

Interview with Zorya Serebryakova

Our reporter
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Zorya Leonidovna Serebryakova was born in 1923. She is the daughter of the leading Bolshevik and Left Oppositionist Leonid Petrovich Serebryakov.

Serebryakov (1890-1937) joined the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Party in 1905 and actively participated in the revolutionary events of that year. Like many Left Oppositionists, he was expelled from the party in 1927 and sent into exile to Semipalatinsk in Kazakhstan in 1928.

Serebryakov was readmitted to the Communist Party in 1930. In the following years, he supported Soviet industrialization. In August 1936, he was arrested. Serebryakov was one of the main defendants in the Second Moscow Trial in early 1937. He was found guilty on January 30 and shot on February 1, 1937. He was not rehabilitated until half a century later, in December 1986.

His daughter, Zorya, was arrested in 1937 at the age of 14. She was sent into exile in Semipalatinsk and returned to Moscow only in 1945. In 1949, already the mother of a little boy, she was again arrested and exiled. Her husband was sentenced to 25 years in the camps for “anti-Soviet agitation.” She and her mother and husband were rehabilitated under Khrushchev in 1956.

WSWS: Can you tell us about your father and your childhood memories of the Left Opposition in the 1920s?

Zorya Leonidovna Serebryakova: My father joined the party at a very young age and he was only 21 when he was sent as a delegate to the Prague Conference in 1912. [1] In fact, someone just recently found out at the local archives of the church in Samara, where he was baptized, that he was born in 1890, not in 1888. He changed his year of birth to be able to start working earlier in the factory; he started working at 14.

My father was indeed from a working class family. The family lived under very modest circumstances, but they were all fighting, so to say, for justice—some as Bolsheviks, others as Mensheviks.

My father was very close to both Lenin and Trotsky. Lenin once called him a “brilliant worker.”

In this photo you see Lenin with the three secretaries of the Central Committee from 1919 to 1921, Serebryakov (to the left of Lenin), Krestinsky [2] (behind Serebryakov) and Preobrazhensky [3] (to the left of Serebryakov). They were all very close to Trotsky.

After 1921, they were basically replaced with Stalin’s men. My father was on the list of the 16 Bolsheviks closest to Lenin who couldn’t be rehabilitated under Khrushchev. I only found that out later. In the 1950s I ran around to try and get him rehabilitated, not knowing at that time that it would be futile anyway.

I remember many old Bolsheviks and Left Oppositionists coming to our house: Voronsky [4], one of my father’s best friends, was there; Preobrazhensky, who was also a close friend of my father; Trotsky, obviously, and many others. He was also good friends with Bukharin [5] until Bukharin started to support Stalin. The Old Bolsheviks did form a close circle, after all. Everyone knew each other very well.

My father admired Trotsky enormously and I was raised with great love

and respect for Lev Davidovich [Trotsky]. I was, in fact, introduced to him as a child. I was very little, but I have very intense and good memories of him.

Many, of course, say that he was cold. But in his relations with my family, he was a man of extraordinary warmth. He took a keen interest in everyone in our family, even in very personal matters like the divorce of my parents (Trotsky was against it and tried to convince my mother not to leave my father).

When my mother left my father for Sokolnikov [6] in 1924, I stayed with my father. I love this picture very much, because it shows how close we were. My mother had told him: “I leave her with you so it’ll be easier for you.”

My mother [7], too, admired Trotsky greatly. She had just started writing in those years and valued highly his opinion and advice in literary matters. She would also visit him when he was sick. He was a friend of our family.

So you see that he was by no means the arrogant and cold man people say he was. He cared a lot about his friends and those who were close to him. It was always very painful for me to see him being slandered like this.

Trotsky was absolutely right when he called Stalin “the gravedigger of the party and the revolution.” I’ve recently found a document in the private fond of Ordzhonikidze that, in fact, confirms that Stalin had been an agent of the Okhrana [the tsarist secret police]. He was an enemy of the people; he destroyed first the party and then the country as a whole.

