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"Soviet Intellectual Dissent in the 1970s"

Fruim Yurevich

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HOST: I'm sorry about our media personnel. They can be very inconvenient at times. While Professor Yurevich is getting ready here, I would like to give you just a brief background to him. He came to Portland this spring directly from the Soviet Union. He held a position in the Krupskaya Pedagogical Institute in Moscow and also a second position in a special English-language training institute that is operated by the Soviet ministry of education. His previous formal training included studies in the city of Astrakhan, which is located in the delta of the Volga River where it empties into the Caspian Sea. He has also taught in the city of Volgograd—which most of you... it is more familiar under its former name of Stalingrad—but his professional activities in recent years have been in the city of Moscow.

Today’s talk is on Soviet intellectual dissent in the seventies, and it’s perhaps rather appropriate that just today Professor [Andrei] Sakharov of Moscow, who has been one of the most outspoken of the individuals seeking change within the Soviet Union and who, as you may know, won a Nobel Prize, has been officially denied the opportunity to leave for Oslo to collect his prize. Well, it gives me great pleasure to have Professor Fruim Yurevich, who is a visiting professor at the University of Oregon, address us on this topic.

FRUIM YUREVICH: Ladies and gentlemen, I first of all want to beg your pardon for the mistakes I am going to make in English, certainly. I devoted many years to studying the language, but in a native-speaking audience, you understand, that I have never been in England or the United States before coming here about six months ago.
Not a simple and not an easy way brought me here before an audience of Americans, speaking about the movement of intellectual dissent in the Soviet Union. Though I am going to concentrate on the seventies, I’ll briefly go into the past to give you an idea of how it originated and when it came into flourishing. The best date for us to begin the movement of intellectual dissent in recent times—it was never totally dead, though—is the twentieth congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, at which Nikita Khruschev, at the closed session, delivered a report exposing the cult of personality of Stalin. This report was then made known, though not officially, to the whole population, practically speaking. I was in those days a student studying English and Russian and literature, and I remember, like I see here, we were all gathered in a hall, and the secretary of the party committee said to us not to make notes, but simply to listen to what she had to say. And she read a more or less complete version of Khruschev’s report.

It will be difficult for you to imagine what kind of an impression it all created on us. Everything in what we believed, everything what we learned, everything what we strove for, was a lie. The crimes which were committed were simply undescrivable. It is natural that this report was the beginning of a new era in the history of the Soviet Union, especially in the intellectual history of it. At the end of Stalin’s life in 1953, there was practically nobody to suppress, and a slight suspicion was enough to put a man to death. So that people not only did not dare to speak, they did not dare to think, even.

Now times were changing, and the remaining political prisoners were coming back. The first question that all of us put to ourselves is, “How on earth could all this have happened? Who is responsible? Who is to blame for all this?” There was a period which we called the “thaw” in literature, but it was very quickly checked, and open discussions were never allowed. This was the beginning of the present samizdat movement.

The Russian word samizdat, which is now borrowed into English, means “self-publishing.” As we could not read the whole truth or even part of the truth in the papers, magazines, and novels—which are published abundantly in Russia—people began to write what they knew and what they thought, and then multiplied themselves the copies and disseminated among their friends. There are different ways in which an interesting text can get to an interested reader. We do not have any copying machine available in the Soviet Union. We have... I see on every floor a Xerox center or machine; this is not available there, simply because it is possible to multiply materials for samizdat with it. Now, the best typing machine, if it is electric, can make about ten copies if you type on a very thin paper, so that the last three copies will be very hard to read, but still it’s ten copies. Now, for disseminating this kind of material, you know that people go to prison,
because this is... there is a special paragraph in the law which says that this is the spread of anti-
Soviet propaganda. But people are engaged in it.

There are many other ways which we often use. For instance, in the recent times, the
broadcasting in the Russian language of government-sponsored corporations like the BBC, the
Voice of America, the Deutsche Welle, and some others, is not jammed. And they sometimes,
very often, give very interesting programs. So using a tape recorder you can make a copy of the
text that they broadcast. And then, in the close company of your friends, you can play it back,
and they will listen. Of course this is again some material which you have to keep, which is
inconvenient because it is dangerous. But in Stalin’s days it was even worse, because people
who wanted to remember... to preserve something memorized whole books. I can give you a
very simple example, that Nadezhda Mandelstam, the widow of one of the most outstanding
poets of Russia of the 20th century, after he died in a concentration camp, memorized his whole
poetry with all the variants, and recreated it after 1956. A collection of [Osip] Mandelstam’s
works has now been published in the United States in three volumes, and in Russia there
recently was published one volume of his poetry. Now, she kept in memory everything from
this collection.

