

Leaders of the Russian Revolution: Ivar Tenisovich Smilga (1892-1937)

Clara Weiss
31 August 2017

As part of the commemoration of the centenary of the 1917 October Revolution, the World Socialist Web Site is publishing a series of profiles of leaders of the Russian Revolution. Due to the bloody and protracted Stalinist and bourgeois reaction against the revolution, these figures remain largely unknown to the international working class. Yet they rank among the most complex and formidable figures of the 20th century and are an important part of the proud historical heritage of the working class.

The stunning and often tragic vicissitudes of their political and personal lives mirror the complicated development of the Bolshevik party itself and the rapid succession of revolution, war and reaction in the 20th century. This series seeks to introduce our readers to the major contributions these figures made to the struggle for socialism and reveal the manner in which their lives intersected with the development of the Russian Revolution.

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Russian are by this author.

Today almost forgotten, Ivar Tenisovich Smilga ranks among the most outstanding leaders of the October Revolution and the Civil War in Russia. At the age of just 24, he became one of Lenin's closest confidants in the preparation for the seizure of power in 1917. He played a central role in the leadership of the Red Army during the Civil War that followed the revolution, and then in the economic work of the early Soviet Union.

Ivar Tenisovich Smilga was born in 1892 to a peasant family that owned a small piece of land in Aloya, a town in Latvia. He was part of a generation that was politicized at a very early age by the Russo-Japanese War, the first Russian Revolution of 1905 and the bloody counterrevolution that followed.

In an autobiographical text from 1919, Smilga recounted that his "revolutionary consciousness was awakened" in 1901—he was then barely nine years old—when the Socialist Revolutionary (SR) Piotr Karpovich assassinated the Minister of Enlightenment, Nikolai Bogolepov. Despite the liberal and enlightened atmosphere in his home, Smilga had held, in his own words, "religious-monarchist views." He continued, "I remember that after the assassination of Bogolepov there was something like a celebration at our house, and I was the only one not to take part in it." [1]

The historian Alan Wildman would later describe 1901 as a year of a "general 'swing of politics' of Russian society" to the left. [2] The following year saw mass strikes of workers in the southern Russian city of Rostov. At the same time, a protest movement by students gained momentum. The young Smilga slowly but surely came under the influence of the socialist movement. By 1904 he was, in his own words, "a convinced atheist and supporter of the revolution."

The tensions in Russian society, briefly bottled up but then aggravated by the war launched against Japan in 1904, finally exploded in the revolution of 1905.

In that year, the working class emerged as the central driving force of the revolutionary struggles that raged throughout the tsarist empire, including what is now the Baltics, which had significant social democratic

movements. (See: "The Legacy of 1905 and the Strategy of the Russian Revolution")

Latvia, like Lithuania, Ukraine and Congress Poland (then still part of Russia), was a multinational and multilingual part of the Russian Empire, where acute social exploitation overlapped with ruthless oppression against the national minorities. In these parts of the empire, the national minorities often formed the local majority population.

In Latvia, there were sizeable minorities of Latvians, Jews and Poles. However, they were prohibited from using their languages—Latvian, Polish and Yiddish—in public and in educational institutions. They were ruled by the Russian administration and a narrow layer of the Baltic German nobility, heirs of fabulous wealth and a tradition of the darkest political reaction.

In 1905, thousands of workers in Latvia, especially in Riga, participated in major strikes. After the crackdown on striking workers in the spring of 1905, mass uprisings of peasants started in the countryside. They seized many estates from the Baltic German nobility. In November 1905, martial law was declared in Latvia and punitive expeditions of the tsarist government roamed the countryside and the cities.

Leon Trotsky later described the counterrevolution in this region:

In the Baltic lands, where the insurrection flared up a fortnight earlier than in Moscow, the punitive expeditions were divided up into small detachments which carried out the bloodthirsty instructions of the [German] Baltic barons, that dirty caste from which the Russian bureaucracy drew its most brutish representatives. Latvian workers and peasants were shot, hanged, flogged to death with rods and stocks, made to run the gauntlet, executed to the strains of the tsarist anthem. According to highly incomplete information, 749 persons were executed, more than 100 farms were burned down, and many people were flogged to death in the Baltic lands within the space of two months. [3]

Among the victims of the counterrevolution was Ivar Smilga's father, who was first tortured and then executed before the eyes of his family. These events had an enormous impact on the young Smilga. He later recalled:

My father moved to the left just as contemporary society moved to the left, and he played an extremely visible role in the revolutionary events. During the elimination of the peasant self-administrations [volostnykh upravlenii] he was elected chairman of the revolutionary distribution committee in our volost' [administrative unit in the tsarist empire]. In 1906 he was shot by a punitive expedition of the tsarist government. In January 1907,

while a student in middle school, I joined the social democratic workers' party. In my student years (1909 and 1910), my Marxist world view was conclusively formed. [4]

Smilga entered the socialist movement at a time of extreme reaction, when the masses of workers, under the impact of the defeat of the revolution, turned their backs on the struggle for socialism, if only temporarily.

