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Dissenting Views:

Secular Liberals, Soviet Christians, and Socialist Humanism in the Brezhnev Era

by Alexander J. McConnell

Soviet dissidents and human rights defenders are often characterized as "humanists" who stood firm against political repression in the name of universal human values. Indeed, "humanism" is sometimes used as a shorthand for ideological overlap between figures who shared little else besides their opposition to the Soviet government. Yet such characterizations gloss over the complex relationship of various dissident "humanisms" to one another, as well as to the official "socialist humanism" of the Communist Party during the post-Stalin decades. By the 1970s, many secular dissidents had disengaged from Thaw-era debates centering on the concept of humanism, opting for legalistic and personal appeals over theoretical polemics. Remarkably, the USSR's most famous dissident during this period, Andrei Sakharov, almost never used the term itself (*gumanizm*) in his writings, deploying instead the closely related but distinct word "humaneness" (*gumannost'*). By contrast, Christian dissidents continued to engage directly with the concept of humanism and to debate the challenge that both Soviet socialist and Western humanisms posed to their own philosophical projects. Such deep engagement with twentieth-century humanism in its disparate configurations was unique to the Christian variant of Soviet dissidence, distinguishing it from (rather than aligning it with) its more celebrated secular liberal cousin.

Keywords: Soviet dissidents, humanism, socialism, secularism, liberalism, humaneness, Christianity, Andrei Sakharov, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, samizdat, human rights

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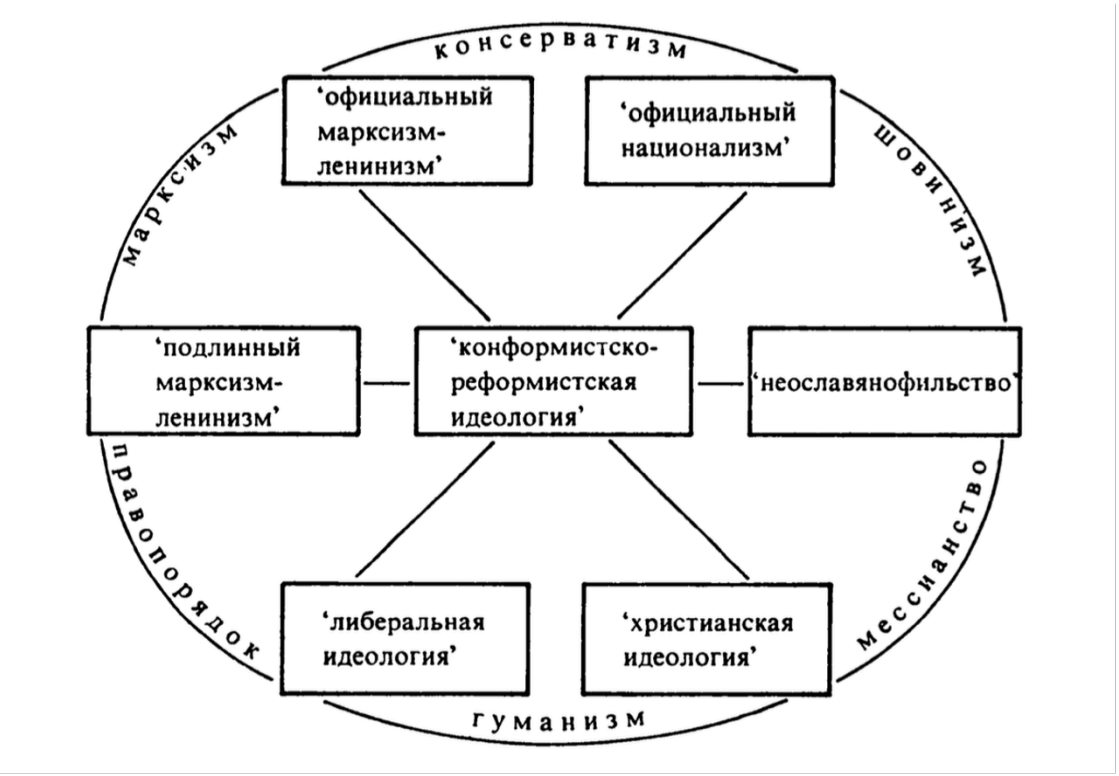

Figure 1. Diagram of late Soviet ideological tendencies. Source: Andrei Amal'rik, *Prosushchestvuet li Sovetskii Soiuz do 1984 goda?* (Alexander Herzen Foundation, 1970), 37.

In his influential 1969 essay *Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?*, the dissident writer Andrei Amal'rik includes a diagram of the relationships between various ideological tendencies in the post-Stalin USSR (Figure 1). At the center of this diagram, Amal'rik locates what he terms the reigning "conformist-reformist ideology" of the Communist Party bureaucracy and the Soviet middle classes, which he suggests is nebulous enough to share features with every other ideological tendency. The diagram's outer ring, meanwhile, illustrates how each of the country's narrower or more marginal ways of thinking relates to one another. Thus, for example, "official Marxism-Leninism" is linked to "offi-

cial nationalism" through the common feature of "conservatism," as well as to "genuine Marxism-Leninism" (rather tautologically) through the philosophy of "Marxism" itself.

This article centers on the ideological relationship that Amal'rik locates at the bottom of his diagram: that between "liberal ideology" and "Christian ideology." Specifically, it concerns the concept that he uses to relate these two post-Stalin dissident tendencies, namely "humanism" (*gumanizm*).[1] For Amal'rik, this term seems to have connoted a broadly shared commitment to human dignity and individual autonomy on the part of both Soviet liberals and Christians, one without precedent in Russian history.[2] Yet, as with the case of "official" versus "genuine" Marxism, the "humanisms" of various figures within the dissident community were not always compatible, let alone identical. This became increasingly evident over the course of the 1960s as secular liberals abandoned their Thaw-era hopes for a more humane Soviet system in favor of a legalistic, rights-based strategy of dissent.[3] In particular, the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, which crushed the Prague Spring movement and its program of "socialism with a human face," was a watershed moment that disillusioned many liberal reformers across the USSR and Eastern Bloc.[4]

Amal'rik's 1969 diagram likewise overlooks the significance and function of humanism as a concept within Soviet official ideology itself. As a fundamental socialist value, albeit one whose scope and meaning were always contested, humanism's ideological significance in the USSR was well-established by the 1960s.[5] Over the next decade, however, the concept's ideological function expanded further as Party theorists deployed it to help articulate a new discourse of socialist human rights in response to domestic and international pressures.[6] Humanism even played a supporting role in Leonid Brezhnev's push for Western recognition of the USSR as a coequal partner during the so-called Helsinki Process of the early 1970s.[7] For example, a December 1973 *Izvestiia* column marking the anniversary of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights included

1. On the Stalin-era origins of this concept in Soviet ideology and public culture, see Alexander McConnell, "'Tragic Presentiments': Maksim Gor'kii and the Invention of Soviet Humanism," *Slavic Review* 83, no. 2 (2024): 300–317.