The samizdat materials reach thousands of people, or reached at the end of the sixties when it
came to a kind of a climax. And people began even to publish special magazines like the
Chronicle of Current Events, where they recorded events which of course were not recorded in
the papers. At the end of the sixties, it reached a very significant scope. Very many people,
practically every educated and thinking people at least in the central cities like Moscow,
Leningrad, Kiev, Odessa, everybody was discussing samizdat and the broadcasts of the Western
broadcasting corporations. Because if you open an issue of Pravda or another Soviet daily
paper, there is very little to discuss there. The samizdat gave answers to the most burning
questions of the time, and there arose a whole literature of which we can only be proud, which
gave to the world such names as Solzhenitsyn, Sacherov, and [...]. So it disturbed, of course, the
authorities; and we got to know that at the end of the 60s, there was a special decision of the
Politburo to put an end to the Chronicle of Current Events and other important samizdat
publications. The police was entrusted, so to say, was doing it.

Anything between two and ten thousand people are imprisoned in our days for political
reasons, and many of them are convicted on the charges arising from disseminating samizdat.
Many people gave their manuscripts... or their manuscripts got abroad, so that the police could
not even... seizing the first copy could not destroy it altogether. You know that Solzhenitsyn did
it with Archipelago. When they seized the manuscript after torturing one of the witnesses—or
questioning her so that she committed suicide after five days at home—he gave permission to
publish it in the West. I may also mention while I’m at it that the second volume, books number three and four, of the *Gulag* have just appeared in English both in hardcover and paperback. Those of you who read the first volume may be interested to read the second too. Altogether there will be seven books, and the story will be brought to our days. The very last book of it will be titled *The Law of Our Days*.

In the seventies—so, as I say, the end of the sixties, after violent repression, many people were arrested, questioned; many materials confiscated—but it did not cease to exist, and it exists up till now. Though the secret police announced that after publication of each issue of the *Chronicle of Current Events* they will arrest people no matter whether they had something to do with the publication of the *Chronicle* or not—so making of people kind of hostages, so hoping that those who are responsible for publishing it will yield to this kind of pressure—but the *Chronicle of Current Events* was published and is published—not later than yesterday I saw the last issue which runs into September ’75. Of course it is on a very limited scale, but it is republished in New York by one of the former leading dissidents Valeriy Chalidze, who is at the head of the *Chronicle* press. It is published in English, too, translations.

So, as I say, many people secured their manuscripts and made it so they reached the West, and were probably published here. And the samizdat became what we call *tamizdat*—that is, rather, “published there,” that is, beyond the frontier. Now, once it is published abroad this way or another [...] will reach Moscow and Leningrad. The same as *Archipelago* is read in the U.S.S.R. And for keeping a copy of this book, you get a prison sentence. They are very violent with it, because you know that this is a very powerful book.

In the West, as I find now coming here, there exists a whole big literature published by samizdat, [...] samizdat. Much of it was known to me while I was there. Something is new. Now I want to... though the dissidents do not form a united group or organization, there is very much in common between them all. Now I want to devote some time speaking about the outstanding people around whom the rank-and-file *samizdashiks* and dissidents group. The first is, of course, academician Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov. Many of you, of course, you all know this name, but let me just briefly outline what kind of a Sakharov phenomenon we have in the U.S.S.R. He is a brilliant physician... a physicist of genius. At 30, he was elected a full member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, which is a thing which not many scientists... well, this was the first case, at the age of 30. Now he is three times a hero of socialist labor. This is unique. Only the general secretary of the Communist Party can be three times’ hero of the socialist labor, and two or three academicians who help to develop outstanding weapons. Sakharov belonged to the most privileged elite of the Soviet scientists who are given absolutely everything that they can wish for, I mean in material things, I do not of course mean freedom of speaking. And
his thinking, his observations, brought him to the conclusion that, as he says, it was a golden cage that he lived in. And towards the end of the sixties, he wrote and officially sent to the central committee his opinion about the existing society, about intellectual freedom, about disarmament, and about what we now call détente. He never got a reply in any form, and as his views developed, he more and more became a confirmed dissident.

Now, you cannot take a man of his stature and authority and easily put him to prison. He is a member of the Academy of Sciences, and in the whole history of the 150 years of the Academy of Sciences, there was never a case when a full member was expelled from it. Now this is one of the things which can still happen to Sakharov in the near future. And you cannot keep him silent. He was invited many times to the authorities, and warned that if his activities go on—and he openly speaks on the phone and invites foreign correspondents to his Moscow apartments, giving all kinds of interviews and writing articles—now, he was warned more that once that if he does not stop his activities, he will be silenced forcefully.

