

Interview with Tatiana Smilga-Poluyan

Our reporter
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Ivar Tenisovich Smilga (1892-1937), the father of Tatiana Smilga-Poluyan, was one of the leading members of the Bolshevik Party during the October Revolution. Having joined the Bolsheviks at the age of 14 in 1907, he was elected to the Bolshevik Central Committee in 1917 and had by then become one of Lenin's closest confidants.

During the revolution, he was entrusted by Lenin with the task of leading the Baltic armed forces that were to come to aid the Bolsheviks during the uprising in Petrograd. After the Bolshevik uprising in October, Smilga remained in Finland as a representative of Soviet Russia.

Along with such outstanding military leaders as Trotsky, Tukhachevsky and Primakov, he belonged to the military command of the Red Army during the Russian Civil War. He was later appointed vice chairman of the State Planning Committee [Gosplan], and, subsequently, vice chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the National Economy [Vesenkha]. From the formation of the Left Opposition in 1923 to his capitulation to Stalin in 1929, he was one of the Opposition's leading figures. (See: "WSWS publishes interviews with children of the Left Opposition")

Ivar Smilga was arrested in 1935 and sentenced to 10 years in prison. In January 1937, he was brought to Moscow from prison on the eve of the Second Moscow Trial. Despite severe torture, he refused to testify against others or plead guilty, which spared him the humiliation of a show trial.

He was shot on January 10, 1937 and would not be rehabilitated until half a century later, in 1987.

His daughter Tatiana was born in 1919 and is now 94 years old. She comes from a remarkable family with longstanding revolutionary traditions. Not only her parents, but also her uncles and aunts were all active participants in the Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent Civil War. Of this generation of revolutionaries, only one aunt and one uncle of Tatiana survived the purges. Her age notwithstanding, Tatiana Smilga-Poluyan has retained an incorruptible memory.

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WSWS: Can you tell us about your childhood memories of members of the Left Opposition?

Tatiana Smilga-Poluyan: It is very difficult for me to talk about all this. I've talked about it a lot. I've given countless interviews to TV channels and newspapers from all over the world, particularly during Perestroika. And it didn't change anything.

History is being lied about just as it has always been. Not only the youth, but people who are 50 or 60 don't know anything about history. They usually haven't even heard of the Left Opposition. There is a book by Abramovich. He describes my father very well, with great warmth. [1] I couldn't describe him better to you. Abramovich was often at our house and knew everyone in my family. It's the best book on the Left Opposition I know. It's a pity it hasn't been translated. It should be.

But I remember everything very well.

Our house was always open to everyone and we had many guests. Trotsky and his wife often visited us, and so did Preobrazhensky [2], Karl Radek [3], Kamenev [4], Zinoviev [5], Lashevich [6], with whom my father was friends since the Civil War, Muralov [7], and others.

You will, of course, want to know about Trotsky. I've always

emphasized, and will emphasize again, that he was very attentive toward children. He and his wife regularly came to our room and brought my sister Natasha and me interesting books or other little presents.

My sister Natasha, who was very boyish as a child, once went to our father's workroom, where Trotsky was sitting on the sofa discussing things with our father. She said to him in a very commanding tone, "Get up, you!" He laughed and asked, "Well, why should I get up?" She repeated, "You're being told to get up!" So Trotsky got up laughingly and she said very tenderly, "I want to show you how I do somersaults." And she did some somersaults on the sofa.

I don't understand much about the Opposition, I don't have a clear understanding of their politics. I know that they were outstanding thinkers. But I do want to emphasize that they were very easy-going people, very tender toward children.

WSWS: Can you tell us more about your father, Ivar Smilga?

Tatiana Smilga-Poluyan: Smilga obviously played a leading role in the October Revolution and the Civil War. He was a leading Bolshevik during the revolution and later military commander at the Southern, Eastern and Western Fronts.

He was expelled from the party in 1927 for being a member of the Left Opposition. This was very difficult for him to cope with—being expelled from the party he had joined as a teenager of 14 years.

He was sent into exile in December 1927. The Yaroslavsky station in Moscow was overcrowded with people when he was taken by the NKVD and put on a train to Minusinsk in Siberia. Trotsky was there too. My sister Natasha, who was five, clung to his knees and he caressed her.

