

Stalin's Neo-NEP to be published in German

New volume of Vadim Rogovin's study of opposition to Stalinism in the USSR presented at Leipzig Book Fair

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Arbeiterpresse Verlag, the publishing house of the PSG (Socialist Equality Party), the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, presented the German translation of volume three of Vadim Rogovin's multi-volume series *Was There an Alternative?* at the Leipzig Book Fair. The book will be published in May. Volumes four and five, *1937—Year of Terror* and *The Party of the Executed*, have already been translated into German.

A reading of essential passages from *Stalin's Neo-NEP* attracted great interest in Leipzig.

In his books, Russian historian Vadim Rogovin, who died in 1998 after a long struggle with cancer, produced a unique study of the opposition to Stalinism in the Soviet Union. The newly translated volume deals with the 1934-36 period, a time of tempestuous change in the Soviet Union.

The Neo-NEP (New Economic Policy) of this period brought about a liberalisation of economic relations through a partial return to market economy mechanisms which had been eliminated during the preceding period of forced collectivisation. Rogovin describes this process:

"Despite all the contradictions of 'Stalin's Neo-NEP', production efficiency was increased from 1934 to 1936 to a level that had not been achieved in the immediate post-World War I era. These economic successes were seen by the foreign and émigré press as signs of a 'Soviet spring', a 'pinkening of Red Russia'. In 1936, the émigré-run Institute of Economic Research characterised the advances in the Soviet economic systems as 'an attempt to organise production and distribution between the state enterprises based on the principles of competition, personal interest, return on investment and profit realisation'.

"Stalin's Neo-NEP' was in sharp contrast to the NEP of the 1920s. The main differences were that the liberalisation of economic life under the original NEP had been accompanied by a conscious application of policies that curbed the growth of social inequality and a drastic reduction of political reprisals, compared to the Civil War period. In contrast to this, Stalin's Neo-NEP combined the relaxation of autocratic administrative control in the management of the economy with deepening social differentiation and steadily increasing political reprisals in order to suppress any opposition or criticism in the Party and in society in general, and to consolidate the dominant role of the bureaucracy and the regime of personal power.

"Trotsky wrote that, now that the greatest economic difficulties caused by forced collectivisation had been overcome, one could have expected a turn to greater freedom of thought and a democratisation of the political regime. But the Stalinist bureaucracy could not take this path, since it imperilled their autocratic rule within the Party and over the country as a whole. 'The more complicated the economic tasks become,' wrote Trotsky, 'and the greater the demands and expectations of the population, the more acute the contradictions between the bureaucratic regime and the requirements of socialist development also become—and the more brutally

the bureaucracy fights to hold onto its power, the more cynically it avails itself of force, fraud and bribery.... Consequently, the necessity of masking repression through falsification and amalgams becomes all the more urgent for them.' This explains why 'Stalin's Neo-NEP' was so short-lived. It gave way to the Great Terror and restrictive labour laws that led to a direct militarization of work."

Rogovin substantiates with a wealth of numerical data his depiction of economic development and recovery after forced collectivisation and the conflicts verging on civil war that accompanied it.

In several chapters he shows how Kirov's murder in 1934 was organised and used to set in motion the Terror and purges. He provides a detailed description of the growing dissatisfaction and opposition in the cities that constituted the actual background to the Terror. At the reading in Leipzig this was demonstrated with several passages from the book, including the following:

"Whereas at the beginning of the 1930s the brunt of political mass reprisals was directed against the peasants resisting forced collectivisation, in 1934 it had turned against the city dwellers who were increasingly voicing dissatisfaction with Stalin's regime. A significant section of the working class, namely those in whom the traditions of the revolution were still alive, reacted with great indignation to the anti-proletarian politics of Stalinism, as a result of which the working masses were still suffering enormously under the social consequences of forced industrialisation ...

