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Sakharov’s Dilemma: Pursuing Nuclear Disarmament during the Human Rights Revolution

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Abstract
The Soviet physicist Andrei Sakharov, a veritable human rights icon, maintained his whole life that the world’s priority must be nuclear disarmament. But during the 1970s, the pursuit of nuclear disarmament was the hallmark of détente between the superpowers. Détente offended human rights activists because it appeared to legitimize the Soviet Union, notorious for its noxious treatment of dissidents. While Sakharov’s actions demonstrated a fervent commitment to human rights, his rhetoric consistently—and paradoxically—prioritized nuclear disarmament. For their part, Soviet authorities evinced little concern for Sakharov’s disarmament ideas but greatly feared his influence as a human rights activist. Sakharov never reconciled these conflicting goals, and although the human rights revolution he helped inspire played a part in bringing down the Soviet Union, it did not substantially challenge the nation-state system’s dedication to nuclear deterrence.

A Marriage for Human Rights
On June 9, 1981, in Butte, Montana, after a long journey from Massachusetts, two men faced each other in a courthouse, preparing to wed. When the ceremony began, Aleksei Semyonov, a young graduate student in mathematics, joined hands with the bald, older man next to him: his longtime friend, publisher Edward Kline. The men then exchanged wedding vows, creating a marriage recognized by only a few states at the time, including Montana.
Despite its appearances, the marriage in Montana was not a gay marriage but rather marriage-by-proxy. Semyonov was the stepson of Andrei Sakharov, the physicist infamously exiled within the Soviet Union for his dissident stands in favor of a variety of human rights concerns. Kline, for his part, stood-in for Semyonov’s true bride, 25-year old Liza Alekseyeva, who was forbidden by the KGB to leave the Soviet Union. By marrying Alekseyeva by proxy according to the laws of Montana, Semyonov and his revered stepfather hoped the Soviet government might relent and permit her to leave, allowing the newlyweds to reunite in the United States.¹

According to Sakharov, Alekseyeva was being detained in the Soviet Union in order to punish him. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Sakharov’s actions had run afoul of Soviet authorities. The so-called father of the Soviet hydrogen bomb had stumped for free speech, campaigned for human rights, denounced sham trials of dissidents, criticized the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and repeatedly argued for nuclear disarmament. Such defiance—met with harsh state repression—inspired countless scientists around the world when Sakharov called them to action. “Western scientists face no threat of prison or labour camp for public stands,” he wrote in 1981, “[b]ut this in no way diminishes their responsibility.”² Just as Kline was willing to participate in the unconventional proxy marriage if it would help Sakharov and his family, many activists found themselves ready and willing to embrace new approaches in their fight against the Cold War. Previous opposition to the Cold War had taken numerous forms, including antinuclear activism, the eruptions of 1968, and third world nationalism. While dissent continued in many forms, the cause of human rights emerged (or re-emerged) during the 1970s as a new way to challenge Cold War orthodoxy.

A number of influential scientists, particularly those in the United States, had established a tradition of opposing nuclear weapons during the Manhattan Project and continued doing so well into the 1970s. But in the years after the Vietnam War and into the 1980s, many politically active scientists began shifting their attention to human rights; they went to such great lengths to help their imprisoned and repressed peers in places like Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, the Philippines, and the Soviet Union that
human rights became an essential part of the scientific discipline. At the January 1980 meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in San Francisco, the one-time dean of the National University of Uruguay told attendees that since 1973 his school had been devastated by a military takeover, after which 144 university employees lost their jobs and 35 more were indicted for “various crimes.” Mario Otero stated that “[m]ost scientific research came to a standstill, and many hundreds of scientists fled the country,” while state security agencies controlled all teaching jobs. “Scientific research in an atmosphere of academic freedom,” Otero said, “simply does not exist today in Uruguay.”

Scientists and physicians in the United States and Western Europe subsequently worked as individuals and in associations to enact boycotts and publicity campaigns to help their peers, a transformation that occurred simultaneously with a broader trend toward human rights for activists around the world in general.

While the movement addressed victims of human rights abuses worldwide, a great deal of interest in human rights arose because of Sakharov, as well as his fellow Soviet scientists Yuri Orlov and Anatoly Schaharansky. But Sakharov, the man at the very heart of this transition, is upon closer analysis a bit of an enigma. Like a number of his peers overseas, such as Leo Szilard, Sakharov played an essential role in creating nuclear weapons only to later embrace nuclear disarmament. Despite this notable shift, however, he ultimately became known primarily as a human rights icon—the 1975 Nobel Peace Prize was just one of the accolades he received for his work (and suffering) in that field. Historical accounts of Sakharov trace his arc from antinuclear activist to human rights martyr, beginning in the mid-1950s when he struggled with Nikita Khrushchev over fallout from nuclear testing. In the words of Donald Kelley, “Sakharov launched his fledgling career as a prophet concerned about the future of mankind in a nuclear world.” During the late 1950s and early 1960s, he explored other issues, including education reform and anti-Lysenkoism, but his priority remained opposition to nuclear testing, activism which culminated in the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963. As the 1960s progressed, he increasingly pursued human rights activism, becoming for many the embodiment of human rights suffering, while nuclear
disarmament took a back seat to his other efforts. Another biography describes how the “father of the Soviet hydrogen bomb” became a human rights activist, the first Russian to win the Nobel Peace Prize, and the “personification of conscience” during the latter days of the Soviet Union. In his recent biography of the physicist, Jay Bergman has perceptively shown how Sakharov’s dissent heavily influenced Mikhail Gorbachev and therefore the Soviet reforms of the 1980s. By analyzing Sakharov in his Soviet context, Bergman offers a cogent vision of him as a steady voice linking numerous political and social causes that morally rejected the status quo, as well as a dissident acting ethically within an unethical system. But an analysis of Sakharov’s writings on disarmament reveal a somewhat different Sakharov, one less certain about the importance of human rights in the world. Previous interpretations of Sakharov have downplayed the oddity that he himself, rather frequently and rather adamantly, stated that nuclear arms control and disarmament should be the world’s priority. With historians increasingly seeing human rights as critical to the end of the Cold War, and with Sakharov playing such an important role in these histories, why did the icon of human rights prioritize nuclear disarmament over human rights?

