

Human Rights Centre Clinic

Civil Obedience for the present day: can dissident strategies from the Soviet Union be used in response to growing illiberalism in the 21st century?

Partner: [Index on Censorship](#)

About

Index on Censorship is a non-profit organisation that campaigns for and defends freedom of expression worldwide. It publishes work by censored writers and artists, promotes debate, and monitors threats to free speech. Index's vision is that everyone should be free to express themselves without fear of harm or persecution – no matter what their views. Index on Censorship publishes an award-winning quarterly magazine, devoted to protecting and promoting free expression. Since 1972, [Index on Censorship](#) has been reporting on free expression violations around the world, publishing banned writing, and shining a light on vital free expression issues through original and challenging commentary and analysis by some of the most influential voices in literature and journalism. Index advocates for changes in law and policy to ensure governments and businesses respect the fundamental right to free speech and fights censorship in journalism, the arts, and campaigning by supporting those affected and drawing attention to the challenges they face.

Project overview

What can we learn from the experience of Soviet-era dissidents and apply to the increasingly authoritarian situation in the United States today? Is it even possible to speak of “American dissidents”? In this project, students will explore lessons to be learned from Soviet dissidents, combining historical and advocacy approaches, drawing on the work of Pulitzer Prize-winning author Benjamin Nathans, Alan Charles Kors Associate Professor at the University of Pennsylvania. In his 2024 book *To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause: The Many Lives of the Soviet Dissident Movement*, Nathans explains how opposition activists of the late 1960s and early 1970s used the legal system to challenge the Soviet authorities. In this way, they sought to force the Soviet regime to uphold its constitutional free speech commitments. Supporting Index on Censorship's longstanding advocacy for the right to free expression, the project will examine

whether it is possible to apply these methods to contemporary America and to fighting the authoritarian patterns that have emerged.

The project will be supervised by renowned journalist [Martin Bright](#), Senior Lecturer at the University of Essex and Editor-at-Large of Index on Censorship. Martin has over 30 years' experience as a journalist, working for the Observer, the Guardian, and the New Statesman among others. He has worked on several high-profile freedom of expression cases often involving government secrecy. He broke the story of Iraq War whistleblower Katharine Gun, which was made into the film Official Secrets (2019) starring Keira Knightley.

Students will also work with [Jemimah Steinfeld](#), the CEO of Index on Censorship. Jemimah has lived and worked in both Shanghai and Beijing where she has written on a wide range of topics, with a particular focus on youth culture, gender, and censorship. Jemimah has freelanced for various publications including the Guardian, the Independent, the Times, CNN, and Prospect.

Background

The Soviet dissident movement is usually understood as a political or literary phenomenon. However, it was also tied up in the fight for legal rights. Article 125 of the 1936 Soviet Constitution stated:

In conformity with the interests of the toilers, and in order to strengthen the socialist system, citizens of the USSR shall be guaranteed by law:

- (a) *freedom of speech*
- (b) *freedom of the press*
- (c) *freedom of assembly and meetings*
- (d) *freedom of street processions and demonstrations*

The so-called Stalin Constitution remained in place for four decades and was only replaced in 1977. Constitution Day was marked every year on December 5 in the Soviet Union.

One of the key moments in the birth of the dissident movement was a demonstration that took place on Constitution Day in 1965. The poet Alexander Volpin held up a sign that said "Respect the Constitution" and began to develop a strategy of resistance. Nathans describes this as "civil obedience" – holding the Soviet authorities to its own standards. As the dissident movement grew over the next quarter century it continued to be inspired by Volpin's concept of glasnost (transparency), eventually adopted by the Soviet Union's reforming President Mikhail Gorbachev.

This project will look at the legal approaches used by dissidents from 1965 through to the collapse of the Soviet Union and examine whether they could be used to challenge authoritarian actions in contemporary contexts. The US will be used as a key case study, as it is a stark example of a democratic country that has displayed recent and emerging patterns of executive abuse of power that have led to restrictions on

free speech, the free press, and the right to protest. The project will explore legal strategies already adopted by American opponents to the Trump government in these areas, and whether they could be helped by an analysis of the Soviet era.

Project output

Index on Censorship will work with a project team from Essex Human Rights Centre Clinic to produce a report (totalling approximately 10,000-12,000 words) which will combine a historical examination of the legal activism of the Soviet dissident movement and how its techniques might be used today. The report will include:

- A survey of Soviet-era “civil obedience” including an examination of the key architects of the dissident movement and the legal techniques they adopted;
- Interviews with experts on the dissident movement;
- An examination of the efficacy of the dissident approach and an analysis of whether it amounted to a system of resistance or something more ad hoc;
- An assessment of how applicable such an approach might be in the 21st century context;
- Recommendations for policy makers, legal professionals and human rights activists.

This research will build an important historical record of “civil obedience” in the Soviet Union. This will help shift the understanding of the era away from a purely political or cultural analysis. This approach will provide new strategies for activists, journalists, and lawyers working to challenge executive power today.

The team will submit a 1,000-2,000 word blog post to be jointly published by Index and the Essex Human Rights Centre Clinic in May 2027.

Timeline

Phase 1: November – December 2026:

- Scoping research, understanding the project and developing the report outline.
- Identifying a list of experts.
- Securing ethical approval, if necessary.
- Outline and bibliography to be submitted to the partner organisation for comments.

Phase 2: January – March 2027:

- Carrying out the interviews online.
- Research and data gathering.
- Submission of the first full draft to the partner.

Phase 3: April – May 2027:

- Revision and finalising the report.
- Blog for Index on Censorship about the main findings of the project.
- Presentation of project to the partner organisation.

Initial reading/viewing

1. *To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause: The Many Lives of the Soviet Dissident Movement*, Benjamin Nathans (2024)
2. American Dissident, Martin Bright's report for Index on Censorship on Benjamin Nathans interview <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/03064220251359913a>
3. Full YouTube interview with Benjamin Nathans at Pushkin House, London <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mA5JckAMFTY>
4. *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible*, Peter Pomerantsev (2014)
5. *This is Not Propaganda*, Peter Pomerantsev (2019)
6. *They Chose Freedom*. Four-part series on Soviet dissidents by Vladimir Kara-Murza, later imprisoned by Putin <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEkkV7dInyQ>
7. The origins of Index on Censorship. Guardian article from 2022: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2022/mar/27/index-on-censorship-inspired-by-soviet-dissidents-marks-50-years-of-fighting-for-free-speech>
8. *Dissidents, Spies and the Lies that Came in From the Cold*. The history of Index on Censorship. <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2022/04/dissidents-spies-and-the-lies-that-came-in-from-the-cold/>

Focal point

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