

Leipzig Book Fair 2012

Mehring Publishers presents new German edition of Alexander Rabinowitch's *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*

Wolfgang Weber
21 March 2012



On March 17, Mehring Publishers held a readers' forum at this year's Leipzig Book Fair to present one of its new publications, *Die Sowjetmacht. Die Revolution der Bolschewiki 1917*. This is the first German edition of a major work by American historian Alexander Rabinowitch. Some 80 people attended the forum.

The book was first published in the US in 1976 under the title *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd*. It has since become a standard work in historical studies and has been translated into seven languages. However, it had been neglected by the major publishers in Germany.

A publisher must have a good reason to publish in German a work that was first released 36 years ago and had not found a publisher in Germany. At the Leipzig Book Fair forum, Mehring Publishers explained its rationale. It based its decision on the merits of Rabinowitch as an historian—virtues that opinion-makers and office-holders in universities, editorial boards and publishing houses in Germany regard as deficiencies.

Methods and results of Rabinowitch's work

Rabinowitch is first of all a staunch advocate of historiography based

on the analysis and evaluation of documents. His credo is “to find out how it *really* was,” as the famous German historian and founder of modern source-based historiography Leopold Ranke (1795 – 1886) once put it. Rabinowitch has spent his entire academic life working systematically and tirelessly in archives, subjecting both the available and the more elusive sources to comprehensive and thorough critical evaluation. Every detail of his writings is supported by verifiable documents—protocols of meetings, personal notes, statements of witnesses or participants in events, newspaper articles, letters, etc.

Second, while Rabinowitch always maintains the distance from the subject matter required for scientific objectivity, his presentation of historical events is characterised by an unmistakable sympathy for the oppressed masses—the soldiers returning from the terrible carnage of World War I, the starving working class families in the cities, the landless and desperate peasants in the countryside. It was his own research work, not a preconceived ideology, which led him to explain those masses as the driving social force of the Revolution.

Consequently, his work draws on not only government documents and memoirs of politicians, but also on other kinds of documents, such as statements of witnesses and newspaper articles about the struggles in the factories, neighbourhoods and lower echelons of the army and navy. He meticulously analyses and documents how the feelings and demands of these various layers found their way into the Bolshevik Party assemblies and the meetings and resolutions of the party committees—resolutions not always in accord with Lenin's views.

Rabinowitch comes to the conclusion that in 1917, as opposed to later years under Stalin, the Bolshevik Party was a relatively open organisation, characterised by frank discussion and democratic decision-making in its internal functioning. This is precisely why it was able to establish a very close relationship with the broad masses, who were disappointed with the results of the February Revolution, became more and more radicalised, and turned to the party and program of the Bolsheviks.

On the basis of his research methods and the results they yielded, Rabinowitch produced a work that stands in stark contrast to the ideologically driven Cold War historiography that dominated high school textbooks and the bookstore shelves in Germany. This school is exemplified by figures such as Richard Pipes, one of its leading representatives. It was a historiography based not on research, but on a prejudiced and preconceived notion of communism, and which

contended that the October Revolution was nothing more than a coup d'état on the part of a small band of revolutionary conspirators led by Lenin and Trotsky. These two were said to have cynically appealed to the needs and desires of the war-weary and hungry masses, exploiting them to seize power with the help of a party membership blindly submitting to the iron discipline of the party leader, Lenin.

As a consequence of the Stalinist bureaucracy's need to legitimise itself, this conception scarcely differed from the one held in the post-World War II Soviet bloc. Of course, Trotsky—the Revolution's most important leader and theoretician apart from Lenin—had to be airbrushed from all photographs and history books to be replaced by Stalin, who was portrayed as the close associate and rightful successor of Lenin. At the beginning of 1917, Stalin, in fact, opposed the workers' seizure of power, and thereafter played only a very minor role in events. In so far as newspapers and documents about the Russian Revolution were cited, the only ones quoted in history books in both the West and the East were those corresponding to the prescribed conception.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the opening of archives in Russia significantly improved access to the body of source material. Rabinowitch was among the first Western historians to take advantage of this opportunity. He plunged into the Moscow and St. Petersburg archives to examine the newly available material. He discovered that the new documents did not contradict his earlier research findings, but rather confirmed them.

