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Physicists for Human Rights in the Former Soviet Union

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In his 1940 paper 'Freedom and Science' Albert Einstein emphasized that "intellectual independence is a primary necessity for the scientific inquirer" and that "political liberty is also extraordinarily important for his work." Raised in the tradition of intellectual independence and dedicated to the scientific truth, physicists were among the first to stand up for freedom in the USSR. It was no coincidence that the founders of the first independent Human Rights Committee (1970) were physicists: Andrei Sakharov, Valery Chalidze and Andrei Tverdokhlebov. In 1973 a physicist, Alexander Voronel, founded a Moscow Sunday (refusenik) Seminar – the first openly independent scientific body in the history of the USSR. In 1976 physicists Andrei Sakharov, Yuri Orlov and a mathematician Natan Sharansky were the leading force in founding the famous Moscow Helsinki Human Rights Watch group. This talk briefly describes the special position of physicists (often viewed as Einstein's colleagues) in Soviet society, as well as their unique role in the struggle for human rights. It describes in some detail the Moscow Sunday Seminar, and extensions thereof such as International Conferences, the Computer School and the Computer Database of Refuseniks. The Soviet government considered such truly independent organizations as a challenge to Soviet authority and tried to destroy them. The Seminar's success and its very existence owed much to the support of Western scientific organizations, who persuaded their members to attend the Seminar and visit scientist-refuseniks. The human rights struggle led by physicists contributed substantially to the demise of the Soviet system.