

CHAPTER 15

1980-1982: Defense of Sakharov
via Dobrynin and the Media

In 1980, after Sakharov is exiled to Gorky, FAS “adopts” Sakharov and boycotts the Soviet Union itself. When Sakharov announces a major hunger strike, in 1981, a desperate telegram is sent to him in Gorky warning that help may not arrive in time; Sakharov’s response arrives in time to help galvanize major public and private support.

Through the 1970s Sakharov had become the central figure to whom the dissidents and the Jewish refuseniks turned for help, which he would often provide by calling in Western reporters in search of a story. The authorities were, for the time being, tolerating his agitation. The numbers of dissidents and refuseniks had diminished through imprisonment and emigration, but his appeals continued.

Sometimes these appeals would be broadcast widely, such as through an op-ed piece in *The New York Times* explaining how the Soviet Union had reacted to President Carter’s letter to Sakharov.²⁷¹ Sometimes they would be sent personally to individuals, such as the letter he addressed to “Drs. Morrison and Stone” appealing to FAS to defend Naum Meiman and Yuri Gol’fand and to inform our members of their plight.²⁷² Sometimes they would come in a long letter in Russian, signed by Sakharov and his son-in-law Efrem Yankelevich, which B.J. would translate.²⁷³ We even received a personalized tape about one refusenik he wanted to help that included Sakharov’s voice offering “greetings to Stone and to his wife, whom

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I remember very well because I met them last year."²⁷⁴ He was spending all his time appealing.

But then Sakharov went too far. During Christmas week in 1979, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he released a statement of protest. In the political rubble of détente, there was no longer any reason for the Politburo to tolerate him.

On January 22, 1980, they stripped him of all state and government awards and said he had been "conducting subversive activities against the Soviet state for a number of years" and had "lately embarked on the road of open calls to reactionary circles of imperialist states to interfere in the U.S.S.R.'s internal affairs."²⁷⁵ Exiled to Gorky, a city off-limits to foreigners because of the military aviation plant located there, he was put under a regimen just short of house arrest.

He and Elena were very closely watched. During the first month they received their mail. But after the Sakharovs tabulated how many were pro and how many con, and mentioned this in a wire-tapped room, all the pro letters ceased to arrive. They were so closely watched that one day, when they conspired to disappear in some bushes during a walk, a helicopter promptly appeared overhead. On another occasion, a purposeful remark by Elena about the terrible trash across the street, and her intention to send a picture of it to the West, induced three Army trucks to clean up the yard the next day.

I invited Bernard Feld, then the editor of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* in Chicago—our slightly younger cousin organization—to join me in a request for a visa to travel to Gorky to discuss Sakharov's situation.^[276] Only one week after the exile, we wrote to the Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin, that we represented the American counterparts of the atomic scientist Sakharov. If the Soviet government "does intend to permit academician Sakharov to meet with any foreign colleagues in future," we would like to do so promptly.²⁷⁷ This was the time to find out if they would permit visitors.

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Meanwhile, FAS and NAS were working hard to prevent Sakharov's expulsion from the Soviet Academy of Sciences.^[278] In the end, after a worldwide protest, the Soviet Academy did not expel Sakharov but only censured him for actions "directed against the interests of our country and the Soviet people, actions helping the heightening of international tensions and denigrating the lofty title of Soviet scientist."²⁷⁹

This was an important first victory for world science in the defense of Andrei Sakharov. On matters relating to Sakharov's expulsion from his academy—as opposed to issues involving his exile or his hunger strikes—it seemed plausible that threats involving scientific exchange could be especially effective.

In June 1980 I tried to visit Moscow to express our concerns, but in midsummer, after we pressed our case with the Soviet embassy, the president of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, Alexandrov, wrote that he could say "nothing new" about the Sakharov affair and wondered if Stone did not want to "consider again the value" of a visit to Moscow at this time.²⁸⁰ When I persisted, the embassy simply declined to provide a visa.

