In memory of Zorya Serebryakova (1923-2024), daughter of Old Bolshevik and Opposition leader Leonid Serebryakov

Clara Weiss
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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently learned that Zorya Serebryakova, daughter of the leading Bolshevik and Left Oppositionist Leonid Serebryakov, passed away at age of 101 on October 26, 2024. Despite the passage of time since her death, her extraordinary life and fate warrant a tribute.

Zorya was born in 1923 to Galina Serebryakova and Leonid Serebryakov, an Old Bolshevik worker who had joined the party at the age of 14 in 1905.

The year of her birth was a fateful one in the political history of the 20th century: Amidst the defeat of the German revolution, a nascent struggle in the Bolshevik Party leadership emerged into the open with the issuing of the Declaration of the 46 on October 15. Both her father, who was one of the party's secretaries during the civil war, and her maternal grandfather, Iosif Byk, a trained physicist from Ukraine and a leader of the Red Army during the civil war, were signatories of that declaration. Byk's wife, Zorya's grandmother, was Bronislava Sigizmundovna Krasutskaya, a talented Polish pianist, who also joined the revolutionary movement at a young age.

Zorya grew up in one of the many remarkable revolutionary families of the Bolshevik and Oppositionist milieu. Her parents were friends with both Lenin and Leon Trotsky whom she recalled very fondly. In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*, Zorya later recalled,

> I remember many old Bolsheviks and Left Oppositionists coming to our house: Voronsky, one of my father's best friends, was there; Preobrazhensky, who was also a close friend of my father; Trotsky, obviously, and many others. He was also good friends with Bukharin until Bukharin started to support Stalin. The Old Bolsheviks did form a close circle, after all. Everyone knew each other very well. My father admired Trotsky enormously, and I was raised with great love and respect for Lev Davidovich [Trotsky]. I was, in fact, introduced to him as a child. I was very little, but I have very intense and good memories of him. Many, of course, say that he was cold. But in his relations with my family, he was a man of extraordinary warmth. He took a keen interest in everyone in our family, even in very personal matters like the divorce of my parents (Trotsky was against it and tried to convince my mother not to leave my father).

After the divorce of her parents, Zorya lived with her father. As she later recalled in an interview, "I adored him. He was everything to me, a mother, a father, everything."

Her mother married Grigory Sokolnikov, who became a member of the Joint Opposition when Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev entered a bloc with Leon Trotsky against the Stalinist leadership in 1926. It was only after the expulsion of the Opposition from the party at the 15th Party Congress in December 1927 and the capitulation of first Sokolnikov and then her father, that she began to live with her mother's new family. Now the Soviet ambassador in London, Sokolnikov and Galina Serebryakova lived, as Zorya later described it, in "a palace." She was desperate to return to Moscow and rejoin her father.

Zorya took great pride in the revolutionary history of her family and often recalled that Lenin had called her father a "brilliant worker." She was also proud of the fact that Trotsky expressed his respect for Serebryakov on several occasions, despite his subsequent capitulation and always emphasized that Serebryakov not once said a bad word, in writing or orally, about Trotsky. Thus, Trotsky wrote in 1937,

> From 1923 to the end of 1927, he, along with I. N. Smirnov, who was shot in the case of the sixteen, occupied a prominent place in the leadership of the Left Opposition. In facilitating the rapprochement with the Zinoviev group (the Opposition of 1926), and in mitigating internal friction within the Oppositionist bloc, Serebryakov unquestionably played the principal role. … Serebryakov capitulated to the rulers [in 1929]—to be sure, in a more dignified manner, but no less decisively, than the rest. (*Writings of Leon Trotsky 1936-37*, (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1978, p. 119)

Upon his capitulation, Serebryakov, like many former Oppositionists, was reinstated into the party and began working to implement the drive to rapidly industrialize the Soviet Union. Zorya described his views as follows, "My father left the Opposition because he felt that the struggle was futile and that he could still contribute something in concrete work. From 1931, he was the head of the automobile transportation [division] and he took his work extremely seriously."