Nuclear Weapons, Human Rights, and the Cold War

Many historians trace the arc of the Cold War primarily through the nuclear arms race, while others emphasize human rights movements in the ending of the Cold War (although the two are not necessarily exclusive). According to the histories focused on nuclear weapons, escalations in the arms race or progress on arms control and disarmament indicated a concurrent escalation or de-escalation of the global conflict. Martin Sherwin, Gar Alperovitz, and Campbell Craig and Sergey Radchenko are but a few historians who put atomic weapons at the start of the Cold War. Others, including Marc Trachtenberg, highlight the role of nuclear weapons in pivotal Cold War transitions, including the shift to détente. Nuclear weapons also play a role in accounts of the end of the Cold War that emphasize Ronald Reagan’s military buildup, Gorbachev’s reduction of the Soviet presence in Eastern Europe and Afghanistan, and nuclear weapons agreements such as the
Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty. To the extent that scientists like Sakharov are considered in such works, it is also through the prism of nuclear weapons: scientists created the weapons that overshadowed the global conflict and at various times championed their development or contested their primacy.

Such a perspective portrays the Cold War as a military conflict with nuclear weapons at its center—fought through proxy wars and the arms race from Berlin to the Third World with the threat of thermonuclear war always lurking. World leaders recognized the primacy of nuclear weapons; they were the Cold War’s “infrastructure of fear,” in Mikhail Gorbachev’s words. One recent history of the Cold War expresses the fundamental importance of nuclear weapons to the conflict’s trajectory. Among other factors, Carole Fink has written, “the advent of the atomic bomb utterly transformed international relations. Once both sides possessed weapons capable of not only destroying the other’s territory and population but also contaminating large parts of the earth, the Cold War developed into a rigid struggle driven by fear and a costly arms race. While nuclear weapons intensified several major Cold War crises, the threat of atomic warfare also served as a brake on the superpowers.”

Meanwhile, histories of nuclear weapons, such as those by Ronald Powaski and Joseph Siracusa, naturally emphasize the military nature of the Cold War. Even histories that focus on the influence of transnational movements in challenging the Cold War, such as Lawrence Wittner’s epic history of the antinuclear movement, define the clash between activists and the nation-state system in relation to nuclear weapons and militarism.

Works relying on new evidence and interpretations have not necessarily overturned the conception of the Cold War as a military conflict. Melvyn Leffler has argued that change occurred in the 1980s with Reagan’s military buildup and the decision to negotiate from strength. This stance led to policies as varied as pursuit of the Strategic Defense Initiative and support for the Contras and the Mujihadeen. And while Gorbachev was a new leader, one way he differed dramatically from his predecessors was in his approach to nuclear weapons. For Leffler, the almost-groundbreaking discussions of nuclear disarmament at Reykjavik, along with the actual disarmament achieved by the INF treaty were all major turning points in the Cold War’s later
Pursuing Nuclear Disarmament during the Human Rights Revolution (Rubinson)

stages. John Gaddis, meanwhile, sees nuclear weapons dominating the Cold War until the 1980s, when real power came to rest in “intangibles,” such as “courage, eloquence, imagination, determination, and faith.” Western leaders like Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Pope John Paul II abounded with these qualities, while the Soviets noticeably lacked them, instead stubbornly and hopelessly clinging to a defunct ideology that refused to acknowledge reality. Nevertheless, the important actions (as opposed to words) of these western leaders often involved nuclear weapons developments and agreements including the SDI and the INF.

A different historiographical approach to the Cold War puts very different people at the center of the culmination of the conflict. Instead of statesmen, activists in the 1970s forged transnational networks based on a global vision that destabilized the Eastern Bloc. Technological innovations such as satellites, fax machines, and cable television; economic policies such as airline deregulation; and new diplomatic approaches such as *ostpolitik* and the Helsinki Accords enabled ordinary people to transcend the superpower divide and in the process discredit regimes in both East and West. Quite frequently the people involved in this movement against the Cold War invoked the concept of human rights in their challenge to the bipolar world. While the superpowers protected themselves from each other by building up nuclear deterrents, many of the people within these nations felt their governments had neglected the ideals promised by their ideology. When Gorbachev attempted to reform the Soviet government and economy, he unintentionally cracked open a door through which eager human rights activists rushed, and in the aftermath communist rule was no longer feasible. The power of the people, not explosive power, ended the Cold War.

Ultimately, Sakharov’s own life reflected these different interpretations even as the Cold War was still going on, as his dilemma showed how human rights appeared to be at odds with arms control and disarmament. In the 1970s, U.S. and Soviet leaders pursued détente for their own reasons, but they agreed on the primary means of achieving it: arms control agreements to stabilize the Cold War and make it less dangerous. At the same time, human rights activism grew because of détente (especially
after the Helsinki agreements) but also in opposition to it—the Soviets were the ultimate violators of human rights, and détente appeared to condone this behavior. The following essay posits Sakharov as the embodiment of the contradictions and conflicts that détente posed for opponents of the Cold War, and I argue that while Sakharov’s rhetoric prioritized disarmament, his actions helped create a powerful human rights movement that often gets credit for ending the Cold War. As a consequence, Sakharov appears as more of a contradiction than previous accounts suggest.

**Sakharov’s Transformations**

U.S. scientists long played a role in advocating for nuclear arms control and disarmament, from publications such as the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* to individuals like Barry Commoner, from the government insiders of the President’s Scientific Advisory Committee to left wing activists like Linus Pauling. After the Franck Report, the Acheson-Lilienthal Proposal, and the test ban campaign of the 1950s and early 1960s, many politically active scientists continued to advocate for measures aimed at stemming the arms race well into the late 1960s and early 1970s, including the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Antiballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty.

