

The life and legacy of a dissident historian of Stalinism

Roy Medvedev (1925–2026): A critical assessment

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Roy Aleksandrovich Medvedev, the Soviet-Russian historian and political writer whose monumental work *Let History Judge* made him the most prominent critic of Stalinism to emerge from within the Soviet Union since the Great Terror, died in Moscow on February 13, 2026, at the age of 100. The cause of death was heart failure. He is survived by his son. His twin brother Zhores predeceased him in 2018. He was cremated, and his ashes were buried at Laikovo.

His passing marks the end of a life that spanned nearly the entire arc of the Soviet Union—from its revolutionary origins through its Stalinist deformation, its protracted crisis, its dissolution, and the capitalist restoration that followed. That Medvedev’s career as historian and political figure traversed all of these stages, and that his political trajectory shifted so dramatically across them, makes his life a subject not merely of biographical but of profound historical and political interest.

Medvedev was born on November 14, 1925, in Tbilisi, in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. His very name bore the imprint of the revolutionary epoch: his father, Alexander Romanovich Medvedev, a Red Army commissar and lecturer in Marxist philosophy at the Military-Political Academy, named his son after Manabendra Nath Roy, the Indian revolutionary and founding member of the Communist Party of India, who had served on the Executive Committee of the Communist International. The family’s fate was bound up with the catastrophe of Stalinism. In August 1938, Alexander Medvedev was arrested on charges of belonging to a “Trotskyist organization” and of “smuggling Trotskyism” into philosophy textbooks he had compiled. Sentenced to eight years in a labor camp, he was sent to Kolyma, where he perished in February 1941. Roy’s identical twin brother, Zhores, a distinguished biologist and writer, was later subjected to involuntary psychiatric confinement and eventually exiled to Britain, where he died in 2018. These experiences of state terror within the historian’s own family were the decisive biographical stimulus for the work that would make his name.

The genesis of *Let History Judge*

Medvedev graduated from Leningrad State University in 1951 and received his doctorate from the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences in Moscow in 1958. He worked as a teacher, school director, and editor before turning to historical research. It was in the ferment that followed Nikita Khrushchev’s Secret Speech to the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU in February 1956 that Medvedev began the research that would occupy him for the better part of a decade. Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin’s “cult of personality”—however partial, self-serving, and

politically motivated—opened a space, if a narrow and precarious one, for a re-examination of Soviet history. It was within this space that Medvedev began gathering testimony from survivors of the camps, unpublished memoirs, party documents, and the accounts of hundreds of witnesses to Stalin’s crimes.

The resulting manuscript, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*, was completed in 1968 and circulated through unofficial channels in *samizdat*. Its existence became widely known when Andrei Sakharov referred to it in his essay *Reflections on Progress, Peaceful Coexistence, and Intellectual Freedom*. Sakharov had been in close contact with Medvedev, and the two exchanged manuscripts; Medvedev helped distribute copies of Sakharov’s essay through the *samizdat* network. In 1969, Medvedev was expelled from the Communist Party for views deemed incompatible with party membership. The first English-language edition of *Let History Judge* was published by Alfred A. Knopf in New York in 1972, and the full Russian text appeared in New York in 1974. The book was eventually translated into fourteen languages and published in twenty countries. In the Soviet Union itself, publication was impossible until the era of *glasnost* (“openness”) in the late 1980s.

The book was immediately recognized as a landmark. Harrison Salisbury, reviewing it in *The New York Times*, declared that on the basis of Medvedev’s work, every existing history of Russia from Lenin’s death to Khrushchev’s fall would have to be revised. Edward Crankshaw described it in *The Observer* as a one-man attempt to rescue Soviet history from the party hacks and to salvage the honor of the revolution.

The significance of *Let History Judge* requires careful calibration. Medvedev was not the first serious internal critic of Stalinism; there were many others within the Soviet Union who, from the 1950s onward, had arrived at critical assessments of the Stalin era and its legacy, and who continued to be suppressed. What distinguished Medvedev’s work was that it was the first major critical study of that period to be allowed to reach publication abroad since the Great Terror had silenced virtually all independent voices. In that sense, its principal significance was as a signal—an indication that within Soviet society there existed a search for a left-wing alternative to Stalinism, and that this search was being conducted with a degree of scholarly seriousness and archival rigor that had not been seen for decades.

