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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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The Sakharov Case: A Soviet Saga

Summary

The Soviet Union's most prominent dissident, Andrey Sakharov, has for two decades presented the regime with a dilemma: how to silence him without incurring too much damage to the Soviet regime's image at home and abroad. In the past, sensitivity to Western and domestic criticism restrained the leadership from using the full panoply of repressive measures against Sakharov and even enabled him at times to win concessions from Moscow. When the 63-year-old physicist went on a hunger strike on 2 May to gain a temporary exit visa for his wife Yelena Bonner, however, the regime adopted a tough approach. By forcing Sakharov to end his hunger strike and severing Bonner's ties with the outside world, the Kremlin appears to have calculated that the mix of advantages and drawbacks of a hardline policy had changed: [redacted]

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- They may have believed that Sakharov enjoyed less foreign support than previously because he had concentrated recently on personal causes (e.g. efforts to win emigration for his family) rather than broader political questions.
- They may have concluded that Bonner, especially after she asked for asylum in the US Embassy in Moscow, would not return to the USSR if permitted to leave and would stir up more foreign criticism of Soviet policies than would ensue from harsh regime actions to suppress her dissent.

This paper was prepared by [redacted] the Office of Soviet Analysis.
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- They may have felt that an unyielding position would signal that US policies toward the Soviet Union have produced tougher, not more accommodating, behavior.
 - They may have judged that a tough stance would reinforce other recent regime actions designed to increase greater ideological controls and eliminate Western influences at home.
 - It is conceivable that some Soviet leaders have used the Sakharov situation to give an anti-Western thrust to policy or to complicate General Secretary Chernenko's tenure.

The regime isolated Bonner in Gor'kiy in early May, then probably threatened both Sakharovs with the prospect that she would receive a harsh sentence for anti-Soviet propaganda or possibly even for treason. The authorities also hospitalized Sakharov soon after he began his hunger strike and may have subjected him to psychiatric treatment in order to break his resolve and to end his fast. [REDACTED]

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By the end of August, the regime brought the situation to its present status. Bonner was convicted of anti-Soviet slander but given a relatively lenient sentence. For the first time, both Sakharovs are confined to Gor'kiy, out of the Moscow spotlight and in a controlled environment. Sakharov's hunger strike has been ended. The Soviets have combined their actions against Sakharov and Bonner with a disinformation and propaganda campaign to deflect foreign criticism. [REDACTED]

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The regime is likely to view the status quo as a victory of sorts. While Sakharov's death could enliven the issue of Soviet mistreatment of its dissidents, Moscow appears to have weathered the storm for now. The leadership is probably counting on time and the lack of information from unofficial sources about Sakharov's situation to cause the West to lose interest in his plight. [REDACTED]

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Background

Andrey Sakharov, considered the father of the Soviet Union's first hydrogen bomb, has presented the regime with a dilemma since becoming a leading critic of Soviet foreign and domestic policies nearly two decades ago. His prominence at home and abroad as a physicist, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, and symbolic head of the Soviet dissident movement has made it difficult for the regime to silence him without incurring both the wrath of its own scientific community and condemnation from the world at large. Indeed, Sakharov's international visibility and the high regard for him at home has forced the leadership to treat him as a special case. In recent months, however, the leadership appears to have reassessed its approach on the Sakharov issue, seeing fewer disincentives than previously and new incentives to move against Sakharov. [redacted]

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Sakharov's weapons research initially led him to dissident activities. He came into disfavor after writing a series of letters to then Premier Khrushchev (1958, 1961 and 1962) opposing nuclear weapons tests. He cofounded the Moscow Human Rights Committee in 1970, but it was not until February 1973 that Soviet officialdom first publicly criticized him--then for a letter written in 1968 and published abroad as "Thoughts on Progress, Coexistence, and Intellectual Freedom." Subsequent calls by Sakharov for an investigation of mental hospitals run by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and--with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn--for the leadership to renounce Marxism as an ideology, provoked strong attacks in the Soviet media on Sakharov in the mid-1970s, but the regime still refrained from subjecting him to disciplinary actions. [redacted]

