

## **October 20, 2016**

### **Oral History Interview with Roland Timerbaev**

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#### **Summary:**

One of the drafters of the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

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#### **Contents:**

Transcript - English

Roland Timerbaev 00 0000 00 0000 One of the drafters of the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons 00 0000 00 0000 Oral history interview conducted by Michal Onderco in person in Moscow on 20 October 2016 00 0000 00 0000 00 0000 Michal Onderco:

Thank you very much, first of all, for agreeing to talk to me... 00 0000 00 0000 Roland Timerbaev:

Yes, you can go ahead and talk. 00 0000 00 0000 Michal Onderco:

Let's start with the origin of NPT. When you were drafting the treaty, what was the idea behind Article 10? Why was it inserted into the treaty? 00 0000 00 0000 Roland Timerbaev:

Well it was a matter of compromise. 00 0000 00 0000 Michal Onderco:

Between? 00 0000 00 0000 Roland Timerbaev:

Because there were those who... You see what is my dissatisfaction. Because in fact when the treaty was extended indefinitely, in fact we legalised P5 nuclear weapon states, forever. In some way, at least in some way. 00 0000 00 0000 Michal Onderco:

So in '67, when you were negotiating the treaty, was there an expectation that by 1995 there would be significant progress on disarmament? 00 0000 00 0000 Roland Timerbaev:

Yes, that's it. And in 1995 there was a chance, because some changes happened in Russia, China was not yet that nuclear, so there were some chances to do something about elimination. Let's say, radical reductions leading to elimination. There was a chance, in the '90's. Now, there is not so much of a chance. First of all because neither the United States nor Russia want to do anything serious, they can extend new START for another five years, they can do this, but they are not prepared to go down very much, because, I think because of China. 00 0000 00 0000 Michal Onderco:

So back to '67, there was this compromise between the nuclear weapons states and the non-nuclear weapons states, and at that time what was your expectation about the extension? Were you thinking that this might lead actually to indefinite extension? 00 0000 00 0000 Roland Timerbaev:

Well, of course, no, we wanted the thing. So we have gone a long way to compromise. Personally I didn't think very much about what would happen after 25 years. I was not that much immersed in this particular issue, because bringing in a treaty. We needed it really very much. And it took so much time - it took us almost a year to make Articles I,II, and III, these are the three main Articles - I, II and III. You couldn't do anything about the rest - the United States didn't like Article VI, we were prepared to have Article VI, but the United States didn't like Article VI. So we wanted [Articles] I, II, and III, it was very difficult to make [Articles] I, II, and III because of the nuclear sharing and all these things, multilateral nuclear force, Atlantic nuclear forces, etc. This was the main issue. And safeguards. So I put all my efforts, personally, into [Articles] I, II, and III. And the rest for me was "let's make it as quick as possible". That's why, of course, Article IV is not very good, because it doesn't say clearly about peaceful nuclear use. Peaceful nuclear use, what is it? There is no peaceful nuclear use. 00 0000 00 0000 Michal Onderco:

Well, electricity? 00 0000 00 0000 Roland Timerbaev:

Well, come on! Look at Germany, Germany is closing down their nuclear industry, other countries too. Because any use of nuclear energy leads to military use, any! 00 0000 00 0000 Michal Onderco:

So who was pushing for the period of 25 years, how did you arrive at that number? 00 0000 00 0000 Roland Timerbaev:

I don't know who, I can't recall particular states, but of course who were active then, especially Mexico was very active during negotiations, and of course Germany was behind everything. The German ambassador, a very serious ambassador, was always in Geneva, he was not part of the negotiations but he was there every minute, he was there. So who particularly cannot be pointed, but non-aligned states, non-nuclear weapons states like Mexico and Egypt was active I think, and who else? I forgot. 00 0000 00 0000 Michal Onderco:

So in fast-forward to 1995, did you expect that there would be an indefinite extension? 00 0000 00 0000 Roland Timerbaev:

No, what I needed then was a treaty! And since the suggested text comprised of three options: indefinite, 25 and period 25s - well it was acceptable to us, to the Soviet Union. 00 0000 00 0000 Michal Onderco:

So fast forward 25 years ahead, in 1995, there were these proposals for indefinite

extension, for the 25 years, and for rolling extension on the basis of performance. You as the drafter of the treaty, how did you see these positions in 1995? [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

In 1995 I wanted, as I said before, option number three. Period, automatic extensions for 25 years unless the conference decides otherwise. [redacted] Michal Onderco:

Of course. [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

But we didn't expect this. But now we can expect, because of this Austrian Humanitarian Initiative. Something like 120, or 130 countries support it. [redacted] Michal Onderco:

The official Russian position was, of course, in favour of indefinite extension. [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

Yes, sure. But Russia, I think, I don't know, I was not on the delegation, I was at that time retired, and representing NGOs. But I think Russia, at the last point, could support 25 year extension. [redacted] Michal Onderco:

So why do you think they went for indefinite? [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

Because the United States wanted it very much. Tom Graham. He did it. Tom Graham did it. He was very aggressive in this respect, very aggressive. And I think the Russian delegation was prepared to support first indefinite, and if not 25 year extensions. [redacted] Michal Onderco:

And the other nuclear weapons states? The Chinese, French... [redacted] Roland Timerbaev: Chinese was very passive I think. The British were behind the United States, as always. France was not there. France I think joined the treaty later. [redacted] Michal Onderco:

1992 [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

'92? [redacted] Michal Onderco:

It was their first conference. [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

You have an excellent memory - I don't remember. France was there. China was there or not? [redacted] Michal Onderco:

It was also the first conference for China. [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

They, I don't remember anything about them, they were quiet. [redacted] Michal Onderco:

So why did you think in 1995, that I would be better for the treaty to have a temporary extension? [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

Because I thought that the Article VI should be pushed. I wanted complete elimination, that was mine. This went very well that we needed to finish with nuclear weapons. So that's why I thought that if we accepted what I call the third option, then we could have a chance to push more. And I'm sure that if we'd had this option, in 2020 we could do something about it. [redacted] Michal Onderco:

So if it had been agreed in 1995, it would be better for the treaty in 2020? [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

Yes. Much better, of course. [redacted] Michal Onderco:

But isn't this putting.. there is so much uncertainty. You never know what could happen over 25 years, so isn't it a gamble to put so much trust in people in 25 years, that there will be positive developments over 25 years? [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

I don't know how to answer this question, would you say it again? [redacted] Michal Onderco:

Because your proposal was "let's do a rolling extension of 25 years". Isn't this too much of a gamble. Because you never know what will happen over 25 years. [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

Of course nobody can know what will be in 2020, 2045. Maybe there will be nothing, an asteroid could hit the earth in 2036 and there would be nothing. You never know what will happen. I am against nuclear weapons, this is my life, I've spent all my life. When I was a young man I was given this task and, even now when I'm old and cannot follow everything my only thought is to stop gambling with nuclear weapons. [redacted] Michal Onderco:

So what happened in 1995 that made it possible for the treaty to be extended indefinitely? How did it happen? Because there were multiple countries who were

either behind an idea of rolling extension or temporary extension. What happened? Roland Timerbaev:

Well I think it's the US pressure, supported by Russia. I think they were working very hard, they brought in a lot of people, to New York, they were working very hard. That was Tom Graham - did you speak to him? Michal Onderco:

I'm speaking to him early next year. Roland Timerbaev:

He was, in fact he led the conference. I don't know where he is now, I haven't seen him for a few years, but he was very active. He did it. Michal Onderco:

So what was the task of the conference president, then? Roland Timerbaev:

Who was.. Michal Onderco:

Dhanapala. Roland Timerbaev:

Dhanapala, Jayantha Dhanapala. He made it so much easier to discuss and to agree. He was following the general. Michal Onderco:

At the conference was there a risk that it may end up without an extension decision? Roland Timerbaev:

No, there was no risk. The major problem was the Middle East nuclear free zone, that was the major problem for the conference. Not the indefinite extension, but the Middle Eastern WMD free zone, that was the major problem. There were many statements after the adoption of the resolution, Jayantha did this resolution, but there were some 20 or some 40 statements after deploring the fact that nothing was done in the Middle East. It was the major problem. Michal Onderco:

Why do you think it popped up in 1995? Why not before, why not later? Roland Timerbaev:

Because from the beginning in the treaty, the conference about extension should be held 25 years after the entry into force of the treaty. Michal Onderco:

But why do you think the Middle East became such a salient issue at that time? Roland Timerbaev:

Well, I don't know, because, it has been a salient issue all the time. Michal Onderco:

So was that already on your mind when you were negotiating the treaty in the '60s? That the Middle East is something that may become a problem? Roland Timerbaev:

I don't think so, when we were negotiating in the '60s I don't think that we discussed this very much. I think Egypt was not that... I don't think that was a big issue then. Michal Onderco:

So why did it become a big issue? Because Egypt, at the end of the day, is a relatively small country, right? Roland Timerbaev:

It was the 1973 regional crisis, I think it was one, indeed the major crises. The two biggest crises were the Cuban crisis - when was it, in '62? And the Middle East in '73. So of course 1973 added a lot of tension to this whole problem. Michal Onderco:

And what did you think about the proposal for the negotiation of the Middle East WMD free zone? Roland Timerbaev:

There is no chance. Michal Onderco:

Was it obvious to you already in 1995? Roland Timerbaev:

I think there is no chance to do that, this idea of the zone has no chance in near future. I'm not an expert on the Middle East, I've never been to the Middle East, I never discuss this issue. I discuss, usually the general issue of prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons. So I was not particularly involved in the Middle East and I don't know well all the details. Michal Onderco:

We touched on the issue of the possibility of the elimination of nuclear weapons already in 1995, and you suggested that this was maybe a unique opportunity for making steps towards elimination. Can you tell me a little more about why you thought this was a good moment for a push towards elimination? Roland Timerbaev:

Because we had a chance because we were discussing the extension. Because extending it indefinitely is in fact legalising the existing of the P5, it's legalizing! Indefinite, for an indefinite time. This was an important period when we could do

something, especially, when you recall that 90's were the best period in Soviet -, or Russian- and United States relations, the '90s. The best period. If you take the entire period after World War II until today, the best period for doing something in arms control was the '90s. □□ □□ □□ □□Michal Onderco:

But why do you think that, for example, Russia would be willing to make big commitments towards disarmament in 1995? □□ □□ □□ □□Roland Timerbaev:

Russia was prepared to discuss it very seriously. There was a Gorbachev proposal.

When was it? He came to power in 1985, it was in 1986 I think. □□ □□ □□ □□Michal Onderco:

But in 1995, there was a lot of domestic turmoil in Russia, and nuclear weapons were one of the things that kept Russia at high tables. [Timerbaev indicates disagreement]

You disagree? You thought that even in '95 Russia was still prepared to give up nuclear weapons? □□ □□ □□ □□Roland Timerbaev:

Well never think that you can do it immediately, it would take years, of course, years. But after all, we have reduced it, we and the United States, by 5 times. We had about 70,000, in 1980, and now we have only 15,000. □□ □□ □□ □□Michal Onderco:

That's still enough. □□ □□ □□ □□Roland Timerbaev:

One is enough! One is enough! □□ □□ □□ □□Michal Onderco:

Even now, when there are proposals for getting rid of nuclear weapons, one of the things that is brought up by those who are sceptical about it is usually the argument that was made by Tom Schelling who basically said, already in the '60s, that it's impossible to get rid of nuclear weapons because you can never kill the knowledge, and the temptation to secretly build one would be too high. Do you disagree with that? □□ □□ □□ □□Roland Timerbaev:

Well of course the door would remain, but I believe that at some point in time people will understand that it's not a weapon, it's a way to self-destruct. Because as you know the universe is made in such a way that something appears, and then disappears, as with human life, this disappears. So planets disappear, stars disappear, and the nuclear explosion is given to mankind for disappearance, for disappearance. And this is something that people will one day understand. But in order to push for understanding you have to work. And what was my function in my life, it was to push people to that understanding. And whenever I, after I retired in the Soviet Union in 1991 I retired, and since then I was teaching and writing. A lot of things I have written quite a few books and articles, an immense number of articles, and in all my speeches I've always made this point. So maybe people didn't believe me, didn't follow me, but I believe it's my function in life to tell you about this. And what about Schelling? Ok, that's his view, of course we can, people can think about other ways, even much more destructive weapons, and they will think of something. But as far as nuclear weapons are concerned, ok the knowledge will stay, but weapons should be demolished, should be eliminated. I'm sorry, I was explaining in such an emotional way, but this is my view of the subject. □□ □□ □□ □□Michal Onderco:

Well you said it's your life so... □□ □□ □□ □□Roland Timerbaev:

It's my life. I've spent all my life doing this. You know, when I started in 1954. This is my profession which I started in 1954, and since then I've been doing it. □□ □□ □□ □□Michal Onderco:

So in 1995 at the NPT RevCon, did you at that time, for example, expect that something like the Humanitarian Initiative would.... □□ □□ □□ □□Roland Timerbaev:

Well I didn't think of it in such specific terms, twenty years ago. But I wanted to do it, "let's do it in 25 years, but not never!" Now we will never do it, because now we

legalised the existence of nuclear weapons for ever. □□ □□ □□ □□Michal Onderco:

So the idea, for example in the working group earlier this year Brazil gave a proposal for coming up with a timeline for abolishing nuclear weapons, for coming up with a treaty abolishing nuclear weapons. What are your thoughts about...? □□ □□ □□ □□Roland Timerbaev:

The most recent working group? The Austrian working group? □□ □□ □□ □□Michal Onderco:

No, no, there was a working group of the Conference on Disarmament... □□ □□ □□ □□Roland Timerbaev:

Yes, they recently proposed the treaty. □□ □□ □□ □□Michal Onderco:

Yes [redacted] [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

Alright [redacted] [redacted] Michal Onderco:

What are your thoughts on having a treaty to ban nuclear weapons? [redacted] [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

I am in favour of it, certainly. I will be the first to raise my hand. Of course, I'm in favour of it. [redacted] [redacted] Michal Onderco:

Even if the nuclear weapons states will never sign it? [redacted] [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

Yes, but (laughing) I cannot vote. [redacted] [redacted] Michal Onderco:

Yeah, of course, of course. [redacted] [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

But if my government asked me to go to Geneva and vote, I would vote in favour of it. And if they said "Don't vote" then I would say "Then I retire from this function" because I am very much in favour of this. I have no other details, I did not read the text of this treaty, because I'd have to read it carefully. But the whole idea of banning it before eliminating is something I fully support. [Off the record section] [redacted] [redacted] Michal Onderco:

But one thing that surprised me was that the push for indefinite extension in 1995 came formally from Canada and South Africa. [redacted] [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

These are tactical things. [redacted] [redacted] Michal Onderco:

But South Africa was surprising, even for people who were in the know. [redacted] [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

Please. Don't tell me this, because Tom Graham called the South African, I forget who... [redacted] [redacted] Michal Onderco:

Mandela? [redacted] [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

No he didn't talk to Mandela, he spoke to the person who was in New York... [redacted] [redacted] Michal Onderco:

Peter Goosen? [redacted] [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

Goosen, I knew him ... and told him "please do it" and he says "Ok Tom, I will do it". It's no problem, in diplomacy it's no problem. If Tom Graham said to the Canadian delegate "please, do it" he would do it of course. And he said the same thing to the Russian delegation, the Russian delegation [said] ok. [redacted] [redacted] Michal Onderco:

I'm having a hard time to understand that the Russians would do it because the Americans asked them to. [redacted] [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

