Alexei Yarotsky's remarkable memoirs of the early Soviet Union and the Stalinist terror: Part Two, "Golden Kolyma"

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[Part One] [Part Two]

The second volume of Yarotsky's memoirs, "Golden Kolyma" (Zolotaya Kolyma), covers his experiences in Kolyma, a region in northern Siberia, which arguably had the worst of all Stalinist labor camps. Dozens of prison camps were arrayed along the Kolyma River. Prisoners labored in gold mines and cut timber, often under freezing temperatures, with insufficient clothing or nutrition. Prisoners perished by the thousands.

As a young engineer at the Transport Ministry (NKPS), Yarotsky became the victim of the 1935 campaign against engineers at this ministry. The head of the ministry, Kaganovich, whom Yarotsky had admired for his efficiency and competence, was in charge of putting together the ludicrous case against his workers. This came just months after the assassination of Kirov on December 1, 1934, which became the pretext for Stalin's launching of the Great Terror.

The basis for Yarotsky's arrest gives a sense of the atmosphere at the time: together with other engineers, Yarotsky had co-written an article calling for greater investment in repair works of the Soviet railroad. They had calculated that the capital of the railroad was being used up far more rapidly than anticipated, and that investing in repairs had become a matter of urgency by the end of the second five-year plan. In particular, they noted that trains were being damaged through excessive use. Dozens of highly qualified engineers were arrested based on this article, and virtually all of them were either killed or disappeared in the camps for decades.

In the following months and years, the NKPS, which was of strategic significance to the Soviet Union's efforts to develop an advanced economy, became, after the Red Army, the Soviet institution with the single highest number of victims during the Great Terror.

Yarotsky was arrested on November 10, 1935 and imprisoned as a "counter-revolutionary" at the Butyrki prison in Moscow, which was by then already filled with former and active oppositionists who had been arrested en masse after Kirov's assassination. In April 1936, Yarotsky was deported to Kolyma in Siberia.

Here, he and thousands of other prisoners were deployed to mine the region's gold deposits. He went through the horrific experiences of hunger, forced hard labor under extreme weather conditions, and the constant terrorization and degradation of the political prisoners by the real criminals, murderers and rapists who were allowed by the bureaucracy to de facto run the camps.

He describes the different stages of the targeted suppression and execution of the Old Bolsheviks and the socialist opponents of Stalinism, the Left Opposition.

Upon his arrival in the Kolyma, he witnessed a protest by Trotskyist oppositionists.

> In the first days of June [1936] some five thousand prisoners were to be brought to the Kolyma with another ship. The group [etap] came out of the camp in columns of four and was moving toward the Zolotoi rog bay, where they had to board the ship. When the column passed the city center, a large group of Leninists, about 200 of them, began singing the Varshavianka [a famous Polish-Russian revolutionary song]. The guards shot in the air, and forced the column to sit down, but even while sitting they continued to sing 'The enemy whirlwinds are flying over our heads, Dark forces are oppressing us…', and then, 'You have fallen as victims in the fateful struggle'. You can imagine what impression the lyrics of this great revolutionary song made; they were so apt for the current moment: 'You have given all you can for it [the struggle]…— 'and you walked, shackles rattling'. They wanted to show to the people that it was the revolutionaries who were being sent to Kolyma, those who made the revolution, and who did not fear to die for the people and for the just cause. (pp. 153-154)

Yarotsky was keenly aware that what was involved in the Great Terror was the destruction and silencing of the entire tradition and party of revolution:

> The Leninist party was a union of co-thinkers, the Stalinist party is an apparatus for the realization of the will of the leader. By this time, it had been become necessary to replace the entire party, Soviet, military and economic apparatus with other people. Those who had been accustomed to thinking, arguing and expressing their thoughts at Party Congresses, and to defend their views, were not only no longer needed, they had become harmful and had to be destroyed. (p. 357)

The year 1937 was the high point of the terror. Beyond those who were arrested, tried without due process and shot in Moscow and other cities, this year and the following year, 1938, saw mass executions of political prisoners—many of them Old Bolsheviks or Left Oppositionists—in the camps.

Foreigners now also became a special target of the terror. Yarotsky recalls that he shared his cell (he was briefly sent back to prison in 1937/1938 and then again back to Kolyma) with a pilot, Yavno, a Polish Jew by origin who had fled to the Soviet Union in the early 1920s and was trained as a pilot by the Red Army.

