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Refusenik (2007)

Director: [Laura Bialis](#)

Critics' rating

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Movie review

From Time Out Chicago

The former U.S.S.R. usually figures only in spy thrillers, but an ambitious new documentary reconstructs one of the Cold War's lengthiest battles: the 30-year struggle to liberate 1.5 million Soviet Jews. A primer for aspiring grass-roots activists, *Refusenik* shows how students and housewives, whites and blacks, Democrats and Republicans, and North Americans and Europeans united in a movement strong enough to part the Iron Curtain.

Despite centuries of anti-Semitism, Russia supported Israel in its 1948 bid for independence, but after 1967's Six-Day War, Moscow shifted alliances, and Soviet Jews who applied for exit visas were refused, fired from their jobs, tailed and often jailed. The most famous was scientist Anatoly (Natan) Sharansky, falsely accused of collaborating with the CIA and sentenced to 13 years' hard time.

In the U.S., students who'd been civil rights activists adopted the refuseniks' cause. Older Jews with memories of the Holocaust still fresh in their minds rallied communities. Congress unanimously passed the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which punished foreign countries' human rights violations by curtailing trade. Western tourists smuggled contraband to Soviet dissidents.

Director Bialis, a meticulous researcher and a born storyteller, backs up contemporary interviews with rare footage culled from Russian archives and old home movies. The format may not be new, but her message that nothing is impossible is as timely as it gets.

Author: Andrea Gronvall

Time Out Chicago Issue 173: June 19-25, 2008

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Landmark's Renaissance Place Cinema

Cast & crew

Director: [Laura Bialis](#)

Rated: NR

Duration: 116 mins

US Release: May 9 2008

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