Sakharov fit squarely within that tradition, although of course his status as a Soviet scientist made him somewhat unique, as the Soviet Union tolerated far less dissent in general (though it officially—and cynically—supported the goal of nuclear disarmament). In the early 1950s Sakharov worked on the Soviet hydrogen bomb at a facility he referred to as “the Installation,” and his layer cake design, tested on August 12, 1953, yielded a modest 400 kilotons but still achieved a thermonuclear reaction. In recognition of this achievement, he was retroactively awarded a PhD and made a member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Further honors included the Stalin Prize, the title of Hero of Socialist Labor, and a dacha, all of which would help protect him from government reprisals in later years. Immediately after 1953, he continued to improve ways of triggering fusion, and this work culminated in another H-bomb, tested on November 22, 1955—just about one year after the American bomb. This bomb, more sophisticated in its design, “had essentially solved the problem of
creating high-performance thermonuclear weapons,” in Sakharov’s words. The successful test allowed the Soviets to achieve explosions in the megaton range with a much smaller quantity of materials. More awards followed and elevated his status even higher, though he remained essentially unknown to the general public in the West.16

Looking back in the 1980s after two decades as a victim of his government’s draconian laws, Sakharov nevertheless explained that, similar to most Manhattan Project scientists, he had no regrets about his time as a weapons scientist. Work on the H-bomb had been satisfying at the time, he explained, because the science was engrossing and weapons work an act of patriotism. With “a true war psychology” Sakharov and his fellow scientists believed that by building nuclear weapons, the sacrifices of World War II would not be in vain.17 These weapons, he explained, had been worth making because the United States needed to be deterred, and the weapons he made contributed to international peace. Free of guilt, he felt that to keep peace, it was necessary to make horrible things. “I and everyone else who worked with me [on thermonuclear weapons] were completely convinced of the vital necessity of our work, of its unique importance,” he recalled. “What we did was actually a great tragedy, which reflected the tragic nature of the entire world situation, where in order to preserve the peace, it was necessary to make such terrible and horrible things.”18

Sakharov’s views of nuclear weapons started to change not while designing weapons but while testing them, as he came to realize that radioactive fallout clearly threatened the lives of civilian noncombatants. Preparing for the 1953 thermonuclear test, Sakharov and his colleagues ignored the fallout problem until just before the day of the test, resulting in an emergency evacuation of nearby residents.19 After the 1955 H-bomb test, he toured the testing grounds and saw fires, shattered windows, thick smoke, and dead and dying animals. “I experienced a range of contradictory sentiments,” he wrote in his memoirs, “perhaps chief among them a fear that this newly released force could slip out of control and lead to unimaginable disasters.” The deaths of a young girl and a soldier, killed accidentally from the force of the explosion, he explained, “heightened my sense of foreboding. I did not hold myself personally responsible for their...
deaths, but I could not escape a feeling of complicity.” At a
celebration that same evening, Sakharov offered a toast that
expressed his newly awakened conscience. “May all our devices
explode as successfully as today’s,” he offered, “but always over
test sites and never over cities.” To his enduring humiliation, a
military officer rebuked Sakharov almost immediately by
responding to the toast with a crass joke. Sakharov would
always remember the slight.

As the 1950s progressed, Sakharov worried more and more
about the biological effects of nuclear tests. In a 1957 article he
harshly criticized testing, writing that “each and every nuclear
test does damage. And this crime is committed with complete
impunity, since it is impossible to prove that a particular death
was caused by radiation. Furthermore, posterity has no way to
defend itself from our actions. Halting the tests will directly save
the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, and it also
promises even greater indirect benefits, reducing international
tension and the risk of nuclear war, the fundamental danger of
our time.” At one point, Sakharov even estimated that every 1
megaton test ended 10,000 lives. Despite the fact that he was
speaking out against Soviet tests, Sakharov received no
punishment for his statements—in fact, Khrushchev had
personally approved the article. Sakharov had access to
policymakers because of his status, and at one point he
convinced his immediate superiors to speak to Khrushchev
about a test halt, though Khrushchev rejected the proposal.

In 1958, the United States and Soviet Union each began an
unverified moratorium on nuclear testing. But Khrushchev was
under continuous pressure to resume tests, and by July 1961 he
had decided to do so. Sakharov, agonizing over every test at this
point, decided to tell him that the Soviet Union had no technical
knowledge to gain from resuming tests. At a high level meeting,
Sakharov boldly passed Khrushchev a note, writing that, “a
resumption of testing at this time would only favor the USA. . . .
[T]hey could use tests to improve their devices. They have
underestimated us in the past, whereas our program has been
based on a realistic appraisal of the situation. . . . Don’t you think
that new tests will seriously jeopardize the test ban negotiations,
the cause of disarmament, and world peace?” Khrushchev
responded later in front of the entire Central Committee
Presidium. “He’s moved beyond science into politics,” he said about Sakharov. “Here he’s poking his nose where it doesn’t belong. You can be a good scientist without understanding a thing about politics…. Leave politics to us—we’re the specialists. You make your bombs and test them, and we won’t interfere with you; we’ll help you. . . . Sakharov, don’t try to tell us what to do or how to behave. We understand politics. I’d be a jellyfish and not Chairman of the Council of Ministers if I listened to people like Sakharov!”

The scolding from Khrushchev, Sakharov later wrote, gave him “an awful sense of powerlessness. After that I was a different man. I broke with my surroundings. It was a basic break. . . . The atomic question was always half science, half politics. . . . It was a natural path into political issues. What matters is that I left conformism. It is not important on what question. After that first break, everything was natural.”

Notably, though Khrushchev was irritated by Sakharov, the physicist at this point faced no serious reprisals or consequences for his stance on nuclear weapons.