> He was arrested as a defector. There was a directive at the time: send everyone to the camps who comes from abroad… They also took foreign communists, and unemployed people who had fled from the Great Depression of the early 1930s, people who believed that the USSR was the fatherland of all working people. All of this was done in the name of the party that was created by Lenin under the banner of the internationalism and brotherhood of all peoples. If Stalin could, he would have even arrested John Reed as a defector. If you think about the destruction of the Polish and German communist parties before the war, which was achieved not by the fascists, but by Stalin, you cannot help but wonder whether it would have been possible to do more to discredit the ideas of the October Revolution than was done. (p. 271)

What clearly troubled Yarotsky the most, however, was the fate of the Old Bolsheviks whom he had admired so much in his youth. Toward the end of his memoirs, he raises the question:

> Why did these people die such a pathetic death, why were protests that no one heard of, and hunger strikes that no one learned about, the most extreme measure they ever took? . … The overwhelming majority, and above all former party members, were people who in fascist camps would have immediately organized an underground movement of resistance, and if they had died, they would have died as revolutionaries. How then can you explain such a pathetic death …?
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> It was the ultimate, final point of a path which began with the fear of arrests, the public denunciation of friends from yesterday, beatings during the interrogation, base and false testimonies against oneself and against comrades, the effort to show there, already after having crossed the horrible line to the other side of Soviet life, to show that I'm still in control of myself, that I am imprisoned because of a misunderstanding, and this was their attitude until the last cry and the last beating.
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> There were exceptions, there were people who understood the course of history and were meeting their end with their head held high, but even they were not able to cross the line and go over to an armed uprising against a government that they still considered theirs. (pp. 315-317)

While Yarotsky's observation is very thoughtful, it falls short of a genuine explanation.

The fact that no effective resistance was leveled against the terror of the bureaucracy was, above all, bound up with the development of the world revolution. It was this delay of the revolution, combined with the backward development of Russia's predominantly agricultural economy, that led, in the early years of the revolution, to the emergence of the bureaucracy. The program of "socialism in one country," which stood in direct opposition to the foundations of the 1917 revolution, provided the platform for the defense of the interests of the bureaucracy.

The defeats of the revolution in Germany, England, China, and then Spain in the 1920s and 1930s were to a significant extent produced by the opportunist and nationalist policies of the Stalinized leadership of the Communist International.

The resulting demoralization not only of the international but also of the Soviet proletariat was a major factor in all the developments in the Soviet Union of the 1930s. Trotsky noted at the time that a resurgence of the class struggle internationally would have had a powerful impact on the consciousness of the Soviet masses. The prospect of the victory of the revolution in Germany or another country would have broken the sense of isolation and encirclement and it would have emboldened the Soviet working class to wage a struggle against the hated Soviet bureaucracy.

Indeed, while made possible by the temporary triumph of capitalist reaction, the Great Terror was, ultimately, rooted in the profound weakness of the Soviet bureaucracy. It found itself constantly threatened by the Soviet working class, the potential extension of the revolution, and the revolutionary traditions of 1917.

This also explains why Yarotsky was among those who were targeted in the terror. While not a leading Bolshevik, not a Trotskyist or even a member of the Communist Party, Yarotsky was part of a generation that had gone through the experience of the revolution. The traditions of Bolshevism and Marxism had left a profound imprint on this layer.

The primary target of the terror was the Trotskyist-socialist vanguard of the opposition to Stalinism. They were, with very few exceptions, murdered. It was, as Soviet historian Vadim Rogovin aptly called it, "a political genocide." But this process of political counter-revolution and annihilation meant not only that the Trotskyists and thousands of socialists from the Soviet Union and abroad had to be murdered. Everyone who had borne witness to the revolutionary culture and traditions that had given rise to the 1917 revolution and Trotsky's Left Opposition had to be killed and silenced. The terror, as Varlam Shalamov, put it, targeted all those who had remembered "the wrong part of Russian History."

Yarotsky's memoirs are a powerful demonstration of the fact that, despite this ferocious Stalinist reaction against the 1917 revolution, the influence of the October Revolution and the struggle of the Left Opposition on the Soviet working class and intelligentsia, however distorted and poorly understood, remained immense and profound. The historical consciousness of these monumental struggles, though severely damaged, could not be entirely wiped out by Stalinism. This is clearly shown by the circumstances under which Yarotsky came to write his memoirs, in the last two decades of the Soviet Union.

In the late 1940s in Kolyma, Yarotsky met with a series of figures who were connected to the leading literary critic of the Left Opposition, Alexander Voronsky. These included Varlam Shalamov, who is now widely recognized as one of Russia's greatest writers. In 1926-27, Shalamov, though not a party member, was a supporter of the Left Opposition, and was arrested for handing out leaflets of the Opposition. Shalamov's literary conceptions had been influenced strongly by Voronsky and he later described his *Tales of Kolyma* a "slap in the face of Stalinism."

Yarotsky also met Voronsky's daughter, Galina Voronskaya, and her husband, Ivan Isaev, in Kolyma. All of them would remain friends in the coming decades, maintain correspondence and write their memoirs about their experiences.

As the literary scholar Nina Malygina notes in her introduction to Yarotsky's memoirs, a significant role model for all of them was Voronsky's semi-fictionalized autobiography *Za zhivoi i mertvoi vodoi*, which Galina Voronskaya was able to publish in the Soviet Union in the 1970s. Written in the 1920s, the book inspired young Left Oppositionists at the time and acquainted them not only with the history of the Bolshevik Party but also with the methods of conspiratorial work that, previously employed under Tsarism, had again become a matter of necessity for the revolutionary tendency under Stalinism.

