

Sakharov: Giving Russia Back Self-Respect

Andrei Sakharov, the nuclear physicist, dissident and human rights activist who died in 1989 is still viewed by many Russians as the epitome of personal morality. • He advocated civil liberties and reforms, enduring exile and persecution after winning the 1975 Nobel Peace Prize. • But his actions never seemed motivated by ego or secret deference to vested interests. • This pureness of intent, the action of a man who spoke his mind no matter what, is seen by some as naïve and others as saint-like, but all still prize it. •

by Lev Gudkov

May marks the 90th anniversary of the birth of Andrei Sakharov, one of the two leading figures of the Soviet Union's perestroika period and comparable in importance only to Mikhail Gorbachev, who introduced the sweeping changes that would ultimately lead to his ouster. Both men were named "Man of the Year," though a decade apart. Each was perceived by Russian society in a radically different way. If Gorbachev was linked to the "democratization" of a totalitarian regime, Sakharov was the symbol of opposition to state violence and disingenuousness.

Both remained in the public spotlight for a relatively short period of time and are perceived differently. Gorbachev was forced to resign five years after his ascent and was later hammered by critics. In contrast, the image of Sakharov, who died in December 1989, was increasingly idealized. The collective attitude of a citizenry toward heroic figures can reflect the character of an entire society, including its passions, prejudices and illusions.

Sakharov is perceived today chiefly as a defender of

civil rights. This side of his life dominated the responses of 60 percent of Russians in a May 2010 poll. Among those who remember him, 77 percent respect and appreciate him, with less than four percent expressing hostility or dislike (19 percent had no opinion).

Sakharov's moment as a model for moral authority came on June 4, 1989. In a speech before enraged members of the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR, he labeled the war in Afghanistan as a "criminal" undertaking. As early public opinion polls showed, an absolute majority of the Soviet population opposed the war and wanted it ended as quickly as possible. But the popular view contrasted sharply with the view of the Communist Party "nomenklatura," which parliament of the time represented.

Then the unexpected occurred: 56 percent of survey respondents across the European Union said they agreed with the political and social vision laid out by Sakharov. For the first time in Soviet history a representative of the intelligentsia, someone inextricably linked to the country's tiny dissident, pro-human rights population, was recognized as an interpreter of the majority opinion. This compelled national to deal with a new reality.

The enormous social resonance of Sakharov's speeches against the war in Afghanistan arose because between the lines of his criticism was an attack on the Communist regime and worries about the country's future. Even those not yet ready to fully sympathize with Sakharov's on the other issues, shared doubts on the overall condition of the Soviet state.

His diagnosis of the situation became a kind of capsule

in which the war in Afghanistan was seen as a crusade among Communist Party Politburo members, one that was both immoral and irresponsible. It was, he said, a policy deserving of unconditionally condemnation. Moreover, the pursuing of such a policy was possible only in a repressive society where personal freedoms were nonexistent and where human rights were systematically violated. The exit strategy demanded the consistent implementation of reforms that embraced every aspect of governance, including the political side, the economic system, and reform of the judiciary, which was impossible without an opening to country's in the Western democratic orbit. His position was highly appreciated by civil society. Three surveys conducted in late 1989 (just before and just after his death on Dec. 14, 1989) showed increasing solidarity with his position, particularly after his dis-

Nobel laureate Andrei Sakharov at his Moscow home in 1975.

appearance from the scene. In early December, his views were approved by 43 percent, which reached 45 percent in the middle of the month and 58 percent at the end (opposition registered at 10, 8 and 2 percent, respectively). A full 71 percent of respondents in 1991 agreed that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a state crime and 63 percent thought the post-Soviet Union should follow in the path of the developed West.

These assessments of public opinion were preceded by a series of events that led to Sakharov's stereotyping as a "legendary man," a "hero opposed to the forces of evil," standing up to injustice as a martyr and a winner. Ascending those heights and reaching that level of moral authority, from which a figure exercises a strong influence on society, required more than being a defender of human rights or a dissident who had served time in a Soviet prison camp.



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This status required two other fundamental pieces. The first was his anointing as an authority independent from political power (in scientific circles, in world opinion, among human rights defenders and the global intelligentsia); the second the respect he received from power sources themselves. It was central that such a figure be free from suspicion of selfishness, personal ambitions and secret interests, all the ulterior motives that a cynical society, after 70 years of ideological manipulation, was ready to attribute to anyone who dared to stand out from the gray masses and oppose the ideas of the majority.

Sakharov's name gained notoriety (after many years' of essential existing in secret among closed scientific institutions) as a result of brutal smear campaign unleashed by the Soviet mass media against him. The campaign didn't begin with his early criticism of the regime in the 1960s, when he openly defended civil rights, criticized Soviet totalitarianism and outspokenly advocated disarmament and called for peaceful coexistence among states with different political systems.

