

Benjamin Nathans' 'To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause' Shortlisted for Pushkin House Book Prize 2025

By [Michele A. Berdy](#)

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Author Benjamin Nathans **M Hamilton Visuals**

Benjamin Nathans is the Alan Charles Kors Associate Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of the award-winning books, "Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia" and "To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause: The Many Lives of the Soviet Dissident Movement." The Moscow Times spoke to him about "To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause," which has been awarded the Pulitzer Prize in General Nonfiction and shortlisted for the Pushkin House Book Prize.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

The Moscow Times: The dissident movement you describe had very specific time periods, different conditions, and different kinds of people, and to some extent, different goals. Is that

a fair description?

Benjamin Nathans: It's fair insofar as the movement experienced a near-death situation several times, and in the process of recovering from those near-death experiences, it had to reinvent itself — or it maybe didn't have to, but it did.

So the form of the movement changed quite significantly. I would say the goals of the movement shifted over time, but in a way that I think was not so perceptible to many of its participants — the transition from trying to leverage civil rights that were enshrined in the Soviet constitution to trying to leverage international human rights, which the Soviet Union had signed onto but were part of a much larger constellation of forces that included countries on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

That was a game-changer strategically and otherwise. But it... wasn't a strategy change within the group. Conditions in the world changed, and they modified their approaches to use that.

MT: From the very start it seems that the goals were not to change the constitution, or to change the system, but to make the system do what it said it was going to do.

BN: The idea was to make the system live up to its own laws.

MT: Does that distinguish it from other movements around the world?

BN: Yes. The legal strategy is a surprisingly common phenomenon in Soviet-style countries... I try to make the case that there's something about Soviet-style systems that generates this kind of dissent, or as I put it in the book: orthodoxies generate their own specific heresies.

It's a real contrast to the strategies of civil disobedience that you're more likely to find in other settings — democratic settings, in particular.

They were not about regime change. They were about making the regime live up to its own law. It's a much more modest, in some ways a minimalist agenda, but it proved to be highly disruptive.

MT: And what do you see now?

BN: The situation for whatever counts as the opposition in Russia today is really grim. This is a regime that is quite ruthless in its suppression of all kinds of dissent, even forms that one would think were essentially harmless. It's far more violent than the late Soviet period was, but it's not nearly as violent as the Stalin era. There's just no comparison.

But the number of dissidents in the 1960s and '70s who were killed was extremely small. You can probably count them on the fingers of one hand... [but] the number of activists and journalists who have been murdered or assassinated in Russia runs into the dozens, and there are, again, hundreds and hundreds of political prisoners now.

The repression is formidable. But I think opposition figures in Russia today could benefit from studying the example of the dissidents, if only because their situation in the '60s and '70s looked even more hopeless. They were up against a superpower that seemed and certainly claimed to have history on its side, that most people could not imagine ever collapsing. It was

really a forever country, or so it seemed.

MT: Could you talk a bit about media coverage of the movement?

BN: Very fine reporting was done... But [the correspondents] brought with them certain assumptions from their own milieu about what to them seemed the obvious need for a movement to have leaders, whom the journalists actually helped create, because the movement for the most part did not want to have leaders and followers. It was allergic to that kind of hierarchy and division of labor.

And you can think whatever you want about a movement that doesn't want to have leaders, but that's what the dissident movement really was struggling with, and for. And I don't think a lot of foreign journalists got that.

They also assumed that whatever leaders they found were going to be men. There was a real blindness to the role of women in the movement. I think possibly a deeper understanding of Russian culture might have saved them from that, because the Soviet Union had promoted women in the workforce earlier and more intensely than many Western countries. And so, a bit more of the local heritage and context might have saved them...

The main problem is that the kind of people who are most likely to be willing to have contacts with Westerners, including journalists, tend to come from the more liberal Westernized, and Western-philic portions of the Russian population.

So, it can create an optical illusion that people like Navalny, or Nemtsov are speaking for the overwhelming majority of Russians, who are just afraid to say what's on their mind, but if they could, they would speak the way Nemtsov did. I don't think that's true.

MT: What would you like readers to take away from your book?

BN: I think one of the messages of the book that may be the most generalizable — or universal — is that very small numbers of determined people can make an extraordinary difference in the arc of history. This is an example of that.

The dissidents, the core activists in the movement, probably never numbered more than 1,000 or 2,000 in a country of 250 million. And yet, through a combination of really unexpected circumstances, they were able to bend the arc of the Cold War, and, therefore, of the second half of the 20th Century.

They were one among many factors, but the degree of their influence is just wholly out of proportion with their numbers. And I think that can give hope to people who are trying to enact social change. Even people who are not engaged in political activism can learn something when they realize that small minorities can make an enormous impact in history.

