

FROM SOVIET PATRIOTISM TO NONCONFORMIST INTELLECTUAL AND DISSIDENT:



N A D I I A SVITLYCHNA AND THE *SHISTDESIATNYTSTVO*

Text — Sierra Salazar

The period following Joseph Stalin's death on March 5, 1953, marked significant shifts within Soviet society towards de-Stalinization and was referred to more broadly as the "Thaw." Policies loosening repression and censorship, including the draining of the Gulag system, at first paved the way for a new cultural generation who grasped on to the rhetoric of liberation sparked following Nikita Khrushchev's so-called "secret speech" at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). There, during a closed session in the Twentieth Congress's final day, Khrushchev

denounced Stalin and his crimes, and split Stalin far from the ideals of Vladimir Lenin—including "gross violations of Leninist principles of nationality policy."¹ These seemingly massive steps towards the liberalization of Soviet society were met with a creeping re-Stalinization, traces of Stalinist speech still present even in the latter Fourth Congress of the Writers of Ukraine (SPU) in 1959, as the need for honesty in Soviet literature was heavily emphasized yet met with warning from then chairman of the SPU, Mykola Bazhan, as not to take advantage of the denunciation of the Stalinist cult of personality.²

On cover page: Nadiia Svitlychna (left) and Alla Horska (right). Mariupol, 1967.

In the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), artists from mostly rural backgrounds born between the 1920s to 1930s took this opportunity into their hands in the following years, amalgamating in clubs of creative youth across Ukraine, such as the "Suchasnyk" Club of Creative Youth (KTM) and the "Prolisok" Club of Creative Youth. The non-conformist intellectuals primarily from the Ukrainian countryside, deriving from a variety of artistic and educational backgrounds, gathered around the development and defense of self expression, subjectivity, personal realization through art, and freedom of expression.³ Rejecting homogenization and promoting open debate and discussion primarily through literary and artistic formats, this intellectual and cultural movement would become known as the *shistdesiatnytstvo* ("Sixtiers" movement). Notable among them are individuals such as Ivan Dziuba, Alla Horska, Ivan Svitlychny, Viacheslav Chornovil, and Lina Kostenko. The unrealized promise of Khrushchev's liberalization policies and later crackdowns on intellectuals in the mid- to late 1960s pushed many of the *shistdesiatnyky* towards full-blown dissent, furthermore after the 1971-1972 wave of arrests. This movement was certainly not destined to move towards dissent, as they almost always argued against the actions of the Soviet authorities within the framework of Marxism-Leninism and Soviet legality, as individuals raised entirely within the Soviet education and many being (at first) firm believ-

ers of communism. The *shistdesiatnyky*'s hope and belief that the Soviet authorities might defend them continued for many until they were forced to a path of dissent or, oftentimes, recantation.⁴ After the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, ending the Prague Spring, most of these hopes were utterly squashed.

Such among these non-comfortist intellectuals who turned towards dissent was Nadiia Svitlychna, born in the countryside of the Luhansk Oblast, Ukrainian SSR, in 1936. She became one of the most crucial figures of the dissident movement—and yet, arguably one of the most undervalued in contemporary literature. Although her name is not typically at the center of the historiography of the *shistdesiatnytstvo* and the later dissident movement, it is always 'behind the scenes' that her name appears: in the editing and publishing of other dissidents' memoirs and works, in the collection of various materials of human rights abuses to create a museum for the repressed, and the dissemination of other critical literary pieces among her many selfless contributions.⁵

During her interview after leaving the Soviet Union for Italy on her way for the USA, Svitlychna stated she was once a prideful Soviet citizen, saying she believed "everything that was Soviet was the best, the Soviet freedom was the greatest freedom in the world [...] one should believe every letter in the Soviet Constitution."⁶ She has frequently stated in interviews she was once an active, adamant mem-

ber of the Komsomol, the Soviet youth organization.⁷ At Kharkiv University until 1958, she studied Ukrainian language and literature, becoming a philologist by training—which she would later cite as being another core reason for her persecution by the Soviet authorities, given her profession's allegedly inherent ideological nature.⁸ Shortly after arriving in Kyiv in 1964 and establishing a job on an editorial board for a technical college, she connected with other intellectuals through her brother, Ivan Svitlychny, and the KTM. Among them was Alla Hor-