2. "As a people, we have not benefited from Europe's humanist tradition. In Russian history man has always been a means and never in any sense an end. It is paradoxical that the term 'period of the cult of the personality'—by which the Stalin era is euphemistically designated—came to mean for us a period of such humiliation and repression of the human personality as even our people had never previously experienced." Andrei Amal'rik, *Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?*, rev. ed. (Harper & Row, 1971), 34.

3. Benjamin Nathans, *To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause: The Many Lives of the Soviet Dissident Movement* (Princeton University Press, 2024), esp. chapters 5–7.

4. Nathans, *To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause*, 238–267. See also Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring* (Cornell University Press, 2010).

5. Aleksandr Bikbov, *Grammatika poriadka. Istoricheskaia sotsiologiia poniatii, kotorye meniaiut nashu real'nost'* (Izd. dom Vysshei shkoly ekonomiki, 2014), 173–194.

6. Examples of this trend in the specialist literature on human rights include V.D. Popkov, *Gumanizm sovetskogo prava* (MGU, 1972); G.V. Mal'tsev, "Sotsialisticheskii gumanizm i prava cheloveka," *Pravovedenie*, no. 5 (1977): 24–34; V.M. Chkhikvadze, *Sotsialisticheskii gumanizm i prava cheloveka. Leninskie idei i sovremennost'* (Nauka, 1978). For a detailed overview of this literature, see Richard Greenfield, "The Human Rights Literature of the Soviet Union," *Human Rights Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1982): 124–136.

7. On the Helsinki Process, see Michael Cotey Morgan, *The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

this emphatic assertion of the Soviet Union's humanizing influence on the postwar legal order:

> The humanism of the Great October Socialist Revolution, accomplished by the workers of Russia for humanity, in humanity's name, and the humanism of the Soviet social order have exercised a great influence on the formation in contemporary international law of principles and norms serving the interests of peace, democracy, and the broad masses.[8]

Brezhnev himself underlined this connection in his keynote speech at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the venue for the signing of the Helsinki Final Act, on July 31, 1975:

> Before this exceptionally competent audience, we would like to stress most emphatically one of the inherent features of the foreign policy of the Soviet Union, of the Leninist policy of peace and friendship among nations—its humanism. The decisions of the 24th Congress of our Party are imbued with ideas of humanism as is the Peace Program, a plank of which called for the convocation of an all-European conference.[9]

Humanism was thus not only (or even primarily) an oppositional term in the post-Stalin USSR, a fact that further complicates its use as a neutral descriptor for overlapping dissident "ideologies."

Both liberal and Christian dissidents, I argue, broadly rejected the socialist humanism of Soviet official discourse, but for different reasons and with a variety of alternatives in mind. During the Brezhnev era, liberal dissidents tended to treat official invocations of humanism as little more than rhetorical window dressing for state repression and human rights violations. From the liberal perspective, Soviet ideology had perverted humanism's historical meanings and grounding in the European philosophical tradition to a degree that risked compromising the concept itself.[10] Indeed, by 1969, many rights defenders (*pravozashchitniki*) and other prominent exponents of Amal'rik's "liberal ideology" had disengaged from the previous decade's debates about humanism, opting for legalistic and personal appeals over theoretical polemics.[11] Remarkably, the Soviet Union's most famous liberal dissident during this period, the physicist Andrei Sakharov, almost never used the term "humanism" in his own writings, despite being lauded as a great humanist by contemporaries and retrospective observers alike.[12] Instead, as I show, Sakharov consistently deployed the closely related but distinct word "humaneness" (*gumannost'*) as a strategic appeal to the personal emotions and moral consciences of his powerful interlocutors. While this strategy succeeded in avoiding the

8. I. Blishchenko, "Vo imia demokratii i progressa," *Izvestiia*, no. 288, December 8, 1973, 2.

9. Leonid I. Brezhnev, *Peace, Detente, Cooperation* (Consultants Bureau, 1981), 24.

10. For a recent survey of the humanist tradition in the West, see Sarah Bakewell, *Humanly Possible: Seven Hundred Years of Humanist Freethinking, Inquiry, and Hope* (Penguin Press, 2023).

11. For a characteristic example of these early 1960s debates, see I.I. Anisimov, N.K. Gei, and L.N. Novichenko, eds., *Gumanizm i sovremennaia literatura* (Izd. Akademii nauk SSSR, 1963).

12. See, e.g., Petr Abovin-Egides, *Andrei Sakharov. Tragediia velikogo gumanista* (Poiski, 1985); Andrei Loshak, "Andreiu Sakharovu—100 let. Kak gumanist pobedil uchenogo?" *Meduza*, May 21, 2021, https://meduza.io/feature/2021/05/21/andreyu-saharovu-100-let-kak-gumanist-pobedil-uchenogo.

thorny issue of humanism's status as a Soviet ideological concept, it ultimately failed to prevent (and perhaps even invited) the public use of the term as a political corrective by Sakharov's critics.

In contrast to their liberal counterparts, Christian dissidents during the 1970s continued to engage directly with the concept of humanism and to debate the challenge that both Soviet socialist and Western secular humanisms posed to their own philosophical projects.[13] Far from being united by a single "Christian ideology," however, these thinkers expressed a broad range of views on the compatibility of religious faith, human freedom, and political rights. Figures as intellectually distant from one another as the self-described Christian socialist Anatolii Krasnov-Levitin and the Russian nationalist writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrestled with what humanism could and should mean for a religious opposition to Soviet authority. Such deep engagement with twentieth-century humanism in its socialist and secular configurations, I suggest, was unique to the Christian variant of Soviet dissidence and distinguishes it from (rather than aligns it with) its more celebrated secular cousin. Yet this preoccupation with humanism also led many Christian thinkers astray in assessing Soviet human rights activists like Sakharov, whom they either tended to dismiss as atheist wolves in secular sheep's clothing or tried to claim as spiritual brethren who had strayed from the flock. Whether positive or negative, these assessments rested on a misattribution of religious meaning to nonreligious dissent based on a contested concept—humanism—that few secular liberal dissidents of the era actually employed.