The tests resumed, and the more they increased in frequency and size, the more Sakharov fretted about fallout. Deciding to speak up again, Sakharov continued to have access to Khrushchev, but not influence over him. Calling the Soviet leader directly before a series of tests, his arguments to cancel the tests proved in vain, and Sakharov later cried about the “terrible crime” of testing and promised to redouble his efforts to end biologically harmful tests. By 1963, after the near-miss of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Sakharov’s proposals to reconsider a test ban had gained traction, and he took some credit for the 1963 Moscow Treaty, as the LTBT was known in the Soviet Union. For the next five years he remained at the Installation to work on arms control, though his world would soon transform again.

Emboldened by the safety of his elite position, Sakharov began to step beyond arms control arguments and into broader political issues, but in contrast to the minimal reaction to his antinuclear actions, he found himself quickly punished. In January 1968 he began writing an essay on the role of the Soviet intelligentsia. He wrote after hours, late into the evenings at the Installation, and although he knew the authorities would not like what he was writing, he made little effort to keep it secret. By late
April, in the heady days of the Prague Spring, he had a polished draft of an essay titled “Progress, Coexistence, and Intellectual Freedom.” Spread throughout Moscow as samizdat, the essay caught the attention of the KGB, who grew concerned that it might make its way into the western press. While a New York Times correspondent refused to accept the essay, a Dutch journalist passed it along and on July 6 it appeared in the Dutch press. By July 10 Sakharov himself heard a BBC report on the document, and by one estimate the essay was reprinted some eighteen million times between 1968 and 1969. Sakharov himself explained that the essay laid a theoretical foundation for his future activism, and it therefore touched on a wide range of subjects.27

The essay is perhaps best known for introducing the concept of convergence—Sakharov’s vision for a future political system that encompassed the best of the capitalist and socialist systems while discarding each system’s failures. Quite naturally, “Progress,” addressed nuclear weapons: All of humanity, Sakharov wrote, was divided and threatened by “universal thermonuclear war.” But because of their destructive power, relative affordability, and imperviousness to defense, nations could not resist relying on nuclear weapons. This situation left the world constantly in danger of nuclear war which, he wrote, “would be a means of universal suicide.”28 But the essay ranged far beyond nuclear weapons, addressing intellectual freedom, the Vietnam War, world hunger, threats to the environment, and also human rights. In his prescriptions for solving the world’s problems, he included the declaration: “All anticonstitutional laws and decrees violating human rights must be abrogated.”29 Although fairly tame by western standards, “Progress” marked a dramatic shift for Sakharov away from his place of privilege and toward the opposite end of Soviet society.

From Disarmament to Human Rights

Sakharov’s tentative expansion into the field of human rights, as manifested in “Progress,” occurred just before a vigorous growth in the spirit of human rights during the 1970s. Much of this growth coalesced around international organizations, such as Amnesty International, and agreements like the landmark Helsinki Accords, which obligated the Soviet Union to respect
human rights in exchange for recognition of the post-World War II borders in Eastern Europe. For its part, the Soviet Union took this new human rights activism much more seriously than antinuclear efforts. While Sakharov’s advocacy of a nuclear test ban did little to harm his career, his “Progress” essay got him upbraided and fired. Afterward he began to draw more attention to the importance of human rights, and as this activism increased, so he increasingly ran afoul of Soviet authorities.

Over the next two decades, he would demand free speech, campaign for human rights, denounce the arrests of dissidents, criticize the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, and endure a hunger strike over the right to emigrate. He opposed the death sentences given to an alleged counterfeiter as well as accused hijackers, spoke out against the rehabilitation of Stalin that occurred after Khrushchev’s ouster, and participated in a campaign to prevent the ecological destruction of Lake Baikal. He attended dissident trials, bearing witness to the abuse of state power either in the audience or holding vigil outside, and helped form the Human Rights Committee in 1970. Other activities included advocating for the rights of Crimean Tatars, defending Pablo Neruda from persecution by the Chilean government, and arguing with fellow human rights iconoclast Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. This list—hardly exhaustive—suggests that he had little time, understandably enough, for antinuclear efforts; it also brings into stark relief the gap between his actions and his rhetoric, as he continued to voice the belief that nuclear disarmament was the most important of causes while simultaneously sacrificing himself for the cause of human rights.

Such defiance—met with harassment, surveillance, and eventually harsh repression—inspired countless activists around the world, though when he gained notoriety overseas it was more for human rights rather than disarmament. Amnesty International’s profile of Sakharov in 1974 painted him as a “dissenter… internationally recognized as a voice of protest in the USSR” and further explained that he had “shifted from protest of Soviet nuclear testing in the Khrushchev period to intervention on behalf of political dissidents.”

It was Sakharov’s fate to be known more for his human rights activism than for arms control or disarmament
achievements. The 1975 Nobel Peace Prize Award Ceremony Speech, given by Aase Lionaes, chairman of the Nobel Committee, described him as “one of the great champions of human rights in our age . . . [who] has emphasised that Man’s inviolable rights provide the only safe foundation for genuine and enduring international cooperation.” Lionaes frequently mentioned Sakharov’s “Progress” essay and linked him to Helsinki: “Andrei Sakharov’s great contribution to peace is this, that he has fought in a particularly effective manner and under highly difficult conditions, in the greatest spirit of self-sacrifice, to obtain respect for these values that the Helsinki Agreement here declares to be its object.” The speech did mention disarmament in addition to his “struggle for human rights,” but the two causes were not quite equal.33

The Nobel Prize assured Sakharov of a greater audience, and the ensuing exposure in the West enabled Sakharov to inspire scientists’ activism for human rights, a movement that focused on areas well beyond the Soviet Union. The same year that Sakharov won the Nobel, the U.S. National Academy of Sciences (NAS) distributed petitions increasing awareness about human rights violations and asking for support for the defense of scientists suffering overseas. In response, more than twenty-five percent of the NAS’s members expressed “a desire for a more active and visible posture.” This sentiment led the NAS to form its Committee on Human Rights in 1977, which the organization heralded as “new departure . . . toward persecuted scientists.” Whereas “silent diplomacy” had been the norm, the committee intended to “open up a public channel of protest” on behalf of scientists. As one Columbia University professor put it, “Silence kills.”34

