

WSWS publishes interviews with children of the Left Opposition

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The *World Socialist Web Site* is publishing interviews with three children of Soviet Left Oppositionists—Tatiana Smilga, Zorya Serebryakova and Yuri Primakov—and with Tatiana Isaeva, granddaughter of the outstanding Marxist literary critic, Alexander Voronsky. The interview with Tatiana Smilga was posted February 25; Yuri Primakov, February 26; Zorya Serebrayakova, February 27, and Tatiana Isaeva, February 28.

While illustrating the devastating impact Stalinism has had on the historical consciousness of society, the accounts of these people provide a fascinating link to one of the most powerful and complex chapters in the history of the working class: the October Revolution, the early Soviet period and the struggle of Trotskyism against Stalinism. The lives of those interviewed and their struggle for the defense of historical truth about Trotsky and the Left Opposition testify to the enduring impact Marxist culture and Trotskyism have had on the working class and intellectuals in the Soviet Union, Stalinism and capitalist restoration notwithstanding.

As young men, the fathers of Tatiana Smilga, Zorya Serebryakova and Yuri Primakov—Ivar Smilga, Leonid Serebryakov and Vitali Primakov—as well as Alexander Voronsky played an important role in the October Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent civil war. Having joined the Bolsheviks as youth, they were educated in Lenin's struggle to build an independent revolutionary party of the working class. They formed part of an entire generation of revolutionaries who, on the basis of the experiences of the revolutionary struggles of the working class in 1905 and the catastrophe of World War I, made the decision to dedicate their lives to the struggle for a socialist society.

The October Revolution was a gigantic leap forward in the struggle for a socialist society and opened up a historical period of revolutionary struggles by the international working class. As the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) emphasized in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, the seizure of power by the Russian proletariat under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party had represented "... the positive culmination of the class struggle as an objective historical process and the political development of the international workers movement. Despite the vicissitudes of the class struggle, the previous 70 years before 1917 had seen an astonishing and historically unprecedented development in the political consciousness of the masses." [1]

It was this Marxist tradition and consciousness in the working class that the Trotskyist movement fought to preserve under conditions of the growing pressure of imperialism on the isolated USSR and the beginning bureaucratic degeneration of the workers' state. Founded in October 1923 by Leon Trotsky, who, together with Lenin, had been the principal leader of the October Revolution, the Left Opposition was to fight over the ensuing decade to reform the Soviet Communist Party and reorient it toward the program of proletarian internationalism upon which the October Revolution had been based. Serebryakov, Smilga, Voronsky and Primakov were to play leading roles in the Left Opposition during 1920s.

The unexpected delay of the world revolution in 1917-1922 had placed

the workers' state under tremendous economic and political pressure. By the end of the Civil War in 1922, the tasks facing the fledgling Soviet regime were daunting: the economy had collapsed to about 20 percent of the pre-war level of 1913, starvation had gripped many parts of the country, and the rebellion at Kronstadt in 1921 had revealed significant unrest among the peasantry and even sections of the working class that had comprised the revolution's main support. The New Economic Policy (NEP) that was introduced in 1921 allowed the partial restoration of capitalism while keeping the commanding heights of the economy in the hands of the workers' state. Within two years of the NEP, clear signs of a newly emerging economic crisis took the form of a disproportionate rise in industrial prices and accompanying collapse of agricultural prices that threatened the alliance between town and country.

The economic strains were accompanied by ever more frequent violations of inner-party democracy within the ruling party; an increasing bureaucratism that reflected a growing divide between the party's upper echelons and the broad masses, especially the working class youth; and a nascent system of privileges enjoyed by sections of the party that were becoming relatively indifferent to the poverty of much of the population.

The formation of the Left Opposition was closely linked to the developments in Germany in 1923, where the absence of a revolutionary leadership capable of taking power, due in large part to the line of the Comintern, had led to an aborted insurrection in October. The delay of the revolution in Germany, on which broad layers of Soviet workers had put all their hopes for an end to the international isolation of the young workers' state, caused widespread demoralization in the working class.

At the same time, Lenin's health was in a precarious state. No one was sure if he would recover from the strokes suffered in 1922 and 1923, nor was it clear who would assume his leadership role in the party if he died. In January 1924, the attacks on Trotsky became more intense at the 13th Party Conference. Then Lenin died on January 21, plunging the nation into mourning.