"On the Basis of Humaneness": Sakharov's Human Rights Appeals and Soviet Humanism

Broadly speaking, secular liberal dissidents and human rights activists in the Brezhnev era fell into one of two categories: those who were dismissive of Soviet official humanism, and those who were disengaged from this discourse entirely.[14] The former camp held that official invocations of humanism were nothing more than a cynical ruse to justify state repression. For instance, Mal'va Landa, a founding member of the Moscow Helsinki Group, wrote in 1979 that when compared to fascism, "communist ideology and regimes, and the Soviet regime in particular, are characterized by greater hypocrisy (more skillfully disguised as 'humanism'), greater deceit, and a limitless capacity for falsification."[15] Eduard Kuznetsov, a Jewish refusenik who in 1970 received a death sentence (later commuted) for attempting to hijack an airplane to flee the USSR,

13. On "secular humanism" as an organized twentieth-century social movement and its relation to atheism, see Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, *Atheist Awakening: Secular Activism and Community in America* (Oxford University Press, 2014); Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism: The Politics of a Modern Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Callum G. Brown, David Nash, and Charlie Lynch, *The Humanist Movement in Modern Britain: A History of Ethicists, Rationalists, and Humanists* (Bloomsbury, 2022).

14. By "secular," I have in mind dissidents whose political activism was not primarily religious in nature, regardless of their personal beliefs. This group includes many secular Jews, who were overrepresented in the dissident movement relative to the overall Soviet population. Nathans, *To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause*, 517.

15. Houghton Library, Harvard University, Human Rights Collection (henceforth HRC), Box 74 (Label 55), File 3, Page 10.

described from prison his own experience of this ideological dissonance: "For too long, you've been stuffed full with declarations of humanism, democracy, and justice, so you can't believe that you've really been deemed an enemy of the state and are going to be punished by death."[16] Other liberal figures, however, refused to even engage with what they saw as a tired recapitulation of Thaw-era debates. When the children's poet Kornei Chukovskii warned his daughter, the writer Lidiia Chukovskaia, against "giving into provocation" over a 1968 speech by the Party-aligned writer Sergei Mikhalkov that used humanism to attack cultural soft-liners, she replied curtly: "This is all very boring since it's already been done a thousand times. The same words, the same people, the same syntax."[17]

Andrei Sakharov, the country's most renowned and respected dissident voice on human rights, also provides a striking example of this latter tendency towards disengagement from the official discourse of Soviet humanism. While Sakharov's political views evolved over time, his letters to domestic and foreign leaders reveal a consistent preference for appeals to "humaneness" (*gumannost'*) rather than the more ideologically charged humanism.[18] Indeed, as mentioned above, Sakharov almost never used the term "humanism" in his own writings. When he did so, it was exclusively to honor the work of fellow dissidents, never to debate the finer points of humanism or invoke it as a fundamental Soviet value.[19] By comparison, "humaneness" appears regularly in Sakharov's copious human rights appeals of the 1970s-1980s. This was the case for letters to Soviet officials as well as to world leaders like Pope John Paul II.[20] "We are convinced," Sakharov wrote in a draft press release in 1972, "that the cause of defending human rights and humaneness in the USSR is not a purely internal matter of our country."[21]

This subtle semantic difference, I argue, in fact represents a strategic move by Sakharov to shift his struggle with the regime onto more favorable rhetorical ground. Though the two terms are closely related, only humanism ever attained something like official status within the increasingly "fixed and normalized discursive system" of late Soviet ideology.[22] Moreover, despite sharing a Latin root, *gumanizm* and *gummanost'*

16. Eduard Kuznetsov, *Dnevniki* (Les Editeurs Réunis, 1973), 145. I have slightly modified the unattributed English translation found in Eduard Kuznetsov, *Prison Diaries* (Liberty Publishing House, 2017), 68.

17. Lidiia Chukovskaia and Kornei Chukovskii, "'Nasha biografiia ne v nashei vlasti': Perepiska (1912–1969)," *Druzhba narodov*, no. 11 (2001): 182–183. Mikhalkov's speech, delivered at the Moscow city CPSU headquarters in April 1968, spoke of the need to "remind these literati about what humanism is in Maxim Gorky's understanding ... a militant humanism of implacable struggle against the hypocrisy and falsehoods of those concerned with saving the old world." S. Mikhalkov, "Vsem serdtsem s partiei!" *Literaturnaia gazeta*, no. 14, April 3, 1968, 2.

18. On Sakharov's political evolution, see Jay Bergman, *Meeting the Demands of Reason: The Life and Thought of Andrei Sakharov* (Cornell University Press, 2009).

19. For instance, a letter that Sakharov wrote circa 1987 refers to the late dissident Anatolii Marchenko's "enormous contribution to the cause of democracy, humanism, and justice." Houghton Library, Harvard University, Andrei Sakharov Papers (henceforth MS Russ 79), Box 30, File 1887.

20. MS Russ 79, Box 31, File 1941.

21. MS Russ 79, Box 81, File 6095, Page 2.

22. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 14.

have distinct connotations in Russian due to their endings. The suffix *-izm* suggests a system or a school of thought (e.g. *kommunizm*, *Marksizm*), while *-ost'* more commonly refers to personal traits or feelings (e.g. *zhalost'* [pity], *vneshnost'* [appearance]).[23] This lexical distinction was even observed in Brezhnev-era legal theory, which characterized humaneness as a more psychologically specific and emotionally laden manifestation of the social principle of humanism. As the aptly titled 1972 book *The Humanism of Soviet Law* explains:

> In the proper (narrow) sense of the word, humanism refers to relations between society and man, between the collective and the individual, individuals imbued with love for humanity and respect for human dignity. In ethical-psychological terms, one expression of humanism is generosity, kindness, tolerance, i.e. that which is typically understood as humaneness.[24]

For Sakharov, therefore, invoking "humaneness" was no mere stylistic preference; it was a way of targeting the emotions and moral consciences of individual leaders without opening up a broader theoretical dispute.

Appeals on behalf of individual political prisoners were a constant feature of Sakharov's dissidence from the late 1960s onwards.[25] Initially, at least, he crafted these appeals to persuade rather than antagonize, adopting a deferential tone towards Brezhnev and other Party leaders. This strategy reflected what Sakharov's biographer Jay Bergman dubs the dissident's "humane elitism," the view that it was the Soviet state's duty—in consultation with and guided by the educated elite—to move towards a more open, rational, and ethical system.[26] Nor did Sakharov yet consider it necessary to abandon socialism, the moral values and "universal, international approach" of which he continued to see as the basis for future convergence with the capitalist world.[27]

This attitude can be seen across Sakharov's extensive correspondence with Soviet state and Party officials during the Brezhnev era. In a collective letter to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in 1970, for example, Sakharov and several other human rights defenders praised the government's decision to drop charges against Irina Kaplan and Viacheslav Bakhmin, two students arrested for anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda. While legal harassment for ideological reasons "remains an important problem," the dissidents wrote, "this humane act by the Presidium gives us hope that we can appeal not only to the law, but also to the humaneness of the authorities." Many others who had been wrongly convicted on similar charges, the letter continued, "proudly endure suffering and are not inclined to appeal to the sympathies of

23. N.Iu. Shvedova et al., eds., *Russkaia grammatika. Tom 1* (Nauka, 1980), 170, 176. See also R.A. Budagov, *Istoriia slov v istorii obshestva* (Prosveshchenie, 1971), 134–155.