I’d like to quote some statements by Trotsky on my father to show how much Trotsky valued him. Here is what he wrote about Serebryakov in 1937: “From 1923 to the end of 1927, he, along with I. N. Smirnov, who was shot in the case of the sixteen, occupied a prominent place in the leadership of the Left Opposition. In facilitating the rapprochement with the Zinoviev group (the Opposition of 1926), and in mitigating internal friction within the Oppositionist bloc, Serebryakov unquestionably played the principal role.” [8]

Further on, Trotsky writes: “Serebryakov capitulated to the rulers [in 1929]—to be sure, in a more dignified manner, but no less decisively, than the rest.” [9] And the final quote: “Pyatakov and Serebryakov, from 1923 to 1927, were indeed my political adherents and were very close to me.” [10]

WSWS: Serebryakov, featured prominently in the Second Moscow Trial in 1937...

Zorya Leonidovna Serebryakova: My father had been the organizational secretary of the party before Stalin. Stalin de facto took his position. Serebryakov was then extremely close to Trotsky in the 1920s and played a leading role in the Left Opposition, as the passages I cited from Trotsky’s writings show. So Stalin just had to extinguish him from history.

My father left the Opposition because he felt that the struggle was futile and that he could still contribute something in concrete work. From 1931, he was the head of the automobile transportation [division] and he took his work extremely seriously.

At the trial, he was accused of having participated in an attempt on the

lives of Yezhov and Beria [11] (the name of the latter was added by Stalin personally) and to be responsible for numerous diversionary and damaging attacks on Soviet railways in his capacity as head of Soviet railway transport. In fact, he was the head of Soviet automobile, not railway, transport. This might appear to be a minor detail, but it's one of the many details that prove the whole thing was a frame-up.

I know that he confessed and participated in the trial to save my life. And I want to emphasize that unlike many others, my father never said a bad word about Lev Davidovich.

Max Eastman remembers one conversation [in 1929] in his memoirs where my father virtually predicted the purges. He [Serebryakov] said: "Stalin will get us all in the end. He will kill every single one of us who ever opposed him. He is the most vindictive human being alive. You know what he said when they were discussing the highest taste of bliss to be had in life: 'To get revenge on an enemy and then go home and go quietly to sleep.' That isn't a myth. It's exactly what he said. Stalin will wait, if necessary a lifetime, for that taste of bliss." [12]

WSWS: What do you remember about the terror of the 1930s?

Zorya Leonidovna Serebryakova: Oh, that was a truly horrific time. I remember how a girl I knew was aghast as she told me in the summer of 1937: "They are driving off the bodies in trucks." One million people were killed in 1937-38, and Moscow was the center of it all.

We were all waiting for the NKVD to pick us up. We were staying awake at night, listening to the vans running in the courtyard. It was dreadful. No one in the house knew who would be next, everyone was waiting in horror.

They came up the stairs slowly, acting as if they didn't yet know whom they were going to pick up. If they knocked at the door of a neighbor, we were relieved, since it meant at least one more day of reprieve for us. One woman in our house, whose bedroom bordered the elevator, came down with a nerve disease because she would always hear the elevator going up, fearing that she was the next to be taken away. In the end, she wasn't arrested but the nerve disorder stayed with her.

Seven people from my family were killed by Stalin. My father's mother was exiled in 1937 when she was 76 and died in exile in the 1940s. His sister, too, died in exile. His brother, a Bolshevik, spent eight years in the camps.

My mother's father, Iosif Moiseevich Byk [13], had been a supporter of the Left Opposition. He had signed the Declaration of 46 (in 1923) [14], and was one of the first to be killed when the Great Purges started in October 1936. His wife, Bronislava Sigizmundovna Krasutskaya, my grandmother, had also been an Old Bolshevik. She was expelled from the party and sent into exile where she died in 1950.

My mother survived only by a miracle. She had psychological problems and had spent some time in psychiatric treatment by the time she was arrested—she just couldn't bear what was going on in the 1930s—and I believe that ultimately saved her life. She spent over 20 years in various labor camps and prisons.