Throughout the next few months, the Stalin faction did not launch a clear frontal attack on Trotsky and his supporters in the Left Opposition. The character of the Bolshevik Party was significantly changed, however, when the doors were opened during the "Lenin Enrollment:" hundreds of thousands of new members were admitted, many of whom were remote from the revolutionary traditions of the Bolshevik Party and a significant number of whom were out-and-out careerists who had nothing to do with Marxism. These new forces would soon be used to drown out the Left Opposition in subsequent inner-party struggles.

In the summer of 1924, the Fifth Congress of the Communist International discussed the failure of the revolution in Germany. Clearly dissatisfied with the results of this discussion, in September Trotsky wrote *The Lessons of October* as a foreword to his volume of writings on 1917. In it, he criticized the right wing that had emerged in 1917 within the Bolshevik Party and opposed the insurrection in October, a right wing that included not only Zinoviev and Kamenev, but also Stalin, Molotov and

Nogin, and that was also largely responsible for the line of the Comintern in Germany in 1923. Vituperative attacks soon followed in the so called "Literary Discussion," as Stalin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin and countless others wrote blatantly false denunciations of Trotsky's party history, his role in the October Revolution, and even his recent role as leader of the Red Army during the Civil War.

The central target of the attacks was the internationalist perspective of Marxism, as summed up in Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. In analyzing the moving forces of the 1905 Revolution in Russia, Trotsky had established that whereas the socialist revolution might well begin in a relatively backward country like Russia, its very existence would depend on the extension of the revolution to at least several of the advanced capitalist countries in Europe. It was this perspective that had formed the programmatic basis of the October Revolution and would guide the policies of the Bolshevik government and the Comintern under Lenin.

In August 1924, Stalin declared that socialism could be built in one country, a nationalist view that rejected the internationalist tenets of Bolshevism. As a political program, the theory of "socialism in one country" gave expression to the social interests of the bureaucracy. Having emerged on the basis of the property relations established by the October Revolution amidst conditions of international isolation of the relatively backward Soviet Union, its enormous social privileges brought the bureaucracy into conflict with the working class and the internationalist program of October. The reorientation of the party along the nationalist line of building "socialism in one country" would eventually require the destruction of the Left Opposition and almost the entire leadership of the October Revolution.

The process was protracted, but it gradually assumed more repressive forms. Throughout the mid-1920s, many of Trotsky's supporters such as Rakovsky, Joffe and Serebryakov were reassigned to remote places, even foreign embassies, by the Orgburo headed by Stalin. Others were clearly demoted, including Trotsky, who was forced out as people's commissar of the army and fleet. Party secretaries who had shown sympathy with the Left Opposition were replaced; workers were dismissed from the factories; military leaders were scattered, including Antonov-Ovseenko, Muralov and Primakov; editors were removed from their newspapers and journals, including Voronsky, Preobrazhensky, Sosnovsky and Vilensky-Sibiriyakov; students were expelled from the universities. Party history began to be rewritten by people who had played no role in the revolution or Civil War, or had been on the opposing side in each.

At the end of 1925, the Stalin-Zinoviev-Kamenev faction broke apart. Although fundamental differences remained, the Left Opposition concluded by April that Zinoviev and Kamenev were reflecting the pressure of the working class in Petrograd (now renamed Leningrad) and Moscow, where they headed the respective party committees, and moved to form the United Opposition in April 1926.

Decisive to the growing political isolation of the Left Opposition was the defeat of the British General Strike in 1926, followed by the crushing defeat of the Chinese Revolution in 1925-1927. In the latter, the policy of subordinating the Communist Party in China to a "bloc of four classes" was advanced by the former Menshevik, now "Bolshevik," Martynov, and promoted by Stalin and Bukharin. In April 1927, the Chinese Communist Party was massacred in Shanghai by the Kuomintang led by Chiang Kai-shek. Stalin-Bukharin-Martynov had insisted that the Chinese CP submit to the demands of the Kuomintang, and then to the "left wing" of the Kuomintang, which carried out another massacre of the workers in Wuhan.

In response to the disastrous events in China, the United Opposition circulated a "Declaration of the 83" from May 1927 to December, when the Fifteenth Party Congress convened. The list of signatories is impressive: it includes over 3,000 Bolsheviks, many of whom were renowned for their role in the revolution. Trotsky later estimated that there

were 10,000-20,000 Oppositionists in Moscow alone.