We—my mother, my sister and I—visited my father in Minusinsk in the summer of 1928. It took us nine days to get there and we couldn't stay long. My sister and I got sick because of the difficult conditions; the water there was very bad. So my mother took us back to Moscow.

Just after our arrival, she got the message that my father had fallen seriously ill with appendicitis. They let him return to Moscow and he was operated on at the Kremlin in 1929. Having recovered, he, Radek and Preobrazhensky wrote a letter declaring their break with the Opposition. I couldn't tell you why they did it.

WSWS: Abramovich writes that Smilga resumed his oppositionist activities in 1932...

Tatiana Smilga-Poluyan: That I cannot confirm. It is possible. At least I believe that he and many others started to think that the Opposition had been correct after all. But no one was coming to our house anymore, and there were no discussions whatsoever on this question. Maybe he did meet with comrades and talk with them, I don't know. But our house was empty in the end, and he was lonely, reading literature in his workroom.

He was sent to Tashkent in 1933 to work in the Central Asian Gosplan, and returned in 1934. He had serious disagreements with the party over economic policies. Stalin and Smilga couldn't stand each other because my father wouldn't give in and continued to defend the positions he considered to be correct.

Upon his return, they didn't let him work anywhere but at the Academia Publishing House. This publishing house was, by the way, excellent. They published beautiful editions of books, beginning with Dante's *Divine*

Comedy up to the 19th century.

There my father wrote forewords to various editions of classical works by Dickens, Saint-Simon, Desiderius Erasmus, Marat and others. He would always tell us at home what he was working on at the moment; he had always taken a great interest in literature and music. By the way, the main editor of the series was Lev Borisovich Kamenev, who was, of course, shot as well during the terror.

Kirov was killed on December 1, 1934 and we learned about it one day later, on my father's birthday. We were all shocked. It was horrific. My father had just asked Stalin to let him work at the Institute of World Literature, but Stalin, naturally, refused. Exactly one month later they came after my father. He spent two years in the Verkhneursk politisolator [political prison] in the Urals. This is where all Old Bolsheviks were imprisoned.

While in prison, he learned French and read Corneille and other major French writers. He wrote me in a letter that when he returned, we would translate French literature together. I loved French literature, particularly [Prosper] Mérimée, since my childhood. But he never returned.

I think that he wanted to retreat from politics and just work as a literary scholar after having been removed from all political posts in 1934. He was still young, you see. He was just 44 when he was shot on January 10, 1937. Do you know how we learned that he was dead? We would always send money to him in prison, but one day they didn't accept the money anymore.

This is also how we learned about the death of my mother, Nadezhda Vasilevna Poluyan [8]. We sent her a packet with clothes, but they sent the package back, saying that the addressee had moved away. She was killed on November 4, 1937. She was born in 1895, so she died at age 42.

She was shot in Karelia [formerly an autonomous republic in the USSR, today divided between Russia and Finland]. It was a mass execution; over 1,000 people were shot on that day. My mother was shot together with two of her friends. They were the wives of Left Oppositionists Vuiovich and Aleksandr Ioselevich. They were all brought to the forest Sandarmokh [9], undressed—so that they couldn't run away—and killed. We only found that out during Perestroika, in 1988.

My mother had been a member of the Bolshevik Party since 1915. I don't know whether she ever signed a declaration of the Left Opposition, but she no doubt shared the political views of my father. By the way, she had visited Lenin while he was in hiding in Sestroretsk in 1917. There she got to know the worker Emelianov [10], who hid Lenin in his barn. He, too, was arrested during the terror. I learned that when we visited our father in prison.

Next to us stood a woman whom my mother recognized to be Emelianov's wife. I remember how surprised I was that the man who had hidden Lenin was imprisoned. He had a large family, with seven children. They were all arrested. Two of his sons were shot. During the terror, almost everyone who visited Emelianov's house in Finland was arrested as well.

WSWS: How many members of your family were killed during the purges?

Tatiana Smilga-Poluyan: Oh, there were so many. I probably can't count them. Four uncles of mine were killed; two were shot, and two died from hunger in the camps.

My mother's three brothers, Yan [11], Dmitry [12] and Nikolai Vasilievich Poluyan, had been participants in the Civil War. Their wives were all sent to the camps. My father's brother, Pavel Smilga, died from hunger in the camps. His wife was sent into exile. Out of my parents' generation, only my mother's sister, a Bolshevik since 1903, and my father's brother Arvid, who wasn't involved in politics, survived.

