

The KGB File of Andrei Sakharov

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

Joshua Rubenstein and Alexander Gribanov (eds.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005. 422 pages.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

Since the early 1990s, the opening of intelligence archives in the United States and Eastern Europe has done much to enhance our understanding of the operations of intelligence agencies during the cold war. A major exception to this trend, however, has been the files of the Soviet KGB. For a brief period following the collapse of the USSR in 1991, researchers gained limited access to the files. The most notable result was Allen Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev's controversial book on Soviet espionage, *The Haunted Wood* (1999)[1]—but the doors soon slammed shut, and much of what we know about the KGB still comes from memoirs or unorthodox sources, such as Vasiliy Mitrokhin's archive. Most of these materials, moreover, have dealt with the KGB's activity abroad and have not shed much light on the service's role in repression at home. But the publication of one small group of KGB documents, reports on the Soviet physicist and dissident Andrei Sakharov, are helping to close this gap. The documents contained in *The KGB File of Andrei Sakharov* were originally given to his widow, Elena Bonner, by the Russian Foreign Counterintelligence Service and supplemented by additional KGB documents from communist party and state archives. In publishing 146 of them, Joshua Rubenstein and Alexander Gribanov provide a long-overdue look at the inner world of the KGB and how it served the Soviet leadership.

An important point to understand from the start is that the book's title is somewhat misleading. The KGB's files on Sakharov and Bonner, some 583 volumes of raw reports compiled by the Fifth Directorate on surveillance and operations and from informants, were ordered destroyed in 1989.[2] What Rubenstein and Griбанov present, instead, are translations of 146 finished KGB memos and reports on Sakharov, often signed by the chairman of the KGB and submitted to the Central Committee or individual Soviet leaders, and have survived in other files and archives. Based on the nonstop monitoring of the dissident's activities, the documents provide a chronology of Sakharov's development as a dissident and the growth of the opposition movement in Russia. This is the story from the Soviet leadership's point of view, and it shows the combination of alarm and confusion in the Kremlin as leaders struggled to understand and limit the phenomenon. The documents are not easy reading, for they are in the formal, ponderous style of the communist bureaucracy, but they give an excellent insight into the minds and workings of the dictatorship.

At the time of Sakharov's first public expression of dissent—the publication in the West in 1968 of his essay “Reflections on Progress, Coexistence, and Intellectual Freedom”—the KGB did not know what to make of him. Sakharov was, after all, one of the Soviet Union's leading physicists, and he had been showered with honors. The KGB, not realizing that Sakharov's essay was the result of a gradual disillusionment with Soviet society rather than an impulsive act, at first hoped to bring him back to orthodoxy. “To prevent him from committing politically harmful acts, we believe it would make sense of one of the secretaries of the Central Committee to receive Sakharov and conduct an appropriate conversation with him,” recommended KGB Chairman Yuriy Andropov in June 1968. (90)

The reluctance to condemn Sakharov, however, brought problems of its own, as the KGB noted that “government circles in the USA” might misread the Kremlin's silence as an endorsement of his views and wrongly assume that Soviet foreign policy was shifting. (94) In 1970, with Sakharov becoming more radical and building contacts with other dissidents, Andropov recommended the installation of listening devices in his apartment to “discover the contacts inciting him to commit hostile acts” and prevent “individuals hostile to the Soviet state” from exploiting his name. The monitoring, which eventually included physical surveillance, break-ins and thefts, and reporting by informers, continued until Sakharov's death in 1999. (99)[3]

The KGB, continually unable to comprehend Sakharov's dissent, could only view his actions through the prism of its Bolshevik and Chekist past. As a result, KGB officials not only saw him as the tool of foreign conspiracies but often managed to detect multiple plots working together. In December 1975, Andropov reported that "bourgeois propaganda is actively exploiting [Sakharov's statements] for purposes of subversive activities against the Soviet Union and other socialist countries." (207) Soviet anti-Semitism reinforced these themes, as when Andropov declared in 1973 that Sakharov and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn were "offering their services to reactionary imperialist and especially Zionist circles." (166) Shortly after President Jimmy Carter sent a letter of support to Sakharov, Andropov claimed that "ideological centers and Zionist organizations have involved the new Carter administration" in Sakharov's subversion. (223) The KGB also often ascribed Sakharov's dissent to the malign influence of Elena Bonner. Her views, wrote Andropov in 1980, "not only are based on her hostile attitude toward the Soviet system but also conform to the recommendation of intelligence services in the USA." (255)

Nonetheless, the KGB understood very clearly the threat that Sakharov and other dissidents posed to the Soviet system. Along with bafflement and paranoia, the reports make clear the leadership's fear that Sakharov's influence could grow among the Soviet people. In February 1973, after the journal *Literaturnaya Gazeta* printed the first official public criticism of Sakharov, Andropov told the Central Committee that the article had been a mistake. Such attacks, while ideologically correct, should not be repeated because they "encourage the antisocial activities of Sakharov" and increase the interest of "hostile elements inside the country" in what he had to say. (139)

The fear increased as Sakharov's stature in the West grew. Easing the pressure on Sakharov and other dissidents was unacceptable, wrote Andropov at the end of 1975, because any relaxation would lead to the creation of an "organized underground for purposes of overthrowing Soviet authority." (210) It was the fear that Sakharov would become a rallying point for opposition to the Soviet regime that led the Politburo to order his exile to Gorky in 1980 and, in 1986, caused KGB Chairman Viktor Chebrikov to keep opposing Sakharov's return to Moscow. (317)

Much of this will be familiar to anyone knowledgeable about Soviet politics or the history of the USSR's security services. Indeed, it is hardly news that the KGB viewed the world through a distorting lens of ideology, paranoia, and anti-Semitism. The greatest value of *The KGB File of Andrei*

Sakharov, however, lies not in what it says about the past but, rather, about the future. Unlike the states of Central and Eastern Europe, the KGB and its successors did not go through radical cutbacks and purges in the decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Instead, many of the KGB's people and practices are still in place, and now, with Russia sliding into authoritarianism under the rule of a former KGB officer and his cronies, the security services are again increasing their power, prestige, and resources. With the publication of the Sakharov documents, we may have a chilling glimpse of events to be repeated and files yet to be compiled.

Footnotes:

[1]See the following review, reprinted from a classified issue of *Studies in Intelligence* (1998) or see James E. Nolan Jr., "American Ghosts in Soviet Files," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 12, no. 2 (June 1999): 227–30.

[2]For information on the destruction of the files, see Elena Bonner, "My Secret Past: The KGB File," *New York Review of Books*, June 25, 1992.

[3]Sakharov told the story of his gradual break with the Soviet system and his persecution by the KGB in *Andrei Sakharov, Memoirs*, trans. Richard Lourie (New York: Knopf, 1990).

Historical Document

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