

ANDREI SAKHAROV

A ROLE MODEL FOR PEACE



THE BACKGROUND

The short 20th century

The 20th century has been called a “short” century, lasting only between 1914 and 1989. In 1914 the first World War started. During this war, the Russian revolution took place (1917). This revolution determined much of the following decades. The Communist rule over Russia and neighbouring countries ended in 1989. Consequently, it can be said that the 20th century more or less coincided with Communist rule in Russia.

Andrei Sakharov was born only four years after the Communists took power and he died in 1989. Sakharov thus lived through almost exactly the whole 20th century in the very country that determined it most.

In order to understand the life and work of Sakharov it is necessary to know something about Russia and about the specific circumstances of the 20th century. These circumstances have now changed so much that it takes some effort to understand how they were at the time. But we cannot understand the greatness of Sakharov unless we understand his circumstances.

The Communist society

When the first World War started, Europe was extremely powerful. But there was great inequality within the European society. Many people were poor. Many countries had colonies, where the local populations were badly treated. Socialism and Communism offered a different vision of society. Many were fascinated by this new teaching.

Russia was a big empire. There was no democracy and great poverty. At the same time, the rich people were extremely rich. Several attempts at political reform had failed. When the war came, the sufferings and injustices became too much, and the people revolted. In 1917, the emperor was deposed, and a new, democratic regime was installed. Only eight months later, however, the Communists took over power by force. There was a very bloody civil war. The Communists won, and they started transforming society. They

called their country the Soviet Union (“soviet” means “council”: every state had a council and these states formed a union. Russia was one of the states).

The Communists didn't believe in democracy. The Communist Party ruled. During this rule, the Soviet Union was totally transformed. There were some good things, but there was also terrible persecution of all who were different. Religions were practically banned. Other parties were banned. People of different opinion were jailed or killed. During the long reign of Stalin, millions of people were killed because of their opinions or faith. The official ideology of the Communists was that the revolution would spread all over the world. Russia was only the beginning. This made many people in Europe afraid of the Soviet Union.

The second World War

In 1939, the second World War started. The Soviet Union was an ally to Germany in the beginning, but in 1941 Hitler broke the pact and attacked the Soviet Union. The war was terribly brutal and devastated large parts of Ukraine and Russia. Eventually, Germany was defeated (1945).

After 1941, the Soviet Union and the United States had worked together to defeat Germany. Very soon after the end of the war, however, the old suspicions against the Soviet Union came back. Stalin was also very afraid of the Americans, because they had a new and terrible weapon, the atomic bomb. They had used it against the Japanese.

The Cold War

What now started is called the Cold War. It lasted more than forty years. The United States and the Soviet Union dominated two “blocks” and tried each to become the most powerful country. West Europe belonged to the American “block” and East Europe belonged to the Soviet “block”. Both blocks spent enormous sums on weapons, including atomic bombs that could easily destroy all life on earth. Both were wary of spies, collaborators and traitors.

Still, the difference between the blocks was great. In the West, there was plurality and richness, and dissent was allowed. In the East, there was

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dictatorship and not much money. Russia, in particular, had traumatic memories of the millions of people who had been killed for resisting the Communist regime or simply for being different.

This is the context in which Sakharov lived his life.

THE STORY

The years of privilege

Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov was born in Moscow on May 21, 1921. He came from an educated and well-to-do family. Sakharov was a brilliant student of science. After the end of the second World War, he did very advanced research in physics. This was the time when the Russians were very anxious to have an atomic bomb, just like the Americans. In 1948, Sakharov participated in the project of developing an atomic bomb under two other prominent scientists, Igor Kurchatov and Igor Tamm.

The scientists were successful. The first Soviet atomic device was tested on August 29, 1949. Sakharov moved to another city, Sarov, in 1950, and there he played a key role in the development of a much more powerful bomb, the hydrogen bomb. The great arms race had started.