"As Khrushchev wrote in his memoirs, even in Moscow the working and living conditions of the workers were very harsh. 'Construction workers were recruited in the villages and had to live in barracks. The conditions in those barracks were unbearable: They were filthy, crawling with lice, cockroaches and other vermin, and above all there was no decent food or work clothes. And in those days it was very difficult in general to acquire the clothes people needed. Of course, all of this led to dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction also broke out when work norms were changed in the collective labour agreements. For instance, a certain quota somewhere would, all of a sudden, be increased by 10 to 15 percent at the beginning of the new year.' These administratively imposed measures, which were obediently supported by the trade unions and which, needless to say, were carried out without asking the workers their opinion, occasionally led to strikes in factory departments or even entire plants. In such cases, writes Khrushchev, party officials explained the situation to the workers. The gist of these explanations was that 'the workers had to tighten their belts to a certain extent to successfully compete with, and then catch up with the (capitalist) opponent.'

"But this constant exhortation to 'belt-tightening' by no means always had the effect on workers desired by the bureaucracy, particularly with regard to young workers. A. Orlov wrote on this subject: 'These young workers were extremely indignant about the outrageous inequality they perceived in the life led by the near-starved majority of the population, on

the one hand, and the life of luxury enjoyed by the privileged class of bureaucrats, on the other. The sons and daughters of the factory workers had to look on as their "comrades" in the Communist League, the sons of the bureaucrats, were appointed to plush positions in state administration, while they themselves were subjected to extreme exploitation through hard manual labour. The members of the League who signed up for work in the construction of the Moscow subway had to work ten hours a day standing in water up to their waists. While they were working, their fellow League members, the sons of the Moscow bureaucracy, were driving about in their fathers' limousines. The relentless exploitation of the young Communists in the construction of the subway led to an outburst of indignation. One day, about 800 of them refused to work, and marched to the headquarters of the Central Committee of the Young Communist League, where they threw their party membership cards onto the ground and furiously cursed at the government.'

"Stalin used every means at his disposal to combat the forms of social protest mounted by the workers—even the exploitation of anti-Semitic sentiments. Khrushchev reports that 'when some disturbances—I wouldn't want to call them a revolt—broke out in Aircraft Plant No. 30', Stalin said to him: 'We should organise the stronger workers, give them cudgels and, when the working day is over, they can beat up those Jews.'

"After a while, the task of suppressing the dissatisfaction of the masses was increasingly passed to sections of the NKVD [Stalin's secret police, forerunner of the KGB—editor's note] that were even beyond the control of the party apparatchiks ...

"These 'state organs' were especially vicious in their activities aimed at preventing 'Trotskyist' ideas from gaining ground in the working class. When oppositionist leaflets were distributed in the Moscow ball bearings plant in 1935, more than 300 workers were arrested the next day.

"In spite of increasing terror, oppositionist ideas kept on spreading to sections of the youth. Orlov writes: 'All over the country, young people formed secret groups in which they searched for an answer to political questions they were not allowed to ask openly.'...

"Oppositionist sentiment in the Soviet Union was mainly communist in character, and was particularly widespread within the Party. Consequently, Stalin carried out three official party purges from 1933 to 1936, in the course of which several hundred thousand party members were expelled."

Rogovin describes in detail in several chapters the increasing social polarisation in the Soviet Union. While the mass of the working class did not benefit from the development of the economy, the ruling bureaucracy was leading a life of luxury:

"One constant feature in the lifestyle of Stalin and his closest collaborators was dinners lasting five to six hours, during which exquisite food and drink were served. Mikoyan's son, who was present at several of these banquets, recalls that Stalin would occasionally say some words in Georgian that meant 'a fresh tablecloth'. Immediately, an 'employee' (in reality, a servant) would appear, grasp the four corners of the tablecloth and clear away all the food on it along with the broken crystal and chinaware. Other food that had just been prepared would then be placed on the new, clean tablecloth."