Under these conditions, the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Party (RSDRP) went through a very difficult period. Trotsky would later write that Lenin, who was in exile at this time, had barely a handful of Bolsheviks in Russia whom he could trust. The opportunist Menshevik wing of the party, which was oriented toward an alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie, found itself strengthened by the tide of reaction.

However difficult these years, they would prove crucial in the political education of Smilga and other leading figures of the revolution, such as Ter-Vaganian, Leonid Serebriakov and Aleksandr Voronsky. They were hardened and educated as revolutionary leaders in Lenin's relentless struggle against Menshevik opportunism and his defense of the philosophical foundations and political principles of Marxism. These struggles were conducted and their lessons were assimilated under conditions in which the Bolsheviks were subject to continuous persecution by the state and suffered numerous arrests.

Smilga was no exception. Between 1907 and 1917 he was arrested no less than four times. He later looked back on these years: "The almost five years of exile proved to be a real university. In exile, alongside the study of the history and tactics of our party, I mainly focused on philosophy and political economy." [5]

Between his two periods of exile, Smilga was briefly a member of the Petersburg Committee of the Bolsheviks, before he was again arrested and sent into exile in May 1915. Like many of the leading Bolsheviks, he returned to Petrograd only after the overthrow of the tsar in the February 1917 Revolution. At the April Conference of the Bolshevik Party, Smilga, only 24, was elected to the Central Committee (CC) along with Lenin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Miliutin, Nogin, Sverdlov and Fedorov. In a Central Committee that at this point was dominated by the right wing under Kamenev and Zinoviev, Smilga became one of Lenin's most important allies in the party leadership.

The CC initially sent him to Kronstadt, where he played a central role in organizing and educating the militant sailors. He was then sent further north, to Finland. In August, Smilga was elected chairman of the Regional Committee of the Army, Navy and Workers of Finland. The committee had 65 members, and the Bolsheviks had—in what was highly unusual for this period—a comfortable majority of 37 delegates. The Left Socialist-Revolutionaries (SRs), which in many instances voted with the Bolsheviks, constituted another 26, whereas the Menshevik-Internationalists had only two delegates.

Due to the highly favorable balance of forces in the committee, Lenin regarded it as a central tool in his plans for the seizure of power. As the inner-party struggle heated up within the Bolshevik Party, Lenin turned to Smilga to make concrete preparations for an armed insurrection.

In the weeks immediately preceding the uprising, Lenin faced objections from two sides: the right-wing opposition, headed by Lev Kamenev and Grigory Zinoviev, rejected the seizure of power in general as premature. They strongly adapted to the Menshevik conception of a two-stage development of the revolution, according to which the revolutionary party would have to struggle not for the seizure of power by the working class, but for a left bourgeois government based on an alliance between the workers and the peasants.

At the same time, Leon Trotsky advocated a seizure of power on the eve of the Congress of Soviets on November 8 (October 26, Old Style). This

position eventually won the majority. The Military Revolutionary Committee was formed and its plan acted upon. However, Lenin feared for weeks that the Bolshevik party leadership would lose important time and miss the right moment for the seizure of power. In a lengthy letter dated October 10 (September 27, Old Style), Lenin wrote to Smilga:

The general political situation causes me great anxiety. The Petrograd Soviet and the Bolsheviks have declared war on the government. But the government has an army, and is preparing *systematically*. (Kerensky at General Headquarters is obviously entering into an understanding—a *business-like* understanding with the Kornilovites to use troops to put down the Bolsheviks.) ... And what are we doing? We are only passing resolutions. We are losing time. We set "dates" (October 20, the Congress of Soviets—is it not ridiculous to put it off so long? Is it not ridiculous to rely on that?) The Bolsheviks are not conducting regular work to prepare their *own* military forces for the overthrow of Kerensky. ... It is my opinion that inside the Party we must agitate for an earnest attitude towards the armed uprising. ... Now about your role. It seems to me we can have *completely* at our disposal only the troops in Finland and the Baltic fleet and only they can play a serious military role. I think you must make the most of your high position, shift all the petty routine work to assistants and secretaries and not waste time on "resolutions"; give all your attention to the military preparation of the troops in Finland plus the fleet for the impending overthrow of Kerensky. Create a *secret* committee of absolutely *trustworthy* military men, discuss matters *thoroughly* with them, collect (and *personally* verify) the most precise data on the composition and the location of troops near and in Petrograd, the transfer of the troops from Finland to Petrograd, the movement of the fleet, etc. If we fail to do this, we may turn out to be consummate idiots, the owners of beautiful resolutions and of Soviets, but *no power!* ... [6]