The son of Dmitry Poluyan, Oleg [13], was shot. Vladimir, Pavel's son, died at the front at age 17 during World War II. Yan had two daughters: Irina, who was a doctor and died at the front as well, and Tania. She was

sent to the camps. My sister Natasha, who was three years younger than me, was only arrested in 1949.

By the way, I was in the same class as Yuri Kamenev, the son of Lev Kamenev. He was shot in the summer of 1937, at age 17. It happened when he visited his mother in the camp, in Nizhny Novgorod, I believe. When school started in September, he wasn't there. No one knew where he was. We only learned during Perestroika what had happened to him.

Three more boys from my school were shot during the purges. The son of Drobnis, who was also in the Left Opposition [14], was shot at the age of 19 [15]. The two other boys were 18 [16] and 19 [17]. During these years, the parents of almost all children were imprisoned. Many were later killed, and we ourselves were supervised by the NKVD.

In 1938, I finished school. I tried to enter first the State Theater Institute (GITIS), but they didn't let me. Then I tried to attend the Cinema Institute. I wanted to become a screenwriter, but they, too, refused to take me, although I had passed all the tests successfully. I finally was accepted with great difficulty at the French faculty of the Pedagogical Institute.

But three months later, on June 11, 1939, I and four other girls from my class at school, as well as one other girl, were arrested on a special order by Stalin. Beria [18] sent Stalin a letter in which he claimed that we were "talking." [19] This was absolute nonsense. We weren't talking about anything, we just wanted to study, be left alone, and find our parents. Stalin responded that we had to be arrested and exiled immediately.

These girls were: Nina Lomova, the daughter of A. Lomov [20], who had been a member of the first Soviet government under Lenin (he, too, was shot, of course); Lena Rukhimovich, whose father [21] was not an oppositionist, but the people's commissar (narkom) of the Defense Industry; Natasha Krestinskaya, the daughter of Nikolai Krestinsky [22], a former member of the Politburo and later a member of the Left Opposition. He was shot in 1938 after the Third Moscow Trial. The other girls were Tamara Medvedeva and Tatiana Bessonova.

Do you know why Beria wrote this letter? We had been told to renounce our parents, but we refused to do that. We had also been asked to denounce other comrades, which we didn't do either. I spent the next four years and four months of my life in a camp and a further 10 years in exile, at the Mordovsky camp. This was the camp to which all the wives of "enemies of the people" were sent. I was the youngest there. I finished my higher education in the nearby city of Ryazan at that time, attending evening classes. I presume they didn't know my surname there so I could pursue my studies unhampered.

I was released in 1953 but had to wait two-and-a-half years before I could return to Moscow. Overall, I lost 17 years of my life. I was rehabilitated only in 1956. Until then, I and my little daughter had to rent rooms, and sometimes even just corners, near Moscow. The room we got upon my rehabilitation in Moscow (1958) was just 14 square meters.

After my return to Moscow the only job I found was working as a school teacher. I wanted to become a journalist or editor, but when I came to a job interview and told them my family name, they immediately said: "Ah, Smilga, the Trotskyist. Please come back tomorrow." And the next day, the job had been assigned to someone else.

I'm telling you all this to give you a picture of what Stalin in fact did. These are things one cannot forget.

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Footnotes

1. Tatiana Smilga-Poluyan is referring to the memoirs of Isai Lvovich Abramovich (1900-1985), who was a young member of the Left Opposition in the 1920s. He was a student of Smilga and capitulated together with him in 1929. Abramovich survived the purges in the camps and later wrote a memoir, *Memories and Views* [Vospominaniia i Vzgliady]. They were published by his daughter posthumously in 2004 and rank among the most important historical documents on the history of the Left Opposition. [back]

2. Evgeny Alekseevich Preobrazhensky (1886-1937), a Bolshevik from 1903, was a high-ranking party member under Lenin and later became one of the leading economic theoreticians of the Left Opposition. He capitulated in 1929 and was shot after the second Moscow Trial in July 1937. He was rehabilitated in 1988. [back]