Scientists concerned about human rights frequently turned academic and professional conferences into occasions for activism. In 1978, scientists and physicians from around the globe descended upon Buenos Aires to attend the International Cancer Congress (ICC) in the hopes of contributing to the defeat of the dreaded disease. But because of scientists’ new identity as human rights activists, some attendees concerned themselves not with those attacked by deadly cancer cells, but another contagion: Argentina’s abysmal disdain for human rights. According to Amnesty International, 15,000 people had been
“disappeared” over the previous two-and-a-half years, including “many scientists” who “lost their jobs as university professors and research workers when the military came to power in March 1976.” In addition, the Argentine government officially acknowledged about 4,000 “persons detained at the disposal of the Executive Power.” Their official status made these prisoners no less a concern in the eyes of U.S. scientists since the government willfully deprived them of their right to defend themselves in court.35

The Committee on Scientific Freedom and Responsibility of the AAAS issued a declaration that called upon scientists and scientific organizations “to initiate on-site investigations in Argentina, on an urgent basis” on behalf of “imprisoned Argentine scientists who have been denied due process of the law.” Accordingly, a group of roughly 35 scientists and physicians attended the ICC with the intention of participating in actions and events aimed at aiding scientific political prisoners.36 At the ICC, the concerned doctors met with the mothers of “the disappeared” for a silent vigil at the Plaza de Mayo, discussed human rights with Argentine activists, met with an Argentine government official, and attended mass with the families of the disappeared. On the final day of the ICC, 75 doctors from eight countries signed a petition expressing “solidarity” with their “Argentinian colleagues.” The statement closed by connecting progress in human rights with progress in science: “If Argentina wishes to continue its distinguished role in the world community of science . . . improvement [in human rights] is mandatory.”37 Scientists, once so synonymous with arms control and disarmament, had transformed into human rights activists.

Despite having caused so much support for human rights, Sakharov did not immediately acknowledge the geopolitical shift away from arms control and disarmament—in fact he often argued that nuclear disarmament should take precedence over human rights. Attending a 1975 vigil for Sergei Kovalev at the exact moment he was being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in absentia, Sakharov made his case for prioritizing nuclear disarmament over human rights and in the process weighed in on the dispute between détente and human rights. “It is absolutely unacceptable—even for a goal as important as respect for human rights—to make conduct in that area a
precondition for disarmament negotiations,” he announced. “Disarmament must have first priority.” In his 1975 book My Country and the World, Sakharov wrote, “The unchecked growth of thermonuclear arsenals and the build-up toward confrontation threaten mankind with the death of civilization and physical annihilation. The elimination of that threat takes unquestionable priority over all other problems in international relations…. This is why disarmament talks, which offer a ray of hope in the dark world of suicidal nuclear madness, are so important.”

Although he often spoke of prioritizing disarmament over human rights, Sakharov also occasionally attempted to unify the two causes, reflecting perhaps the difficulty he had in putting one before the other. In his Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech, delivered by Elena Bonner on December 10, 1975, he mentioned both together. Sakharov began by describing the award as “a manifestation of tolerance and of the true spirit of détente.” But since the award specifically praised his human rights contributions, he added that it made him “particularly happy … to see that the Committee’s decision stressed the link between defense of peace and defense of human rights.”

Sakharov’s Nobel lecture, also read by Elena Bonner, attempted this convergence, arguing that disarmament could not happen without respect for human rights. “I am convinced” Bonner read to the audience of luminaries, “that international confidence, mutual understanding, disarmament, and international security are inconceivable without an open society with freedom of information, freedom of conscience, the right to publish, and the right to travel and choose the country in which one wishes to live.” Much of the lecture discussed a two-step plan for disarmament, and reframed the Helsinki agreement as an avenue toward a real disarmament agreement.

Sakharov’s rhetorical emphasis on disarmament stood in substantial contrast to the way Soviet authorities viewed his power. For the KGB in particular, Sakharov’s human rights activities posed an exponentially greater threat to the Soviet system than anything related to disarmament. According to Joshua Rubenstein and Alexander Gribanov, the editors of The KGB File of Andrei Sakharov, “once Sakharov began openly to question Kremlin policies and campaign on behalf of imprisoned human rights activists, the KGB felt compelled to remove his
security clearance and place him under constant surveillance.”

From this one can infer that his antinuclear activism did not inspire much fear. During the 1970s, the KGB grew very much concerned about democratic movements, including dissidents, *samizdat*, refuseniks, and activist networks. Accordingly, the KGB worried tremendously about Sakharov’s work with the Human Rights Committee and “came to the conclusion that he could become a leader [of Moscow human rights activists] and that his philosophy could help provide a common approach for a growing and diverse culture of popular discontent.”

The KGB essentially admitted that Sakharov’s human rights activities caused more concern than his antinuclear stands, as the KGB apparently began keeping a file on him only in 1968, the year of the “Progress” essay (although the editors of the published version of his file insist that he had to have been monitored before that).

By its own account, the KGB feared not his antinuclear efforts but the links Sakharov forged (or even might possibly have potentially forged) between government opposition groups, such as Ukrainian nationalists and human rights activists in Moscow. Yuri Andropov, the head of the KGB at the time, revealed this fear in a memo, writing that dissent movements’ “main thrust is to create, by using every form of political pressure, a situation that could cause a certain deformation in the structure of Soviet society. . . . The hysteria stirred up lately in the West around the names of Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn is directly subordinated to these goals and represents the product of a prearranged and coordinated program.” Sakharov, he wrote, “is definitely degenerating into anti-Sovietism. . . . [And] the anti-Soviet campaign attacks many aspects of our social and political structure and the Soviet way of life.” The KGB not surprisingly erred in seeing a conspiracy at work. In Rubenstein and Gribanov’s words, “the KGB had a fundamentally flawed understanding of what Sakharov and his fellow activists were up to. Andropov and the KGB represented the human rights movement to the Politburo as a kind of political opposition, a political movement that was too dangerous to recognize. But the human rights movement was not primarily a political phenomenon. It was a loosely organized movement of activists.
who were taking a stand, each in his or her own way, against lies and oppression.”

