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Sergei Kovalev: The White Crow of Russian Government

Kovalev proved that you can fight for your principles over decades — and sometimes win.

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Sergei Kovalev **DonSimon**

Sergei Kovalev died just a few days shy of the 30th anniversary of the 1991 August revolution — the revolution that he fought for, that the won, and that put an end to the communist experiment in Russia.

Kovalev was a veteran of many wars he volunteered to fight in, and like any old soldier, he sometimes won and sometimes lost his battles.

His early biography did not presage a life of dissent. Kovalev graduated from the biology department of Moscow State University in 1954 and began to work as a scientist. But even at

the start of his scientific career he ended up fighting a battle over genetic theory. The country's leaders had launched a campaign against genetics. To create a communist society, they needed to create a new kind of person — complacent and passive. Stalin believed it was possible, but genetic theory got in his way.

So the party leadership started a mass campaign against scientists working in genetics, called "the prostitute of imperialism" in the media. Scientific research was halted. Scientists lost their jobs. Some were executed. It was dangerous to fight on the side of science against ideology, but Kovalev joined the battle.

That war went on until the 1960s.

By then Kovalev was a well-known scientist with dozens of works to his name.

But in 1966 Kovalev switched from defending scientific theory to defending human rights. He asked his colleagues to sign a petition in defence of the authors Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuly Daniel, who were on trial for publishing their books abroad.

The petition was in no way political. It simply stated the right of each person to express their views, write what they want and publish where they want. This was the first of many such petitions, and their authors became known as "dissidents."

In 1969 Kovalev took what was probably his most important step as a human rights activist in the Soviet period: he became one of the founders of the first human rights organization in the country, the Action Group for the Defense of Human Rights in the U.S.S.R.

Recognizing that it was pointless to petition the Soviet leaders, they decided to try a new tactic. The group wrote the leaders of countries that had signed the Declaration of Human Rights — which was also signed by the Soviet Union — and requested that they compel the Soviet government to abide by its commitment to respect human rights.

The Soviet government regarded demands like these as "interference in the country's internal affairs" and encroachment on their sacred right to do what they wished with their citizens. The group instantly became a target of repression, and over the course of a decade virtually all the members were put behind bars. Kovalev was arrested in 1974 for "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda."

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To avoid attention, the case was tried in Vilnius, Lithuania (Kovalev was a corresponding member of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences).

The sentence was harsh: seven years in the camps and three years exile.

Kovalev brought his war to the camps, too. He participated in mass prisoner protests at Perm Camp No. 36 and then spent months in solitary confinement as punishment. (Later one of the first things Kovalev did in his official government capacity was to end the practice of providing only cold food in solitary confinement cells).

To get basic medical care and treatment for serious illnesses, he went on hunger strikes. He spent the last years of his sentence in a prison, not in a camp, and then he was sent to serve out his exile as far as a human being could be sent — Kolyma. In the best Stalinist traditions, they arrested his son Ivan, too.

Released in 1984, he didn't come home. "Anti-Soviets" were not allowed to live in Moscow with their families, so he settled in the provincial city of Tver. Only at the beginning of perestroika, 13 years after his arrest, was he allowed back into the Russian capital.

Perestroika radically changed everything. A man who'd recently been in a jail cell could become a deputy of the Supreme Soviet. President Boris Yeltsin personally asked Kovalev to head the Committee for Human Rights of the Supreme Soviet. In 1993 Kovalev was appointed head of the Commission on Human Rights under the President, and a year later — the first ombudsmen in Russian history.

Kovalev gave a good description of his time in government in the title of his memoirs: "The Flight of the White Crow." He was indeed a white crow — the odd man out, a misfit — in the Yeltsin administration. Yeltsin brought people onto his team whose only principle was their devotion to him. But Kovalev was a man of principle.

The first serious conflict with Yeltsin took place in October 1993. Kovalev asked Yeltsin not to sign the decree dissolving the Supreme Soviet (the country's highest parliament), which would cause a stand-off that ended with tanks firing on the Supreme Soviet Building. That became the symbolic start to the end of new Russian democracy. Yeltsin did not respond to Kovalev's letter. Kovalev asked for a meeting and Yeltsin ignored him again. Faced with a choice between human rights and tanks, Yeltsin chose the latter.

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Later his tanks went even farther. The final break between Kovalev and Yeltsin was after the start of the first Chechen War. Kovalev tried to stop it. He went to Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, hoping that the generals wouldn't bomb the city when the ombudsmen was there. But that hope was in vain; perhaps he was simply a good target.

In 1996 Kovalev resigned from all his positions and wrote a furious letter to Yeltsin: "Your policies today will revive a state where inequality will flourish. You are recreating the swamp of Stalinism and Brezhevism, only now communist phrases have been changed to anti-communist rhetoric. Those who follow you will fix that."

Prophetic words. For the last 20 years Kovalev became a dissident again, speaking out against political repression and the closing of independent media.

Kovalev was one of hundreds of Russians in history who failed in their attempt to pull Russia onto the path of European development. But an idealist can never win against a competitor who doesn't win by skill but by hitting his opponent over the head with the chessboard. Idealists are too reasonable and soft for battle. Sergei Kovalev was also very gentle in the tradition of the Russian intelligentsia. He never insisted on his point of view; he began every

phrase with “perhaps” or “probably.”

But Kovalev proved that you can fight for your principles over decades — and sometimes win.

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