

Stephen F. Cohen, biographer of Nikolai Bukharin, dead at 81

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Stephen F. Cohen, professor emeritus of Russian studies at New York University, passed away on September 18 from cancer. His academic and political biography was bound up, above all, with his 1973 biography of Nikolai Bukharin (1888–1938), a principal figure in the inner-party struggle of the 1920s. The book, which sought to present Bukharin, instead of Leon Trotsky, as the main alternative to Stalinism, formed the basis for Cohen’s prominent role as a public intellectual in the final stage of the Stalinist restoration of capitalism in the USSR.

Born in Kentucky in 1938, the year that Bukharin was executed in the Stalinist Great Terror, Cohen’s studies of public service and economics at Indiana University in the late 1950s and early 1960s coincided with the period of the “thaw” in the Soviet Union under Nikita Khrushchev.

Khrushchev’s partial acknowledgment of some of the worst crimes of Stalin at the 1956 Twentieth Party Congress had sent shockwaves through the Communist movement internationally. Combining a limited relaxation of censorship with pro-market reforms, Khrushchev’s thaw was a period of enormous political and intellectual burgeoning within the Soviet Union. Significant sections of workers and intellectuals searched for a genuinely left alternative to Stalinism and a “return to the real Lenin”.

In the US and UK, several important historical works on the Russian revolution and the struggle of the Left Opposition in the 1920s against the Stalinist bureaucracy helped trigger growing interest in the figure of Trotsky. This included the multi-volume history of the Russian revolution by E. H. Carr and Robert V. Daniels’ *Conscience of the Revolution. Communist Opposition to Stalinism* (1960). Between 1953 and 1963, Isaac Deutscher’s monumental three-volume biography of Leon Trotsky appeared in English.

These works significantly undermined the so-called totalitarian model of Soviet history, in which Stalinist “totalitarianism” was depicted as a direct outgrowth of Marxism and the October revolution as nothing more than a “coup” of a clique of criminals led by Lenin.

It was in this climate that Cohen was drawn to the question of “alternatives” to Stalinism. Robert C. Tucker, who had just completed his diplomatic service for the US embassy in Moscow and would go on to become a lifelong friend and mentor to Cohen, strongly encouraged him on this path. In this search, however, he was focused early on finding “opposition” forces within the Stalinist apparatus. He later noted that in the two decades after Khrushchev’s removal from power in 1964, “my main project was identifying pro-reform forces and their ideas *inside* the murky bureaucratic realm of the ruling Communist Party.” (Stephen F. Cohen, *Soviet Fates and Lost Alternatives: From Stalinism to the New Cold War*, Columbia University Press, p. x, emphasis added.)

His 1973 biography of Bukharin, based on his dissertation from 1969, was part of a series of studies that appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s in which figures that had been murdered by Stalin and all but erased from official historiography—including Left Oppositions like Evgeny Preobrazhensky, Nikolai Muralov or Ivar Smilga, or other leaders of the Bolshevik party like Alexei Rykov or Lomov—were named, often for the

first time in decades, and subjected to closer analysis. This included the studies of the revolution in Petrograd by Alexander Rabinowitch, and further research into the Left Opposition by Richard B. Day and others.

Under conditions of major working class struggles internationally, these books were read by many socialist intellectuals and workers not just as academic works but as providing a historical basis for their own political orientation. Within this broader development, Cohen’s biography of Bukharin—the first in English—appeared as an effort to counteract the growing interest in Trotsky and the understanding that the Left Opposition represented the main opposition to Stalinism.

In his preface, Cohen acknowledged that he sought “to revise the customary interpretation which views the Bolshevik revolution after Lenin chiefly in terms of a Stalin-Trotsky rivalry.” (Stephen F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution. A Political Biography, 1888–1938*, Vintage Books 1975, p. xvi) Instead, he tried to present Bukharin not only as the leading theorist of Bolshevism, but also the main opposition to Stalin.

Bukharin was indeed a significant figure in the Bolshevik party. A Bolshevik since 1906 and the youngest member of the Politburo in 1917, Bukharin was extremely popular, a talented writer, and dedicated revolutionary. There was a great deal of tragedy in his ultimate fate, as there was in that of most “old Bolsheviks”. However, Cohen’s presentation of Bukharin as a central figure in 1917, second only to Lenin, and as the main political alternative to Stalinism was seriously misleading and contradicted the historical record.