However, none of the major publishing houses in Germany, such as Beck, Hanser and Suhrkamp, was prepared to publish *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*. This was despite the fact that German specialists in the field of the Russian Revolution, such as Bernd Bonwetsch, largely followed Rabinowitch's account and assessment of the July events and the Kornilov coup and its aftermath. Why was this so?

Post-modernism and post-structuralism—a rejection of the science of history

The dominance of the Cold Warriors in the academic world of historical institutions and publishers was supplemented by the post-modernists, post-structuralists and constructivists and their philosophies. These ideologues opposed historical research committed to the excavation of historical truth, and did so all the more aggressively the more the opening of archives in Russia and Eastern Europe facilitated access to that truth.

For these elements, there is no objective truth, nor are there cause and effect relationships in history. In their view, even source documents fall into the category of purely subjective opinions—“intersubjective conventions,” “narratives,” “representations,” etc.

Jörg Baberowski, professor of history at the Humboldt University of Berlin and representative of the subjectivist theory of history, ridicules historians like Rabinowitch who hurried to Moscow and Leningrad in 1990-1991. He has written that “for some of them, history could be illuminated—even today—all the more lucidly by the radiance of authenticity, the more that (new) sources came to light within the scientific community. They regarded sources as pieces of a mosaic that can be assembled into a whole picture, engendering the past for the people of today. Historians devoted to the reconstruction of past worlds justify their operations by drawing attention to the gaps that

have to be filled. Following the opening of archives in the former Soviet Union, this line of argument has unfortunately become increasingly convincing... The Soviet Union as a huge construction site, on which historians bring the whole of history step by step back into the present—that is what historians dream of today. That is what motivates their hunt for ever more sources... The claim to show how the past actually was turns out to be an illusion. What the historian confronts in the sources is not the past... the past is a construction.” *

The small but loaded word “unfortunately” which Baberowski slips into the methodological exposé reveals the motive and aim of the post-modernist and post-structuralist offensive: the old, virulently anti-communist conception of how to write the history of the October Revolution of 1917 was to continue its dominance in the universities, newspaper feature pages and book stores, even after the end of the Cold War.

Since the opening of the archives, the irrational and factually untenable nature of these notions can be exposed by a critical analysis and disclosure of the numerous documents previously held under lock and key. Precisely because of this, the post-modernists all the more resolutely attribute to those ideologically-based “narratives” and “representations of the past” the same legitimacy as the concepts and findings derived from a scrupulous, critical evaluation of historical documents.

According to the post-modernists and post-structuralists, the ideology-based concepts on the one hand and the documents and conclusions drawn from them on the other both provide merely subjective “representations” or “constructions of the past.” Therefore, according to them, diligent document-based research and the excavation of historical truth are illusions, an entirely futile labour of love! This is the creed of post-modernism and similar theories. It is a rejection of scientific history in general.

Throwing down the gauntlet to the post-modernists

Mehring Publishers' publication of Alexander Rabinowitch's book aims to throw down the gauntlet to the theories and efforts of post-modernist lecturers and authors and their portrayal of the history of the Russian Revolution. Under conditions of a global crisis of capitalism and social counterrevolution in Europe, many people—particularly the young—are looking for a solution for the whole of humanity. As a result, there will be a growth of interest in history and the lessons of the October Revolution. Rabinowitch's work will greatly assist people in their study and understanding of this history “as it *really* was.”

* Baberowski, Jörg: *Geschichte Ist Immer Gegenwart (History is Always Present)*, Stuttgart, Munich 2001, pp. 10-11



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