

John Exnicios on Training USSR Dissidents

John Exnicios , David C. Speedie

December 14, 2010



Kremlin Sunset by [John Leach](#)

The Carnegie Council's U.S. Global Engagement program gratefully acknowledges support for this project from the Alfred and Jane Ross Foundation and Donald M. Kendall.

DAVID SPEEDIE: I'm David Speedie, director of the U.S. Global Engagement Program at the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs.

The topic of the day is "[The End of the Cold War](#)" project of the Carnegie Council, and I'm in New Orleans to speak with an individual who can speak with great authority on that subject, John Exnicios.

John, first of all, thank you for welcoming us into your home today. We greatly appreciate this.

JOHN EXNICIOS: I appreciate your coming down to talk to me. I'm glad to share whatever I can help you with.

DAVID SPEEDIE: I'm sure you can. Let's just get right into this.

You had a rich and rewarding association over what can only be described as an epochal period of world history in the 20th century—namely, the end of the Cold War—and specifically with [Paul Weyrich](#) and [Robert Kriebel](#). How did this come about? How did you meet Kriebel and Weyrich?

JOHN EXNICIOS: My relationship with Weyrich goes back to about 1977. He was founder of many conservative organizations, and one of them was a political action committee, [Free Congress](#). He had a field team of political consultants. They were scattered around the U.S. The person who represented the South was elected to the Louisiana legislature, and he couldn't do the work anymore. My name was given to Paul as a person who might be interested in working with him.

I was an attorney in New Orleans. He invited me up to Wisconsin, where they were having one of their training conferences. I was hired by him to be the southern representative for Free Congress PAC.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Was that Mr. [Jenkins](#), by any chance?

JOHN EXNICIOS: No. It was an individual by the name of Thompson. Jenkins was close to Weyrich, but he never worked with the field team.

It was a part-time job. I was a full-time attorney. In every election cycle we would start getting involved in political campaigns and serve as consultants to challenger races. We didn't really get involved with incumbents. We felt once they were elected, they were in pretty good shape. I was working, trying to get conservative, mainly Republicans—it was a bipartisan PAC—elected throughout the South.

To get to how this came about, it was 1988 and I was at Army Reserve summer camp. I was up at Command and General Staff College in Virginia, Norfolk, and I got a call from Weyrich asking me if I wanted to make a trip to the Soviet Union to do political work. I said, "Sure would." That's the first I found out about Bob Kriebel and what he was trying to accomplish.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Specifically, how did the work in the Soviet Union come about? I'm interested in your personal role in the training of the [Inter-Regional Group of Deputies](#). How did you position yourselves for that?

I remember there were some other initiatives going on at that time. For example, Harvard's Kennedy School had some programs going. But yours seems to have had real traction. You made some very interesting contacts.

JOHN EXNICIOS: My understanding is that Bob Kriebel, when he retired from Loctite, was looking for something to do. He made inquiries in Europe as to what the dissident movement was interested in.

They advised him that they were interested in political training, because they had no experience in politics. [Gorbachev](#) had opened up just prior to that, in March of 1989, the Inter-Regional Group of Deputies in this new People's Congress that he had created.

Kriebel was close to Weyrich through other associations, and he was familiar with Weyrich's political activities in the U.S. They got together and decided they would make a trip.

Our first trip over there was to Moscow, Budapest, and Tallinn, Estonia. Weyrich invited several of his field people to come with him—myself, Jeff Butzke, who was in the New York area, Paul Ogle, Bob McAdam. He took the team of people who were doing American politics and put us together for this first trip to the Soviet Union.

Basically, it was outreach from Arkady Murashev, who was the corresponding secretary of the Inter-Regional Group of Deputies, who made contact with Kriebel to get this thing going.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Murashev made the contact.

JOHN EXNICIOS: That's my understanding. He was the one who was on the cutting edge of trying to make contacts in the West, and Kriebel was there and he responded.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Then you went to Yekaterinburg and met up with [Yeltsin](#) and his people. Or that came later?

JOHN EXNICIOS: The people that were close to Yeltsin came to our first conference that we had in Moscow. They were with us from the beginning. Actually, the Inter-Regional Group of Deputies brought us into the whole orbit of being able to travel in the Soviet Union. They set up our trip to Estonia and were helpful in what we were trying to accomplish.

DAVID SPEEDIE: So you come to the Soviet Union with the basis of training through the Free Congress Foundation, the principles of training political organizing, and so forth. You traveled widely. This was not a Moscow-centric operation. You said earlier that you had been to Magadan; you had been to the Far East. You went basically over the entire Soviet space.

