles of women in the

movement, their experiences in prison and exile, their private lives (including family situation, children, etc.) and the impact that their involvement had on their lives. The discourse analysis of the biographical materials in this essay attempts to reconstruct the life style of the dissidents, their values and the collective biography (Schroeder, 1985) of the women who took part in the dissident movement between 1956 and 1986.

Unlike their male counterparts, women's autobiographies often prefer to discuss private relationships rather than public and political affairs. The particular value of the autobiographies in this research lies precisely in the abundance of details describing the dissident circle and its milieu. While men mostly report their ideas, the anti-Soviet activities and the struggle against the KGB, women talk more about relations and about the moral atmosphere of their circle. Their stories show us the internal life of that circle, the 'home front' of the dissident movement.

Two generations of dissidents

Studies of the dissident movement and the interviewees themselves distinguish between two generations of dissidents. Here I refer to them as the sixties generation (1956 to the end of the 1960s), and the generation of the 1970s and 1980s (1968-1986) (see also Chuikina, 1994).

There are many similarities between the life experiences and opinions of dissidents of both periods. Most of the respondents were born in Moscow or in Leningrad and their parents belonged to the middle class; a small number of dissidents came from working-class families, or from the provinces.

Most of the interviewees attended universities or colleges. They were considered capable students and obtained good grades. The family situations of the women dissidents varied, there being both married and single women, with and without children. Comparing the life-stories of the respondents, I noted a common trait in the biographies that could be named high personal independence in most areas of life. There are however important differences between the life-strategies of the women of these two generations.

The sixties generation

The majority of the interviewees graduated successfully from the universities and colleges of St. Petersburg and Moscow. They considered their work (usually academic) to be very important and their life strategies centred upon their professional careers.

> "I've already given birth to my daughter, I graduated from a college, but I was eager to study again and again, to walk along university corridors and go to the

> lectures, and so I entered the post-graduate course. I got the best marks in the exam, and then I could continue my scientific work. I worked from 9.00 am till 9.00 in the evening. I had a passion for science." (Nina, 56, chemist)

These women were interested in politics, and took an active part in the discussions, meetings, and various cultural events that constituted the atmosphere of the 'thaw' period. They usually had a circle of close friends from university with whom they formed a clandestine group.

Often a woman's primary motive for participating was solidarity with her husband or the wish to share all the interests and activities of the man she loved. Love-comradeship was their ideal.

A typical form of dissident activities at the time was the circulation of *samizdat*,[3] leaflets, books, or journals.

In general the women got married before they started their activities. Their participation in the clandestine group until the arrest had no important impact on their family life. Usually there was not the slightest anticipation of the wave of arrests to come, so that the women were totally unprepared for the persecutions.

The generation of the seventies and eighties

The dissident circle and its special milieu began to form in the late 1960s. It united former political prisoners and their families, and people whose way of thinking and acting was unorthodox and who had the same moral values, social positions and life styles.

Women dissidents of the 1970s were on average younger than their forerunners. They became involved in dissident activities as students (and through friends). Often they stopped their studies (sometimes they were expelled) because of their involvement in the dissident movement. Even if they graduated, usually they did not go on to work in an area related to their studies.

In contrast to the sixties generation, their life strategy was not centred upon their professional careers. It was typical of women to choose jobs which offered more free time (though brought in less money), did not control them entirely and left them a certain amount of freedom, which they were not afraid to lose. They worked as janitors, porters, guards, or very often as private typists. The activities in the dissident movement were their means of self-fulfilment and became a profession in itself for them.

As for their private lives, they were usually involved with a man who had been participating in dissident activities for some time. There were also single women involved. The latter claimed they could only ever become involved with 'a comrade-in-arms'. Here is an observation: "How could I marry a stranger, a man, who would not approve of my activities and would not be an unorthodox thinker himself!" (Elena, 43, typist).

Unlike their predecessors, they realized long before marriage that their family lives would be strongly associated with the activities of the dissident movement.

