

A Tribute to Vadim Rogovin

David North
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At a meeting held in Moscow on May 15, more than 75 people commemorated what would have been the 65th birthday of the Russian Marxist historian and sociologist, Vadim Z. Rogovin. Among those attending the gathering were surviving children of Russian Left Oppositionists murdered by the Stalinist regime, scholars who worked with Vadim at the Institute of Sociology in Moscow, the representatives of several socialist tendencies in Russia and many friends. The meeting was organized by Galina Rogovina, Vadim's wife.

David North, editorial board chairman of the World Socialist Web Site, was invited by Galina Rogovina to deliver the principal address on the significance of Vadim's life and work. His remarks are reprinted below.

Today we meet to commemorate what would have been Vadim Rogovin's 65th birthday and to celebrate the publication of the seventh and final volume of his magnificent historical cycle: *Was there an Alternative to Stalinism?*, a history of the political struggle against the betrayal of the October Revolution, from the founding of the Left Opposition in 1923 to the assassination of Leon Trotsky in 1940.

There is a profound and moving symbolism in the combination of these events. In observing the 65th anniversary of his birth, we celebrate Vadim's life. In welcoming the publication of the seventh volume of his History, we honor Vadim's work.

Every human life is both finite and infinite. It is finite in its individuality and physical mortality. But it is infinite both as an element of man's collective social being and, on that basis, to the extent that it gives conscious expression to the universal in human experience and thereby transcends the boundaries of finite existence.

There are those who, to use the words of Trotsky, "carry on their shoulders a particle of the fate of mankind." In such people, this precious element of infinite transcendence finds exceptionally intense expression. Their contribution to mankind's future lives on after them. The legacy of their lives enters into the consciousness of ensuing generations and becomes the treasured and collective inheritance of all humanity. Such a life was that of Vadim Zakharovich Rogovin.

Wherein lay the greatness of Vadim Rogovin? That question can be answered only by placing his life in the context of the times in which he lived—especially, in the context of the last decade of his life, the period of Vadim's greatest intellectual creativity. Much has happened in the former Soviet Union during the past 15 years. Today, it is not my intention to enter into an argument over the nature of the changes in the social and economic structure of post-Soviet society. There are among us, I am sure, many different

opinions as to the nature and consequences of these changes. It was Vadim's view, which corresponds to that of the international Trotskyist movement, that the protracted crisis of the Soviet Stalinist regime was resolved in the late 1980s and 1990s in a manner that was politically reactionary and socially regressive.

But there is one particularly notable feature of the intellectual environment of the last 15 years to which I feel obliged to call attention. Notwithstanding all that has happened since the mid-1980s, there has not emerged from the upheavals of Soviet and post-Soviet society a single political figure who commands international respect, let alone admiration. To the extent that mankind is searching for new and promising ideas, it occurs to no one to look for them in post-Soviet Russia. Virtually all those who have achieved prominence or notoriety have been exposed as mediocrities and rank scoundrels. Who, today, could speak of the "greatness" of Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Lebed, Sobchak (some of these names are probably not even remembered) and, excuse me, the present occupant of the Kremlin, without causing his audience to burst out laughing? All of these people were, or are, unconscious instruments of historical and social processes that they neither foresaw nor understood.

I should add that blindness and mediocrity is not an affliction of political life alone. Perhaps I am poorly informed, but I believe that one can say without serious contradiction that the cultural life of Russia is as impoverished as its economy. Has there been produced during the past decade a single major novel, an important poem, a significant musical composition or even a cinematic work that is truly worthy of international attention? Against the background of this intellectual and cultural wasteland, the work of Vadim Rogovin stands out all the more as a monumental achievement.

The seven volumes of Vadim's history will endure as a major contribution to not only Russian but also world literature. "Great history," wrote E. H. Carr "is written precisely when the historian's vision of the past is illumined by insights into problems of the present." Herein lies the key to understanding the significance of Vadim's works. It was Vadim's preoccupation with the problems of his own time and his concern for mankind's future that compelled him to study, analyze and explain the past. Vadim's ferocious preoccupation with the problem of historical truth was not that of a simple moralist. Rather, it derived from a profound insight into the great problem of the epoch in which he lived—that the universal loss of social perspective, the decline of class consciousness, the all-pervasive political bewilderment and stupefaction of public opinion are the social price paid for decades of Stalinism's lies and falsifications. The destruction of historical

consciousness has created a confused and disoriented people, unable to understand the nature of the social and political problems they confront and to discover a progressive solution to the crisis of their society.