3. Karl Radek (1885-1939) played an important role in the communist movement, which he joined at age 19, in Poland, Germany and Russia over a period of several decades. He was a leading member of the Comintern in the 1920s and a member of the Left Opposition. Sharp differences with Trotsky emerged over the question of the Chinese Revolution in 1926 and 1927. Radek opposed the perspective of permanent revolution. He capitulated in 1929 and occupied important posts in Stalin's apparatus for the next several years. Radek was one of the main defendants in the second Moscow Trial in 1937 and was murdered in prison in 1939. He was rehabilitated in 1988. [back]

4. Lev Borisovich Kamenev (1883-1936) was in the Russian Social Democratic Party from 1901 and a Bolshevik from 1903. He and Zinoviev were among those opposed to the October insurrection in the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party. Together with Zinoviev and Stalin he formed the notorious "troika" from 1923-1925, which initiated a slanderous campaign against Trotsky and the theory of permanent revolution. From 1925 on, he formed part of the Zinovievite Opposition, which soon fused with the Left Opposition to become the United Opposition. He capitulated together with Zinoviev after the defeat of the Chinese Revolution in 1927. Like most former oppositionists, he was assigned to minor posts in the party apparatus afterwards. He was shot after being convicted at the first Moscow Trial in 1936. Both his sons were shot during the purges. Kamenev was Leon Trotsky's brother-in-law. He was rehabilitated in 1988. [back]

5. Grigory Evseevich Zinoviev (1883-1936) was an Old Bolshevik and former secretary of Lenin, a member of the Bolshevik Central Committee and later the Politburo, and chairman of the Comintern 1919-1926. Together with Kamenev, he opposed the Bolshevik insurrection in October 1917. In the inner-party struggle of the 1920s, he and Kamenev first sided with Stalin. They supported the Stalinist-Bukharinist theory of "socialism in one country" and the campaign against Trotsky and the theory of permanent revolution. In 1925, he and Kamenev broke with Stalin. Zinoviev started heading the so-called Zinovievite Opposition, which enjoyed significant support among sections of Petrograd workers. Although substantial political differences remained, Trotsky's Left Opposition united with the oppositionists under Zinoviev in 1926. Zinoviev and Kamenev capitulated to Stalin soon after the defeat of the Chinese Revolution. He was one of the chief defendants in the first Moscow Trial and was shot on August 25, 1936. He was rehabilitated in 1988. [back]

6. Mikhail Mikhailovich Lashevich (1884-1928) was a member of the Russian Social Democratic Party from 1901 and a Bolshevik from 1903. He was an active participant in the 1905 revolution and one of the leaders of the Bolshevik insurrection in October 1917, and later a hero of the Civil War. He was a member of the Zinovievite Opposition, expelled from the party in 1927 and readmitted one year later. Lashevich died in Harbin, China, in 1928. His wife and his mother were killed during the purges. [back]

7. Nikolai Ivanovich Muralov (1877-1937) was a Bolshevik from 1903 and an active participant in all three Russian revolutions. He was a legendary hero of the revolution in 1917 and the Civil War, and one of the most popular leaders of the Bolshevik Party. He participated in the Left Opposition, was expelled from the Bolshevik Party in 1927, and exiled in 1928. He officially proclaimed his break with the Opposition in two personal letters to Stalin in 1935 and 1936. He was arrested on April 17, 1936 and severely tortured. After being convicted at the second Moscow Trial in January 1937, he was shot in early February 1937. Trotsky wrote

of him in his autobiography: "Muralov is a magnificent giant, as fearless as he is kind." (Leon Trotsky, *My Life*, NY: Pathfinder Press, 1970, p. 315) Muralov's wife Anna Semyonovna and their daughter spent several years of their lives in exile. His brother, Alexander Ivanovich, a leading Bolshevik, died in custody in October 1937. His son and his sister perished in the camps in 1943. Muralov was rehabilitated in 1986. [back]

8. Nadezhda Vasilievna Poluyan (1895-1937), a Bolshevik from 1915, was killed during the purges in 1937 and rehabilitated in 1987. [back]

9. The Sandarmokh forest in Karelia was a notorious place for mass executions during the Great Terror. Over 9,500 people from 58 different countries were shot there in 1937-38. The sites of the shootings were discovered only in 1997. Between October 27 and November 4, 1937, the day Nadezhda Poluyan was shot, 1,111 people, including politicians, artists and scientists, were killed. [back]

