Alexei Yarotsky's remarkable memoir about the early Soviet Union and the Stalinist terror: Part One

"Facing the Past"

Clara Weiss
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[Part One] [Part Two]

Alexei Yarotsky: *Litsom k proshlomu [Facing the Past]*, Moscow 2018.

Alexei Yarotsky: *Zolotaya Kolyma. Vospominaniia A. S. Yarotskogo o Kolyme v literaturnom kontektse [Golden Kolyma. The memoirs of A. S. Yarotsky about the Kolyma in their literary context]*, St. Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriia, 2021.

The old saying "habeant sua fata libelli"—books have their own fate—applies to the memoirs of Alexei Yarotsky. Yarotsky was a Soviet engineer who in the 1970s wrote his two-volume memoirs about his experience of the October Revolution, the Civil War and the Great Terror. The volumes were only published recently, in 2018 and 2021, respectively. Under conditions of the NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, which has been accompanied by an extraordinary onslaught of propaganda and historical falsification, these memoirs, remarkable under any circumstances, acquire additional significance.

One of the legacies of Stalinism and the Great Terror is that very few memoirs, and even fewer memoirs by ordinary people, exist of arguably the greatest social upheavals of the 20th century—the October Revolution and the ensuing Civil War. Yarotsky's memoirs are a rare exception. Having witnessed the October seizure of power by the working class in Petrograd and the subsequent Civil War in Ukraine, he was targeted in the Great Terror of the 1930s and spent many years of his life in a labor camp in Siberia.

Despite his own horrific experiences, Yarotsky wrote his memoirs as a socialist opponent of Stalinism who remained dedicated to the ideals of the October revolution. He also understood that his experiences were those of millions, and that it had fallen to the few conscious survivors of the terror like himself to preserve the historical memory about both these historic events and the Old Bolshevik leaders of the revolution, whom he had first known as rulers of the country and then as prisoners of the Stalinist labor camps.

The first part of his memoirs was published in 2018, under the title *Facing the past* (Litsom k proshlomu), by Tatiana Isaeva, the granddaughter of the Trotskyist literary critic Alexander Voronsky, and covers the period of 1917 through 1930.

Alexei Yarotsky was born in 1908 to a relatively well-off family of the Russian democratic intelligentsia in St. Petersburg. As a young boy, he experienced the February Revolution of 1917, including the famous demonstration on the Field of Mars for the martyrs of the revolution, and the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in October (November 7 by the contemporary calendar) that year.

Like many familes from the intelligentsia, Yarotsky's family was proletarianized in the course of the revolutionary upheaval. They moved to Ukraine shortly after the 1917 revolution, and they remained there for the entirety of the civil war. Here, the young Yarotsky witnessed the violent eruption of anti-Semitism during the Civil War, when up to 200,000 Ukrainian Jews were murdered, most of them by the Whites and various nationalist formations. He also witnessed how, for years, political power went back and forth between the Red Army, the White Army and the German occupation, and he witnessed as well the peasant uprisings under the leadership of the anarchist Nestor Makhno.

No territory was as bitterly fought over in the civil war as Ukraine, both because of its geostrategic significance and its complex socio-economic make-up. While the Donbass in the East of what is now Ukraine held the most important coal reserves of the former Russian Empire and was home to a large industrial working class, these workers were mostly ethnically Russian. The overwhelming majority of the Ukrainian-speaking population, by contrast, lived in the countryside and toiled as peasants.

The fight by the Bolsheviks to win the allegiance of the Ukrainian masses thus entailed both a correct political line on the question of nationalities—including a recognition of their long-suppressed national strivings—and the granting of land to the peasants. Most parts of Ukraine changed their rulers many times during the civil war—from the Reds to the Whites back to the Reds—with anarchist uprisings also playing a disproportionate role in the civil war in this area.

As Yarotsky's memoirs show movingly, however, the victory of the Red Army over the Whites and Ukrainian nationalists was achieved not only due to the nationality policy of the Bolsheviks and their granting of land to the peasants. A major factor in determining the outcome of the revolutionary war was the outbreak of revolution in Germany in November 1918. Up until then, German troops had been stationed in Ukraine, where they backed the dictatorship of the Hetman Pavlo Skoropadskyi as a counterweight to Bolshevism and the Red Army. The town that Yarotsky's family lived in was also under German control, and the family was forced to house a German soldier. Yarotsky recalls the enormous impact of the news that soldiers and workers in Germany had formed councils, and that the Kaiser had fled. Rejecting the nationalist account of the civil war that was promoted by the Soviet bureaucracy by the 1970s, he writes,

> "It is fashionable here [in the Soviet Union of the 1970s] to write how, under the blows of the Red Army, the German occupiers fled the Ukraine. But I saw something quite different. …[upon hearing of the revolution in Germany] a miracle happened, the voiceless, mute ranks [of German soldiers] suddenly began to speak,

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something broke under the steel helmets, noise and chatter went through the ranks. They read a telegram about the Kaiser's abdication, about the armistice and the revolution in Germany.

In three or four days the German army broke up, a soldiers' council was created in the city, red bows appeared on the north-green uniforms, a rifle was already hanging on the shoulder with the butt up. The Germans were leaving. Herr Otto said to my mother:

— Frau Yarotskaya, we will do the same at home now, that is a revolution.

This was a tremendous victory for the ideas of the October Revolution: the Germans were leaving not as enemies, but as people ready for the revolutionary struggle."

