

Alexander Rabinowitch (1934-2026), historian of the October Revolution

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Professor Alexander Rabinowitch, the most important American historian of the 1917 Russian Revolution, passed away on June 16 at age 91. He was Professor Emeritus of History at Indiana University, Bloomington. In the course of six decades Rabinowitch produced four authoritative volumes that examined the transformation of the Bolshevik Party from a relatively small organization into a mass party that overthrew the capitalist Provisional Government, established a workers government, and, finally, emerged triumphant in a civil war against counter-revolutionary forces backed by the major imperialist powers.

Rabinowitch's tetralogy consisted of 1) *Prelude to Revolution*, published in 1968, which concentrated on the political crisis that erupted in Petrograd in the summer of 1917; 2) *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, published in 1976, which dealt with the events that culminated in the October 1917 socialist revolution; 3) *The Bolsheviks in Power*, published in 2007, which provided a detailed narrative of the first year of Bolshevik rule; and 4) *The Bolsheviks Survive: Petrograd 1919*, published in 2026, which focused on the almost miraculous victory of the Bolshevik Red Army, led by Leon Trotsky.

The substantial span of time between volumes reflected the meticulous character of Rabinowitch's research, which was based on intense work in critical archives. The major achievement of his work was its substantiation of the mass working class base of the Bolshevik Party. It came to power not through a coup, but as the result of a massive revolutionary offensive. The Bolsheviks became a mass party because its program coincided with and clearly articulated the interests of the working class.

More than once, Rabinowitch's honesty and principled approach to history put him at odds with the dominant moods and tendencies in his profession and personal milieu, setting his life on a course that he himself never anticipated. The works he produced as a result of this unyielding commitment to historical truth were pathbreaking and constitute an important contribution to the historical record of 1917 and the first two years of the civil war.

Alexander Rabinowitch and his twin brother Victor were born in London in 1934 to a family of Russian-Jewish emigres. His father, Eugene Rabinowitch, was a noted scientist who, deeply hostile to Bolshevik rule, had fled Petrograd shortly after the 1917 Revolution. In the 1920s, Eugene Rabinowitch studied in Berlin under several Nobel laureates, including Albert Einstein and Max Planck.

When the Nazis came to power in January 1933, he and his young wife, Anna Maiersohn, an actress from Kiev, were forced to flee Germany. They first went to Denmark, where they were briefly sheltered by eminent physicist Niels Bohr, before moving to England.

In 1938, a year before the outbreak of World War II in Europe, the family settled in the US where Eugene Rabinowitch became a professor of chemistry at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Boston. Here, Alexander Rabinowitch grew up in a climate shaped by the anti-Bolshevism of his parents and their friends, which included the Menshevik leaders Irakli Tsereteli and Boris Nicolaevsky, and the anti-

Communism of the early Cold War.

In a lecture given in Vienna in 2011, he explained:

Daily life, their careers, their families — everything had been turned upside down by the October Revolution for these prominent people and so it was no wonder that I constantly heard from this circle only the worst things about that great event in world history. They were all agreed that the October Revolution had been a cold-blooded coup on the part of a handful of Lenin's ruthless fanatics — a coup, which had absolutely no support from among the people and therefore had to resort to terror in order to establish its rule. Despite their endless stormy disputes, this was the unifying bond of common belief among the Russian emigres.

Rabinowitch attended high school and college during the McCarthy era and Korean War. He later recalled about his years as an undergraduate, "As an ROTC cadet, I was trained to think and prepared to train others to think of the Soviet Union as the incarnation of evil and the 'free world's arch enemy.'"

But his own research contradicted these conceptions. Having initially set out to write his dissertation about the Menshevik leader Irakli Tsereteli, a trip to Soviet Russia in 1963-64 prompted Rabinowitch to shift his attention to the July Days of 1917. His dissertation, which he defended in 1965 at Indiana University, became *Prelude to Revolution: The July Days in Petrograd*. A pathbreaking work, it established that, contrary to the prevailing view in the West, the July insurrection was not an early botched attempt by Lenin at a coup d'état.

