

# Vadim Rogovin and the significance of his historical research

Vladimir Volkov  
2 December 1998

Socialist historian Vadim Zakharovich Rogovin was buried in Moscow on September 21. Cancer had torn him from the ranks of the living, not permitting him to finish the extensive historical work to which he had dedicated the latter years of his life.

Though his death went unnoticed in the Russian mass media, it has great significance, not only with respect to current events in Russia, but as a world event.

Following the collapse of the totalitarian regime in the former Soviet Union and the destruction of the 'Iron Curtain,' Rogovin was able to win an international audience. His books have been translated into English and German. His lectures abroad drew audiences of hundreds.

Having proved himself in Soviet social science during the sixties and seventies as a specialist in the fields of esthetics and sociology, V. Rogovin early in the *perestroika* period moved to the front ranks of Russian historians, culminating with his multivolume historical study dedicated to the struggle against the growing Stalinist degeneration of the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet state in the 1920s and 1930s.

The sixties generation and V. Rogovin.

V. Rogovin underwent a great evolution as a scientist and as a thinker. He was born in that most terrible of years of Soviet history--1937. His opinions ripened and the beginning of his spiritual development took place during the 'thaw' that followed Stalin's death in 1953. The flowering of his living and creative forces coincided with the economic and moral decay of Soviet society during the Brezhnev period of stagnation.

Despite these peculiarities, the intellectual high-point of his biography came in the 1990s, when he was able to rise to a moral height that would probably have been impossible for a scientist living under the duress of the Stalinist regime.

Rogovin belonged to that most interesting and deeply contradictory generation, labeled 'the sixties people,' which up to this day continues to play a defining role in the cultural and spiritual life of Russia. In spite of the deeply revelatory character of the anti-Stalin speech of Khrushchev at the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956, and the process of critical rethinking of Soviet history which during the thaw spread to the widest circles of Soviet society, the general world view of the sixties generation could not break out of the confines formed during the epoch of Stalin's dictatorship and the Cold War.

The criticism of Stalinism at the end of 1950s and the first half of 1960s could not reach the depth which was the hallmark of the generation of socialist intellectuals and Bolshevik leaders who went through the experiences of three Russian revolutions and the beginnings of socialist construction in the USSR. This limitation to a great extent determined the further moral and spiritual decay which the sixties generation underwent during the 1970s and 80s.

It may be said that this generation had for a quarter century been moving along the road of gradual abandonment of those ideas and values for

which it strove in its youth. The ecstatic support which many talented representatives of this generation gave first to Gorbachev's perestroika and then to Yeltsin's capitalist reforms have led them to spiritual impoverishment and intellectual degradation. It is this fact which to a large extent explains that atmosphere of intellectual helplessness which predominates today in the public social, scientific and artistic life of Russia.

Vadim Rogovin's evolution is completely different. While in the early years of his scientific activity he was primarily interested in problems of esthetics and artistic creation, later, in the 1970s, while not abandoning his earlier interests, he turned toward questions of social justice. This orientation eventually brought him during the years of perestroika to a serious search for alternatives as they had emerged in the historical development of the Soviet Union as it evolved from the 1930s to the 1980s. Thinking over these problems inevitably strengthened his interest in purely historical questions.

At the end of the 1980s V. Rogovin was one of a very few among major Soviet scientists and authors who seriously and with interest concerned themselves with the problem of studying the ideological and political heritage of Leon Trotsky, one of the Bolshevik leaders, the creator of the Red Army and an uncompromising fighter against the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union. This road brought Rogovin up against the need to undertake an extensive research into the history of 1920s and 1930s. The opening of the Soviet archives, which occurred soon afterwards, gave this plan a realistic foundation.

Comparing the ideological evolution of V. Rogovin with that of so many other representatives of his generation, one is forced to ask oneself: What forces acted on this unusual individual and motivated him to eventually break away from much of what had surrounded and been close to him in his earlier days?

Beginning his investigation, he fully understood the ideological and psychological obstacles that continue to dominate among the educated public and wide layers of Russian society, and recognized that he could not expect any easy successes. Yet he also understood that the clarification of historical questions is the necessary precondition for overcoming the causes of that spiritual and cultural decay which enveloped Soviet and then Russian society. The only possible motivation for this work was an uncompromising yearning for historical truth, a selfless striving to help his people and a belief in the nobler side of human nature.

