



READING GROUP GUIDE

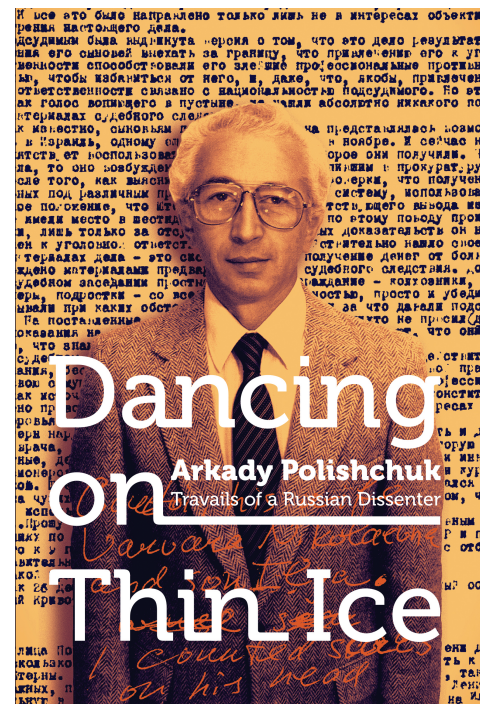
Dancing on Thin Ice: Travails of a Russian Dissenter By Arkady Polishchuk

Introduction

In this memoir, replete with Jewish humor and sardonic Russian irony, exiled Russian journalist and human rights advocate Arkady Polishchuk colorfully narrates his evolution as a dissenter and his work on behalf of persecuted Christians in 1970s Soviet Russia. Told primarily through dialog, this thrilling account puts the reader in the middle of a critical time in history, when thousands of people who had been denied emigration drew international attention while suffering human rights abuses, staged show trials, forced labor, and constant surveillance.

From 1950–1973, Polishchuk worked as a journalist for Russian state-run media and as an editor at *Asia and Africa Today*, where all foreign correspondents were KGB operatives using their cover jobs to meddle in international affairs. His close understanding of Russian propaganda makes this memoir especially eye-opening for American readers in today's political climate.

Through the course of the narrative, we are along with Polishchuk as he covers anti-Semitic trials, writes *samizdat* (political self-publications), is arrested, followed and surveilled, collaborates with Jewish refuseniks and smuggles eyewitness testimony to the West. The absurdity of his experiences is reflected in his humor, which belies the anxieties of the life he lived.



"The author has a tenacious eye, magnificent sense of humor, and deep understanding of the realities of Russian life under the rule of both Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev. Exciting and mentally stimulating reading."

— Eduard Kuznetsov, former political prisoner, now an Israeli journalist; author of *Prison Diaries*



PRAISE

Dancing on Thin Ice is a book by a dissident about dissidents. Arkady Polishchuk helped to break the silence of Western politicians and recognize the plight of persecuted Evangelicals in the Soviet Union. The memoir tells us about past events, about the KGB use of media outlets, but its subject certainly does not belong to history. It remains relevant today, while dissidents in different countries continue their struggle for human rights and liberty, their own and ours.

– Dr. Yuri Yarim-Agaev, Scientist and human rights activist; Member, Moscow Helsinki Group; President, Center for Democracy in the USSR

Skillfully written and a page-turner, Arkady Polishchuk's memoir is about making a free man out of a slave and about the price an individual is prepared to pay for his freedom. It helps the reader to understand the processes taking place in modern Russia and its internal and external policies, including the aggressive attempts being made to revive Russia as a superpower. As an elite Russian journalist, Arkady Polishchuk rebelled and, despite facing formidable forces of the state secret police, found himself fighting the brutal regime.

– Vladimir Konstantinovich Bukovsky, author of *To Build a Castle* and *Soviet Hypocrisy and Western Gullibility*; Russian opposition presidential candidate in 2008

Arkady Polishchuk's memoir of life as a Russian dissident uses an icepick forged of sardonic wit and personal experience to pierce deep into the hide of the Soviet system. [...] The book takes a sharp look at the dysfunction of the U.S.S.R., offering details that no one in the West could imagine. [...] An important memoir by a fearless man.

– Foreword Reviews

The books that really stimulated thinking and kept me up at night countless times are those I take personally. [...] I recognize the settings, I commiserate with people, I know how horrible it is to feel stuck there. I could not sleep after *The Russians* by Hedrick Smith; *Putin's Russia*, by Anna Politkovskaya; and *Dancing On Thin Ice* by Arkady Polishchuk [...] The depressing surroundings of Polishchuk's life might be hard to believe for a Western person—but it is re-counted with such journalistic vision and style that reading the book is both enlightening and entertaining.

– Fiona Citkin, *Thrive Global*



READING GROUP QUESTIONS

Discussion with the author, Arkady Polishchuk.