10. Nikolai Aleksandrovich Emelianov (1871-1958) was a Bolshevik from 1904. He hid Lenin and Zinoviev at his house in Finland when the two were forced to flee from Petrograd in the aftermath of the failed July 1917 insurrection. Emelianov later participated in the seizure of the Winter Palace in October 1917 and the Civil War. He occupied leading posts in the management of the Soviet economy during the 1920s and signed the platform of the Left Opposition in 1927. He was arrested in 1932 and sentenced to ten years in exile in Kazakhstan. His wife, too, was arrested in 1932. Their seven children were arrested in 1934; two sons were shot in 1937. Nikolai Emelianov was released and rehabilitated after the death of Stalin in 1956. [back]

11. Yan Vasilievich Poluyan (1891-1937), a Bolshevik from 1912, played a major role during the Civil War at the front in Southern Russia and later became a member of the Soviet government. He was shot in 1937 and rehabilitated in 1955. [back]

12. Dmitry Vasilievich Poluyan (1886-1937) was an economist and member of the Committee of the NKPS (Nardoniyy Kommissariat Putei Soobshchenii), the Soviet Transportation Ministry. He was convicted and shot on July 31, 1937 and rehabilitated in 1957. [back]

13. Oleg Dmitrievich Poluyan (1912-1938) was the vice president of the NKI for railway transportation of the NKPS (Soviet Transportation Ministry). He was arrested in January 1938 and convicted and shot on February 20, 1939. He was rehabilitated in 1986. [back]

14. Yakov Naumovich Drobniis (1890-1937) was a leading Bolshevik in the Ukraine. He signed the Declaration of 46, the founding document of the Left Opposition, in 1923. He was expelled from the party in 1927 and readmitted in 1930. In 1936 he was arrested. Drobniis was one of the main defendants in the second Moscow Trial in early 1937. He was shot shortly after the trial and rehabilitated in 1988. [back]

15. Nikolai Yakovlevich Drobniis (1918-1937), who was studying at the Institute for Aviation in Moscow at the time, was arrested on January 29, 1937. He was convicted on July 13, 1937 for allegedly leading a Trotskyist terrorist youth organization and shot the same day. He was rehabilitated in 1956. [back]

16. Oleg Mikhailovich Frinovsky (1922-1940) was arrested at age 16 on April 12, 1939. His father had been the deputy of NKVD Chief Nikolai Yezhov. Frinovsky was convicted on January 21, 1940 and shot on January 23, 1940. His mother, Nina Stepanovna Frinovskaya, was also shot in that year. Oleg Frinovsky was rehabilitated in 1966. [back]

17. Vladimir Arkadievich Volkov (1919-1937) was a student at the Institute for Aviation in Moscow at the time of his arrest. He was convicted and shot on July 13, 1937. He was rehabilitated in 1956. [back]

18. Lavrenty Pavlovich Beria (1899-1953) was a Bolshevik from 1917. He soon became a leader of the Cheka and belonged to the closest circle around Stalin. He was the notorious hangman of the Moscow trials. Beria was the leader of the NKVD during World War II and deputy premier from 1946 until he was arrested, convicted, and executed after Stalin's death in 1953. [back]

19. The full Russian text of this letter can be accessed here. [back]

20. A. Lomov was the pen name of Georgy Ippolitovich Oppokov (1888-1938), a Bolshevik from 1903. Lomov was a member of the Central Committee during the October Revolution and later presided over large sections of the Soviet economy. He was a close friend of Nikolai Bukharin and Alexei Rykov, the leaders of the Right Opposition in the 1920s. Lomov was arrested on August 28 and convicted and shot on September 4, 1938. His wife was arrested and sent into exile. She died shortly after her rehabilitation in 1958 due to the severe torture she had suffered in the camps. Lomov was rehabilitated in 1956. [back]

21. Moisei Lvovich Rukhimovich (1889-1938) was an Old Bolshevik who supported Stalin in the inner-party struggle. He was a member of the Central Committee from 1924 until his death. He was arrested in 1937, sentenced on July 28, 1938, and shot one day later. Rukhimovich was rehabilitated in 1956. [back]

22. Nikolai Nikolaevich Krestinsky (1883-1938) was a Bolshevik from 1903 and member of the Central Committee from 1917 to 1921. He was a long-time supporter of Trotsky until he broke with the Left Opposition in April 1928. Krestinsky was executed after the third Moscow Trial in March 1938 and rehabilitated in 1956. [back]



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