

Yuri N. Afanasyev, Historian Who Repudiated Communism, Dies at 81

By Sophia Kishkovsky

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MOSCOW — Yuri N. Afanasyev, a Russian historian and former Communist loyalist who became a leading democratic politician in the late Soviet era and founded a liberal arts university that, together with the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, introduced Russia's first academic Jewish studies program, died Sept. 14 at his home here. He was 81.

The cause was a heart attack, said a spokeswoman for the Russian State University for the Humanities, which Mr. Afanasyev founded in 1991. His son-in-law, Viktor Prichesnyayev, told the radio station Ekho Moskvyy that Mr. Afanasyev had diabetes.

Mr. Afanasyev's life traced an unpredictable arc that began under Stalin's harsh rule in the 1930s, carried him as a boy through the hardships of World War II and brought him stature and privileges as a dedicated Communist, only to lead him away from the very political system that had nurtured him.

By the end of his life he had embraced democratic principles, laid bare the sins of Russian history as a scholar and spoken out against his country's leaders, from Soviet party chiefs to Mikhail S. Gorbachev to, most pointedly, Vladimir V. Putin.

Yuri Nikolaevich Afanasyev was born on Sept. 5, 1934, in the Volga River region of Ulyanovsk. His father, Nikolai, was a laborer; his mother, Anna, taught at a village school.

Mr. Afanasyev rose in Soviet academic and political circles during the thick of the Cold War. He earned a degree in history at Moscow State University, served as secretary of the Komsomol youth organization at a Siberian hydroelectric power plant, and became a senior researcher at the Soviet Academy of Sciences and rector of the Historical Archives Institute in Moscow.

But by the 1980s he had begun to turn from Soviet orthodoxy, thanks in part to the Soviet authorities themselves. Allowed by the state to travel to Paris in the 1970s and to do academic research at the Sorbonne, Mr. Afanasyev stumbled on the work of Soviet

dissidents, including the poet Anna Akhmatova and the nuclear physicist Andrei D. Sakharov. He began questioning his party loyalties.

“I was pro-regime,” he said in a 1991 interview with *Dialog*, a Moscow magazine, “and sincerely believed that our system is the best in the world, and since I believed this, I worked in government structures. To say that now I curse myself in every possible way for what I was then — is to say nothing.”

He became an editor, in 1983, of *Kommunist*, the Communist Party’s flagship journal, and caused a furor two years later when, in an article titled “The Past and Us,” he suggested that the Soviet authorities distorted history.

“Badly understood history is an extremely dangerous thing,” he wrote.

He went on, in 1988, to edit “There Is No Other Way,” a seminal collection of essays by leading thinkers of the time about the necessity of reform. He wrote the introduction.

In 1989, Mr. Afanasyev helped found Memorial, an organization dedicated to exposing Stalin’s atrocities and commemorating the victims.

That year he also joined the Soviet Union’s first freely elected parliamentary body, the Congress of People’s Deputies, which was created under Mr. Gorbachev’s reforms. But he grew disenchanted, doubting that its unwieldy mix of Stalinists, democrats and Communist Party functionaries could bring about change, and denouncing both its “aggressively obedient majority” and Mr. Gorbachev.

“They did not send us here to be graceful but to drastically change the situation in the country,” Mr. Afanasyev said.

He quit the Communist Party in 1990 and helped found the Democratic Russia political movement, an opposition faction. He gave speeches at pro-democracy rallies that drew hundreds of thousands of protesters in the prelude to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The journalist David Remnick, in “Lenin’s Tomb,” his 1993 account of that era, called Mr. Afanasyev “the democratic movement’s master of ceremonies.”

Equally disappointed in Mr. Gorbachev’s successor, Boris N. Yeltsin, Mr. Afanasyev withdrew from politics and turned to education, founding the Russian State University for the Humanities, an outgrowth of the Historical Archives Institute that today enrolls more than 21,000 students.

In his book “Russia in Search of Itself” (2004), James Billington, the librarian of Congress and a historian of Russia, described the university as possibly “the most vibrant new

large institution of higher learning in post-Communist Russia.”

The university created its Jewish studies program, Russia’s first, in 1991 as a joint effort with the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in Manhattan. Mr. Afanasyev was not Jewish but had denounced many Russian nationalists as anti-Semites and received threats because of it.

In 1996 the university granted an honorary doctorate to Dr. Ismar Schorsch, who was the seminary’s chancellor at the time.

“The study of religion in any systematic fashion was taboo” in Soviet Russia, Dr. Schorsch said in an interview with *The New York Times* that year, “and he told us” — referring to Mr. Afanasyev — “You can’t study the history of religion without studying the history of Judaism.”

Mr. Afanasyev continued his own research on the history of Russia. In the 1990s he edited a multivolume work covering the nation’s 20th century. In 2001, in his book “Dangerous Russia,” he argued that Russia had been poisoned by its past.

As the title of one chapter, “Putin’s Reconstruction of the Russian State,” suggests, Mr. Afanasyev’s concerns extended to present-day Russia. In a 1999 essay, he projected a scenario in which Russia, in 2015, “will end up in the trap of imperial nationalism,” fueled by economic depression.

He was rector of the university until 2003 and retired as its president in 2006. Though his health was failing, he continued to write and speak about his country.

In May, at a conference in Poland marking 70 years since the end of World War II in Europe and attended by European leaders, Mr. Afanasyev warned of a new form of Stalinism growing in Russia and called the country under Mr. Putin “criminal from the bottom up.”

Mr. Afanasyev’s wife, Ninel, died in 2008. He is survived by a son, Andrei; a daughter, Marina; and four grandchildren.

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