Rather, it was an uprising, originating from below, which the Bolsheviks first sought to counteract, recognizing that it was too early to succeed, and only supported as it became clear that it enjoyed overwhelming support among the most militant sections of workers and soldiers.

Rabinowitch's book documented the Bolsheviks' transformation into a mass organization within the few months following the overthrow of the Tsar in the February 1917 Revolution. As he explained in his 2011 lecture, "This party was deeply rooted in the masses, the factories, the residential districts and the garrisons, and exhibited great sensitivity to the prevailing political opinions and tendencies, as well as to the highly developed culture of democratic discussion in its own organization."

Having arrived at this conclusion through the research for his first book, all of his future research would serve to substantiate and deepen it. Rabinowitch would later credit his teachers, historians Leopold Haimson and John M. Thompson, for awakening his interest in the revolution as a seminal political and social event and emphasizing that historical research must be as "objective as humanly possible."

But the intellectual climate of the 1960s and early 1970s also played a major role. It was a period of mass social struggles, including the civil

rights movement in the US, and, later, mass protests against the Vietnam, and mass movements in France and Chile, and major strikes and protests in Stalinist-ruled Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Poland in 1970-1971. These years saw a series of significant publications on the history of the Russian Revolution and Leon Trotsky, including by Moshe Lewin, Samuel Baron, Leopold Haimson, Marcel Liebman and Oliver Radkey.

This climate provided an audience for Rabinowitch's work. It also helps account for his genuine interest in workers as a social and political force, their concerns, grievances, thoughts, and relationship with their political leaders — a hallmark of his historical writing.

Rabinowitch's great strengths as a committed researcher were at full display in his second and perhaps most important book, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The 1917 Revolution in Petrograd*, first published in 1976. It is difficult to overstate the significance of this work in countering both anti-Communist and Stalinist falsifications of history.

Given that access to Soviet archives was out of the question, he had to base himself on a meticulous analysis of published sources, especially newspapers and meeting minutes. Rabinowitch was able to trace the political conflicts within the Bolshevik Party, the relationship between the Bolsheviks to factory workers and the changing moods within the working class itself. He showed how, upon his return to Russia in April, Lenin had to wage a fierce struggle within the leadership of his own party to orient the party toward the socialist seizure of power.

Rabinowitch's account illustrated and confirmed, in all essential elements, the analysis of the inner-party struggle provided by Leon Trotsky's *Lessons of October*. His book also highlighted the decisive role of Trotsky as the head of the Military Revolutionary Organization in the planning and organization of the October 1917 insurrection. Rabinowitch's account was also the first to establish the immense historical rule of later leaders of the Left Opposition such as Ivar Smilga in the events of 1917. Their role had been wiped from the historical records as they themselves were murdered by Stalin during the Great Terror.

Stalinist historians in the Soviet Union denounced his first two books and labeled Rabinowitch a "bourgeois falsifier." In the West, his work dealt a devastating blow to anti-communist denunciations of 1917 as a "coup." Despite many an effort to revive this discredited narrative — especially after 1991 — Rabinowitch's account has never been refuted. In 1989, in the final years of the Soviet Union, it became first major work of a Western historian on 1917 to be translated into Russian. More than half a century upon its first publication, his book remains an unsurpassed study of the Bolshevik Party on the eve of the seizure of power.

To his great credit, Rabinowitch did not respond to the 1991 Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union with the cynicism exhibited by so many in his profession. Instead, he intensified his work. Having already begun a third book on the first years of Bolshevik rule in Petrograd, the opening of archives in the last years of the Soviet Union and after 1991 suddenly provided Rabinowitch with a wealth of documents that had been previously inaccessible. Rabinowitch perused, verified and cross-checked thousands of documents.

He continued this research after his retirement from Indiana University in 1993 where he had taught several generations of historians, helping turn the university into one of the leading centers for the study of Russia and the former Soviet Union. Although the archives helped Rabinowitch deepen his research, the materials he discovered reinforced his principal assessment of 1917. In the course of his work, he established close relations with a number of Russian historians and archivists. In 2013, he was honored as an Affiliated Research Scholar of the St. Petersburg Institute of History of the Russian Academy of Sciences — a rarity for foreigners, of which he was very proud.