This path could not but bring Vadim Rogovin into deep psychological isolation within his own country, since the public environment was dominated by an atmosphere of cynicism, derision for global problems and egotistical striving for 'success' at any price. This outlook had become fashionable, particularly among the 'educated' layers of Russia, and above all in Moscow during the heyday of Gaidar. Many old friends turned away. His work was passed over in silence. This situation persists to a great extent even today.

But Vadim Rogovin was able to find a new spiritual foundation and new friends. Beginning in 1993, his joint activity with the International Committee of the Fourth International was extraordinarily productive for both sides. While the historical experience and knowledge of history which the International Committee had accumulated through the many decades of its activity helped Vadim Rogovin clarify many of the most important questions of Soviet history of the 1920s and 30s, to the same extent Rogovin's attention to the problems of social justice and social equality had a profound influence on the political line of the International Committee.

#### V. Rogovin's contribution to the science of history

The first volume of the historical investigation that V. Rogovin undertook appeared in 1992, the year after the collapse of the USSR and the year that Yeltsin's reforms began. The book was titled *Trotskyism: Was There an Alternative?* and covered the period from Lenin's final days until 1928. The second volume, *The Power and the Opposition*, covered the events of 1928-33 and appeared one year later.

These books laid a foundation for the type of understanding of the pre-war history of the Soviet Union that V. Rogovin defended, and that begins with an unprejudiced study of the historical facts. It consists of an understanding that the stabilization and strengthening of the Stalinist dictatorship were in direct contradiction to the tendencies and principles laid down by the October Revolution of 1917, which is why Stalinism collided with a powerful opposition comprised of the best layers within the party and the Soviet apparatus.

The victory of Stalinism was far from predetermined: the eventual development was decided by a complicated combination of various objective and subjective factors. The Bolshevik Party was deeply split into two tendencies: the first saw the fate of the revolution and of socialism in the USSR as being indissolubly tied to the development of world socialism; the second viewed the building of socialism as proceeding exclusively from the point of view of the success of national reforms.

The irreconcilability of this split found its highest expression in the political genocide which Stalin and his clique embarked upon during the 1930s. This policy aimed at the extermination of generations of Bolsheviks as well as socialist-minded intellectuals and workers. It based itself on a new, privileged layer of the Soviet bureaucracy. Only by such bloody means could the Stalinist dictatorship withstand the weight of its own disasters and catastrophes.

Following the appearance of his first two volumes, doctors suddenly discovered that V. Rogovin had cancer of the colon. It had already spread to the liver and become very dangerous. The doctors declared him incurable and gave him only a short time to live. Despite this prognosis Rogovin underwent an operation and was able to work productively for a few more years.

The third volume of his investigation, issued in early 1995, was titled *Stalin's NeoNEP* and covered the period 1934-36. The fourth and fifth volumes were *1937* and *The Party of the Executed*. They described the preparations and execution of the Great Purges of 1936-38, and were published in 1996 and 1997. The last of the volumes issued was *World Revolution and World War* and appeared in bookstores at the end of August of this year.

Vadim Rogovin had almost completed the preparation of the seventh and final volume of his investigation, which concerns the events of 1940-41 and describes in the most minute detail the circumstances surrounding Trotsky's murder in August 1940. Rogovin's plans had also included preparation of a new book based on previously unpublished archival materials, which would have clarified the question of communist oppositions within the Comintern and its national sections in the late 1920s and 1930s.

#### The major ideas of Rogovin's historical research

Toiling with a rare intensity over a period of only several years on the problems of Soviet history and the story of the communist movement of the pre-war period, Vadim Rogovin strove consciously toward a number of goals. Let us summarize the more important of these.

As we have already said, he tried to show the principled irreconcilability between the policy which underlay the October Revolution of 1917 and the foundation of the social and economic basis of the Soviet Union, and the policy of national socialism and economic autarchy which was carried out by Stalin. While the policies of Lenin's times were oriented toward the program of international socialist revolution and based themselves on the widest possible layers of workers and peasants, the policies of Stalin were an expression of the strivings of the growing layer of privileged Soviet bureaucrats, for whom national privileges and state interests were above the interests of workers of all countries and their struggle for social liberation.

