Mehring Books publishes first volume of Vadim Rogovin's *Was There an Alternative?*

Historical falsification and the struggle for socialism

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Vadim Z. Rogovin, *Was There an Alternative? 1923–1927. Trotskyism: A Look Back Through the Years.* Mehring Books, 2021. ISBN 9781893638969. Available for purchase here.

The English-language publication of Soviet historian and sociologist Vadim Rogovin's first book in the seven-volume cycle on the socialist opposition to Joseph Stalin is a major political and intellectual event. *Was There an Alternative? 1923–1927. Trotskyism: A Look Back Through the Years* focuses on the period when, under the leadership of Leon Trotsky, the Left Opposition initiated the battle against the bureaucratic clique consolidating around Stalin inside the Communist Party and the Soviet Union.

Rogovin (1937–1998) explodes the myth, shared by both anti-communists and Stalinists alike, that Stalinism evolved naturally and seamlessly out of Bolshevism. He demonstrates that this claim can only be sustained by erasing from the historical record the socioeconomic and political convulsions that seized the USSR and Communist Party—that is, by arguing, as he notes in his introduction, that "all the interim stages between October 1917 and the consolidation of power by the Stalinist regime were insignificant zigzags."

The volume, published first in Russian in 1992, is a feat of historical research. It makes use of a vast array of sources to which, until the late 1980s and 1990s, Soviet citizens were denied access by the Kremlin's occupants. Most of this material has also been inaccessible to Western readers, except for small portions used in historical research published in North America or Europe.

Through letters among party members, minutes of meetings high and low, observations and notes of secretaries and other observers, reports and communications from regional and local party bodies, and countless other internal documents, as well as articles, speeches and commentary published in the press at the time, the reader descends into the history of the most important political struggle of the last century—its twists and turns, personalities, tragic and noble moments, and underlying economic and social drivers. The drama, one could even say the heat of this hard-fought battle, spills off the pages. There are photographs, as well as original cartoons and other imagery not published since the 1920s in the Soviet Union, throughout the book. At the end, there are biographical notes on over 70 of the historical figures. Throughout the volume we hear the voice of Trotsky, as well as those of many other, lesser-known oppositionists. After decades of having been wiped out of official Soviet history, Rogovin returns them to their rightful place.

The English-language translation differs from the original Russian version because Rogovin redrafted and expanded this volume as the result of intensive discussions he held with the Trotskyist movement during the mid-1990s. After having worked in near-total isolation for decades, he was finally able to review many complex historical and political questions in collaboration with co-thinkers in the International Committee of the Fourth International. The changes he made to his manuscript were painstakingly reviewed and incorporated into the English version by the translator Frederick Choate.

Was There an Alternative? begins by addressing the political situation in the country in the lead-up to the conflicts of the mid-1920s. It addresses the formation of a single-party system, the attitude of the Bolsheviks towards privileges for those in positions of authority, and the ban on factions instituted under Lenin's leadership in 1921. Rogovin's goal is twofold. First, to create a vivid portrait of the political life of the Bolshevik Party prior to Stalin's rise to power, such that the reader grasps the chasm separating what was from what would come to be. Second, to demonstrate that in the final period of his life Lenin was preparing to openly combat Stalin and the tendencies that he represented.

Already in 1922 the twin processes of bureaucratization and socioeconomic differentiation were underway. Rogovin notes that in that year, for instance, almost half of the 10,700 senior officials placed by the Central Committee went through an appointment process effectively overseen by the office of the general secretary, a position which Stalin held. In August 1922, a party conference legalized a proposal by Stalin and his supporters to create a hierarchy of wages for party officials. It also authorized their receipt of special housing and medical services, as well as child care and educational opportunities for their children. By bringing forward this kind of historical detail, the author illuminates in a very concrete manner the transformation happening inside the Bolshevik Party and the top-down and anti-egalitarian processes to which oppositionists would begin objecting.

By early 1923, the conflict inside the Communist Party was well underway. At the end of the previous year, Lenin had begun dictating a series of letters, which would become known as his "Testament," protesting the nationalist and bureaucratic tendencies emerging within the Communist Party. He proposed reforms to party and state structures in order to arrest their development. Making a series of observations about the strengths and weaknesses of a number of leading Bolsheviks—Trotsky, Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, and others—he singled out Stalin for particular criticism, calling for his removal from the post of party general secretary and subjecting areas of work under his supervision to special criticism.

Throughout the book, Rogovin returns to the history and fate of the "Testament," demonstrating how Lenin's final words haunted Stalin, who had to work repeatedly to suppress and contain their fallout. He

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convincingly argues that Stalin was guilty of the "psychological murder" of Lenin, who suffered his final stroke shortly after having read a series of party conference resolutions that condemned Trotsky and the Opposition for "petty-bourgeois deviation."

