

# Tatiana Ivarovna Smilga-Poluyan: May 22, 1919 – September 27, 2014

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It is with profound respect that the *World Socialist Web Site* bids farewell to Tatiana Ivarovna Smilga-Poluyan, the daughter of the revolutionist and Left Oppositionist Ivar Smilga, who died in Moscow on September 27, 2014, aged 95.

Tatiana Smilga dedicated her entire life to restoring historical truth about all those who had been murdered and whose names had been besmirched by Stalinist reaction.

Tatiana Smilga was born in 1919, two months after Lenin and Trotsky founded the Third Communist International (Comintern). She was a member of an outstanding family with long-standing revolutionary traditions, whose life and fate were intimately bound up with the development of the Russian Revolution in the 20th century.

Her grandfather, Tenis Smilga, participated in the Russian Revolution of 1905 in Latvia. He was executed in 1906 as one of the local leaders of the insurrection against the Tsar. One year later, Tatiana's father, Ivar Smilga, joined the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Party at age 14. By 1917, he had become a leading member of the party and close confidant of Vladimir Lenin. As the struggle escalated within the party leadership between Kamenev and Zinoviev, who opposed the seizure of power, and Lenin and Trotsky, who fought to prepare the party for the insurrection, Lenin turned to Smilga and asked him to ready military forces in Finland to come to the aid of the revolution in Petrograd.

Ivar Smilga, along with two brothers of Tatiana's mother, were among the civil war heroes who helped defeat the counter-revolutionary White armies and the interventionist armies of the imperialist powers. However, after the victory of Soviet power in the Civil War, immense pressure built up against the Soviet Union as the international revolution, on which the program of October had been based, was delayed in the West.

Following the defeat of the German Revolution in 1923 and amid growing bureaucratic tendencies within the Soviet Union, a fierce political struggle unfolded within the Bolshevik Party over the future program of both the Soviet leadership and the Comintern. Under conditions of international isolation and the consolidation of a privileged bureaucratic stratum within the Soviet state, the Stalinist faction formulated the program of "socialism in one country" in 1924. This program was to form the political foundation for the political reaction against the Russian Revolution.

This reaction was fought against by the Left Opposition under the leadership of Leon Trotsky, who defended the Theory of Permanent Revolution as the basis for the policies of the Comintern internationally and advocated a political reform of the Bolshevik Party until 1933. After Hitler came to power in 1933, Trotsky issued the call to build a new revolutionary Fourth International and overthrow the Stalinist bureaucracy by means of a political revolution, preserving the social gains of the October Revolution.

Ivar Smilga was among those who sided with Leon Trotsky in the inner-party struggle. For the rest of the 1920s, he was to play a leading role in

the Left Opposition. He was expelled from the Party in 1927 and exiled in 1928. In 1929, exhausted by many years of relentless revolutionary struggle, Smilga capitulated to Stalin. In 1935, he was arrested by the NKVD. Despite brutal torture, he never confessed to a single "crime" and could thus not be used by the Stalinists in one of their gruesome show trials. He was shot in January 1937.

Tatiana's mother, Nadezhda Vasilevna Poluyan, a Bolshevik since 1915, was arrested shortly after her husband and shot in a mass execution in Karelia in November 1937. With few exceptions, all relatives of Tatiana Smilga-Poluyan fell victim to the Stalinist terror and the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union in World War II.

Tatiana Smilga herself was arrested in 1939, along with four other girls from her class. Of the two statements that served as the basis for her conviction under article 58, "counter-revolutionary agitation", one was made in a conversation with a young man who later turned out to be an informant of the NKVD. Tatiana Smilga, then a convinced socialist like so many of her generation, had said: "How can we make a world revolution, if in other countries they will learn that all the Old Bolsheviks have been arrested here?"

Tatiana Smilga was to spend the next 14 years of her life in prison, camps and exile. She was released from exile in 1953. Her initial rehabilitation followed in 1956, but she could return to Moscow only in 1958. In exile, she had met her future husband and given birth to their child, Oksana. As the daughter of Ivar Smilga, a well-known Trotskyist, she was banned from taking the job she wanted and had to work as a school teacher.

Despite the cruel blows of history, Tatiana Smilga-Poluyan remained an optimist throughout her life. She never lost her scathing sense of humor and wit. She also cherished a life-long love for music and literature inherited from her parents. The main content of her life, however, was the rehabilitation of her parents and their generation – not only in a legal, but in a historical and political sense. To this task she devoted herself with seemingly inexhaustible energy and considerable personal courage.

During perestroika, when the bureaucracy was forced to acknowledge at least some of the crimes committed by the Stalinist regime during the terror, Tatiana Smilga finally achieved the full rehabilitation of her parents – in 1987, almost exactly half a century after their murder. Her own full rehabilitation followed in 1988. Amid an upsurge of interest in the history of the Left Opposition, she gave countless interviews to newspapers and television and wrote numerous essays on her childhood recollections of Left Oppositionists and the terror.

The collapse of Stalinism and dissolution of the USSR in 1991 unleashed a campaign of historical falsification in bourgeois academia internationally that was based, in the final analysis, on the very lies Stalinism had propagated and the crimes it had committed. It is to the great credit of Tatiana Smilga that she did not succumb to the climate of demoralization and cynicism that followed the dissolution of the USSR, when many turned away from any serious study of the October Revolution

and the Trotskyist movement. Although she no doubt felt the historical pessimism of most of her generation, she never wavered in insisting on restoring historical truth about the victims of Stalinism. This alone testifies to her extraordinary firmness of principle, courage and honesty.

Even as old age and disease began to take their toll, she didn't cease to give interviews to anyone seriously interested in this history. In the last two years of her life, she gave extensive interviews to the *World Socialist Web Site*, and talked to the Gulag Museum in Moscow and to a Russian filmmaker. She published a book of memoirs in 2013 with the help of her daughter Oksana and Tatiana Isaeva, the granddaughter of Aleksandr Voronsky.

A political assessment of the legacy of the life of any given individual must be based on a historical appreciation of the conditions under which he or she lived. In the case of Tatiana Smilga, this requires, above all, an understanding of the far-reaching implications of the Stalinist terror and the role played by historical falsification in the political reaction against October.

The falsification of the struggles within the Bolshevik Party before, during and after the revolution, and the distortion of the political role and program of Leon Trotsky, was an indispensable element of the Stalinist revision of the internationalist program that inspired the October Revolution. Explaining the significance of the defense of historical truth against the background of the evolving terror in the Soviet Union, Trotsky wrote in 1937:

[I]t remains an incontestable historical fact that the preparation of the bloody judicial frame-ups had its inception in the 'minor' historical distortions and 'innocent' falsification of citations. The bureaucracy found it indispensably necessary to adapt Bolshevism to its own needs. This could not be done otherwise than by corroding the soul of Bolshevism. To the revolutionary essence of Bolshevism the bureaucracy gave the name of 'Trotskyism'. Thus it created the spindle on which to wind in the future its falsifications in all the spheres of theory and practice. ...The most prominent place in the struggle against 'Trotskyism' was accorded to *historical questions*. These involved both the history of the development of Russia as a whole, as well as the history of the Bolshevik party and the October Revolution, in particular. (*The Stalin School of Falsification*, London: New Park Publications, 1974, pp. ix-x. Emphasis in the original.)

The terror of the 1930s was the sharpest expression of the counter-revolutionary role of Stalinism. It extinguished entire generations of revolutionaries, Marxist workers and intellectuals. The purges themselves were based on the most monstrous lies and fabrications. Leon Trotsky and his supporters were accused of being "fascist agents" of Nazi Germany—a malicious lie that continues to be propagated in Russia to this day. Within the Soviet Union and beyond, the terror dealt a devastating blow to the prestige and cause of socialism.

When Tatiana Smilga was released from exile in 1953, with the exception of a handful of individuals, the entire Trotskyist movement in the Soviet Union—some 30,000 men and women—had been murdered. Fascism in Europe had taken the lives of many more. Due to the betrayals of the revolutionary movements of workers in Europe and Asia by Stalinism, world capitalism could reestablish a relative equilibrium in the post-war period. In the Fourth International itself, the revisionist current of Pabloism, which ascribed a progressive role to the counter-revolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy, seriously hampered the capacity of the Trotskyist movement to intervene in the Soviet Union as well as in many other countries of the world.