The work was written from within the Soviet Union, by a man formed within its intellectual and political culture, and from a standpoint that was informed, though limited by the effect of Stalinist distortions, by Marxism. Unlike the works of Western Cold War Sovietologists, it did not approach Stalinism as the organic and inevitable outcome of the October Revolution or of Marxism as such. And unlike the writings of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, whose *Gulag Archipelago* would appear shortly afterward, Medvedev’s critique was not animated by Russian nationalism, religious

mysticism, or hostility to socialism. Medvedev set out to demonstrate that Stalin's crimes were a monstrous aberration from, not the fulfillment of, the Bolshevik program. In this respect, Medvedev performed a genuine and important service. At a time when the dominant current in Western academic and political life sought to equate Stalinism with Bolshevism—and thereby to discredit the very idea of socialist revolution—Medvedev's work stood as a powerful refutation. It documented, with considerable evidentiary force, the chasm between the political culture of Lenin's party and the terroristic apparatus of Stalin's regime.

Medvedev and the Khrushchevite framework

For all its merits, however, *Let History Judge* was constrained by serious political and theoretical limitations—limitations rooted in the very milieu from which Medvedev emerged. Medvedev was, in essence, a man of the Twentieth Congress. His critique of Stalinism never transcended the boundaries established by Khrushchev's Secret Speech. That speech attributed the crimes of the Stalin era primarily to the personal defects of Stalin himself—his paranoia, his lust for power, his cruelty—while insisting that until approximately 1934, Stalin had been a faithful Leninist who had correctly led the struggle against the various oppositions. Khrushchev's schema thus preserved the fundamental Stalinist falsification of the inner-party struggles of the 1920s: the claim that the Left Opposition, led by Trotsky, and the various other opposition currents had been enemies of socialism whom Stalin had been right to defeat.

Medvedev, while going considerably further than Khrushchev in documenting the scale and horror of the terror, essentially operated within this same framework. He treated Stalinism as a problem of "personality" and of deformations within an otherwise sound system, rather than as the product of a definite social process—the bureaucratic degeneration of the workers' state, rooted in the material conditions of Soviet backwardness, international isolation, and the defeats of the world revolution. This was the central theoretical weakness of his work, its inability or unwillingness to provide a class analysis of the phenomenon it described.

In evaluating the limitations of Medvedev's outlook, it is necessary to take into account the devastating impact of the Great Terror itself on the intellectual and political development of subsequent generations. The physical annihilation of the Old Bolsheviks, the Left Oppositionists, and the broader layer of Marxist intellectuals in the 1930s had severed the living connection between the generation of the revolution and the generation to which Medvedev and, later, Vadim Rogovin belonged. The men and women who could have transmitted the traditions, the theoretical culture, and the political experience of the October Revolution and its aftermath had been murdered. Their writings had been confiscated, suppressed, or destroyed. The isolation of Soviet intellectuals from the Trotskyist tradition was further reinforced by the role of Pabloism, the revisionist tendency within the Fourth International that, from the early 1950s onward, accommodated itself to Stalinism and abandoned the struggle to build independent Trotskyist parties within the Soviet bloc. The combined effect of the Terror and the Pabloite betrayal was to leave an entire generation of Soviet critical thinkers without access to the most powerful body of Marxist analysis of the very phenomenon they were attempting to understand.

Medvedev's assessment of Trotsky and the inner-party struggle

Medvedev's treatment of Trotsky requires careful examination. He rejected the most grotesque of the Stalinist fabrications and did not maintain that Trotsky was a counter-revolutionary, an agent of fascism, or a traitor. He acknowledged Trotsky's leading role in the October Revolution—a partial rehabilitation within a Soviet context in which the very mention of Trotsky's name in anything other than the language of denunciation had been a punishable offense. But the closer one examines Medvedev's treatment, the more apparent it becomes that his approach was characterized not by scholarly objectivity but by persistent political hostility—a determination to counter, undermine, and reject any claim that Trotsky represented a viable and politically superior alternative to Stalin.