1. The Prologue demonstrates how the corruption of law enforcement helped us survive as prisoners. In what ways does Russia seem to be unique in its tradition of corruption? Did any particular aspect of the prisoner-warden relationship surprise you?
2. After the fall of communism in Russia, a bribe can still fix issues related to lack of medication and housing, poor quality of city services, and getting the necessary help or a document from the authorities. What are some instances in the book where corruption helped the protagonists and their friends?
3. What are some examples of how official communist ideology permeated all spheres of the Soviet citizen's life? Specifically, the chapter "The Life of the Blind" shows the role of ideology in the Marxist experiment with the blind. How did people live in reality, compared to the ideal version of their society?
4. The current government in Russia is experimenting with neo-imperialist propaganda peppered with "uniquely Russian" Christianity – an ideological platform that has been eagerly supported by the Russian Orthodox hierarchy. Do you think a state ideology based upon religion can be effective, and if so, how? Discuss examples in the book where the support or suppression of religion and religious figures played a role in enforcing state power.
5. The chapters about *Asia and Africa Today* show how Soviet media outlets were widely used by the KGB for espionage abroad, a practice that continues into the 21st century by autocracies and dictatorships using modern technology. Can Western democracies resist this aggression without restricting the democratic freedoms of its citizens? Which freedoms might be most impacted?
6. Two chapters, "On the Horns of Dilemma" and "The Unpredictable World of Dissent," are about the power of fear in a society controlled by secret police. You will never understand an undemocratic society if you don't take in consideration this power of fear. Stalin instilled fear in our genes. What does fear do to people in these chapters?
7. Fifteen years after Stalin's death, almost a quarter century after the expulsion of Crimean Tatars from their homeland, my colleagues and I refused to open a handwritten notebook



brought to our editorial room by a Crimean Tatar. It was about the suffering of his people. Why do you think we did this?

8. Think about any fear you've experienced while making decisions unacceptable by state law, a strata of society to which you belong, members of your family, religion, or a person you loved. And yet, all of these is easier to overcome than the animal fear of people under communist or autocratic rule. Share as much as you want or are able to about an experience where fear ruled your life, and what kinds of decisions you made based on this fear.

9. In the trial of the Jewish Ukrainian physician Dr. Stern, the majority of prosecution witnesses, most of them villagers, sympathized with the defendant. What does this case, which took place in a country where anti-Semitic prejudice has been widespread for centuries, reveal about the Ukrainian villagers' supposed "predisposition" to prejudice? What does the trial show about these two versions of ideas about rural people and which is most valuable to the State? Do you see other examples where people in power perpetuate false ideas? Discuss.

10. "The Struggle for Purity in the Party Ranks" reveals how a dictatorship that claims superiority over other societies and ideologies can be ridiculous and hypocritical. Connect the anecdotes in this and other parts of the book to any hypocrisy you've noticed in your own country's social institutions, such as politics, religion, or higher education. How does society react in response? What are some of the ways that people in Soviet Russia responded?

11. Today in Russia, a new undemocratic ruler rewrites the history of his country and shows the population a distorted picture of its past. For example, the government controls the content of school textbooks and downplays the 70 years of mass repression against its own people under socialism, and it has changed monuments to Jewish victims of the Holocaust to erase the fact that they were Jews. But how does the force of inertia associated with the unresolved issues of the past haunt every society? Are there modern attempts to rewrite American history, change monuments, and mask past atrocities? What goals do these efforts have, and how do they relate to the national project of American democracy?

12. Several chapters are devoted to the Jewish emigration movement of the 1970s, a unique feature of Soviet life that opened up a previously closed society and created the word "refusenik." Today, many Russians who had humiliated and persecuted Jews for attempting to emigrate are now benefiting from being able to travel freely, although no official apology or words of gratitude have been expressed towards refuseniks. What does this hypocrisy reveal about the Russian government's attitude towards the past and how silence is perpetuated?



Photo © Chad Gracia

ARKADY POLISHCHUK (b. 1930) is a Russian Jewish dissident and former journalist who has authored articles, essays, and satires for leading Russian periodicals, as well as two books about Africa. His writings have appeared in many publications in Europe and the United States including the *National Review*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *Witness*. Polishchuk was a broadcaster and correspondent for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty from 1985–2008 in Washington DC, Munich and Prague. Polishchuk has been heavily involved in human rights throughout his career, including as a testimonial speaker for Amnesty International and working on behalf of 30,000 Russian Evangelicals trying to escape decades of persecution under communist rule. In 1981 he was awarded the British McWhirter Human Rights Foundation Award and has received numerous travel grants for his human rights activities as well as being covered by *Life*, the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Nightline with Ted Koppel*, and international publications.

Polishchuk became a dissident in 1973 and spent several weeks in prison as part of a four-year campaign in support of Jewish and Christian emigration. When the Christian Emigration Movement was born after the Helsinki Accords in 1975, Polishchuk concentrated his human rights efforts on helping persecuted Christians – which included the dangerous smuggling of witness testimonies out of the U.S.S.R. After successfully petitioning for the right to emigrate he spent several years in Europe before arriving in the United States, where for two years he was the managing editor and spokesman for Door of Hope International, an Evangelical human rights organization focusing on religious persecution. He holds an advanced degree in Philosophy from Moscow University.



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