No, I don't think so, the Russians, when they came I talked to them and they said they're going to ask for indefinite extension. When they came to New York, I came from Monterrey, I was teaching in Monterrey and they came from Moscow. I explained to them, as I'm explaining to you now, that I would rather have automatic 25 year extensions, and they said, "we will prefer indefinite", and I said ok. Because I was a nobody, I was a member of an NGO. [redacted] [redacted] Michal Onderco:

Did you at that time advise any of the delegations or were you apart? Because there was a proposal from Venezuela I think that basically was encapsulating something like... [redacted] [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

Venezuela was in favour of 25 years. [redacted] [redacted] Michal Onderco:

Yes, did you talk to them before? [redacted] [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

Yes of course, my friend, I forget his name, let me show you. Do you know about PPNN? [redacted] [redacted] Michal Onderco:

Yes, Ben Sanders and John Simpson. [redacted] [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

Yes, let me show you (looks for document) [redacted] [redacted] [Roland Timerbaev:

and Michal Onderco: look at picture from the meeting of PPNN] [redacted] [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

[Sanders] he worked for the IAEA for many years. So he was retiring in '86 I think, and I was then ambassador in the Soviet mission in New York. He was in some important position in the United Nations. He said let's think about delivering on the renewal and extension [context?], how? And little by little, we talked and talked, and he came with the idea of having this organization. [redacted] [redacted] Michal Onderco:

The PPNN? [redacted] [redacted] Roland Timerbaev:

The PPNN, I was then an official, an official from the then-Soviet government, but he

was retiring. And he had good contacts with some funds in the United States, he knew how to do this. I didn't take part in this. And so we wrote some papers, some ideas. But he is still alive. □□ □□ □□ □□ Michal Onderco:

Yes, yes I know. I have his email somewhere. □□ □□ □□ □□ Michal Onderco:

How did he come into touch with John Simpson? □□ □□ □□ □□ Roland Timerbaev:

Yes he then decided that we should bring someone else, and for John Simpson it was a new thing. It was both, Ben and myself we were involved in arms control for many, many years, but John Simpson I think was doing something else. But he brought him in and I think it was a very good decision, and we have picked up people. □□ □□ □□ □□ Michal Onderco:

But at the time, you said you were thinking that "let's do something about the extension conference." What was that 'something' that you wanted to achieve? Did you want to push for the 25 year extension? Did you want to push for indefinite extension? □□ □□ □□ □□ Roland Timerbaev:

You mean in PPNN? □□ □□ □□ □□ Michal Onderco:

Yeah, □□ □□ □□ □□ Roland Timerbaev:

In PPNN it was decided, from the very beginning, that we, the members, shall not have any position, on anything. Each member of the PPNN may have its own position, so we had different views, and we never discussed 'who is for this' and so on. I was in favour of a 25 year, and my friend from Venezuela was in favour of that, maybe someone else I don't know, but we didn't discuss even this. Because we thought that we should keep our hands open for anything. That's why when I was making this statement. I didn't say that I was speaking for PPNN. I was speaking for Monterrey and from Moscow's association [an NGO]. So we had different views. □□ □□ □□ □□ Michal Onderco:

So if there was no agenda to push in 1995, what was it that you wanted to achieve at that conference, or why then did you found the PPNN? □□ □□ □□ □□ Roland Timerbaev:

We wanted to extend it, the idea was to extend it. For how long, that's different. But we wanted, the conference was called 'the Review and Extension Conference'. □□ □□ □□ □□ Michal Onderco:

OK, and when we were in the other room you talked about the fact that you had the discussions with the Venezuelans on their proposal. Why do you think the Venezuelan proposal didn't catch on? □□ □□ □□ □□ Roland Timerbaev:

Well this I don't remember. I know that we discussed the 25 year extension but I don't think I can add anything to what I said, because I forget the details really. □□ □□ □□ □□ Michal Onderco:

But you were not involved in the drafting of the Venezuelan proposal? □□ □□ □□ □□ Roland Timerbaev:

No, not at all. I was pushing my ideas, and most of the delegates knew me, and I came to everyone and said that "I think this is the best thing, because otherwise the P5 will continue to have it forever", that's what I was telling delegates. □□ □□ □□ □□ Michal Onderco:

And what were they telling you back? □□ □□ □□ □□ Roland Timerbaev:

Different delegations told me different things. But you see the United States was so important at that time, much more important than today. Because the Soviet Union was finished, it was then the Russian Federation, so the United States was the big country, the very biggest country, the greatest country. So what Tom Graham said was sufficient for many delegations, I think. □□ □□ □□ □□ Michal Onderco:

So is this also why they agreed to extend the treaty by consensus, and not by vote for example. □□ □□ □□ □□ Roland Timerbaev:

How Tom Graham did it, I don't know. But of course Jayantha Dhanapala certainly played an important role in the sessions, I think. □□ □□ □□ □□ Michal Onderco:

Were the different parts connected? For example, the extension, was it made conditional on something else? Because sometimes there is discussion of a package deal, right? SO there was a package deal that included a strengthened review process, and Middle East WMD free zone, in exchange for indefinite extension? □□ □□ □□ □□ Roland Timerbaev:

I even thought that perhaps this tension around the Middle East somehow pushed away the problem of for how long to extend. There was a lot of talk about, everyone talked about the Middle East. Different ideas, resolutions and so on, and the idea of extending it indefinitely certainly came quite easily. □□ □□ □□ □□ Michal Onderco:

And that's to the detriment of the treaty, as you seem to suggest? □□ □□ □□ □□ Roland Timerbaev:

Not so much to the detriment, but to my foremost idea of eliminating nuclear weapons, this is to the detriment. I think so. Because you know, did you see the book, I didn't read it but I read a very good review of this book that was published two years ago about incidents with nuclear weapons. □□ □□ □□ □□ Michal Onderco:

Yes, I read it. □□ □□ □□ □□ Roland Timerbaev:

What's his name, Schlosser or something? It was published some two years ago. □□ □□ □□ □□ Michal Onderco:

Yes. □□ □□ □□ □□ Roland Timerbaev:

A book which has 600 pages discussing all the incidents with nuclear weapons. And this is, after this book, we should do something about Article VI. □□ □□ □□ □□ Michal Onderco:

But you are very sceptical that it is possible today. □□ □□ □□ □□ Roland Timerbaev:

Unfortunately. There was some chance to do it earlier. Some chance. And we did something. At least we did some very at least we did reduce it by several times, four or five times less nuclear weapons than before. □□ □□ □□ □□ Michal Onderco:

But in the current climate between the United States and Russia, it's quite unlikely that this will lead to success. □□ □□ □□ □□ Roland Timerbaev:

I hope it will change. Much depends on Putin, himself, personally. □□ □□ □□ □□ Michal Onderco:

Seen from Europe, it seems that the ball is now in Russia's court, and especially when Putin talks ... I mean there are all these drills and there are invocations of the nuclear threat against Europe, and there is the placement of the Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad: it seems to be that the nuclear threat is becoming more palpable in Western Europe again. □□ □□ □□ □□ Roland Timerbaev:

No, I don't think it will ever be used, nuclear weapons, but the threat from people in the street. It seems like a threat for people in the street. Actually, of course, nobody believes it; it's not usable, this weapon is not usable. Because if one weapon falls on say, town A, town B will immediately be demolished by another weapon, so I don't think so. I don't want to go into Russian internal politics. Much depends on Russian internal politics. This is not a nuclear issue, to me, what is going on in Russia. He suspended the plutonium agreement by saying that "the United States must cancel, with others, the sanctions and so on", it's a completely non-nuclear affair. Russia will continue to implement this agreement I think, they have built a MOX fuel factory in Siberia, they are going to do it. To produce MOX fuel for using in electricity reactors, whatever is said in this statement by Putin. So the whole thing is internal, I don't want to discuss it. □□ □□ □□