Because of his work and expertise, Sakharov was part of a very small and privileged class in the Soviet Union, enjoying all facilities. He was among the top scientists.

At that time, Sakharov didn't feel that he did something wrong in developing nuclear bombs and contributing to the Cold War. This gradually changed. In the 1980s, he wrote: *"After more than forty years, we have had no third world war, and the balance of nuclear terror ... may have helped to prevent one. But I am not at all sure of this; back then, in those long-gone years, the question didn't even arise."*

The years of activism

After giving the hydrogen bomb to Stalin, Sakharov went through a dramatic moral transformation. He slowly understood that his invention was extremely harmful in the hands of politicians, and it caused him a serious moral pain. Sakharov became a staunch opponent of the nuclear tests and made a political statement in 1961, causing anger from Khrushchev, the successor of Stalin. Sakharov also raised his voice in 1966-1967 in defense of the political prisoners in the USSR.

This was a period of profound distrust between the Soviet Union and the USA. The Soviet rulers felt threatened by the West. In the mid-60s, they wanted to create a complicated and expensive system of defense against missiles from the West. Sakharov wrote a secret letter to the Soviet leadership on July 21, 1967, explaining the need to trust the Americans and accept their proposal to stop the competition in arms. Otherwise, he said, the risk of nuclear war would increase very much. He also asked permission to publish a manuscript (which accompanied the letter) in a newspaper to explain the dangers posed by this kind of defense. He wanted to start a public debate on the topic. The government, however, ignored his letter and refused to let him initiate a public discussion in the press.

In spite of being awarded many prizes and titles and enjoying many privileges, Sakharov decided to go against the Soviet government. In 1968 he published his essay on 'Peaceful Co-existence and Intellectual Freedom', and was immediately cut off from the privileged food supplies which he was entitled to as a top scientist.

In 1969 he donated all his life savings to the Red Cross in Moscow. The following year he co-founded the Committee for Human Rights. Sakharov was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace (1975) but was not allowed to go to Norway to accept it. His wife, Yelena Bonner, read his speech at the ceremony in Oslo. The Norwegian Nobel Committee called him "a spokesman for the conscience of mankind". The committee said: "In a convincing manner Sakharov has emphasized that Man's inviolable rights provide the only safe foundation for genuine and enduring international cooperation."

The years of rejection

Sakharov later said that "it took years" for him "to understand how much substitution, deceit, and lack of correspondence with reality there was "in the Soviet ideals." At first I thought, despite everything that I saw with my own eyes, that the Soviet state was a breakthrough into the future, a kind of prototype for all countries". Then he discovered, in his words, "the theory of symmetry: all governments and regimes to a first approximation are bad, all peoples are oppressed, and all are threatened by common dangers." After that, he realized that there is not much "symmetry between a cancer cell and a normal one. Yet our state is similar to a cancer cell – with its messianism

and expansionism, its totalitarian suppression of dissent, the authoritarian structure of power, with a total absence of public control in the most important decisions in domestic and foreign policy, a closed society that does not inform its citizens of anything substantial, closed to the outside world, without freedom of travel or the exchange of information.” Sakharov's ideas on social development led him to put forward the principle of human rights as a new basis of all politics. In his works he declared that "the principle 'what is not prohibited is allowed' should be understood literally", defying the unwritten ideological rules imposed by the Communist ruling elite on the society.

In 1979 he opposed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He also joined the boycott of the Moscow Olympic Games in 1980. Sakharov wrote an open letter to Brezhnev, the successor of Khrushchev, declaring that "wars must stop during the Olympics. According to the tradition, the Soviet Union must remove the troops out of Afghanistan. Olympics cannot be in the country, which is at war." Soviet government retaliated immediately by canceling all his state awards, honours, and privileges and cutting his salary.

Sakharov was sent in exile to the sealed and controlled city of Gorky (now Nizhni Novgorod) from 1980-1986. There, he lived in a small flat on the ground floor of a building, filled with secret police, who performed day and night surveillance of his life.