The pattern is evident in Medvedev's discussion of the most critical period of all: 1917. Discussing Trotsky's role in the months before October, Medvedev wrote:

Like Stalin, Trotsky also made many mistakes during that period. However, whatever one may think of Trotsky's subsequent political career, one cannot overlook the eminently useful work he did in the decisive months before the October Revolution. (p. 36)

This passage, while contradicting the official and enduring condemnation of Trotsky, was hardly an accurate explanation of his role. The description of Trotsky's contribution as "eminently useful work" was a remarkable understatement for the man who, as chairman of the Petrograd Soviet and organizer of the Military Revolutionary Committee, was the principal operational leader of the insurrection itself. More tellingly, the comparison with Stalin was entirely false and misleading. In the aftermath of the February Revolution, Stalin had adopted a conciliatory and defensist line toward the Provisional Government and the imperialist war—a position that Lenin sharply denounced upon his return to Russia in April 1917. Trotsky, by contrast, had been an unwavering opponent of the imperialist war and arrived at a position virtually identical to Lenin's before Lenin's own April Theses reoriented the Bolshevik Party. To place these two figures on the same footing, as though both had made comparable "mistakes," was a distortion of the historical record. Moreover, Medvedev did not identify what Trotsky's supposed "many mistakes" actually were—a vagueness that itself served a political function, casting a shadow over Trotsky's record without the inconvenience of substantiation.

Equally significant was what Medvedev omitted. He made no mention of the decisive theoretical connection between Lenin's April Theses—which called for the overthrow of the Provisional Government and the transfer of power to the soviets, scandalizing many Old Bolsheviks in the leadership—and Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, which had anticipated precisely this strategic perspective since 1905. Lenin's reorientation of the Bolshevik Party in April 1917, which made the October Revolution possible, represented a convergence with the very perspective for which Trotsky had been attacked and marginalized for over a decade. To have acknowledged this would have undermined the entire Stalinist narrative—and the narrative of the Khrushchevite reformers who inherited it—which presented Trotsky as a perpetual outsider whose relationship to Bolshevism was always problematic.

Medvedev's method was one of studied contradiction, a pattern of conceding Trotsky's significance with one hand while taking it back with the other. He referenced the "key role" Trotsky played in the revolutionary events and cited John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World* as evidence. But he immediately countered such acknowledgments with snide and unsupported attacks. Having praised Trotsky's role on one page, Medvedev would assert on the next that "Trotsky exaggerated his services to the revolution." (p. 38) He dismissed Trotsky's concern for

democratic norms within the party as something that “smelled of demagoguery.” (Ibid) This “on the one hand, and on the other hand” approach was not a sign of scholarly balance; it was a political technique, designed to inoculate the reader against any conclusion that might place Trotsky in too favorable a light.

Most critically, Medvedev directly attacked the theoretical foundations of Trotsky’s political perspective. He asserted that

Trotsky’s famous theory of permanent revolution was also wrong: it resembled Marx’s and Lenin’s theories of uninterrupted revolution in name only. This theory, which Trotsky tried to defend for the rest of his life, was associated with one of his major errors: underestimation of the revolutionary potential of the peasantry, as the main ally of the proletariat not only in the bourgeois democratic period of the Russian Revolution but also, in the case of the poorer peasants, during the socialist period. (p. 38)

This passage is of the greatest significance, for it reveals the degree to which Medvedev, even as a dissident, remained captive to the foundational lie of the anti-Trotsky campaign that had been constructed by the faction of Stalin, Zinoviev, and Kamenev following Lenin’s incapacitation in 1923: the claim that Trotsky “underestimated the peasantry.” This accusation, which became the stock-in-trade of every Stalinist textbook and polemic for sixty years, was a deliberate falsification. Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution did not deny the revolutionary role of the peasantry; it argued that the peasantry, by virtue of its heterogeneous class composition and its dispersal in the conditions of small-scale production, could not play an *independent* political role and would follow the lead of either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. The October Revolution itself had confirmed this analysis. The peasantry supported the revolution under the leadership of the working class and the Bolshevik Party, exactly as Trotsky’s theory had predicted.