From Chapter 16: How to Conduct Yourself

For some dissidents, usually men, interrogations provided the functional equivalent of war stories told around kitchen tables, preferably highlighting the protagonist's heroism and cleverness, in contrast to the ham-fisted malevolence of the KGB. "How we laugh when we come home from interrogations," proclaimed the mathematician Vladimir Albrekht, who

experienced more than a few himself.

Albrekht grew up in Moscow and taught high school there. His first brush with the KGB came in 1972 in connection with the investigation of the *Chronicle of Current Events*. He subsequently underwent multiple interrogations and became a dedicated collector of stories of run-ins with the KGB's Fifth Directorate. And for good reason: during the 1970s he produced four conduct manuals, at least two of which were published in Paris, designed for smuggling back into the USSR. The most famous, *How to Be a Witness*, went through multiple editions.

Albrekht's manuals pushed the boundaries of the genre in new directions. To begin with, unlike [Alexander] Volpin's, they are often funny. "We were born to make Kafka real," announces one, parodying the famous opening line of the hymn of the Soviet Air Force ("We were born to make a fable [*skazka*] real, / To overcome space and expanse. / Reason gave us winged arms of steel, / And in place of our heart, a fiery engine"). They also assume a certain intimacy with the reader, addressing him or her directly, in the manner of the nineteenth-century mock-conversational literary style known as *skaz*. "Did you know, reader, that the investigator obtains his results with the help of no fewer than eighteen techniques? ... You might enjoy asking which technique he's trying so unsuccessfully to use with you and advise him to use a different one." Albrekht would rehearse the manuals in private readings among friends, leading one to comment that by "carnivalizing interrogations," Albrekht had created "a new genre."

The most striking thing about Albrekht's manuals, apart from their playful authorial voice, is their attention to the inner state of the participants. What started out as a purely documentary genre—the interrogation transcript as two-dimensional chess move list — had acquired, with Volpin's incorporation of extra-textual information about Soviet law, a third dimension. Albrekht added further dimensions to create an almost novelistic effect, as in this account of the prelude to his interrogation about the activities of Irina Belogorodskaya in 1972:

Unfortunately, I am afraid.... Fear arises when it becomes clear that neither hearing nor sight nor smell nor touch are of any use. There's just no way to deploy them. How do you block fear? With a good joke? No! Only with a good thought! One will come to me momentarily.

Now we've arrived and we're inside the interrogator's office. On the wall, there's Lenin. I feel better already.

"Take a seat, please. My name is Anatoly Gavrilovich Zhuchkov. I'm handling Lyudmila Mikhailovna Belogorodskaya's case (he was mistaken: her first name is Irina). My job is to interrogate you as a witness. But first I will explain your rights and obligations."

While he speaks, I try to lower my blood pressure.

"Is that all clear?"

"Yes. Everything. Absolutely. And I think it would be good to begin right away writing everything down."

"Why right away? I'm required by law to start off by speaking with you about the background

of the case. Why do you insist on immediately writing everything down?"

"For purposes of expediency—nothing more. You ask the questions, I give the answers. What could be simpler?"

Zhuchkov did not agree. It turns out he is supposed to create a relaxed atmosphere, thank you very much. Conversing with him is supposed to help me remember what I have forgotten. He will help me, prompt me.

The two men get into an elaborate argument about whether Albrekht is allowed to enter the case number (24) and Belogorodskaya's name in the transcript. Zhuchkov, still trying to relax his witness, tries to draw Albrekht's attention to a specific day:

"Think about a certain event that happened on your 35th birthday."

This is probably a hint of some kind.

He paused in a way meant to suggest significance. I paused too. There was hardly anything for me to remember or forget. My 35th birthday didn't mean much to me. The last time I celebrated my birthday was on February 23, 1937, when I was four. My father always marked my birthday three days early so that it would coincide with Red Army Day. But on the night of August 5, 1937, he was arrested. He said it was a "mistake," that he'd return soon. But he didn't return. On March 14, 1938, he was executed "by mistake." Since then I have never marked my birthday. In contrast to March 14. If only [Zhuchkov] would ask about that day. Last year I was taken to a police station on March 14. They checked my documents, saying they were looking for a criminal. I had just come from the Yakirs' apartment and was standing at the Auto Factory metro station.... But none of this was of any interest to Zhuchkov.

Alternating dialogue with stream of consciousness, Albrekht offers a subjective (and possibly fictionalized) but in certain ways more realistic version of the interrogation experience, including arguments, silences, and mental associations uncaptured by the official transcript. Zhuchkov mentions his birthday, triggering a flashback to his father's arrest by Zhuchkov's predecessors in the NKVD, which reminds Albrekht of his recent detention on the anniversary of his father's execution. Readers were thus perhaps less likely to be caught off guard by the multiplicity of their own associative thoughts and emotions when under interrogation.

