

Interview with Tatiana Isaeva

Our reporter
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Tatiana Isaeva is the granddaughter of the Marxist literary critic Aleksandr Konstantinovich Voronsky (1884-1937). Voronsky, a Bolshevik from 1904, was an active participant in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 and later became an important figure in the Left Opposition. (See: "WSWS publishes interviews with children of 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 and an ardent opponent of the emerging Proletkult [proletarian culture movement]. 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. He was rehabilitated in 1957.

First his daughter, Galina Aleksandrovna, and then his wife, Sima Solomonovna, were arrested, convicted under Article 58 of the Soviet Criminal Code for "counterrevolutionary Trotskyist activities," and sent to labor camps. Sima Solomonovna was released in 1943, seriously ill with cancer, and died soon thereafter. Galina Aleksandrovna (1914-1991) spent her sentence in Kolyma, a region in the far east of the former Soviet Union. There she gave birth to her second daughter, Tatiana Ivanovna Isaeva, in 1951. Since the 1990s, Tatiana Isaeva has published a number of books in small circulation, including most of Voronsky's works and her parents' memoirs.

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

On Wednesday, February 26, the WSWS published an interview with Yuri Primakov, son of Left Oppositionist Vitaly Markovich Primakov.

On Thursday, February 27, the WSWS published an interview with Zorya Serebryakova, daughter of Left Oppositionist Leonid Petrovich Serebryakov.

WSWS: What do you know about your grandfather, Aleksandr Voronsky?

Tatiana Isaeva: I probably don't know more about him than you do. All I know comes from my mother's narratives, and she didn't know much about him and the Left Opposition either. When she would ask him back in the 1930s, he refused to tell her anything, saying that she should mind her own business. My mother did her best to rehabilitate him and get his works published. I think his greatest contribution to literary criticism was his work for *Krasnaya Nov'* and his struggle against the Proletkult. He always emphasized that one had to learn and know the classics. As editor of *Krasnaya Nov'* he defended some of the greatest writers during that time.

WSWS: Can you tell us more about your family and your own life?

Tatiana Isaeva: My grandmother was arrested shortly after my grandfather had been killed. A little later, my mother, too, was arrested. She was just 23 at that time and due to finish her studies at the Literary Institute in Moscow.

My grandmother was released in 1943, but she was already seriously ill and died soon thereafter.

My mother, Galina Aleksandrovna, was initially sentenced to five years in a labor camp, which she spent in Kolyma at a sovkhos [a state-owned

farm]. She should have been released in 1942, but during the war people who had been sentenced under Article 58 [counterrevolutionary activity] would not be released. Her sentence was extended to 22 years. Fortunately, she was released earlier, in 1944. In that camp she also met Genrietta Rubinshtein, the wife of Sergei Sedov [1], Trotsky's younger son. Her family later emigrated to Israel.

In 1944, she married my father, Ivan Isaev, who also was a political prisoner. [2] They had known each other from the Literary Institute in Moscow where they had both studied. In 1945, my sister, Valentina Ivanovna, who later became a historian of antiquity, was born. In 1949, my mother was arrested once more. I was born in Kolyma in 1951. In 1955, my father was rehabilitated and allowed to rejoin the party. [3] In fact, he was one of the first of those convicted under Article 58 to be rehabilitated.

Two years later, my mother and my grandparents were rehabilitated. We could finally return to Moscow. The return wasn't easy, however. It took us two years to get an apartment, and the one we got was in a khrushchevka [generic apartment building built during Khrushchev's rule]. We were not allowed to go back to the nice apartment on the Moscow River where my grandparents had lived. And we continued to be under surveillance by the KGB.

Our telephone was tapped and from time to time dubious figures would show up, claiming to be admirers of my grandfather and wanting to know a lot about the Left Opposition and the death of Frunze. [4] They started to wiretap my phone again in the 1990s, when I began publishing works by Voronsky. I don't know whether I'm still under supervision. I don't think so. But frankly, I don't care. They should come and listen if they don't have anything better to do.

After our return from exile, our family continued to be friends with some families of murdered oppositionists, the relatives of Bukharin and Rykov, the daughter of Serebryakov [Zorya Leonidovna Serebryakova] and the son of Primakov [Yuri Primakov]. My mother and I were also close friends with Maria Mino [5], a former member of the Left Opposition. She died in 1989.

After the trials, no one in my family ever meddled in politics. Of course, everyone had his views, but we never became politically active. The same goes for most surviving members of the Left Opposition. I knew them and their relatives. Official politics were repulsive and unprincipled.

WSWS: Have all of Voronsky's works now been published?

Tatiana Isaeva: Yes, all works by Voronsky have been republished. But I've only continued the work my mother couldn't finish. Despite great obstacles, she achieved the publication of all of his works. As for my editions—this was a merely technical work.

I'm now hurrying up with my other editorial work since I'm feeling that, politically, the screws are again being tightened.

WSWS: How were his books received?

Tatiana Isaeva: Well, when my mother published some of his works under Brezhnev [in the 1970s], the reception was very restrained, and in the official press he was still slandered for his "anti-Marxist approach." So when I began publishing his works again, I didn't expect much success, I just felt that it was my obligation to do it.

But the reception has been fairly positive. I was surprised when the Pedagogical Institute in Moscow called me up to invite me to its Sheshukov lectures. Sheshukov wrote a famous book about the literary debates in the 1920s, and obviously he couldn't help but mention my grandfather. [6] The students at the Institute were very interested in his works, which pleased me, of course. Falanster [an alternative bookstore in Moscow] is also very interested in selling his books, and [the publishing house] Molodaya Gvardiya [Young Guard] published his book on Gogol in 2009. So there is an interest in his works.