The defeat of the Chinese revolution, a confirmation of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution in the negative, represented a major setback for the development of the world revolution. The disillusionment and disorientation it caused in the working class were used by the Stalinist faction in the party to expel the Left Opposition from its ranks at the Fifteenth Party Congress.

Participation in oppositional activity became a crime, punishable under Article 58 of the criminal code. Trotsky was exiled, first to Alma-Ata in Central Asia, then abroad to Turkey in 1929. His supporters were scattered across prisons and places of exile throughout the Soviet Union.

The early repressions notwithstanding, the Left Opposition remained a major political and cultural force in Soviet life of the 1920s. Particularly among youth and workers who had experienced the October Revolution and Civil War and the internationalism of this early period, the opposition enjoyed substantial support. Many of the most respected leaders of the October Revolution—among them Antonov-Ovseenko, Joffe, Muralov, Smilga, Sosnovsky, Serebryakov, I.N. Smirnov, Preobrazhensky, Primakov, Ter-Vaganyan, Voronsky, and above all, Leon Trotsky, were known to be Left Oppositionists.

Major figures in cultural life such as the writers Boris Pilnyak and Isaac Babel; theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold; film director Sergei Eisenstein; the young future writers Anatoly Rybakov, Lev Kopelev and Varlam Shalamov; as well as several young Marxist philosophers such as Maksim Shrivindt, Olga Tankhilevich, Izrail Agol and Nikolai Karev sympathized with or were members of the Left Opposition. This is to name but a few.

When Stalin made his "left turn" toward complete collectivization and rapid industrialization in 1928-1929, many Oppositionists capitulated and sought readmission to the party. Trotsky was ruthless in his criticism of former supporters who had surrendered their principles to "build socialism in one country." Some of them, like Radek, became his outspoken opponents, whereas others, such as Voronsky and Serebryakov, fell into silence and tried to find a *modus vivendi* with the Stalinist regime. Some were readmitted to the party but played relatively minor roles in political life. Those who were writers often turned to the nineteenth century, assiduously avoiding contemporary politics.

The 1930s saw renewed struggles of the working class in Western Europe and rising social tensions and political discontent in the Soviet Union. The coming to power of Hitler in Germany represented a historical turning point: with its ultra-left line and refusal to fight for a united front between social democratic and communist workers against fascism, the Comintern bore the main political responsibility for this catastrophic defeat of the German working class.

From this defeat and the absence of any critical discussion within the Comintern on its previous line, Leon Trotsky drew the conclusion that the Third International had degenerated from an internationalist organization established to work for the interests of the world revolution into an instrument of the Stalinist bureaucracy to preserve its social privileges by stifling revolutions abroad. As an agency of imperialism within the workers' state, the bureaucracy would have to be overthrown by a political revolution that would restore power to the working class, while preserving the social foundations laid by October. The fight for Marxist leadership in the working class would require the building of the Fourth International.

The counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism was most clearly expressed in its mass murder of Trotskyists and communists internationally in the 1930s. The murder of leading party member Sergei Kirov on December 1, 1934 was used by Stalin as a pretext to begin the arrest of most former Oppositionists, charging them with political responsibility for the assassination. In August 1936, he began a series of show trials in which the former leaders of the October Revolution were charged with

espionage, sabotage and plotting, in league with fascist Germany and Italy, to restore capitalism by dismembering the Soviet Union. The Dewey Commission, an impartial commission established in April 1937, found the Moscow Trials to be “frame-ups” and declared Leon Trotsky and his son Leon Sedov, the main defendants in the trial, “not guilty.”

Coming on the eve of another world war and under conditions of a hitherto unprecedented crisis of the world capitalist system, the terror unleashed by Stalin against socialist workers, intellectuals, and leading members of the Bolshevik party had the primary purpose of preventing the emergence of a mass movement of the working class under a Trotskyist leadership that could lead to the overthrow of both the Stalinist bureaucracy and capitalism.