Instead, the persecution started after Sakharov was awarded the 1975 Nobel Peace Prize. Since the honor couldn't be concealed from the public, the regime decided to counterattack, using its typical methods of repression and muzzling. His exiling to Gorky in 1980 led to Sakharov's becoming the symbol of the democratic movement in the Soviet Union. He was admired as a nonviolent advocate for change, a man who was willing to pursue the changes through legal means.

At the same time, it was impossible to expect mass domestic understanding of his positions in the late 1970s into the mid-1980s. Few outside of the inner circle of samizdat readers and those that listened to foreign radio programs transmitting regularly into the Soviet Union even knew who he was. In that time period, those in the know represented roughly five-to-seven percent of the adult population, and between 10-12 percent at the beginning of perestroika.

Ironically, Sakharov's popularity grew in proportion to the official propaganda directed against him, or perhaps because of it. Gradually, Soviet media became the main source of information about Sakharov. The slander and defamation directed against him made his name jump out. Not even the long years of isolation stopped the spread of his reputation.



At the beginning of perestroika, a substantial part of the society (thought never more than 15-to-20 percent) not only didn't trust the media, but also associated official information with misinformation. The smear campaign conferred its own legitimacy. A man was seen to be acting "honestly," "justly" and for the common good, but by doing so did what most people, "the common people," were to afraid to, fearing reprisals. The awareness of respect, even if not publicly expressed but kept warm instead by a small circle of "friends," proved extraordinarily useful in the strengthening of Sakharov's identity. It helped alleviate the weight of conformism felt by people living under the regime – though, as later developments showed, it didn't free them from playing both sides of the street, on

Sakharov died in December 1989.

the contrary strengthened their social adaptability.

This mechanism of appropriated "relief," which distracted from the oppressive awareness personal indecision and opportunism, typified the conscience of an absolute majority of the Soviet intelligentsia, which constituted the main audience of Sakharov's appeals. Psychologically, this shift in focus was expressed in the form of an exaggerated reverence: It was Sakharov as hero, saint or, in part, fool.

Did people actually believe what the press was writing about Sakharov during the Brezhnev years that lasted from the mid-1960s to the end of the 1970s. It is hard to say. Data from a survey conducted in 1991 is of little help. The majority of respondents say little that's a definite on the subject. Only 12 percent believed that "the majority didn't believe" the anti-Sakharov propaganda spread by newspapers; 58 said they "didn't remember" or had a hard time answering the question. Thirty percent of respondents said they were convinced the "the majority believed" the government line portraying Sakharov as a treasonous figure.

This data doesn't reflect the peculiarities of human memory. The significance of ideological campaigns in Soviet times was sterilized by mass conformity, crushing and suffocating any capacity for personal liking for a persecuted man or protests against his fate. The awareness of injustice and loyalty to the power structure existed in different "compartments" of consciousness.

Only during perestroika, when the media opened up, was it possible to speak of Sakharov in a different tone different from the standard one, which is to say "general condemnation." As a result, Soviet public views on the moral or humanitarian smear campaign mounted against Sakharov remain inarticulate and hard to quantify in any

scientific sense. Even the general atmosphere of mourning that arose after death, when all appeared to respect if not revere him, as well claiming to share his views, only 50 percent of respondents were willing to label Soviet actions against him as "illegal and unjustified." The majority reaction doesn't evidence any particular wish to justify Soviet agitprop or the actions of the press and those of the persecuting KGB. Nor does it evidence any particular desire to condemn and punish those responsible for these persecutions.

The rise in Sakharov's authoritativeness after his return from exile was determined by a combination of factors. First, he remained a member of the Soviet elite in the sense that he came from the world of science, considered "pure" and, at least in theory, non-ideological. (Though it wasn't merely his status as a physicist but one who was involved in the creation of nuclear weapons, considered an important attribute of a "great power"). Sakharov's scientific merits were unquestionable and unassailable. He was a brilliant mind. This by itself excluded him from being seen a manager or administrator associated with the scientific nomenclatura, which covered most of the members of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Here instead was a true scientist, among the greatest in his field, whose merits had been confirmed by countless awards and academic degrees all of which had been conferred long before he started his work in defense of civil rights.

This factor fundamentally removed from "dissidence" any belief that his opposition to the existing power structure was concealed an eagerness "for personal gain." Nor was it possible to see him as an abject "failure" in life, which had been a key ingredient of Soviet propaganda. It tended to brand dissenters as social misfits, maladjusted, mediocre, and so on.

TABLE 1.

Why did Sakharov get involved in political debate and the defense of human rights?