The other motive which moved Rogovin in his work was his goal of destroying the artificial impression that the Bolshevik Party had spontaneously and without any inner opposition adopted that political direction which the Stalinist faction in the leadership of the party and state dictated. On the basis of a thorough and all-sided study of the facts, he showed that the opposition to Stalin's course was enormous, not only during the 1920s, but also in the 1930s, and that this eventually led Stalin to the idea of the total annihilation, with a few individual exceptions, of the whole galaxy of Old Bolsheviks.

Finally, V. Rogovin wanted to show that within the Bolshevik Party and the Comintern there existed forces who defended the policy of the initial years of Soviet power, and whose victory over Stalin could have brought the Soviet Union onto a trajectory of development completely different from that of the 1930s to 1980s. These forces were grouped around the Left Opposition and their political and intellectual leader was Leon Trotsky.

#### V. Rogovin's stature as a historian

The intensity of Rogovin's intellectual labor was astonishing. He created works which, for the first time in post-war Russian historiography, provided an integral and complete story of the 1920s and 1930s. This has created a powerful foundation for a far-reaching rethinking of the story of this period, and a renewal on this basis of many sides of the public and spiritual life of the country.

If we compare the results and the scale of Vadim Rogovin's intellectual heroism with the other authors and historians of contemporary Russia, we see that he stands completely alone and at a significantly higher intellectual level. There are two names that dominate the liberal historiography of Russia: General Dmitry Volkogonov and the author Edward Radzinsky. We could probably add, due to his popularity, the name of Victor Suvorov, but he is so inconsiderate of historical facts that his writings cannot be taken seriously by any self-respecting scientist.

With respect to the first two names, even the better of the two, D. Volkogonov, can hardly be called a historian in the full sense of the word, even though he has left behind a number of quite voluminous works, encompassing large periods of Soviet history and shedding light on many questions of this epoch. His central works are his biographies of Stalin, Trotsky and Lenin. These books introduce us to a large number of previously unknown documents and demolish many of the established myths of the Stalinized social sciences. At the same time, however, they create new myths, or, perhaps more accurately, renew some ancient ones.

The books of Volkogonov's trilogy appeared between 1988 and 1993 and bear the signs of a deep change in the political orientation of their

author. For this reason they are not tied together by a unifying world view or conception of history. The biography of Stalin appeared during the first years of perestroika and shows the traces of the traditional Soviet approach: Stalin is viewed as a figure who left a deeply positive trace on Soviet history, albeit with some 'deformations' and 'excesses.'

Trotsky's biography belongs to the period of late perestroika, when the author viewed the Stalinist dictatorship in a completely negative light and moved to positions which rejected any progressive historical significance to the October Revolution. Volkogonov views this event as a retreat from 'normal civilization.' While expressing definite sympathies towards Trotsky and recognizing his political and intellectual superiority over Stalin, Volkogonov sees him as a 'demon of the revolution,' who, in substance, represented only a variety of the same political being as Stalin. The overall theme of the book is that one must condemn revolution and all violence in general and return to the path of 'normal' bourgeois development.

The last in the Volkogonov trilogy was devoted to Lenin and written when its author had become a most crude and rabid anticommunist. Hence it is the least valuable from a scientific point of view. Having condemned Bolshevik revolutionary violence and equated it with the state violence of the totalitarian Stalinist system, Volkogonov supported Yeltsin's tank bombardment of the Russian parliament in the fall of 1993. This alone constitutes an incontrovertible scientific condemnation of the historical conception of this former Soviet general, who had for many years supervised political indoctrination in the army.

Despite the fairly low intellectual level of D. Volkogonov's historical works, they stand taller than the average scribblings that dominate the Russian book market today, and they form a scientific looking basis for the present political regime of the country. Volkogonov remains one of the main ideologists and heroes of the 'new' capitalist Russia.

The other author, E. Radzinsky, gained prominence due to his participation in the investigation of the circumstances surrounding the execution of the tsar's family in 1918, and the publication last year of an extensive biography of Stalin. His works have a more fictional, 'pop history' character and they are supported by a massive public relations campaign in the liberal media of Russia. After Volkogonov's death, they have made Radzinsky the best known author writing on Soviet history.

The level of Radzinsky's writings very clearly reflects the general process of intellectual decay characterizing the thinkers and ideologues of the 'new Russia.' This is especially obvious in his biography of Stalin. The problem is not so much that Radzinsky does not approach his subject as a scientific historian, but that as a publicist and 'free' artist he does not pay too much attention to the veracity and integrity of his judgments. The problem lies with the viewpoint and general conception on the basis of which E. Radzinsky considers his material.