Lenin wrote these lines while in hiding in Helsingfors, Finland, where he had fled after the failed July uprising in order to avoid arrest and possible execution. In August and September, he and Smilga met numerous times in Helsingfors to discuss the preparation for the seizure of power. Smilga also helped Lenin maintain his tenuous connection to the party leadership.

In 1919, Smilga explained:

... our plan was that, in case that the revolutionary workers and soldiers of Petrograd would not be able to immediately conquer the entire city, they would have to immediately [seize] the islands and the Vyborg side [an industrial district in Petrograd and stronghold of the Bolsheviks, CW] ... in this case I should decide the struggle with the help of the forces from Finland. [7]

As it turned out, however, the workers and soldiers of Petrograd were able to seize power much more quickly and smoothly than expected—not least thanks to the correct assessment of the balance of forces and the plan advocated by Trotsky. Some 1,800 sailors from Finland, under the command of Smilga, moved to Petrograd for the armed insurrection, but when they arrived the only strategic building left to conquer was the Winter Palace. This last fortress of the old regime in Petrograd fell on November 8 (October 26, Old Style).

Smilga continued to support Lenin at many critical turns in the civil war,

including the peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which the Bolshevik government felt compelled to sign on March 3, 1918. At the same time, Smilga acted as the emissary of the Russian Soviet Federal Republic (RSFSR) to Finland. A few words should be said about this crucial but little-known episode in the Civil War.

Finland had formed part of the Russian Empire since the early 19th century. In the early 20th century, it became a preferred hiding place for Russian revolutionaries persecuted in the empire. In 1917, it was one of the most significant strongholds of Bolshevik influence. One major reason for this was the principled defense by the Bolsheviks of the right to national self-determination.

On January 26, 1918, the People's Republic of Finland was formed. The Bolsheviks held a majority in the democratic assembly of the republic. But, tragically, the socialist leadership of the People's Republic maintained strong illusions in a parliamentary road to socialism, which doomed it to defeat. Otto Wille Kuusinen, the principal figure in the Finnish revolution, later acknowledged:

The weakness of the bourgeoisie led us into being captivated by the spell of democracy, and we decided to advance towards socialism through parliamentary action and the democratization of the representative system. [8]

But the bourgeoisie had no intention of granting a parliamentary and peaceful transition to socialism. It immediately launched a counterrevolutionary offensive, relying primarily on German troops. Despite the significant growth of the Red Guards and the Baltic fleet, where Smilga, Dybenko and Antonov-Ovseenko had worked, the working class and the fledgling armed forces of the Bolsheviks were unprepared to fight against the Whites and the invading German and Swedish troops.

Within weeks, thousands and thousands of revolutionary workers were slaughtered. Victor Serge estimated that, in total, over 100,000 Finnish workers—i.e., a quarter of the country's proletariat—were massacred. Some 70,000 Red prisoners were placed in concentration camps. About 50,000 of them were supposed to be shipped to Germany as slave laborers, a plan prevented only by the outbreak of revolution in Germany itself. The Bolsheviks had to give up hopes for the incorporation of Finland into a union of Soviet socialist republics, and the revolution in Finland was thrown back for decades.

This experience proved critical for the further conduct of the civil war by the Red Army. As Victor Serge later pointed out:

The *total extermination* of all the advanced and conscious elements of the proletariat is, in short, the rational objective of the White terror. In this sense, *a vanquished revolution—regardless of its tendency—will always cost the proletariat far more than a victorious revolution, no matter what sacrifices and rigor the latter may demand.* One more observation. The butcheries in Finland took place in April 1918. Up to this moment the Russian Revolution had displayed great leniency towards its enemies. It had not used terror. We have noted a few bloody episodes in the civil war in the south, but these were exceptional. The victorious bourgeoisie of a small nation that ranks among the most enlightened societies in Europe was the first to remind the Russian proletariat that *woe to the vanquished!* is the first law of social war. [9]

In May 1919, Smilga was co-opted into the leadership of the Red Army,

the Revolutionary Military Council (Revvoensovet), at the behest of its chairman, Leon Trotsky. He would remain in this position throughout the civil war, until March 1923. [10]

In this capacity, he played a central role in defeating armies led by White generals Denikin and Wrangel and fighting against the counterrevolutionary armies that invaded Soviet Russia from Czechoslovakia and Poland.