Under these conditions, for someone in the Soviet Union, the bridge that could be built to the political heritage of October was through the attempt to find out and defend the truth about the leaders of the revolution and the crimes of Stalinism.

Tatiana Smilga's political understanding of the social and political forces behind the terror was, for historical reasons, limited. However, like many who survived the terror and had been imbued with the spirit of revolutionary Marxism of the early Soviet Union, she understood one thing very clearly: that with the terror, the Stalinist bureaucracy tried to erase the memory of the Soviet people about its own revolutionary history.

Against this, she struggled with impressive determination and energy. The obstacles and difficulties she confronted were enormous: the opposition of the massive apparatus of a bureaucracy, which was drenched in the blood of revolutionaries and engaged in an unrelenting campaign of falsification; her own traumatic experiences in prison, camps and exile; the socio-economic catastrophe that accompanied capitalist restoration; the constant fear of the KGB and then FSB that never left Tatiana Smilga or any other survivor of the terror; and, last but not least, the pain evoked by remembrance of the horrible fate that befell her loved ones, her classmates and her friends.

Tatiana Smilga was not alone in withstanding the pressure to forget or be silent about the history of the revolution and the Left Opposition, but, outside the Trotskyist movement, individuals like her were no doubt in a minority, and their struggle was made all the more difficult by the fact that they were conducting it in isolation from the Fourth International.

Her motivation for this courageous struggle had profound historical and cultural roots: what she described and tried to transmit in her memoirs was the socialist culture of the generation of October that Stalinism intended to extinguish from the memory of not only the Soviet, but the international, working class.

As a young child and woman, Tatiana Smilga had met some of the most talented and significant figures history has produced: Leon Trotsky, the greatest revolutionary leader of the 20th century; her own parents; Nikolai Muralov, a genuine working-class hero of the revolution and living legend in the 1920s; the economist Evgeny Preobrazhensky; the literary critic and revolutionary Aleksandr Voronsky, and many more. In all her interviews and writings, she emphasized the high erudition and human warmth of these people and the enormous respect they commanded among their contemporaries. It is from these early memories that she derived her love for life, energy and sense of dignity. She knew and refused to forget that Stalinism was not the only current within early Soviet politics, and that its domination was based on the physical liquidation of the leaders of the revolution, the Soviet Trotskyist movement and many hundreds of thousands of innocent people.

Tatiana Smilga felt immense pride about the revolutionary traditions of her family, in which so many had dedicated their lives to fight for a better, socialist future of mankind. The struggle for historical truth was her way of continuing these traditions—and under the conditions she lived in, it was in fact the only possible way.

In what turned out to be a prophetic warning and apt summary of the devastating impact of Stalinism in the 20th century, Trotsky wrote in 1928:

*The Comintern will not survive five more years of similar mistakes.* But, if the Comintern crumbles, neither will the U.S.S.R. long endure. ... Certainly, even in this case the proletarian revolution would be able in the end to pioneer new roads to victory. But when? And at the price of what sacrifices and countless victims? The new generation of international revolutionists would have to tie up anew the broken threads of

continuity and conquer anew the confidence of the masses in the greatest banner of history, which may be compromised by an uninterrupted chain of mistakes, upheavals, and falsifications in the domain of ideas. (*The Third International After Lenin*, London: New Park Publications, 1974, p. 196. Emphasis in the original.)

By helping to tie up the broken threads of continuity in the former Soviet Union and contributing to the restoration of historical truth about the Left Opposition, Tatiana Smilga has done a significant service to all the generations of revolutionists who have been cut off from the heritage of the October generation. Moreover, against the background of a historical period that was dominated by the reaction against the October Revolution—against its program, its leaders and its ideas—her struggle is testimony to the capacity of the best sections of the Russian working class and intelligentsia to fight for principles and historical truth, even under the most difficult circumstances. New generations of revolutionists will be inspired by the legacy of Tatiana Smilga and will honor her memory in the struggle for socialism.



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