What was the task that Vadim set for himself during the last decade of his life? To refute the gross falsification of Trotsky's role in Soviet history; to counter the lie that Stalinism was the necessary and organic product of Marxism and the October Revolution; to answer the claim that there existed no alternative to Stalinism in the USSR. In discussion and in collaboration with the International Committee of the Fourth International, Vadim developed his interpretation of the Stalinist purges of the 1930s as a form of political genocide directed against the representatives of Marxist politics and culture in the Soviet working class and intelligentsia. Vadim interpreted the terror of the 1930s as a form of civil war, directed by Stalin and his henchmen (Molotov, Kaganovich, Voroshilov, Beria, Yezhov, Mikoyan and others) against a suppressed but still powerful socialist opposition whose greatest voice was that of Lev Davidovich Trotsky.

Underlying this historical analysis was a concept of philosophical profundity. Vadim insisted that the motive force that determined the murderous character of the Stalinist regime was the striving for social privilege—the achievement of material benefits for the few at the expense of the many. The social policy that found expression in the crimes of Stalin was the promotion and defense, by the bureaucracy that he led, of social inequality. The fundamental contrast between Bolshevism and Stalinism was precisely this: the historical objective of the former was the achievement of social equality; the goal of the latter was the protection of individual privilege. As Vadim wrote, “Stalin's greed for material things, his craving for limitless luxury in his everyday life were passed on to his descendents up to and including Gorbachev, all of whom, unlike the Bolshevik Old Guard, were unwilling to share physical difficulties and privations with the people.”

At the core of Vadim's philosophy of history was an unshakable insistence on the ontological validity of objective truth. The recognition of truth as the correspondence of subjective thought with objective properties and processes of social being is the essential basis of scientific historical consciousness. This axiom must serve not only as the foundation for the study of the history of the USSR. At issue here is a truly international problem: that of coming to grips with the historical experience and lessons of the 20th century as a whole. It is not only in Russia that this problem demands attention.

In my references to the blighted state of post-Soviet society, I did not mean to suggest that Americans and Europeans are enjoying a flowering of intellectual creativity. The situation beyond the borders of Russia is no less pathetic. In different forms and with varying degrees of intensity, one encounters throughout the world the same disorientation, confusion and ignorance. As in Russia, the source of this disorientation is the failure to assimilate and theoretically comprehend the historical events and experiences out of which the present emerged. And, how can the experience of the past be assimilated and comprehended when even the factual components of history—especially those related to the October

Revolution and its aftermath—are concealed and falsified? That is why the work of Vadim Rogovin is of world significance and has attracted an international audience.

There are periods of history when revolutionary social upheavals shatter old barriers and clear a path for great advances in every sphere of human culture. In the wake of such upheavals, there emerge the geniuses who act as the spokesmen of the new age. They amplify all the progressive impulses of their time and endow them with the most profound, universal and timeless form.

But there are other, more difficult and painful periods of history, when creative genius must labor in isolation and in opposition. The exceptional figures of such an epoch are not men and women *of their times*, but men and women *against their times*. In this sense, there is a parallel between the life of Trotsky and the life of Rogovin. Had Trotsky died in 1923, he would have certainly lived on in history as one of the major figures of the ascendant Russian Revolution. But it was what Trotsky achieved during the last 17 years of his life, between 1923 and 1940—his unyielding struggle against the Stalinist betrayal of world socialism—that insured his historical immortality as the greatest and most important revolutionary thinker and leader of the 20th, and perhaps even of the 21st, century.

Vadim's greatness, like that of Trotsky, manifested itself in political, intellectual and moral opposition—in his courageous, principled and indefatigable devotion to historical truth in an environment made rotten by decades of lies, cynicism, hypocrisy and cowardice. In opposition to the times in which he lived, Vadim Rogovin produced seven volumes that will live in world literature as a moral and intellectual milestone in mankind's reclaiming of its revolutionary heritage.

The seventh volume of Vadim's book is entitled, *The End is the Beginning*. This title might also serve as a fitting epitaph for Vadim himself. Only his physical being left us on September 18, 1998. That which was immortal in Vadim's life and work lives with us and gains in strength from day to day.



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