Smilga was not only one of the most important military commanders of the Red Army, but also an important military writer and strategist. In December 1919, he chaired the First Congress of Political Workers (politrabotnikov) in the Red Army in Moscow. His pamphlet *Building the Red Army* (Stroitel'stvo krasnoi armii) was issued in no less than three editions between 1919 and 1920. Time and again, Smilga emphasized that the building of the Red Army had to be seen as part of the development of the Russian Revolution. It was, as he put it, the "first major organizational effort" of the Soviet state. Smilga put special emphasis on the paramount significance of educating the Red Army soldiers and, above all, their commanders on a political but also cultural level.

Hundreds of thousands of workers and peasants learned reading and writing, and the ABCs of politics, in and through the Red Army in the first years of the Civil War. The goal was, in Smilga's words, to not have a single "illiterate soldier in the Red Army." Given that the vast majority of the Red Army soldiers were recruited from the peasantry, by far the largest class in Russian society, which was in its overwhelming majority illiterate in 1917, this was a daunting undertaking.

Yet it was a priority concern for the Soviet government. Under the most difficult conditions of economic devastation and financial strangulation, and in the midst of a war against almost all of the major imperialist and capitalist powers of Europe, as well as Japan and the United States, the Soviet government funded an impressive network of schools, libraries and other cultural facilities to educate the soldiers. As Smilga wrote, "To conduct cultural-educational and political work among the soldiers of the Republic we never did and never will shun any means (zhalet' sredstv)." [11]

In 1920, according to Smilga, some 1,520,674 newspapers were distributed in the army on a daily basis. They not only covered political and military questions, they also included supplements on literature, theater and music. This was in addition to about 30 newspapers issued by army units on a regional and local level. Overall, in the first 11 months of 1920, the government distributed 18,888,325 pieces of different kinds of literature in the army.

By October 1920, there were over 2,000 libraries in the army. The number of schools rose from 4,400 in July 1920 to 5,952 in November 1920, with the number of students growing from 108,000 to 120,000 in the same time period. [12]

Writing in late 1920, when much of the bloody fighting on the eastern, western and southern fronts had come to an end (although the war would continue in some areas until 1922), Smilga noted:

Now that the war has ended, we have to remember that, if the task of the war was victory, then the task of the peaceful period must be a transformation of the Red Army into a Communist Red Army. Our enemies shall only try then to throw their crafty designs against the revolution in Russia. The conditions for conducting political and cultural work in the army are now much better than they were during the war. Not a single minute must be passed in vain." [13]

Starting in 1921, Smilga devoted himself increasingly to economic work, which, once the Civil War had been won, became the central

battleground for the fledgling workers' state. Initially, he worked as the vice-chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the National Economy (VDNKh), where he was in charge of fuel supplies, one of the most responsible positions in the Soviet economy at this time. In 1923, he became the vice-chairman of the Gosplan (State Planning Commission) of the USSR.

Immediately after the end of the Civil War, the party became engulfed in a bitter factional struggle. The backwardness of the Russian economy, ravaged by almost 10 years of continuous war, and the continued isolation of the revolution gave rise to an increasingly assertive bureaucracy and strengthened a nationalist and opportunist tendency within the party, against which Lenin had fought so adamantly in 1917.

The bureaucratic tendencies in the USSR were reinforced by the aborted German Revolution in 1923. After a series of strokes, Lenin died in January of 1924. In the fall of that year, Nikolai Bukharin formulated the theory of "socialism in one country," according to which socialism could be built in the isolated workers' state. Hence, political priority would be given by the party leadership to "building socialism at home," while the international extension of the revolution was delegated to a matter of secondary importance.

The slogan of "socialism in one country" directly contradicted the fundamental tenets of socialist internationalism, on the basis of which Lenin and Trotsky had fought for the seizure of power by the working class in 1917. It became the central axis of a program of opportunist adaptation to petty-bourgeois and bourgeois forces both in the USSR and on a world scale, expressing the interests of a bureaucracy that had arisen in the isolated and relatively backward workers' state and was essentially hostile to social equality and the program of socialism. Joseph Stalin emerged as the chief political agent of this layer.