The contradictory character of Medvedev’s treatment of Trotsky extended to his assessment of the inner-party struggles of 1923–24 and after. He flatly declared: “The erroneousness of most of Trotsky’s assertions and demands in 1923–24 is obvious today, as it was then.” But even this sweeping dismissal could not be maintained consistently, for Medvedev was compelled by the weight of the evidence to acknowledge that Trotsky’s criticisms “contained a considerable measure of truth.” He even admitted that many of Trotsky’s warnings “were justified by later events.” The tension between these statements was never resolved. The reader was left with the impression of a historian who knew more than he was willing to say—or perhaps, more precisely, a historian whose political commitments prevented him from drawing the conclusions that his own evidence demanded.

In all his major works, Medvedev maintained that it was Nikolai Bukharin, not Trotsky, who represented the genuine alternative to Stalinism. This aligned him with the current of reformist opinion within the Soviet bureaucracy that found its fullest expression in the Gorbachev era. Medvedev’s 1983 study, *Nikolai Bukharin: The Last Years*, contributed to the rehabilitation of Bukharin as a central ideological project of the glasnost period. This elevation of Bukharin served a definite political function: it excluded Trotsky and the Left Opposition from consideration as bearers of a revolutionary socialist alternative. Bukharin’s program—market concessions, socialism “at a snail’s pace,” accommodation to the peasant proprietor—was, as Preobrazhensky and Trotsky warned, a program tending toward the restoration of capitalist relations. That this was precisely the path taken under Gorbachev and carried to its conclusion under Yeltsin is a historical confirmation that Medvedev never acknowledged.

Medvedev’s account of the inner-party struggles was also marked by significant omissions and evasions. As critics noted, even in his revised 1989 edition of *Let History Judge*, Medvedev failed to inform his readers of the existence of the secret “Septumvirate”—the conspiratorial bloc of Zinoviev, Kamenev, Stalin, Bukharin, Rykov, Tomsky, and Kuibyshev—which secretly managed party and state affairs in 1924–25, conducting the anti-Trotsky campaign behind the backs of the party membership. The existence of this faction, long asserted by Trotsky and the Oppositionists, was confirmed by documents published in the CPSU’s own *Izvestiia TsK KPSSt* [Bulletin of the Central Committee of the CPSU] in 1990 and 1991. Medvedev’s silence on this matter, even after the documents became available, speaks to the limits of his willingness to follow the historical evidence whenever doing so would have vindicated Trotsky’s account of events.

The persistence of the Stalinist campaign against Trotsky

In assessing Medvedev’s hostility toward Trotsky, it is essential to situate it within the broader context of the Stalinist campaign against Trotsky, the Left Opposition and the Fourth International—a campaign of extraordinary force, viciousness and persistence, unprecedented in the history of the modern workers’ movement. For more than six decades, the Soviet bureaucracy deployed every instrument at its disposal—falsification of documents, rewriting of history, show trials, assassination (culminating in the murder of Trotsky in Mexico in 1940), and the systematic physical destruction of tens of thousands of Trotskyists—to eradicate not only Trotsky’s person but his ideas and his place in history. The anti-Trotsky campaign was not a secondary feature of Stalinism; it was central to the bureaucracy’s ideological self-justification and to its claim to represent the continuity of Bolshevism.

What is remarkable is the degree to which this campaign retained its hold even during the period of glasnost, when so many other Stalinist falsifications were being exposed. On November 2, 1987, in his address commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the October Revolution—a speech that was itself hailed as a landmark of de-Stalinization—Mikhail Gorbachev explicitly endorsed Stalin’s campaign against Trotsky. Gorbachev described Trotsky as a man who, after Lenin’s death, had displayed “excessive pretensions to top leadership,” thereby confirming what Gorbachev called Lenin’s opinion of Trotsky as “an excessively self-assured politician who always vacillated and cheated.” He denounced Trotskyism as a political current whose adherents “took cover behind leftist pseudo-revolutionary rhetoric” while assuming “a defeatist posture,” and declared that the struggle waged by Trotskyism had been “essentially an attack on Leninism all down the line.” Most significantly, Gorbachev affirmed that “the party’s leading nucleus, headed by Joseph Stalin, had safeguarded Leninism in an ideological struggle” against the opposition. In the supposed high noon of glasnost—the era of openness and historical truth-telling—the General Secretary of the CPSU stood before the world and repeated, almost word for word, the central falsehoods of the Stalinist historiographical tradition regarding Trotsky.