JOHN EXNICIOS: The model developed slowly. Our first trip was pretty much a discovery for us to find out what was going on and what could be accomplished. The fact that it was successful led us to try to do more conferences.

Eventually we got to the point where we started a Kriebel Institute within the Free Congress Foundation. As time passed, and relatively quickly, I was eventually offered a job being director of the center that would be handling the conferences. We went to a program of about four trips overseas a year, with three cities on each conference, which would last about two weeks. Then we would also do what we eventually called mini-conferences, where one individual might go overseas and do one-day conferences in several cities.

But it wasn't a plan that was developed before we left. Slowly ideas developed as we went along.

DAVID SPEEDIE: What interface did you have of any kind with the embassy in Moscow at that point?

JOHN EXNICIOS: We really had very little contact with anything in the U.S. government. It was a wonderful circumstance for me because I didn't have to do any fundraising. Bob Kriebel could fund the organization. We had very little red tape. We could do what we wanted to do, when we wanted to do it, very efficiently.

Before we went to Moscow, we were going to Budapest for our first conference. The night that we arrived, we were having dinner with the people that were supposed to be attending and putting on the conference for us, and they advised us that the conference was canceled. They didn't want to have anything to do with us. It turns out that the embassy had advised them not to deal with us. Our Budapest conference was pretty much deep-sixed by the U.S. embassy.

What we then did in Budapest was to make contact with other political parties and had some small meetings, where we tried to tell them what we were trying to accomplish. But there was really no support from the U.S.

government in what we were trying to do.

DAVID SPEEDIE: You were very much flying solo here and making your own contacts. Obviously, there were other important people, dissidents, at this point in time that were well known in the West. I think of [Sakharov](#) and his wife, [Yelena Bonner](#). Were they involved in your enterprise at all?

JOHN EXNICIOS: Sakharov died very shortly after we began our work. I met Bonner on the first trip to Moscow. I'm not sure about the date. He may have died just before we got to Moscow for the first time.

Basically, we were involved with all of the key dissidents that were working in the Soviet Union. They were the network that would get us into places in Armenia and Georgia. We covered probably 13 of the 15 republics.

Originally, we were working with the Academy of Sciences. You had to have a host who would invite you to come to Russia. After things began to break up, we stopped that relationship, and we were able just to get our visas by applying to the Russian embassy—the Soviet embassy at the time—and go to places we wanted to go. It was remarkably free, in the sense that we could do what we wanted to do. It was as if the Soviet Union didn't know what we were doing and paid very little attention to us.

DAVID SPEEDIE: You really think that was it? There was just a knowledge gap of who you were talking to and what their role was?

JOHN EXNICIOS: Looking back on it in retrospect, for them to allow a foreign group of people to come into their country, to go pretty much where they wanted to go and give the support that we were giving to the dissidents is a result of them not being competent to understand what was happening.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Are you still in contact with Murashev, for example, or you mentioned Reznikov and some others.

JOHN EXNICIOS: We had a group of probably about 40 or 50 field people that we hired in the various republics and also satellite states. I'm in touch with maybe ten of them still. I speak on Skype with some of them, email them. I have made several trips back overseas. But most of them have gone off the radar. I couldn't locate them now.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Before we sat down to talk, you showed me some pictures of a remarkable group of young activist types from 13 of the 15 former Soviet republics. You haven't really tracked their progress?

JOHN EXNICIOS: In some cases. I know one of them is living in New Orleans now. After I quit working for Kriebler, he wanted to go to university and I got him in at the University of New Orleans. He's married, has an American child, and he's getting citizenship. I know a couple have moved to Canada. One is a doctor in Minnesota. Some of them have emigrated. Some of them have passed on. The life expectancy in Russia isn't real high. Some of them I haven't had contact with in a good while.

It's such a broad area. Over the past 20 years, I have gone back maybe eight or nine times, and I have seen some of them. But others it's just hard to keep up with.

DAVID SPEEDIE: When I look at that group, I immediately think of another phenomenon of the past 20 years, more recently, the [color revolutions](#)—the [Orange Revolution](#) in Ukraine, similar upheavals in Serbia, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, and so forth. Do you see this as somehow a legacy of what you helped put in place? Is that too fanciful?

JOHN EXNICIOS: I'm not sure that I want to give us that much credit for what was put in place, because this would have happened no matter what. We were a small organization, spending maybe \$1 million to \$2 million a year in an enormous area. What we did was cutting-edge. We were advanced over other people. It was a remarkable experience, but I wouldn't want to take credit for what would have unfolded anyway.

