

“The October Revolution was the most important event of the 20th century”

Interview with Alexander Rabinowitch

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1 June 2011

On June 6, 2011, American historian Alexander Rabinowitch will give a lecture at the University of Vienna dealing with his latest book, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Bolshevik Rule in Petrograd*. The lecture is sponsored by the university's Institute of Contemporary History, with the support of the Historical and Cultural Studies School and Mehring Verlag, which published the German edition of the book (details [here](#)).

Professor Rabinowitch will participate in a panel discussion with Vienna University lecturer Dr. Finbarr McLoughlin. McLoughlin is an expert on the history of the Soviet Union and has conducted and published research primarily on the Stalinist Terror of the 1930s and its victims among the members of the Communist and Social Democratic parties of Austria and other European countries.

The Bolsheviks in Power is the product of more than three decades of extensive research, including in Soviet archives. In an earlier review of this work, the WSWS encouraged the widest study and discussion of this book, while pointing out certain differences with the political analysis of the events described. (See “*Bolsheviks in Power—Professor Alexander Rabinowitch’s important study of the first year of soviet power*”)

Alexander Rabinowitch is currently carrying out research in the archives of St. Petersburg. He is working on his next book dealing with the second year of Bolshevik rule.

Prior to his trip to Vienna, the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed Rabinowitch on his career as a historian and his work on the history of the Russian Revolution.

WSWS: How did you come to develop such a strong interest in Russian history, culture and especially the October Revolution?

It was a very natural development. My mother and father were Russian-born and I grew up in a Russian émigré community in New England surrounded by distinguished Russian intellectuals. Among them were the famous founder of Russian studies in the United States, the Harvard historian and former Socialist Revolutionary Michael Karpovich, and the leading Menshevik and foremost archivist and historian of Russian Social Democracy, Boris Nicolaevskii.

WSWS: What, primarily, have you tried to achieve in your research and writing?

Under the influence of the members of the émigré community in which I grew up, the lives of all of whom had been torn asunder by the October Revolution, and also of the Cold War, my initial aim was to acquire a better understanding of a dangerous enemy. But early in my research, I became convinced that the October Revolution, and Russia's revolutionary experience generally, was a complex, as yet poorly understood and little studied political and social process of immense

historical importance.

After that my goal was, and remains to this day, that of trying to understand and to reconstruct this process as objectively as possible and in a way that is meaningful for specialists and for general readers simply interested in acquiring accurate knowledge of one of the seminal events in world history.

WSWS: What sources could you draw on for your work?

I mainly drew on major contemporary newspapers, published documents and memoirs, and unpublished memoirs accessible in such major Western repositories of Slavic materials as the New York Public Library and especially the Hoover archive and library at Stanford University. However, the beginning of my research coincided with the start of academic exchanges between the United States and the Soviet Union.

During the 1963-1964 academic year, as a graduate student in Moscow, my source base expanded immeasurably by access to relevant, rare published materials not available in the West. Unfortunately, at that time Russian historical archives were tightly closed to non-Soviet scholars and to most Soviet historians as well.

WSWS: After the break-up of the Soviet Union, what was the impact of the opening of the Russian archives upon your research work, your working conditions and your relationships with Russian colleagues?

The impact of the gradual opening of Soviet historical archives, which began in 1990, was immense. After that, I was suddenly able to examine records of government, party and trade union agencies, from top to bottom, as well as personal records and unpublished memoirs. For me, it was a totally unexpected, hugely exciting and rewarding turn of events.

Before the implosion of the Soviet system, especially in 1963-1964, before Khrushchev's overthrow, I was able to develop friendly, although constrained, relationships with younger Soviet historians. Under Brezhnev, these relationships became significantly tighter. After the appearance of my first publications, my writings were immediately banned and I was publicly attacked as a “bourgeois falsifier.”

At a personal level, however, I was able to retain personal, albeit surreptitious friendships even with some of the historians who attacked me publicly. All this gradually changed for the better in the late 1980s, well before the break-up of the Soviet Union. After that, relationships were normalized. And I am happy to say that my professional and personal life has been extraordinarily enriched by very close, warm collegial and enormously rewarding relations with scholars in Russia.

WSWS: How do your views on the Bolshevik Party in 1917 and on the October Revolution, views you arrived at as a result of your research work already 30 or 40 years ago, differ from traditional mainstream interpretations?

Soviet historians and most Western historians traditionally viewed the Bolshevik Party as a tightly knit, essentially monolithic party marching in unity behind an infallible leader, V.I. Lenin. The primary difference between them was that while Soviet historians pictured the October Revolution as a broadly supported popular uprising, Western historians tended to view “October” as nothing more than a military coup devoid of significant popular support.

