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"Refusenik" shows the effort to free Soviet Jews from the anti-Semitism of postwar Russia

By John Hartl
Special to The Seattle Times

We've been hearing a lot this year about human-rights abuses and the potential impact of organized protests and diplomacy on uncooperative countries. Rarely is the subject addressed as effectively as it is in Laura Bialis' absorbing new documentary, "Refusenik," which takes its title from defiant Soviet Jews who tried to escape the pervasive anti-Semitism of postwar Russia.



SEE CAPTION

"Refusenik," a documentary directed by Laura Bialis, chronicles the 30-year movement to free Soviet Jews from the pervasive anti-Semitism of postwar Russia.

Movie review ★★★★★

"Refusenik," a documentary directed by Laura Bialis. 117 minutes. Not rated; suitable for general audiences (though it has some horrific elements). In English, Hebrew and Russian, with English subtitles. [Varsity](#).

Just a few years after the Holocaust, many Russian Jews, no matter how bright or gifted, were prevented from attending universities or studying Hebrew. They were forced to carry "internal passports" and denied the chance to emigrate.

"It's a pity Hitler didn't finish you off," reads one sign at a ghoulish rally.

Jews who applied for exit visas were not only refused an opportunity to leave the country, they were immediately dismissed from their jobs. When a group of refuseniks tried to hijack a plane and take it to Israel, some were condemned to death.

But the Soviets couldn't ignore the massive international protests that followed these sentences, and the would-be hijackers survived. Israeli's triumph in 1967's Six-Day War inspired Jews everywhere, proving that they could reverse widespread predictions of defeat and defend themselves.

The story ends with the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall, which Bialis presents as the almost inevitable outcome of decades of grass-roots protests and the efforts of many politicians, artists and a few labor-camp survivors. Quite prominent are Washington Sen. Henry "Scoop" Jackson, who was deeply affected by a postwar visit to the Buchenwald concentration camp, and President Ronald Reagan, whose relationship with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was seen as crucial.

Eloquent as always, author and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel discusses the silence of the Jewish leadership in the postwar era. Bialis also talks to several longtime political prisoners and provides just enough grim glimpses of Soviet jails to suggest what it must have been like to survive — as one man recalls — for 405 days alone in one chilly cell.

John Hartl: johnhartl@yahoo.com

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