The year 1956 is associated with new freedoms in the Soviet Union. One need only recall Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of Joseph Stalin at that February's XX Party Congress and the release of GULag prisoners that followed. Rehabilitation of cultural icons purged or silenced under Stalin took place alongside new literary and artistic sensations, including the publication of Vladimir Dudintsev's anti-bureaucratic novel Not by Bread Alone and the first exhibition of Pablo Picasso's works in the USSR. Young people from the East bloc began to study in Soviet universities, while preparations got underway for the arrival of guests from all over the world for 1957's International Youth Festival. Yet behind the atmosphere of greater openness lurked uncodified, inconsistent limitations on speech with punishments for those who transgressed. The importance of disarray regarding limits on speech becomes clear when one looks at 1956 as also a year of protest and repression.

Khrushchev's reversal of the official deification of Stalin shocked the populace and provoked daring outbursts from those who would defend Stalin as well as from those who found the Secret Speech insufficiently radical. In Georgia, officials had to cope with street protests against the reevaluation of Stalin. Though they decisively quashed the pro-Stalin demonstrations in Georgia, Soviet authorities seemed tacitly at least to support growing political and artistic liberalism in the months following the denunciation of the cult of personality. In late 1956, however, events in Hungary led to a change in attitude at the top. In December, the Central Committee issued a classified letter to Party organizations instructing them to strengthen political work among the masses in light of a spate of anti-Soviet outbursts. This letter identified writers and artists as the most likely offenders, but also targeted students as vulnerable to foreign propaganda. At the same time, the KGB seems to have


2. "Pis'mo TsK KPSS 'ob usilenii politicheskoi raboty partiinykh organizatsii v massakh i pereschenii vylazok antisovetskikh vrazhdebnykh elementov'," in Doklad N. S. Khrushcheva o
stepped up its investigations of suspicious types, especially among liberal students. The subsequent crackdown on free thinkers [vol’nodumtsy] in late 1956-1957 cut short many youthful experiments with free speech and created dozens of new political prisoners.

This essay examines two cases of young people who suffered for their words or deeds in late 1956. The focus is on those subject to the most extreme measure—arrest, trial and prison camp. 1956 was a year of great turmoil in Soviet universities; debates about the state of the Komsomol, de-Stalinization, literary canons, and even student life culminated in many scandals, but few arrests. An in-depth study of two extraordinary cases of the first political prisoners of a new generation reveals the regime’s limits on tolerance. It also addresses numerous questions about the nature of “freethinking” among young elites at the start of the thaw: what interested students in 1956? How did some become political actors? Did those who landed in prison feel themselves out of step with their fellow students? Lastly, what was the relation of the “generation of 1956” to later dissident groups?

Official figures for anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation convictions for 1956 and 1957 show a remarkable jump from 384 in 1956 to 1,964 in 1957. Indeed, 1957 and 1958 were by far the peak years for article 58 (anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation) trials for the whole post-Stalin period of Soviet history. My goal, however, is not to breakdown these statistics to classify the nature of convictions or the demographics of offenders. Rather I focus on...