Medvedev, who by 1987 was among the most prominent reform-minded historians in the Soviet Union, and who certainly knew the allegations against Trotsky to be false, raised no objection to Gorbachev’s remarks. His silence was consistent with his entire career, during which he expressed a willingness to challenge Stalinism on many fronts, but a refusal to challenge it on the one front that mattered most to the bureaucracy—its falsification of Trotsky’s role. The demonization of Trotsky functioned as a last ideological frontier—the boundary that even the boldest reformers would not cross, because to do so would have called

into question not merely Stalin's methods but the very legitimacy of the ruling stratum that had emerged from the anti-Trotsky struggle.

The evasion of the central theoretical question

Medvedev's reluctance to engage honestly with Trotsky's historical role was inseparable from his failure to address the central theoretical issue in the conflict between Trotsky and Stalin: the theory of permanent revolution versus the doctrine of socialism in one country—that is, the question of proletarian internationalism versus national reformism. This was not a peripheral or abstract doctrinal dispute. It was the axis upon which the entire political life of the Soviet Union and the Communist International turned in the 1920s, and its resolution in favor of the Stalinist position had consequences of world-historical magnitude.

Trotsky's theory held that in the epoch of imperialism, the democratic and national tasks of backward countries could be resolved only through the seizure of power by the working class, and that the resulting workers' state could sustain itself only as part of an advancing international revolution. Stalin's doctrine, first promulgated in late 1924, inverted this perspective, arguing that the Soviet Union possessed within itself sufficient resources to build a complete socialist society. This doctrine provided the theoretical foundation for the bureaucracy's nationalist degeneration, its transformation of the Comintern into a tool of Soviet foreign policy and its betrayal of revolutionary movements from China in 1925–27 to Spain in 1936–39.

Medvedev, in all his major works, simply declined to engage with this question in any serious way. He acknowledged, in passing, that there had been disputes over "socialism in one country," but he never subjected the doctrine to critical analysis, never examined its theoretical premises, and never traced its catastrophic practical consequences for the international workers' movement. This omission was not accidental. To have examined the question honestly would have meant acknowledging that Trotsky's critique of Stalinism was not merely a set of specific policy objections but a comprehensive theoretical and political alternative, rooted in the classical Marxist understanding of the world-historical character of the socialist revolution. It would have meant recognizing that the struggle between Trotsky and Stalin was, at its core, a struggle between two irreconcilable social programs—one that sought to extend the revolution internationally on the basis of the independent mobilization of the working class, and another that sought to consolidate the privileges and power of the national bureaucracy at the expense of both the Soviet and the international proletariat.

By evading this question, Medvedev reduced the inner-party conflict of the 1920s to a contest of personalities and factional maneuvering, stripped of its theoretical content and class significance—a political choice that served the interests of those within the Soviet establishment who wished to reform the system without confronting the social foundations upon which it rested.

Medvedev on the purges

On the Moscow Trials and the Great Purge of 1936–38, Medvedev's contribution was more substantial. He documented with considerable power the fraudulence of the show trials, the baselessness of the charges, the torture and coercion employed to extract confessions, and the staggering scale of the repression. He showed convincingly that the

defendants—Old Bolsheviks, military leaders, party cadres, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens by the hundreds of thousands—were innocent of the crimes attributed to them. He demonstrated that Stalin was not a madman but a calculating and ruthless political actor obsessed with the consolidation of personal power.

Yet Medvedev's analysis of the purges suffered from the same theoretical deficit that afflicted his treatment of the earlier period. He could describe the what of the terror with great force, but he could not adequately explain the why. If Stalinism was merely the product of one man's pathological personality grafted onto an otherwise healthy body, why did the party, the state, and the security apparatus prove so utterly incapable of resistance? Why did the terror assume the specific political form that it did—targeting, above all, those who had any connection, however tenuous, to the traditions and ideas of the October Revolution and to the program of international socialism?

These questions demanded a class analysis of the Soviet bureaucracy—an analysis that Trotsky had provided in *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936) and in his voluminous political and theoretical writings of the 1930s. The terror, as Trotsky explained, was not an irrational spasm but a deliberate act of political counterrevolution, the physical destruction of a generation of revolutionaries by a bureaucratic caste that had usurped power and whose privileges and position were threatened by the persistence of socialist consciousness within the working class and the party. Medvedev, who never accepted Trotsky's analysis of the Soviet bureaucracy as a parasitic caste, was incapable of arriving at this explanation. His account of the purges thus remained, for all its empirical richness, theoretically incomplete.

