Alexander Rabinowitch's *The Bolsheviks Survive: Petrograd 1919*

Clara Weiss
2 July 2026

Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Survive. Petrograd 1919*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2026.

The Bolsheviks Survive: Petrograd 1919 by the late Professor Alexander Rabinowitch, focuses on the second year of Bolshevik rule in Petrograd. It marks a major contribution to the history of the civil war that followed the 1917 October Revolution. Rabinowitch, who died on June 16, shortly after the publication of this book in late April, was Professor Emeritus at Indiana University, Bloomington. His preceding three volumes covered the years 1917 and 1918. They demonstrated, in considerable detail, that the 1917 October Revolution was a sweeping social overhaul, led by a Bolshevik Party that was deeply rooted in the working class. His last book is a worthy continuation of his important series.

As Rabinowitch's previous works, *The Bolsheviks Survive* is based on ground-breaking and impressively meticulous archival research. It is engagingly written and was clearly produced with a lot of care, including an extraordinary selection of never-before-seen archival images from the city of the 1917 Revolution, its residents and principal leaders, among them Leon Trotsky, Adolf Joffe, Sarra Ravich and Sergei Zorin. Many of them would later play important roles in the Left Opposition against Stalinism.

The book also shares many other strengths of Rabinowitch's previous volumes: He pays great attention to political conflicts within the Bolshevik Party, moods and concerns of the working class, and shows the essential role of Leon Trotsky in securing the Bolshevik victory in the Revolution and civil war. However, Rabinowitch argues that, having increasingly lost touch with the working class and turning to suppressing dissent, the Bolshevik leadership created the basis for the later dictatorial rule of Stalin. Before examining this critique more closely, we shall summarize some of the key historical findings of this book.

The struggle against the counterrevolution

With great detail and vivid images, *The Bolsheviks Survive* describes the immense objective challenges confronting the fledgling revolutionary state. 1919 was arguably the most difficult year of the civil war. Although the German Revolution in November 1918 had forced a troop withdrawal from what is now Ukraine, critical regions were occupied by the White Armies. This resulted, among other things, in severe fuel shortages in Petrograd, since the Donbass in what is now East Ukraine and other coal regions were all under control of counterrevolutionary forces.

The counterrevolution was also active behind the frontlines. The French and British, in particular, were engaged in large-scale efforts to infiltrate Soviet troops and the as-yet very young and inexperienced state apparatus. Based on research in archives in Moscow, St. Petersburg and Great Britain, Rabinowitch reconstructs the work of one particularly damaging agent of the British secret service, MI6, Paul Dukes, who was able to build up a substantial spy network in 1919.

Dukes' operation, although centered on Petrograd, had far-reaching implications for the battlefield where the Red Army confronted the combined military forces of over a dozen hostile capitalist countries. Rabinowitch writes that Dukes "recruited and directed a vast network of mostly paid secret agents, almost all of whom were deeply hostile to the Bolshevik regime. These secret operatives, and Dukes himself, successfully infiltrated many of Petrograd's most important civil and military agencies and installations, including Gorokhovaia 2 as well as the Petrograd garrison." (p. 79)

The material gathered by Rabinowitch on the operations of Dukes casts new light on the background of the Kronstadt uprising in March 1921. A center of Bolshevik influence in 1917, by 1919, Kronstadt had become a critical nexus for the machinations of counterrevolutionary forces. Rabinowitch notes, "Dukes developed an especially productive pipeline to Kronstadt and the Red Baltic fleet, from which he received a steady stream of valuable, up-to-date, usually strictly confidential military data. Thus, in addition to his personal distillations of the latest naval data touching on sensitive personnel matters, planning and operations, and internal problems of one kind or another, he furnished London with purloined transcriptions of status reports, revealing correspondence among naval officials in Kronstadt and between them and Moscow, updated planning documents, and information relating to such useful matters as the locations of minefields and other key targets." (p. 79)

