

Tatyana Yankelevich greets the Conference on behalf of Elena Bonner and reads her Article “The Interregional Deputies Group and Andrei Sakharov”.

Thank you! Thank you Boris for these condolences in connection with passing away of Efrem Yankelevich. My mother Elena Bonner asked me to tell her warm greetings to the participants of the Conference. Unfortunately she herself could not come because of the heart problems. I came here just now from the airport arriving from Oslo where I also spoke on behalf of Elena Bonner at the Forum of the “Oslo Freedom House” human rights NGO. I read there her Talk dedicated to modern problems encompassing Israel, Russia and the West.¹

Quite recently my mother wrote an Article describing the troublesome events of the last year of Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov which, as she thinks, would be a proper contribution at this Memorial Session of the Conference. Thus she asked me to read you this Article.

Elena Bonner

“THE INTERREGIONAL DEPUTIES GROUP AND ANDREI SAKHAROV”

(read by Tatyana Yankelevich at the Memorial session of Sc4 on 21 May 2009)

The First Congress of People’s Deputies of the USSR took place from May 25 through June 9, 1989. In early June, the more active and “progressive” deputies from various regions and republics of the RSFSR were beginning to unite around a group of deputies from Moscow.

Their first meeting took place in the lobby of the Hotel Moskva on June 7. There weren’t enough chairs for the 80 or more participants, so some deputies had to stand. The gathering was noisy – it resembled a town meeting. But in the chaotic discussion, there was evident a general demand for some kind of association that might be able to influence the Congress’s concluding resolution, despite the anticipated resistance of the majority of the deputies who were defending the past methods of governing the country.

Two more meetings took place on June 9 and June 10. (The Hotel Moskva’s management allowed the 150 or more persons who attended the meetings to use the hotel’s conference hall in order to avoid a commotion in the lobby.) For the first time the future name of the organization, the Interregional Group of People’s Deputies (IDG), was heard. It was decided to convene an organizing conference during the coming summer. The meeting also adopted a resolution proposed by Sakharov and several other deputies condemning the massacre of students and workers on Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, although quite a few of the deputies present refrained from signing it.

The first Conference of the IDG took place in late June. Sakharov could not attend because we were visiting the United States, but more than 300 persons were present although not all joined the IDG. The Interregional Group of People’s Deputies was formally adopted as the association’s name. A Coordinating Council with 25 members and five co-chairmen was elected. The election of the co-

¹ <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/2255694/posts>

chairmen went through three stages and almost led to a split in the Group before it was formally organized. At first, a single chairman, Boris Yeltsin, was elected. The omnipresent foreign correspondents immediately sent this information to their employers, who immediately broadcast it. At the time, Andrei, Ed Kline and I were drinking tea, my daughter Tanya was cooking something, and her husband Efrem was twirling the dial of the radio. I remember feeling that a shocking mistake had been made. It seemed to me that Ed and Efrem were disappointed. Sakharov himself reacted something like “Well, it’s OK. That decision means there’s no necessity to take part in the Group.” I don’t remember exactly all the things he said, but I do remember his concluding sentence, “I’ll simply be myself.” But later that evening, Voice of America broadcast that the Conference had elected five co-chairmen.

Later we found out that in the course of this session, there had been strong protests to the first vote. Four co-chairmen had been elected in a second round of voting – Yeltsin, Gavriil Popov, Yuri Afanasiev, and Viktor Palm. Shortly, voices were raised saying that people wouldn’t understand if Sakharov wasn’t elected, that the West, too, would be disappointed. So a third vote was called. Sakharov was added to the list, but he received only 69 votes, Yeltsin 144, Afanasiev 143, Popov 132, and Palm 73. It was abundantly clear that Sakharov was not needed by the majority of the “progressive” deputies.

The sense that Sakharov was considered an unneeded and unwanted intruder by many deputies was emphasized during the interval between the First and Second Congresses of People’s Deputies when the Supreme Soviet was in session. Sakharov, although not a member of the Supreme Soviet, attended many of its sessions² and raised for discussion a number of specific issues that were critical for the country’s future. I once overheard a remark by a member of the Supreme Soviet: “Sakharov spoke again. What does he want? He only gets in the way of our work!” This tragic rejection of Sakharov was even more marked in the period immediately before and during the Second Congress.

A small digression to Czechoslovakia is necessary here. On November 17, 1989, there was a demonstration in Prague of 75,000 students marking the 50th anniversary of the Nazi occupation. The demonstration was broken up. On November 18 there was a second demonstration with many more participants – the students were joined by workers and intellectuals. On November 19, one of the *intelligentsia* clubs, the Civic Forum, called on the government to repeal the article in the Czechoslovak Constitution analogous to the Soviet Constitution’s Article 6³ and to resign. On November 27, a two-hour political General Strike was held, and the participants called for carrying out the Civic Forum’s demands. On November 28 the government resigned and the infamous article of the Constitution sank into oblivion together with the government. That’s the story in short of Czechoslovakia’s Velvet Revolution.

On December 1, 1989, at an unofficial meeting of the IDG’s Coordinating Council (only a few members were present), Sakharov proposed holding a two-hour all-Union political General Strike to take place on December 11, just before the opening of the Second Congress of People’s Deputies. He also presented a draft appeal to be issued by the IDG, which was slightly amended and then signed by five members of the Council – Sakharov, Popov, Arkady Murashev, Vladimir Tikhonov, and Yuri Chernichenko. On the working copy of the draft leaflet, which is kept in the Sakharov Archive, the first four names are printed but Chernichenko’s name was written in by Sakharov, which indicates that he gave his agreement by phone. On the evening of December 2, I dictated to Alexander Ginzburg in

² In the Fall of 1989.