But before Sakharov embarked on this very hard, unimaginably hard, road, he knew what he was in for, and he is presumably ready to fight to the end. Therefore, the decision of the Nobel Prize committee to award the Nobel Peace Prize to academician Sakharov is of course a great achievement not only for the Soviet movement of dissidents but for all the people who are concerned with defending human rights everywhere in the world. We have just heard that Sakharov will not be given permission to go and receive his prize. Now it remains to be seen what will happen to him, because it cannot go on indefinitely. He refuses to cease his activities, and the authorities—well, I don’t know how long they are going to tolerate this. He is practically the only outstanding, the most outstanding man who remains within the U.S.S.R., because many outstanding dissidents were forcefully kicked out, as you know was the case with Solzhenitsyn, or emigrated to the West.

The latest book which Sakharov wrote is this small booklet, My Country and the World, which is now available in English translations. So this is the original which was published in New York, and this is the English version of it. Sakharov, in this book, gives his views about the U.S.S.R. and about the future of détente. There is, at the end of the book, a whole chapter which is a message to the Western intellectuals, therefore I cannot emphasize it too strongly that I would like as many of you as possible to read it and at least think of what he has to say about the burning problems of our time.

The second most outstanding and unusual, even for Russia, dissident is of course Solzhenitsyn. This name is now known to everyone who reads, I would like to believe. Solzhenitsyn combines in himself... he is a unique combination of one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century
and a most outstanding Russian national hero. This combination happens very very seldom. You know that Russian literature is not poor in names of great writers in the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, and there were very many revolutionaries and national heroes too. But to have a combination in one person is a very exceptional thing, and therefore he has been in a position, due to his biography which you certainly know, to expose the crimes with such a might that the whole world was suddenly awakened to the idea of what was and is happening in the U.S.S.R. As you know, he was... he also refused to keep silent while he was in the U.S.S.R., and was ready for anything, and when he was arrested, he left a short note saying that he would not cooperate with any authorities and that he leaves them only one simple thing, a possibility. To kill me, he says, because I write truth about Russian history.

But the pressure of Western public opinion made it possible for Solzhenitsyn to be transferred to the West so that he did not go to Siberia again. The hope that he would be silenced or not listened to in the West, this did not materialize. You know that his voice is again and again heard. About a week ago, Solzhenitsyn put out a new book, which is called Lenin in Zurich, which gives chapters of his historical novels like August 1914, chapters which were never published, about Lenin. Well, I understand that the book will be soon translated into English too. Shortly before this, about two or three months ago, Solzhenitsyn wrote a biography, an extensive volume of 600 pages, which is roughly... in English, it is The Oak and the Calf. Now the literal title means how the calf was butting an oak. He describes all his literary biography, everything what can be published in our day, because with such a man many people were involved, and many of them still are there; therefore he sometimes does not mention names and places. But when it comes out in English, and I’m pretty sure that it will be soon, I can also recommend you to read this. This is a very interesting book.

Now, if Sakharov comes from the circle of what we call intelligentsia, the scientists—and he calls himself in this a reformist, and sees a hope for the future for Russia in scientific development and in cooperation with the United States, because Russia has a lot to learn from the United States in the way of technology. Solzhenitsyn takes a different view. He is at his best when he is exposing the brutal regime which existed, or the arbitrary rule of our days. And this is what he will be remembered for. Now, his positive views, his program if you may call it so, is expressed in this short small booklet, which is a letter to the leaders of the Soviet Union. Shortly before his expulsion—he was not planning to publish Gulag because he was afraid to bring repressions upon those who gave him evidence, about 200 people—shortly before this, he wrote a letter to the leaders of the Soviet Union and sent it off. Again, he never received any reply, but it gives his views as to the future of Russia. Solzhenitsyn is not admiring Western technology or Western... the state in which the West finds himself. The first chapter is entitled, “The West on its Knees.” And he says that Russia has a special way for the future. Remembering
that we have, he says, wide distances—wide land which is hardly habited at all, in Siberia; in which the Chinese, well, they say that it belongs to them—for us, the way to develop is to put industry and people into this area. And he also has a detailed plan of doing it. Very many dissidents who believe in what Sakharov says, and Sakharov himself, disagreed with many of the things which Solzhenitsyn outlined in this letter. And Solzhenitsyn, in the preface, says when somebody offers a better plan, and more realizable or realistic, then I'll be the first to take this back. I won’t insist on it.