WSWS: Did you know that your mother had signed the Declaration of 83 in 1927?

Zorya Leonidovna Serebryakova: No, I didn't know that. She would never tell me. But I'm very pleased to learn that. Most probably, she didn't tell me because she was afraid. In her memoirs [on her arrest] she writes at one point: "What we feared the most were provocations." This fear never really went away, not even under Khrushchev [1956-1964], when she was already a famous writer.

WSWS: What happened to you?

Zorya Leonidovna Serebryakova: I could have been shot, had I been a boy and one year older. Stalin had ordered that children from the age of 15 were to be held accountable for "crimes" according to the same standards as adults.

Rauf Lakoba, the son of Nestor Lakoba [15], and his two cousins were

arrested at age 15. His parents were not members of the Left Opposition, but they were on friendly terms with Trotsky and accommodated him and [his wife] Natalia Sedova in 1924 and 1925 at their house in Abkhazia.

The boys were brought from Abkhazia to prisons in Moscow and ultimately killed on the order of Stalin. In Abkhazia, Rauf and his mother were tortured in front of each other; they wanted to force her to testify against her husband. She refused and repeatedly told her son: "Hold on!" Can you imagine that? She finally died from the torture. He was subsequently shot.

I was sent into exile in 1937 and returned in 1945. In 1949, I was arrested again. We already had Viktor, our son. He was sent to an orphanage. My husband was arrested and sent to the camps that same year.

My mother and I were rehabilitated by Khrushchev in 1956, for which I'm very grateful. I think it's very important to remember that Khrushchev released hundreds of thousands of political prisoners. People don't fully appreciate this. We were able to return to Moscow and were given free accommodations. I was allowed to work as a historian, could do research in the archives, and started to work on my dissertation.

My mother was friends with the wife of Khrushchev. Under Khrushchev, my mother again became a famous writer, was invited to all kinds of receptions, and so on.

When Khrushchev was removed from power [in 1964], it became impossible for me to defend my Ph.D. I still tried to achieve the rehabilitation of my father, but for the next two decades there were no further rehabilitations. They told me: "What do you want, anyway? After all, you know that he was a Trotskyist."

I could resume the work on my Ph.D. only under Gorbachev [1985-1991].

Then, under Yeltsin in 1992, I was fired from my job at the Historical Institute. They told me, "Unfortunately, our opinions differ too much." I was stupid enough to say, "Well, I thought we now had democracy, so that isn't supposed to matter." The director of the institute replied: "Zorya Leonidovna, you cannot be that naive, after everything you've gone through." They didn't even care about formalities when firing me.

As chance would have it, the same month that I was fired from my job Sudoplatov [16] and Eitington [17]—the chief organizers of Trotsky's assassination—were rehabilitated.

The 1990s were dreadful. The times under Stalin were, of course, beyond description, but in the 1990s there was just absolute chaos. If it weren't for my son, I wouldn't be here anymore. I had no job and nothing to live on. People in the neighboring houses were robbed, some killed, and no one would mind. That was what capitalism, which everyone had so highly anticipated, looked like in reality.

I remember with horror the events of October 1993. The West and the intelligentsia, of course, applauded Yeltsin when he moved to disperse the parliament, although he had no right to do so! And they continued applauding even when he was storming the White House with tanks. I've gone through a lot, but if you see history at work like this, it is truly terrifying.

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Footnotes

1. The Sixth Party Conference of the Bolshevik faction of the Social Democratic Party of Russia took place in Prague, January 5-17, 1912. The conference marked the final break between the Bolsheviks, who now officially formed a single party, and the Menshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Party.[back]

2. Nikolai Nikolaevich Krestinsky (1883-1938) was a Bolshevik from 1903 and member of the Central Committee (CC) from 1917 to 1921. From 1919 to 1920, he was secretary of the CC. Krestinsky was a long-time political associate of Trotsky until he broke with the Left Opposition in April 1928. He was executed following the Third Moscow Trial in

March 1938. He was rehabilitated in 1956.[back]

