

*The Political Ideas of Soviet Scientists in the 1950s and 60s and Their Reaction to Sakharov's Essay*

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I believe I first met Sakharov about 1967. I first met Sakharov's wife Elena Georgievna in 1973 when I visited her and Sakharov in the Academy of Sciences hospital where she was being treated for a thyroid condition and he was having his heart tested.

The organizers of this conference assigned me the topic "The Political Ideas of Soviet Scientists in the 1950s and the 1960s and their Reaction to Sakharov's Essay." I decided not to survey any literature on the subject, but instead to use myself as a "probe particle," especially for the 1950s. I had a lot of conversations then with leading scientists in the Soviet Union.

First, let's remember what was happening in the early 1950s. Stalin was still alive. According to the official press, medical doctors tried to poison Stalin. Unfortunately, it was not true, but the doctors were put in prison. There were also campaigns against "cosmopolitans," geneticists, and others. There was an attempt to condemn Einstein's theory of relativity and Bohr's quantum theory as pseudo-scientific concepts, but that campaign was stopped on orders from above. I was a student at that time of Vladimir Berestetsky. Perhaps Richard Wilson remembers Berestetsky. The introduction of the first edition of *Quantum Electrodynamics* cites Lenin's remark that the electron was as rich as, and no less complicated than, the atom. (Lenin, by the way, wasn't stupid; what he said about the electron is generally true.) Later, of course, the authors (Akhiezer and Berestetsky) excluded this citation. But it's amazing that leading theoreticians in a leading book on quantum electrodynamics would cite Lenin in their introduction. That's how it was at the time.

The question – "What were the political ideas of scientists in the late Stalin era?" - makes no sense at all if we recall that probably 15 percent of scientists were forced by the KGB to write denunciations. In my group of students at Moscow University's Physical-

Technical Department, at least 25 percent of them were denouncing each other. Some of them came to me later and described what was going on. In such a situation, to ask about their political views is a silly question.

The situation changed rather quickly after Khrushchev's speech to the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 denouncing Stalin. I was a young scientist then at the Institute of Theoretical and Experimental Physics (ITEP), and a member of its Party Committee. After Khrushchev's speech, I was asked to help organize a meeting of the Institute's Communists in order to discuss the situation. We, the Party Committee, prepared for it well, rehearsing who would say what.

Robert Avalov, a Georgian and a dedicated Marxist-Leninist, proposed that in order to avoid Stalinist regimes in the future we needed to arm the people by giving weapons to the workers. We all agreed with his suggestion, and decided he should speak first.

I was more of a theoretician. Although I was a Marxist, I didn't believe in determinism. In my speech, I said that the socialist economic system was all right, but the political system can be repressive or terrorist. I used the phrases "terror policy" and "socialist but not democratic country." I suggested the Soviet Union should become more liberal like Yugoslavia. I also talked about the moral degradation of the Soviet people from the top to the bottom.

Another member of the committee, Vadim Nesterov, talked about freedom of information and asked why the Soviet Union was jamming the BBC.

All our speeches are available now. Drawn from the Party archives, they have been printed in various publications. I was very happy to read my own speech; I had forgotten large parts of it.

So those were our very radical thoughts as young scientists. I wasn't familiar with human rights concepts at that time. What I had were revolutionary thoughts: arming the workers

and resisting a future bureaucratic regime. Earlier, in the mid-1940s when I was an officer in the Red Army, my personal view was that we didn't have a dictatorship of the working class; we had a dictatorship of the bureaucracy.

What was the reaction of leading scientists to our speeches? All the Communists of the entire Institute lost their Communist Party cards because they supported us during that meeting. They had to condemn in writing our speeches and apologize for not having condemned them at the meeting. Those who did not write properly did not get their Party cards back. And a week later, we, the organizers, lost our jobs.

The director of ITEP, Abram Alikhanov, summoned us to his office. He explained that he had called Khrushchev on our behalf, and Khrushchev said, "I'm not alone in the Politburo. All I could do was see to it that they weren't arrested." When Alikhanov asked him not to fire us from the Institute, Khrushchev said that was impossible. Alikhanov concluded our meeting by saying, "If you knew what you were doing, you're heroes. If you didn't, you're fools."

