Back to Article page

London Review of Books

When did your eyes open?

Benjamin Nathans

> *Meeting the Demands of Reason: The Life and Thought of Andrei Sakharov* by Jay Bergman
> Cornell, 454 pp, £24.95, October 2009, ISBN 978 0 8014 4731 0

In 1957, Boris Shragin, a young art historian, accompanied a group of foreigners on a visit to the Moscow studio of Aleksandr Gerasimov, the president of the Soviet Academy of Arts. Gerasimov had made his name with fawning neoclassical portraits of Stalin and Voroshilov, and used his position to crush 'cosmopolitan' and 'formalist' artists whose work strayed from the official aesthetic. Repelled by the crude naturalism and pomposity of the paintings on display, Shragin turned to one of the foreign visitors and quietly offered his own appraisal: 'Merde.' 'Someone should have told him about Cézanne,' the visitor, an art critic from Tokyo, agreed. In broken French and English the two men quickly established their shared preference for Picasso and other modernists. And then the foreigner asked: 'When did your eyes open?' 'I was unable to answer,' Shragin remembered.

> 'Eyes open' – to what? Aleksandr Gerasimov had never been my ideal. 'When did your eyes open?' I heard this question many times after I emigrated. Or, in even simpler form: 'When did you become a dissident?' It's impossible to answer. Within the question itself lies a wilful distortion of reality. Just as the ancient Sophists used to ask: 'When did you stop beating your parents?' If you stopped, that means you used to beat them. If you didn't stop, that means you continue to beat them. But I didn't beat them. Ever.

When it emerged in the 1960s, dissent in the USSR – unauthorised public gatherings, petitions in support of arrested intellectuals, wide circulation of samizdat texts – caught almost everyone off guard. The Soviet authorities had assumed that class antagonism, the ultimate source of social and ideological deviance, had long since been eradicated. Western analysts, accustomed to regarding the Soviet Union as the archetypal totalitarian state, were similarly unprepared for public manifestations of dissent. The two sides' attempts to

explain these phenomena were curiously similar. Soviet officials (and many ordinary citizens) believed samizdat publications and unofficial demonstrations were 'anti-Soviet'. Reluctant to contemplate the possibility that individuals born in the USSR and raised on its values would publicly criticise the Soviet way of life, they routinely ascribed dissenting ideas to foreign influence, whether émigré organisations or Western intelligence services. For their part, Western commentators were quick to cast dissidents as surrogate soldiers of Western liberalism in the ideological battles of the Cold War.

The surprise of foreign observers was not lost on the dissidents themselves. As one of them, Andrei Amalrik, put it, it was as if an ichthyologist had discovered talking fish. Suddenly there were natives inside the closely guarded Soviet aquarium who could not only speak, but speak their own minds. Smuggled texts found their way to the West, where they appeared under such titles as *Sakharov Speaks* and *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn Speaks to the West*. The mere existence of people like Amalrik, Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov seemed to take the 'total' out of totalitarianism. Yet they soon became the darlings of those who continued to regard the USSR as totalitarian, albeit in the updated form of an omnicompetent rather than an omnipotent state. Indeed, it was precisely the regime's persecution of dissidents – arrests, harassment of family members, imprisonment in psychiatric hospitals, bogus trials, vicious press campaigns, harsh sentences – that served as the most potent evidence of the Soviet system's abiding malevolence.

All but crushed by the KGB in the early 1980s, Soviet dissidents surprised the world a second time when Gorbachev came to power. In a stunning reversal, their slogans – glasnost, the rule of law, democratisation – could now be heard emanating from the Kremlin. It's true that apart from Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the first president of post-Soviet Georgia, no Soviet-era dissident came close to assuming power in the manner of Lech Walesa or Václav Havel. But several of them, including Sakharov (released from internal exile), Liudmila Alekseeva (returned from exile in the United States), Revolt Pimenov (free after multiple jail sentences and internal exile) and Sergei Kovalev (after a spell in a labour camp and then internal exile), were elected or appointed to positions of influence.

How different it all looks now. In Russia, disenchantment with the dissidents is almost as widespread as disenchantment with socialism. The freedom fighters of the Soviet era are dismissed as irrelevant or, worse, as responsible for the chaos of the Yeltsin era and Russia's precipitous decline as a global power. Meanwhile, a new generation of Russian scholars is busily reinterpreting the dissidents as mirror-images of the fervent Communists they opposed, trapped in an equally dogmatic worldview, an insular collective in thrall to the moral absolutism of human rights. We're not far from where we began: the USSR as a totalitarian society in which even the regime's opponents were unable to think and speak outside the force-field of official norms.

