

Interview with Yuri Primakov

Our reporter
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Yuri Primakov was born in 1927 and is the only son of Vitaly Markovich Primakov (1897-1937). Vitaly Primakov joined the Bolshevik Party in 1914. Still in his early twenties, he became a hero of the October Revolution and the Civil War and later an important member of the Left Opposition. (See: “WSWS publishes interviews with children of the Left Opposition”).

At age 19, Primakov was a member of the Military Revolutionary Committee that organized the October insurrection. He was a commander of factory workers in the Bolshevik seizure of the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg in October 1917 and founded the legendary “Red Cossacks” in 1918. Like many other leading Bolsheviks, he joined the Left Opposition in the early 1920s. He capitulated to Stalin in 1928.

Primakov remained one of the most important figures in the Red Army until 1936, when he was arrested along with other leading Soviet generals. In 1937, Primakov and the other generals were accused of being part of a “Trotskyist anti-Soviet military organization” in the so-called “Tukhachevsky Affair” and subsequently shot. He was rehabilitated in 1955.

On Tuesday, February 25 the WSWS published an interview with Tatiana Smilga-Poluyan, daughter of Left Oppositionist Ivar Tenisovich Smilga.

WSWS: Can you tell us about your father?

Yuri Primakov: I knew my father, but I didn’t see him very often. My parents got divorced when I was a little child. I had sepsis when I was just two months old. It wasn’t treated properly and I hovered between life and death until the eighth year of my life. So he couldn’t take me to Afghanistan or Japan, where he was for the most time during those years. When I was nine, he was already arrested and eventually shot.

He had come to Petrograd in September 1917 at age 19 with two mandates: one to the Second Soviet Conference from the soldiers of the Thirteenth Infantry Regiment, and one to the Constituent Assembly from the people of the city of Chernigov [in Northern Ukraine]. He was then elected to the Military Revolutionary Committee that organized the October insurrection and led the troops of the Rechinsky Plant in the seizure of the Winter Palace.

At the Second Congress of Soviets in Petrograd [November 7-9, 1917], he was elected a member of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party. They sent him to Ukraine to build a military unit capable of fighting the troops of Petliura. [1] In Kharkov he founded the Red Cossacks, which not only defeated the troops of Petliura, but also a number of White generals, among them Denikin [2] and Pilsudski. [3]

I later got to know many of the Red Cossacks who had fought alongside Primakov during the Civil War. They all lived extremely modestly during and after the Civil War. They didn’t care about money and they truly believed in communism. They were convinced that one had to fight for the betterment of humankind, not just for the improvement of one’s own material position.

If you compare that to the elites today, who don’t give a damn about the people and are interested only in the market rates of their companies on the stock exchange, then you can see what degradation has taken place.

Also, no other unit of the Red Army had as many international connections as the Red Cossacks. It was a genuinely international army, with soldiers coming from Ukraine, Russia, Latvia, Germany and other countries. Thus, it was a real school in internationalism. You see, when Stalin killed the leaders of the Red Army who had fought in the Civil War, he wasn’t just killing these people—he was destroying an entire system and culture.

Primakov was a left Communist, both during the Civil War and after. He was a member of the Left Opposition, which he left in 1928, when he published a letter in Pravda. He was in Afghanistan at this point, and I believe that his experiences there, in China and other countries of the East influenced him in this decision, convincing him that the peoples of the East were not ready for world revolution. [4]

As for the Left Opposition, as far as I know, most oppositionists had been active participants in the Civil War. They had fought at the very front, they knew about the hunger and the deprivation of the people, and they genuinely wanted to give the peasants land and improve the situation for the workers. Now, when the Civil War ended, they saw a privileged bureaucracy emerge, and they were against it because this was not what they had fought for.

My mother [Maria Dovzhik] [5], who had been a member of the Moscow City Soviet, left the party in 1922 because she already saw this bureaucracy emerge after 1919. She was a gifted violinist and they wanted her to join the orchestra of the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow. She later told me how she saw the party elite in the theater during the NEP era [6]—sartorially dressed, just like under the tsar. It was basically a new class that emerged. The Left Opposition opposed these social privileges.

WSWS: How do you remember the 1930s?

Yuri Primakov: Neither my mother nor I were repressed. My father’s brother, Vladimir Markovich, was expelled from the party. He perished in World War II, in 1941. His other brother, Boris, who was also a Bolshevik, was arrested and sent to the camps. He volunteered for the war and died in 1944. Their mother, Varvara Nikolaevna, was sent into exile to the Urals, where she lived with her youngest son Evgeny.