The Bolsheviks in Power, dedicated entirely to a study of 1918 in Petrograd, was pathbreaking in its detailed analysis of the first year of

Bolshevik rule, the immense difficulties confronting the newly formed revolutionary state; the military, socio-economic and political pressures of the counter-revolution and the fierce — but remarkably democratic — discussions and political debates the Bolsheviks engaged in to overcome these challenges. As with his previous work, Rabinowitch also restored to their rightful place in history a host of otherwise little or completely unknown Bolshevik leaders who were later murdered in the Stalinist Terror.

In a review of the book published on the *World Socialist Web Site*, it was described as an "impressive scholarly achievement."

Rabinowitch's principled approach to history brought him in contact with the revolutionary movement and placed his work at the center of major political struggles, especially in Germany. As part of the fight launched by the International Committee of the Fourth International against the post-Soviet school of historical falsification, the German branch of Mehring Books [Mehring Verlag], published a translation of *The Bolsheviks in Power*.

A translation of his book *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* would follow. In 2010-2011, the Mehring Verlag, together with the International Students for Social Equality — the predecessor of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality — organized a lecture series with Rabinowitch in Germany and Austria which drew hundreds of people.

In Berlin, Humboldt University's Historical Institute refused to host Rabinowitch's talk. What may, at first glance, have appeared as an oddity and nasty expression of academic politics, turned out to have been an expression of a much broader political process. The chair of Eastern European History who refused to host Rabinowitch's was the far-right professor Jörg Baberowski, who has come to play a central role in efforts by the German ruling class to legitimize the crimes of Nazism based on falsifications of the 1917 October Revolution.

Fully aware that Rabinowitch's work undercut this campaign, Baberowski and his allies sought to prevent it, dispensing with basic academic courtesy. As a result, Rabinowitch had to deliver his lecture at the building of Humboldt University's Institute for Agricultural Sciences. Attended by 350 people and covered by the leading German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel*, the talk became a significant intellectual event, dealing a blow to those who sought to prevent it.

In early 2014, Baberowski would invite Robert Service to speak at the Historical Institute in an attempt to rehabilitate the discredited author of a hackwork on Leon Trotsky had been subjected to a devastating critique by the *World Socialist Web Site*. In the ensuing struggle for historical truth and against the revival of German fascism and militarism, Rabinowitch's works have played an important role.

Rabinowitch collaborated with the Trotskyist movement on these lectures and his German book publications. He formed an intellectual friendship with several leaders of the Trotskyist movement, including the late Wolfgang Weber, who played a central role in organizing Rabinowitch's lectures in 2010-2011 and interviewed him for the WSWS.

Despite health problems and an intellectual climate that became ever more hostile to serious historical research into the history of the October Revolution, Rabinowitch continued work on his fourth and final volume, *The Bolsheviks Survive*. The WSWS will soon publish a more extensive review of this important work.

With his determination to continue and deepen his important historical research, Rabinowitch demonstrated an admirable degree of intellectual and moral integrity. Like the best historians of his generation, he was motivated by the conviction that history is a science and that the historian's principal task is the establishment of historical truth for the sake of the development of society. Underlying this work was a deeply felt concern with the fate of humanity and social progress.

He would not have been able to conduct this work without the immense support of his wife of over 64 years, Janet Rabinowitch. An accomplished

and renowned academic editor who had also been trained in Russian studies, Janet Rabinowitch assisted and encouraged his work at every step, both on a personal and a professional level.

Rabinowitch's death is a genuine loss to the historical profession and all those committed to historical truth. It speaks to the climate of reaction that prevailed after 1991 that no comparable figure emerged from later generations of historians.

Nevertheless, his work has left a significant imprint. He was widely respected among scholars and readers across several continents. Among those mourning his death on social media were, in particular, a younger generation of historians, including from Russia, whose approach to history has been significantly shaped and inspired by his works.

The remarkable body of historical research he produced remains an indispensable foundation for any serious study of the Russian Revolution and the civil war. As new generations of workers, principled intellectuals and young people are radicalized by the cascading crises of capitalism and an emerging global war, the intellectual appeal and political significance of his work will only grow.



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