

# Great interest in lecture by Professor Rabinowitch in Berlin

Our correspondent  
16 October 2010

The American historian Alexander Rabinowitch introduced his new book *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Bolshevik Rule in Petrograd* at a meeting Thursday evening at Humboldt University in Berlin.

The meeting was held under the auspices of the book's German publisher, Mehring Verlag, and the International Students for Social Equality, the student organization of the Fourth International.

There was an overflow audience in the auditorium, which holds 300 people. Many of those who came to hear the historian had to sit on window sills or stairs, while others had to stand.

Ulrich Rippert, chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG), welcomed this leading expert on the history of the Russian Revolution. Professor Rabinowitch is a supporter of the document-based study of history, Rippert said, adding, "Every detail of his work is supported by verifiable documents."

Rippert said that the scientific basis of Rabinowitch's work stands in contrast to the ideologically distorted interpretations of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union that are widely found today. While many historians claim there is no such thing as objective truth and no relationship between cause and effect, declaring history to be purely subjective perception and personal interpretation, "Professor Rabinowitch represents a fundamentally different approach to history," the PSG chairman told the audience.

David North, chairman of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* and national chairperson of the Socialist Equality Party (US), spoke on the importance of the American historian.

North said that he himself was part of the generation that had been and continued to be inspired by the social developments of 1968. "The question of the Russian Revolution was then the main question. We were against Stalinism and did not want such a form of socialism. So what was the Russian Revolution?"

In the United States, it was hard to find an answer. The historians of the Cold War presented the revolution as a conspiracy by the Bolsheviks, who had no influence among the masses.

"Professor Rabinowitch was the representative of a new generation of historians in America," North said, "who, with his first book on the Russian Revolution, which appeared in 1968, showed that the Bolsheviks enjoyed mass influence." Rabinowitch also showed the prominent role played by Trotsky in the Bolshevik's seizure of power, while the Stalinists did everything to eliminate Trotsky from the

history books.

Forty years later, Rabinowitch has now produced *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Bolshevik Rule in Petrograd*. At a time when "many had thrown their principles overboard," he remained true to his and continued the work contained in his previous books. He is an exceptional representative of the school that is dedicated to uncovering historical truth. "His work is extremely important for us all," North concluded.

Rabinowitch began his contribution by describing how he had come to study the Russian Revolution.

His father, Eugene Rabinowitch, a noted biophysicist, had fled St. Petersburg in August 1918 and had studied from 1921 to 1926 at the University of Berlin, now Humboldt University. Via Copenhagen, he made his way to Boston, where the family settled and remained in close contact with other Russian émigrés. The young Alexander Rabinowitch had "vivid memories of endless debates with famous émigrés such as Kerensky, Nicolaevsky, Tsereteli and many others on history, literature and current developments in the Soviet Union," Rabinowitch said.

Despite their differences, all were agreed on one point—namely, that the Russian Revolution was a military coup organized by a band of conspirators under Lenin and financed by the Germans. The political climate in the McCarthy era after the Second World War and during the Korean War (1950-53) reinforced this negative perception of the Russian Revolution, with which he had grown up. In his time as a student while serving in the Army reserves, the Soviet Union had been described as the "incarnation of evil."

Rabinowitch began his study of Russian history at the University of Chicago, in part under the historian Leopold H. Haimson. "But as a graduate student, I had not yet changed my perspective on the October Revolution," he said.

He first thought about writing a dissertation, a biography of Irakli Tsereteli, the Georgian Menshevik and implacable opponent of the Bolsheviks, whom he had known in his youth. When he realized that in order to write a comprehensive biography he would have to acquaint himself with the Georgian language, he decided instead to investigate Tsereteli's role in the period from February 1917 until the summer of that year.

In carrying out this work, however, his interest shifted to the role of the Bolsheviks. Why was this so? Rabinowitch asked. There was a simple answer: "Under Haimson, I had learned to study the facts and to interpret them as objectively as possible. The study of the sources, as limited as they were in the early 1960s, had prompted me to adopt a

different perspective on the revolution of 1917.”

He described how, in the original documents then available—Bolshevik newspapers and minutes of the Bolsheviks’ St. Petersburg Committee—he discovered both the prominent role played by Lenin and the fact that deep divisions prevailed within the Bolshevik Party.

Rabinowitch then wrote his doctoral dissertation on the development of the Bolsheviks between the February Revolution and the July uprising of 1917. This formed the basis for his first book, *Prelude to Revolution—The Petrograd Bolsheviks and the July 1917 Uprising*. In it, he shows how the Bolsheviks, from being a small group working primarily underground, had in fact been transformed into a mass party after the February Revolution. The party was deeply rooted in the workers’ and sailors’ soviets, and had a highly democratic culture of discussion among different currents.