The KGB did recognize Sakharov’s deep opposition to nuclear weapons, with one report stating: “Having made a great contribution to the creation of thermonuclear weapons, Sakharov felt his ‘guilt’ before mankind, and, because of that, he has set himself the task of fighting for peace and preventing thermonuclear war.” (Though Sakharov in his memoirs claimed to have no feelings of guilt.) Another report noted that he discussed nuclear weapons with a Canadian journalist, going so far as to describe his statements in the interview as “highly confidential and constitute[ing] a state secret.” But the concern raised related not to Sakharov’s identity as antinuclear activist but rather “someone who opposes Soviet foreign policy and who seeks to compromise this country’s position at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe.” No such judgment had been passed on him when his activism consisted solely of opposition to nuclear fallout.

**Détente, Disarmament, and Human Rights**

By the time Sakharov had become known worldwide as a human rights activist and to the Kremlin as a subversive, Cold War geopolitics had moved toward détente, a transformation manifested in Nixon’s trips to China and the Soviet Union, trade agreements between the superpowers, and arms control agreements including the NPT and the ABM treaty. But a number of social activists and conservative politicians in the United States grew skeptical about coexisting with the communist behemoth, and shifted attention away from the successful arms control negotiations and toward Soviet failures to respect human rights. Détente, according to this strange coalition, appeared to excuse Soviet human rights violations, and while very few objected in principle to the goal of nuclear disarmament, many people believed that with the Soviet Union seemingly growing more “evil,” it made little sense to weaken the West’s nuclear deterrent. Opponents of détente feared that treating the Soviet Union like a legitimate nation excused—and maybe even rewarded—the Soviets for disregarding human rights which, they argued, should take precedence over collaboration, coexistence, and disarmament. Congressional
Cold Warriors moved against détente by adding the Jackson-Vanik amendment to a trade agreement, for example, that made the deal contingent on the Soviets easing emigration restrictions on Soviet Jews. Among politically active U.S. scientists, growing sentiment for human rights turned into actions which included boycotts of U.S.-Soviet scientific exchange in defiance of détente and scientific internationalism.⁴⁷

Nuclear disarmament, of course, meant less of a threat to humanity, which sounded like a type of support for human rights. After all, Article 3 of the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights announced each human’s right to “security of person.” But to the anti-détente segment of U.S. society, the easing of tensions ignored human rights by portraying the Soviet Union as a legitimate nation rather than the repressive master of the people of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. So the rise of détente actually in many ways conflicted with the rise of human rights. In the House of Representatives, Donald Fraser (D-MN) led a push against détente and for human rights in 1974; his Subcommittee on International Organizations and Movements, part of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, issued Human Rights in the World Community: A Call for U.S. Leadership, which declared, “we have disregarded human rights for the sake of other assumed interests.”⁴⁸ Further on, the document tried to refocus U.S. policy: “Men and women of decency find common cause in coming to the aid of the oppressed despite national differences. Through their own governments and international organizations, they have both the opportunity and responsibility to help defend human rights throughout the world.”⁴⁹ One of the subcommittee’s recommendations suggested that the State Department “upgrade the consideration given to human rights in determining Soviet-American relations. While pursuing the objectives of détente, the United States should be forthright in denouncing Soviet violations of human rights and should raise the priority of the human rights factor particularly with regard to policy decisions not directly related to national security.”⁵⁰ The subcommittee also worried that détente had the potential to subvert U.S. ideals: “Traditionally, the United States has not hesitated to criticize violations of human rights in the Soviet Union and other Communist states. Current U.S. policy, however, has made it clear that Soviet violations of human rights
will not deter efforts to promote détente with the Soviet Union. . . . Certainly it is in the interest of national security to find areas of cooperation with the Soviet Union. But cooperation must not extend to the point of collaboration in maintaining a police state.”

Fraser’s perspective on détente contrasted with Sakharov’s insistence on prioritizing nuclear disarmament, but the physicist had much in common, perhaps surprisingly, with Henry Kissinger’s views of détente. On July 15, 1975, in Minneapolis, the Secretary of State defended the policy in an address titled “The Moral Foundations of Foreign Policy.” Since the hostility between the United States and Soviet Union made nuclear war increasingly likely, Kissinger stated, “[w]e have an obligation to see a more productive and stable relationship despite the basic antagonism of our values.” He mentioned the growing “rebellion against contemporary foreign policy,” and how that opponents described détente as “excessively pragmatic, that it sacrifices virtue in the mechanical pursuit of stability.” He also recognized the “clear conflict between two moral imperatives,” human rights and peace. But “[i]n an era of strategic nuclear balance—when both sides have the capacity to destroy civilized life—there is no alternative to coexistence.”

Treatining the Soviets like a legitimate nation, he hoped, would make them act like a legitimate nation: “The American people will never be satisfied with simply reducing tension and easing the danger of nuclear holocaust. Over the longer term, we hope that firmness in the face of pressure and the creation of incentives for cooperative action may bring about a more durable pattern of stability and responsible conduct.” The “[c]ritics of détente must answer,” Kissinger declared, “Are they prepared for a prolonged situation of dramatically increased international danger? Do they wish to return to the constant crises and high arms budgets of the cold war? Does détente encourage repression—or is it détente that has generated the ferment and the demands for openness that we are now witnessing?” He closed by directly asserting, “We do not and will not condone repressive practices.”

