

Soviet Academy Replies to NAS Defense of Sakharov

On 8 September president Philip Handler of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) sent a cablegram (Science, 21 September) to the Soviet Academy of Sciences, warning that, if the Soviet government took repressive action against physicist Andrei D. Sakharov, U.S.-Soviet scientific exchange programs would be jeopardized. Handler and other NAS leaders did not expect a reply. On 17 October, however, one came from M. V. Keldysh, president of the Soviet academy. Although firm in stating that Soviet scientists will not be swayed by threats of a withdrawal of American cooperation, the message from Keldysh does not seem harsh by Soviet standards. "I was delighted to have a response," Handler told Science. "It means that the Russians are willing to keep talking. . . . The length and detail [of Keldysh's message], and the care with which it was prepared, all indicate that our communication was taken very seriously and that, to some extent, it served its purpose."

Sakharov is the most noted political dissident among Russian scientists. He and members of his family have been severely harassed, and, by late August, it appeared that Soviet authorities might move to silence him. Especially ominous, or so it seemed at the time, was a letter in Pravda, signed by Keldysh and 39 other academicians, which denounced Sakharov's activities as a "discredit to the honor and dignity of a Soviet scientist." This letter precipitated the message from the NAS to the Soviet academy. More recently, some American scientists have given credence to reports from Russian colleagues that, harsh though it seemed, the letter by the Soviet academicians was actually a milder version of a letter that would have flatly accused Sakharov of treason. Below is Keldysh's letter, with minor deletions, followed by Handler's reply.

Having acquainted ourselves with your letter concerning, as you say, Sakharov's welfare, my colleagues from the presidium of the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences and I cannot but strongly object to its content and tone, which are not in accord with either the substance of the matter or with the spirit of relations between our Academies. . . .

In your letter you present the matter in such a way as if Soviet scientists condemned Sakharov for his contribution to the cause of continuing progress or for his spirit of free scholarly inquiry. This is an obvious distortion of the Soviet scientists' real motives and standpoint. The members of the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences criticize Sakharov, because he essentially spoke out against détente and the consolidation of positive changes in international life, against the normalization of relations between the western countries and the Soviet Union. Moreover, he called upon the West to improve these relations only in case the Soviet Union accepted several ultimatums concerning the Soviet people's sovereign rights. Sakharov slandered Soviet reality and the aims of our country in international relations, having ascribed aggressive intentions to it. . . .

However, you propose that we, Soviet scientists, should not condemn Sakharov's acts and, what is more, that we should defend him. In this respect, we openly

say that we find your claims inconsistent, and that it would be pointless to continue our correspondence on this score. After all, the question is not whether Sakharov enjoys intellectual freedom; there is no doubt that he does. The question is how he uses it and for what purpose.

It is commonly known that no action has been taken against Sakharov. Even today he has every opportunity to actively conduct research. And if he has actually departed from science of late, this was not due to someone's fault but to his own will. . . .

Certainly, we are not surprised that Sakharov's calls appealed to some figures in the United States and some other countries, and they lost no time in using them. But we believe, Dr. Handler, that American scientists, at any rate most of them, will manage to see the difference between intellectual freedom and concrete actions by one person or another, Sakharov in the given case, which run counter not only to the interests of his own people, but also to those of mankind as a whole.

We, Soviet scientists, are aware of the great responsibility of the men of science to the peoples of their countries, to all mankind, and we, like all Soviet people, highly value the current process of the international détente and the transformation of international relations on the basis of the principle of peaceful coexistence of states with different social systems and the development of mutually advantageous relations between them. At the same time, the other extremely important principle of international intercourse—noninterference in the internal affairs of one another—should naturally be strictly observed.

This also applies to scientific exchange and scientific cooperation between our countries, which you have touched upon in your letter. In actively promoting such exchange with American scientists and willing to continue it, we have always regarded it as a purely voluntary undertaking which is of equal interest to both countries. The attempts to use this exchange to influence the Soviet scientists' political stand are absolutely unpromising, let alone the ethical aspect of this matter. We stand for an extensive development of scientific cooperation, provided that the traditions and way of life of every country are mutually respected and observed.

Handler's reply, dispatched 23 October, follows:

Thank you for your thoughtful reply. . . . The Council of the National Academy of Sciences is pleased to learn that no action has been taken against Sakharov and that he continues to have full opportunities to conduct research and to speak to public issues. We were appalled by the recent news of the attempt by terrorists to intimidate him and his family and we trust that your academy and the Soviet government were also offended by this barbaric behavior.

The Council has also asked me to convey our hope [for continued] evolution of close and friendly scientific relationships [between U.S. and Soviet scientists]. May I suggest that we soon develop an appropriate mechanism [enabling] representatives of our academies, at regular intervals, to discuss matters of common interest and to review our cooperative efforts.