3. Evgeny Alekseevich Preobrazhensky (1886-1937) was a Bolshevik from 1903. He 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 in July 1937. He was rehabilitated in 1988.[back]

4. Aleksandr Konstantinovich Voronsky (1884-1937) was a major Marxist literary critic of the 20th century. A Bolshevik from 1904, he was an active participant in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. Later, he became an important figure in the Left Opposition. As editor of the literary journal *Krasnaya Nov' [Red Virgin Soil]*, Voronsky was known as one of the most influential literary critics of the 1920s. He officially left the opposition in October 1929. He was arrested immediately after the Second Moscow Trial on 1 February 1937 and shot on 13 August 1937. Voronsky was rehabilitated in 1957.[back]

5. Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin (1888-1938) was a leading member of the Bolshevik Party. After having taken ultra-left positions during the Civil War, he supported Stalin in the inner-party struggle against Trotsky and was the chief theoretician of "socialism in one country" (1924). Later, he distanced himself from Stalin and emerged as the head of the Right Opposition, which demanded more pro-market policies. He was shot in 1938 and rehabilitated in 1988.[back]

6. Grigory Yakovlevich Sokolnikov (1888-1939) was a Bolshevik from 1905. He was a high-ranking figure in the Soviet government under Lenin. As a supporter of Zinoviev, he joined the Left Opposition in 1925. He was arrested in 1936 and killed in 1939. He was rehabilitated in 1988.[back]

7. Galina Iosifovna Serebryakova (1905-1980) was a prominent Soviet writer and long-time member of the Bolshevik Party. She signed the Platform of the 83 of the Left Opposition in 1927. She was arrested in 1936 and rehabilitated in 1956.[back]

8. *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1936-37*, (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1978), p. 119.[back]

9. Ibid.[back]

10. Ibid. p. 110.[back]

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

12. Max Eastman, *Love and Revolution. My Journey through an Epoch* (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 536.[back]

13. Iosif Moiseevich Byk (1882-1936) was an active participant of the Civil War and a high-ranking member of the Bolshevik Party in Ukraine. He signed the Declaration of the 46 in 1923, was arrested in July 1936, and shot on October 5 of that year.[back]

14. The Declaration of 46, a letter by leading Bolsheviks that was sent to the Politburo in secret on October 15, 1923, was the founding document of the Left Opposition. For the full English translation and the signatories of the letter, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Declaration_of_46. [back]

15. Nestor Lakoba (1893-1936) was an Abkhaz Bolshevik. He supported Stalin in the inner-party struggle of the 1920s. However, he continued to maintain good relations with many other leading Bolsheviks who ranked among the opposition, including Serebryakov and Leon Trotsky, whom he accommodated in his house in 1925. He was arrested and died under mysterious circumstances in 1936. Most of his family members were repressed, sent into exile, or killed.[back]

16. Pavel Anatolyevich Sudoplatov (1907-1996) was a leading figure in the GPU, NKVD and MVD. He was placed in charge of the assassination of Leon Trotsky in March 1939. Sudoplatov personally selected Trotsky's murderer, Ramon Mercader, who was to kill the leader of the Fourth International in August 1940. He was arrested after the death of Stalin in

1953 and served a prison term of 15 years. He was rehabilitated in 1992, a few days after the official dissolution of the USSR, and buried at the prestigious Cemetery of the Donskoy Monastery in Moscow.[back]

17. Nahum Isaakovich Eitington (1899-1981) played a major role in Stalin's secret service apparatus. While working for the GPU during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), he was not only responsible for the murder of thousands of communists, but also established relations with Spanish Stalinists such as Ramon Mercader who were later involved in Trotsky's assassination. Together with Sudoplatov, he was put in charge of the organization and execution of a plan to assassinate Trotsky. In the early 1950s, he was put on trial in the so-called Doctor's Plot and charged with collaborating in an attempted plot to seize power from Stalin. After the deaths of Stalin and Beria, he was imprisoned for 12 years. He was rehabilitated in early 1992 after the collapse of the USSR together with Sudoplatov.[back]



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