The author also explores the possibility that Stalin was guilty of the poisoning of Lenin, a conclusion at which Trotsky would arrive. After having improved for many months, the Bolshevik leader's health quickly and inexplicably took a turn for the worse in mid-January 1924, at the moment when, as Rogovin notes, "the main danger for Stalin was not Trotsky … but Lenin." Stalin had both the motive and the means. At the very least, he was delighted by Lenin's departure from history. Stalin's secretary described the general secretary as follows at the time: He "is in a good mood and beaming. At meetings and sessions he puts on a tragically mournful, hypocritical face, makes insincere speeches, and swears with pathos to be true to Lenin. Looking at him, I cannot help but think: 'What a swine you are.'"

Lenin's death created significant new political challenges for Trotsky, as his opponents felt they had free rein to falsely portray themselves as Lenin's heirs and distort to their advantage pre-1917 differences between Lenin and Trotsky over the nature of the forthcoming Russian Revolution. Trotsky had long insisted, on the basis of his theory of permanent revolution, that the task facing the Russian working class was not just the overthrow of tsarism, but also the overturning of the capitalist order that had taken root in the country and to which the semi-feudal state was deeply tied as part of the global economy. Workers, allied to but standing at the helm of a massive peasant upsurge, would have to fight on the basis of an explicitly anti-feudal, anti-capitalist and socialist program. In contrast, Lenin had argued that the Russian working class and peasantry, united in a "democratic dictatorship" in opposition to the bourgeoisie, had to defeat tsarism and doggedly fight for their class interests, but would as of yet "not be able to touch (without a whole series of transitional stages of revolutionary development) the foundations of capitalism." In April 1917, Lenin abandoned this position and came over to that of Trotsky. In doing so, he waged a political struggle against forces within his own party—among them, Stalin, Kamenev and Zinoviev—who, in essence, clung to illusions in bourgeois rule. This political history underlay the conflicts of the 1920s.

Rogovin insists that by the time Lenin died in January 1924, Trotsky had already made a key error: in early 1923 he did not make his criticisms of party policy known outside the Politburo. In a chapter titled "Trotsky's Mistake," Rogovin argues the co-leader of the 1917 revolution lacked "resolve." Here, the author underestimates the complexities facing political leaders navigating an inner-party situation and historical conjuncture in which contradictory tendencies have emerged and the prospects for their future evolution are as of yet extremely unclear.

By the start of 1923, the "Georgian Incident," which Rogovin discusses in his book, had revealed sharp divisions within the party over Soviet nationalities policy and Great Russian chauvinism. There were disagreements over the dangers involved in the New Economic Policy, which Lenin had spearheaded as a necessary political concession. The 1921 ban on the creation of formal factions inside the party added another complex dimension to the situation. But there was also the prospect that a revolution in Germany would fundamentally transform the world situation, break the USSR out of its isolation, and give Soviet workers renewed revolutionary strength. It was also entirely possible that Lenin would recover, return to political life, and unleash the "bomb" against Stalin that, according to Lenin's private dictations, he was preparing for the 12th Party Congress. The situation was on a knife's edge.

Lenin's absence was used in 1923-1924 by Stalin and his allies, Zinoviev, and Kamenev—two old Bolsheviks with whom the General Secretary had formed an illegal "triumvirate"—to cement their authority. This faction, which was later transformed into a cabal of "Seven" whose members met secretly to work out their own agenda, used every trick in the book. But their maneuvers, demagogy, stacking the decks at party votes, and manufacture of the charge of "Trotskyism" failed to resolve the situation decisively in their favor. What becomes very clear from Rogovin's account is the fact that the machinations and secrecy of the Stalin faction were symptomatic of its underlying instability. Zinoviev, for instance, insisted that he and his co-conspirators had to meet behind closed doors—in particular, without Trotsky—so that they could "vacillate" among themselves. They could not confront his criticisms head on.

Rogovin details these criticisms, and those of other Left Oppositionists, throughout the book. Particularly with regards to domestic policies and the issue of inner-party democracy, his summary is penetrating. His use of primary source material is particularly effective, as we hear in Oppositionists' own words their ferocious objections. As he documents both the content and form of the unfolding political conflict, Rogovin draws out the connection between Trotsky's and the Left Opposition's criticisms and the major problem confronting the USSR—how a backward and by then politically isolated country, catapulted into the future by socialist revolution but with a small industrial base that had been decimated by war and a vast and primitive peasant economy, could mobilize resources, develop and hold out against the surrounding capitalist states. His account is both complex and lucid.