The Left Opposition, led by Leon Trotsky, was the main political force fighting against this betrayal of the program of October and the political usurpation of power by the bureaucracy. It is not entirely clear when exactly Smilga joined the Left Opposition. He was not one of the signatories to the Declaration of the 46, the founding platform of the Trotskyist Left Opposition from October 1923.

However, Smilga's writings from this period suggest that he must have sympathized with much of the criticism of the Left Opposition on the economic plane. The Trotskyists demanded a greater focus on strengthening industry, and thereby the working class, and opposed the Stalin faction's policy of promoting the middle layers of the peasantry in the countryside. In a pamphlet from 1924 entitled *Industry Under Conditions of the New Economic Policy*, which was based on four lectures he had given in 1923, Smilga relied on the report given by Trotsky at the XIIth Party Congress on the state of Soviet industry, which raised many of the concerns of the Left Opposition.

In the second half of the 1920s, Smilga's apartment in Moscow became a central meeting place of the Opposition. Isai Abramovich, who was recruited to the Left Opposition in Moscow by the leading Marxist theoretician Ter-Vaganian and mentored by Smilga, later devoted an entire chapter to Smilga in his memoirs. He wrote:

At Smilga's apartment we got to know and often met K. Radek, Kh. Rakovsky and V. Trifonov—they were regular guests. L. D. Trotsky, G. L. Piatakov, E. A. Preobrazhensky, A. K. Voronsky went to Smilga every so often. Zinoviev and Kamenev also came, but very seldom. We also got to know the brothers of Smilga's wife, Nadezhda Vasilievna Poluyan. They were all Old Bolsheviks: Yakov worked in the Tsentsosoiuz, Dmitri was a member of the collegium of the NKPS (People's Commissariat for Transportation), Yan had previously been a secretary of the All-Russian Executive Committee, Nikolai had fought in the Red Army. We usually gathered at Smilga's in the evening. We mainly

talked about the most burning political questions—there were more than enough of them during Stalin's rule. ... Ivar Tenisovich was a simple, democratically minded person. He addressed himself to everyone in the same manner, regardless of the position this person occupied. He was an exceptionally interesting interlocutor, he had had a rich, eventful life, and he had something to talk about. [14]

In April 1926, the United Left Opposition was formed when Lev Kamenev and Grigory Zinoviev, two of the most influential party leaders in Leningrad, joined with the Left Opposition despite continued disagreements with Trotsky, most notably on the question of internationalism and the Chinese Revolution.

The Chinese Revolution in these years occupied a central place in the inner-party struggle, not just within the Bolshevik Party but within the Comintern as a whole. The Trotskyists opposed the subordination of the Chinese Communist Party to the bourgeois Kuomintang party, an alliance that was advocated by the Stalin faction, which argued that the bourgeois stage of the revolution in China had to be fulfilled before the working class could take power and begin to implement socialist policies.

At the same time, social tensions within the Soviet Union were on the rise. While a narrow layer of middle peasants was strengthened by the New Economic Policy, the working class continued to face serious food shortages and an increasingly oppressive regime in the factories. This development, along with renewed hopes for a continuation of the revolution abroad, increased the prestige of the Left Opposition and led to a significant influx of new members. In the Soviet Komsomol, the youth organization of the Communist Party, in numerous scientific and academic institutions as well as in individual Central Committees, most notably the Central Committee of the Communist Party in the Georgian Soviet Republic, the Left Opposition wielded significant influence. In some, it even held a majority.

In these years, Smilga was the director of the Economic Institute in Moscow, named after Georgi Plekhanov. Here, he helped build an important cell of the Left Opposition, which included the above-quoted Abramovich and several other promising young revolutionaries.

The tide turned again, however, when the Chinese revolution was shattered under the blows of the very Kuomintang to which the Stalinist faction had subordinated the Chinese masses. On April 12, 1927, the military forces of Chiang Kai-Shek, with the full support of the Kuomintang, massacred members of the Chinese Communist Party in Shanghai and thousands of workers. On May 25, 1927, the United Left Opposition published another declaration, which was signed by thousands of party members, including hundreds of the best-known leaders from the seizure of power in 1917 and the Civil War.

However, the defeat of the Chinese Revolution strengthened the Soviet bureaucracy by reinforcing the international isolation of the USSR. The Stalinist faction, terrified by the recent successes of the Left Opposition and the continued prestige enjoyed above all by Leon Trotsky, used the demoralization and confusion created by the disaster in China to escalate its crackdown on the Opposition.