Leon Trotsky (1879-1940), was the co-leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution, socialist opponent of Joseph Stalin, founder of the Fourth International, and strategist of world socialist revolution.

In the 1920s, Bukharin played a central role in the struggle of the emerging Stalinist bureaucracy against the Left Opposition. In fact, if the Stalinist faction with all its erratic zigzags and opportunist maneuvers had any ideological head, it was Bukharin. It was Bukharin who in 1923 introduced the notion of the movement toward socialism at “a tortoise pace”. In the fall of 1924, it was also Bukharin who first openly articulated the “theory of socialism in one country” that Stalin openly adopted in December 1924, an explicit repudiation of the strategy of international socialist revolution that had formed the basis for the 1917 revolution.

This nationalist political orientation was bound up with the bureaucracy’s increasingly open orientation toward more privileged, semi-bourgeois and bourgeois layers of the peasantry, summed up in Bukharin’s infamous call to the kulaks (better-off peasants) in 1925, “Enrich yourselves”.

This class orientation underlay the countless vile attacks on Trotsky and the theory of permanent revolution that Bukharin authored on the pages of the most important journals and newspapers of the party press. Throughout the inner-party struggle in the 1920s, Trotsky warned very sharply that Bukharin’s program represented most clearly the restorationist tendencies within the bureaucracy and Soviet society.

Bukharin's role in the Communist International, where he became part of the executive committee in 1926, was no less politically disastrous—but all but ignored by Cohen. He helped articulate and develop opportunist policies and an orientation toward non-proletarian layers that resulted in major historical betrayals, above all that of the Chinese Revolution in 1925–27.

In 1928, Bukharin authored the draft program of the Comintern, which Trotsky subjected to a withering critique. Trotsky demonstrated that the Stalinist policies of the Comintern represented a return to the Menshevik two-stage theory, according to which the socialist revolution by the working class in backward countries had to be relegated to the future and subordinated for a prolonged historical period to the fight for a bourgeois democratic revolution.

In 1917, Trotsky and Lenin, who by April of that year had adopted Trotsky's conception of permanent revolution, had to fight against any adaptation to such conceptions in the Bolshevik leadership in order to orient the party toward the seizure of power. Trotsky's *Critique of the Draft Program*, in which he further elaborated upon the internationalist strategy of the Marxist movement, defended these political traditions and became the founding document of the International Left Opposition.

Against this background, Cohen's claim that Bukharin was the real theoretical leader of "Bolshevism" was false and misleading. Bukharin's theoretical role only became prominent when the bureaucracy, under the leadership of the Stalin-Bukharin duo, felt compelled to fundamentally revise core tenets of Marxism and Bolshevism. In a letter to the Politburo from 1927, Trotsky pointedly noted:

Every new stage in the development of the party and the revolution, every new book, every new fashionable theory, has called forth a new zigzag and a new blunder on the part of Bukharin. His whole theoretical and political biography is a chain of errors committed within the formal framework of Bolshevism. The mistakes of Bukharin since the death of Lenin far exceed in their scale, and especially in their political consequences, all his earlier mistakes. This scholiast, emptying Marxism of all concrete reality, converting it into a game with ideas, often into mere verbal sophistry, has proved naturally the most suitable 'theoretician' for the period of the sliding over of the party leadership from the proletariat to the petty bourgeois rails. Without sophistry this cannot be done. Hence the present 'theoretical' role of Bukharin.

The "Right Opposition" of Bukharin, Alexei Rykov, Tomskii and Lomov, which Cohen tried to present as an alternative more significant and viable than that of Trotsky, in reality, had no clear political platform. Prompted by the massive grain crisis of 1928 and their opposition to the program of mass collectivization, the Right Opposition was, as Robert V. Daniels noted, "a phenomenon of the moment, emerging on the political scene with little forewarning. The Right Opposition had no background as a deviation, for the simple reason that before its appearance as an opposition it had been, both as a group of men and as a program, an indistinguishable part of the party leadership itself." (Robert V. Daniels, *Conscience of the Revolution. Communist Opposition to Stalinism*, West View, 1988, p. 322)

By the 1930s, Bukharin had re-entered a political alliance with Stalin. He became the editor-in-chief in 1934 of *Izvestia*, a major party newspaper, a position he maintained throughout the first part of the horrific Stalinist terror in the 1930s.