The 1930s were a very difficult time. It is probably hard to imagine for one who hasn’t experienced it. On the one hand, you had a blossoming of Soviet culture, cinema and literature, and the propaganda machine of the Kremlin in the West worked very well, so everyone there thought things in the Soviet Union were just fine. On the other, you had not only the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the labor camps, repressions, and mass executions, but, what was worst of all, absolute insecurity about tomorrow. There was no regularity [zakonomernost] whatsoever; people just didn’t know what would happen tonight or tomorrow.

You must not forget that in addition to those millions who were killed during the repressions, further millions—their family members and friends—were all affected. And it wasn’t just the leaders of the Civil War who were killed. About half the country had been in the Red Army; and everyone who had had connections to these leaders thus became an “enemy of the people.”

Primakov is buried in a mass grave with some 250 other people; they simply threw them all in the ground and poured sand over them. About

100 to 150 of them were from the Comintern. Stalin killed almost the entire leadership of the Comintern.

The murdered leaders of the Civil War—Primakov, Tukhachevsky [7], Yakir [8], and all the others—in fact didn't have any graves at the cemetery until I made them some in 2003 at the Donskoy Cemetery in Moscow. White Army generals like Denikin are buried near the Donskoy Monastery as well. When I went there to visit my father's grave with my family, my granddaughter pointed at the majestic grave of Denikin and asked: "Why do they have such big graves, and ours don't?" And I didn't have an answer.

Their murder in 1937 deprived the Red Army of its most important leaders. Where else in history did a government kill its own military leaders on the eve of a major war? Hitler knew all that, of course, when he signed the pact and he was delighted. It was like a fairytale to him.

I'm absolutely convinced that, without Stalin, Hitler would never have come to power. After all, the Communists, the Social Democrats and the Trotskyists were all against the Nazi Party (NSDAP). If they had formed a united front, Hitler wouldn't have come to power. But Stalin effectively prevented this.

And then he made the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with "Comrade Hitler" [in August 1939]. During this same period, the movie *Alexander Nevsky* and other movies and books with a heavy nationalist connotation came out. [9] Tsarist generals like Kutuzov [10] and Suvorov [11] were glorified, while the heroes of the Civil War were mentioned less and less.

When I went to school, we were still taught revolutionary songs. Many of them were German, since everyone was hoping for a revolution in Germany. We were still raised in the spirit of internationalism. I also learned German at school and was shocked when our teacher told us in autumn 1939, shortly after the pact had been signed: "Der deutsche Führer ist Adolf Hitler, und unser Führer ist Genosse Stalin." ["The German Führer is Adolf Hitler, and our Führer is Comrade Stalin."]

During the battle of Stalingrad, 1941-1943, a Soviet anti-fascist committee was distributing propaganda leaflets among German soldiers. This was very important. But as soon as the Red Army won the battle at Stalingrad and started to make advances, this policy was abandoned. Until 1943, the nationalist propaganda had been toned down because they needed everyone to fight in the Red Army and defend the Soviet Union. When the imminent danger was over, they changed the propaganda and now only talked of a war of "Russians against Germans."

WSWS: How did you experience the war?

Yuri Primakov: I went to Bashkiria [then an autonomous republic in the southeast of the Soviet Union] with my mother in 1941. In 1942, we travelled back to Moscow. I then began working at a medical facility. Some soldiers who had been wounded at the front told me how poorly equipped they were. I also met a partisan from Belarus, a peasant woman. I asked her why she had become a partisan, and she answered, with tears in her eyes: "How could I not? The Germans killed all my family right in front of my eyes. I barely escaped with my own life."

The partisans played a very important role in the defense of the Soviet Union. Yet they, too, had hardly been prepared and equipped. There had been a partisan school in the mid-1930s, led by Primakov. They provided excellent courses to prepare people for partisan battles. After the Tukhachevsky affair in 1937, this academy was dissolved. So no one was preparing these people for what was to come.

I think the worst thing Stalin did was to discredit the ideas of socialism and communism. People in other countries would look at the USSR and think: "Well, is that what the October Revolution was about, to bring a nomenklatura to power?" I'm afraid this experience makes the solution to social inequality in the 21st century more difficult.

"Why" is the most important question for any historian. I always wonder why Stalin did the things he did. Which laws [zakonomernost] drove him? From a logical standpoint, his decisions often didn't make any

sense at all, and he was never ready to take responsibility for his own actions. Everything he did was ultimately directed against the interests of the people and the goals of the revolution.

I think that Plekhanov and Martov, who said that Russia wasn't ready for a socialist revolution, were ultimately right. [12] The psychology of people is an important factor and, unfortunately, it changes only very, very slowly. And the time for the world revolution that Lenin and Trotsky were counting on had apparently not come yet.