24. Popkov, *Gumanizm sovetskogo prava*, 66.

25. Andrei Sakharov, *Memoirs*, trans. Richard Lourie (Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 267–280.

26. Bergman, *Meeting the Demands of Reason*, 147.

27. A.D. Sakharov, "Razmyshleniia o progresse, mirnom sosushchestvovanii i intellekual'noi svobode," in *Trevoga i nadezhda*, ed. Elena Bonner, 2nd ed. (Inter-Verso, 1991), 42. Compare the uncredited English translation in Andrei Sakharov, *Progress, Coexistence, & Intellectual Freedom* (W.W. Norton, 1968), 78, which misleadingly renders *obshchechelovecheskii* ("universal," "common-to-all-humanity") as "humanistic."

the authorities" despite hardships due to health or old age. In such cases, "an act of humaneness would be especially appropriate."[28]

Both halves of Sakharov's "humane elitism" are on display in this letter. Despite its legal subject, the letter's primary category is not "truth" (*pravda*) or "law" (*pravo*), but humaneness—compassion or sympathy for the well-being of others, expressed in actions that need not be legally motivated. Both the KGB's recommendation to drop the charges (partly, it seems, based on a lack of evidence) and the Presidium's decision to do so are described independently as "humane," as if to emphasize the unusual but welcome nature of this outcome. At the same time, Sakharov and the other signatories cast this decision as a potential precedent for defendants in similar circumstances. Importantly, this is not a legal standard, but rather a model of humane action for scenarios in which such action on the part of the authorities would be "especially appropriate." Rather than imploring Soviet leaders to observe their own laws, a fundamental demand of the Soviet dissident movement, Sakharov and his allies are content here with appealing to their personal compassion and humane wisdom.[29]

Sakharov took a similar approach in a letter he sent jointly to the Supreme Soviet Presidium Chairman Nikolai Podgornyi and U.S. President Richard M. Nixon three months later. Sakharov's message to Nixon concerned the radical feminist and Communist Party member Angela Davis, whom the President had called a "dangerous terrorist" upon her arrest in October 1970.[30] Whether or not Sakharov was aware of this, he directed his appeal to the judicial system rather than Nixon: "I hope that the American court will consider the Davis case with total impartiality. I also hope for humaneness from the American court." Conversely, Sakharov framed his message to Podgornyi, a plea for leniency in the Leningrad hijacking case mentioned above, in terms of the Soviet leader's personal authority: "Comrade Chairman! Do not allow [Mark] Dymshits and [Eduard] Kuznetsov to be executed. That would be unjustifiably cruel. Reduce their sentences in line with the other defendants." Sakharov closed with a direct appeal: "I hope for your personal humaneness (*lichnaia gumannost'*) and consideration of the higher interests of humanity."[31]

By linking the Angela Davis and Dymshits-Kuznetsov cases, Bergman contends, Sakharov "suggested their moral equivalence and, more subtly, the moral equivalence of the Soviet and American legal systems."[32] However, the rhetorical contrast between Sakharov's appeals to Nixon and Podgornyi arguably suggests as much, if not more, about the differences the dissident assumed between the two systems. The American court's "humaneness" in the Davis trial was desirable but subordinate to the legal standard of "total impartiality" that Sakharov hoped would be upheld. And while Sakharov undoubtedly felt more entitled to issue directives to Podgornyi, his countryman, than

28. MS Russ 79, Box 29, File 1834.

29. On this dissident demand, see Nathans, *To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause*, 24–25 and *passim*.

30. Bettina Aptheker, *The Morning Breaks: The Trial of Angela Davis*, 2nd ed. (Cornell University Press, 2014), 24.

31. A.D. Sakharov, "Otkrytoe obrashchenie k Prezidentu SShA R. Niksonu i Predsedateliu Prezidiuma Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR N.V. Podgornomu, 28 dekabria 1970," in *Sobranie dokumentov samizdata*, vol. 7 (RFE/RL, 1972), no. AS512.

32. Bergman, *Meeting the Demands of Reason*, 178.

to the President of the United States, he also understood which of the two was more likely to make a difference through personal intervention. Sakharov acknowledged as much in a subsequent letter to Podgornyi on behalf of the Christian socialist Anatolii Krasnov-Levitin, arrested in 1971. "If you cannot accept the arguments above as proof of the legality of [Krasnov-Levitin's] actions," Sakharov wrote, "I ask that you use your constitutional power and sway to ease his plight on the basis of humaneness."[33]

Sakharov's close attention to the precise wording of his appeals is perhaps most evident in a letter to the Chilean junta led by General Augusto Pinochet in 1973. Below is the full draft text of the letter, with Sakharov's own original handwritten edits reproduced:

> ~~As an opponent of the death penalty in principle,~~ I write to you with a request to spare the life of Luis Corvalán, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Chile. ~~This appeal is strictly humanistic in nature.~~ Lacking complete and accurate information, I refrain from political evaluations. But I am certain that tolerance and humaneness always contribute to the prestige of ~~any regime~~ any government.
>
> ~~With hope,~~
> ~~With a plea for humaneness,~~
> With deep respect,
> Andrei Sakharov[34]

Here, one sees Sakharov struggling with the proper language and tone to employ in petitioning an unfamiliar foreign power. His choice to emphasize state prestige in calling for humaneness from Chile's military dictatorship conveys uncertainty (and likely skepticism) about the new regime's ethics and respect for the rule of law. This stands in sharp contrast to the deft maneuvering between Soviet paternalism and American legalism in the letter to Nixon and Podgornyi. Sakharov's refusal to make "political evaluations" of the Pinochet government also restricts him to the self-interested case for mercy. His decision to close the letter "With deep respect," rather than the more optimistic "With hope" or the earnest "With a plea for humaneness," is an unusually stark example of tactical deference to authority taking precedence over ethical or emotional appeals in Sakharov's writings.