A comparison with Vadim Rogovin

The contrast between Medvedev's work and that of Vadim Zakharovich Rogovin (1937–1998) illuminates with particular clarity the political and theoretical issues at stake. Rogovin, a Marxist sociologist and historian at the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, produced between 1992 and his death in 1998 the seven-volume *Was There an Alternative?*, a monumental study of the Trotskyist opposition to Stalinism covering the period from 1923 to 1940. Rogovin approached the same historical terrain as Medvedev, but from a fundamentally different standpoint—that of revolutionary Marxism, informed by and broadly sympathetic to the perspective of the Left Opposition and the Fourth International. Rogovin's own understanding of the struggle waged by Trotsky was considerably deepened by his relationship with the International Committee of the Fourth International, which began in 1993. Following his initial discussions with representatives of the ICFI, Rogovin revised the first volume of his history. The subsequent volumes were written during the years of his close collaboration with the ICFI.

Where Medvedev treated the inner-party struggles of the 1920s as regrettable but essentially secondary episodes in the consolidation of Soviet power, Rogovin demonstrated that they were the central political drama of the epoch—that the conflict between Stalinism and Trotskyism was not a mere factional squabble but a struggle over the fate of the revolution itself, with world-historical implications. Where Medvedev presented Bukharin as the authentic alternative to Stalin, Rogovin showed, on the basis of extensive archival research, that it was the Left Opposition—with its program of planned industrialization, inner-party democracy, and proletarian internationalism—that represented the viable revolutionary alternative, and that the principal function of the Great Terror was the physical annihilation of this opposition and the eradication of Trotsky's political influence.

Rogovin explicitly situated his work in relation to both the Western Sovietological tradition and the Soviet dissident historiography represented by Medvedev. In the introduction to *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror*, the fourth volume of his series, Rogovin noted that the majority of Sovietologists and dissidents had used the tragedy of the terror to argue that its premise was the “utopian” communist idea and the revolutionary practice of Bolshevism itself. He observed that Medvedev’s work, while more objective than Solzhenitsyn’s, belonged to the genre of “oral history”—research based almost exclusively on eyewitness testimony—and that it failed to engage with the most important body of contemporary analysis of the events it described: the writings of Trotsky himself, who had been the principal accused in all three Moscow Trials, even though he was not present in the courtroom. This was a devastating and accurate criticism. Medvedev’s treatment of Trotsky was characterized throughout by a reluctance to engage seriously with Trotsky’s own political and theoretical writings, preferring instead to rely on the filtered and distorted accounts of the Stalinist historiographical tradition.

Medvedev wrote as a reformer, addressing himself to the more enlightened elements of the Soviet bureaucracy; his political program was the democratization of the existing system without a revolutionary transformation of the social relations upon which it rested. Rogovin wrote as a revolutionary Marxist, animated by the conviction that the historical process opened by October had not been completed but merely arrested, and that the Trotskyist movement embodied the possibility that the Soviet Union might have developed along a profoundly different and more progressive path.

From *glasnost* to Putin: Medvedev’s political trajectory

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 represented a decisive test for the various currents of Soviet political thought, and Medvedev’s response to it is deeply revealing. During the *glasnost* period, Medvedev had been rehabilitated. His books were published in the Soviet Union for the first time, he rejoined the Communist Party in 1989, was elected to the Congress of People’s Deputies, and served as a member of the Supreme Soviet. In September 1991, he opposed the banning of the Communist Party and did not recognize the dissolution of the Congress. He briefly co-chaired the Socialist Party of Working People.

But as the catastrophic social consequences of capitalist restoration became apparent, Medvedev did not move toward a revolutionary socialist critique. On the contrary, he turned sharply to the right and became thoroughly corrupted politically—a trajectory characteristic of virtually the entire layer of the official dissident movement. He did not return to the archives to deepen his work on the Terror. Instead, he devoted himself to increasingly uncritical biographical studies of Russian political leaders that served, in practice, to legitimize the new Russian state power.