What bothers me most is that people have not learned the lessons of the 20th century. Above all, they show that the problems can be solved only if people all over the world collaborate. The experience of the USSR is, in my opinion, the most important lesson for people all over the world.

It is very, very difficult to study history seriously and understand why everything happened the way it did. To establish historical truth is the most important task today. People in Russia have forgotten their own history. But history doesn't go away. And it has to be understood if anything is going to change for the better.

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Footnotes

1. Simon Vasylyovych Petliura (1879-1926) was a Ukrainian nationalist who led the struggle for Ukrainian national independence from the Soviet government in Petrograd in 1918-1920 and against the White Army. In 1920, he concluded a treaty with Pilsudski's Poland to forge a military alliance against Soviet Russia. However, in October 1920, Poland was forced to sign an armistice with the Soviet government. In late November, the Red Army defeated the Ukrainian military of Petliura. [back]

2. Anton Ivanovich Denikin (1872-1947) was a tsarist general who co-plotted the attempted coup by Kornilov against Kerensky's Provisional Government in August 1917. He later became one of the main commanders of the White Army in the Civil War. [back]

3. Józef Pilsudski (1867-1935), formerly a leading figure in the Polish Socialist Party, was the Polish chief of state 1918-1922 and dictator of the Second Polish Republic 1926-1935. Under his political leadership, Poland supported the Central Powers, i.e., Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in World War I, and later spearheaded the struggle of the Western powers against the Soviet government in the Civil War. [back]

4. Primakov was in China in 1925-1926, where he helped build the Chinese National Revolutionary Army. From 1927 to 1929 he was in Afghanistan. [back]

5. Maria Aronovna Dovzhik (1897-1990) was the second wife of Vitaly Primakov. She was a member of the Bolshevik Party from 1919 to 1922. [back]

6. The NEP (New Economic Policy), introduced under Lenin, lasted from 1921 to 1928. The combined effects of economic backwardness in the Soviet Union and the delay of the world revolution forced the Soviet government to initiate limited pro-market measures to develop industry and bridge the vast gulf between the countryside and the cities. [back]

7. Mikhail Nikolayevich Tukhachevsky (1893-1937) was one of the greatest military leaders of the Civil War. From 1925 to 1928, he was the commander-in-chief of the Red Army. In 1935, he became marshal of the Soviet Union. He was arrested in late May 1937 and was one of the main defendants in the so-called "Case of the Trotskyist Anti-Soviet Military Organization." Tukhachevsky was shot in June 1937 and rehabilitated in 1957. [back]

8. Iona Emmanuilovich Yakir (1896-1937), a member of the Bolshevik party from 1917, rose to fame as one of the bravest military commanders of the Civil War. He played a major role in the reforms of the Red Army during the 1920s and 30s and was the long-time head of the Kiev Military District, one of the most important positions in the Red Army. He was shot in June 1937 after the trial in the "Case of Trotskyist Anti-Soviet Military Organization." After his execution, his wife was arrested and killed. His 14-year-old son was arrested and spent several years in prison.

Yakir was rehabilitated in 1957. [back]

9. The movie *Alexander Nevsky* by director Sergei Eisenstein depicts the attempted invasion of 13th-century Novgorod by the Teutonic Knights of the Holy Roman Empire and their defeat by Alexander Nevsky. The film has heavily anti-German connotations and was shot at the behest of the Soviet government. It was released in 1938 and became one of the greatest successes in the history of Soviet cinema. After the pact with Nazi Germany in 1939, the screening of the film was temporarily halted. It was resumed after the fascist attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941 and became part of a campaign that depicted the conflict with the Nazis as a war between Germans and Russians. [back]

10. Mikhail Illarionovich Golenishchev-Kutuzov (1745-1813) was a general of the tsarist army in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. He is mostly remembered for his role in the Russo-Turkish wars and the Napoleonic War. Since the Stalinist regime from the very beginning drew an analogy between the onslaught of the fascist army and Napoleon's invasion of Russia, Kutuzov, as the leader at the battle of Borodino, where the French troops were effectively defeated, was one of the most celebrated figures of that time. [back]

11. Alexander Vasilievich Suvorov (1729/30-1800) was a Russian general in the 18th century. He took part in the Russo-Turkish wars and the bloody suppression of the Polish uprising in 1794. [back]

12. Georgy Valentinovich Plekhanov (1856-1918), the “father of Russian Marxism” and author of numerous outstanding Marxist writings, was a Menshevik from 1903. He and Julius Martov (1873-1923), also a famous Menshevik, opposed the working class revolution in Russia, arguing that the country wasn't economically “ripe” for a socialist revolution and had to go through a bourgeois-democratic stage of capitalist development first. [back]



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