The volume examines how, having no real answer to the critique of Trotsky and the Left Opposition, and beset by crises provoked by its own policies, the Stalin faction responded with efforts to undermine Trotsky's authority, politically and organizationally. Rogovin's work is extremely valuable in terms of illuminating the methods used in this political skullduggery.

The cabal took control over Lenin's archive. It transferred people close to Trotsky out of leading positions in the Red Army. On the grounds of reviewing those party members who were not "workers from the bench," it carried out a purge of 5,763 members in a campaign "conducted with particular severity in those organizations which had passed resolutions favoring the Opposition." It maneuvered to ensure that at the 13th Party Congress in May 1924 no Oppositionists had deciding votes, and leading associates of Lenin—"even Trotsky, Radek, Rakovsky, and Piatakov, as members of the CC [Central Committee], were admitted to the congress merely with a consultative vote." It lied to the Soviet masses by printing false ballot counts so as to make it appear that there was little support for the Opposition more broadly in the party.

In discussing the central political problem facing the Stalin faction, Rogovin quotes French Communist Party leader Boris Souvarine, who, speaking quite bluntly in 1924, observed, "The great majority of the working class is Trotskyist." Despite all the attacks, Souvarine continued, "Trotsky's popularity continued to grow, as his lengthy speeches before diverse audiences sent his listeners into raptures. It was often said that only Trotsky offers new ideas, that only he has studied an issue seriously, etc. This attitude towards him was quite striking against the background of indifference, if not contempt, which greeted the banalities and trivialities that filled the pages of *Pravda*."

The quote from Souvarine is only one of many that readers will find in the volume that addresses the attitude of the broad masses towards Trotsky, and the receptivity within the party, as well as the Comintern, to his positions. Speaking of the impact in 1924 of the publication of *Lessons of October*, Trotsky's blistering critique of the failure of the Soviet Communist Party to correctly orient its German comrades as they faced an immediate revolutionary situation in their country in 1923, one communist wrote, "'The Lessons of October' have become a battle cry—the workers do not believe that Trotsky could oppose Leninism."

By mid-1926, Rogovin explains, more than half of those Bolsheviks who had been elected to the Central Committee of the party in 1918, 1919 and 1920 had joined the Opposition. Zinoviev and Kamenev, who had

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been Stalin's henchmen and leading architects of the assault on the Opposition, finally became so horrified over what they had wrought that they formed an alliance with Trotsky. The author's account of their criminal and tragic role fills the reader with foreboding; both Zinoviev and Kamenev would be tried and executed during the Great Terror. In 1927, after both broke with the Opposition and returned to the ruling faction, Zinoviev, referring to his past loyalty, asked Stalin, "Does Comrade Stalin know what gratitude is?" And Stalin replied, "It's an illness that afflicts dogs."

Was There an Alternative? notes how the nationalist and right-wing economic policies pursued under Stalin's leadership produced disaster over the course of 1926-1927. The British working class was sold out by Stalin, who chose cooperation with the British trade unions over any independent struggle for political power by the masses. In China, the Communist Party was butchered by the Kuomintang (KMT) after having been instructed by Moscow to forge an alliance with it. Neither agriculture nor industry had recovered to their pre-war levels, and the country's per capita national income stood at just 80 to 85 percent of that in 1913. The richest 4 percent of peasants controlled one-third of all agricultural machinery. The proletariat's wages had stagnated and millions were unemployed. A full-blown grain crisis ultimately developed, with the state unable to buy enough food to feed the cities. Within this context, the Opposition's program was finding a hearing. Meetings, by now unsanctioned, started taking place in Moscow and Leningrad. Thousands attended.

Precisely because Stalin and his backers had no solution to the economic problems facing the USSR or answers for their critics, they had to drive the Opposition into illegality. Over the course of 1926 and 1927, the party membership was flooded with new and inexperienced recruits. Meetings at which, in principle, party policy should have been discussed more broadly in the membership were held less frequently. The charge of "Trotskyism" intensified. Oppositionists' statements were edited for distribution in such a manner that their positions could not be fully known and votes for representatives to party bodies occurred before their platforms were distributed.

Trotsky and Kamenev were removed from the Politburo and Zinoviev as chair of the Comintern, and all three would shortly be expelled from the party. Charges of "disorganizing behavior" and "factionalism" were leveled against their supporters at party meetings. Anti-Semitism—Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev were all Jewish—was encouraged. At the 15th Party Congress in December 1927, crude and stupid interruptions from the audience drowned out the speeches of Oppositionists. We see here the destruction of the political culture of the Bolshevik Party.

