

Historian Alexander Rabinowitch speaks in Vienna on the Russian Revolution

Our correspondents
15 June 2011

On the evening of June 6, more than 180 visitors gathered in the campus auditorium of the University of Vienna to hear American professor of history Alexander Rabinowitch speak about his research into the Russian Revolution of October 1917 and the first months of Soviet government.

He was invited to speak by the Institute for Contemporary History and the university's Historical and Cultural Studies department. The occasion for the lecture was the publication in German by Mehring Verlag of Rabinowitch's book, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd*. (Click here for the English edition from Mehring Books.)

Mehring Verlag and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) had set up information stands at the university two weeks before Professor Rabinowitch's lecture to promote the event. From discussions amongst students, young workers and older residents of Vienna, it was already apparent that there was considerable interest in the course of the October Revolution and its fate in the following years.

Many guests at the June 6 event had to stand or find seats on window ledges. Despite the oppressive summer heat, they stayed to listen to the lecture and subsequent panel discussion between Rabinowitch and the Viennese academic Finbarr McLoughlin. This was followed by a spirited discussion with active participation from the audience.

Professor Oliver Rathkolb, director of the Institute of Contemporary History at the University of Vienna, opened the event. He warmly welcomed Alexander Rabinowitch as an outstanding historian of the Russian Revolution, and then introduced the other participants in the panel discussion: Dr. Finbarr McLoughlin, lecturer at the Institute for History, and Wolfgang Weber of Mehring publishers.

Rabinowitch began his contribution by describing what had led him to begin his research into the Russian Revolution. Following the revolution, in August 1918, his father Eugene Rabinowitch had fled Petrograd, going on to study chemistry at the University of Berlin from 1921 to 1926 under renowned scientists such as Albert Einstein and Otto Hahn. He then worked in Göttingen with James Franck, the German physicist and Nobel laureate.

The elder Rabinowitch, a Jew, lost his position after the Nazis seized power. He was sheltered for a while by the Danish physicist Niels Bohr in Copenhagen, and later moved to England. In 1938, he finally settled down with his family in Boston, on the US East Coast, where Russian emigrants assembled at the dinner table every Sunday to engage in endless debates about the October Revolution and the current situation in the Soviet Union.

On these occasions, Alexander Rabinowitch became acquainted with such famous historical and cultural figures as the former prime minister of the 1917 Russian provisional government, Alexander Kerensky; the leader of the Mensheviks, Irakli Tsereteli; the Menshevik historian and archivist, Boris Nicolaevsky; and poet Vladimir Nabokov.

"Daily life, their careers, their families—everything had been turned upside down by the October Revolution for these prominent people", explained Rabinowitch, "and so it was no wonder that I constantly heard from this circle only the worst things about that great event in world history. They were all agreed that the October Revolution had been a cold-blooded coup on the part of a handful of Lenin's ruthless fanatics—a coup, which had absolutely no support from among the people and therefore had to resort to terror in order to establish its rule. Despite their endless stormy disputes, this was the unifying bond of common belief among the Russian émigrés. Naturally, these were also my views when I first began to study history at the University of Chicago."

"Even at the beginning of my dissertation, I had not yet changed my perspective on the October Revolution", continued Rabinowitch. At first he thought about writing a biography of Tsereteli, the Georgian Menshevik and implacable enemy of the Bolsheviks, whom he had met in his youth. However, his interest increasingly turned to the role of the Bolsheviks in 1917. "Why? Because I had learned to study the facts and to interpret them as objectively as possible. The study of the sources, although there were not so many of them in the early 1960s, soon led me to abandon my previous view of the 1917 revolution", he said.

Rabinowitch described how he discovered in the then-available original documents—Bolshevik newspapers and protocol records of the Petrograd Committee of the Bolsheviks—both the outstanding roles of Lenin and Trotsky, and the deep divisions within the Bolshevik Party.

Consequently, he 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 this book, he shows how the Bolsheviks were transformed after the February Revolution from a small group, working mainly in the underground, into a mass party. According to Rabinowitch, "This party was deeply rooted in the masses, the factories, the residential districts and the garrisons, and exhibited great sensitivity to the prevailing political opinions and tendencies, as well as to the highly developed culture of democratic discussion in its own organisation."

He argued that there was no trace of the so-called "Leninist conception of the party", according to which Lenin always gave the correct line and all party members obediently followed. This "Leninist conception of the party" was invented later and was also uncritically presented as a given in the West's rendering of history, but, according to Rabinowitch, had nothing to do with the reality of 1917. Rabinowitch offered as proof his finding that, following the failed July uprising that had taken place against his will, Lenin wanted to dispense with the slogan, "All power to the Soviets", and instead prepare for the seizure of power directly in the name of and under the auspices of the Bolshevik Party. In September, he vigorously argued within the party for the seizure of power "without any further delay". In both cases he was unable to prevail within the party. Rabinowitch asserted that this showed that the party was in close

connection with the masses and rightly assessed their mood.

