

# “He was a revolutionary in the absolute best sense of the word.”

## 70th anniversary meeting honors the life and work of Vadim Zakharovich Rogovin

**Our correspondent**  
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May 10 marked what would have been the 70th birthday of the Russian Marxist historian and sociologist Vadim Zakharovich Rogovin, who died in September 1998 after a years-long battle with cancer. A memorial service and book presentation honoring his life and work was held on Friday, May 11, at his former place of work, the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow.

Approximately 30 colleagues and friends gathered at the building where Rogovin began working in 1977 to discuss the lasting significance of his research on social inequality in Soviet society and his monumental seven-volume series, *Was There an Alternative?*, which examined the history of the socialist opposition to Stalinism in the USSR.

In celebration of this event, a new Russian-language volume of Rogovin's sociological writings from the 1980s and early 1990s, entitled *Justice and Equality*, was published. The book contains articles and essays written by Rogovin in the years leading up to and during *perestroika*, the period of economic reforms instituted by Mikhail Gorbachev that paved the way for the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union.

There was a lively discussion at the memorial service about the relationship between social justice and social inequality, with those in attendance examining the different aspects of this problem both in Soviet history and in contemporary Russia.

In the 1990s, the name Vadim Zakharovich Rogovin became widely associated with the fight to establish the historical truth about the existence of a genuine Marxist alternative to Stalinism in the Soviet Union. *Was There an Alternative?* was the first attempt by a Soviet historian to clear away decades of falsifications and lies about the historical role of Leon Trotsky in the Russian Revolution. The series explained the political perspective that animated Trotsky's opposition to Stalin's program of building "socialism in one country."

Drawing on the writings of Trotsky and other left oppositionists, as well as newly-released archival documents, Rogovin's books exposed the murderous campaign carried out by Stalin against the entire intellectual and political legacy of Marxism in the Soviet Union. He demonstrated the relationship between Stalin's efforts to establish unchallenged political control over the USSR by brute force, and the growth and defense of privileges for the party-state bureaucracy.

As Iuri Vitalievich Primarkov, the son of the executed former Red Army General Vitali Markovich Primakov, stated at the memorial service, "The most important contribution of Vadim Rogovin was that he was the first person in the history of the Soviet Union to tell the truth about the Opposition. Those of us who lived in this country knew nothing about the ideas and proposals [of Trotsky]. What we heard about Trotskyism was that it was a curse for which one could be shot. Maybe overseas people

knew about Bukharin, about Trotsky, but here we knew nothing. Rogovin discovered all of this for us."

The daughter of Left Oppositionist Leonid Serebriakov, Zoria Serebriakova, also spoke about Rogovin's enormous contribution to Soviet history. "When we are talking about social justice", she stated, "we cannot forget about (Rogovin's) contribution to this question in his work on the year 1937. He told the truth about the most terrible injustice of Soviet history, Stalin's bloody terror. Now, many people talk about Stalin's 'political repressions'. But this term does not even begin to capture the horror of what was done. Rogovin's work revealed this truth".

The conference received greetings from the International Committee of the Fourth International, the Trotskyist movement with which Rogovin established very close intellectual and political ties while writing *Was There an Alternative?*. The letter from David North, Chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site*, read:

"Today, on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of his birth, the International Committee of the Fourth International and the countless comrades and friends of Vadim Zakharovich Rogovin pay tribute to his memory. It is impossible on this anniversary not to think of that beautiful day ten years ago when we celebrated with Vadim his sixtieth birthday. The comrades, colleagues and friends who gathered on that day at the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Science spoke of the significance of the life and work of this extraordinary man.

"In my own remarks," North wrote, "I described Vadim as a 'prophet of historical truth.' I sought to explain the immense intellectual, political and moral significance of his uncompromising struggle to shatter the massive edifice of lies, erected by the bureaucratic dictatorship, beneath which the revolutionary egalitarian principles of the October Revolution, the socialist and democratic foundations of the Soviet Union, and the Marxist program of Leon Trotsky and the anti-Stalinist Left Opposition had been buried for more than a half-century."

"During the last decade of his life, Vadim devoted all of his seemingly inexhaustible energy to writing seven volumes of a historical cycle that ranks among the great intellectual achievements of the 20th century. He demonstrated that there had existed an alternative to Stalinism, that the principles and program for which Trotsky fought would have enabled the Soviet Union to develop in an infinitely more humane and progressive direction, and would have vastly strengthened the cause of world socialism.

"When we met in May 1997," North continued, "we all knew that Vadim was gravely ill. But inspired by Vadim's courage, undiminished intellectual productivity, and joyous energy, we maintained the hope that he would be with us for many more years. That was not to be. In

September 1998, at the all-too-young age of 61, Vadim died. For those of us who were privileged to know him and to be counted among his friends, his passing represented a profound personal loss. But his life work endures and his influence continues to grow, in Russia and throughout the world. The last volume of his historical cycle was entitled, *The End is the Beginning*. Vadim intended with this title to express the historical immortality of Trotsky's political and intellectual heritage. These same words can be invoked today, as we honor the legacy of Vadim Zakharovich Rogovin."

The republication of Rogovin's sociological writings about Soviet society in *Justice and Equality* is part of this new beginning.