Rogovin's account is extraordinary. The partisan reader will wish that he or she could descend into this history and stand on the side of the defiant. Rogovin himself clearly felt similarly, and one gets the sense that at moments when he argues that Trotsky made one or another mistake by not speaking out soon or sharply enough against his opponents, it is because Rogovin understood that the fate of the revolution depended on the outcome of this battle. Nothing was foreordained.

The circumstances of Rogovin's intellectual isolation imposed certain limits on his research—limits that he was overcoming, in collaboration with the International Committee of the Fourth International, when his life was tragically cut short by cancer. While there is valuable material in the volume on the impact of Stalinism on some sections of the Comintern, such as the Polish Communist Party, the work focuses on the situation inside the Soviet Union.

Rogovin's knowledge and understanding of the consequences of "socialism in one country" around the world and the battle with the Left Opposition outside the borders of the USSR was still developing. He had far less access to primary and secondary source materials on this subject. His discussion of international issues is brief and, particularly with regards to the political conflict over events in Germany in 1923, a bit confusing. When he delves into the question of Stalin's "socialism in one country" and the prospects for world revolution, his characterization of the global situation, particularly after World War II, is one-sided. He overestimates the stability achieved under American hegemony and the scale of the capitalist class's concessions and reforms. He incorrectly states that Trotsky believed socialist revolution in the US "in the foreseeable future was not realistic."

These limits notwithstanding, Rogovin's seven-volume cycle is unique in the historiography of the rise of Stalin and Stalinism. For this reason, it has been passed over in near-total silence by academics. His research stands in opposition to that of a long list of scholars, who, from one vantage point or another, have alternately argued that the Trotsky-Stalin conflict was little more than a tempest in a teapot, that Stalinism was a manifestation of deep-seated sentiments within the Soviet masses, or that the real alternative to Stalin was not Trotsky and the Left Opposition but the right wing of the party grouped around Nikolai Bukharin—or some combination of all three.

Stalin hagiography and Trotsky hatred intermingle in all of this. There are many differences among them, but the work of scholars like Sheila Fitzpatrick, J. Arch Getty, Stephen F. Cohen, Stephen Kotkin, Robert Service, Ian Thatcher and others, share one trait: the refusal to recognize Trotsky and the Left Opposition as the socialist alternative to Stalinism, the embodiment of the revolutionary strivings of the working class and a political force whose victory was an objective possibility.

Rogovin does not hide his political sympathies. He is forthright with his readers. His work achieves historical objectivity not by assuming a false pretense of indifference to the events under his review, but by revealing the social and class forces underlying the political conflicts raging within the Communist Party in the 1920s. The brutality of Stalinism was driven by the intensity and ferocity of the nationalist bureaucratic reaction to the working class and its revolutionary aspirations, its fight for human equality. Trotsky and the Left Opposition represented this class and its sentiments. For all the victims chewed up by the bureaucratic machine, they were always the main object of Stalinism's repressions. Rogovin is the only historian who has thoroughly understood this.

The dominant trends of Russian and Soviet historiography of the past 40 years emerged in an epoch of political reaction. Rogovin wrote this work as the Communist Party was in the process of dissolving the USSR and stealing everything that was and was not nailed down. Grotesque celebrations of the alleged virtues of inequality as a new form of "social justice" filled the press, many penned by fellow Soviet intellectuals who anticipated they themselves would get more. Rogovin's concentration on inequality and bureaucracy in the conflicts of the 1920s was as much an insight into the late Soviet present as it was the early Soviet past.

In his Introduction, the author argues that "incorrect notions of true facts"—"the tendentious over-emphasis and interpretation of certain historical facts and the suppression of others"—are not "so much the result of sincere error, as much as the conscious or unconscious fulfillment of political demands." Historical falsification, he insists, is "an ideological weapon to deceive people in order to carry out reactionary policies." Thus, the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union by the Stalinists, with all the social destruction it wrought, demanded new lies and new distortions about the socialist opposition, about the differences between the revolution's progenitors and its butchers.

Today, as social inequality reaches heights never before witnessed, new falsifications are appearing. In the United States, American history is being subjected to a racialist reinterpretation that denies class as the fundamental dividing line in society and rejects that there was anything progressive about the American Revolution and the Civil War. In Germany, the crimes of Hitler and the Nazis are being whitewashed, as far-right politics surge forward. In the Philippines, it is the crimes of

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Stalinism that are whitewashed to benefit a political elite yoked to American imperialism. One could go on.

Political reaction cannot tolerate truth. The telling of lies about history is never an innocent mistake. *Was There An Alternative?* is not just a powerful recounting of the history of the struggle for socialism, it is a warning to the working class about the political intent of those who peddle historical lies and their consequences.

The book can be ordered here from Mehring Books.

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