WSWS: How was the history of the Left Opposition dealt with in the Soviet Union, and how is it dealt with today?

Tatiana Isaeva: I don't know much about the Left Opposition myself. There was one historian, Vadim Rogovin, who wrote a series of books on the opposition and I have the sense that his works were the most sober judgment of that history. [7] Unfortunately, he died prematurely in the late 1990s.

As for the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union, there is a story a friend told me about the Brezhnev period. A university teacher in Kherson [a city in Southern Ukraine], who was a party member and thus had access to the archives, accidentally came upon files of the Left Opposition. He wrote a little on it: first a paper, and later a book, which he published in Kherson.

Then he had a bad idea: he sent the book to Moscow and wanted to know what their opinion was. The party functionary from Moscow who then came to Kherson was furious. He said: "How the hell did you come up with the idea of writing on Trotsky?" The poor man was terribly frightened and stumbled, "I-I-I d-d-didn't write a-a-anything on Trotsky, I-I-I only wrote s-s-something about a certain Bronstein." The Moscow apparatchik said, "You idiot! Don't you know that Bronstein is Trotsky?!"

Under Brezhnev, the name "Trotsky" would still scare people off and continued to do so even in the early years of perestroika [which started in 1985].

We were full of hope during perestroika and expected everything but the social catastrophe that followed. The flood of previously forbidden books and information that was published in these years was overwhelming, however. It was overwhelming for people who were not prepared, and even for me, who knew comparatively more about this history, it was sometimes simply too much to process.

During perestroika, Trotsky was published for the first time and I started reading him. Like many others, I would get up at 6:00 a.m. so as to get the latest issue of *Moskovskye Novosti*. But then, toward the end of perestroika, the amalgams started: truth and lies were mixed in a dangerous way. Today, they simply lie about history. It is often claimed, for example, that Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky were all the same, that they were all murderers.

Young people are now told in school that all prisoners of the gulags were criminals, that non-criminals would never get arrested, and so on. And this generation has no immunity whatsoever against these kind of lies. My generation was different: we were immune against the state ideology and would always question what we were told. But young people today are defenseless, like newborns, and just imbibe this nonsense.

Those who criticize Trotsky usually haven't read him or use falsified citations. For example, he is often attacked for his policy of the labor army. People blow this up and take it as a proof of his cruel policies, but it was, in fact, a very concrete question. The labor army was a temporary measure under conditions of a civil war, whereby soldiers who had earlier fought in the war would be deployed to help get the economy of the country going.

The epithet "the most vicious enemy of the people" still remains connected to his name. I don't even argue with people anymore in such cases. I think many don't really try to analyze and understand these questions. It's true that some try to understand what happened, but it's

another question how successful they are with their efforts.

WSWS: People in Russia appear to be heavily traumatized by this history...

Tatiana Isaeva: Yes, that's right. They are.

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Footnotes

1. Sergei Lvovich Sedov (1908-1937) was an engineer. He was not involved in politics and didn't follow his family into immigration in 1929. In 1935 he was arrested and in 1937 he was shot in Vorkuta. [back]

2. Ivan Stepanovich Isaev (1907-1990) was arrested in 1936 as a student in Moscow and sentenced to five years in exile in Kolyma for "counterrevolutionary activities." A party member from 1930, Isaev had known members of the Left Opposition and their families, among them Voronsky's daughter. He wasn't active in the opposition himself, however. He later wrote a number of stories and autobiographical texts, some of which were published by Tatiana Isaeva. [back]

3. After the death of Stalin in 1953, there was an amnesty of political prisoners. An estimated third of the gulag population was released, and many were rehabilitated in the following years. Members of the Left Opposition, however, were usually rehabilitated much later, some in the 1960s, others only during perestroika. Trotsky was never officially rehabilitated in the Soviet Union, and only partially rehabilitated after the collapse of the Soviet Union. [back]

4. Mikhail Vasilievich Frunze (1885-1925) was a leading member of the Bolshevik Party during the October Revolution and member of the Politburo in the 1920s. He was a close friend of A.K. Voronsky. Frunze died prematurely in 1925 during an operation that had been ordered by the Politburo. The circumstances of his death remain obscure and evidence suggests that Stalin had insisted on an operation that had, in fact, not been necessary. His death was a topic of debates that followed Khrushchev's speech to the 1956 party congress. [back]

5. Maria Nikolaevna Mino (1897-1989) joined the Bolshevik Party in 1917 and was a member of the Left Opposition from 1923. She was the technical editor of the popular journal *Vlast' Sovetov* [*Soviet Power*] until she was expelled from the party in 1928. She was one of the very few Left Oppositionists to survive the camps and mass executions. She returned to Moscow from exile in 1956. [back]

6. Stepan Ivanovich Sheshukov (1914-1995) was a Soviet literary critic and philologist. His book *Furious Zealots: From the History of the Literary Struggle of the 1920s* was published in 1970. [back]

7. Vadim Zakharovich Rogovin (1937-1998) was a Soviet sociologist. He wrote a seven-volume study of the history of the Left Opposition in the USSR from the 1920s up to the German invasion in June 1941. Two volumes of this series in English may be purchased at Mehring Books and six volumes in German can be ordered at Mehring Verlag. [back]



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