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ska, who became one of her closest friends and whom she would later teach Ukrainian to.⁹

As repression from the Soviet authorities increased, so did the organization of the shistdesiatnyky in order to abide by their principles of truthfulness and open discussion, often with many disseminating theirs and others' works through networks of uncensored material (samvydav). As the gradual re-Stalinization took hold—culminating in the closure of the KTM in 1964 and the initial arrests of 1965-66—the social networks and friendships formed among the shistdesiatnyky evolved into what shistdesiatnytstvo scholar Simone Attilio Bellezza describes as "solidarity networks" and uses the concept of kompaniia to describe such, introduced by Liudmila Alexeyeva and furthered by Juliane Fürst as "an experimental space that reorganized the relationship between the public and private spheres."¹⁰ These networks enabled the intellectuals to continue their discussions in various apartments and provided mutual support to the repressed and their families to resist and recover from the increasingly severe repressions. This also provided other forms of support, such as through attending each others' trials and recording the unofficial minutes there.¹¹ As aforementioned, their resistance—Svitlychna included—entailed working through Soviet legality and Marxism-Leninism in order to express the authority's violation of the former and deviation from the latter, particularly in the case of Lenin's



A photo taken by a KGB officer in a file dated 1 December 1976. One of the few remaining files on Alla Horska. In the photo, according to the KGB file, Nadiia Svitlychna organized the memorial to place viburnum on her grave. Together with the attendees, they sang carols and songs from the choir "Homin"—a choir founded in 1969 and forcibly disbanded in 1971.

nationality policy and when addressing Russian chauvinism.

The arrests marked a significant turning point for Svitlychna: her brother had been arrested in 1965. In her first interview after leaving the USSR, she repeatedly emphasized the repression of her family and friends pushing her towards the path of dissent, as well as her own subsequent repression merely for her family ties. She stated, "It [being sacked from jobs] happened many times, especially when my brother was imprisoned, it was not

because of my activity for there was no activity as such, not because of my involvement in the human-rights movement for there was none, but because of my family-name. Because I dared to have the same family-name as my brother. And that was an unannounced reason for the persecution."¹² Despite the harsh repressions of herself and her family, she managed to continue partaking in the cultural movement and supporting others arrested through their solidarity networks built over the years prior.¹³



Nadiia Svitlychna's headshot, taken by the KGB, during her arrest in 1972.

In 1970, the brutal murder of her close friend Alla Horská sharply intensified Svitlychna's opposition to the Soviet authorities. While she had already been involved in the human rights movement since 1965, this tragedy seems to have been the decisive moment that pushed her fully into dissent. Not only was she among those who found Horská's body, she also cleaned her friend's wounds and prepared her for burial.¹⁴ Svitlychna did not at first attribute the murder to the KGB as

the rumor had spread of such, yet with time, recalled gradually came closer to this conclusion.

"At first, the rumor that the KGB was involved in her murder was very popular. But at that time, I was positively against the very possibility of such involvement. I said that the KGB was allegedly guilty of all sins. People want to ascribe even this tragedy to the KGB. Though after some time, I noticed some circumstances, details of the investigation and concluded that it could really

*have happened with the KGB involvement."*¹⁵

According to Svitlychna, the KGB even considered visits to her deceased friend's grave as "gatherings" and "activity."¹⁶ In the remaining few KGB files on Alla Horska at the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU)'s archive, a letter dated November 29, 1971, from the KGB to Petro Shelest, First Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party refers to the commemoration of Alla Horska's passing by her friends as "the intention of na-

tionalists to celebrate the anniversary of the death of [Horska]" and states the heightened surveillance to prevent "unwanted actions" from Ivan Svitlychny, Ivan Dziuba, Oksana Franko, Yevhen Svetsiuk, Vadym Smohytel, and Halyna Sevruc.¹⁷ Svitlychna was arrested among the next wave of arrests between 1971-1972, charged under Article 62-1 "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda," and sent to a women's labor camp in Barashevo, Mordovia SSR, until 1976. As a result, her two-year-old son, Yarema, was placed in an

Photo taken prior to Svitlychna's departure to the USA. From left to right: Oksana Meshko, Vira Lisova, Mykhailna Kotsiubynska, Nadiia Svitlychna, Darka Husyak, Mykhailo Horyn, Atena Pashko, Valentina Chornovil.



