

Winter Recommended Reading Series

Shannon Jones: “One of the best short political biographies of Marx and Engels ever written”

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: An Introduction to Their Lives and Work

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Mehring Books is continuing its Winter Recommended Reading Series, in which writers for the World Socialist Web Site are asked to share their thoughts about works of Marxist literature that have influenced them and to explain why. This week's recommendation is from Shannon Jones, who regularly writes for the WSWS about labor and social issues in the United States. Previous recommendations were made by David Walsh and Tom Eley.

David Riazanov's *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: An Introduction to Their Lives and Work* is one of the best short political biographies of Marx and Engels ever written. When I first read this book as a young person new to socialism it made a big impression on me. I found it very helpful in grasping the significance of the work of Marx and Engels and also felt that it gave me a good historical overview of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the emergence of the working class as a force in world history.

Riazanov is able to communicate to his reader complex concepts and controversies in a way that is accessible and engaging. He puts the lives of Marx and Engels in the context of the social and political struggles of their times. I remember being very struck, for instance, by an observation of Riazanov's contained in the first chapter of the book, where he introduces

Marx.

“Every genius creating something new does it on the basis of what has been accomplished before him. He does not sprout forth from a vacuum. Furthermore, to really determine the magnitude of a genius, one must ascertain the antedating achievements, the degree of the intellectual development of society, the social forms into which this genius was born and from which he drew his psychological and physical sustenance. And so to understand Marx—and this is a practical application of Marx's own method—we shall first proceed to study the historical background of his period and its influence upon him.”

Riazanov, who headed the Marx Engels Institute in the USSR, was a remarkable figure in his own right. Among other things he published the first editions of Engel's *Dialectics of Nature* and *The German Ideology*.

Like countless other Old Bolsheviks, his life was tragically ended by the Stalinist Terror. Thus, reading this book also gives one a sense of the extraordinary human material wiped out in Stalin's purges.

I recommend *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: An Introduction to Their Lives and Work* as a first-rate introduction to these two great figures.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: An Introduction to Their Lives and Work is available from *Mehring Books* by [clicking here](#).

Price: \$5.00



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