

Dissent is a dirty word

MOSCOW — Ronald Reagan's meeting with a group of Soviet dissidents has angered the Russians and hit a sour note in the so far harmonious summit.

Soviet officials are openly sneering that the meeting at Spaso House, the U.S. ambassador's residence, was a crude gesture aimed at winning points with Jewish-American voters in the fall elections. They claim that inclusion of political and religious dissidents along with Jewish refuseniks is simply a way of masking the fact the president is motivated by domestic political reasons.

But it is increasingly difficult for the authorities to deny there is a vocal and growing dissident movement within the Soviet Union.

Citizens with all sorts of grievances have been encouraged by glasnost to go public with their complaints. During the past few days here in Moscow, 2,000 members of the would-be opposition group, the Democratic Union, held an unprecedented demonstration in Moscow. Riot police quickly broke up the demonstration though participants were not roughed up by KGB men, as is the usual case. Too many foreign newsmen watching.

Jewish refuseniks have also staged public demonstrations, the most recent in front of the Lenin Library. Moscow police and the KGB used a novel method to short-circuit the protesters. They put their loudspeakers on high and drowned out the Jewish speakers — but no violence was used.

Tatars, driven into Siberian exile by Stalin, have set up a protest tent city, demanding the return of their homes in Crimea. And many other political and religious protesters are telling their stories.

Protest and dissent in the Soviet Union is no light matter. Dissent can mean a long term in prison, labor camp or, until now, internal exile. Jailing of dissenters in mental institutions continues. Angering the authorities means risking your job, apartment, retirement benefits and residency in the capital. Friends suddenly disappear. Harassment can be constant and ranges from late-night phone calls to flooded apartments.

Without actually seeing first-hand just how thugish and ugly security men here are, it's impossi-

**ERIC
MARGOLIS**



ble to understand how much courage it takes to stand up to the might of the state. A state, we should recall, that controls almost every aspect of a person's economic and personal life.

The individual stories Reagan has been hearing are harrowing. A man who protested the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia was branded an anti-state element and lost his job. Here, anyone without a job can be jailed as a parasite or hooligan.

Anti-Semitism is still fairly evident in everyday Soviet life — as is prejudice against other national ethnic groups, like Georgians, Armenians or against Soviets from Central Asia.

In the Soviet view, there are simply no human rights violations in their vast nation of 280 million. The Soviets define human rights quite differently from the way we do in the West. For them, human rights means the right to food, education, shelter, national security and a job. The Soviets proudly point to the fact that all their citizens enjoy such benefits — which is true. Of course, the price the nation has paid for this mammoth, muscle-bound welfare state has been crushing, both in personal freedom and the standard of living.

Democracy, in the Soviet Union, means the right to vote for the Communist party alone. No opposition has ever been tolerated and none, I believe, will emerge in the near future. Dictatorship of the proletariat still remains a pillar of Soviet political theology. Hence, immediate police action against the pitifully small bands of Soviet citizens who have tried to operate outside the party.

When Mikhail Gorbachev uses the term democracy in the context of glasnost and perestroika, he means multiple choice candidates in Communist party elections — and that is all.

So was President Reagan right to throw a bucket of ice water on the summit fiesta? I think so. In fact, it's a tribute to the president and his advisers that they risked irking their hosts, with whom they badly want a deal, in order to remind the world that in the realm of personal and political freedoms, the Soviet Union is still in the mid-19th century.

A few Soviet citizens have had the courage to come forth and thank the president. Some whisper muted support. The majority, though, don't agree. Dissenters are still seen as foreign agents, political perverts, mentally ill or traitors. There is simply no tradition in Russia's long history of permissible dissent.

From the safety and security of North America, it's easy to make light of Reagan's human rights meeting in Moscow. Over here, his words are no mere platitudes. Reagan has reminded Soviet citizens that a good part of the world thinks their system needs far more perestroika than Gorbachev has so far allowed to happen.