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Sakharov's special status was reflected in the fact that TASS announced Sakharov's Nobel Peace prize in October 1975, although it asserted that the award is given to Soviet "enemies." The regime attempted during 1977 to rein Sakharov in when it publicly warned him to curb his dissident activities or face criminal charges. In January 1980, following Sakharov's criticism of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the regime took its first direct disciplinary action against him, stripping him of his state honors and exiling him to Gor'kiy. The Academy of Sciences censured Sakharov in 1978 and 1980, but it has not expelled him. A vote for his expulsion--which, according to academy statutes, would have to be by secret ballot--would probably be difficult to obtain. Moreover, because any failed attempt would embarrass the regime, the leadership has been reluctant to force the issue. [redacted]

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Despite the regime's disciplinary action in 1980, it did allow his wife's daughter and her husband to emigrate that same year.

[redacted]

Sakharov was also successful in pressuring the regime to gain emigration for another family member in 1981, after his stepson (who lived in the United States) married a Soviet woman by proxy (at the time the woman was denied permission to emigrate). In November 1981 Sakharov and his wife, Yelena Bonner, went on a hunger strike as a way to force the authorities into granting the emigration of the wife of Sakharov's step-son. The authorities hospitalized both Sakharovs and threatened to force-feed them, but yielded to their demands in little more than a week. The woman entered the United States in January 1982. [redacted]

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The Regime Says No

The current situation was precipitated in September 1982 when, according to Bonner's family, she again applied for a temporary exit visa to visit Italy for eye treatment (she was permitted to visit there in 1975, 1977 and 1979). This time the regime said no. Moreover, Soviet media launched a new campaign to discredit Sakharov after his article on "The Danger of Thermonuclear War" was published abroad (Foreign Affairs, July 1983). On 2 May 1984, Sakharov went on a new hunger strike to gain an exit visa for Bonner. [redacted]

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Since April it has been difficult to reconstruct with precision the events in the case. Bonner's access to US diplomats ended then, and in May her ability to communicate with others was largely cut off. It appears that the authorities isolated Bonner in Gor'kiy in early May, then threatened both Sakharovs with the prospect that she would receive a harsh sentence for anti-Soviet propaganda or even possibly be tried for treason. They also hospitalized Sakharov and may have subjected him to psychiatric treatment as a way to break his resolve and to end his hunger strike. The regime appears to have brought the Sakharov situation to its current status by the end of August. [redacted]

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It is possible that a temporary settlement was reached with the couple under which Bonner would receive a light sentence and be permitted to reside with her husband in Gor'kiy. A "most reliable" source of the US Embassy in Moscow reported that Bonner was tried and sentenced on 17 August for anti-Soviet slander. An investigation had been under way since May, and she was given a relatively light sentence--five years internal exile in Gor'kiy. According to the West German press, Viktor Louis--an agent of the KGB who has functioned as a "tipster" and unofficial channel abroad for the regime's views and actions--indicated in early September that Sakharov had been released from a hospital and was living with Bonner in Gor'kiy. [redacted]

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Only days after Bonner's sentence, Viktor Louis, according to media reports, provided photographs of the Sakharovs dating from mid-June. He also provided a videotape of the couple in Gor'kiy. That tape appears to be the work of the KGB. Although extensively edited and heavy-handed, the videotape does seem to show that both Sakharovs are alive and confined to Gor'kiy and that Sakharov is not on a hunger strike. According to dated material introduced into the tape, Sakharov was in the hospital as of mid-July. For example, the physicist is shown in hospital dress with two other people (one of whom is a nurse, the other possibly a psychiatrist). Magazines held up to the camera by one of the people in the scene bear the dates 28 June 1984 (Bunte) and 13 July 1984 (Paris Match). Sakharov is again depicted in the videotape in what may be a hospital dining room, and someone hands him an international edition of Newsweek, dated 16 July 1984. (Some of his comments in this instance were edited out by the authorities.) Bonner is shown in Gor'kiy on the videotape with her lawyer, and a Soviet journal that appears in the scene places the date around 15 July. Although both Sakharov and Bonner appear together in the videotape, there is no indication of the date they are together. (While it seems Bonner was isolated from Sakharov and others in early May, the couple may have been reunited in Gor'kiy after Bonner's conviction in mid-August.) There is nothing apparently more recent in the videotape than 16 July. The West German newspaper Bild Zeitung recieved the tape on 22 August. [redacted]