The exiled Trotsky was engaged in a relentless campaign to expose the Moscow Trials as a frame-up and explain that they represented a ferocious reaction against Marxism and the October Revolution, and not, as the Stalinists and their bourgeois apologists claimed, their defense against “enemies of the people.” Summing up the social and political interests behind the bureaucracy’s massacre of revolutionists, Trotsky wrote in 1938:

“In the struggle for power and income, the bureaucracy is forced to chop off and crush those groups who are connected with the past, who know and remember the program of the October Revolution, who are sincerely devoted to the tasks of socialism. The extermination of the Old Bolsheviks and of the socialist elements of the middle and younger generations is a necessary link in the anti-October reaction.” [2]

The Great Terror would lead to the execution of about one million victims in 1937-1938 alone; millions more were sent to prison camps, many never to emerge. Almost all the Old Bolsheviks were killed. Virtually the entire Soviet Left Opposition of some 30,000 members, the overwhelming majority of whom were workers and youth, was exterminated.

An entire generation of socialist workers was murdered. Thousands of outstanding writers, scientists, philosophers, architects, directors and musicians were imprisoned, tortured and killed. Almost all members of the Comintern were purged. Virtually the entire cadre of the Communist Parties of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Yugoslavia was beheaded. Thousands of communists from Germany and Hungary who had fled fascism were killed by Stalin in the Soviet Union.

While mass executions were carried out in the Soviet Union, many thousand more communists were killed by the Stalinist GPU in the Civil War in Spain. The apex of the terror came in August 1940 with the murder of Leon Trotsky in Mexico by the Stalinist agent Ramon Mercader. Thus, far more communists and revolutionary leaders were killed by Stalin than by any fascist regime.

Then, between 1941 and 1945, the Second World War swept away about 27 million Soviet citizens, including many of the young generation who had been born and raised since October 1917. The destruction of entire generations of Marxist workers and Trotskyists proved to be vital for the re-stabilization of capitalism after the end of the world war, when millions of workers internationally were again drawn into revolutionary struggles only to be betrayed by their Stalinist leadership.

The liquidation of Trotskyists throughout the world by Stalinism, assisted by fascism, led to an enormous degradation in the political consciousness of the working class, the impact of which would be felt for generations to come. Even today, the names of even the most outstanding cultural and political figures who made profound contributions to the Marxist education of the working class internationally in this period remain, for the most part, unknown. In the consciousness of millions, socialism and Marxism are still falsely associated with the counterrevolutionary policies of Stalinism and the terror in the USSR.

However, while Stalinism did cause horrific damage to the consciousness of the working class internationally, it proved incapable of

destroying the international Trotskyist movement. The Marxist tradition that had formed the basis of the October Revolution, the struggle of Trotskyism against Stalinism and all forms of petty-bourgeois opportunism, were continued and brought to a higher level by the Trotskyist movement internationally throughout the post-war period and after the collapse of the USSR. As Trotsky remarked before the Dewey Commission when asked whether he drew any pessimistic conclusions from the Moscow trials:

“No, I don’t see any grounds for pessimism. One must take history as she is. Mankind moves like some pilgrims: two steps forward, one step back. During the movement back, it seems to skeptics and pessimists that all is lost. Nothing is lost. Mankind has risen from the ape to the Comintern. It will rise from the Comintern to genuine socialism. The sentence of the commission shows once again that a correct idea is stronger than the most powerful police. In this conviction lies the indestructible foundation of revolutionary optimism.” [3]

Tatiana Smilga, Zorya Serebryakova and Yuri Primakov were all born shortly after the October Revolution. They were only children when they experienced the vibrant political and cultural life of the 1920s and were introduced to some of the most outstanding men history has ever produced. Yet they still remember this period, contradictory as it was, as the most stimulating in their entire lives.

Tatiana Isaeva, who was born after World War II and never got to know her grandfather, Aleksandr Voronsky, is separated by an even greater distance in terms of time from the October Revolution and the Left Opposition. Still, she has devoted her energy to restoring the historical truth about her grandfather, her parents and many other victims of the terror.

All of their lives were overshadowed by Stalinism, in both a personal and political sense, as were those of countless millions of workers and intellectuals. In the Soviet Union, the bureaucracy, consisting mostly of “recruits of 1937” who had risen to the top by murdering thousands of revolutionaries, carried out a relentless campaign to falsify the history of the October Revolution, Marxism, and above all, the historical role and perspective of Leon Trotsky.