In May 1984, Yelena Bonner was detained. Sakharov began a hunger strike, demanding permission for his wife to travel to the United States for heart surgery. He was forcibly hospitalized and force-fed. Then he was held in isolation for four months. In August 1984 Yelena Bonner was sentenced by a court to five years of exile in Gorky.

In April 1985, Sakharov started a new hunger strike for his wife to travel abroad for medical treatment. He was taken again to a hospital and force-fed. Then he remained in the hospital until October 1985, when his wife finally was allowed to travel to the United States. She had heart surgery in the United States and returned to Gorky in June 1986.

Recognition



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On December 19, 1986, the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, who had initiated the policies of perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness), called Sakharov to tell him that he and his wife may return to Moscow.

Back in the capital, Sakharov continued his work as a humanitarian. He died of a heart failure on December 14, 1989, in Moscow.



SOME WORDS OF ANDREI SAKHAROV

Intellectual freedom is essential to human society – freedom to obtain and distribute information, freedom for open-minded and fearless debate and freedom from pressure by officialdom and prejudices.

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I hope that no one will claim to know the final answers; no good comes from preachers. Without giving a final answer, we must still constantly think about it and advise others as our minds and conscience prompt. God is your judge, as our grandparents would have said.

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Any action increasing the division of mankind, any preaching of the incompatibility of world ideologies and nations is madness and a crime. Only universal cooperation under conditions of intellectual freedom and the lofty moral ideals of socialism and labor, accompanied by the elimination of dogmatism and pressures of the concealed interests of ruling classes, will preserve civilization.

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A complete destruction of cities, industry, transport, and systems of education, a poisoning of fields, water, and air by radioactivity, a physical destruction of the larger part of mankind, poverty, barbarism, a return to savagery, and a genetic degeneracy of the survivors under the impact of radiation, a destruction of the material and information basis of civilization — this is a measure of the peril that threatens the world as a result of the estrangement of the world's two super-powers.

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Every rational creature, finding itself on the brink of a disaster, first tries to get away from the brink and only then does it think about the satisfaction of its other needs. If mankind is to get away from the brink, it must overcome its divisions.

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What most troubles me now is the instability of the nuclear balance, the extreme peril of the current situation, the appalling waste of the arms race ... Each of us has a responsibility to think about this in global terms, with tolerance, trust, and candor, free from ideological dogmatism, parochial interests, or national egotism.

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The threat of hunger cannot be eliminated without the assistance of the developed countries, and this requires significant changes in their foreign and domestic policies.

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Both now and for always, I intend to hold fast to my belief in the hidden strength of the human spirit.



THE VISION

The vision Sakharov had for humanity grew out of his science. He was first and foremost a great scientist. But he realized that you can be a scientist only if you are free to think. He also realized that, as a scientist, he was able to produce things that other people could abuse. Therefore, the scientist has moral responsibility for what he does. When he had reached this conclusion, he widened it: all people must be free to think. All people have a moral responsibility.

This didn't fit into the society in which he was living. He began to see that the Soviet society was deeply unequal and repressive. Sakharov felt that it was his duty to point this out and suggest changes. His vision was of a society in which divisions are overcome, the movement of thoughts and people is free, and trust is built.

It is important to understand that Sakharov developed this vision as a result of reflection and experience. It was not on principle that he rejected the Soviet system, nor did he do it from the beginning. In fact, he was well served by it during the first part of his life, and he believed in socialism. When he considered that some change was needed, he appealed to the leaders. He didn't doubt that they, too, wanted what was good for the country. When he discovered that they didn't want to hear the truth, he continued telling it to them anyway.

Sakharov trusted reason. He was respectful of religion but didn't believe anyone could give final answers. He desired a society of thinking, questioning people who would not be afraid of sacrificing their own privileges for the good of other, less fortunate people.