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The Regime's Motivations

By refusing to give in to Sakharov and his wife this time, the Soviets chose a course of action that practically ensured international condemnation at a time when several foreign leaders were planning first-time meetings with General Secretary Chernenko. It also risked even greater condemnation since Sakharov could have died during his hunger strike. Indeed, West European governments grew concerned in May about the medical condition of the then fasting Sakharov. For example, Portuguese Prime Minister Soares sent a letter to Moscow on Sakharov's behalf, and King Juan Carlos of Spain broached the subject of human rights during his visit to the USSR in May. The furor over Sakharov's status almost torpedoed French President Mitterand's visit to Moscow in June. [redacted]

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In taking a hard line stance toward Sakharov, the Soviets probably were motivated by the following calculations:

- They may have believed that Sakharov's tendency in recent years to concentrate on personal causes--such as helping family members to emigrate rather than on

broader questions of human rights--had weakened his moral appeal at home and abroad. In sum, the regime may see Sakharov as having somewhat less sympathy than he had earlier. Moreover, Bonner's action in seeking asylum afforded the regime a greater opportunity to smear her as a would-be defector than had earlier been the case.

- They may have concluded, at least by the time Bonner appealed for asylum in the US Embassy in Moscow, that if Bonner left the USSR again, she would not return. The leadership probably believes that the Soviet image internationally would suffer more if Bonner were abroad and able to criticize the regime with impunity than if they resorted to repressive techniques in keeping her at home. The Soviets probably assume that even if Sakharov died and the tone of Soviet-West European relations worsened temporarily, little real change would occur in the substance of these relations.
- They may have believed they had no incentive to accommodate Sakharov at a time when dialogue with the West was negligible and could use the Sakharov issue in a broader campaign to make it appear that US policies had backfired by producing tougher Soviet behavior.
- They may have judged that a tough policy toward the Sakharovs would reinforce the regime's other actions designed to limit Western influences on Soviet society and to inculcate greater ideological commitment among youth and intellectuals. The leadership has increased internal repression generally in recent months. The hardline stance is reflected in the regime's increased efforts to block refusenik contacts with Westerners (especially with US Embassy officers and American newsmen) and in new dissident prosecutions, including that of Yuriy Shikanovich--a mathematician and friend of Sakharov--who has been sentenced to five years in prison and five more in internal exile for his involvement with the prominent underground publication Chronicle of Current Events.

While the decision to refuse to give in to Sakharov was probably made by the leadership as a whole, it is conceivable that even Soviet policy toward Sakharov has become bound up in differences in the leadership and pre-succession politics.

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Tactics

The regime has made a major effort to keep the West from finding out the true state of affairs in the Sakharov case. To this end the Soviets have employed a variety of propaganda techniques. Soviet media and Soviet officials in contact with US officials have been used in an attempt to convince the West that the Sakharovs are alive and well and to counter recurring rumors that Sakharov has died. [REDACTED]

-- TASS alleged on 30 May that Sakharov was feeling well, eating regular meals and living normally in Gor'kiy and that Bonner was getting good medical treatment. A week later, TASS specifically denied Western press accounts that Sakharov had died, asserting that such accounts were part of a broader smear campaign undertaken by "US special services."

-- A senior Soviet diplomat in Moscow told the US Embassy's deputy chief of mission on 31 May that Bonner's health was good, that she was living in Gor'kiy and even driving her car all over the city. He described Sakharov's hunger strike as a "pseudo-hunger strike," asserting that he had not lost a pound.