Known Left Oppositionists were demoted to positions that were well below their abilities or outside their field of expertise in order to both humiliate and politically neutralize them. Smilga was sent from Moscow to the Far East as head of the Economic Council. When his train departed from the Yaroslavl Station in Moscow on June 9, 1927, he was accompanied to the station by a crowd of some 1,500 people, among them numerous leading oppositionists. Trotsky gave a speech citing Smilga's demotion as an example of reprisals against the Left Opposition.

On the eve of the XVth Party Congress, on November 14, 1927, Leon Trotsky was expelled from the party. On December 19, 1927, the Congress voted to expel all members from the party who had signed the

latest platform of the United Left Opposition. Among them was Ivar Smilga.

Together with Christian Rakovsky, Karl Radek and Nikolai Muralov, he issued a statement on December 18, 1927. It included the following passages:

Expulsion from the party deprives us of our party rights, but it cannot free us from the duties which every one of us took on himself in joining the ranks of the Communist Party. Being expelled from its ranks, we remain as before true to the programme of our party, its traditions, its banner. We shall work for the strengthening of the Communist Party and its influence on the working class. ... We pledged, and pledge ourselves now, to do our utmost for the preservation of unity of our party, which is at the head of a workers' state. We categorically reject the intention to organise a second party that is ascribed to us as being incompatible with the proletarian dictatorship and against Lenin's teachings. ... We reject just as emphatically the assertions concerning the anti-Soviet tendencies in our struggle. All of us, in one form or another, are partakers in the building up of the Soviet state, the first country of the toilers. ... We are being expelled for our views. They have been laid down in our platform and theses. We consider these views to be Bolshevik-Leninist views. We cannot renounce them because the march of events confirms their correctness. ... The party regime resulting in our expulsion inevitably leads to a new dismemberment in the party and to new expulsions. Only a regime of inner-party democracy can guarantee the elaboration of a correct party line and strengthen its ties with the working class. ... True to the teachings of Marx and Lenin, vitally connected with the CPSU and the Comintern, we reply to our expulsion from the CPSU by our firm decision to fight under the Bolshevik banner without restraint for the triumph of world revolution, for the unity of the Communist parties as the vanguards of the proletariat, for the defence of the conquests of the October Revolution, for communism, for the CPSU and the Comintern. [15]

The German Trotskyist Oskar Hippe, a member of the German Left Opposition since 1923, later noted in his memoirs:

If it had not been for the declaration of the comrades Smilga, Muralov, Rakovski, Radek and others, who also appealed to the delegates on December 18 at the XVth Party Congress, raising the voice of the internationalists, the ranks of those fighting for the Marxist-Leninist position would have hardly been as united as they were. ... The fight of the best parts of the Russian party, as it was expressed in their fundamental declaration at the XVth Party Congress, not only gave new courage to the Russian comrades, but was also perceived in the International as an encouragement in the struggle against the Stalinist faction. [16]

As for all Left Oppositionists, the expulsion was a heavy blow to Smilga, both politically and personally. His daughter, Tatiana Smilga-Poluyan, later recalled: "It was extremely difficult for father to deal with being expelled from the ranks of the Communists, which he had entered as a 14-year-old youth." [17]

The only way for Left Oppositionists to be readmitted to the party was to renounce their earlier views. Participation in oppositional activity was

now a crime, punishable under Article 58 of the criminal code.

The defeat of the Chinese Revolution and the expulsion from the party provoked a deep crisis in the ranks of the United Left Opposition. Kamenev and Zinoviev were soon ready to capitulate to the Stalin faction. The meeting at which the United Left Opposition split occurred at Smilga's apartment. Isai Abramovich described it in his memoirs:

Zinoviev, Kamenev and their supporters agreed to accept the conditions for the capitulation that had been dictated [by the Central Committee]. Trotsky and his co-thinkers agreed to concede that the factional struggle had been a mistake, but they categorically rejected the demand to renounce their views. The discussions about this among the members of the center of the opposition took place at the apartment of I. T. Smilga, in his study, at the big desk, with the Zinovievites sitting on one side and the Trotskyists on the other. Imiarekov, Brigris and I were sitting in the room next door and awaiting the results of the meeting. I. T. Smilga (he had, of course, come in a great hurry from the Far East) from time to time came out and briefly told us what was being discussed. At one point, after a speech by L. D. Trotsky, Ivar Tenisovich came to us and said with admiration, "What a figure!"