Rabinowitch also documents counterrevolutionary conspiracies of the Finnish bourgeoisie, which included major terrorist attacks in Petrograd in late March 1919. The chapters that deal with these counterrevolutionary conspiracies and insurrections are among the strongest and include a vast amount of entirely novel material. They demonstrate the complexity of the military, economic and political challenges confronting the Bolsheviks. At every step, the advance of the counterrevolutionary armies was aided by the operations of their agents behind the front lines. Yet a remarkable report by the same MI6 agent Dukes, reproduced at length in the book, also gives a sense of why these efforts ultimately failed. Whatever the immense difficulties of this period, the conquests of the Revolution had struck deep roots in the consciousness of the masses. A few passages from this report by Dukes are worth quoting:

> Tremendous reforms have been introduced in the sphere of evening schools for the proletariat, and it would be folly to suppose that the workmen, however anti-Bolshevik they might be, will submit in the future to curtailment of their privileges in this respect. Studies in these evening schools are pursued zealously. Rapid advance is being made by working youths and girls who formerly were deprived of the means of education. No [in]ducements are required to allure pupils to these classes but

> nevertheless everything is done to render them attractive, even to the giving of free suppers. Special attention is devoted to sport, physical culture, gardening and natural history. These innovations may sometimes be one-sided and clumsy, and always colored by Communist propaganda, but all teachers testify to the eagerness with which their pupils learn. Further, the provision for the proletariat of free concerts, opera, and theater, must also be placed to the credit account of the Soviet regime. The future Government will have to reckon with the fact that apart from political hostility to the Bolshevik Power there are spheres in which Soviet reforms have received the general approbation of the population, and attempts to curtail these benefits will inevitably arouse hostility. (Quoted pp. 83-84)

Time and again, the working-class population of the city would rise up whenever these conquests would come under threat. The most remarkable such episode was the fight against the imperialist-backed attempt by the forces of General Nikolai Yudenich to seize Petrograd in the fall of 1919. Although the Bolsheviks began preparations to defend the city too late and were in a very weakened position, the onslaught was beaten back. Rabinowitch shows that there were two principal reasons for that: First, the mass mobilization of workers in the city, including many who did not support the Bolsheviks politically but were determined to defend the Revolution. The second reason was the extraordinary intervention of Leon Trotsky.

In his 1976 book on the 1917 Revolution, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, Rabinowitch documented Trotsky's central role in the actual seizure of power. In his capacity as the head of the Military Revolutionary Council, it was Trotsky's plan and politically astute insistence on waiting for the Second Congress of Soviets for the seizure of power that ultimately ensured the success of the insurrection. Rabinowitch likens Trotsky's role in the defense of Petrograd in 1919 to this earlier feat.

> During the decisive "October days" in 1917, Lev Trotsky, chairman of the Petrograd Soviet and de facto leader of its Military Revolutionary Committee, more than any other single individual engineered the Bolsheviks' successful accession to power. Two years later, in October 1919, as people's commissar for war, he led the defense of that historic achievement against almost certain destruction at the hands of General Nikolai Iudenich's attacking White Northwest Army. This remarkable repeat performance began on October 16, when Trotsky departed Moscow for Petrograd aboard his armored train. (p. 172)

Before Trotsky arrived, an occupation of Petrograd was well within the realm of possibility and demoralization was beginning to spread. Yet combining extraordinary political, rhetorical and military-strategic abilities, within just a few days Trotsky was able to summon the forces of the Red Army and local working class.