Here is a typical observation by one of the respondents:

> "First our daughter was born. Only after her birth did we get married. Because I understood quite well what sort of life I was going to lead, I had no 'rose-coloured spectacles'. I understood that we were going to have lots of problems because of these activities. (...) It was clear that this man would never earn a lot of money, but it seemed to me, especially when we were young, that although we had nothing, we could be happy. After the KGB began to spy on him, he asked me, 'What will you choose?' It was then that I made the decision to stay with him. After his arrest we did not see each other for five years ." (Tatyana, 44, librarian)

The dissident circle and dissident milieu[4]

The specific feature of the dissident circle was that the members of the movement were constantly persecuted by the state authorities. The latter spied on dissidents, disturbed them, listened to their private discussions and telephone calls, searched their flats and bags and organized various obstacles to their activities. The atmosphere of danger united dissidents and created solidarity, an *ésprit de corps* that consolidated the movement. The interviewees recounted how they "lived in an atmosphere of exceptional fraternity and friendship".

I contend that women in the movement fulfilled an important role as creators of the dissident milieu, the support and information networks of the movement, and its atmosphere of solidarity. Here is a sketch of the history of the dissident circle.

Rendezvous between women with husbands who had been arrested and sent to labour camps and prisons were the beginning of the dissident network. The wives of the sixties generation were the first to meet in this way. Waiting in the queues for their appointments with husbands they met the wives of other political prisoners. The women began to exchange useful information and to share the rare news they received in letters from their detained husbands.

Soon a 'wives' network' was formed which later developed into the infrastructure of the movement.

> "My husband was arrested. (...) I went to the prison - there on a wall I saw a list - what was not forbidden to send to a prisoner. Then I bought something from a shop and returned to the queue. After I had given all the things to the prison official, a woman approached me and said: 'You have bought the wrong things. There are some secrets about how to make up a parcel.' She was already an

> experienced wife of a political prisoner and she gave me a lot of useful advice. For the first time since my husband had been arrested, I had the feeling that I was not alone in my sorrow. I also understood that I had to be such a 'woman in the prison queue', to help women who would soon be in the same situation. This way we could help our arrested husbands better. (...) So when I got to know that someone had been arrested, I always offered his family my help." (Lena, 55, geologist)

The flats of many women dissidents, especially of the wives of prisoners, became a sort of open home. The hostesses themselves had different functions. One such home was known as a 'community centre', where the parcels that were sent to the camps were made. Everyone who wanted to help their brothers- or sisters-in-arms went there to help. Another home contained a 'store' of old children's clothes. Nearly all dissidents lived in poverty, and it was not always easy for the mothers to buy new things for their children. They could always come and look for something in this store. A third flat was the place where one could get legal aid, learn how to write appeals, how to protest against the illegitimate arrest of a husband or a son, and so on.[5]

Usually such open homes were full of people, coming and going. They were known as refuges, where one could always come, sleep or eat, and receive help. Homeless dissidents lived in such flats for weeks on end.

Information from the prisons and camps was very often brought to the women who ran such homes, and was afterwards given to the correspondents of 'The Chronicle of the Current Events'.[6] The dissident open homes were, as one of the respondents said, 'shadow cabinets' of the dissident movement.

Former political prisoners in their interviews and memoirs describe how the labour camp communities were formed. Political prisoners shared the food that they received in parcels, struggled together against the camp administration for their rights, hid their secrets from the informers, and helped each other to survive in a labour camp (Ratushinskaya, 1982; Marchenko, 1993). When they returned to the outside, it seemed to them that there was no solidarity, that people there were too individualistic. Acting together in the dissident movement, the former prisoners tried to re-establish the atmosphere of solidarity with brothers/sisters-in-arms against the enemy - the Soviet Power. They were ready to suffer themselves in order to save their friends from persecution. The betrayal of friends and of the common cause could never be forgiven in dissident circles.