Rabinowitch concluded by saying, “The Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 can no more be described as Lenin’s successful coup than the July uprising as his unsuccessful coup. Although a classical mass uprising occurred in neither case, the historical sources clearly show that both were the result of the repressed classes of Petrograd’s widespread disillusionment with the results of the February Revolution, and the enormous appeal of the Bolshevik programme to the broad population. The energetic leadership of Lenin and Trotsky together with their unyielding adherence to their policies—immediate ending of the war, land distribution to the peasants, bread for the masses—on the one hand, and the growing and ultimately overwhelming mass support for the policy of the Bolsheviks, on the other, secured the victory of the October Revolution.”

Professor Rabinowitch then presented the most important themes and theses of his latest book, now published in German, *The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd*: the disputes over the composition of the revolutionary government; the humiliating Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with the German imperialist government and its terrible consequences; the Constituent Assembly; and finally the beginning of the Red Terror, following the many assassination attempts and plots against the government and the Bolshevik Party, expressly engineered by the British and French governments.

In his introduction to the podium discussion, Wolfgang Weber quoted the founding father of source-critical historiography, Thucydides of Athens (ca. 454 BC-399 BC): “Most people are unconcerned about seeking the truth of things, but are willing instead to accept the first available conventional wisdom”.

Weber continued: “Alexander Rabinowitch is one of those few, praised by Thucydides, who are committed to exploring the truth, even if they—as he described himself in his lecture—are forced to break with the views of their youth, their family and friends, and confront vigorous attacks from the academic world of both East and West for many years. When the archives in the former Soviet Union were first opened to the public in 1991, many historians from the West began work on various topics. But when it comes to probing the truth of the October Revolution—the course it took, its programme—and critically reviewing all the previous thinking on the subject, no other historian has dedicated so much energy, love of truth and obvious joy to this task as Alexander Rabinowitch”.

“The Mehring publishing firm”, Weber added, “takes pride in publishing the work of this historian. But even more to the point: it regards doing so as a programmatic obligation.”

“The defeats of the world revolution in the 1920s and 1930s were accompanied by increasing ideological attacks on the principles and goals of the eighteenth century Enlightenment. The rise of the Frankfurt School in Germany and its systematic attacks on historical materialism have their roots in this backlash. Mehring publishers has made it its task to lead a new global campaign in defence of Enlightenment goals—especially concerning research into historical truth about the twentieth century—in order to begin to prepare for a new period of revolutionary class struggle.”

“This campaign is an integral part of our work”, said Weber, “It aims at nothing less than a revival of Marxist—and today that means Trotskyist—culture. Of crucial relevance to an understanding of the attacks on science, the Enlightenment and any expression of independent critical thought is the suppression of all documents on the history of the Bolshevik Party and the October Revolution of 1917 by the Stalinist bureaucracy: the anti-communist lies and falsification about its course, its leaders and its political programme. All of its Marxist leaders—indeed, all independent and critically thinking people—were eventually physically exterminated in the course of the Moscow Trials and the Great Terror. The resulting theoretical and political global decline of the labour movement and wide circles of the intelligentsia in the second half of the twentieth century can and must be overcome. The reconstruction of historical truth

concerning the October Revolution and the first years of Soviet government power constitutes an important contribution to this task.”

During both the panel discussion, as well as during and question-and-answer period, thoughtful and interesting questions were raised—for example, about the connection between the domestic economic, social and political development of the young Soviet state, and the course of revolutionary struggles outside Russia in Europe.

In this respect, Professor Rabinowitch reported some of the findings of his recent research, conducted in the St. Petersburg archives in the recent period. He himself was surprised that many daily reports and analyses of developments and struggles in Hungary, Germany, Italy, France, and Poland were to be found in the Kronstadt sailors’ daily newspaper, for example, as well as in other previously inaccessible and largely ignored local newspapers of 1918. Every big or small strike, every political conflict in distant countries was vigilantly followed. Not only Lenin and Trotsky, but ordinary workers, soldiers and sailors of the lowest orders were convinced that their fate depended on the development of the revolution in other European countries, especially Germany. “I myself had not expected that”, Rabinowitch stressed.

The discussion included many more questions on the course of the civil war, which the counterrevolutionary forces—supported by Britain, France, the US and Japan—waged against the Soviet power; the development of the Bolshevik Party; and the devastating consequences of the bloody suppression of the revolution in Germany by the SPD (Social Democratic Party) government. After the event, many stayed to continue the discussion at a small buffet in the old courtyard of the university.

Towards the end of the gathering, several people approached Alexander Rabinowitch and Wolfgang Weber to personally express their enthusiasm for the event and their gratitude to the American historian for his work on the October Revolution and to Mehring for its publications. Advance orders were also taken for Rabinowitch’s book, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd*, the next of his books to be published by Mehring Verlag.

At midday on the same day, Alexander Rabinowitch had been invited by the American International High School in Vienna to discuss his work as an historian with students from graduating classes and a history course. About 50 young students, motivated by interest in its theme, attended this optional event, asking many questions in an engaged discussion. Some then went on to buy a signed copy of Rabinowitch’s book.

The American historian’s visit to Vienna concluded the next day with a lecture, a reading from his book and a discussion at the popular Lhotzky’s Literature Buffet. This bookstore in the 2nd Leopoldstadt district of the city, the former Jewish quarter, is also committed to the promulgation of the Enlightenment and its objectives, and went to considerable lengths to prepare and contribute to the success of Alexander Rabinowitch’s visit to Vienna.



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