The path to dissent was not so inevitable for those who later partook in it.

orphanage.¹⁸ To resist the degrading treatment by authorities within the camp and to maintain activities "[...] for their own souls and for other people," Svitlychna and fellow Ukrainian women inmates turned to their artistry and intellect: Nina Strokata, a microbiologist, worked on a dictionary of microbiological terms; Iryna Kalynets and Orysia Senyk both composed poetry, the latter embroidered. Where she could, Svitlychna aided them in editing and cooperating on their works. However, they were not allowed to take the works out of the camp and oftentimes had them taken away while there, leading to hunger strikes by the women for their return.¹⁹ After her release, Svitlychna was harassed by the KGB, constantly under surveillance, and struggled to find a place to live with her child— forbidden to return to her previous apartment. Svitlychna renounced her Soviet

citizenship in a letter to the CC CPSU, stating,

"I am now free—'as free as a dog on a leash'—perhaps less so, for at least a collar is not a noose. And as a free person, as the mother of her child, today, on Human Rights Day, I declare with full responsibility that after all these experiences, I consider it beneath human dignity to be a citizen of the world's largest, most powerful, most perfect concentration camp."²⁰

After Svitlychna renounced her citizenship in 1976 and left the USSR in 1978, she worked for Radio Liberty from 1983 to 1994 and founded the External Representation for the Ukrainian Helsinki Group, where she regularly published the Herald of Repression from 1980-1985 documenting human rights violations in Soviet Ukraine from abroad.²¹ Yet her work did not stop there, as she actively collected material (photographing, saving prison uniforms of friends returning from the prison camps) to establish the Sixtiers Museum in Kyiv, Ukraine, was an editor for the women's magazine Vera, and published numerous editions and collections on fellow dissidents.²²

The path to dissent was not so inevitable for those who later partook in it: this small excerpt on Nadiia Svitlychna shows just that, even in her own words. The human rights movement organized most promin-

ently in the form of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group (UHG) in 1976, which contained individuals from various movements, ideological backgrounds, and streams of Ukrainian nationalism. For the cultural movement that was the *shistdesiatnytstvo*, dissidence was certainly not the only path that its members embarked upon. In fact, it was largely over by the time that a more organized dissident movement grew. As Bellezza argues, whilst several *shistdesiatnyky* became leading dissidents and politicians, the cultural

movement itself lacked the necessary leadership and ideological consensus to evolve into a political movement. However, the UHG and human rights activists learned from the *shistdesiatnyky*, such as the strategy of utilizing the Soviet constitution and legality to argue their rights. Even more, they learned from their intellect and artistic works, which illuminated Ukrainian society and literature with their values of individualism, honesty, openness, and the emotional and spiritual dimensions of human existence.


У світі пощесті і змору,
Німотності і глухоти,
Де мудрі муштрою мінти
лічують душі без розбору.
Там пісня, витвір висоти,
Свободи й пружного простору
Шугнула вільним птахом вгору
У вир! У небо! У світи!

Іван Світличний,

уринок з вірша «Лебедина
пісня», присвяченого Надії
Світличній.

*In a world of plague and weariness,
Of muteness and deafness,
Where the "wise" with their drill
Count souls without discernment.
There, a song, a creation of heights,
Of freedom and elastic space,
Soared up, a free bird,
Into the maelstrom! Into the sky! Into
the worlds!*

Ivan Svitlychnyi,

An excerpt from the poem "Swan
Song" dedicated to Nadiia
Svitlychna.²³ 

For full list of references, bibliography and photo credits, follow this link.

<https://tinyurl.com/gazetasasha>

*The cover of the KGB
investigation file on
Nadiia Svitlychna.*

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