³ “The leading and guiding force of Soviet society and the nucleus of its political system and of all state and public organizations is the Communist Party...”

Paris the text of the leaflet and the names of the five persons who signed it. Beginning almost immediately, Radio Liberty, Voice of America, and other Western radio stations broadcast the full text of the appeal several times a day.

Chernichenko was called in and browbeaten by Anatoly Lukyanenko, the Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Soviet. On December 7 *Izvestia* denounced the appeal and announced that Chernichenko had removed his signature from it, alleging that I had included it without his agreement. On December 6th or 7th, Yuri Afanasiev returned from a trip abroad and endorsed the appeal, restoring the number of signatures to five.

Many regions of the Soviet Union responded to the appeal, but some strikes, depending on local conditions, began as early as December 5.

On the Saturday and Sunday before the Second Congress, December 9th and 10th, the IDG met in the large hall of a building on New Arbat Street. I was there both days. On Saturday, all the time before the dinner break was spent on the topic of the strike appeal. The majority of those present were sharply critical. They called it “the Sakharov appeal,” without mentioning any other names. They warned that the strike would have dire consequences for the country. They denounced Sakharov for his irresponsibility (the term “extremism” was not yet in fashion). The atmosphere in the hall resembled that at the First Congress on June 2, when the Afghan veteran Sergei Chervonopisky spoke against Sakharov. Yuri Boldyrev spoke harshly, even rudely.

When the meeting began on December 9th, Sakharov, as a member of the executive committee, asked those who supported the appeal, to sign it during the morning break. At his request, I placed the text of the appeal on the piano, which was next to the table at which Sakharov and the other members of the executive committee were sitting. Of all the 400 or more persons present in the hall, only thirty persons signed the appeal in addition to the five original signatories. And that evening, people from various towns phoned to tell us that their deputies had called from Moscow and asked them not to strike.⁴

Sakharov had a very busy day on December 11, the day before the Congress began. First there was a 10 AM meeting at the Physics Institute. A tape recording exists of Sakharov and the other speakers⁵. Almost the whole staff of the Institute joined the strike. At 3 PM Sakharov was interviewed. At about 7 PM we left for the Conference Hall of the New Tretyakov Gallery on Krymsky val where there was a ceremony and press conference in connection with the presentation of the signed petitions supporting Sakharov’s appeal for the abolition of Article 6 of the Constitution. Volunteers from the Memorial Society (which had still not been officially registered) and from voters’ clubs, and some of “our” Afghan war veterans (we divided Afghan veterans into “ours” and “not ours.” Many were “ours.”) had gathered signatures from all over the USSR. Six or seven large boxes filled with petitions and letters were placed on the table in front of the Executive Committee. After the press conference the boxes were taken to the Congress’s reception room for transfer to Mikhail Gorbachev.

The Congress opened on December 12th. Sakharov spoke at the first morning session and demanded that the question of Article 6 be put on the agenda. He said he had 60,000 signatures and 5,000 telegrams supporting repeal. To this, Gorbachev answered, “Come here. I’ll give you thousands of telegrams. Let’s not try to intimidate each other, and manipulate public opinion.” (transcript, page

⁴ Some time ago when I was working on the chronicle of Sakharov’s life, I asked the secretary of the IDG Arkady Murashev to send me a copy of the protocols of the IDG’s sessions and other pertinent documents. He told me: “My girls [his employees – EB] couldn’t find them.”

⁵ There is also the film of Sakharov speaking at this meeting in Lebedev Institute. See also Fig. 18 above. – *B. Altshuler*.

28). The whole country saw this memorable scene on television, and millions more abroad saw it as well. Sakharov and Gorbachev were both talking about the same boxes. Sakharov knew that the boxes contained signatures in his support. I don't know if Gorbachev understood that, but if he did, then he was "manipulating public opinion." The result of the voting was: "for repeal of Article 6" – 839; "against" – 1,138.

Three months later, on March 12, 1990, Article 6 was repealed by the Third Congress so quietly that almost no one noticed. It was another time, with new controversial issues. Passions boiled around the Gorbachev's election to the new post of President of the Soviet Union, and a few months later, about Gorbachev's nomination of Gennady Yanaev for the post of Vice-President. On August 19, 1991, the country got a good look at Yanaev to the tune of Tchaikovsky's Dance of the Little Swans, while Gorbachev was vacationing in Foros⁶.

The campaign in the IDG against Sakharov and his strike appeal continued until the last day of his life. The Congress was in session the 12th and 13th of December, but a recess was announced for the 14th, and at 3 PM, the IDG convened in the conference hall of the Kremlin. I wasn't there, but Sakharov told me that Goldansky, Boldyrev and others spoke and not just against the strike appeal.

The majority of the IDG sharply rejected the "formula of opposition" which Sakharov proposed at this meeting, and even his use of the word "opposition." Sobchak and Stankevich were among his especially vehement opponents. I don't remember other names.

Later, the question – "Is opposition permissible?" – led to a formal split of the IDG. The membership list was divided in two – more radical and less radical. The members, however, decided not to publicize the split. But this all happened after Sakharov was gone. He died after dinner on the 14th.

December 10, 2008

Elena Bonner

⁶ This was an attempt of conservatives' coup under the leadership of Gennady Yanaev. - *B. Altshuler*.