

# Vadim Rogovin's contribution to Russian social sciences

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*The author of this essay is Doctor of Economic Sciences and a Professor of the Institute of Economics of the Russian Academy of Science; he also heads the Trotsky Institute, which was established this March in Moscow. Vadim Z. Rogovin, a Russian Marxist historian with a worldwide reputation, died last September after a long struggle with cancer.*

Some time has now passed since the death of Vadim Zakharovich Rogovin, and we may more calmly and fundamentally evaluate his work for our country's social research. It is not by accident that some claim that his works are in a way suppressed. This is not quite the case: Rogovin's books are read, they arouse many debates and arguments. And yet, the professional, social and political press has published very few reviews. There are some powerful reasons for this, but we shall deal with them later on.

Even during the Soviet period V. Rogovin was known as a serious researcher of the sociological problems of development, of the social structure of our society, of the social policies of the state. V.Z. did not change his world views and social ideals even during the most complex post-Soviet period; he remained a creative researcher, a Marxist pioneer in our nation's social science. But the major work of his lifetime was that which he performed in the last period.

The scale of his completed work is truly staggering. In the field of Russian social sciences there is probably none who can equal V.Z. insofar as the breadth and the depth of the written history of the Soviet Union during the pre-war period. Most importantly, Rogovin's books give us a completely new history than the one which we got so used to reading during Soviet days, and a different history than the stuff which is forced on us today by the various ideological quick-change artists and opportunists.

During Soviet times, and even today, the writings about our history were of two types: purely factual history, and conjunctural. The first type originated with M. Karamzin. It simply relates historical events: at this time there came to power this tsar or this General Secretary, this and that happened, and it was good. Or, depending on the author's political orientation, it was bad.

The conjunctural type of historical storytelling is more complicated. The writers tried not just to simply relate what happened, but to fit these events into some theoretical conception which supposedly explained these events. But the whole conception grew out of the political agenda laid out beforehand by the central authorities. The theoretical underpinnings of such writings did not amount to much.

Today, of course, certain advanced historians attempt to escape these clichés. It is not considered serious today to simply relate events; to be looked on as an opportunist means to be treated with derision. This is all the more true since the current central authorities simply do not express any coherent theoretical views on social development. And yet, all the results of such attempts, and there have been a few, are quite unimpressive.

It is thus not a coincidence but quite reasonable that the problem of

working out historical concepts has been taken up by specialists in a related field. In the case of V.Z. Rogovin we see one example of a very successful entry of a philosopher and a sociologist into the field of history. This has often happened in the history of science. We may remember a number of cases of mathematicians entering into the fields of economics, or physicists working in biology, etc. However, V.Z. Rogovin did not simply cover the traditional field of historical research. He had created his own area of study, which may be classified as historical sociology. For our national science this is an original and pioneering approach. Hence, not everyone can accept and understand him.

For a start, let us briefly describe Rogovin's books. There are seven of them, all united by a common theme: "Was there an alternative" to the Stalinist course of social and economic development of our country during the pre-World War II period. Let us remind the reader of the contents of these volumes.

**Volume 1. *Trotskyism: a View from a Distance*, Moscow, 1992.** Here, and perhaps for the first time in our literature, there is presented a reasonably detailed story of the internal Party struggle of 1922-27. The events and content of this struggle were crudely falsified during the years of Stalinism and the period of stagnation. Even today, this period has for many people remained completely unknown. The author shows the role of the "Left Opposition" and of L.D. Trotsky, who really did begin to struggle against Stalinism as early as 1923. The book describes the genesis of the totalitarian regime in the USSR, the causes for the tragedy of the Bolshevik Party of Lenin's period.

**Volume 2. *The Central Authority and the Oppositions*, Moscow, 1993.** This volume covers the period of 1928-33. The book develops a picture of an irreconcilable struggle between the Stalinists and the various opposition groupings within the Party, both legal and underground; it exposes the myth of the unbroken continuity from Leninism to Stalinism and of the "monolithic unity" of the Bolshevik Party. The book talks in detail about the contents of the Left Opposition's proposals, how it tried to fight against Stalin's forced collectivization and dekulakization, against the adventurist methods of industrialization, the bureaucratization of central planning, social privileges, the totalitarian political regime. The book tells the story of Leon Trotsky as the leader of the Left Opposition, his alternative course of social and economic development of the country.

**Volume 3. *Stalin's Neo-NEP*, Moscow, 1995.** This book looks at our history in 1934-36, which was actually a somewhat milder period than both the preceding and the succeeding ones. Were it not for the murder of S. M. Kirov and the repression that followed... But can one find within Stalinism "softer" periods? The author develops an original sociological conception which explains the spread of Stalin's repression and the sharp vacillations in the Party's "general line."

**Volume 4. *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror*, Moscow, 1996.** The title of this book speaks volumes--this was the most terrible year in Russia's history. On the basis of numerous historical materials, including new archival sources, the author in a significantly new way describes the

mechanism of the Great Purge, the mass repression, the Yezhov regime.

**Volume 5. *The Party of the Executed, Moscow, 1997.*** What had remained of the Bolshevik Party after 1938, what had it become? For the first time in our literature the problem has been posed that not all the accusations of the Stalinist clique against the Opposition had been invented. The materials presented in the book convince the reader that the Oppositionists were "guilty" in the sense that they did fight against Stalin.

**Volume 6. *The World Revolution and World War, Moscow, 1998.*** This book in a detailed way characterizes the economic and political situation in the USSR after the Great Purges at the end of the 1930s, it describes the international situation which developed immediately prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. A special section is devoted to the role of Trotsky in warning about the danger of fascism and Hitlerism's aggressiveness, and the history of the founding of the Fourth International.

**Volume 7. *The End Means a Beginning.*** This volume has not yet been released. It describes the state of readiness of the USSR for a major war, the history of the Patriotic War itself, and the murder of Trotsky.

This is just a short account of the contents of these seven volumes. But it is senseless to cite their contents, these books must be read. All the more so since they are written in a beautiful Russian language, simply and clearly. They tend to be read at a single sitting (na odnom dikhanii). After you read these books by V. Z. Rogovin you will finally begin to understand the history of our country, you will learn to distinguish the truth from falsehood. In addition, Rogovin's books, while describing these very dramatic events and showing how tragic Russia's fate was, for some reason they have an optimistic effect on the reader. After reading them the world will somehow appear brighter, all the current outrages and the ugliness of the Yeltsin regime will seem petty. Most importantly, one gains the conviction that all the crimes, both of the past and of the present, will not remain unpunished. It is this life affirming world view, this conviction that justice will sooner or later prevail, which form the thread running through the books of V.Z. Rogovin. And that is excellent.

Of course, from the point of view of some pedantic social studies professors, Rogovin's books contain many gaps, some vague spots, unproven assertions. But even these errors add to the special appeal of the books. These elements point to the areas where the historians and sociologists still need to work, which must be corrected or filled in. After all, one person cannot do the work of all our humanities scholars.

Sometimes even persons who by and large support Rogovin say that he did not introduce anything fundamentally new into historical science. I completely disagree with this and will show later which of Rogovin's work is "fundamentally new." But right now I shall briefly enumerate a few things "not fundamentally new" which Rogovin had added to our historical knowledge.

For example, in the book *The central authority and the oppositions* Rogovin develops the idea that during the 1920s the Left Opposition was the only political movement which counterposed to Stalinism its own ideological program on all the fundamental problems of the world communist movement and socialist construction within the USSR. The author writes that the act of reading the documents of the Left Opposition "clearly convinces one that all that is correct within the contemporary criticism of Stalinism had already been said by the Bolshevik opposition in the late 1920s and the early thirties" (p. 6). In other words, L. Trotsky and his supporters had already in the 1920s said about Stalin and Stalinism all those things, which the *perestroika* publicists of the Gorbachev period repeated recently and which had produced a shocking effect on the innocent Russian public. But Trotsky had said them much more profoundly and intelligently.

Did anyone write about this in our historical literature? Nobody! This line of reasoning is rare even abroad. Rogovin, while analyzing foreign writings, cites the example of a well-known book by R. Conquest, *The Great Terror*. The book devotes a single page to the activity of Leon

Trotsky, and Rogovin found 10 "crude factual errors and exaggerations" on this one page. This is how much the vaunted historical science, even foreign science, is worth. Well, I should not exaggerate; there are quite worthy historical works written abroad. But, unfortunately, they do not alter the trend.

Where in our literature is there an examination of Trotsky's fight against world fascism, his analysis of the trends and the character of the Second World War? All the forecasts of Trotsky concerning the coming war were astonishingly correct. And for the first time in our nation's literature all of this is in a very detailed manner described by V.Z. Rogovin. In his last book, *The end means a beginning*, Rogovin concludes: "Even the bourgeois politicians and publicists reluctantly concluded that nobody else in the world could make such thorough analyses and such reliable prognoses of world events as Trotsky. Therefore, his statements and articles in the world press--about the Soviet-German pact, the division of Poland, the attack on Finland--were reprinted in many countries in tens of millions of copies."

Another subject must be mentioned. For the first time in our country's literature V.Z. Rogovin honestly and truthfully described the person and activity of L. Trotsky. Even today, among our public there are currently many legends and myths about Trotsky; even today one could repeat George Orwell's words: "Today to call a person a 'Trotskyite', means to call him a murderer, an agent provocateur, etc. On the other hand, anyone who criticizes the Communists from the left may be labeled a 'Trotskyite'" (cf. *World revolution and world war*, p. 328). V.Z. Rogovin returns the concepts "Trotskyism" and "Trotskyist" to their original, I would even say, their scientific sense. A Trotskyist is a person who shares the major views and tenets of Trotsky, and in his theoretical and political activity is to some extent governed by these views. Hence, a Trotskyist is a supporter of Trotsky's teaching in the same way that a Kantian is of Kant's, a Marxist--of Marx's, and a Keynesian--of Keynes'. This was for the first time explained in our literature by Rogovin. In a similar way, Trotskyism is a complex of views and tenets of Trotsky himself on the major social, economic and political problems of the contemporaneous epoch. One can agree or disagree with Trotskyism, love it or hate it, but it is simply idiotic to pretend that there is no such teaching. Regrettably, our social sciences avoid noticing many things.

Of course, our literature and historical science are unique, so to say something truthful already means to make a significant contribution to science. To talk truthfully about Trotsky and about his role in Russian history--that is a heroic feat in science, for this one must be very brave. V.Z. Rogovin possessed such bravery in full measure. And that is why he never really fit into the usual Russian political structures, neither of the left "communist" type, nor of the right.

Some opponents of Rogovin ascribe to him an apologetic attitude towards the person and the activity of Trotsky. Persons who are well acquainted with the whole world literature on this subject might agree with this impression. But for us, for the Russian readers who discovered the truth about Trotsky for the first time in the books of V.Z. Rogovin, no, we do not come away with an impression of apologetics. The very theme chosen by the author, "alternatives to Stalinism," by the nature of this genre presupposes the sort of tonality which is used by V.Z. Rogovin. However, even here one must bear in mind that in many cases Rogovin points out the miscalculations and errors of Trotsky. The book *World Revolution and World War* even contains a chapter entitled "In what and why did Trotsky err." In general, however, Rogovin's books are not only about Trotsky. Behind some trees, even the very large ones, one must also see the forest.

And there is another quite correct and profound observation by V. Z. While describing the defeats suffered by the Soviet Army during the initial years of the Patriotic War Rogovin with reason criticizes Soviet historiography for its implied admission that fascism was a more effective

economic system that socialism. The author explains this by the fact that Soviet historiography tried to find some "objective" reasons for the Soviet defeats during the initial period of the war. The works of Soviet historians lead to a conclusion that "within seven years (1933-1939) the Hitler clique succeeded in preparing its country for war thoroughly and extensively while Soviet Union, having at its disposal much more time, did not" (*World Revolution and World War*, p. 132). It would appear (from the books of these Soviet historians) that Stalin's crimes had nothing to do with this.

There is another point, and it is a pioneering one in our social and economic literature. While describing the victims of Stalin's terror many publicists and writers in general correctly state that these persons were innocent. This was especially so during the campaigns of rehabilitation in the 1950s and 1980s. True, many accusations were impossibly false (accusations of espionage, terror, struggle against Soviet power, etc.). But if we do not distinguish between the Soviet power and Stalin then the results of these rehabilitations imply that nobody had seriously fought against Stalin. Such a conclusion would be monstrous, implying with it that the Russian people, and the Bolshevik Party first and foremost, had willingly and placidly accepted this dictator.

This was not so. Up till the late 1930s and even later there was inside the country an opposition, which had furiously fought against the Stalin regime for the ideals of socialism and democracy. V. Z. Rogovin correctly notes that the campaigns of rehabilitation came to the false conclusion about the "arbitrariness and fabrication of all the political accusations which were thrown at the victims of Stalin's terror campaign" (*Stalin's NeoNEP*, p. 8). That is, strange as it may sound, a number of Stalin's accusations were justified. But what were these valid accusations? The author convincingly explains that the Stalinists correctly accused the oppositionists of speaking out against the Stalinist Central Committee, his Politburo, against Stalin personally. This was really so. But only a mind completely bent by totalitarianism would conclude from this that by acting against Stalin these oppositionists were acting against the people or against the Soviet power. V. Z. Rogovin justifiably concludes that "the Moscow Trials were not an unjustified cold-blooded crime, but a counterstroke made by Stalin in the course of a sharp political struggle" (1937, p. 78).

I recounted only some of the new facets and discoveries fundamentally important for our historical science, which were made by V. Z. Rogovin. In my opinion, from now on one can no longer write about Russia's history without reference to his discoveries. Such historical writings would seem simply ludicrous. V. Z. introduced into our historical science not just something it lacked, but something which was completely alien to it. By this I mean sociological generalizations. V. Z. Rogovin succeeded in collecting and organizing an enormous amount of historical materials with the result that there took shape a definite conception of the historical process in Russia during the first half of the twentieth century. It is exactly this which shows the fundamentally new approach of this author towards historical science, his fundamentally new contribution to science. Not only for the historical science but for the national study in humanities in general.

I must elaborate. The thing is that while justly condemning historical science we must give it credit (only to its best representatives, of course) for collecting a huge amount of sources and facts about the history of Soviet Russia, and sometimes even generalizing on this basis. Our historians are not responsible for, in fact they were victimized by, the fact that many primary sources were closed off, the archival research was strictly circumscribed, that there were administrative bans on work in one or another subject. Even in these horrific circumstances our historians were still able to work with facts and with documents.

But this work with documents, this "archival work" resulted in a fear of theoretical generalizations of the historical material, an avoidance of

working out broad and interesting hypotheses, of searching for historical patterns. The historians have literally buried themselves in the archives and never emerge from them. Even today there is a certain "tone" among the professional historians which declares that a historical find, a discovery can occur only on the basis of new, never before seen archival materials. According to this logic it would appear that the historical concepts of the Soviet period were either absolutely correct or absolutely false, and some people really think this. That up until the archives were opened it was impossible to find out about the monstrous deeds of Stalinism. Some sharp operators in the field of historical science attempt to find a "new" archival basis even against Lenin.

All of this is just another conjunctural twist. The archives have nothing to do with it. There are enough facts available about Lenin, about Stalin, about the 1930s. With all due respect for the archives and for archival research, it would be very difficult to find there any fundamentally new facts. And what could these facts prove or disprove? What we are mainly lacking at this time is not new facts or documents, but a theoretical comprehension, or more exactly, a reconsideration of those facts which had been known for a long time already. We have no theoretical, more precisely, no sociological understanding of our history. Up until today nobody can give an answer to a whole series of fundamental questions about the social and economic nature of the social regime in the USSR, the pattern of its formation and development, the nature of the contemporary social situation in Russia, the social and economic processes which are literally tearing our country apart. It is precisely a theoretical and sociological comprehension of our history which would be able to answer these many questions.

Thus, it is the historical and sociological works of V. Z. Rogovin which create such a historical conception. I would describe him as the founder of Russian historical sociology. This means that history must be composed not out of a simple recounting and description of facts and documents, but through their elaboration and synthesis into a unified conception of society's development. Within our social and historical science it was Rogovin who was the first to do this. Hence it is senseless to judge his contribution to science from the point of view of "archival research." To evaluate V. Z. Rogovin's work in its totality one must climb out of the archives into the light, rise up and breathe some fresh air, and then judge.

So, what is the historic-sociological conception of V. Z. Rogovin? It is contained in the title of his multi-volume work, "Was there an alternative?" The author proceeds from the theory of social alternatives of historical development, but for the first time he thoroughly and seriously works this conception out on the basis of extensive historical material. Prior to him this task was undertaken by the well known historian P. Volobuev, who declared that there was an alternative to the post-revolutionary development of Russia: either towards capitalism, or towards socialism. As if the previous feudal society of monarchist Russia was free to make such a choice.

Rogovin approached this problem in a completely different way. He spoke not about alternative paths of an objective historical process, but about the alternatives to the Stalinist political course of development. The author proves that there was a real alternative which led to the same and even better results of social development, but only on the basis of a different political course, a different social and economic strategy. It was the Left Opposition which personified an alternative to Stalinism, and it fought till the last for the ideals of socialism.

This theoretical conception of Rogovin still demands scientific discussion and development. Not everything is clear and proven. Thus, one must consider as questionable the issue of the aims and orientation of the Left Opposition's political strategy. Did it coincide in its eventual goals with the Stalinist course, and did it, therefore, differ only in its form of historical process? Or, did the strategy of the Left Opposition pursue completely different goals? These and many other questions must still be

seriously discussed.

But today, thanks to the efforts of V. Z. Rogovin our nation's social sciences possess an integral historical-sociological conception of our society. And in this consists the permanent and fundamental contribution of V. Z. Rogovin to our social sciences.



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