Of the half-dozen biographies of Sakharov, Jay Bergman's is the most probing, though

none of them, it must be said, surpasses Sakharov's own disarmingly frank account of his life. Like the Tokyo art critic, Bergman wants to know how Sakharov became a dissident. More than that, he is eager to demonstrate that Sakharov, like Shragin, never believed in Communism, that the 'seeds of future dissidence' were there from the beginning. Indeed, he is impatient for those seeds to blossom. The early chapters of the biography repeatedly glance ahead, informing readers that a certain essay by the young Sakharov was a 'harbinger of things to come' and offering previews of his subsequent dissident activities even though 'all this ... was far in the future.' When we come to Chapter 9, 'A Dissident at Last', Bergman's relief is palpable. His central argument, by contrast, is backward-looking: the seeds of dissent were present in Sakharov (who was born in 1921) because the traditions of the pre-1917 Russian intelligentsia were transmitted to him intact. The sense of alienation from a sordid reality, the 'ethos of "moral wholeness" requiring the application of moral principle to every aspect of life', the 'belief in the perfectibility of humanity': all these qualities of the ancien régime intelligentsia came to Sakharov via his family and his youthful immersion in the classics of Russian literature. Family was a 'cocoon', Bergman says, 'protecting him ... from the larger world'. Home-schooled by his father and a succession of tutors until he was 13, Sakharov was 'not hostile ... so much as indifferent' to Soviet ideology well into early adulthood, famously failing the required exam in Marxist philosophy as a doctoral candidate in physics at the Academy of Sciences.

The Soviet dissident movement, according to Bergman, can best be understood as re-enacting the history of the tsarist-era intelligentsia. Soviet dissidents, too, drew universal moral imperatives from their own experience of indignity at the hands of a despotic regime. Dissidents 'initially turned to petitioning their Soviet tsars for the redress of their grievances', moving from 'isolated protests condemning specific actions of the government to a co-ordinated and organised movement for systemic reform', thereby reproducing the trajectory of their forebears. In Bergman's view, dissidents like Sakharov were the sole inheritors of a pre-Revolutionary tradition.

Quite a few Soviet dissidents saw things this way. In their memoirs (dissidents wrote memoirs as prolifically as Puritans kept diaries), the pre-Revolutionary intelligentsia typically provides the template, implicitly or explicitly, for their own experience. Memoirs such as Herzen's *My Past and Thoughts* (1868) established a model of life-narrative whose influence could be felt more than a century later. Like Herzen, Sakharov designed his memoir 'to focus less on me as a person and more on what I have seen and understood (or tried to understand) during my 68 years of life'. Herzen's sense of his life story as 'the reflection of history in someone who accidentally got in its way' also finds an echo in Sakharov: 'My fate proved greater than my personality. I only tried to keep up with it.' In this manner, as Irina Paperno has noted in *Stories of the Soviet Experience*, Soviet-era memoirists claimed 'membership in history's favourite class', inscribing themselves into

the ethos of the Russian intelligentsia.[*]

That act of self-inscription tells us a great deal about the way Soviet dissidents saw themselves. But should we accept this pedigree at face value? The more closely one inspects Bergman's argument, the less persuasive it seems. The dissident movement did not recapitulate the history of the intelligentsia; it lacked both its unshakeable faith in historical progress and its hopes for a transformative, purifying revolution. Revolution was anathema to most dissidents, who were all too familiar with its results and tended to shun the elaborate programmatic statements that appeared, contrary to Bergman's claim, very early in the intelligentsia's history, starting with the Decembrists. What the dissidents shared was a wish or a determination that the Soviet state should obey the letter of its own laws, especially those governing civil rights and due process – a legalistic approach of which the ancien régime intelligentsia had been, in its own day, largely contemptuous.

Soviet dissidents might have been amused to hear themselves described as 'a co-ordinated and organised movement'. Compared to their forerunners in the tsarist era, with their periodic party congresses held abroad, their executive committees and their active recruitment in Russia's universities, the dissidents remained – partly by choice, partly by necessity – a diffuse conglomeration of activists. While the intelligentsia wanted above all to reach imperial Russia's largely illiterate masses, the dissidents, like their counterparts in Nazi Germany, engaged in 'resistance without the people' – a people who, in the meantime, had become literate and urbanised, if not exactly urbane. In keeping with their law-based strategy, the dissidents aimed to sway the hearts and minds of Soviet lawmakers. When that failed, they turned to foreign journalists in the hope of shaping Western public opinion, where they succeeded spectacularly. Nothing like this happened to Herzen and his fellow *intelligenty*.