Sakharov did take up politics directly in the so-called "Memorandum" he sent to Brezhnev in March 1971. The purpose of this document, in Sakharov's own words, was to present the Soviet leadership with "a comprehensive, internally consistent alternative to the Party program."[35] Going beyond pleas on behalf of individual dissidents or pragmatic appeals, the Memorandum described the defense of citizens' rights as "the state's fundamental purpose" and the defense of human rights in general as "the loftiest of all aims."[36] Though many of its policies, such as abolishing the death penalty, were

33. MS Russ 79, Box 30, File 1870.

34. MS Russ 79, Box 31, File 1978.

35. Sakharov, *Memoirs,* 326.

36. MS Russ 79, Box 45, File 2783, Page 24. I have slightly modified the translation in Sakharov, *Memoirs*, 644.

ideas that Sakharov had advocated elsewhere, they now appeared in a single political manifesto that registered both his creeping pessimism about the potential of in-system reform and stubborn commitment to pursuing it regardless.[37]

This underlying tension imbues the Memorandum with a duality absent from Sakharov's earlier, more optimistic writings as well as later works of cynical realism like *My Country and the World*.[38] Notably, for instance, Sakharov proposes eliminating the harshest Soviet corrective labor regimens, "strict" (*strogii*) and "special" (*osobyi*), for being "contrary to socialist humaneness"—one of the rare instances in which he appended a modifier of any kind to the term.[39] That Sakharov felt it was necessary to do so here, in a document he kept private for over a year in anticipation of a reply from Brezhnev that never came, indicates the importance he still attached to the appearance of deferring to the Soviet authorities. And yet, having made the strategic choice to underscore his loyalty, Sakharov nevertheless resisted the preferred terminology of "socialist humanism" in favor of an alternative form that hewed closer to his own moral stance. Tellingly, the English-language edition of Sakharov's memoirs, published in 1990, renders the sentence quoted above as simply "Special-regimen imprisonment should be abolished as inhumane," suggesting the author's chagrin late in life at having invoked socialism in this context at all.[40]

Sakharov's steadfast appeals to "humaneness" rather than "humanism" did not prevent and, in fact, may have provoked the latter term's use against him in a series of public smear campaigns, the first of which commenced in late summer of 1973.[41] On September 1, *Sovetskaia Rossiia* printed several denunciations of Sakharov, supposedly from ordinary workers. "Learning from the papers about statements made to foreign correspondents by the 'humanist' Sakharov, I was simply stunned," wrote one I. Animov. "Only someone hostile to the Soviet Union and to the ideals of socialism could slander the truly humanistic policies of our government."[42] A letter from members of the Soviet Pedagogical Academy, published by *Izvestiia* on September 4, charged Sakharov with "claiming to be some kind of 'humanist' or 'defender of civil liberties' while at the same time opposing détente."[43] The next day, *Literaturnaia gazeta* printed a collective letter from a group of Soviet writers praising the "most humane" policies of the Communist Party but lamenting that "the true humanism and bright ideals of our Soviet society are not to everyone's liking. ... Let Sakharov remember that he who wants to reverse the wheel of history always ends up taking a back seat."[44]

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37. Bergman, *Meeting the Demands of Reason*, 180.

38. Andrei D. Sakharov, *My Country and the World* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1975).

39. MS Russ 79, Box 45, File 2783, Page 27.

40. Sakharov, *Memoirs*, 647. A more accurate English translation of the original Russian text is "Eliminate strict and special-regimen imprisonment as contradictory to socialist humaneness" (*Otmenit' osobyi* [sic] *i strogii* [sic] *rezhimy lisheniia svobody, kak protivorechashchie sotsialisticheskoi gumannosti*).

41. Bergman, *Meeting the Demands of Reason*, 199–210.

42. MS Russ 79, Box 75, File 5664.

43. MS Russ 79, Box 75, File 5667.

44. MS Russ 79, Box 75, File 5668.

The use of humanism to disparage Sakharov only intensified after the physicist became the first Russian to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975. A statement in *Izvestiia*, signed by members of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, labeled the award "blasphemy against the ideas of humanism, peace, justice, and friendship of the peoples." While "declaring himself a defender of humanism and human rights," the scientists alleged, "Sakharov has expressed his hope that the Pinochet regime will usher in an 'era of rebirth and consolidation' in Chile."[45] These allegations were part of a KGB operation to discredit prominent liberal dissidents by misrepresenting their humanitarian appeals to Pinochet as support for his rule.[46] They also played on the image of the Chilean dictator in the Soviet press as a kind of arch-villain whose "humanism" was expressed through his bloody repression of left-wing politicians and activists. (Figure 2) Like Pinochet, it was implied, Sakharov was an American puppet who disguised his reactionary views with humanistic language. An article in the newspaper *Trud*, for example, singled out Sakharov's support for the 1974 Jackson-Vanik amendment, which limited U.S. trade with non-market economies such as the USSR based on the latter's restrictive emigration laws. "By classifying those in the United States who disrupt normal trade relations between our countries as 'humanists,'" the article stated, "Sakharov reveals straight away what he means by 'humanism.'"[47]

Of course, what Sakharov "meant by humanism" was nothing at all, in the sense that he effectively avoided the word altogether. His disengagement from the Soviet discourse of socialist humanism and appeals to personal humaneness only encouraged critics who saw him as deceitful and treacherous. A lengthy screed in *Komsomol'skaia pravda* on February 15, 1980, for instance, delivered this paradoxical verdict on Sakharov's worldview: "His 'humanism' is not simply false. It is pathologically inhuman."[48] By that time, Sakharov had already been arrested and sentenced to internal exile alongside his wife and fellow dissident, Elena Bonner. This concession, Sakharov and other human rights defenders alleged, was meant to preserve "the appearance of humaneness" while the couple suffered beyond the gaze of the Moscow-based foreign press corps.[49] Sakharov and Bonner would remain exiled in the closed city of Gor'kii until their amnesty and release by Mikhail Gorbachev in December 1986.

"Truth" or "Consequences": Christian Dissidents on Secular Humanism

The concerns of Soviet religious dissidents overlapped with but were not identical to those of secular figures like Sakharov in the movement for civil and human rights.[50] Indeed, some within the Russian Orthodox intelligentsia held human rights activism

45. MS Russ 79, Box 75, File 5682.

46. Tobias Rupprecht, "Formula Pinochet: Chilean Lessons for Russian Liberal Reformers during the Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000," *Journal of Contemporary History* 51, no. 1 (2016): 172–173.