Often relationships between friends replaced those with close relatives (especially when the latter were against the dissent activities). Mutual help in all spheres, not only where the movement was concerned, but also in everyday life

created an atmosphere of being protected by friends as well. Women dissidents - the 'mothers and sisters' of this circle - used to take care of their 'heroic brothers'.

Family life

The family life of women dissidents was not easy, first of all because of the constant persecution. The respondents told me of difficulties caused by their activities and especially by the arrests. They mentioned some of the most vital problems of the time including the long years of loneliness and difficult journeys to rare prison appointments, bringing up children without their fathers, and forced estrangement from the external world because of their negative social status.

Sometimes after the arrest of her boyfriend or husband a woman was expelled from her workplace for her activities and had to look for another way of earning money. If she did stay at her work, she was very often persecuted by the chief or her colleagues for being an 'anti-Soviet element'. Even close relatives did not sympathize with these women in their sorrow. The women felt a great estrangement from the entire Soviet world.

On the other hand these women did not stay alone. Their circle tried to help. Comrades helped each other to nurse children and elderly relatives, and to find a job. Besides the mutual help of friends, the wives of the political prisoners received financial and material support from the foundations from time to time.[7]

Although the respondents reported that they lived in poverty, they often did not mention money as one of the most important problems in their family. The problem of well-being and prosperity did not matter to the respondents. They "could disregard material values for the more significant moral ones." Even typists (the usual women's responsibility in the movement was typewriting of the literature and leaflets) often tried to work for free.

Our respondents told us about the so-called prisoner complex, which their families encountered after their husbands returned from the labour camp. In the camp political prisoners learned to resist the camp administration in order to defend their human rights. As a result, they regarded the entire world as their enemy. They brought back this type of behaviour as they returned home. This caused certain psychological problems in relations, especially with close relatives.

> "After the imprisonment no one remains the same. (...) In the camp, where one has to resist the authorities, a person tries to defend oneself all the time, so he learns to reject everything. He gets angry about every phrase or word, everything disturbs him. (...) The family suffers most of all, it's a very difficult time, and one has to bear it, without conflicts." (Tatyana, 44)

Some of the former prisoners (mostly those who were very young when they got involved in the activities and arrested) could not adapt at all to normal everyday life. They were experienced fighters, 'professional revolutionaries', but they hardly were able to do anything else, except for 'the revolution'. Many spheres of normal everyday life were hidden from them. They had difficulties in getting a job and taking care of themselves, and their social competence was very low.

> "When I met my husband, he had just escaped from a psychiatric prison. He looked very old and he was strangely dressed. (...) He began to open his world to me. This was a new interesting world. (...) My husband was everything to me: a child, a man, a lover, a teacher, and an adviser. He was a philosopher and a historian and he knew a lot about the affairs of the Bolsheviks. He could not find a job after prison, and he became a correspondent for a Western journal. I only helped him. He did not work, he was sitting at home and writing his articles. I was working, earning money, and I did all the work about the house. Sometimes I was very angry with that situation. But in general everything was all right and he was the most unique person I've ever met." (Galina, 61, English teacher)

While men were in prison, or entirely absorbed in dissident activity, women learned how to be the only breadwinner and the head of the family. As a result of this role division, women sometimes stopped to regard the man as a "useful family member". Generally respecting men as intellectual leaders, they confirmed that "it was easier to live without men"; the more so, as single members of the movement did not feel solitude or loneliness - they were included in "a friendship network" that always supported and encouraged them.

In many families the image of a husband and a father as "a fighter for noble ideas" was cultivated. The fact that women dissidents considered men from the dissident circle as quite different from those whom they met elsewhere, is also remarkable. The women who were involved in the movement together with their husbands said that their husband was the embodiment of their ideal, of "a noble man". Most of the respondents described their husbands as "creative talented men", "with interesting views and ways of thinking". The most attractive character trait of the husbands was honesty, "the high level of ethical and moral values", "the wish to live according to their moral values", "not to lie - it was at that time quite rare", the courage and the will to sacrifice himself, or even lay down his life for the truth, for his ideas, and also for friends.