In 1949, Stalin carried out a new wave of repression in the blatantly anti-Semitic “anti-cosmopolitan” campaign. Many children of former Oppositionists were rearrested, only to be freed under the “Khrushchev thaw” in 1956. This period of partial de-Stalinization, to which the bureaucracy had felt compelled due to its deep economic and political crisis, led also to the posthumous rehabilitation of some, but by no means all, of the former Oppositionists. The very mention of the name Leon Trotsky was taboo almost until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The next round of rehabilitations would come only under Perestroika, particularly in the last years of the Soviet Union’s existence, from 1988 through 1991. These rehabilitations proceeded along two lines: party and legal. Thus, the Supreme Court could declare that a given victim had not carried out a crime as an “enemy of the people,” but the Communist Party might not restore the victim’s party membership (which would bring significant benefits to any surviving relatives).

Trotsky was never rehabilitated along either line during the Soviet Union’s existence. There are indications that, under the Yeltsin regime in 1992, he was cleared of two criminal charges of anti-Soviet activity (for which he had been exiled in 1929 and stripped of his Soviet citizenship in 1932), but never rehabilitated by the by-now defunct Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

The fact that, after the annihilation of the Left Opposition in the USSR by Stalinism, the Soviet and Eastern European working class remained isolated from Trotskyism throughout the post-war period was mainly the responsibility of Pabloism. Assigning a progressive historical role to the Stalinist bureaucracy, the Pabloites advocated the liquidation of the Trotskyist movement into the Stalinist and social democratic parties

worldwide, as well as into the national revolutionary movements in the backward countries. With its opportunist perspective, Pabloism disoriented workers internationally and politically destroyed thousands of Trotskyist cadre. The climax of this betrayal came in 1985-1991, when the Pabloites enthusiastically supported the push toward capitalist restoration by the Stalinist bureaucracies, while falsely calling themselves “Trotskyists.”

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, amid a staggering rise of social inequality and an escalation of imperialist wars, the Russian oligarchy and its international counterparts have employed an entire army of academics to falsify the history of the October Revolution and the Soviet Union, justify Stalinism, and attack the life and work of Leon Trotsky. In this campaign, they base themselves above all on the historical falsifications of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the enormous political damage it did to the historical consciousness of the working class.

Under these conditions, the fact that, despite the tremendous political and personal pressure they were under both in the Soviet Union and after, Tatiana Smilga, Zorya Serebryakova, Yuri Primakov and Tatiana Isaeva have dedicated their lives to restoring the historical truth about their families, and thereby, Trotskyism, is of great political significance. Like Nadezhda Joffe, the daughter of the Left Oppositionist Adolph Joffe, and, most importantly, the sociologist Vadim Rogovin, whose monumental seven-volume history of the Left Opposition remains one of the most important contributions to Soviet historiography in recent decades, these four descendants of Left Oppositionists are among those who have withstood this relentless assault on the historical consciousness of the working class over a protracted historical period.

This was not simply a personal decision they made. While their point of view on this history is largely personal, their courage and endurance in this difficult struggle for historical truth express a deep consciousness of the objective significance this history has for society and the future of mankind. With their struggle they have made an important contribution to reviving and deepening the historical consciousness of the working class.

As workers internationally enter into a new period of revolutionary upheavals, a century after the beginning of World War I and over two decades after the collapse of the USSR, this history indeed acquires extraordinary significance. The continuity of the history of the Left Opposition and its struggle against Stalinism is embodied in the International Committee of the Fourth International. This is an essential part of the history of the working class that workers and youth must and will assimilate in their struggle for socialism.

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Footnotes:

1. David North: “After the Demise of the USSR: The Struggle for Marxism and the Tasks of the Fourth International,” Report to the 12th Plenum of the ICFI, March 11, 1992; in: *Fourth International*, Vol. 19 No. 1 (Fall-Winter 1992), p. 68.[back]

2. “Biulleten’ oppozitsii,” 1938, No. 66-67, p. 21 (L. D. Trotsky: “Does the Soviet Government Still Follow the Principles Adopted Twenty Years Ago?”), translation quoted from Vadim Z. Rogovin: *Stalin’s Terror of 1937-1938. Political Genocide in the USSR*, Mehring Books 2009, p. 186.[back]

3. “Biulleten’ oppozitsii,” 1938, No. 62-63, pp. 1-2 ([No author indicated] “Verdict of the International Commission on the Moscow Trials”), translation quoted from Vadim Z. Rogovin: *Stalin’s Terror of 1937-1938. Political Genocide in the USSR*, Mehring Books 2009, p. 345.[back]



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