

Young Russians Work to Spread Message of a Soviet-Era Dissident

By MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ
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MOSCOW — Andrei Sakharov was one of the best-known dissidents of the Communist era — a celebrated physicist persecuted for crusading for human rights and against Soviet brutality. He won the Nobel Peace Prize, and came to personify the struggle to create democracy here.

Yet when a group of college students at the Russian Law Academy in Moscow were asked the other day for their views on his legacy, they fumbled. Most seemed never to have heard of him.

“One of our professors talked about him in a lecture,” said Maria Danilyants, 17, an aspiring lawyer, who was one of the few who recognized the name. “But I don’t really remember now exactly what he said.”

Many of Sakharov’s admirers are alarmed that memories of his achievements are fading, especially among young people, before his ideals have fully taken hold. Sakharov spent his life challenging government shortcomings, but today’s youth seem to easily look past them, if they notice at all.

A nuclear physicist who helped design the Soviet Union’s first hydrogen bomb, Sakharov spurned the Soviet elite to become a dissident. He championed human rights, spoke out against nuclear weapons and opposed the Soviet war in Afghanistan. His work earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975, as well as a long stint of house arrest and exile.

He died in 1989, two years before the dissolution of the Soviet Union and before many of today’s college-age Russians were born.

A survey conducted last year by the Levada Center, a respected polling agency in Moscow, found that 44 percent of Russians ages 18 to 24 knew nothing about Sakharov. Of those who did, only 9 percent knew that he was a champion of human rights and a dissident.

Sakharov and his ideas have fallen so far from the public consciousness that a group of Russian college students has begun a campaign to introduce him to their peers. They believe Sakharov can serve as a moral compass in Russia, like a Martin Luther King Jr. or Nelson Mandela.

“Sakharov is an example of Russian democracy,” said Anna Solodovnikova, 19, a journalism major at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations and one of the coordinators of the campaign, called the Sakharov Movement. “Though more than 22 years have passed, what he promoted is relevant today.”

In many ways, their task should be easier now than it would have been in Sakharov's day, when meetings had to be held secretly and publications had to be distributed by hand.

They are using social networks like Facebook and Twitter to disseminate Sakharov's ideas and writings. The movement was founded in March, and it already has a small online following. (As of last week, 439 people "liked" the movement's Facebook page, and hundreds more had joined through other social networks.)

They have hung posters in subway cars and universities with the slogan, "I'm not Sakharov, but ..." to suggest that Russians can play a role in society, even in small ways.

And they have published interviews with well-known writers, artists and activists about how Sakharov has inspired them.

Yet, small as it is, the Sakharov Movement has encountered opposition.

Internet users have accused it of being a front for Western interests. Its posters have been defaced and torn down.

But the movement's biggest challenge may be overcoming apathy and cynicism.

"People do not believe that a person can care about his nation without having some ulterior motives," said Darya Peshchikova, 18, another coordinator of the movement.

Today's college students grew up in a very different Russia from the one Sakharov opposed. Though they had many more freedoms, by the mid-1990s the allure of democratic reforms had faded; their major concerns were disorder and economic hardship.

Vladimir V. Putin, the former president and the current prime minister, came to power in 1999, promising security and stability, while putting a brake on democratic reforms. Under his leadership, the Kremlin largely co-opted youth activism in Russia, mobilizing thousands of young people in defense of the government.

Last month, some 50,000 members of a Kremlin-backed youth group called Nashi gathered for a rally against corruption in downtown Moscow. Analysts say government officials are a major source of corruption, but Nashi tends to focus its protests on government opponents.

Members of the Sakharov Movement used the occasion to make a point, circulating among the crowd and asking people on camera what they knew about Sakharov.

"He manufactured sugar," one young woman said at the rally, which, coincidentally, took place on a street named after Sakharov. (The root of Sakharov's name is "sugar" in Russian.)

The videos were later posted on the movement's Web site, angering leaders of Nashi, who criticized the group's tactics and defended their support of Mr. Putin, a man they say is Russia's true guiding light.

"Ultimately, knowing or not knowing who Sakharov is does not define a person as good or bad," Kristina Potupchik, the group's spokeswoman, wrote in a statement.

For now, the Sakharov Movement is hoping to turn Sakharov's old office in Moscow into a museum, and it is raising money in the effort to generate grass-roots interest in him. It is focusing on obtaining small donations from Russians, rather than larger ones from corporate or foreign sponsors.

"We don't need a cult of Sakharov," said Grigory Shvedov, a journalist who is part of the movement. "Average Russians need to take this model of Sakharov's life and use it as a basis for their own actions."

Mr. Shvedov said Russians did not need to give up their lives to become dissidents. Simple actions like refusing to pay a bribe or speaking up about an unjust policy could go a long way.

Many young people, however, follow different ideals.

Asked about his heroes, Suren Khachtryan, 18, another student at the Russian Law Academy, responded without hesitation: "Roman Abramovich and Mikhail Prokhorov," two of Russia's billionaire businessmen.

"They are successful, shrewd and intelligent," he said.

Asked about Mr. Sakharov, he replied, "Who?"