In spite of all the sufferings the married respondents disregarded the drawbacks of their family life, saying that they had found their own unique way of family life and their unique "noble man".

Three types of dissident families

We can distinguish between three different types of family in the dissident circle: the egalitarian, the patriarchal, and the special dissident type of family.

The egalitarian family

In this case the husband and wife both earned money, ran the household together, brought up the children and participated in dissident activities (so that the one who had more free time at the moment was more active). In the movement they were both usually not leaders.

> "We got married when I was 19 and he was 20. Our daughter was born soon: we tried to get out of the city nearly every weekend. We read and talked a lot. We travelled together with our friends. We began to participate in the group together around 1963. My husband was the main publisher of the book that our group was disseminating. He compiled it using a camera - like a book of photographs. I helped him to do it. Then once they wrote leaflets, I went to the university and distributed them there. There were some other activities as well.
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> Then, when my husband was arrested, the KGB officials said that they were going to arrest me as well. I was quite prepared for it, because I had done quite a lot in the group. So I wrote our daughter a letter and asked her not to blame us, that we tried to do our best and that her father had been imprisoned already. I was sure that they would take me as well, but they left me alone.
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> In the 1970s my husband was the head of the Solzhenitsyn Foundation, but he did not want me to participate in it. We had a little son, we were both working and I was earning much more money than my husband, because he had less opportunities after prison. So I had to work a lot.
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> We ran the household together. My husband took his part in the bringing-up of our children. He repairs everything in the house, and can also cook sometimes. (...) I am happy with the marriage." (Nina, 56, chemist)

The patriarchal family

In such families the husband was a leader in the dissident movement. His wife took the traditional serving roles of a housekeeper, mother, and secretary. She was also the main breadwinner. The man partly participated in the cultural education of children. The woman decided on all kinds of family questions. Their flat was usually at the same time a 'headquarter' of the leader where the wife played the role of hostess.

> "My husband had a large network of informants. I didn't know everything about his affairs. He thought a wife should not be involved in everything and later remain free and bring the parcels to her husband into prison. (...)
>
> We had a little room in a communal flat. Usually a lot of people visited us and we discussed political news and books. (...) My husband thought the most useful thing I could do was to make salads and tea. (...) Certainly, I did it. I also took part in the conversations. Then we began to disseminate the information bulletin. My husband looked for information and arranged everything and I helped him.
>
> We both worked. Once I said that I would like to find a more interesting job. He said, 'Don't worry, you are the secretary of a mighty man.' (...) Then we were both arrested." (Irina, 60, tour guide)

Women in patriarchal families were at the beginning, as they expressed it, 'dissident wives' rather than dissidents themselves. Among them there were mostly women who never intended to participate in any political activities themselves. They came into the dissident movement because of their marriage to a dissident. Some of them said: "In our family we have a role division: my business is the home, his business is politics". Although they did not intend to "mix with politics", they could not avoid it, because even if they "just brought tea" to the leaders, they became involved in the dissident circle and therefore became outsiders of the society together with their husbands. Their own activity in general began only after their husband's arrest and was oriented to helping him much more than to help the movement. Nevertheless this activity was often very useful, and the 'patriarchal wives' were impartially regarded as full and equal members of the dissident circle.

Here is another observation:

> "Before I met my husband I was an active *komsomol* member, but I never wanted to make a career. It was necessary to lie everywhere even in scientific circles. Deep in my heart I dreamed of having a normal family, of children. Nothing else really interested me. (...) When I met my husband, it was awful - all my values began to change. But then I felt myself very happy. He was a man who had his own ideals, a high level of ethical and moral values, who didn't want to lie. (...) I got to know that he took an active part in some seminars, but I didn't take part in them. I spent a lot of time with our little daughter... Family life has never been the right element for my husband. It's only something that warms him. To my mind revolutionaries in general are not interested in everyday life. They are not family men, they think in a different way. For me it's normal. I'm not interested in the men's world either. I like to be at home with the children. (...)
>
> He was arrested, everybody wanted to help me. People supported me, both morally and materially. Then a representative of the Solzhenitsyn Foundation