The July uprising was, according to Rabinowitch, a result of the fundamental mass discontent with the results of the February Revolution. It was supported by radical sections of the Bolsheviks, especially the military organizations, against the will of the Central Committee.

At that time, Rabinowitch still thought that the party, which only a few months later would take power, had been restructured after the July debacle along the lines of the so-called “autocratic Leninist model”—the predominant view amongst contemporary historians. “This view turned out to be wrong,” said Rabinowitch. “The opposite was the case.” There were many different viewpoints and violent disputes in the ranks of the Bolsheviks, showing that the party “was close to the masses.”

He then provided several examples of these conflicts.

The party rejected Lenin’s proposal to abandon the slogan “All power to the soviets.” After the July uprising in 1917, Lenin no longer believed in the possibility of bringing about the revolution via the soviets, in which the moderate socialists were in the majority, and proposed the slogan “All power to the working class, led by its party, the Bolsheviks.” The party should focus its work in the factories and soldiers’ committees, he insisted. In practice, however, there was no deviation from the slogan “All power to the soviets.” This corresponded to the attitude of the workers and sailors.

After the failed Kornilov coup in late August 1917, the Bolsheviks gained the majority in the Petrograd Soviet due to their crucial role in the repulsion of the attempted coup. Lenin then urged the party to move towards the immediate seizure of power, but could not impose his line directly. “I’ve often asked the question whether a seizure of power in September would have been possible,” said Rabinowitch. “But I have come to the conclusion that this would have led to an even greater defeat than the July debacle.”

Lenin’s letters from his hiding place near St. Petersburg had the same significance as his April Theses. Lenin urged the Bolsheviks to the left, towards removing the provisional government and carrying out an independent seizure of power. At a meeting of the Central Committee on October 10 a vote was taken at which the majority supported the armed seizure of power, with Kamenev and Zinoviev voting against.

However, little had been undertaken to actively implement this decision. This became possible only with the so-called defensive strategy. The dismissal of the provisional government of Kerensky was to come about as the consequence of a defensive strategy to defend the revolution and the soviets. The Second National Soviet Congress set for October 25 would sanction the removal of the

government.

Between October 21 and October 24, this plan was vigorously put into practice. “It was above all due to Leon Trotsky, who could be heard and seen everywhere as a brilliant orator,” Rabinowitch said. “In the end, the provisional government was removed without a shot being fired, with Trotsky as the central figure, as head of the Military Revolutionary Committee and chairman of the Petersburg Soviet.” Only then, a month later, were Lenin’s demands realised.

In conclusion, Rabinowitch said: “There is just as little justification for describing the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 as a successful coup by Lenin as there is for describing the July uprising as an unsuccessful coup by Lenin. Although, in both cases, they did not constitute classical mass uprisings, historical sources show clearly that they were the result of widespread disillusionment on the part of the working classes in Petrograd with the results of the February Revolution and the enormous appeal of the Bolshevik program for the broad population.”

“But,” he asked, “why did the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet Union end as they did?” This cannot be explained merely by examining the period before the October Revolution and the structure of the party at that time, he said. The guiding principle in his book *The Bolsheviks in Power* is, he said, how to explain the contradiction between the original, open process of discussion and the democratic structure of the soviets and party and their later centralized, authoritarian character.

“The changes in policy and structure of the Bolshevik Party and the soviets in Petrograd observed during this first year,” he summarized “are determined less by ideology than by the permanent crises and emergencies, in which the main task of the Bolsheviks was simply to secure their survival.” He had originally considered calling his book “The Price of Survival.”

Professor Rabinowitch concluded with the announcement of plans to complete a new book dealing with the years 1919 and 1920.

Following the lecture, which was met with a great deal of applause, Rabinowitch answered a number of questions from the audience, including queries on the legitimacy of the soviets, the role of Kerensky, why the revolution ultimately failed to establish genuine socialism, and the significance of the Russian Revolution compared to other revolutions which had taken place in the twentieth century.

In his replies, Rabinowitch stressed the international perspective of Lenin and Trotsky, who regarded the Russian Revolution as a trigger for worldwide socialist revolution. The failure of revolutions in Germany and Finland intensified the pressure on an increasingly isolated Russia, he said.

Lively discussion amongst the audience continued long into the evening following the official end of the meeting, with a number of those attending taking the opportunity to buy the newly published German edition of *The Bolsheviks in Power*.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**