

Andrei Sakharov and the fate of liberal democratic thought in post-Soviet Russia

Vladimir Volkov**25 June 2001**

Last May 21 academician Andrei Sakharov, renowned as one of the developers of the Soviet hydrogen bomb and later as a dissident and liberal critic of the Stalinist regime, would have celebrated his eightieth birthday. This date was marked by a wave of publications in the Russian press.

The general tenor of these publications was triumphant. Typical were phrases like these, appearing in the newspaper *Izvestia*: "Sakharov overcame space and time," "Sakharov won in his encounter with history," he and Alexander Solzhenitsyn "are the two free persons of their slavish times."

There is an explanation for such ecstatic characterisations. The new capitalist Russia has obliterated all of the old values and authorities, but created nothing new to replace them. The majority of popular celebrities—politicians, writers, show business personalities—have repeatedly disgraced themselves and disappointed the expectations of the average citizen. In this atmosphere of disappointment, political disorientation and a vacuum of authority, the new regime attempts to implant from above certain cult figures to serve as models of morality and ethics.

Academician Sakharov has become quite useful as a member of this select circle of "saintly" personae. Having become a kind of prophet of the new capitalist Russia, he had come to believe that only the dominance of private property could guarantee democracy and human rights. Fortunately for his reputation, he departed in time, and is therefore not held responsible for what happened later.

Yet when one examines the spectrum of adoring expressions addressed to Sakharov's shadow by the new ruling elite, one detects traces of ambivalence. Contemporary Russian policy-makers and media barons do not strive to initiate a serious discussion of what this Soviet dissident and scientist really thought, how his ideology evolved, and the consequences of the political program for which he publicly fought during the second half of 1980s.

The celebrations of Sakharov acclaim him as an admirable person, rather than as a public and political figure. Typical are the words of a well-known dissident of the period from

the 1960s to the 1980s, Alexander Ginsburg: "I think that if Sakharov were alive today our life would not be significantly different.... He showed us not a political, but an ethical road."

There are even more sober judgements. Observer Leonid Radzikhovsky writes: "Sakharov remains, of course, a historic figure, but for some reason he has not turned into a 'burning hot' prophet among the Russian public. His life has not become a heroic and mythological national symbol."

This remark highlights a vital fact: Sakharov has not become a popular hero. He was and remains a cult figure of the Russian official intelligentsia and its elites. Moreover, even his most ardent supporters direct a certain amount of criticism toward his legacy.

What is it that today arouses perplexity or disagreement among the proponents of what might be called Sakharov's heritage? First of all, their unease is bound up with certain of Sakharov's basic goals—those concerning his appeals to human conscience and his belief in progress and the possibility of bettering society to benefit the majority of its people.

Although his concrete political perspectives and proposals took, from the mid-1970s on, an ever more reactionary character and were increasingly directed at promoting the idea of capitalist restoration, Sakharov until his death remained personally a man free of postmodernist cynicism and indifference to the fate of mankind.

In his autobiography, written at a ripe old age, Sakharov wrote: "I am not a professional politician, perhaps that is the reason for always worrying about the relationship between my actions and their eventual results. I tend to think that only moral criteria in conjunction with an open mind can serve as a sort of compass for these complex and contradictory problems."

Sakharov did not initially embrace liberal and democratic illusions about capitalism. In a 1968 document outlining his credo, entitled "Thoughts on progress, peaceful coexistence and intellectual freedom," he noted, "The author's outlook is profoundly socialist."

This interesting document interprets the well-known idea of “convergence” from the standpoint that the social basis of the Soviet Union had to be preserved while its social life was completely democratised; in the West, the socio-economic fundamentals had to be fundamentally reformed. Here we see that the writer assigns historical superiority to socialism, cleansed of all traces of Stalinism.

It was only later that Sakharov began to change his emphasis in the opposite direction. The dominant ideological outlook in Russia is, of course, disinclined to remember the earlier pages of Sakharov’s intellectual biography.

Another of his hallmarks was a consistent struggle for free speech and human rights. This theme long ago ceased to be popular among official policy-makers. The Kremlin, especially since Putin came to power and started the second Chechen war, has conducted a definite policy of uprooting the beginnings of civil rights and democratic traditions that had begun to sprout in Russia in the early ’90s.

The Russian establishment chooses to forget that Sakharov began in the late 1980s to develop the draft of a new constitution. Among other points, it guaranteed equal legal rights for all of the national territorial constituents of the Soviet Union.

Boris Yeltsin’s appeal in the early 1990s to the various regional elites—“Take as much sovereignty as you can manage”—exploited this and similar ideas. The consequences of Yeltsin’s destructive policy took the form of numerous ethnic and regional conflicts throughout the territory of the former Soviet Union, and its victims are counted today in hundreds of thousands of innocent people.

Having shifted 180 degrees, the present policy of the Kremlin attempts to deal with separatism by strengthening the vertical military and police apparatus, and reviving traditions that had earlier appeared to sink into the past, together with the whole heritage of Stalinism.

In other words, there is an attempt to turn Sakharov into a prophet and an icon, but only as a private individual, rather than as a social and political leader.

There is another question, which the Russian mass media prefers to avoid altogether. This concerns Sakharov’s heritage: has he left something behind that has encouraged the appearance of a new generation of independent and responsible citizenry, responsible for their society’s fate? If one examines the actual state of affairs in post-Soviet Russia, one is obliged to recognise that nothing even remotely close to this exists.

According to T. Gurova, the sociological analyst of the journal *Expert*, the ideas of democracy, civic rights and individual freedom are rooted in the dissident movement of the Soviet period. Their personal representatives are mainly “persons of non-party or semi-party intelligentsia” who are

today by and large over 45 years old. “It is among them that the concept of freedom is equated with the concepts of free speech and freedom of conscience, association, emigration”, etc.

But these people do not shape contemporary economic, social and political life in Russia. That role is played by people who were extremely successful over the past 10 years. Writes Gurova: “They succeeded not by following the mystical ideal of democracy, but because they relied on their own will and energy.” They are rooted, he continues, “in the soil of unlimited transgression of laws by their partners, the idiocy of regional governors, the thuggishness and at the same time the ingenuity of their colleagues, the enormity of the market, the indifference of the state authority, all of which comprise our everyday life.”

This is perhaps the only objective social consequence by which we can evaluate the significance of Sakharov and other persons like him. Perhaps his subjective goals were fine. Personally he did not disgrace himself with lies, blood and corruption, as have the bulk of the Kremlin politicians of the 1990s.

Yet his political ideas have not become less reactionary. From the point of view of the large historical perspective, his political program represented not the emergence of the Soviet Union from its dead end, but just the opposite—its sinking into an ever deeper and more deadly crisis.

It should not come as a surprise that Sakharov’s ideas did not bear positive fruit within the new post-Soviet generation. The jubilee of academician Sakharov, dead now for 12 years, gives us pause to reflect on this significant fact and to consider which political outlook can serve the real renewal of society.



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