> came. He brought me some money, some food, helped to find a lawyer, organized a meeting with my husband. I also helped him to distribute help afterwards. Then I got aquainted with other wives. We helped each other a lot." (Tatyana, 44, librarian)

The dissident family type

Some of the participants began to create this special type of family in the 1970s. In this case the family situation of dissidents was influenced and even dependent upon the traditions of that milieu and the requirements of the movement.

The prison marriage was one specific case. The couple were registered when the partner (normally it was a boyfriend) had been or was going to be arrested. Dissidents got the hard-won opportunity to marry in prison in 1969 after the hunger-strike of Alexandr Ginzburg (Smirnov, 1972). To register a marriage was necessary for several reasons.

> "Our marriage was registered in prison (...) because our son had been born. He was six weeks old when my friend was arrested. The child was not registered at all, as if he didn't exist... Before we were not going to register the marriage. In fact, one needed a stamp in one's passport to have the right of 'private rendezvous', which meant to live for two days in the punishment labour camp together with a husband in the hostel for relatives. This was the way to get information, what was going on in the political zone and to feed a man with normal food. This was very important.
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> I lived together with my child; I received financial support as the wife of a political prisoner from the Solzhenitsyn Foundation, and sometimes from foreigners, who helped us. (...) I worked in the Foundation myself, and also worked as a private typist." (Natalya, 44, typist)

The spouses who created this type of family "were above family relationships". They told me that their family lives centred around the activities in the dissident movement. Wives in such families were regarded by their husbands first of all as comrades-in-arms. Even conflicts normal for the 'usual' families (the role division, 'the husband doesn't bring in enough money', 'the wife doesn't clean the flat or cook meals', he or she has a lover) did not normally take place. This is how this style of relation was explained by one of the respondents:

> "We were true to each other. But we knew we had the moral possibility of infidelity. For the families of the older generation of dissent such a relationship was not typical. But for the generation of seventies - the 'children of the sexual revolution' - it was a political slogan, a symbol, a flag. This had a great impact on their families. A person who caused a row because of the adultery of the spouse looked like a complete idiot. One could have a lover who was very often

> from the same circle, and was invited as a guest to the family." (Alla, 25, economist, married to a dissident in 1988)

Such behaviour was partly a consequence of the principle of 'truth in all aspects of life', the most important value for most of the activists. However the high standard of moral values, typical of the world view of dissidents generally did not apply to family relations. Rather, it concerned their responsibility for the activities and for friends, especially in the case of arrest.

The respondents also used to disregard personal offences, paying more attention to the demands of the common cause:

> "I divorced my husband when his next wife was pregnant and I already lived with another man. (...) We all knew that soon my first husband would be arrested again, so they had to register their marriage, for he had to have an official wife to go to the rendezvous. (...) This girl lived in another city and when she came to Leningrad she used to help me with my child while I was arranging other things. It's not easy to explain - but as 'our' husband was arrested no other problems mattered any more. The most important thing for both of us was to help him." (Natalya, 44, typist)

So called fictional marriages were also widespread among dissidents, usually being organized in order to support the political prisoner with parcels and news during the time of imprisonment, or to get permission to move to another city. The 'stamp in the Soviet passport' was not considered a meaningful symbol of marriage, but was from time to time used for the purposes of the movement.

Here is an example, from the memoirs of the well-known civil rights activist Anatoly Marchenko (1993, p. 368):

> "After my book was disseminated in samizdat, I began to prepare for arrest. I had to get a 'close relative' in Moscow, who could have the right to help me with lawyers and to come to the 'rendezvous'. One very nice girl suggested becoming my 'bride'. We went to the state office and announced a marriage application".