-- During French President Mitterand's June visit to Moscow, Soviet spokesman Leonid Zamyatin asserted to the foreign press that Sakharov was feeling well, getting a high salary as an Academy of Sciences member and was being exploited in a US-sponsored anti-Soviet campaign. Soviet media repeated these themes throughout the summer.

-- A prominent member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences told the foreign press in early June that Sakharov was in Gor'kiy, well, and that his situation as publicized in the West--"this disinformation"--does not correspond to reality. [REDACTED]

One plausible explanation for some of the erroneous reports that Sakharov had died is that Sakharov's friends and sympathizers were spreading rumors to focus Western attention on the case. It is also conceivable that Soviet authorities themselves were responsible for putting out the false stories. They could have done this in order to prepare the foreign audience for the

[redacted]

possibility that he might die either from his hunger strike or from force-feeding. They could also have seen an advantage in floating contradictory rumors to confuse Western observers and cloud the issue of Sakharov's fate. Moreover, they could have fed alarmist rumors to friends and relatives of Sakharov in order then to refute them, thereby discrediting the veracity of Sakharov's friends, and the Western press that publicized rumors of mistreatment of Sakharov. [redacted]

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For example, the circumstances of a reported telephone call from Bonner to an Italian acquaintance in June suggested the possibility that the Soviets were "setting up" Bonner by deliberately providing her with false information. An Italian newspaper reported that Bonner said in the call that her husband was "no longer with us." Bonner's family abroad concluded that since contact with Bonner had been tightly controlled by the authorities, the call probably was designed to confuse them about the situation. Bonner almost certainly could not have made an international phone call without official approval, she may have been led to believe that Sakharov had died, as part of the pressure the authorities were then applying. After the Western press reported the phone call the Soviet attacked it as representative of the Western "smear campaign." [redacted]

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Finally, it is possible that the false stories of Sakharov's death were floated by Soviets who may have used the Sakharov situation to give an anti-Western thrust to policy or to complicate General Secretary Chernenko's tenure, attempting to embarrass his regime over its handling of the affair. We have little evidence, however, to support this hypothesis. [redacted]

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The Soviet Endgame

With both Sakharovs confined to Gor'kiy, the end of Sakharov's hunger strike, and the prosecution of friends of the Sakharovs, the regime may be satisfied that it has concluded the Sakharov affair on its own terms and forced the submission of the country's most prominent dissident. At a minimum, the regime has bought some time for itself on the issue. [redacted]

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The Soviet leadership could conceivably now move to arrange an exchange of Bonner for someone in the West. They have exchanged people for political prisoners in the past. In fact, Sakharov's family abroad broached the subject of possible exchanges for the couple with West European leaders during the summer. This prospect, however, seems unlikely. The regime probably will continue to believe that Bonner alone, or together with Sakharov, would stir up criticism abroad of Soviet policies. [redacted]

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The most likely course is for the regime to continue the status quo and wait out the situation, believing that the interest of foreign governments and even its own intellectuals will wane with the passage of time. To maintain the status quo the regime can still rely on intimidation and the threat of even more repression against the Sakharovs. [redacted]

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The status quo seems also to remove some of the embarrassment over the case felt by Soviet intellectuals and officials at home. For example, in July the director of the Soviet Space Research Institute commented that the Sakharov situation was standing in the way of US-Soviet scientific exchanges. Earlier [redacted] [redacted] reported after visiting the USSR that there was widespread concern among Soviet intellectuals about Sakharov. While Soviet diplomats and scientists may have no illusions about what has happened in this case, in dealing with foreigners they can at least point to the pictorial evidence in the Soviet film (no matter how contrived) that the Sakharovs are not being mistreated. [redacted]

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In sum, the regime appears to have succeeded in placing Sakharov and his wife in a completely controlled environment, isolated from foreign diplomats and Western reporters. The leadership is consequently likely to view the status quo as a victory of sorts. While Sakharov's death could trigger a major propaganda problem for the regime, the leadership for now appears to have weathered the storm and reined in a critic who has rankled it for two decades and who until now had seemed to enjoy some immunity from the full panoply of Soviet repressive measures. [redacted]

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