These observations show not only the immense impact of events in Germany on the development of the Russian revolution; they also powerfully demonstrate that the perspective of world socialist revolution was not a mere slogan, but a viable political program that wielded immense influence and was a pole of attraction for the masses, from Soviet Russia and Ukraine to Germany.

Yarotsky is full of admiration for the "Leninist people's commissars [Leninskie narkomy]" of that period. In Ukraine, these included Christian Rakovsky, one of Leon Trotsky's closest friends and allies, and several other future leaders of the Left Opposition. He joined the Communist youth organization, the Komsomol, and moved to Leningrad to study political economy and become an engineer.

His peers at the Polytechnical Institute, one of the Soviet Union's best economics institutions, were mostly veterans of the civil war who were much older and more politically experienced than him. Among them were many future outstanding economists, almost all of whom were later murdered in the Great Terror.

Yarotsky financed his study with the help of his older brother, then already a party member, as well as by working at a factory during the summer. He also experienced the immense social power of the working class. A major demonstration in the wake of the murder of the Old Bolshevik revolutionary Petr Voikov on June 7, 1927, by a White emigré in Warsaw, made a particularly deep impression on him:

At four o'clock in the afternoon the horns of all the factories in St. Petersburg and all the steam locomotives at all the stations blew, the gates opened, and immediately the entire working class of the Vyborg side came out to the demonstration. Blocking the entire width of the former Samsonovskii Prospekt, they went to the Finland Station, where a monument to Lenin now stands...

I understood what this was, what power it [the working class] had and how unanimous these people were. (229-230)

Following the defeat of the Chinese revolution of 1925-27—a result of the opportunist policies of the Stalinized Communist International—the Stalinist faction expelled the leaders of the Left Opposition from the party in December 1927. Under the leadership of Leon Trotsky, the opposition had fought — and continued to fight after 1927—against the nationalist and bureaucratic degeneration of the Bolshevik party. In one of the most striking passages in the book, Yarotsky acknowledges that for him, at the time, the ferocious political battles within the party were almost incomprehensible. Recalling his time as a student, he writes:

I came into a period of heated discussions, mostly with the Trotskyists at the time, but I had not yet reached that level of political development, I just didn't understand what they were arguing about. Now, I understand what they were arguing about, but then I did not. This entire aspect of life at the time passed me by, I was simply too young, and yet today it is clear that the debates at the time were to determine the entire course of our country for many decades to come. (p. 220)

His experience was no doubt shared by many workers and youth: In fact, one of the biggest crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy was that it systematically suppressed the publication and circulation of documents by the opposition, as well as the articles Lenin had authored in his final struggle against the nascent bureaucracy and Stalin. As the Soviet historian Vadim Rogovin has shown, the increasingly bureaucratic regime made democratic discussion in the party all but impossible, creating immense confusion and anxiety even among the most advanced and dedicated members of the party within the working class and youth. While a ferocious campaign was waged in the pages of the Soviet press against Trotsky and the opposition as a whole, workers ran the risk of being expelled from the party if they were found reading any of the opposition's documents.

Yarotsky graduated in 1930, in the middle of the drive for forced collectivization and the rapid industrialization of the first-five year plan. Like many of his generation, he was full of enthusiasm for the revolutionary advances in industrialization and determined to do whatever he could to help build the Soviet economy. However, the impact of collectivization and the emerging Stalin cult quickly disillusioned him politically.

His older brother had volunteered for one of the many battalions of youth that were sent into the countryside to enforce the collectivization of peasant households. These youth, idealistic communists who were convinced that they were fighting for the good of both the workers and peasants, were confronted with the horrifying reality created by the policy of forced collectivization.

Based on the program of building "socialism in one country," and faced with enormous social pressures from wealthier layers of the peasantry that had prospered in the 1920s under the New Economic Policy, the Stalinist leadership made a sharp U-turn in 1928. It proclaimed the need for both a rapid industrialization of Soviet society and the mass collectivization of the tens of millions of private plots that peasants owned. Trotsky's warnings that such policies, in the absence of a sufficiently high level of technological development of both agriculture and industry, could only lead to disaster, were quickly and tragically confirmed. The policy of forced collectivization plunged tens of millions of peasants into utter starvation, with the death toll estimated in the millions, and brought the Soviet countryside to the brink of civil war.

Yarotsky, who was told by his brother about the latter's experiences in the countryside, became deeply disturbed by the brutality involved in collectivization and especially the mass death of children from hunger. He was also appalled by the Stalinization of public life and the Stalin cult.

Having spent four years of studying Marx, Plekhanov and Lenin, it was difficult to get used to the extremely simplified formulas: what is the nation, first, second, third. It was completely clear, you only had to remember it. But once you started thinking, nothing of this brilliant formula [by Stalin] remained. (p. 271).

Although he had been an enthusiastic member of the Komsomol throughout the 1920s, when Yarotsky was now invited to join the party,

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he decided against it, because he felt that he could not “honestly” join the party any more. This decision had far-reaching consequences. He was quickly expelled from the Komsomol and denounced as a “class enemy,” a dangerous designation.

In the midst of the beginning of a purge of economists and broader layers of the intelligentsia in the early 1930s, Yarotsky decided to leave Leningrad. Now married to Maria, the daughter of a railroad worker, he moved to Moscow, where he found a job as an engineer with the People’s Commissariat of Transportation. It is also here that he would experience the Great Terror of the 1930s, the subject of the second volume of his memoirs.

To be continued

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