The image of Sakharov as Rip Van Winkle waking up in the Soviet Union doesn't just mistake myth for history. It obscures the extent to which Sakharov was embedded in the Soviet world as well as the ways in which that world, and specifically the Communist Party, staked its own powerful claim to be the sole heir of the intelligentsia. Why ascribe Sakharov's belief in the 'perfectibility of humanity' to his roots in the pre-Revolutionary era, when the Communist Party preached the same message to Soviet citizens? Why interpret Sakharov's idea of a seamless link between a country's domestic and foreign activity as a legacy of the intelligentsia's moral universalism, and not as a variant of Soviet internationalism – i.e. the notion that ideological affinity governs relations among states? Why cast the dissident petitions to Soviet officials as a revival of the practices of pre-Revolutionary intellectuals, when petitions were the most common mode of communication between Soviet citizens and their rulers? Most dissident texts about life in the USSR, especially the memoirs, highlight their authors' estrangement from Soviet practices and ways of thinking – understandably, given the ideological witch hunting that

prevailed for much of the USSR's history. But we should bear in mind, to paraphrase the anthropologist Ruth Benedict, that the last thing a talking fish would be likely to mention is the water in which it swims.

A particularly striking example of Bergman's tendency to discount the Soviet context appears in his otherwise insightful analysis of Sakharov's *Reflections on Progress, Peaceful Coexistence and Intellectual Freedom* (1968), the samizdat essay that effectively ended his career as a weapons scientist and catapulted him to world fame (18 million copies were published outside the USSR in the first year alone). 'Stylistically,' Bergman writes, 'the essay leaves much to be desired':

> Sakharov's use of Marxist-Leninist phraseology – his references to 'dogmatism', 'ruling classes', 'monopolist capital' in Nazi Germany and 'militarist circles' in the United States – are jarring and seriously detract from the strength of his arguments … But *Reflections* is still an impressive achievement. Nearly everything in it could have been written by a non-Russian, and Sakharov's ability to transcend the political culture in which he was raised and address issues from a truly global perspective – the first Soviet dissident to do so – is absolutely breathtaking.

To whom is the Marxist-Leninist language in *Reflections* jarring? It was part of the conceptual apparatus through which Sakharov made sense of the world at this stage in his life. To suggest that Soviet conventions helped shape his thinking well into adulthood in no way diminishes his stature; if anything, it deepens the drama of his intellectual and moral journey, while reminding us that orthodoxies often contain the ingredients for heresies.

An American friend of Sakharov once made the mistake of referring to him as a dissident. Elena Bonner, Sakharov's wife, immediately corrected him: 'My husband is a *physicist*, not a dissident.' He was both, of course, but the physics came first. As well as explaining in clear, accessible language the often arcane substance of Sakharov's research on thermonuclear weapons and the structure of the universe, Bergman establishes important links between Sakharov's science and his social thought. For Sakharov, science was a model for society, an arena in which, as Bergman puts it, 'substantive disagreements and interpersonal conflicts were presumed to be amenable to reason.' Trained in theoretical physics, Sakharov also excelled in solving practical mechanical problems, including those connected with the design of advanced weapons. This unusual combination of the abstract and the concrete informed his dissident activities as well, where his unbending commitment to universal human rights led to his insistence on coming to the defence of individual victims of their violation – even in cases which many of his fellow dissidents

considered too narrow or too trivial to deserve his attention. It surfaced again during his brief stint as an elected member of the Congress of People's Deputies under Gorbachev, where his tremendous moral authority was inflected by a pragmatic approach to politics as the art of the possible – again to the dismay of his more uncompromising colleagues.

Sakharov's knowledge of the Soviet leadership was a factor in shaping his dissidence. From its inception, the Bolshevik state had assumed a parental role vis-à-vis the Soviet masses: punishing them, rewarding them and above all educating them at every available opportunity. The Soviet legal system was designed to teach (or 'show', as in 'show trials') as much as to administer justice; Soviet newspapers, radio and television were designed to instruct as much as to inform. 'Study, study and study!' Lenin had enjoined. Those who failed to learn their lessons were charged with 'political immaturity'. To be sure, before the Second World War, most European states considered it their duty to instruct their masses in moral and other matters, but in the postwar order Western European governments gradually retreated from paternalism. In the USSR, where Stalin had played the role of Great Teacher with exceptional brutality, his successors retreated from the use of terror, but kept a firm grip on their role as teacher. During the intervening years, however, their charges had grown up. Thanks in no small measure to the efforts of the Communist Party, tens of millions of illiterate, impoverished peasants had learned to read, moved to cities and, in some cases, received a higher education. By the 1960s it was no longer clear that teachers such as Khrushchev and Brezhnev – neither of whom had a university degree – were wiser than their brightest pupils.