We trained maybe 5,000 people over there. Just thinking back, I made 40 trips to the empire during that period, doing three conferences a trip. That's 120 conferences. There were maybe 5,000 to 7,000 people that we trained at the seminars. I'm sure some of those people are involved. Some of them have been elected to things. Some of them are still involved. Obviously, certain countries are more advanced than others. People in Croatia are involved in politics; politics are pretty much dead in Russia, in my opinion.

It varies widely as to what they have done. Some have become businessmen. Some have come to the U.S. Unfortunately, a lot of the best people have left over there.

DAVID SPEEDIE: I assume that your role as a lawyer, was in advising and training in the legal foundation and framework for new democratic—

JOHN EXNICIOS: The way it developed was, first we were doing political competence: How do you win elections?

It was basically how you do opposition research, how you understand the election mechanisms, how you identify voters, how you turn them out. Once we had some success and they were becoming elected to positions in city and regional government, we put on governance conferences on how government functions, talking about balances of power, ethics in government, and things like that. We also started putting on a parallel track at the same time where we would put on business conferences about free enterprise and how to start a business.

We trained in three different areas—election technology, governance, and business.

As far as the law goes, the legal structures were there, but they were such shams that there really wasn't a lot of legal advice that would come from a lawyer. It was more like, what did you learn in seventh-grade civics class? Most of the people that we worked with were physical scientists and doctors. The lawyers were the people who were the worst to deal with in the Soviet Union at the time.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Do we have something to learn from that?

JOHN EXNICIOS: I guess there is, on the margins.

DAVID SPEEDIE: All this was done without hindrance? I know you said this before.

JOHN EXNICIOS: A city had to be open. When we went to Nizhny Novgorod, we were probably the first Americans to ever go there because that had been a closed city. We had to wait sometimes for a city to be open. But basically we would sit down, Kriebel would say, "Where are we going to go?" and I would try to come up with three cities that would be interesting for Weyrich, Kriebel, and myself, that were somewhat geographically able to make the connections.

Logistically it was more, could we make flights, and were there connections? There was no real support that we needed from the Russian government that the Inter-Regional Group of Deputies couldn't get us.

When we would go there, sometimes we would stay at the Intourist hotels, if we were in a city that had tourists. Other times we would stay at the Octoberskya hotels, which were the hotels for the Russian dignitaries. We weren't just going in there because we showed up and said, "We want to stay at the dignitary hotel." It was because the Inter-Regional Group of Deputies was doing something.

But on my end, I would go down to the Soviet embassy and get the visas. On their end, they would take care of the logistics.

DAVID SPEEDIE: It was Robert Kriebel himself who basically did the research as to where you should go and scheduled the—

JOHN EXNICIOS: Not really. He wanted to make interesting trips. He would come up with a place he wanted to go. To be honest, we were interested in Russian culture, Russian history, so what are the places we would like to go?

There were so many places to go. It wasn't like it had to be a place you had to go. A lot of it was driven by either Weyrich's interest in some issue or Kriebel's. Or, frankly, since I got to make the decision as to what was recommended, I put my opinion in.

DAVID SPEEDIE: It's interesting, what you just said. There was a genuine interest in Russian history, culture, and place in the world that helped define this political process.

JOHN EXNICIOS: Kriebel got into this because he disliked communism. He wanted to do something to end communism. I got into it because it was fascinating. Obviously, I was anticommunist, but, to me, the whole culture—every trip was interesting, no matter where we were going, because it was so unknown to us.

As I mentioned, I was on reserve duty when Weyrich called me. We may have watched a meeting about how the Russians were ten feet tall and they had 15,000 tanks in Germany. There was no thought going on that the empire was about to collapse. As soon as you got off the plane and started looking around, you realized that what we were being told in the West was not what was actually going on there.

It was truly fascinating—the people, the food, everything. It was different. If you have any interest in other cultures and societies—I was a very lucky person.

DAVID SPEEDIE: So it seems.

You said something a few minutes ago in passing about what has happened in Russia since that time. This is the 20th anniversary of the end of the Cold War, the topic at hand for us at the Council. Twenty years on, speak a little bit more to how you view developments in Russia and the state of U.S.-Russia relations. In this regard, what has been the legacy of what you did?

Obviously, there was an interesting moment when former President [Bush](#) famously spoke of looking into [Putin's](#) eyes and seeing his soul. There is apparently a cordial relationship between the current presidents of the two countries and so on. How do you see it?

