

# The critical reception in Germany of Vadim Rogovin's *1937*

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In the spring of 1998 the *Arbeiterpresse Verlag* published *1937--Year of Terror* by Vadim Z. Rogovin. It is the fourth volume of a six-volume history of the socialist opposition to Stalinism within the Soviet Union. Last month Rogovin, who was working on a seventh volume, died of cancer in Moscow.

Since its publication, *1937* has met with a very contradictory reception from the German press and broadcast media.

In a full page review in the April 29 issue of the newspaper *Junge Welt*, Anton Holberg wrote:

'The significance of Rogovin's book is above all that, contrary to the majority of available literature, it proceeds from a communist position, and despite its scientific qualities the book, amongst other things, turns to literary sources whereby the sombre atmosphere of the period becomes vivid. Many photos in the book of the persons mentioned strengthen this impression.'

In the Berlin *Tagesspiegel* of May 25, Bernhard Schulz devoted a half page to Rogovin. Concerning the debate on the number of victims, initiated by the authors of *the Black Book of Communism*, he wrote:

'More important (than the numbers) is the view from inside the terror, its organisation and its justification. In this respect the handling of the Stalin period is still unsatisfactory, at least in comparison with the what is known about the (fascist) SS state... The work of the Russian historian Vadim Z. Rogovin will considerably deepen our understanding.'

Stalin did not have avowed enemies in his sights, but rather former companions and like-minded comrades, and at least the most prominent victims of the terror did everything they could to maintain the impression that the accusations of 'espionage' and 'betrayal' were justified, according to Schulz. 'There was an important exception... the Trotskyists... In the representation of the oppositional activities of the Trotskyist circle, including the very young cadre already born under the Soviet regime, the whole dimension of the purges, so often dismissed in the west as merely as an internal power struggle, becomes clear. Rogovin devotes a number of chapters in his extensive book especially to the murder of Trotskyists abroad, the devastating terror measures of the NKVD amongst the republicans in Spain, as well as the conditions for those Trotskyists imprisoned in the Gulag camps. The description of the hunger

strikes in the work camps of Kolyma and Vorkuta in 1936, avenged the following year with mass shootings, is a moving tribute to the Trotskyist resistance.'

'A book well worth reading.' This was the conclusion of Bernhard Bayerlein in his June 17 review on the public radio station Westdeutscher Rundfunk.

'Without doubt, the strength of this book lies in the extensive presentation, based on sources, of a chain of events which was known about but had not, up until now, been reconstructed in such detail, and where the individual parts were only diffusely grasped ...

'For Rogovin, the Terror was not predetermined. Proceeding from a relative openness with regard to the historical situation, his thesis maintains that the terror was not in the first place a product of the paranoia of the Red Tyrant, but rather must be understood as a means of liquidating a left alternative, represented first and foremost by Trotsky. This situation required, however, the destruction of a large part of the old Bolshevik cadre. In order to realise this aim, Stalin employed the method of amalgam, i.e., a mixture of inventions and true events...

'It must be positively emphasised: the book does not mirror the simplified monocausal viewpoint on the history of communism. In this respect it differs agreeably from the mainstream of post-Soviet historiography.'

A very different judgement was arrived at by Eckhard Jesse in the *Zeit* of August 20. He reviewed Rogovin's book alongside *Terror*, a volume produced by Hermann Weber and Ulrich Mähler. In two short paragraphs Jesse raged over Rogovin's statement that many of the immigrants and renegades from the twenties and the thirties 'brought into disrepute and soiled the heroic period of the Russian revolution'. He accused Rogovin of 'weaving new tales with regard to Trotsky', and 'pouring venom' on 'the open renegades from communism', including Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Yakovlev, whom Jesse undertook to defend.

Although Jesse concluded that Hermann Weber's book is free from 'such nostalgia', his critique of the latter's book is interesting: 'Worthy of critique would appear to be Weber's characterising of the purges as an intrinsic part of the transformation of communism from a radical social movement

into a totalitarian, dictatorial organisation--as if communism, irrespective of what type, did not from the very beginning possess such totalitarian tendencies. Also the term 'the democratic beginnings of communism' is less convincing, equally the term 'Stalinist' to describe the party purges.'