While even Kissinger was trying to reframe détente and disarmament as consistent with human rights, Sakharov continued to place disarmament above all else. Even when he
was exiled to Gorky in January 1980 for denouncing the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, he criticized the Soviet Union's actions more for their effect on nuclear arms control rather than human rights. The invasion of Afghanistan, as he saw it, was regrettable because it would make impossible the ratification of the SALT-II agreement, which "is so vital to the entire world, in particular as a necessary first step toward disarmament."56

One way to understand Sakharov's dilemma is to view his contradictory words and actions on disarmament and human rights as complex and intertwined with his personal life and his interpretation of Cold War geopolitics. According to Bergman, Sakharov had, by the time of his Gorky exile, come to see the Soviet Union as essentially evil. Reprisals against his own children and step children, including refusing them admission to university, preventing them from traveling overseas, and even threatening them with violence, made this unmistakably clear to him.57 In addition to innumerable show trials, the imprisonment of dissidents in psychiatric hospitals, and his own exile, the incursion into Afghanistan convinced Sakharov of the need to use nuclear deterrence to contain the Soviet Union, which he saw as a pathologically aggressive nation. But empathy with people suffering under the yoke of Soviet rule convinced him of the dire need to press the Soviet Union on human rights, and the Carter administration noticeably disappointed Sakharov when in his opinion it downplayed human rights in order to gain arms control agreements.58 But Sakharov still favored arms control and disarmament talks, arguing that they should continue even if the Soviets continued to violate human rights. Negotiations should make sense, he argued—they should not allow the Soviets to gain an advantage. Since Sakharov believed that the Soviet leaders respected only strength he even at one point approved of the United States building more nuclear weapons.59 While Sakharov certainly recognized the importance of human rights, nuclear disarmament was listed first when he voiced his priorities. He frequently stated that scientists had an obligation to the "moral improvement of humanity," in Bergman’s words. “But he was also aware that this moral improvement required first of all that the moral degeneration of humanity, which in a nuclear
age could lead to the obliteration of everyone and everything, be brought to a halt.”

Sakharov’s exile to Gorky in 1980 only further increased western agitation on his behalf—that year, the Federation of American Scientists distributed bumper stickers that read, “Release Andrei Sakharov,” and later smuggled a computer in to him. Upon being exiled, however, he made a statement reaffirming his commitment to disarmament. He declared, “I am for giving priority to the problems of peace, the problem of averting thermonuclear war.” Even allowing for modesty—that he may have been trying to refute the claims of his enemies that he was an irrepressible egomaniac—his statements downplayed his own plight and reflect an adamant belief that disarmament was more important than human rights. In a wide-ranging, open letter to the New York Times, he wrote: “I feel that the questions of war and peace and disarmament are so crucial that they must be given absolute priority even in the most difficult circumstances. It is imperative that all possible means be used to solve these questions and to lay the groundwork for further progress. Most urgent of all are steps to avert a nuclear war, which is the greatest peril confronting the modern world.” Out of six statements that he declared from exile, four of them dealt with disarmament. Years later, reflecting on his life, he described nuclear disarmament as “surely the goal of all reasonable people.” Even if human rights were achieved, he wrote, “we would still face a protracted and dangerous period of transition.”

The Threat of Human Rights

During his time in Gorky, which included hunger strikes to get permission for his wife and step-son’s fiancé to travel, the theft of the manuscript of his memoirs, and pressure from his scientific colleagues, he reversed the thinking from when he worked on the H-bomb and became convinced that the Soviet Union, rather than the United States, was the nation that needed to be deterred. Naturally only the United States possessed a nuclear arsenal capable of deterring the Soviets. So while he worried about nuclear war, he saw a role for nuclear weapons in the world. But since he still worried about nuclear weapons, the evolution of his thinking would eventually convince him that
nuclear deterrence was no longer credible. And yet this change in mindset did not lead to a subsequent shift in priorities away from disarmament. Worried as he was about a conventional Soviet attack in Europe, he reconciled his desire to deter the Soviets with his wish to end the nuclear arms race. The answer was to build up the U.S. arsenal of conventional weapons until the United States reached parity with the Soviet Union, a concept he described as conventional deterrence.65

Upon receiving the Szilard Award in 1983, he explained how conventional deterrence could be used to deter the Soviets while still pursuing nuclear arms control and disarmament. “I am convinced that nuclear deterrence is gradually turning into its own antithesis and becoming a dangerous remnant of the past. The equilibrium provided by nuclear deterrence is becoming increasingly unsteady; increasingly real is the danger that mankind will perish if an accident or insanity or uncontrolled escalation draws it into a total thermonuclear war.” It was therefore “necessary to strive for nuclear disarmament,” while deterrence had to shift to conventional forces.66 This allowed Sakharov to endorse arms control and disarmament without seeming to recognize the legitimacy of the Soviet government.

In a 1983 open letter to Sidney Drell, one of many U.S. scientists concerned with disarmament (and with Sakharov’s plight), Sakharov further explained conventional deterrence. In spite of the dangers of nuclear war, the weapons remained useful for deterring the Soviets, he wrote, but they did not deter conventional aggression. Expecting a Soviet military incursion into Europe, Sakharov believed that “it is necessary to restore strategic parity in the field of conventional weapons,” even though this would entail drastic restructuring on the part of the West. This allowed him to reconcile his desire to deter the Soviets with his passion for disarmament. “On the whole I am convinced that nuclear disarmament talks are of enormous importance and of the highest priority,” he wrote to Drell. “They must be conducted continuously—in the brighter periods of international relations but also in the periods where relations are strained—and conducted with persistence, foresight, firmness and, at the same time, with flexibility and initiative.”67

By this time, détente had ended and disarmament had regained mainstream favor in the West. Sakharov, however, had
maintained the same vision for almost thirty years, explaining in his memoirs, written during the 1980s, that “my fervent and paramount dream continues to be that they will be used only to deter war, never to wage war,” words that echoed his toast after the 1953 thermonuclear test. Late in life, while the Soviet Union was undergoing glasnost and perestroika, he held to his antinuclear principles, writing in his memoirs: “The first issue on which I spoke out publicly was the danger of thermonuclear war, and I have repeatedly stressed that this peril must take priority over all other concerns.” Sakharov had long preached the importance of openness for the reform of Soviet society, but he ultimately thought eliminating nuclear weapons would be more transformative for the world. He may not have been wrong about that, but it was political and social reform that transformed—eliminated, even—the Soviet Union.