47. MS Russ 79, Box 75, File 5683.

48. MS Russ 79, Box 75, File 5695.

49. MS Russ 79, Box 59, File 3890, Page 5; HRC, Box 13 (Label 9), File 39.

50. Partly for this reason, some scholars use "dissident" narrowly to mean only those like Sakharov who campaigned for civil and human rights, rather than any oppositional or non-conformist figure. See, e.g., Nathans, *To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause*, 15.

in contempt, deriding it as "secular heroism" or worse.[51] When it came to the matter of humanism, however, it was religious dissidents such as Anatolii Krasnov-Levitin—the Orthodox Christian socialist on whose behalf Sakharov had petitioned in 1971—who engaged more readily with the categories of Soviet official discourse.[52]

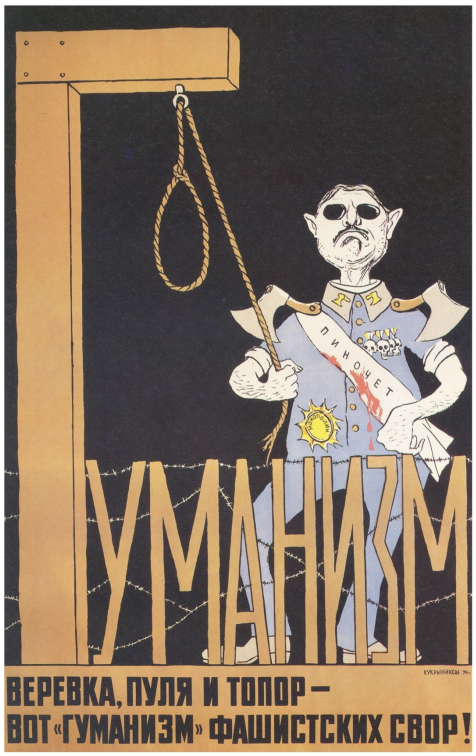

Figure 2. Anti-Pinochet Poster, 1974. The Cyrillic letter Г at the beginning of Гуманизм (Humanism) serves as the beams of a gallows. The text reads: "Rope, bullet, and axe—here is the 'humanism' of the fascist packs!" Source: "'Gumanizm' Pinocheta," Arthive, accessed May 3, 2025, [Link].

In *Stromata* (1972), a collection of essays published abroad while he was still imprisoned, Krasnov-Levitin advocates what he calls "neo-humanism" in an attempt to unite "many religious believers, many honest communists, many supporters of socialism and other societal forms" under one philosophical umbrella.[53] His account of how neo-humanism diverges from traditional ("old") humanistic ideas is quite reminiscent of Com-

51. Ludmilla Alexeyeva, *Soviet Dissent: Contemporary Movements for National, Religious, and Human Rights*, trans. Carol Pearce and John Glad (Wesleyan University Press, 1985), 264.

52. On Krasnov-Levitin, see Mikhail Epstein, *Ideas Against Ideocracy: Non-Marxist Thought of the Late Soviet Period (1953–1991)* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 78–81.

53. A. Krasnov, *Stromaty* (Possev-Verlag, 1972), 150. The exact origins of the term "neo-humanism" (*neogumanizm*) in Krasnov-Levitin's thinking are unclear, but it is possible he was inspired by the Russian émigré philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev, whose name appears in several of Krasnov-Levitin's works. In his 1936 essay "Neo-Humanism, Marxism, and Spiritual Values," Berdiaev questions the compatibility of Christianity and Marxism as exemplified by the "neo-humanism" that was becoming fashionable with the Catholic Left in interwar France. Krasnov-Levitin employs the term in a similar manner to Berdiaev but endorses (rather than rejects) the potential unity of socialism with religion. Nikolai Berdiaev, "Neogumanizm, marksizm i dukhovnye tsennosti," *Sovremennye zapiski*, no. 60 (1936): 319–324.

munist Party ideological texts about the gulf between revolutionary socialist humanism and its moribund bourgeois foil:

> Neo-humanism, like old humanism, means humanity [*chelovechnost'*] and preaches love for people. However, whereas old humanism foregrounded the concept of humankind [*chelovechestvo*], neo-humanism foregrounds the human [*chelovek*], the individual person [*chelovecheskaia lichnost'*]. Old humanism is thus something abstract, disconnected from life, inert, and intellectual. Neo-humanism is concrete, active, dynamic—it is an artistic worldview, inspirational and encouraging, carrying a romantic impulse, and appealing to the broadest masses.[54]

Like the Soviet variant of humanism, Krasnov-Levitin's neo-humanism is also internationalist: he includes Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Bertrand Russell, and Albert Einstein alongside compatriots like Konstantin Paustovskii and Sakharov among its unspoken practitioners.[55] Thus, if Sakharov tacitly exploited the Soviet distinction between "humaneness" and "humanism," using the former to engage the personal sympathies of individual leaders, Krasnov-Levitin instead sought to fashion an alternative concept out of the official discourse of socialist humanism itself, one that could unify the Soviet opposition and perhaps garner mass appeal.

Religious dissidents of a Russian nationalist or Slavophile persuasion, however, had reason to be dubious of an idea recalling the "concrete," "active," and internationalist humanism of Soviet official ideology. Even more moderate nationalists such as Vladimir Osipov, founder and editor of the Orthodox samizdat journal *Veche*, expressed reservations.[56] Krasnov-Levitin, Osipov wrote in 1974, "is true to the ideals of his youth: socialism, internationalism, Renaissance humanism. He defends these views, inculcates and cultivates them, but his own spiritual experience kills them at the root." By this, Osipov appears to have had in mind a perceived contradiction between Krasnov-Levitin's socialist politics and his Christianity: "The only convincing pages of [Krasnov-Levitin's] most recent work, 'Earth Rampant,' were those in which spiritual insight about man in general and Russian man in particular supersedes all pre-determined enlightenment slogans."[57] For Osipov, the issue with humanism was not simply its Marxist overtones, but also its adoption and promulgation by foreign secular groups such as the American Humanist Association with its *Humanist Manifesto II* (1973).[58] The *Manifesto*, he wrote, represented "an open challenge to the Christian conscience" and, for all its "affected humanism," revealed its authors' "total ignorance of the human soul."[59] As an overar-

54. Krasnov, *Stromaty*, 149.

55. Krasnov, *Stromaty*, 150.

56. Mikhail Epstein deems Osipov the "most outspoken proponent" of a "moderate, even liberal, nationalism." See Epstein, *Ideas Against Ideocracy*, 19.

57. Vladimir Osipov, *Tri otnosheniia k rodine* (Possev-Verlag, 1978), 187.

58. Paul Kurtz and Edwin H. Wilson, *Humanist Manifesto II* (1973), American Humanist Association, accessed May 5, 2025, https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto2/. Andrei Sakharov was among the original 120 signatories of the *Humanist Manifesto II*.