WHY IS SAKHAROV IMPORTANT TODAY?

A similar world

Today's world is very different from the world in which Sakharov lived. The Cold War is over, there are several different big, political powers, Asia is rising and the Soviet Union has disappeared.

But some things have remained the same. There is still an enormous number of nuclear arms in the world. India, Pakistan, Israel and perhaps even North Korea has nuclear arms. Not a single country has yet abolished its nuclear arsenal. Several countries plan to build their own. We are still capable of destroying the planet. There are still scientists working with the development of arms and chemicals and technology that can be used in war (and is used, like the drones). There are still dictatorial regimes where it is dangerous to speak your mind, where you may be imprisoned or killed because of what you believe or think.

The particular, social and political environment of Sakharov has vanished. But similar environments are being recreated in other countries. That's why Sakharov can still be a model for us who come after him.

But Sakharov is a model even in smaller matters than world politics. There are at least four elements in his life that can be very helpful to us.

Thinking

The first point is that Sakharov never stopped thinking. He was by all means an exceptional scientist. It would not have been difficult for him to commit himself exclusively to science and stop thinking about the rest. The Soviet system did all it could to support scientists like himself. It was a perfect setting. But he reflected on what he did and on the consequences of what he did. He observed what was happening, listened and read and felt responsible for the things he was involved in. By reflecting, he arrived at some important questions.

Questioning

That is the second point. Sakharov never stopped asking questions. The central question is always: “why?” In trying to answer this question in different circumstances, Sakharov discovered unexpected answers that gave rise to new questions. Why did the Soviet leaders not behave responsibly with nuclear weapons? Why was there such a difference between what was presented as the truth and what people experienced as the truth? Why does science need an atmosphere of inquiry and free research in order to develop? These questions were important, because by answering them Sakharov discovered something essential about the human being and about society. He discovered the terrible consequences of divisions between peoples and nations, the dangers of political manipulation and the sclerosis of the Soviet system. He saw that there was an urgent need for reform, and that everybody has a responsibility to make this reform happen.

Acting

The third point is that Sakharov never stopped acting on the answers he found. Many people think and ask questions and arrive at conclusions. Then they stop. Intelligent and educated people often understand problems in society, or between people, through analysis, but they rarely act on what they have found. Instead of acting, they talk. They would like others to act, or consider that it is the duty of the state or the politicians to act. If everyone acted, they would also act. Alone, they don't act. This is how most people are.

Sakharov was different. If he arrived at the conclusion that something was right, or wrong, he felt the need to affirm it, or to take a distance to it. This is why he, who had invented the hydrogen bomb, later wanted it to be banned. He saw that what he had done was being badly used and was dangerous. So, he decided to campaign against it. Because he had the courage to act according to his conscience, he was largely free from fear. When the Soviet authorities told him that he was not allowed to meet any foreign journalists, he arranged a press conference. He could not submit to a rule that was meaningless. But this also meant that he was taking a great risk.

Sacrifice

The fourth point is that Sakharov never feared taking that risk. Because he followed his conscience, he lost all the privileges he had enjoyed. The Soviet authorities cut his salary, blocked his access to the special shops where Party people bought food, and forced him to move to a small flat in a distant town. This was all they could do, because he was a very famous man. During the rule of Stalin, he would simply have been killed. Less well-known people were killed also after Stalin, and sometimes are even today. Sakharov, however, was watched by the whole world.

Because of that, he never suffered as much as some other dissidents. He was never put in jail. He was never tortured. He never went to a labour camp, like millions of Russians during his lifetime. Yet his loss was considerable. He had led a good and protected life. He was close to people in power. He had money and comfort. It would have been very easy for him to keep it like that for him and his family. Because he wanted to follow his conscience and take his responsibility, he lost it all.