The meeting at which the split occurred ended. All participants, with the exception of K. Radek and Ch. Rakovsky, left. Nadezhda Vasilievna, Smilga's wife, invited all who had remained to come to the table, where discussion centered, of course, on the meeting that had just ended. They were especially upset about G. I. Zinoviev. Smilga declared that the behavior Zinoviev and Kamenev had displayed today reminded him of their behavior in October 1917. Radek and Rakovsky agreed. [18]

Shortly thereafter, Smilga was arrested and exiled to Minusinsk in the Soviet Union's Far East. At Smilga's request, Abramovich and his friend Imiarekov hid Smilga's personal archive and library with Riazanov, one of the leading experts on the writings of classical Marxism, who was at this point still in charge of the Institute of Marx and Engels. Throughout this time, Smilga suffered from severe health problems that dated back to his years in exile and the Civil War.

In 1929, Smilga co-signed a letter of capitulation in which he, Radek and Evgeny Preobrazhensky renounced their views and asked to be readmitted to the party. It was one in a series of capitulations by Old Bolsheviks in the Left Opposition following the regime's so-called "left turn" of 1928. Smilga was allowed to return to Moscow and resume work for the party, although at a very modest level.

Like many other Old Bolsheviks, Smilga maintained the illusion that the "left turn," which in Soviet economic policy included a commitment to industrialization and collectivization in the countryside—both policies for which the Left Opposition had fought for years—would mark a significant change in the class orientation of the policies of the Stalinist faction. Added to this illusory hope were the exhaustion from the years-long struggles, the expulsion from the party, and the extremely difficult conditions facing all those who opposed the dominant party line.

Yet the hopes of the Left Oppositionists who capitulated to Stalin in the late 1920s were very soon shattered. The results of the "left turn" were nothing short of catastrophic, both within the Soviet Union and internationally.

In the Comintern, the left radicalism dictated from Moscow prevented a united struggle of Communist and Social Democratic workers in Germany against the rise of fascism, thus making possible the coming to power of Adolf Hitler in January 1933 without a single shot being fired. On the domestic front, the policy of forced collectivization led to a horrendous

famine in the Ukrainian Soviet Republic, the southern parts of the Russian Republic and the Kazakh Soviet Republic, bringing particularly the Ukraine to the brink of civil war. Serious estimates put the number of those who died from the famine at around 7 to 8 million.

Abramovich, who had joined the “Declaration of the Three” and also capitulated to Stalin, frequented Smilga’s apartment in Moscow in these years and later recalled:

At every meeting, Ivar Tenisovich talked about how the collectivization was enforced with enormous distortions. He became ever more gloomy and started saying that our leaving the opposition had been a mistake—it only made Stalin more confident and arrogant. The politics of Stalin will result in devastating consequences for both the countryside and the cities, said Smilga. He was upset about the totally inhumane policy of de-kulakization, of which neither Lenin nor the party had ever conceived. ... And then, already proceeding from humanistic concerns to economic ones, Smilga the economist emphatically talked about how much the country’s economy would have to pay for the absurd policy of the Stalinist collectivization. I remember almost word by word: “The losses in livestock resulting from the forced collectivization, in terms of value, exceed the equivalent of all the gains made in basic resources in the years of the first five-year plan. I. T. Smilga talked about how among the Old Bolsheviks the discontent was growing about the policies of both collectivization and industrialization, that at the work places discontent about the consequences of collectivization was rising. ... [19]

In 1932-1933, Smilga worked for the prestigious Academia Publishing House, which in these years became something of a refuge for former leading revolutionaries who had fallen out of favor with the Stalinist leadership. He edited and wrote forewords to works by Goethe, Erasmus, Saint-Simon, Kropotkin and Charles Dickens. In 1933, Smilga was sent to Tashkent to work in the Central Asian Gosplan. He returned to Moscow in 1934, but the party leadership refused to give him new work.

On December 1, 1934, the popular Leningrad party leader Kirov was killed in what was most likely a provocation arranged by the GPU on behalf of Stalin, who seized on the assassination as a pretext for the beginning of mass purges in the party. As a close confidant of Lenin, leader of the October Revolution and former Left Oppositionist, Smilga was one of the first to be arrested and killed.

He was taken from his home in the night of January 1-2, 1935, just a few weeks after Kirov’s assassination, and sent to the Verkhneursalsk politisolator, a political prison in the Urals. His wife, Nadezhda Poluyan, who was also an old Bolshevik, would be arrested in 1936.