In August 1936, Serebryakov was again expelled from the party and arrested. That month, the first Moscow Show Trial ended in the conviction and murder of Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev and other leaders of the October Revolution for alleged "counterrevolutionary sabotage." The alleged mastermind behind their "conspiracy" was Leon Trotsky. Serebryakov, as well as Sokolnikov, were accused of the same crimes and became defendants in the Second Moscow Show Trial, held in January 1937. As Zinoviev and Kamenev before them, they admitted, under duress, to crimes they had never committed or even fathomed, and were shot. Zorya was convinced that threats against her life played a central

role in the NKVD's systematic attempts to torture and break her father.

Aged just 13, she herself was interrogated for three full weeks at the NKVD's Lubyanka prison. The entire city was gripped by terror. To quote her interview with the WSWS again,

> We were all waiting for the NKVD to pick us up. We were staying awake at night, listening to the vans running in the courtyard. It was dreadful. No one in the house knew who would be next, everyone was waiting in horror. They came up the stairs slowly, acting as if they didn't yet know whom they were going to pick up. If they knocked at the door of a neighbor, we were relieved, since it meant at least one more day of reprieve for us. One woman in our house, whose bedroom bordered the elevator, came down with a nerve disease because she would always hear the elevator going up, fearing that she was the next to be taken away. In the end, she wasn't arrested but the nerve disorder stayed with her. Seven people from my family were killed by Stalin. My father's mother was exiled in 1937 when she was 76 and died in exile in the 1940s. His sister, too, died in exile. His brother, a Bolshevik, spent eight years in the camps.

Zorya's maternal grandfather, Iosif Byk, an impressive figure and outstanding revolutionary, had already been shot in October 1936.

Old friends of the family were murdered left and right. In the case of the family of Lev Kamenev, as Zorya often recalled with horror, even the sons who were above 15 were taken away and killed. Zorya's family, decimated by the terror, was overtaken by "terrible despair." Both her mother and her grandmother, who were each longstanding revolutionaries in their own right, were contemplating suicide. Her mother was hospitalized several times because of her severe psychological distress. They were eventually both exiled to Semipalatinsk in Siberia.

Zorya soon joined them and became a midwife. In the spring of 1941, she was allowed to return to Moscow. Yet soon thereafter, on June 22, the Nazis attacked the Soviet Union, and she returned to Semipalatinsk where she began working as a nurse. Her first husband, Ilya Ivanovich Perevezentsev, was killed fighting to defend the Soviet Union against the Nazi invasion in the spring of 1944. Throughout the first year of the war, Zorya not only worked but also tried to make up for the several years of school that she had missed at the height of the terror. She was admitted to the local pedagogical institute where she studied history.

The first years after the war were a period of a relative relaxation of state repression. Zorya was allowed to transfer to the prestigious Moscow State University and graduated from its history department in 1947. Nevertheless, as a "daughter of the enemy of the people," she was not allowed to teach history at institutions of higher education and instead had to teach in high schools in Semipalatinsk. Here, she met her second husband, Genrikh Solomonovich Tsveig, a native of Cracow, Poland, who had fled the Nazis with his family in 1939 and survived the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. Their son, Viktor, who would go on to become a noted biochemist, was born in 1948. That year, a new wave of terror began. This time, it had an overtly antisemitic component, with many prominent Yiddish writers and Jewish intellectuals arrested and, in several cases, executed. In many cases, however, the targets were people who had, in one way or another, survived the Great Terror of the 1930s, despite their personal or political connections to leaders of the revolution and the Left Opposition.

In 1949, Zorya's husband was arrested for having established a relationship with the daughter of an "enemy of the people." He was sentenced to 25 years in the camps. Her mother too was re-arrested and sentenced to another 10 years in the camps.

In June 1950, Zorya too was arrested and her son put in an orphanage. In an interview with the Museum of the History of the Gulag, Zorya described how the NKVD stole the last picture of her father that she had kept and treated it as an "essential piece of evidence" in her case. However, she refused to admit to any "counterrevolutionary" activities—the feared 58th article of the criminal code—and was eventually sentenced to 10 years in exile in the Jambyl region in what is now Kazakhstan for being a "socially dangerous element." She rejoiced upon hearing the verdict because, unlike a prison or camp sentence, the sentence, severe though it was, meant that she could be rejoined with her son from whom she had been separated for almost a year.