In my view, in the aftermath of the February 1917 revolution, the Bolsheviks reorganized themselves into a mass party with close, interactive ties to workers, soldiers and sailors, the leadership of which was divided into moderate, centrist and radical or Leninist wings throughout the year. Each of these wings, in my opinion, contributed significantly to the party’s triumph in October. Moreover, in my view the October Revolution was neither a popular uprising nor a coup, although it included elements of both; rather it was the culminating event in an immensely complex, dynamic, political and social process rooted in Russia’s development before the February Revolution and exacerbated by participation in a losing war.

WSWS: Having dug in the archives in St. Petersburg and Moscow now for almost two decades, did the results have an impact upon the conceptions which you developed before 1990? Did you have to revise your views?

No. Frankly, if anything my years of work digging deeply in formerly closed Russian historical archives have reinforced my original conception. It is precisely for that reason that I have chosen to study the factors shaping Soviet state-building during the civil war rather than prepare a revised edition of my book on the October Revolution in Petrograd, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*.

WSWS: How do you assess the fight Lenin waged within his own party in April 1917 in reorienting the party to the task of taking the power instead of just supporting a bourgeois government without a tsar? He had to combat politically the majority of his own Central Committee at that time. How deep were the divisions? Did they linger on beyond October 1917 and, if yes, how did this find expression?

Lenin’s successful effort to point the party toward an early socialist revolution in Russia at the Seventh Party Conference in April 1917 was one of the decisive moments in the history of the revolution, even though it did not end intra-party conflict. The division between the party moderates led by Leo Kamenev, who felt that a socialist revolution in Russia was premature, and the Leninists, who believed the success of social revolution in Russia would provide the spark necessary for the eruption of decisive worldwide revolutions, was profound and lasted as a major force until the end of 1917. After October, it was mirrored in the bitter conflicts between the moderates and the Leninists over the composition and status of the new government in early November and over policy toward the Constituent Assembly in December.

WSWS: How would you describe the relations between Lenin and Trotsky from May 1917 on?

Trotsky did not formally join the Bolshevik party until the Sixth All-Russian Party Congress at the end of July. Members of Trotsky’s Interdistrict Committee such as Volodarskii and Uritskii joined the Bolshevik leadership significantly earlier. Nonetheless, the relationship between Lenin and Trotsky was one of mutual respect throughout 1917. Trotsky went to jail for coming to Lenin’s defense in the immediate aftermath of the failed July 1917 uprising, he filled in for Lenin during the run-up to the October Revolution, and he was Lenin’s staunchest supporter during the struggle with the moderates in its aftermath.

WSWS: Your research work and publications on the Russian Revolution

covering the overthrow of the tsarist regime in February 1917, the Provisional Government thereafter, which continued the war, the July uprising and finally the October Revolution—all that represents already an accomplishment which could have caused you to end your labor as an historian and to look back on your academic life with satisfaction. But instead, you have thrown yourself into the study of the early years of Soviet state-building. Could you explain your motivation and your plans for doing that?

Under no circumstances would I have stopped serious historical research in 1976, when the American edition of the *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* originally appeared. I happen to love historical research and writing. However, I seriously considered picking a different topic. The reason I did not was twofold. First, I remained fascinated by the revolutionary era and appalled by the degree to which it was misunderstood and misrepresented. Second, and more important, my findings about the character of the Bolshevik Party in 1917 and the reasons for its success in October raised fundamental, intriguing questions about the factors shaping the character of the Bolshevik Party and the soviet system that begged to be answered. In short, I became hooked by the problem and still am.

WSWS: You write for a broad readership, and seem convinced that, almost 100 years after the event, a study and thorough knowledge of the October Revolution is important not just for a few academic historians. Can you explain why?

Well, as I think about it another reason I am “hooked” on the revolutionary era is because of its immense historical importance. To my mind, the October 1917 revolution in Russia was certainly one of, if not the single most important, events in the 20th century.

The revolution occurred in what was then the third largest country in the world, with a population of more than 165 million, occupying an area three times as large as the United States and bigger than China and India combined. It brought Lenin and the Bolsheviks to power, derailing the possibility that Russia would become a liberal democracy on the Western model. It should be kept in mind that the revolution began as an experiment in egalitarian socialism. Into 1918 and on into the 1920s, it stimulated revolutionary unrest throughout Europe and not only Europe.

Under Stalin, the political system spawned by “Red October” was transformed into an all-powerful, ultra-repressive, authoritarian dictatorship. Yet in Europe the threat of a revival of “Red October” remained. In 1933 this contributed to the rise to power of Hitler, who had promised to destroy the Soviet Union and Bolshevism once and for all. Thus the path that led to World War II was set. After the victory of the allies, Stalin’s Soviet System expanded into Central and Eastern Europe.

Fear of the spread of Communism helped give rise to the Cold War between East and West which lasted until the implosion of the Soviet system in 1991. Surely, the centrality of the October Revolution in shaping modern European history and indeed world history demonstrates the importance of knowledge about it on the part of thinking people everywhere—and not just academic specialists like me.



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