On the one hand, he presents himself as a liberal and anticommunist, who naturally treats the October Revolution and everything having to do with Bolshevism and communism with hostility. On the other hand, Radzinsky is enchanted with Stalin and describes him as a great person and towering political figure.

He ascribes to Stalin qualities that the latter did not possess, or which took on a very peculiar form. For example, Radzinsky pictures Stalin as having a deep understanding of individual psychology and a penetrating mind. But such psychological insight concerned knowledge of the worst sides of human nature and the ability to exploit people's weaknesses to his advantage.

The artistic talents that Radzinsky discovers in Stalin are in sharp contradiction to everything we know of the artistic inclinations of the Soviet dictator, which made him such a 'gray spot' when compared to a wide layer of the intellectual leaders of Bolshevism. As for the ability to foresee events, which Radzinsky also ascribes to Stalin, this not only wildly contradicts the facts of Soviet history, it relegates the scientific

value of Radzinsky's book to the level of the scrawls of Stalin's fanatical and dull-witted admirers.

When one looks closely into the motives and goals which Radzinsky poses to himself, one must conclude that they consist of an attempt to rehabilitate Stalin in the eyes of public opinion--not as a Bolshevik and revolutionary, but as an extraordinary statesman and great figure of Russian history. In brief, this conception could be expressed thus: Stalin was, of course, a tyrant and a bastard, but he was a great bastard and he was our bastard and we must, because of this, be proud of him.

In this sense E. Radzinsky is laying a historical foundation for the next turn in the contemporary policy of the Kremlin, the substance of which consists in the wish to find a compromise and establish direct cooperation among all the layers of the old Soviet nomenclature and the new Russian ruling class.

Comparing these kinds of authors with the work of Vadim Rogovin one is bound to see that the literary heritage of the latter is characterized by a much wider and deeper outlook and understanding of events. We may justifiably call V. Rogovin the greatest historian in Russia, and in science a figure of world magnitude.

#### The historical perspective

While valuing very highly the contribution made by V. Rogovin to Russian and world historical science, we cannot forget that strictly speaking he did not add anything radically new. The major judgments and the general conception which he used to understand historical events were worked out before the war, principally by Leon Trotsky. During the postwar period there existed in the West a powerful school of historians who had written many works presenting a coherent and consistent picture of the events which unfolded in the USSR during the 1920s and 30s.

Vadim Rogovin is not a pioneer in this sense. What he did that was really new consisted in unifying the new materials published following the opening of the Soviet archives and integrating them into the already existing scientific understanding of the epoch. We should speak not of his primacy as a discoverer, but rather of his ability to raise Russian historical science to the level which it had achieved in the West, in some areas even rising above the West. Yet even this is sufficient to include him within the galaxy of the best historians.

When viewing this matter from the standpoint of the development of historical science in Russia, V. Rogovin's scientific research places him alongside the major Russian historians of the past century, such as Nikolai Karamzin or Vasily Kliuchevsky. Karamzin was the first to comprehend Russia's history as a whole from the point of view of the development of statehood and the formation of the monarchy. Kliuchevsky achieved something similar from the point of view of social and economic development and the formation of the legal and social institutions of Russia. No one can conceive of studying Russian history without reading and taking into account the works of these authors.

V. Rogovin plays a similar role in relation to Russian history of the twentieth century. He not only describes, but explains the key period in the twentieth century history of Russia--a period, moreover, more complex and more deliberately falsified than any other.

No matter how the historical science of Russia and the world develops in the future, no matter how far its understanding of twentieth century history deepens and extends, it will inevitably proceed from, base itself on and relate to the intellectual inheritance which Vadim Rogovin has left us.

See Also:

*Vadim Rogovin and the significance of his historical work*

Memorial meetings to be held in Berlin and London

[27 November 1998]

Victim of Stalinism protests at threats

*Professor Nathan Steinberger writes to the Student Union at Humboldt*

*University, Berlin*

[28 November 1998]

International tributes for Russian Marxist historian:

Vadim Rogovin buried in Moscow

[6 October 1998]

1937 - Stalin's Year of Terror

[WSWS Exhibit]



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**