JOHN EXNICIOS: First, I would say that I look at it as more than just Russia. While Russia is the most important state, what happened in the Czech Republic, the Baltics, freedom to Ukraine and other republics is also part of the story. If we go just to Russia, I'm of the opinion that politics is dead. There are no opposition parties.

There's some sort of a charade that goes on where you may have [Zhirinovsky](#) stirring up the nationalists and you have [Zyuganov](#) with the communists. But it's all a kabuki play which is controlled. There is no free debate. As one of my Russian friends told me, politics in Russia is boring. It doesn't exist.

What happened in the Soviet Union is just as important for freeing millions of other people as the failure of democracy in Russia.

The other thing—you haven't asked me this—also interesting is, I have also worked with an organization that has brought many Russians and Ukrainians to the U.S.—

DAVID SPEEDIE: I was going to get to that. I'm glad you mentioned it.

JOHN EXNICIOS: I'm meeting a lot of young Russians who were six years old when this happened. They are coming over here, and they have very little knowledge of what was going on in their country at the time. They are not particularly upset by the lack of political freedom. They can travel now. They have access to goods. It's an entirely different mentality of what's going on in the young people in Russia now compared to the Russians that we were working with 20 years ago.

I have done work with [Open World](#), which is a project funded by the U.S. Congress, through the Library of Congress. They bring groups of Russians for one-week periods to the U.S. I would host them when they were in New Orleans. I have met a lot of Russians through that over the past 11 years.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Politics in Russia is seen as boring by Russians because it's—

JOHN EXNICIOS: The Russians that I speak to see it as no politics. You have Putin, who has a guy who is shorter than he is as president, who does whatever he says to do. They create the myth that he's the good czar—he might be the one who is going to really be a democrat—and Putin is firm. Then you have the left and the right, a false opposition.

There is really no politics. The only democrat that actually tried to do something in the last election was [Garry Kasparov](#). He's independent. He has money. He could speak. His little party did absolutely nothing. We would meet with him frequently when we would go to Moscow.

Murashev was the manager of the Russian chess team. He's very close to Kasparov.

Truthfully, I don't see any politics in Russia. There is less politics than there was during the Soviet period, because at least you could watch the *Politburo*, some sort of party doing something. But now it's pretty much run by the KGB aides of Putin, in my opinion. I could be entirely wrong. But I don't see much there as a political opposition.

DAVID SPEEDIE: You mentioned Kasparov, who is obviously a charismatic figure, and Bonner we mentioned before—these were people of some substance and charisma. But you think they have just been essentially—

JOHN EXNICIOS: A lot of them have left. Some of them have been co-opted. The situation was entirely different. It was very dismal. Things were clearly wrong in the Soviet Union. They had people who realized, "We have to change what we're doing." In my opinion they are taking the oil wealth—Russia is basically a mineral-exporting state now—and instead of subsidizing Nicaraguans and Cubans, they are subsidizing Russian people. The

Russian people are living somewhat better off of the oil wealth than they were before. The oligarchs and the people that are in power are living very much better.

But the safety valve is there. You have a lot of Russians who are able to leave, who want better lives. Then you do have better lives for some of the young people, where they do have jobs, for some, and they do have a better standard of living, because they are putting more of their oil proceeds into maintaining the population.

DAVID SPEEDIE: We had a very interesting conversation before we came on camera about the domestic situation here and how you came to work with Paul Weyrich and Robert Kriebel. It was around the question you put of how to get conservatives to come to the polls. Talk a little bit about that point, where the conservatives, especially the Christian right, did not take part in the political process and how that dynamic unfolded.

JOHN EXNICIOS: As I mentioned, I started working for Weyrich in 1977. I covered the South. It was very difficult for Republicans, or conservatives, to get elected in the South. The main problem that we had there was a demographic which was apolitical. In those days, the Christian right was apolitical. They were trying to find some reasons for Christians to get involved, and we weren't that successful.

The [Moral Majority](#) was created, and various other Christian right organizations began to get more involved in the issue of abortion. But Christians basically were not of this life; they were of the other. A large portion of the evangelicals didn't want to get into politics.

My recollection is that Israel was offered to them as part of their fundamental philosophy, that for Armageddon to come and to find Heaven, there had to be the re-creation of the Jewish state and it had to be protected. Israel was brought into the dynamic to attract Christian ministers into getting politically involved.

This has nothing to do with what we were doing overseas. What we taught overseas was how to build coalitions and how to find something that people would be interested in.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Yes, that's why I mentioned before the nexus between what you did here and then what you tried in the former Soviet Union.