(March 1991, based on % of 2,000 people interviewed)

	IN % BASED ON INTERVIEWEES
Compassion for people who'd been humiliated by the regime	13
Sense of responsibility given what was going on in the country	44
Ambition	0,3
To get rid of the guilt for being the man behind the H-Bomb	4
Because he was tired of being a scientist	2
Don't know	18
No answer	18

This longstanding recognition of Sakharov's merits, combined with a sense (at least from the standpoint of Soviet man in the street) that his actions and motivations were the result of deeply-held personal and moral beliefs, which in amoral Soviet society was perceived as extraordinary, only added to his legitimacy, and in some cases, to his ridiculing. The Soviet filter, still hemmed in by layers of suspicion, led to extreme polarities, from those who dismissed his actions as frivolous and meaningless ("What else does the man need? These are the caprices of a man who has too much.") to those who suggested that this in act was a "man unlike the others" (a hero, a saint, supernatural) as a result should command unquestioned authority and esteem.

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TABLE 2.

Do you know who Sakharov was, his field, why he was famous in Russia? (N = 1600)		
	1997	2010
Was a famous nuclear physicist	47	44
Was one of the creators of the Soviet H-Bomb	28	29
Was a dissident who defended human rights	14	18
Criticized the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan	12	13
Worked to ban nuclear testing	13	9
Was a politician, a member of the Soviet parliament, and an opposition leader	8	11
Was an Anti-Soviet figure who slandered the regime	4	0
Was one of Gorbachev's closest assistants	3	0
Was the father of perestroika/of the democratic transformation of the USSR	3	0
I don't know exactly	16	6
I don't know who he is	11	24

TABLE 3.

What adjectives suit Sakharov?		
(N = 1600)	1997	2010
Courageous	36	35
Just	25	28
Forward-thinking	23	30
Independent	19	20
Resolute	18	29
Responsible	15	21
Altruistic	7	7
Vulnerable	6	6
Naïve	5	6
Incompetent	5	6
Shrewd	5	9
Narcissistic	1	2
Rancorous	2	1
Detached from reality	7	7
Don't know / no answer	33	21

Sakharov was not seen (then or later) as the sole initiator of social change or transformation in the country. For this reason, he doesn't bear the weight of the backlash that emerged following the failure of democratic-leaning reforms of the 1990s, a period in which the new Russian fell into profound crisis. He was among those who helped make public guidelines and criteria to help assess the country's situation. He was the one who had publicly criticized the power grid. This was seen as his fundamental function in a society that otherwise lacked humanitarian values and any functional concept of legality.

It can be assumed he's remembered because he didn't bind public behavior to his image. He didn't ask people to act like him. He didn't hint at any personal imperative to enact change. He remained an isolated instance of moral action, action unto itself, which didn't need to be

TABLE 4.

Which view of Sakharov's life and work do you most associate with? (May 2010, N = 1,600)	
He inadvertently hurt his country	> 1
Maybe it was inadvertent, but he caused severe harm	> 4
As a young man, he was a famous scientist, but after that I don't know	> 8
I know nothing about him but I'm critical	> 1
I know nothing about him so I can't comment	9
I know nothing about him but I have a favorable impression	12
He did a lot of good for the country	27
He played an important role in the country's history	29
He's a heroic figure who sacrificed himself for the greater good	11
Negative/positive views	0,16



President Ronald Reagan signs a proclamation honoring Sakharov in the presence of his daughter Tatiana Yankelevich, left. In his Soviet dissident days, Sakharov was a lightning rod.

repeated by others, or more specifically by common people. His greatness consisted in creating an ideal and a set of actions that didn't require anyone follow. (This attitude toward events can be defined as "spectator" values).

In a society characterized by the erosion of moral values and concepts, very few people buy into the idea of putting a halo over the righteous. But if they do, the halo endures, and efforts to denigrate the legacy are destined to fail because it rams up against a wall of refusal. People don't want to hear such talk about their heroes.

The vast majority believed that Sakharov was not acting for himself or for personal gain, for private interests of one group or another, but instead to defend his position on the key issues regarding the future of Soviet society. His aim was to achieve peace and harmony in the country (a view now sustained by 75 percent of Russians and opposed by only four percent.) He has earned the trust of fellow citizens through determination and, simultaneously, with the apparent "strangeness" of his speeches, in that he appeared totally indifferent to the impressions his views and words might produce in others. He didn't take a position to have an effect, or even play to the "common good." He just openly and vigorously but defended his point of view, knowing that they in contradiction to prevailing policies and that he had no practical alternative to offer but also knowing he was being true to himself in denouncing the hypocrisy and demagoguery of the Soviet leadership. So it is that Russians see him as the man who helped re-teach themselves self-respect. ●