

## The resonance of Andrei Sakharov in Putin's Russia

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Thirty years after the fall of the Soviet Union the legacy and spirit of the late dissident remain grimly relevant

Simon Kuper 10 HOURS AGO

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On December 15, 1986, workers in the Russian provincial town Gorky (now Nizhny Novgorod) visited Andrei Sakharov's dingy apartment to install a turquoise telephone. The physicist and peace activist had been exiled almost incommunicado at [214 Gagarin Avenue](#) since 1980. A day later the phone rang. It was Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, ending Sakharov's internal exile. "Thank you," replied Sakharov, "but a few days ago, my friend Anatoly Marchenko died in Chistopol Prison. He was first on the list which I gave you. Many prisoners of conscience are in Soviet prisons, and they all must be released."

A week later, Sakharov and his wife Elena "Lusya" Bonner got off the train in Moscow. It was a historic moment: Sakharov embodied the freethinking crushed in the USSR. Would his return change the country? Swarmed by foreign correspondents, he name-checked many prisoners, but then had to run: it was Tuesday, the day his beloved physics institute FIAN held its weekly theoretical seminar.

The USSR collapsed 30 years ago this week, but the spirit of Sakharov still hangs over us. The father of the Soviet thermonuclear bomb, who became the USSR's leading dissident (he preferred "freethinker"), would have turned 100 this year. As Vladimir Putin's army threatens Ukraine, Sakharov's warning that a state that denies human rights to its own citizens will endanger its neighbours seems prescient. Meanwhile, this month, another Russian dissident deprived of freedom, Alexei Navalny, won the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. Only this week Russia's Supreme Court ordered the closure of Memorial, the country's most prominent human rights group which Sakharov helped to found.

What would he make of today's Russia (where about 60 streets and squares are named after him)? "I cannot imagine how disheartened he would have been," says his stepdaughter Tatiana Yankelevich.

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**Descended from a line of Orthodox priests**, Sakharov grew up among the remnants of Moscow's pre-revolutionary intelligentsia. His father Dmitri wrote popular physics books. Though the USSR was founded in 1922 when Sakharov was 19 months old, mentally he was raised almost outside it, homeschooled until age five, and again in fifth and sixth grade. Learning physics and maths from his father, Sakharov felt he "understood everything immediately". One later colleague wrote that Sakharov "could mentally transform himself into [electrons or neutrons], as if his very skin could feel what it was to be them." Sakharov said youthful isolation left him with "a deep dislike of socialising, which caused me to suffer". But almost uniquely among Soviet citizens, he was taught free thinking.

Relatives "disappeared" in the Great Terror of 1937, but his parents shielded him from politics, and the teenager wasn't yet interested. In the second world war, he turned his gifts to patriotic use, inventing a new way to test bullet cores used in anti-tank guns. In 1945 he read about the American atomic bombs open-mouthed.

**Sakharov never repented for his bombmaking . . . yet he was growing uneasy. He saw that nuclear contamination would kill untold thousands**

Stalin's secret police chief Lavrentiy Beria insisted he join the USSR's bomb programme. That tore Sakharov away from theoretical physics. Recalling his research of summer 1947, he regretted: "Never before or since have I been so close to the highest level of science." (This and other quotes in this article come from the centenary album *Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov*, published in English next year.)

He and his young family were dropped in a research centre known only as "The Installation", in a town called Sarov that had been removed from maps, where inmates of local penal camps did the menial work.

Yet bombmaking suited him, because he was a rare combination of theoretician and practical inventor, explains his biographer Gennady Gorelik. Before turning 30, Sakharov devised the "layer cake" structure of the Soviet "hydrogen bomb", tested successfully in August 1953. Arguably this device wasn't really an H-bomb, since most of the energy came from nuclear fission, not fusion. Either way, it was the world's deadliest weapon, as destructive as 25 Hiroshima A-bombs. In 1955 the USSR tested a thermonuclear bomb, co-designed by Sakharov, that was four times stronger still.

With so many Jewish physicists, Soviet leaders were delighted to celebrate an ethnic Russian hero. Sakharov was kissed by Brezhnev and Khrushchev, earned fortunes, and could get any leader on the phone. He was named Hero of Socialist Labour three times. Whenever he got confused at a railway ticket-office window, waving his Hero booklet (which for security reasons carried no photograph) resolved any problem.

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**Sakharov never repented** for his bombmaking. He felt he was protecting the fatherland, and by achieving nuclear parity with the US, the world, too. But he was also driven by intellectual fascination. The Installation, where he spent 18 years, was a relative oasis of free thinking, even though it was closed to outsiders. The Party accepted that physicists needed intellectual freedom to develop weapons. And so, in their equivalent of the American “atomic city” Los Alamos, scientists could chat in comfort even about news items from BBC radio, recounts Gorelik. Their library received the American Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. The work was “paradise for a physicist,” recalled Sakharov. He then still mostly believed in the Soviet system.



Sakharov getting into his car in Moscow, 1988 © Sputnik / TopFoto

Yet he was growing uneasy. He saw that nuclear contamination would kill untold thousands. Though the victims were anonymous individuals, many yet unborn, his ability to combine abstract with concrete thought helped him imagine them. For years Sakharov lobbied Khrushchev to end nuclear testing. The 1963 Moscow Treaty, in which the US, USSR and UK renounced above-ground tests, is partly his achievement.

**In a 1968 essay, sensationally published in the New York Times, he called for intellectual freedom and convergence of the communist and capitalist systems**

But once his mind strayed beyond bombmaking, it couldn't stop. From 1966 to 1968, in what Gorelik calls a "creative surge", he rethought his personal politics while also producing a rush of original research rare for a forty-something physicist. British physicist Norman Dombey says, "In pure physics, his major achievement was to solve the problem of how the observable universe was made out of particles rather than antiparticles, even though the laws of physics were symmetrical between particles and

antiparticles."

On Constitution Day 1966, he attended his first demonstration: a few dozen dissidents met at Moscow's Pushkin Monument, removed their hats and stood in silence to show respect for the constitution. (Half the attendees kept their hats on; they were KGB agents.) Then Sakharov, a Pushkin obsessive, read out an inscription on the Monument:

*Long will I be by my people beloved  
For awakening kind feelings with my lyre,  
For celebrating freedom in this cruel age  
And calling for mercy for those who have fallen.*

He had crossed over to the other side. In a [1968 essay](#), sensationally published in the New York Times, he warned about nuclear extermination, and called for intellectual freedom and convergence of the communist and capitalist systems. He also warned that "carbon dioxide from the burning of coal is altering the heat-reflecting qualities of the atmosphere". Banned from military research after publication, he battled on, despite expecting failure. "If you want to be a free person, you don't stand up for human rights because it will work, [but because it is right](#)".

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**His first wife Klavdia** died in 1969. In the dissident movement he met Bonner, who educated him about life beyond his old bomb-making Installation. Outside a trial in Moscow in 1978, he and she each hit KGB agents. At the hearing, Bonner said she didn't regret it, but apologised to a police chief whom she had punched accidentally. Still protected by Sakharov's Hero status, the couple were merely fined.

In 1974 Sakharov predicted a computerised “universal information system” — the internet. In 1975 Bonner collected his Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, and [read out his speech](#) that explained why peace couldn't exist without progress and human rights. In 1980 he was stripped of his Soviet honours and exiled for protesting against the invasion of Afghanistan.



With his granddaughter Marina Sakharov-Liberman © akg-images / SNA

His granddaughter Marina Sakharov-Liberman, who now lives in London, recalls visits to Gorky with long conversations in the woods (his apartment was bugged), and drawing ambidextrously with him (a family tradition). He once telegraphed her that her moss was blossoming. “I didn't receive the telegram for three weeks,” she laughs. “I think the KGB was puzzling over what the cipher might mean.” Most of his physicist friends stayed loyal to him. The Nobel laureate Vitaly Ginzburg even checked on Marina's progress in her physics studies, taking on Sakharov's grandfatherly duties.

In Gorky Sakharov staged five hunger strikes, mostly to get permission for Bonner to travel abroad for medical treatment.

Freed from Gorky, he became a democratic activist. In 1988 he co-founded the Memorial Society to remember victims of Soviet repression. That year he made his first ever foreign trip, landing in the US just before the presidential election. Staying with his refugee stepdaughter Tatiana Yankelevich in Newton, Massachusetts, he watched voting at the local elementary school enthralled. But when Newton's mayor suggested he accompany Yankelevich into the voting booth, Sakharov refused: the ballot was secret, he insisted.

Soviet citizens saw in him a hitherto unknown moral purity. Elected to parliament in 1989, he said, "The people — deceived so often by hypocrisy, corruption, crime, influence-peddling, and inertia — turned out to be alive and well. God help us if their expectations are frustrated. Historically, there is never a last chance, but psychologically, for our generation, the disappointment might prove irreparable." On December 14, 1989 he called for scrapping the constitutional article that guaranteed the Party's "leading role". That night Bonner found him on the floor of his apartment, dead of acute heart failure. An estimated 100,000 attended his funeral.

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**Three decades later**, the Memorial Society estimates that the number of political prisoners in Russia — some 450 — is comparable to the levels in the USSR in the late 1980s. Among the hundreds of jailed dissidents in Belarus are laureates of last year's Sakharov's prize. Yankelevich notes that some prison sentences for protesters are now harsher and more arbitrary than in Soviet times, perhaps because Putin cares less about western approval than Soviet leaders did.

Navalny flew back to Russia in January knowing he would be jailed. He may look like a digital-savvy, catwalk-ready update of Sakharov, and he too defied the almighty state, but Sakharov's stepdaughter and granddaughter resist comparisons. "Both are very brave but it's like comparing vegetables and fruit," says Yankelevich. "Navalny has evolved but that doesn't make him a great thinker. Sakharov was a great thinker."

When Navalny's daughter Daria accepted his Sakharov Prize in Strasbourg this month, like Bonner receiving Sakharov's Nobel, she attacked western politicians who won't confront Putin for "pragmatic" reasons. "Andrei Sakharov," she remarked, "was probably one of the most non-pragmatic people on the planet." She finished by quoting him: "My destiny has turned out to be larger than my personality. I simply tried to live up to my destiny."

Afghanistan in 1980 could become Ukraine in 2022. But Navalny surely remembers Sakharov's return from Gagarin Avenue. "Perhaps one day," says Sakharov-Liberman, "Russia can be the Russia of Sakharov."

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