JOHN EXNICIOS: Basically, what we did here was teach a system of grassroots politics. We weren't working with campaigns that were rich in funds, but we were working with campaigns that could get a lot of people into the streets to knock on doors and to identify and turn out voters. That worked very well in the Soviet Union.

Obviously, when you have big blocks of flats with lots of people living in flats, those are easy groups to work with. You couldn't use the telephones at the time, because they didn't have that many phones. Mail was somewhat effective, in some regions. Some of the things that we could do here, we could do there.

It was fascinating for us, because we learned a lot, by doing things over there, as to how people function.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Good point.

One name I forgot to mention, by the way, just to get back to Russia, Mayor [Popov](#), in Moscow.

What was your interaction with him?

JOHN EXNICIOS: Popov was with the Inter-Regional Group of Deputies. We met him at our first conference. Not too long after that, he was elected to be mayor—or he was appointed mayor; I'm not sure. But he became mayor of Moscow. Arkady was appointed by him to be the chief of police.

He was an outstanding individual. He was more of an academic than a politician, and he probably wasn't suited for being mayor of Moscow, with the way things were working at that time. My understanding is that he resigned after a year and a half or so. Then they had [Luzhkov](#) for almost two decades or more.

DAVID SPEEDIE: That's right. But you don't keep in touch with Popov?

JOHN EXNICIOS: No.

DAVID SPEEDIE: The last thing before we wind up, on this general topic, John. You were kind enough to give me a [book](#) about Robert Kriebel. Thank you. I appreciate it.

Is there a wide Kriebel archive available? Was a film produced on the training in the former Soviet Union?

JOHN EXNICIOS: I remember that we videotaped that first conference in Moscow. We actually did bring a film crew with us on one series of trips and they did film it. To be honest, I don't know what happened to that movie. We filmed three conferences with an American film crew that we brought with us.

As far as archives go, it is whatever Free Congress has. Paul died two years ago. He was the lifeblood of the organization. I'm not sure what they have in their archives. It would be interesting to see those films.

DAVID SPEEDIE: When we go to Moscow, we may find out.

JOHN EXNICIOS: Well, that would be in America. The Russians filmed that first conference in Moscow. They reproduced that and they gave it to other members. I had forgotten. We did bring a film crew from America to do a filming for American purposes. But I don't recall what purpose we made of it.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Your relatively negative impression of Russia—what do you see as the success stories? You mentioned Hungary as one of your first. Who were your contacts there? How was that?

JOHN EXNICIOS: We didn't do as much work in the republics or the satellite states that were closer to Eastern Europe and had better connections, because we were overtaken by events so quickly. Other than our first trip to Hungary and another later conference, we really didn't do much there.

We had one conference in East Germany, but East Germany was taken care of by West Germany. The Czech Republic was so advanced that before we could go back for a second trip, they were making progress.

I suspect we spent most of our time in Ukraine, Russia and the Russian republics. We could only put on so many conferences, and there were so many places. We hit just about every country more than once. But I wouldn't want to suggest that just because we went to a place twice and gave two conferences that we did anything that would be altering of the whole landscape—although, on the other hand, you don't know what people have done with that information that you did give them.

DAVID SPEEDIE: This has been fascinating. I'm interested in what you're doing now. You are retired as an attorney. What keeps you busy?

JOHN EXNICIOS: I babysit. I have a granddaughter that lives two blocks away, so I get her a lot.

I stay in touch with Russians that come over here. Until recently, I was hosting them. One year I had six groups in my house. I had six weeks of Russians staying here. I try to stay in touch over there. I get to go back occasionally. My son is in the military, and he's an attaché in the Army. I have visited him in Ukraine, and he'll be going to Moscow for three years shortly, so I anticipate going back.

Basically, I garden, cook. I'm retired.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Did you ever take up chess or any great Russian—

JOHN EXNICIOS: No.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Ever play with Kasparov?

JOHN EXNICIOS: No. I had supper with him.

DAVID SPEEDIE: What's he like, Kasparov?

JOHN EXNICIOS: He was a very personable and warm guy, very down-to-earth. He was with his friends when I was there. I didn't speak Russian, so I was relying on translators. But I was impressed by him as an individual.

DAVID SPEEDIE: John, thank you again for taking the time to speak to this enormously important topic. It really is an archival moment. It has been enormously helpful to us in trying to reconstruct and learn from what you and others did.

JOHN EXNICIOS: Thank you. I appreciate being able to tell the story and give a little credit to Bob Kriebel and Paul Weyrich for what they did.

DAVID SPEEDIE: Very good. Thank you.

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