Yarotsky wrote his memoirs from 1967 through the 1970s, at a time when the Brezhnev regime had rehabilitated Stalin. Significant sections of the intelligentsia, above all those known as the "dissidents," moved sharply to the right during this period, after the Warsaw Pact invasion and crushing of the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia in 1968. Many now completely dissociated themselves from socialism and the heritage of the October Revolution.

Yarotsky's memoirs are further evidence that, while the increasingly

anti-Communist sections of the dissident movement dominated the perceptions of intellectual currents in the Soviet Union, genuinely left-wing tendencies continued to exist, but were driven underground and repressed with the greatest ferocity by the bureaucracy. They were often unable to publish their works and memoirs until just before or even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Yarotsky himself was rehabilitated in September 1956, but met the limited revelations of Stalin's crimes by Nikita Khrushchev in his "secret speech" in February 1956 with great skepticism. Like many workers and socialist intellectuals during the Thaw, Yarotsky felt that a "return to the real Lenin" was needed, but, cut off from the Fourth International that Trotsky had founded in 1938, he did not understand how that could be accomplished. In a letter to Shalamov from December 1961, he wrote

> I'm not convinced that the cult of personality will not be limited to the transfer of ashes and the removal of Kaganovich and a few others. If they would reconstruct the state as [Vladimir] Ilyich [Lenin] called for in his "State and Revolution," then I would say that the cult of personality has been eliminated." (quoted pp. 38-39)

At the end of his memoirs, he noted,

> As all aspects of Khrushchev's policies in this question [the revelation of the crimes of Stalinism], everything was half-baked, contradictory, there were half-truths, without conclusions and generalizations. Khrushchev did not even publish his report to the XXth Congress, he subverted the idol of Stalinism but immediately erected his own. He did nothing to change the foundations of society, and limited himself to very superficial reforms, before he fell victim of a palace intrigue that would have been unthinkable in a democratic country. (p. 359)

These comments are a remarkable testimony to the fact that a left-wing opposition to the Stalinist bureaucracy *did* exist in the post-war Soviet Union, although it remained without program and without organization. Indeed, it is the great tragedy of Yarotsky and his generation that despite their firm commitment to the October Revolution and their hatred of Stalinism, they remained cut off from the program of Trotskyism and the Fourth International.

This historical crime was a result not just of Stalinism but also of Pabloite revisionism, a tendency that had emerged within the Fourth International. Rejecting Trotsky's analysis of the counter-revolutionary role of Stalinism, the Pabloites worked to promote illusions in a supposedly "left" wing of the bureaucracy—including Khrushchev—and to liquidate Trotskyism into it. This orientation aided the efforts of Stalinism in cutting off the cadre of the Fourth International from figures like Yarotsky and many others in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union who were clearly seeking a socialist basis upon which to defend October and fight the bureaucracy.

This enforced isolation of socialists in the USSR was only broken in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Having expelled the Pabloites from the Fourth International in the split with the WRP in 1985-86, the International Committee of the Fourth International was able to directly intervene in the crisis of Stalinism. Its leaders travelled to the Soviet Union and established direct contact with youth and workers. Most important among these relationships was that between the ICFI and Vadim Rogovin, who had worked for many years, in isolation, on establishing the historical record of the struggle of the Left Opposition against Stalinism, and was now able to write a seven-volume history of that struggle.

By then, unfortunately, Yarotsky—who died in 1983—was no longer alive. Well aware that his memoirs would not see the light of day in the Soviet Union while he was alive, he nevertheless refused to have them published in the West, fearing that they would be abused by anti-Communists. However, he remained convinced that eventually they would find their audience in Russia, even if it would take many years.

He was not mistaken. The publication of his memoirs in Russia many decades later is an indication that, despite the monumental crimes of Stalinism, leading to the restoration of capitalism and all the resulting confusion, there is significant and serious interest within broad layers of the population in the great historical questions of the 20th century.

Voronsky's granddaughter, Tatiana Isaeva—who has worked for many years to recover his manuscripts and first published them on her own—as well as Nina Malygina, deserve great credit for the service that they have done for workers, intellectuals and young people in Russia but internationally. The 2021 edition of the second volume of Yarotsky's memoirs is beautifully edited, and includes careful footnotes as well as an introduction by Malygina that places the work in its broader literary and historical context.

Under conditions of the NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, and a relentless, reactionary and ignorant vilification of the Russian people, Russian history and Russian culture, the translation of Yarotsky's memoirs for a wider international audience is an urgent question. They can play a significant role in re-connecting new generations of socialists with the great historical traditions of the socialist movement and intelligentsia in Russia, as they fight for the completion of the world socialist revolution in the 21st century.