By any measure, Sakharov’s legacy lies in the realm of human rights. His activism involved human rights much more than disarmament, and human rights were responsible for the Soviet government’s repression of him. Nuclear weapons were not irrelevant to the Soviet government’s treatment of Sakharov—the KGB and other government figures used his nuclear knowledge as an excuse for essentially incarcerating him in Gorky. Authorities forbid him and Bonner from associating with citizens of capitalist countries “since these contacts result in the disclosure of secret information that can cause serious harm to the country’s defenses.” Claiming that Sakharov’s draft memoir contained “secret” information about nuclear weapons, and that sending it abroad would be “detrimental to national security,” the KGB, sensibly by its standards, stole the manuscript. In a 1986 interview with the communist French newspaper l’Humanité, Mikhail Gorbachev maintained this fiction: “It is common knowledge that [Sakharov] committed actions punishable by law. … Measures were taken with regard to him in accordance with our legislation.” Claiming that the physicist “lives in Gorky in normal conditions,” the Soviet leader added that Sakharov “still possesses information that concerns secrets of special importance to the state and for this reason cannot go abroad.” But this should not be mistaken as evidence that the Soviet government feared his antinuclear stance. Soviet authorities were notably more concerned (at least
Pursuing Nuclear Disarmament during the Human Rights Revolution (Rubinson)

ostensibly) with Sakharov’s potential to leak nuclear information; his criticism of the arms race was safe in that it implicitly criticized the United States.

Far more alarming to the KGB than Sakharov’s antinuclear views was his alleged role in a brewing conspiracy involving dissident groups. “Members of these organizations established contacts with certain foreign anti-Soviet centers and, for purposes of discrediting the Soviet state and public order, collected and assembled libelous materials,” a KGB report stated. Sakharov “incites aggressive circles of capitalist countries to interfere in the domestic affairs of socialist states and to embark on military confrontation with the Soviet Union. . . . Sakharov has also undertaken measures to unify anti-Soviet elements inside the country and incites them to engage in extremist acts.” The Nobel Peace Prize was reward and compensation from the West for these “hostile activities.” Far from fearing his antinuclear statements, the KGB even asked him to write about disarmament and SDI in return for his passage to Moscow when he was freed from exile in 1986. Upon his return to Moscow in 1986, the KGB nevertheless continued to keep tabs on him, and at his funeral ceremonies in 1989, observed by the KGB, a sign read: “Even dead you terrify them.”

Understanding Sakharov

While Sakharov argued in words that disarmament was his priority, his actions more often served the cause of human rights. Nuclear war threatened the entire world, but in some ways it had become removed from the daily life of a Soviet dissident. His own life confronted (at least) two very different dangers: thermonuclear war and the nature of the Soviet Union. “We must liquidate the ideological monism of our society,” he once stated. “The uniform ideological structure that is anti-democratic in its very essence—it has been very tragic for the state.” And it was the repressive structure of Soviet society that Sakharov helped bring to an end. The KGB was perhaps correct to fear the human rights movements of the 1970s and 1980s, given the peaceful protest that contributed to the end of the Cold War. Meanwhile, nuclear weapons dwindled in number, but world arsenals remain
potent, and nations around the world continue to see them as the ultimate in national defense.

Sakharov’s life ultimately challenged the Soviet system far more than the global nation-state system predicated on nuclear weapons and mutually assured destruction. One reason for this may have been Sakharov’s areas of influence. During the era of the test ban debate, he had access to Khrushchev to an extent and attempted to change policy. But as he spoke out in other areas the KGB and Soviet government punished him and his access diminished. Human rights became an issue over which he could have influence, not least because his own human rights were being violated. By demonstrably suffering for causes including free expression, free association, and the right to travel, he was able to inspire activism and expose Soviet hypocrisies. As the KGB recognized, Sakharov was, in acting for human rights, attacking the Soviet Union where it was particularly vulnerable. Sakharov’s steadfast emphasis on disarmament shows the difficulty it took to recognize that despite their destructive power, nuclear weapons were less effective as agents of change than idealistic causes and activists.

Notes

Pursuing Nuclear Disarmament during the Human Rights Revolution (Rubinson)


17 Sakharov, Memoirs 97.

18 Quoted in Bergman, Meeting the Demands of Reason, 62–76.


20 Sakharov, Memoirs, 193–94.

21 Sakharov, Memoirs, 194. This was Sakharov’s paraphrase of his toast rather than the exact words he used at the time.

22 Sakharov, Memoirs, 202–04.

23 Sakharov, Memoirs, 207–08.

24 Sakharov, Memoirs, 216–17. In his memoirs, Sakharov points out that the statements are based on his recollection rather than original documents.
26 Sakharov, Memoirs, 225–32.
29 Sakharov, Progress, 87.
30 Sakharov, Memoirs, 288.
41 Rubenstein and Gribanov, KGB File, x.
42 Rubenstein and Gribanov, KGB File, 100, 106, 113.
43 Rubenstein and Gribanov, KGB File, xii–xiii.
44 Rubenstein and Gribanov, KGB File, 115, 151, 131.
45 Rubenstein and Gribanov, KGB File, 154, 157, 168.
46 Rubenstein and Gribanov, KGB File, 199–200.
50 Human Rights in the World Community, 3.
51 Human Rights in the World Community, 11.
56 Sakharov, Memoirs, 658.
57 Sakharov, Memoirs, 375, 393.
58 Bergman, Meeting the Demands of Reason, 260–61.
59 Bergman, Meeting the Demands of Reason, 270–71.
60 Bergman, Meeting the Demands of Reason, 307.
64 Sakharov, Memoirs, 537, 577–78.
65 Bergman, Meeting the Demands of Reason, 311–13; Sakharov, Memoirs, 98.
68 Sakharov, Memoirs, 97.
69 Sakharov, Memoirs, 409.
70 Rubenstein and Gribanov, KGB File, 203, 236.
72 Rubenstein and Gribanov, KGB File, 217, 243, 244, 329, 348.
73 Sakharov, Memoirs, 628.