Albrekht's manuals also provided memorable advice on how to respond—or not respond—to potentially fraught questions. Never acknowledge that a given samizdat text is anti-Soviet or claim—if said text is discovered during an apartment search—that it doesn't belong to you. Both would signal guilt of one kind or another. "You never have to justify yourself or prove anything," he warned. "The burden of proof is on them and them alone." Rather than invoking Volpin's procedural fine points during an interrogation, Albrekht favored an artful naiveté, as, for example, in this exchange:

"Where did you meet with Belogorodskaya?" I panicked. I did not want to name any names, absolutely none! I pretended to be wracking my brain. Well, where could I actually have seen Belogorodskaya? In various people's homes. At birthday celebrations...

"At farewell gatherings," Zhuchkov hinted.

“Which ones?”

“Well, for example, the one for Alik Volpin. Remember? At the Belorussky train station. You wanted to pass on a photo album of Russian and Soviet writers to a certain someone.”

Even though I lowered my very guilty eyes, I could feel the penetrating, painfully familiar stare.

“No, I don’t remember.” I tried very hard to say that calmly.

Zhuchkov telegraphed the message “We know everything.” It practically dripped from his face. I could feel the pleasure with which he was now scrutinizing mine.

“And then again at the New Year’s party.”

“What New Year’s party?”

“The children’s party.”

“Which children’s party?”

I was genuinely surprised. He too was surprised as well as annoyed by my forgetfulness.

“The New Year’s party for children of those convicted under Articles 190 or 70,” the investigator investigator slowly enunciated. His cunning look once again said: “We know everything. Everything.”

Out of surprise, I laughed.

“Of course, I remember. I confess to being at the New Year’s party. But was Ira there?”

“Absolutely. She was there,” Zhuchkov confirmed.

“How do you know? Were you there too?”

If Volpin advised channeling one’s inner lawyer, Albrekht illustrated how to channel one’s inner Holy Fool. The best answers, he advised, were “honest but not concrete, bold but naive.” Sometimes, as in the above exchange, the best answer might be a question.

In place of Volpin’s reliance on the dense Code of Criminal Procedure, Albrekht constructed his own simplified code, encapsulated by the easy-to-remember acronym P-L-O-D (“fruit”). “P” signified *protokol*, the default response when facing difficult questions: “Write the question in the protocol and I will answer it.” This bought time and deterred interrogators from asking leading or other improper questions. “L” stood for *lichnoe*, or personal, matters, a reminder not to be afraid to use arguments based on personal relationships or personal ignorance. Refusing to characterize someone else’s views, refusing to make statements beyond one’s assigned role as witness (as opposed to defendant), citing one’s ignorance of the law when asked to comment on alleged criminal activity — all these might feel uncooperative or cowardly but were perfectly legitimate. “O” signaled *otnoshenie k delu* (relationship to the case), or the absence thereof. During an interrogation regarding the physicist Andrei Tverdokhlebov (one of the founding members of the Human Rights Committee), a witness

was asked to name the author of a certain letter. He refused:

INVESTIGATOR: Do you refuse to say that you know who the author of the letter is?

WITNESS: No, I do not refuse.

INVESTIGATOR: What then prevents you from answering the question “who is the author of the letter”?

WITNESS: What prevents me is the necessity of remaining within the bounds of the case under investigation.

Valery Chalidze had also been known to use this technique. When asked by an interrogator why he refused to answer a certain question, Chalidze allegedly replied, “Your question does not relate to the present case. It relates to a case that has not yet been opened, concerning my refusal to answer the preceding question.”

Finally, “D” stood for *dopustimost*, or permissibility from a moral standpoint. Aggressive or unacceptable questioning during an interrogation needed to be called out and, if possible, entered into the protocol. “I request that the investigator not circle around me,” Albrekht offered by way of example, “not intimidate me, not blow smoke in my face, not raise his voice, not push me to answer quickly. In a word, not subject me to pressure.” Conversely, witnesses should not shy away from invoking moral (not just legal) standards of behavior—if only because defendants were likely to read investigation protocols in the lead-up to their trial and would be heartened by expressions of moral solidarity from witnesses.

Excerpted from Pulitzer Prize Winner “To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause: The Many Lives of the Soviet Dissident Movement” by Benjamin Nathans and published by Princeton University Press. Copyright © 2024 by Benjamin Nathans. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Footnotes have been removed to ease reading. For more information about the author and this book, see the publisher’s site [here](#).

“To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause” has been shortlisted for this year’s [Pushkin House Book Prize](#), which will be awarded on June 19 in London. Tickets for the ceremony are available [here](#).

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