The impact of motherhood

Several dissident women did not leave the movement after the birth of a child. Many of them were involved (usually together with their husbands), already having up to three children. Analyses of the interviews, documents and memoirs showed that children very often 'saved' their mothers from arrest. Normally KGB did not arrest mothers of little children, especially if their husbands had already

been put into prison. Most of the women who spent several years in labour camps in 1957-1986, had not had children before being arrested.

Women had a attitude to this question:

> "When a husband sits,[8] it's a normal situation. But it's awful when a woman sits there. (...) All the warm clothes were taken away from them and they were often put into a cold punishment cell. It was hardly possible to give birth to a child after all that... When a woman is in prison, it is tragic. When she stays at home, even alone, bringing up her children, this is natural." (Natalya, 44, typist)

Such views were widespread among women dissidents. In the seventies and eighties this role division between men and women was approved by most of them.

In the Russian tradition, motherhood is considered to be a woman's most important responsibility. A woman who has not given birth to a child is considered to be unhappy and not quite normal.

This point of view was quite typical of the women dissidents as well. Some of the respondents from the generation of the seventies stated that "it's not necessary to have a husband, but it's normal to have a child". Although our respondents confirmed that "this activity didn't leave any time and energy for children", or that "there was no place for children in this system of relations", motherhood was very significant for the majority of the interviewees. Some of them had special ideas about upbringing and even wrote articles in *samizdat* about it.

The women spent a lot of time with children, hoping that their activities would not be an obstacle to the children's happiness and education.

> "I brought them up as a normal mother. I read them fairy tales aloud, we went for walks in the woods. Sunday was always a day off from the underground work. That day I spent only with my children." (Lena, 55, geologist)

Unlike women, men dissidents often did not take such days off to spend with the family. This role division was a norm of life for most families. At the same time the children were a sort of common property of the community. As the women told me, "I was not afraid for my child, I knew that my friends would help him to survive and would bring him up in any case" (Elena, 43, typist).

The following view was very typical:

> "Certainly, parents bring up children, but the community also looks after them. I was sure that living among me and my friends, the child would be our child." (The same woman)

Although most of the parents tried "not to influence the world view of children with their views", "not to say, that father is in prison", children usually took part in the common business of the grown-ups.

> "We were all doing a lot of things together. For example we received Western aid-packets of dry chicken broth. We were not allowed to send them in a parcel, so we made secret 'oat biscuits' of them, according to a special recipe. My daughters who were ten and three years old both helped me." (Lena, 55, geologist)

Gender images in the dissident family

I have tried to show that the dissident movement was not entirely a movement of leaders with various ideologies. It was first of all a specific milieu, a circle of people sharing a particular way of life, united by informal networks and relations.

The common cause uniting the dissident circle, and every family that belonged to it, looked like a family business. As I have already mentioned, the relationships between friends were so close that they were similar to the relations between family members. The interviewees described how this situation arose from the common problems and sorrows that were typical only in that milieu and therefore united the members of the circle.

The dissident circle can therefore be presented as a 'quasi-family'. Dissidents in general did not draw a distinction between the private and public spheres of their lives. Underground work, 'quasi-public' activities, were regarded at the same time as private activity, because this work was always carried out in the flats (or rooms) of dissidents, and all members of the family living there, had to participate in it somehow.

> "We discussed how to 'publish' my book. (...) The T:s rented a flat, and suggested working there. We found three typewriters somewhere; one of them broke down immediately, so four of us worked in turn. Those who could not type, helped to correct mistakes and to edit. One couple worked in the kitchen, the other in the room. (The little child of the hosts slept in the adjacent room). There were sheets of paper everywhere. (...) In the kitchen someone constantly made coffee and sandwiches, and in the room someone slept. Work went on round the clock for two days." (Marchenko, 1993, pp. 362-3)

Private life (relationships with partners, family members, children and friends) formed the 'homefront', very important for the movement, because as the latter was forbidden it could hardly survive without a very strong back-up.