Responsibility

Perhaps the keywords are responsibility and trust. As we can see from his “words” above, Sakharov believed in the capacity of the human being to respond positively to the present situation. To respond positively means taking responsibility for the necessary change. When he pointed out that that rich countries needed to change in order for poor countries to develop, he meant exactly that. It is not enough to make an analysis and point to the solution. We are all a part of the solution. It will never become reality unless we ourselves get involved. If we want unity, we have to live united in our own lives. If we want to be heard and understood, we have to make an effort at listening to others and understanding them. If we want everyone to have enough, we must share.

Similarly, if we expect sacrifices, we must ourselves be the first who make them.

The challenge



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Sakharov was everything that most of us are not and will never be. He was a brilliant scientist with direct contact to some of the most powerful people on earth. Yet nobody would have known about him if he hadn't started to criticize what was wrong in his country. Nobody would have blamed him if he had remained silent, with all his privileges, until his death. But he spoke out anyway.

This is why Sakharov is a model for us. We are not powerful or great, but we all have our little privileges. We all have something to lose. We also have a conscience. On our own scale, we experience conflicts. Not all are dramatic. Many can easily be avoided by keeping silent. Nobody would blame us. Everyone would understand. And still it would be wrong.

That is when we should remember Andrei Sakharov.

YOU CAN DO IT YOURSELF

Is it so different?

What can Sakharov inspire you to do in Bangladesh today? It is so different. As we have seen, Sakharov dealt with big questions: nuclear arms, super-powers, dictators... What has all that to do with Bangladesh today?

Quite a lot, perhaps. Get some information on how much is spent every year on the army. You will be surprised. Look into the relations the government has with powerful countries. What does it like the most, getting money unconditionally or getting advice on human rights? Look at the leaders of the big parties in the country. Do they discuss with others, listen to advice or simply rule by decree? Have they ever been elected in open elections? Ask yourself: what is the ideology behind the different parties? Is it an ideology that promotes reflection, questioning, freedom of thought? To what extent does the ideal of the party correspond to the reality you can see around you, and especially within the party?

There is no doubt a big difference between the Soviet Union and Bangladesh, and between the present situation and the Cold War. But the basic tendencies are the same, simply because we are human beings, now as then.

The four-point strategy

Let's look once again at the four points that characterize Sakharov's itinerary as an activist: thought, questioning, action and sacrifice. This is something that is not limited to his time and situation. It can be used today, where you are.

To begin with: think. Don't take things for granted. Ask questions. Why is one man a rickshaw-puller and another one a university student? Why is there corruption? Why is everything so dirty everywhere? Why is everyone in the office so irritated? Why do so many students cheat? Think deeply about questions like that. Where is the answer? Don't stop after one or two steps. Continue thinking and asking. You will be surprised to see how far it

goes. There is always a social dimension; somehow, you are affected, too. Somehow you are involved.

You will start noticing things that you never saw before. People around you will find your questions unnecessary and uncomfortable. This is the price of being observant. Most people don't notice very much.

Sakharov rejected the old, Soviet answers to the difficult questions. They took the easy way out, creating even more problems. If someone was irritating, Stalin would have him shot. If everything was dirty, the government would say that it's clean and jail anyone who insisted it is dirty. These are traps that are easy to fall into even if you are not a dictator. We don't shoot people, but we stop talking to them or hate them. We cannot jail people, but we can refuse to hear and acknowledge what they say, especially when it is unfavourable to ourselves.

Face reality

Don't do that. Face the real situation. Tell yourself: this is the problem. Now what can I do? Remember that there is always something you can do. Even refusing to act or simply saying “no” can be an important statement. Whatever you do, however, it will probably cost you something. Time, friendship, opportunities, some money... Remember that Sakharov had all the material comfort one could hope for. Nevertheless, he spoke the truth.

Remember also that Sakharov never ceased to believe “in the hidden strength of the human spirit.” This spirit is in you, too. You can do it, and others will be inspired by you. It may be very small, but any action in favour of unity, reconciliation, openness and exchange between people is precious.