We thereupon wrote to Dobrynin that we were breaking off relations with the Soviet Union and the embassy staff, leaving open only the possibility of communications from him personally—and thus preserving our standing to send complaints to him. This was a major step for us, since U.S.-Soviet disarmament was an absolutely fundamental FAS goal. ☐

Sakharov could not leave Gorky, but his wife could. Elena Bonner would travel to Moscow from Gorky and smuggle out letters, probably through the U.S. embassy. From time to time, we would get a message. For example, a letter of December 9, 1980, read as follows:

Dear Dr. Stone:

Five years have past since you came to visit us in our dacha in Zhukovka. At that time, our children, Tanya and Efrem, and our grandchildren were still with us and took an active part in our meeting. Elena

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was then in Italy, but she knows you from having heard about you. Now our life has greatly changed. Our children are in the U.S., and we are very lonely without them, and we worry about them. I am in Gorky; my wife, with great difficulty, commutes between Moscow and Gorky. . . .

I know much, though of course not all, about the important work which FAS is conducting in my defense. I heard your speeches on the radio, in spite of the jamming. They pleased me very much.²⁸¹ Thanks for "adopting me." Undoubtedly your speeches were well suited to the more detailed and broader development of a campaign. It seems to me quite proper that FAS and SOS [Scientists for Orlov and Sharansky] look upon my defense as a part of the campaign in relation to all the repressed scientists in Russia—Orlov, Kovalev, Sharansky, and all the others. . . .

It is also important that you emphasize the similarity of my position on questions of disarmament with the position of FAS.

I have already more than once announced publicly and written in letters, and I am using this letter to write you personally, that I consider it important to include in the campaign for my defense the exit problems of our son's fiancée, Lisa Aleksayeva. For almost three years, she has failed to receive permission to emigrate, and her request has not been answered in more than a year.

There is no other reason for holding on to her except the unlawful one of using the situation to put pressure on me. But indeed this gives me a basis for asking those participating in my defense also to speak up for her right to leave to get married. . . . I suspect that it would be not unhelpful to know that I turned for help on this question to the Soviet Academy of Sciences, in a letter to E. Velikhov and later in a letter to A. Aleksandrov, but without any result. Efrem has the text of these letters.

With gratitude and respect,
Andrei Sakharov

On the first anniversary of Sakharov's exile, we wrote to Ambassador Dobrynin (with Frank von Hippel, then the FAS chairman, cosigning the letter) saying that "the silencing of Andrei Sakharov continues to be a permanent impediment to exchanges between our

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office and your embassy staff.”²⁸² A month later, I wrote asking for an “off-the-record” discussion of related problems—but never got one.²⁸³

In June I wrote asking for a change in the “conditions of confinement” of Sakharov, including “visits and communications” with colleagues. And we complained at length about the pressures being applied to Lisa Aleksayeva.²⁸⁴ In October in response to rumors in the newspapers, we wrote supporting an exchange of Sakharov, Orlov, and Sharansky for an East German, General Zorn.²⁸⁵

Third Sakharov Hunger Strike

That fall, FAS and a few other individuals and organizations received personal announcements of Sakharov’s intention to hold a well-prepared and extensively publicized hunger strike, his third. In a letter dated October 9, 1981—but delivered to everyone much later, after the hunger strike had begun—he wrote, “Having despaired to break through the KGB-built wall by any other means, (we) are forced to begin hunger strike demanding that our daughter-in-law, Lisa Aleksayeva, be allowed to leave the U.S.S.R. to join our son.”^[286]

Announced by Elena Bonner on November 16 in Moscow, the hunger strike was begun on November 22 and lasted seventeen days. On the thirteenth day, the point at which Soviet regulations call for intervention with labor-camp hunger strikers, Andrei and his wife were hospitalized.

Despite Elena’s press conference in Moscow a week before, the references in the press were a total of about two inches of coverage in *The Washington Post*, plus a *New York Times* article on a letter signed by a few dozen Nobel Prize winners (many of whom had been rounded up by the FAS office).²⁸⁷

We—and not only we—were in despair about whether the hunger strike would work. In an editorial, *Nature* magazine wrote,

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“It is possible that on this occasion their isolation has led them to misjudge the future.”²⁸⁸ Three days after the strike began, we cabled Sakharov in Gorky: ¶ “Attention has now been drawn to this problem. It may not be possible to secure results immediately. The Federation of American Scientists asks you to discontinue the hunger strike while your supporters work to help you achieve your goal. The world needs you. Do you have the right to risk yourself in this way?”

