

**Benjamin Nathans**

**Alexander Volpin and the Origins of the Soviet Human Rights Movement**

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**Abstract**

This paper traces the life and thought of Aleksandr Volpin, the person widely credited with inventing the rights-based approach to dissent in the former Soviet Union. It is conceived as part of a larger study of the fate of the idea of rights, including human rights, in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union. After considering some of the leading explanations for the emergence of "legal" dissent in the USSR, the paper attempts to reconstruct the intensely inter-disciplinary milieu within which a law-based approach emerged as a leading conceptual tool for a wide variety of dissident positions. Volpin's scientific-technical training, his literary pursuits and his fascination with cybernetics serve as windows onto the intellectual life of an important segment of the post-war urban intelligentsia. By closely examining Volpin's encounters with the Soviet government and its courts, I attempt to illuminate on the micro level the unlikely journey of a Soviet intellectual to the idea of rights – and thus to the dominant global moral discourse of the second half of the twentieth century.