The almost two decades of continuous repression, repeated arrests and exiles, only ended when Stalin died in March 1953. In 1955, she was able to return to Moscow with her son. In 1956, she was rehabilitated. After the "Secret Speech" of Nikita Khrushchev at the 20th Party Congress, in which the head of the Soviet party—and one of Stalin's henchmen during the terror—admitted to some of Stalin's most egregious crimes, the first large wave of rehabilitations began. Among those now rehabilitated were her mother and husband, who were now also able to return to Moscow. In 1964, based on newly available archival materials, Zorya completed her dissertation on the emergence of the Soviets in the Russian Revolution. However, that year, Khrushchev was toppled, and she was not able to defend her thesis. This would only become possible over two decades later, in 1988.

Her mother, Galina Serebryakova, who had spent two decades behind prison bars, in exile and in camps, once again became a famed writer. She completed a three-volume biography of Karl Marx which was widely sold and was friends with the family of Khrushchev. In an indication of the prevailing climate, however, she never told her daughter that she, too, had supported the Opposition and signed the 1927 Joint Platform of the Left Opposition.

In the late 1980s, as the Soviet bureaucracy moved to restore capitalism under Mikhail Gorbachev, it began making available archival materials that revealed, to an extent hitherto unfathomable, the scale of the crimes of Stalinism during the terror. Many victims were only now rehabilitated, among them Zorya's father. Zorya was also given back her father's dacha in a suburb of Moscow which Andrei Vyshinsky, the chief prosecutor of the Moscow Trials, had shamelessly stolen after Serebryakov's murder. She would live there until the end of her life.

The last three decades of Zorya's life coincided with yet another wave of political and ideological reaction that followed the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union. It is to her great credit that, throughout this period, she remained deeply committed to restoring the historical truth about the Opposition and, in particular, Leon Trotsky and her father, Leonid Serebryakov. When Vadim Rogovin began publishing his history of the Opposition in Russian in the 1990s, she endorsed his work and participated in meetings organized by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

In 2010, already in her late 80s, she appeared on Russian national television at a popular show called "The Court of Time" to debate Leon Trotsky. In a minority of one, Zorya ardently defended the co-leader of the revolution and founder of the Red Army against the anticommunist smears of the other talk show guests. She also wrote articles on historical subjects, insisting that archival evidence proved that Joseph Stalin had been working for the Tsarist secret police, the Okhrana, before 1917. She gave many interviews to historians and outlets, in Russia and abroad, with the last one dating from when she was already well into her late 90s. In a climate shaped by the systematic rehabilitation of Joseph Stalin and his crimes, on the one hand, and anticommunism, on the other, her unwavering defense of historical truth required tremendous courage and tenacity.

It speaks above all to the immense political, cultural and intellectual

impact of the crimes of Stalinism that she herself never came to grips with why these crimes occurred. While she held historical truth above all else, Zorya viewed history not in terms of social forces or political tendencies, but in terms of the actions and personal intentions of individuals. This marred her understanding of both history and politics. To her, the crimes of Stalinism were a result of Stalin's personality, and the fate of the 1917 October Revolution was ultimately decided in Russia alone. Meanwhile, she was a fervent defender of Nikita Khrushchev and Mikhail Gorbachev. In her later years, she also came to admire Vladimir Putin.

Thus, even though she would passionately defend the figure of Leon Trotsky until the end, she was never able to fully assimilate the political basis of his opposition to Stalinism and his analysis of the betrayal of the October Revolution. But this view of history was not just her own: It was and is shared by many in her generation and those that came after. It is the result of decades of repression of any independent activities of the Russian working class and the destruction of the Marxist culture in the brutal political genocide of the Stalinist terror, of which Zorya's family was such an immediate victim.

Indeed, her fate and that of her family are a tragic embodiment of the meaning of the term "political genocide." Within the realm of her possibilities, Zorya Serebryakova did what she could to help future generations overcome the terrible legacy of these crimes. For this, her life deserves the profound respect of everyone committed to historical truth and the fight for human progress. We salute her memory.