While still in his thirties, Sakharov was sufficiently eminent in the world of nuclear weapons research to have met quite a few leading Soviet officials, including Beria, Suslov, Khrushchev and Brezhnev. Such encounters left lasting and often unfavourable impressions on him. The most famous of these meetings took place in November 1955, following the USSR's successful atmospheric testing of its first thermonuclear bomb. At a celebratory banquet just hours after the detonation, Sakharov, as the bomb's principal designer, was given the honour of making the first toast:

> Glass in hand, I rose, and said something like: 'May all our devices explode as successfully as today's, but always over test sites and never over cities.'
>
> The table fell silent, as if I had said something indecent. Everyone froze. [Deputy Minister of Defence, Marshal Mitrofan] Nedelin grinned and, rising from his seat with glass in hand, said:
>
> 'Permit me to tell a parable. An old man wearing only a shirt is praying before an icon: "Guide me and give me strength, guide me and give me strength." An old woman, who is lying on the stove, calls over: "Just pray for strength, old

> man, I can guide it in myself.” Let’s drink to getting strong.’
>
> My whole body tensed, and I think I turned pale – normally I blush. For a few seconds no one in the room spoke; then everybody began talking loudly. I drank my brandy in silence and kept my mouth shut for the rest of the evening. Many years have passed, but to this today I retain the sensation of having been lashed by a whip ... Nedelin considered it necessary to rebuff my pacifist deviation, to put me and anyone else who might share these ideas in our place. The point of his tale (half indecent, half blasphemous, which added to its unpleasantness) was clear. We – the inventors, scientists, engineers, and technicians – had created a terrible weapon, the most terrible in human history. But we would have no say whatsoever over its use. That decision would be made by them – those at the pinnacle of power, of the Party and military hierarchy ... The thoughts and emotions that took shape then ... would completely alter my thinking in years to come.

On another occasion, Sakharov received a public scolding from Efim Slavsky, head of the Soviet nuclear weapons programme (and thus Sakharov’s boss), for working on an unauthorised alternative detonation device that Sakharov hoped would reduce the need for atmospheric testing. Slavsky lashed out at ‘theoreticians who think up new devices while sitting on the toilet and propose them for testing before they’ve buttoned up their trousers’. Was it on such an occasion that Sakharov’s eyes opened: when he came face to face with the fact that the workers’ paradise was ruled by men whose crude way of speaking betrayed their moral crassness? Here, it seems to me, is an unspoken inheritance from the pre-Revolutionary intelligentsia: the repeated shock at discovering the moral and cultural chasm that separated it from ‘the people’.

Some of the most interesting chapters of *Meeting the Demands of Reason* concern the changes that took place in Sakharov’s thinking after he became clearly identified as a dissident. Well into the 1970s, he viewed democracy, including multi-party elections, with scepticism, fearing that the task of managing a complex industrial society was beyond the capacity of the masses and therefore best left to a stable political leadership advised by technical and scientific experts. Along with innumerable reform-minded Soviet ideologues, he instead favoured ‘democratisation’ – that is, more active participation by ordinary citizens in civic affairs. During the 1970s the idea of convergence between capitalism and socialism, with peaceful competition leading each system to adopt the best practices of the other, became central to Sakharov’s outlook – though as Bergman notes, this concept was built more on hope than on history. Was Sakharov aware, I wonder, that his most prominent supporters in the West, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, were busy weeding out whatever ‘socialist’ elements had been planted in their capitalist societies? It

wasn't clear either how the introduction of 'capitalist' elements would stem the tide of consumerism and selfishness whose growth in the USSR Sakharov deplored. Still, seen as a prefiguring of globalisation, the concept of convergence begins to appear more plausible.

[*] Cornell, 285 pp., £14.50, January, 978 0 8014 7590 0.

Vol. 32 No. 9 · 13 May 2010 » Benjamin Nathans » When did your eyes open? (print version)
pages 25-26 | 3365 words

ISSN 0260-9592 Copyright © LRB Ltd., 1997-2011 ^ Top