Solzhenitsyn is now abroad, as you know, but his voice—he lives with his face addressed to the U.S.S.R.—and his voice, I’m sure, is heard there. People are accused again and again of having copies of his books. Everything that he did publish in the U.S.S.R. has been removed from libraries.

There is another trend which I wanted to mention here, which I call “legal Marxism.” The probably most outstanding spokesman for this trend is Roy Medvedev, who says that he is a Marxist. Medvedev wrote a comprehensive book, probably the most comprehensive up to now, about the Stalin era, calling it *Let History Judge*. I know that the book has been translated into English; in fact I saw copies of it in English too. It’s an extensive volume of about a thousand pages. He collected all materials that he could to describe everything that happened in the period of Stalin’s rule; this was roughly thirty years. Now, he says, this was not what Marxism-Leninism obliged Stalin to do. This was a distortion, a misunderstanding of the true teaching. In the twenties, he says, while Lenin was alive and shortly after his death, some freedoms were in the U.S.S.R., and in fact we have some books published in the 20s which it is impossible to imagine that they would be published nowadays. But people like Solzhenitsyn managed to show in their books very convincingly, undeniably, that this is not the case—that everything that Stalin brought to an end was initiated in those days by Lenin and his comrades in the Party. At the same time, if Lenin lived for twenty years more, let’s say, nobody has doubts that it wouldn’t be so terrible like it was with Stalin, but it would be the same totalitarian regime and one-party system, because the parties were [...] and there was no freedom of the press, no freedom of speech.

Stalinism was brought to a peak by killing people, and killing them on such a scale that even Russian history, which is not poor in killings, you know, never knew. Solzhenitsyn keeps to the figure of 66 million people being exterminated in Russia during Stalin’s rule. This is not taking into consideration the 20 million people who gave their lives in the fight with fascism. And he says, Dostoyevsky was right. Dostoyevsky once said that Russia would have to pay 100 million lives.
Now, Medvedev wrote a review, one of the first reviews, of the Archipelago. And there he takes only a defensive position, because one cannot deny facts. And what Solzhenitsyn writes, this is a fact which is known to millions and millions of people who are still alive. Many of them have been silenced by fear to the end; others do not want to remember, but practically in every family there was a victim.

At the beginning of the 70s, there was a major breakthrough in the development of the political thinking in Russia. Emigration was, this way or another, officially recognized and allowed. In the old days, the first law was: put the frontier on a lock. Do not allow anyone in or out. And for 50 years, we didn’t know what it means to freely visit a capitalist country. Now, like many of you are not thinking about making trips to the moon, it’s exactly the same thing. Because, for instance, I was majoring in English for many years, and taught English and English and American literature for many years. It would be at least natural for me to go for a week or two weeks or a month to England, to say nothing of the United States. But even if I lived there for 25 years more and taught, I did not have any hope of doing it. And I knew this well. Therefore, I concentrated on learning it from the books. By this time, a hundred over, a hundred thousand people left the U.S.S.R. for the West. You know that many of them, and probably most of them, went to Israel; many remained in Europe; many went to Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. Among those emigrating, very many people—well, I’m not trying to make an evaluation of how many—are dissidents who came to the conclusion that inside Russia there was practically speaking no hope for a better future. Therefore, they left the material goods that they were able to earn there, because before you emigrate the Soviet authorities very carefully rob you of everything that you have. And [they] were determined, some at the age of fifty and even sixty to begin a new life in an absolutely, totally new society, and many of them do not know the language too. This creates a very, very big barrier to adjust to the life here.

This is another question and another thing and another problem about which there will probably be in the future time to speak. At this time, we know that the Soviet government allows outstanding dissidents sometimes, instead of putting them to prison, allows them to write an application for emigration, and they are kicked out and go to Paris or to the United States. Thus, I can say that the best Russian writers and poets and publishers are now in the West. They are... Most of them are in Paris, where they publish a new magazine, Continent, which sets itself [...] of struggling from outside with the totalitarian regime inside the U.S.S.R. And Solzhenitsyn is not alone. There are very many other outstanding writers. Another dissident writer who is now in Paris, Maximov, has been nominated this year for the Nobel Prize. He did not receive it this year, but probably he will receive it in the future, because he is... it doesn’t matter whether he receives it or not, he is an outstanding writer. And Victor Nekrasov is an outstanding writer; there is no denying this. And Joseph Brodsky is the best
Russian-writing poet; there is no denying this. Korzhavin is an outstanding poet. So there is simply no way for an intellectual who is writing and thinking to be there, and most of the people, many people see a way out and emigrate.

Solzhenitsyn personally says that he is strongly against it, and there are supporters like academician [...] saying that of course this is finally... “not a final decision, because how many people can emigrate? And what will they be doing abroad? This is a movement, a step of despair, and a form of denial and fight, and I do not want to have anything more to do with you.”