This historical record made Cohen's attempt to present Bukharin as the main alternative to Stalinism necessarily often inconsistent, and, at worst, dishonest. Cohen's description of Bukharin as an advocate of "social and

cultural pluralism" and a man of "intellectual integrity" was a judgement motivated not so much by historical facts but political sympathies. Cohen discussed the theoretical writings of Bukharin in some detail and documented his social orientation toward peasant layers within Soviet society and the revolutionary "world peasantry"; his early move away from the Marxist conception of "class struggle" and his substantial theoretical interest in anti-Marxist Western sociology.

In fact, it was in these political conceptions of the mid-1920s that Cohen saw Bukharin's main contemporary political relevance. He concluded his biography by pointing to the growing interest in Bukharin's ideas for "market socialism" in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, where the bureaucracy and privileged layers of the intelligentsia responded to growing unrest within the working class and the crisis of the Stalinist regimes by moving ever more openly toward restoring capitalist property relations.

Cohen's favorable portrayal of Bukharin found a certain echo upon its publication in 1973 as it coincided with a growing turn by layers of the intelligentsia and petty bourgeois left away from any orientation to the working class and Marxism.

However, it was only with the turn of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the USSR toward the full restoration of capitalism with the 1985 "perestroika" program under Mikhail Gorbachev that the promotion of Bukharin, and therewith also Cohen's biography, assumed immediate political significance.

Cohen became one of the best-known public intellectuals in the US, speaking regularly on television and radio programs such as NPR about developments in the USSR. He established a friendship with Gorbachev that lasted until his death, and became close to Bukharin's widow, Anna Larina. In the late 1980s, as the promotion of Bukharin in the USSR reached its peak, he also started working as an adviser to US President George H. W. Bush as US imperialism tried to "aid" the Stalinist bureaucracy's final destruction of the USSR. In 1988, Cohen married Katrina vanden Heuvel, later the long-time editor of the *Nation*.

However, the archival material that was published at the time further undermined Cohen's portrayal of Bukharin. The publication of the letters that Bukharin had written to Stalin in 1934-36, in particular, painted the image of a man who was not only politically broken, but also sought to save his life by betraying and denouncing others. While none of this prevented his execution in the end, Bukharin did enjoy privileged treatment in prison and seems to have foregone much of the torture that other Bolsheviks were subjected to.

In four letters to "Koba", as he called Stalin, Bukharin begged for his life, offering his service in the fight against Trotsky. He promised he "would conduct a campaign about the trials, wage a mortal struggle against Trotsky, win over large layers of the vacillating intelligentsia, become what amounts to an Anti-Trotsky and conduct this matter both on a grand scale and with definite enthusiasm." (Quoted in Vadim Rogovin, *Political Genocide in the USSR*, Mehring Books, 2009, p. 36)

After 1991, Cohen conducted no significant research in the newly opened archives in Russia and published only a few books. Much indicates that he viewed himself, first and foremost, as a political figure. After three decades at Princeton, where he had taught politics since 1968, he became professor of Russian studies at New York University in 1998.

In a climate dominated by a combination of overt anti-Communism and the neo-Stalinist lies of the post-Soviet school of historical falsification, Cohen's hostility to Trotsky assumed such dimensions that he relegated him to one mention in a single footnote in his 2009 book *Soviet Fates and Lost Alternatives*. Throughout his post-1991 career, he, like virtually all of his academic colleagues, stubbornly ignored the path-breaking seven-volume study of the Left Opposition, *Was There an Alternative?*, by Vadim Rogovin.

The last decades of his life were dominated by his attempts to oppose

the increasingly hysterical anti-Russia campaign and war preparations in the US, making him something of a pariah in liberal and academic circles. In the early 2000s, he wrote a book warning of the dangerous deterioration of NATO-Russia relations, which acknowledged at least some of the devastating economic and social consequences of the very restoration of capitalism that he had done much to support.

As the anti-Russia hysteria has reached staggering proportions following the imperialist-backed coup in Kiev in 2014, Cohen appeared on television and wrote op-eds, calling out some of the most glaring lies and contradictions of the anti-Russia campaign. Thanks to his interactions with the US state apparatus, Stephen Cohen was no doubt keenly aware of just how far advanced and dangerous the preparations by US imperialism for all-out war with Russia are. He dedicated his last book, *War with Russia?* (2018), to warning of the dangers of a US-Russia war.



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