The works contained in the 350-page book demonstrate that, even before it was possible to openly criticize the Soviet regime, Rogovin published articles that tried to address the existence of a significant divide between the living standards of ordinary people and those who occupied positions of power in Soviet politics, the economy, and the cultural sphere. As Mikhail Voyekov, an economist at the Institute of Economics of the Russian Academy of Sciences and a colleague of Rogovin's noted at the memorial, "The problem [of social inequality] ran very deep in Rogovin and dominated his thinking throughout his creative life."

In *Justice and Equality*, Rogovin writes about the need to address the existence of inequalities in Soviet higher education, in which elite universities are overwhelmingly occupied by those who come from privileged political and economic backgrounds. Rogovin also addressed the question of inequalities in access to housing. He argues that the issue here was not simply the fact that some people had access to better accommodations than others, but also that housing costs for these layers, who were on the higher-end of the Soviet income scale, tended to be much lower, as they were given access to state-subsidized accommodations in which utilities and other services were a fraction of the regular cost.

Rogovin consistently defended the position that what is "socially just" cannot be understood apart from the struggle to establish social equality. This principle, Rogovin argued, is violated when certain layers of the population have access to goods that are not universally available, such as those distributed through the system of closed shops. Not limiting himself to simply the question of the material conditions of the population, Rogovin further maintains that equality has to be understood in the broadest possible terms, including the ability to participate in the process of making "socially significant decisions." In other words, equality requires the right to participate in politics and the forming of social policies.

In several articles, Rogovin insisted on the creation of not only a socially-guaranteed minimum living standard, but also the creation of a socially-guaranteed maximum living standard, so that there would be "no Soviet millionaires."

It is important to bear in mind that Rogovin was writing these articles under conditions in which the Soviet regime denied both the existence of social class differences in the population, as well as the existence of privileges that the bureaucracy itself enjoyed.

As the 1980s progressed, and the political atmosphere in the Soviet Union became less repressive, Rogovin began to write more openly about the problem of social inequality and the effect of the pro-market *perestroika* reforms on Soviet society. In these works, Rogovin distinguishes himself from nearly all of his fellow colleagues, the majority of whom became spokespeople for the Gorbachev administration. They either openly participated as advisors in his government or wrote statements in the press defending his policies, even as social discontent over the effect of these policies on living standards was growing.

Andrea, a Ph.D. Candidate in Sociology who is writing a dissertation on the history of Soviet sociology in the 1980s, also spoke at the memorial. "As the implications of the economic reforms undertaken as part of *perestroika* became clearer," she said, "Rogovin's work developed in two

ways. First, his contributions to various newspapers and journals sought to warn the public against the growing unbridled accumulation of private wealth taking place under the cover of *perestroika*. He advocated social policies ... that he thought should be implemented in order to defend the principles of social justice. Second, he began to analyze and write about the historical relationship between Stalinism, corruption, the ideological attack on the principle of egalitarianism, and the stagnation of the Soviet economy.

"For Rogovin, the collapse of morale and labor discipline among the Soviet masses, which reflected itself in low levels of labor productivity among other things, was not so much a product of the lack of material stimuli in the Soviet economy (the position argued by almost all of his contemporaries). Rather, it was the product of the disillusionment of the Soviet masses in the socialist project because of the vast gulf that had developed between the espoused ideals of the Russian Revolution and the reality of economic life in the Soviet Union. This gulf, according to Rogovin, had worsened during the Brezhnev period when corruption, bribery, and the theft of state resources caused a significant growth in unofficial forms of social inequality."

"Furthermore," she said, "Rogovin noted that *perestroika* represented not a break with the economic tendencies that developed under the Brezhnev period, but rather their logical continuation. For Rogovin, growing social inequality, even in just the sphere of wages, was not only a violation of social justice. It was inextricably linked with the political domination of the Soviet Union by the party-state bureaucracy. This was why it was so important for Rogovin to demonstrate, as he did in numerous articles, the historical relationship between the rise of Stalinism in the 1930s, the growth of social inequality, and the defense of bureaucratic privilege."

"As many people here who are familiar with Rogovin's work can see," she concluded, "there was an organic relationship between his career as a sociologist working on social inequality and social policy, and his later work on the history of the socialist opposition to Stalin."

As Voyekov noted in his introductory remarks to the gathering, "Rogovin turned to the work ... of Trotsky precisely because through him and his work, Rogovin tried to find and explain the riddle of 'Soviet socialism'."

The publication of *Justice and Equality* is an important event because it reestablishes Rogovin as a major figure in Soviet sociology and social thought. Despite the numerous books, articles, and interviews published over the last 15 years about the history of Soviet sociology by leading figures within the discipline, one will find no reference to Rogovin's work. The fact that not a single one of Rogovin's former colleagues at the Institute of Sociology attended this memorial service is certainly telling in this regard.

However, as the friend and colleague of Rogovin, Evgenii Grigorevich Andrushinko, noted in his remarks, "Many people unfairly judged him, but he never let that bother him ... Rogovin was a revolutionary in the absolute best sense of the word", said Andrushinko. "He was an intellectual star in our science, distinguished by his immense fortitude and courage".



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