The depth of Medvedev’s political degeneration is starkly illustrated by two facts. First, in 2007, he was awarded a literary prize of the FSB—the Federal Security Service, the direct successor of the KGB—for his biography of Yuri Andropov, the former KGB chairman and General Secretary. The book was published in the prestigious “Lives of Wonderful People” series, and it received a preface by Nikolai Patrushev, then the director of the FSB. That the son of a man who had been arrested, tortured, and worked to death in the Gulag by the organs of state security should, seventy years later, accept a literary prize from the institutional heirs of his father’s killers is a fact that requires no commentary to convey its meaning.

Second, and no less remarkable, was the convergence of Medvedev’s political trajectory with that of figures against whom he had once defined

himself. By the end of his life, Medvedev found himself in essentially the same political camp as Alexander Solzhenitsyn—who had by then become a notorious anti-Semite and apologist for authoritarian Russian nationalism—and other of the most right-wing elements of the dissident movement, many of whom Medvedev had fought against at the beginning of his political career. Both Medvedev and Solzhenitsyn endorsed Putin’s rule. That men who had begun from diametrically opposed starting points—one a Marxist reformer, the other a Russian nationalist and religious mystic—should have arrived at the same political destination is a powerful confirmation that the limitations of their respective perspectives, however different in form, led to the same essential capitulation before the forces of reaction.

As late as May 2025, at the age of ninety-nine, Medvedev gave an interview to *Moskovsky Komsomolets* reiterating his support for Putin’s policies. This trajectory was the logical outcome of the political standpoint that had informed his work from the beginning. Having never accepted that the bureaucracy constituted a social formation with its own material interests, distinct from and hostile to those of the working class, Medvedev was left without a theoretical compass when the bureaucracy transformed itself into a capitalist oligarchy. His program of “socialist democracy” had been premised on the reformability of the existing system; when that system collapsed into gangster capitalism, the program collapsed with it.

The contrast with Rogovin is again instructive. Rogovin had interpreted the dissolution of the USSR as a confirmation of the Trotskyist analysis that the Stalinist bureaucracy, far from being the guardian of socialist property relations, was a transitional formation that would either be overthrown by a political revolution of the working class or would itself preside over the restoration of capitalism. This analysis provided a framework for understanding what had happened that Medvedev’s reformism could not.

Assessment and legacy

Let History Judge was a work of considerable courage, written at the cost of expulsion from the party and under the threat of prosecution.

For decades, Robert Conquest’s *The Great Terror* (1968) was the standard Western account of the purges, but its standpoint was fundamentally different from Medvedev’s. Conquest wrote as an anti-communist, directing his work toward the conclusion that the terror was the natural and inevitable product of the Bolshevik project itself—an unbroken continuity from Lenin to Stalin, from October to the Gulag. Medvedev’s work represented an important counterweight. By demonstrating from within the Soviet experience that Stalinism was a departure from the revolutionary program, he challenged the central thesis of Cold War Sovietology. His book brought to light a vast body of evidence about the crimes of Stalinism and demonstrated that within Soviet society there existed the moral commitment to confront the darkest chapters of its history.

But Medvedev’s legacy is deeply contradictory. His inability to provide a class analysis of Stalinism left his defense of the October Revolution incomplete and vulnerable. If Stalinism was merely the product of one man’s personality, why could it not happen again? These were precisely the questions that the anti-communist tradition exploited to greatest effect.

His politically hostile treatment of Trotsky, his repetition of foundational Stalinist falsifications, his elevation of Bukharin, his evasion of the central conflict between permanent revolution and socialism in one country and his inability to provide a class explanation for Stalinism—all contributed to the ideological disarmament of those forces within Soviet

society that might have offered a socialist alternative to capitalist restoration.

The trajectory of Medvedev's life—from dissident critic to recipient of the FSB's literary prize and supporter of Putin's authoritarian regime—would have been entirely comprehensible to Trotsky, who warned that the bureaucracy's monopoly of power, if not broken by the working class, would lead to capitalist restoration and new forms of authoritarian rule. The work of Vadim Rogovin represents the alternative historiographical tradition—rooted in classical Marxism, approaching the Soviet experience not as a cautionary tale against revolution but as a confirmation of the necessity of revolutionary leadership, international socialist strategy and workers' democracy. It is within this tradition that the most important questions raised by the history of the Soviet Union will continue to find their most penetrating answers.



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