It is likely that Stalin intended to have Smilga as one of the defendants in the show trials that began in the summer of 1936. However, despite severe torture, Smilga would not “admit” to any of the crimes of which the Stalinist bureaucracy accused the revolutionary leaders, including collaboration with the fascist governments of Japan, Germany and Italy as well as counterrevolutionary activities with the aim of restoring capitalism in the USSR. On January 10, 1937, the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR declared Smilga guilty of conducting “counterrevolutionary Trotskyist activity.” He was sentenced to death and shot the same day.

His wife, Nadezhda Poluyan, was shot in Karelia (now part of Finland) 10 months later, on November 4, 1937. Her brothers, all long-time Bolsheviks and military leaders in the Civil War, were also killed in 1937 and 1938. Smilga’s two daughters, Natasha and Tatiana, were arrested and sent to labor camps, where they lingered for many years before being

released in the mid-1950s. Ivar Smilga was rehabilitated only half a century after his murder, on April 3, 1987. For decades, his name was banned from official Soviet—i.e., Stalinist—writings on the Russian Revolution and early Soviet Union.

Few Western historians have shown interest in establishing a truthful historical record of Smilga’s role in the Russian Revolution. One of the first to acknowledge it was the American historian Alexander Rabinowitch, who detailed many of Smilga’s positions and his collaboration with Lenin in his path-breaking study *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* from 1976. Much of the work and effort to rehabilitate Smilga and set the historical record straight, after decades of falsifications, fell upon his daughter Tatiana, who tirelessly fought for her father’s formal rehabilitation and his recognition as both a leader of the revolution in Russia and an opponent of Stalinism. Yet, as with virtually all leaders of the Russian Revolution, 100 years after the Bolshevik seizure of power, Smilga still awaits a serious biography.

**

Literature on Ivar Smilga and his role in the revolutionary movement:

Isai Abramovich, *Vospominaniia i vzgliady* (Memories and views), Moscow 2004. (Online available in Russian: <http://lib.ru/MEMUARY/ABRAMOWICH/abramowich2.txt>).

A. P. Nenarokov, “Ivar Tenisovich Smilga,” in: *Revvoensovet*, Moscow 1991, pp. 349-359.

Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, Chicago 2009 (especially chapter 11).

Tatiana Smilga, *Moi otets, Ivar Smilga (My Father, Ivar Smilga)*, Moscow 2013.

WSWS: Interview with Tatiana Smilga-Poluyan (27 October, 2014).

**

Notes:

[1] Autobiographical text by Ivar Smilga in: *Deiateli SSSR i revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia Rossii. Entsiklopedicheskii slovar’*. (Figures of the USSR and the revolutionary movement in Russia. An encyclopedic dictionary), Moscow: 1989, p. 63.

[2] Allan Wildman, *The Making of Workers’ Revolution. Russian Social Democracy, 1891-1903*, Chicago: 1967, p. 150.

[3] Leon Trotsky, 1905, chapter 21. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1907/1905/ch21.htm>

[4] *Deiateli SSSR i revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia Rossii*, p. 63.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

[6] Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Letter to I. T. Smilga (September 27, O.S., October 10), emphasis in the original. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/10.htm>

[7] Quoted in: Abramovich, *Vospominaniia i vzgliady*. <http://lib.ru/MEMUARY/ABRAMOWICH/abramowich2.txt>

[8] Quoted in: Victor Serge, *Year One of the Russian Revolution*, Chicago-New York-San Francisco: 1972, p. 186.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 191, emphasis in the original.

[10] A.P. Nenarokov, “Ivar Tenisovich Smilga,” in: *Revvoensovet*, Moscow: 1991, p. 350.

[11] I. Smilga: “Stroitel’stvo krasnoi armii,” in: *Voennye ocherki*, Moscow: 1923, p. 21.

[12] Numbers from *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 23.

[15] Quoted from *Report of the XV Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Official Report with Decisions and Discussions*. Published by the Communist Party of Great Britain, London 1928, pp. 401-404.

[16] Oskar Hippe, *...und unsere Fahnen ist rot. Erinnerungen an sechzig Jahre in der Arbeiterbewegung [...and our flag is red. Memoirs of sixty years in the workers’ movement]*, Hamburg 1979, pp. 106-7.

[17] Smilga, *Moi otets, Ivar Smilga*, Mp. 8.

[18] Abramovich, *Vosposminaniia i vzgliady*.

[19] Ibid.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact