

Jay Bergman, *Meeting the Demands of Reason: The Life and Thought of Andrei Sakharov*. 454 pp., illus., bibl., index. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009. ISBN 0801447313. \$39.95.

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Andrei Sakharov, not unlike Mikhail Gorbachev, has been more respected than listened to lately, and more heard of than actually heard, since the views of the two Soviet winners of the Nobel Peace Prize do not easily fit into the narrower ideological currents of today. Their names are often invoked symbolically in various political contexts, but their actual words would make uncomfortable both those who are painting the Soviet Union as a totalitarian bogeyman and those who nostalgically recollect idealized features of the Soviet past. Despite official public homage, Sakharov's political essays have rarely been reprinted or reread in the West or in Russia since the early 1990s. Sakharov's *Collected Works* finally appeared in Russian in 2006, in eight volumes compiled by his widow, Elena Bonner, but the response was muted, as far as I am able to tell.¹

The task of Sakharov's biographers is complicated, as much as helped, by the dominating power of his *Memoirs*, an autobiographical narrative of exceptional sincerity written during Sakharov's Gor'kii exile in the 1980s, which outweighs in volume and detail most other sources on his life. Yet additional materials continue to come to light, including formerly classified documents from the Soviet atomic project and from the KGB, recollections (mostly hagiographic) by Sakharov's friends and colleagues, and his own personal diaries and writings, political as well as scientific.² Existing biographical studies had to rely heavily on the *Memoirs* but explored in greater depth certain facets of Sakharov's life and work. Richard Lourie emphasized Sakharov's family history and his indebtedness to the worldview

¹ Andrei Sakharov, *Sobranie sochinenii: Trevoga i nadezhda (stat'i, pis'ma, vystupleniia, interv'iu)*, vols. 1–2; *Vospominaniia*, vols. 1–3; *Dnevniki*, vols. 1–3 (Moscow: Vremia, 2006).

² Andrei Sakharov, *Memoirs* (New York: Knopf, 1990); A. D. Sakharov, *Nauchnye trudy* (Moscow: Tsentrkom, 1995); Joshua Rubenstein and Alexander Gribanov, eds., *The KGB File of Andrei Sakharov* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); *Atomnyi proekt SSSR: Dokumenty i materialy*, 9 vols. to date (Moscow: Nauka-Fizmatlit, 1998–); *On mezhdru nami zhil...: Vospominaniia o Sakharove* (Moscow: Praktika, 1996).

of earlier, prerevolutionary generations of the Russian intelligentsia. Gennady Gorelik focused primarily on Sakharov's scientific milieu and how his work, teachers, and colleagues in physics contributed to his transition from science toward political and moral preoccupations by the late 1960s. The revised recent edition added a chapter on Sakharov's possible religiosity, however unconventional and undeveloped.³

Some biographical chapters of Jay Bergman's study reviewed here follow Sakharov's *Memoirs* very closely, summarizing and paraphrasing the episodes in the same order as they are narrated in the autobiography. But Bergman delves much more extensively into the intellectual aspects of Sakharov's life, analyzing the development of his thought as revealed by his other writings, for which the *Memoirs* often provide only brief descriptions of context and motivation. Such an undertaking could have been an extremely valuable and pioneering account, but this would have required the intellectual courage to contradict today's conventional wisdom. Bergman, unfortunately, fails to rise to the challenge. Many events and ideas in Sakharov's life do not fit into the propagandistic stereotype that American readers typically have of the Soviet Union and the Cold War. Bergman resorts to reinterpreting or somewhat "correcting" Sakharov's ideas on several key points, thus bringing them more in line with the neoconservative mentality that has so self-confidently dominated American public discourse for a large portion of the last two decades.

His study is sketchier than both Lourie's and Gorelik's in describing the earlier half of Sakharov's life, up to the 1960s. Bergman is not particularly interested in elaborating on the reasons behind Sakharov's commitment to socialist ideas; he can hardly wait for him to finally become a dissident. Physics and nuclear weapons, Sakharov's main preoccupation during that period, are not Bergman's primary concern either. Physicists among the readers will stumble upon a number of strange assertions in his biography. For example, that deuterium can release energy through fission (43). Or that the key secret of building an atomic bomb, given sufficient quantities of U-235 or P-239, was "to devise a container for these elements that was durable enough to be dropped from the airplane—but also large enough to enable the chain reaction" (47). Or even that after 1952, "fusion reactors ... have been used around the world to generate thermonuclear power ...

³ Richard Lourie, *Sakharov: A Biography* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2002); Gennady Gorelik, *Andrei Sakharov: Nauka i svoboda* (Izhevsk: R&C Dynamics, 2000), translated by Antonina W. Bouis as *The World of Andrei Sakharov: A Russian Physicist's Path to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), rev. Russian ed. (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2010).

more power than the typical nuclear reactor can generate” (71). Designers of implosion mechanisms, aspiring and clandestine nuclear powers, and governments that keep wasting millions in public funds on fusion research can only regret not having learned of such great discoveries earlier. Bergman’s book is not intended for them, however, but for those interested in Sakharov primarily as a political thinker and dissident.

Soviet dissidence requires an explanation, in part because the very name was somewhat misleading and not liked by many to whom it was habitually applied. The term is most justifiable, perhaps, with regard to those in the USSR who were attracted to non-Soviet ideologies and values, whether they be religious, radical nationalist, or racist. From the 1950s onward, however, an arguably more influential and vocal opposition in the USSR took inspiration from the values that were writ large on official Soviet banners. Such intellectuals were increasingly critical of the political establishment and existing practices for not living up to the standards of the publicly promoted ideal. People in this group preferred the self-identity *pravozashchitniki*—that is, defenders of rights or rightful defenders—although many of them eventually accepted, however reluctantly, the foreign media’s common but inappropriate label “dissidents.” They often disagreed about specific values and strategies. Some thought it was enough to demand the strict observance of existing laws and regulations; they protested against violations of the Soviet constitution and staged demonstrations in support of it. Proposals by others, including Sakharov, were not as narrowly legalistic, as they demanded the reform of official rules and practices to make them better satisfy the ideal principles of socialism.⁴ The representation of these groups as “anti-Soviet” was initiated by the KGB, which accused them of serving ideological enemies of socialism from abroad, and by those very enemies themselves. The mutual influence of these external perceptions did result in the movement eventually becoming de facto anti-Soviet, and in much further mislabeling and misrepresentation. It became particularly hard to acknowledge how quintessentially Soviet this anti-Soviet activity was.

Sakharov’s own political concerns focused first and foremost on the danger of nuclear war, which he could discuss with professional knowledge. By the mid-1950s, Soviet nuclear experts generally agreed that a strategic military confrontation with thermonuclear weapons was not winnable by either side but only assured mutual annihilation. Their argument convinced

⁴ For an example of self-reflection by *pravozashchitniki*, see Petr Abovin-Egides, *Andrei Sakharov: Tragediia velikogo gumanista* (Paris: Poiski, 1985). For a recent historical analysis, see Benjamin Nathans, “The Dictatorship of Reason: Aleksandr Vol’pin and the Idea of Rights under ‘Developed Socialism,’” *Slavic Review* 66, 3 (2007): 630–63.

Khrushchev to declare publicly in 1956 that major wars had become avoidable and to announce the principle of “peaceful coexistence” with capitalism, the cornerstone of all subsequent Soviet strategic policies.⁵ Sakharov supported this thinking wholeheartedly in his major political essay of 1968, “Reflections on Progress, Coexistence, and Intellectual Freedom,” where he insisted on the necessity for a common recognition that a nuclear war would destroy the entire civilization on Earth—a conclusion, he observed, that was still resisted by Maoists in the communist camp and by strategists of so-called “limited nuclear war” in the United States. Throughout his life to the very end, he valued his contribution to the development of Soviet nuclear weapons as a way to establish a more symmetric strategic balance and prevent further Hiroshimas and Nagasakis. Bergman agrees that Sakharov’s work on the hydrogen bomb was justified, but he misrepresents both the Soviet policy of peaceful coexistence and Sakharov’s explicit statement in favor of it. He asserts that the Soviets continued to believe they could “fight and win a nuclear war” (225), while the U.S. side saw in nuclear weapons a deterrent only. Such a statement will certainly please neoconservative readers, but it lacks factual evidence. To support it, Bergman has to ignore informed recent studies on Soviet strategy and resurrect an old conspiracy theory by Richard Pipes, who in a 1977 article mobilized neoconservative opposition to Richard Nixon’s policy of détente.⁶ Following Pipes, Bergman claims, equally counterfactually, that Sakharov’s argument for peaceful coexistence was directed *against* the Soviet policy.

Similar problems arise in Bergman’s discussion of Sakharov’s later positions on nuclear issues. He happily discusses situations in which Sakharov was critical of Soviet actions: for example, on the issue of medium-range missiles in Europe in the late 1970s. But Bergman does not want to acknowledge that at the same time Sakharov’s urging of a “no first use” commitment on nuclear weapons explicitly demanded the removal of the key element of NATO’s strategic doctrine. Bergman cannot deny that, to the end, Sakharov opposed the development of ABM (antiballistic missile systems) and Reagan’s SDI (Strategic Defense Initiative) as inspiring dangerous illusions of safety and destabilizing the calming effect of deterrence, but he wishfully suggests (130) that, had Sakharov lived longer, he could have reversed his position by

⁵ David Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb: The Soviet Union and Atomic Energy, 1939–1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 335–45.

⁶ Richard Pipes, “Why the Soviet Union Thinks It Could Fight and Win a Nuclear War,” *Commentary* 64, 1 (1977): 21–34. For a political analysis of the origins of this ideological rhetoric, see Alan Wolfe, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Threat: Domestic Sources of the Cold War Consensus* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

now, after George W. Bush's unilateral decision to withdraw from the treaty banning such systems. All in all, the recent neoconservative interpretation of Sakharov's views on nuclear issues characteristically colludes with the old KGB propaganda that depicted Sakharov as thoroughly pro-American, whereas in fact he was trying to think out of the box of Cold War partiality and to approach the problem from the perspective of humanity's common interest in survival.

On some other issues, Bergman thinks that Sakharov was mistaken, and his choices are revealing. He reproaches Sakharov for believing in the "moral equivalence between the United States and the Soviet Union" prior to his realization by the late 1970s that "countries that provide human rights domestically act peacefully abroad" (306, 409). Sakharov's views were changing, but at no time did they fit either of these simplistic and unsustainable ideological dogmas. He strongly criticized the logic of automatic confrontation that made both superpowers interfere with the affairs of third countries, undermine each other's clients, and wage proxy wars. To Sakharov, the extension of the Cold War to other countries around the globe was both morally reprehensible and dangerous, as it could unintentionally escalate into direct and suicidal nuclear confrontation. He did not assign blame symmetrically, however, but followed changes in international affairs. Throughout the 1960s, Sakharov was more critical of the United States for "flagrant crimes against humanity" in Vietnam,⁷ while reproaching both superpowers for feeding conflict in the Middle East. By the end of the 1970s, the main force of his critique went against the Soviet leadership, especially for its military intervention in Afghanistan. He strongly sympathized with the Carter administration's decisions to advocate human rights and to restrain the use of military force abroad. In that period, Sakharov viewed Soviet imperialism as militarily more expansionist and dangerous than its U.S. counterpart.

Starting in the mid-1970s, Sakharov often used the word "totalitarian" or "totalitarian socialism" in reference to the Soviet regime.⁸ On this issue, Bergman is more careful than many neoconservative writers who embrace the totalitarian concept as a way to declare the Soviet polity as a whole reducible to Stalinism and Stalinism to the Gulag, and who then, with the help of such redefinitions, happily proclaim the equivalence between communism and Nazism. As Bergman writes mostly about the post-Stalin Soviet Union,

⁷ Andrei D. Sakharov, *Progress, Coexistence, and Intellectual Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 38.

⁸ Andrei Sakharov, *Alarm and Hope* (New York: Knopf, 1978).

he is aware that the totalitarianism concept is not applicable to that period in general, and in particular to the rather measured and cautious methods the country's leadership used to restrain political opponents such as Sakharov. As for Sakharov, like many other Soviet dissidents he used the "totalitarian" label but not with the same meanings attached to it by the school of Cold Warriors in the United States.⁹ To him, it meant primarily secrecy and the lack of public discussion of major political decisions in the USSR. The totalitarian school's insistence on the impossibility of changing the regime internally was also alien to Sakharov, as his entire activity was predicated on the hope that Soviet de-Stalinization would resume and move further in the direction of "pluralistic socialism," however slim the prospects for such reform seemed during Brezhnev's stagnant rule.

Bergman gives Sakharov full and detailed credit for his courageous defense of human rights in the USSR, but he genuinely cannot comprehend how Sakharov, to the end of his life, could be so mistaken in advocating "convergence," a gradual and peaceful rapprochement between socialist and capitalist principles and societies. To Sakharov, however, human rights and convergence were intimately linked. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights combined the lofty goals of both capitalism and socialism into a common ideal, including on the one hand political, intellectual, and religious freedoms, and on the other racial, ethnic, and gender equality, universal employment and health care, and other social rights. Even if neither social system was ready to realize the entire spectrum of human rights immediately, their mutual acceptance of the overarching commitment as formulated in the United Nations declaration opened, to Sakharov, the way toward the gradual undoing of the main ideological divide of the 20th century. The opposing ideologies, to him, were both undesirable and unviable in their radical versions, whereas moderate modifications had more commonalities than differences.¹⁰ In the 1960s and 1970s, he saw Western societies as taking much more impressive steps toward convergence via human rights, and he was utterly frustrated by the failure of the Soviet regime to move beyond Khrushchev's limited de-Stalinization.

Sakharov lived to see his long-held dreams come true with the start of Gorbachev's *perestroika* in 1985, when the Soviet Union accelerated toward

⁹ See Bergman's own analysis in "Was the Soviet Union Totalitarian? The View of Soviet Dissidents and the Reformers of the Gorbachev Era," *Studies in East European Thought* 50, 4 (1998): 247–81.

¹⁰ Andrei Sakharov, "Dvizhenie za prava cheloveka v SSSR i Vostochnoi Evrope—tseli, znachenie, trudnosti" (1978), and "Konvergentsiia, mirnoe sosushchestvovanie" (1988) in his *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1:487–510 and 2:221–26, respectively.

convergence. Advancing an important argument against the tendency of contemporary writers to dismiss the impact of dissidents, Bergman points out that most of the political agenda that Gorbachev famously promoted—the slogans of *glasnost*, democratization, the rule of law, and the priority of international commitments, in particular to human rights, over internal legislation—had been formulated by Sakharov and other dissidents during the preceding decades.¹¹ But Gorbachev, as a clever political tactician, advanced these initiatives one at a time, throwing his official power behind them only when he thought the time was ripe and he could assure adequate support for them. Sakharov's pronouncements, in contrast, radicalized at a faster pace, and he was accustomed to arguing from a minority position for ideas that ran ahead of the changing limits of acceptable political discourse. By late 1988, *perestroika* had evolved into a mass revolution; the public mood had its own momentum and competing agendas; and neither Gorbachev nor any other individual, no matter how powerful, was able to control developments.

One of Sakharov's last documents before his death in December 1989 was the draft of a new constitution of the Soviet Union that envisioned a multinational federation, the coexistence of state and private property, and the full protection of human rights. Bergman, however, jumps farther ahead in time, crediting Sakharov—rather than, say, Gorbachev's incompetent handling of economics or the hapless leaders of the anti-Gorbachev coup—with the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. He then jumps even farther, into the post-Soviet period and current politics, concluding that Sakharov was “out of step” with a Russian national culture that is incapable of absorbing his lofty ideas (407), as if Sakharov came from some other culture or *perestroika* was due to some visiting aliens. With such remarks, Bergman joins the chorus of commentators on current affairs who for the past ten years have been flooding the English-language mass media with Russophobic stereotypes. Not only neoconservative, but even mainstream and liberal publications have often unabashedly proliferated generalizations about Russians that in application to others would have been judged as bordering on racism.

Sakharov died in 1989, and here is probably not the right place to argue about contemporary Russian politics, to speculate what difference it might have made had he lived longer, or how his ideas might have evolved by now. But I feel reasonably certain that he would not have liked to see his name

¹¹ See also Robert Horvath, *The Legacy of Soviet Dissent: Dissidents, Democratization, and Radical Nationalism in Russia* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005).

and actions misappropriated in the service of a variant of Cold War ideology resurrected and promoted by latter-day neoconservatives.

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