59. Osipov, *Tri otnosheniia k rodine*, 185–186.

ching ethos for the dissident movement, Osipov concluded, humanism was promising in theory but untenable in practice.

A similar concern with the fate of humanism in a secular age motivated Evgenii Barabanov, an Orthodox theologian and art historian, to call in 1974 for "a Christian initiative to counter the godless humanism that is destroying man and to stop [religious] humanism from degenerating into a non-religious form."[60] Barabanov revisited this dilemma in 1976 with "The Truth of Humanism," an essay that can be read as a response to Osipov's dismissal of humanism as a unifying creed for Soviet dissidents. Why, Barabanov wondered, do Christians so often repudiate those whose good deeds are driven by a this-worldly love for their fellow man, dismissing such acts of "secularized humanism" as misguided or naïve?[61] In the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, for the first time in history, ordinary people were asserting their rights not in defiance of religion or absolute monarchy, but against "an all-encompassing ideology that calls itself and demands to be accepted as nothing less than genuine humanism." It was thus imperative for believers to avoid "outdated ideological standards" when appraising secular dissidents, lest they mistake the "religious-historical meaning of the new humanism" for "all those godless 'do-gooders' and 'philanthropes' who have given their lives to the creation of totalitarian regimes."[62]

Barabanov's distinction between the benevolent "new humanism" of secular dissidents like Sakharov and the "godless humanism" of the Soviet state reflected a desire to harness the potential overlap between "liberal" and "Christian" ideologies that Amal'rik identified in his 1969 diagram. By insisting on the "religious-historical meaning" of secular dissent, Barabanov hoped to convince his fellow Christians that this overlap was spiritual rather than superficial. What mattered most, he argued, were humanism's origins in and basic affinity with Church doctrine regarding humanity's divinely ordained liberty, individuality, and creativity. Renaissance humanists such as Erasmus and Thomas More were religious thinkers whose Christian beliefs had informed their renewed interest in classical ideas about human nature. If this movement had later drifted towards secularism, this was the fault of Christians themselves, whose religious wars and resistance to change precluded a deep engagement with humanist philosophical insights. "Christians have been more likely to speak of humanism's lies," Barabanov lamented, "and have not always wanted to understand its truth."[63]

The perceived need for dialogue between secular and religious dissidents led the editors of the Moscow-based samizdat journal *Poiski* to establish a new rubric called "Faith and Humanism" in 1979. The rubric's introduction, most likely written by the historian Mikhail Gefter, announced its purpose as facilitating "a dialogue between the two main worldview systems in our country: Christianity and atheism (not state, but

60. Evgenii Barabanov, "Raskol Tserkvi i mira," in *Iz-pod glyb. Sbornik statei* (YMCA Press, 1974), 197.

61. "In this way, humanism, especially when combined with the epithet 'secularized,' becomes synonymous with a kind of unquestionable untruth, a delusion, or in the best case, a spiritual limitation, kindly blindness, foolish optimism." Evgenii Barabanov, "Pravda gumanizma," in *Samosoznanie. Sbornik statei* (Khronika, 1976), 17.

62. Barabanov, "Pravda gumanizma," 18–20.

63. Barabanov, "Pravda gumanizma," 14–15.

personal)."[64] It was this personal unbelief, rather than what Viktoria Smolkin describes as the "alternative cosmology and way of life" of Soviet state atheism, that liberal Christians like Barabanov had in mind when they spoke of making common cause with the "new humanism."[65] The confluence of liberal (or "open") Christianity and secular (dissident) humanism, Mikhail Epstein writes, made sense from a political as well as spiritual standpoint: "In its appeal to humanistic values, open Christianity proves to be a dissident movement vis-à-vis the Church's conservatism. By the same token, secular humanism's belief in the freedom of conscience makes it unacceptable to the hardline policy of official 'class-based humanism' maintained by the Soviet authorities."[66] Indeed, as we have seen, Christian dissidents were more inclined to engage and identify positively with the notion of humanism than the very "secular humanists" with whom they sought dialogue.

Barabanov's open-mindedness, however, was by no means the mainstream view among his co-religionists. In fact, the starkest Christian expression of the anti-humanist position came from the only dissident figure of comparable stature to Sakharov during the late Soviet period: the writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.[67] In his commencement address at Harvard University in 1978, after four years of exile from the USSR and two years living in the United States, Solzhenitsyn delivered a scathing indictment of Western legalism, individualism, and materialism that stunned his audience and provoked a heated debate in the American press.[68] The speech's conclusion, beginning with a section entitled "Humanism and Its Consequences," places the blame for the West's "decline" and "debility" squarely on the Renaissance-era turn towards what Solzhenitsyn calls "rationalistic humanism or humanistic autonomy."[69] If such a historical turn was inevitable after the ideological exhaustion of medieval religious despotism, the Western embrace of "boundless materialism" and "freedom from religion and religious responsibility" had now resulted in a "harsh spiritual crisis and political impasse."[70]

For Solzhenitsyn, the central problem with humanism is that it renders Western societies incapable of resisting socialist influence and, ultimately, communist dictatorship. By denying the "existence of intrinsic evil in man," non-religious humanism tends naturally towards the worship of humanity and its material needs. Marxism-Leninism, with its promise to satisfy these needs and scientific-atheistic worldview, is only the most radical iteration of this secular humanist tendency. Thus, in Solzhenitsyn's telling, an "unexpected kinship" reveals itself between the capitalist West and communist East;

64. Quoted in V. Sokirko, "Prodolzhenie razgovora s sobesednikom Kronida Liubarskogo Sergeem Alekseevichem Zheludkovym," website of Viktor Sokirko and Lidiia Tkachenko, accessed May 5, 2025, https://sokirko.com/victor/ideology/kronid/continue.html.

65. Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton University Press, 2018), 8.

66. Epstein, *Ideas Against Ideocracy*, 89.

67. On Solzhenitsyn's political and philosophical differences with Sakharov, see Bergman, *Meeting the Demands of Reason*, 211–219.

68. See the responses collected in Ronald Berman, ed., *Solzhenitsyn at Harvard: The Address, Twelve Early Responses, and Six Later Reflections*, (Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1980).

69. Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, "A World Split Apart" in *Solzhenitsyn at Harvard*, 16.