Rogovin also examines the contradiction between this extravagant lifestyle and the propaganda version, according to which Stalin was a frugal person who "rejected material wealth". The Russian historian points out that, formally speaking, there was no personal property, this being a relic of the October Revolution. But in actual fact the ruling bureaucracy had free and unrestricted access to all of the state's material wealth:

"The fact that, in formal terms, there was no personal property was of course no hindrance, but rather an enormous impetus for the top layer of the bureaucracy who, in Trotsky's words, were leading the lives of rich Western European capitalists. Somewhat later, this was confirmed by E. Varga, who worked within the Comintern apparatus for many years and

later had ample opportunity to observe the life and customs of the Soviet elite as a member of the Academy.

"In his memoirs, written shortly before his death in the early 1960s, Varga states that at first he thought the enormous differences in income and wealth between the various social strata were merely a moral defect of the system. It was his opinion at the time, he writes, that only an insignificant number of privileged people were involved, and that therefore they could not be using up any substantial portion of the national income. Later on, however, he came to the conclusion that he had greatly underestimated the amount of funds spent by the state to support the lifestyles of the bureaucracy elite, and that the individual amount of this expenditure for *one* prominent dignitary was incredibly high. To substantiate this point, Varga writes: 'There are dachas [the traditional country cottages of well-off city dwellers—editor's note] near to Moscow which of course belong to the state, where there are always ten to twenty guards and, in addition to them, gardeners, cooks, room maids, specialist doctors and nurses, drivers, etc.—a total of 40 or 50 domestic employees. This is all paid for by the state. Apart from that, they of course have a city residence with the appropriate number of domestic employees and at least one other dacha in the south. They have their own personally reserved special trains and aeroplanes (both with a kitchen and cooks), personally reserved yachts and, of course, a large number of cars and drivers at the disposal of themselves and the members of their families day and night. They get ... all of their food and other consumer goods free of charge.... To lead that kind of life in America, you have to be a multimillionaire!'"

But the domestic employees led a miserable life:

"In his book *Back from Soviet Russia*, (André) Gide writes that he wanted to convince himself during his trip there that poverty no longer existed in the Soviet Union. But all too soon he discovered that there were 'too many, much too many poor people'. However, 'misery is in ill repute in the Soviet Union. It hides itself. One would think it feels guilty. If it revealed itself it would find no sympathy, no helping hand, only contempt.' For the honest observer of Soviet life, this poverty revealed itself at every corner. For instance, in the girls who found employment as a maid in a rich family: They received miserable wages and existed under pitiful, degrading conditions. 'The maid of the people who live on the same story as my friends ... sleeps in a storeroom where she can hardly stretch herself out to full length. As for the food she gets to eat.... She came to my friends and begged them: "Please, dear lady, don't throw away your kitchen waste." Up to then, she had to scavenge in the garbage bin to find something edible.'

"The maid problem acquired a serious social significance in the 1930s, particularly because there were so many of them. These women, who had left their impoverished villages to find employment in the big city, were an enormous labour reservoir for the privileged caste. Almost every family of the ruling bureaucracy and the elite of the intelligentsia had at least one domestic employee."

This insurmountable gap between the working class and the ruling bureaucracy forced the bureaucracy to use every weapon at its disposal to combat the Left Opposition (led by Trotsky), the only movement providing political articulation of the widespread dissatisfaction with these conditions.

The presentation of *Stalin's Neo-NEP* in Leipzig was only able to touch on a few aspects of this fascinating book. The Stakhanov movement, the Stalin cult, public opinion of Stalinism in the West, Leon Feuchtwanger's view of the Soviet Union—these are topics which would require presentations of their own in order to be appropriately discussed.

The discussion that followed the reading confirmed that Stalinism is a central issue of the twentieth century that urgently requires clarification. In the coming years, Arbeiterpresse Verlag will continue to translate and publish other volumes by Rogovin which will make a decisive contribution towards this necessary clarification.



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