Now, I am finishing my short talk because I want to give you time to ask questions, which I am sure you will have here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: What do you think would be the most ideal system, and what should have been done?

YUREVICH: In the U.S.S.R.?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes.

YUREVICH: Now, the outstanding people like Sakharov, they are not... well, the Soviet authorities say about Sakharov: he is a good physicist, but a poor politician. Let him make weapons, and we will know what to do with them. Now Sakharov developed a whole program of slowly democratizing the U.S.S.R. And this is the way in which we should be moving, because we live in the 20th century, and the U.S.S.R. is one of the most powerful countries. But for the 20 years that I personally waited that they would embark on this course, this is not going to happen.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: What do you mean by democratization?

YUREVICH: Well, I was unable before I left the U.S.S.R.—let me give you a very simple example—to have a look at a copy of the New York Times or the Times or any other Western paper. This simple fact gives you an idea of what kind of a prison we all live in. Now, how many people could read the New York Times if it was sold in the U.S.S.R.? Of course not millions, you understand. Thousands or tens of thousands in the best case. But even this is not allowed, though the West pressured for it for a long time. Even this is not happening. So. I am not speaking, of course, about voicing your opinions in a kind of a group, openly. When we gather in a room, we cover the telephone with very many blankets, because this is one of the main
devices where you can be overheard. Therefore it gives rise to a whole psychology that you
must be always on your guard, that you are always watched. You have probably read Orwell,
and this is not very much of an exaggeration. Yes?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [off-mic, muffled] This is sort of a two-pronged question. I’m curious
about semi-dissidents like Yevtushenko, who on some occasions have spoken out and on other
occasions when there were people who were in concentration camps and places like that being
given the brain shock in mental hospitals to bring them back to political... [...] he didn’t speak
up. What’s his position? And how much are so-called imputations of insanity made against
dissidents in the Soviet Union?

YUREVICH: I know that Yevtushenko was a kind of a very big success in the United States, and
many people know his name and many people heard either him read the poetry or translations.
Yes, on many occasions... Yevtushenko is what I call a publicist poet. That is, he sometimes
produced—I put it in the past—poems on the burning problems of the day; let us mention
Stalin’s followers [Heirs of Stalin], then Babi Yar and Bratskaya Ges and some others. But I can
tell you this, in the circles of real dissidents, he is not considered a real dissident because he
never spoke openly up against the authorities so to antagonize them. His criticism always left
room for a kind of compromise, and I personally think that he is inclined not to be kicked out of
the Soviet literature. He enjoys a popularity in the U.S.S.R. too. But those publicist poems are
not published any longer. They are also circulating in samizdat, and many people know them by
heart too.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: What do the working people think of the intellectuals?

YUREVICH: This is a very good question. Well, unfortunately this is a movement of the
intelligentsia mainly. There is one outstanding representative which I know from the working
class; this is Marchenko, who wrote Who is a Worker? [tape skips] But very... several Soviet
dissidents developed a theory that at the end of the 20th century it is the intelligentsia which
takes over this role, because of the vital role of the technological and scientific progress on
which the society rests. And we see such things happen. Yeah?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: What has happened to the [...] [unintelligible]

YUREVICH: Well, you heard about the affair of Sinyavski and Daniel. Sinyavski was convicted
several years... seven years, but he was released after five years, I think. He is now in Paris and
he is a professor of the Sorbonne University Russian literature and just put out of a new book,
In the Shadow of Gogol, devoted to one of the classics of Russian 19th-century literature. Daniel
is inside, and I know that he signs letters of protest. We call such people “signers.” We have a special name for it; we have a name for those who are remaining, for those who are leaving, for those who are applying, for those who get refusals, and for those who get permissions. And he is going... such people are called podpisanty; many of you know Russian and understand. So he’s still a podpisanty, but he... it is understandable that he doesn’t want to take part in very active demonstrations, because he tasted of the prison world.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How is the class difference in Russia... between the intelligentsia and the leaders and so forth?

YUREVICH: It is not... the borderline is in material wealth; it is not between intelligentsia and workers, because they receive the same salaries, or workers receive more than the average doctor, the average teacher, the average engineer, or the average clerk.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How is the education versus working in [...] ...people that go to school because they can pass such a test, or does everybody have equal opportunity for school?

YUREVICH: [aside] ...The time?

HOST: I’m sorry, our time is up. Perhaps you can answer this question in person following the discussion. I want to thank you very much, Professor Yurevich.

[applause; about 15 seconds of silence; program ends]