70. Solzhenitsyn, "A World Split Apart," 16–17.

both sides of the Cold War divide stake their political legitimacy on humanity's material rather than spiritual well-being. Furthermore, as the more ideologically consistent of the two materialisms, communism will eventually prove stronger and more attractive to Western populations. "Humanism which has lost its Christian heritage," Solzhenitsyn cautioned his Harvard audience, "cannot prevail in this competition."[71]

This remark helps to clarify the difference between Solzhenitsyn's views and those of more liberal Christian thinkers like Evgenii Barabanov. While both men agreed broadly on Renaissance humanism's historical basis in Christianity and later degeneration, they diverged over the question of whether its "Christian heritage" was lost (Solzhenitsyn) or recoverable (Barabanov). Moreover, Solzhenitsyn reaffirmed humanism's fundamental affinity with Marxism—placing him in striking agreement with the official Soviet position.[72] Barabanov, as we have seen, rejected the Communist Party's claim to a monopoly on "genuine humanism" and distinguished between secular dissidents, such as Andrei Sakharov, and the atheistic Soviet state these dissidents opposed. Put another way, what Solzhenitsyn understood as an *ideology of secular repression* in the USSR was for Barabanov a *secular ideology of repression* that could be opposed by secular as well as spiritual means. The "truth of humanism," to quote the title of Barabanov's 1976 essay, was that it was flexible enough to accommodate diverse and even conflicting political projects, from the "godless humanism" of state socialism to the "new humanism" of liberal dissidents.

Conclusion

As this article has argued, it was this very flexibility that drove Sakharov and other liberal dissidents to dispense with humanism during the 1970s in favor of less ideologically compromised alternatives like "humaneness." Such an approach recalls what Alexei Yurchak dubs "being *vnye*," the prevalent late Soviet practice of operating simultaneously inside and outside the categories of official discourse. Yurchak, however, limits the application of "being *vnye*" to apolitical contexts made up of people "neither simply in support [of] nor simply in opposition" to the Soviet system.[73] While Sakharov's opposition was never simple, his dissidence cannot be classified as *vnye* in the sense that Yurchak uses the term.[74] Rather, his recourse to humaneness over humanism is better understood as a form of what Sergei Oushakine calls "mimetic resistance." Soviet dissidents, Oushakine argues, failed to establish a "subject position outside the existing discursive field" and hence were "able only to intensify its reproduction." At the same time, their ability to "reproduce the discourse of the dominant without merging with it" proved threatening enough that the Soviet authorities could not simply ignore the

71. Solzhenitsyn, "A World Split Apart," 18.

72. "As humanism in its development was becoming more and more materialistic, it also increasingly allowed its concepts to be used first by socialism and then by communism. So that Karl Marx was able to say, in 1844, that 'communism is naturalized humanism.' This statement has proved to be not entirely unreasonable." Ibid.

73. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 127–128, 288.

74. For a sympathetic critique that seeks to expand Yurchak's arguments in a more political direction, see Kevin M.F. Platt and Benjamin Nathans, "Socialist in Form, Indeterminate in Content: The Ins and Outs of Late Soviet Culture," *Ab Imperio*, no. 2 (2011): 301–324.

movement altogether.[75] In Sakharov's case, this manifested as a sustained campaign of public vitriol beginning in 1973, in which the discourse of socialist humanism was reasserted to discipline and, eventually, punish the dissident physicist and his wife.

Within Christian dissident circles, meanwhile, the 1970s were a decade of intense debates across the political spectrum about humanism's unifying potential and compatibility with religion. Some liberal Christian dissidents made explicit overtures to their secular counterparts, advocating "neo-" or "new humanism" as a shared ideology for the entire anti-Soviet opposition. These efforts could be taken as confirmation of Andrei Amal'rik's prescience in his 1969 diagram linking "liberal ideology" and "Christian ideology" through the concept of humanism. On the other hand, moderate to liberal Russian nationalists joined conservative Christian thinkers in rejecting humanism as too secular, too socialist, or both, suggesting the limits of this ideological overlap. Nor is it clear that the "new humanism" some liberal Christians attributed to secular dissidents actually corresponded with the latter's political or philosophical views. Like Soviet journalists who distorted Sakharov's human rights activism into a "false" and "pathologically inhuman" worldview, albeit without their malicious intent, liberal Christians also ascribed a spiritual significance to secular dissent based on a concept (humanism) that many dissidents had long abandoned or never consistently employed.

The liberal Christian effort to claim Sakharov as a fellow traveler outlived these 1970s debates and, indeed, Sakharov himself. In the wake of the dissident physicist's untimely death on December 14, 1989, the Paris-based Russian Orthodox journal *Vestnik Russkogo khristianskogo dvizheniia* opened with an editorial by Nikita Struve (grandson of Petr Struve) that acknowledged Sakharov's professed agnosticism while also asserting the religious significance of his dissidence:

> In his ascetic ministration, remaining until the end a humanist-agnostic, A. Sakharov revealed to all, and to Christians above all, the truth of humanism, too often discarded or unjustly despised in the name of falsely understood and one-sidedly perceived verities.

Sakharov, the editorial allowed, "had never touched on philosophical, much less religious subjects" in his public appearances. Yet, by virtue of his familial background (his great-grandfather was an Orthodox priest) and early childhood in a "religious atmosphere," he had imbibed scriptural values that shaped the "Christian image and elemental Russianness of this 'Soviet' truth-loving scientist." Though Sakharov had ceased to consider himself a believer in adulthood, Struve concluded, "his humanism has direct Christian roots."[76]

It is hard to imagine a more fitting coda to the Brezhnev-era heyday of Soviet religious and secular dissent, or a better encapsulation of the complex relationship between the two with regard to the concept of humanism. In Struve's telling, it had taken Sakharov, a self-declared agnostic, to reveal the "truth of humanism" to Soviet Christians—a revelation made possible by Sakharov's own Orthodox upbringing and allegedly

75. Sergei Alex. Oushakine, "The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat," *Public Culture* 13, no. 2 (2001): 192, 204, 208–209, 213.

76. Nikita Struve, "Pamiati A.D. Sakharova," *Vestnik Russkogo khristianskogo dvizheniia*, no. 158 (1990), 3–4.

religious moral outlook. Whether or not the "truth" of this "humanism" would have been recognizable to Sakharov himself was beside the point; it made him a potent symbol for Christians willing to look past his personal unbelief and endorsement of the atheistic *Humanist Manifesto II*.[77] As a unifying concept for the entire Soviet dissident movement, however, humanism never quite became the bridge across the secular-spiritual divide that Amal'rik had envisioned in his 1969 diagram. Ironically, it was not until after his predicted "expiration date" for the Soviet Union in 1984 and the coming to power of the reformist Mikhail Gorbachev that the broad alignment of humanistic forces Amal'rik had foreseen would finally come to pass.

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77. Sakharov also received the American Humanist Association's "Humanist of the Year" award in 1980.