The KGB evidently let the telegram through, no doubt because it seemed to serve the KGB purpose, as they did a similar telegram from Joel Leibowitz, a former chairman of the New York Academy of Sciences.

On November 30 we received Sakharov’s answer, which concluded, “I can no longer believe in the kind of promises of the authorities not backed up by action! I ask you to understand and take this into account. With esteem and thanks.”²⁸⁹

During the interval between the telegrams, in a random off-hand discussion with a *Washington Post* reporter, I complained that the newspapers were in danger of going from one-inch stories to full-page “obits”—with nothing in between to alert their publics that a major story was brewing. Might they not be held guilty of poor editorial judgment? ¶ He told me what to do.

On his advice, I appealed to the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* foreign desks and asked each to “query” its Moscow correspondents for stories. Two days later both papers displayed lengthy stories on the Sakharov hunger strike. From then on, a reporter advised FAS, the “story was assured.”²⁹⁰

These stories appeared on December 2 along with a splendid *Post* editorial, “Tragedy in the Making.” This was the perfect backdrop for our release of our December 1 telegram from Sakharov. ¶ The release said that FAS had “no doubt of Sakharov’s determination and had put aside all other duties and is working full-time to avert the disaster which his death would represent.”²⁹¹ For the KGB’s benefit, we sent the same sentiments to Sakharov by cable.

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The telegram and the long-awaited news stories from various Moscow correspondents gave us something with which to work. Armed both with the telegram and the Moscow press reports—and especially with the underlying fact of Sakharov being without food for *ten days*—we got what we felt were important results.

Placing quiet telephone calls, we were able to induce, among others, two former secretaries of state (Cyrus Vance and Henry Kissinger), at least one former president of the United States, one American winner of the Lenin Prize (Linus Pauling), and a former ambassador to the Soviet Union (Averell Harriman) to call the Soviet ambassador in Washington and express their concern.^[292]

On December 5 the press reported that President Reagan had made a “brief and deliberately low-key statement” urging Lisa Aleksayeva’s release out of growing concern that the situation could become a “source of major new tensions.”²⁹³

Two or three days later, the Soviet government gave up.

In the end, the Sakharovs were not force-fed. Each was told that the other was dying and was urged to eat. But they held to their fast. On the seventeenth day of the strike, on December 8, a high KGB official came to Gorky and assured Sakharov that if he discontinued the hunger strike, his daughter-in-law would be permitted to go to the West.

In his memoirs, Sakharov reviews the affair and says, “No one can say which was the drop that caused the glass to overflow, which act of support was decisive.”²⁹⁴ Little did we know that still another hunger strike was coming and that we would be involved in that one also.

For now, however, the Soviet leader, Leonid I. Brezhnev, had thrown in the towel, and eventually he permitted Bonner two foreign visits; in one of them she even visited her children in Boston without attracting attention.

In retrospect, the KGB made a mistake in letting our telegram through because it prompted Sakharov’s response, which in turn

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galvanized our effort and our ability to mobilize others. Activists should heed the lesson of this episode: Even powerful opponents normally, in the heat of battle, make mistakes.

Our second contribution, the rounding up of phone calls to Dobrynin from so many famous and influential nonscientists, shows that when the conditions are right, one can mobilize the greatest support with ease—whereas when the conditions are not, it is possible that nothing at all will work. Here again we see the role of supersaturation in politics, which is to say that public interest change can be most easily precipitated when conditions are ripe to respond to small perturbations.

All things considered, I think that FAS played as significant a role in defending Sakharov through this third hunger strike as it had in the second, in 1975. But basically, Sakharov saved himself through his determination and unwillingness to take no for an answer, even from his most faithful (and nervous) supporters.

His success, in turn, depended upon certain characteristics of the hunger strike tactic. Prolonged hunger is deeply feared by all primates, and the humans of the industrialized world are normally quite unfamiliar with it. Accordingly, the notion that Sakharov had been *ten days* without food not only struck a deep empathetic chord in all who heard of it, but also galvanized observers into action as if every day might be his last. Fortunately, humans are capable of surviving hunger strikes considerably longer than people think. This fact provided the necessary time to generate the institutional, bureaucratic, and political concern needed to turn the Politburo around.

In sum, tactics often determine results in subtle ways. Political activists, no less than generals, must give a lot of thought to how their efforts are likely to play out.