Eckhard Jesse, who since the reunification of Germany has taught philosophy at the University of Chemnitz, is a notorious anti-Communist. He is the editor of the annual *Extremism and Democracy*, a 'scientific' version of the corresponding report drawn up every year by the German intelligence forces. He vehemently rejects the term Stalinism. For him everything is 'communism', a version of totalitarianism comparable to Fascism.

It is noteworthy that the *Zeit* gave Jesse the job of reviewing Rogovin's book. Co-editor of the newspaper is the former social democratic chancellor Helmut Schmidt. The equating of communism with fascism has a long tradition in the SPD. The party has always used the crimes of Stalinism as the basis for discrediting genuine left-wing critics.

The leader of the SPD after the Second World War, Kurt Schumacher, spoke of 'red-painted fascists' in the run-up to the ban of the German Communist Party (KPD) in 1956. One should also bear in mind the haste with which the social democratic Brandt government banned communists from working in specified professions at the beginning of the seventies under the pretext: 'the defence of democracy against extremism'.

The criticism in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of September 24, by Ralf Zwengel, rejected out of hand the scientific nature of Rogovin's work because the latter takes his stand alongside the Trotskyist Opposition. Zwengel, a 37-year-old graduate student from Berlin, sought to resolve the problem by setting the designation historian in relation to Rogovin in inverted commas.

In his review in the October 2 issue of the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, editor Karl Grobe saw the significance of Rogovin's work for the discussion in present day Russia: 'The discussion which he (Rogovin), member of the Academy of Science, has set in train should above all spur on his Russian colleagues--from the standpoint of avoiding new political errors.'

In *Neues Deutschland* a theoretician of the pro-Stalinist Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), Vladislav Hedeler, rejected Rogovin's thesis that 'the Moscow Trials were Stalin's counterblow in an increasingly intense political struggle.' In common with the reviewer of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, he found Rogovin's work repugnant and rejected the historian's stance in favour of the Opposition. He denied the scientific character of the work without being able in the least to refute the facts and arguments put forward.

In his September 20 review on Hessen Radio, Ulrich Schiller concentrated on the case of Tukhachevsky: 'Although it lies 60 years in the past and despite dozens of inquiries, the case of

Tukhachevsky continues to occupy Russians and non-Russians alike, even to fascinate... With great meticulousness the Russian historian has reconstructed the internal party and international intrigues in the case of Tukhachevsky.

In parts, the book *1937--Year of Terror* reads like a crime novel. Rather than describing the measures of torture and interrogation used by the NKVD to force confessions from Trotskyists and enemies of the party, the book deals more with the devilish mechanisms employed by Stalin and his former head of the secret police, Yezhov.

'While it is often said today that the Russians still seek to evade confronting their own history, one has to praise Rogovin and his account of Stalin, based on the archives which have been opened up, for holding up a critical mirror to Russian society--even though in the reflection, clear traits of Trotsky's influence can be seen. Above all Rogovin has demonstrated: in town and country there were always courageous people who defied Stalin, and refuted his mouthpieces even when it meant risking their lives.'

In the Austrian *Magazine of Company and Trade Union Libraries*, Karl Lhotzky compared Rogovin's book with the work of the American historian Richard Pipes and the *Blackbook of Communism*. 'For both ideological and commercial reasons it is very much en vogue at the moment to compare Stalinism and National Socialism, then go back to the Russian Revolution and in the course of doing so, turn Marx and Engels into the progenitors of every form of terrorism...

'Utilising a wealth of documents and protocols, Rogovin demonstrates that the terror was by no means the continuation of the methods of the revolution, but rather its negation... It becomes clear that the resistance against Stalinism was much more extensive than is often presumed to have been the case...

'All those who are seriously interested in the history of the workers' movement cannot miss reading this book. The reviewer eagerly looks forward to the forthcoming volumes.'



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