I first met the Italian physicist and Communist Bruno Pontecorvo in Dubna when I was employed by ITEP. I met him again on Gorky Street after losing my job by order of the Politburo and working as a tutor in order to feed my two kids. He asked me what I had said at the meeting. I told him I'd said that we needed democratization on the basis of socialism. But, he objected, socialism and Western democracy are not consistent with each other. That was his opinion at the time.

In 1975, 20 years later, when we discussed the political situation in the Soviet Union, that was still his opinion. Pontecorvo told me that if I would try to organize a Democratic Party, as he had heard I might do, we would be enemies. He was not so much pro-Soviet as he was pro-Italian. He said he was a member of the Italian Communist Party, which was a bit different from the Soviet Party, but he still said we'd be enemies. That was his reaction.

The reaction of scientists from Novosibirsk's Institute of Nuclear Physics, Leningrad's Ioffe Institute, Kharkov's Physical Technical Institute, and Moscow's Lebedev Physics Institute as well as ITEP was quite different from Pontecorvo's reaction: they gathered money for us. Boris Chirikov twice brought assistance for me personally from the Novosibirsk Institute, because I had two kids at that time. Gersh Budker at a scientific meeting said, "Why so grim? You're a hero. Cheer up!"

That was the reaction, mostly a very supportive reaction. It's true that Lev Landau was unhappy, but for a special reason. You know his story. He was arrested in 1938 and released only in 1939 after Pyotr Kapitsa's personal intervention on his behalf. Landau considered 1956 a turning point in the development of the Soviet Union, and he wasn't happy about what we had done. He said to me: "If you want to make science your career, don't make speeches." He wanted me to do physics. He considered me able.

That was the 1950s. During the 1960s, most scientists were quiet. Probably one reason was that in the early part of that decade, there was a movement among them to join the Communist Party "in order to transform it from inside," as some of them explained to me. I was rather skeptical at the time, saying that the Party might transform them instead of being itself transformed. Now I think that this movement wasn't bad for the time.

The 1960s was of course the period when dissidents emerged in force. And 1968 was a peak year: in April there was the first issue of the samizdat journal *A Chronicle of Current Events*; in July Sakharov's *Reflections*; in August the demonstration on Red Square by Pavel Litvinov, Bogoraz, and six others protesting the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. On May 20, 1969, the Initiative Group for the Defense of Human Rights, founded by Pyotr Yakir, Viktor Krasin, with fifteen members, including Sergei Kovalev, issued an appeal to the United Nations on behalf of Soviet political prisoners. (There was no response from the United Nations at that time.)

I had decided to concentrate on physics and succeeded in becoming a Professor and a Corresponding Member of the Armenian Academy of Sciences. However, Sakharov's essay, first, and the demonstration on Red Square, second, made me ashamed that I had

done nothing after 1956 to promote democracy and human rights. So 1968 was a turning point for me. But I didn't want to do something insignificant. If I simply opened my mouth in Yerevan, the next day I would find myself on the way to the Urals.

In 1973, I became a founding member of the first Amnesty International group in the Soviet Union. In May 1976, after considerable thought, I organized the Moscow Helsinki Watch Group and served as its chairman until my arrest in February 1977.

As I have said, Sakharov's essay and the demonstration on Red Square were crucial for me in 1968. As for the reactions of scientists generally to *Reflections*, Pavel Litvinov in his talk has described them completely correctly. It was not important *what* was written in the Sakharov article. It was important that *Sakharov* wrote it. It was his position both in science and in the political structure of the Soviet Union that made it important. *Reflections* completely contradicted the official line. To say that we needed democratization was a crime, because we were supposedly the most democratic country in the world.

There were quite a few scientists like Gersh Budker, who in private conversation with me or in my presence expressed serious concern about the fate of Sakharov and discussed how to help him if he were to be punished.

In the 1960s, scientists in the Soviet Union were generally supportive of critics of the regime. But most scientists, particularly in the provinces, did not sympathize with sending criticism abroad. They considered involving foreigners anti-patriotic.

I'm afraid that I've run out of time.