To ensure the defense of Petrograd, Trotsky first had to consolidate the forces within the city and reverse the retreat by the Red Seventh Army forces. His intervention was marked by brutal honesty in denouncing what he called "shameful panic followed by needless flight." Trotsky changed the leadership of the division. Insisting that the enemy forces were too weak for direct combat, he called upon officers to open their troops' eyes to this fact and urged, "Forward, attack, attack, attack, attack, attack!" Yet despite these interventions and calls for reinforcements from other parts of the Soviet republic, Petrograd's defense would have to be carried out largely by local forces and residents. Preparing for the possibility of urban combat to fight off an occupation, Trotsky told local Bolshevik leaders,

> All of you must say to your constituents in plants, factories, and at worker assemblies that Petrograd has never ever faced such great danger as it is facing now. . . . [W]e need to insure ourselves doubly—on one hand at the front, on the other within Petrograd. . . . Those who might attempt a night-time raid into Petrograd to cut the throats of sleeping workers, and factory women and their children need to know that we will work tirelessly tonight, during the day tomorrow, the next night and through all of these terribly critical days to strengthen ourselves internally. . . . We are strong enough to smash and pulverize the attacking White Guards into powder even if they number 10,000 rather than 3, 4, or 5 thousand … Anyone who cannot be utilized at the front must be mobilized for urban warfare, including women. Working women, wives, and mothers will do no worse than men in arming themselves with rifles, revolvers, and grenades for the defense of the Russian and the world's working classes on the streets, squares, and buildings of Petrograd. ... Red Petrograd remains what it has been, the guiding light of the revolution, the rock of steel upon which we will build the church of the future. Reinforced by the combined forces of the entire country, we will not surrender Petrograd to anyone. (quoted p. 181)

The mood within Petrograd in the following days remained grim, as the counterrevolutionary forces already prepared for what they considered all but certain victory. Yet in the days of October 21-25, the Red forces were able to fight off repeated attempts by the Whites to push through into the heart of Petrograd. By the end of the month, the attempt to take the city of the Revolution had collapsed. Soon after, the Red Army would go on the offensive. As a US official disappointedly concluded, "Iudenich's heralded drive has ended in a farce which has enthusiastically consolidated the Bolsheviks." (Quoted p. 193)

The Military Opposition

Rabinowitch spends a considerable amount of time discussing the conflicts within the Bolshevik Party. Of particular importance is his chapter on the Eighth Party Congress in March 1919. At the time, the so-called Military Opposition, which enjoyed the support of Joseph Stalin and many of his future allies, had gained significant ground within the party. The principal target of its critique was Leon Trotsky's conception of the organization of the Red Army, which he had led since its founding in March 1918. With the support of Lenin, Trotsky had insisted on the creation of a centralized command structure and the use of military specialists—the so called "spetsy"—from the Imperial army. They were convinced that it was necessary to utilize the military and technological expertise of these specialists for the aims of the revolutionary army, even though many of them had been and remained hostile to the Revolution. To oversee and evaluate their military work, these specialists were placed under the supervision of political commissars who were trusted party members.

The documents about this conflict have never been fully examined. For decades, the Stalinist bureaucracy concealed key transcripts of debates with the Military Opposition, most notably those of closed sessions of the Eighth Party Congress. Such closed sessions were designed to limit discussion of highly sensitive and controversial policies to a set number of

delegates. In contrast to the remainder of the Congress proceedings, transcripts of closed sessions were not published in the official publications of the Congress minutes.

Based on a careful study of these materials, Rabinowitch notes that the "Military Opposition held overwhelming majorities in all four closed meetings of the congress's Military Section." (p. 41) The discussions were so heated that at one of the sessions Trotsky and his supporters angrily walked out. Based on transcripts that were released in the final years of the Soviet Union, Rabinowitch concludes that Trotsky's position was only able to carry the day after a forceful intervention by Lenin. He writes,

> In a characteristically firm, at times passionate rebuttal of the arguments of the Military Opposition … Lenin conceded that the walkout by a minority of the Military Section before its work was finished had been improper. Nonetheless, he was obviously profoundly upset by the way discussions of the military question had played out in the Military Section; he condemned Smirnov's theses [for the Military Opposition] individually and collectively with striking ferocity. (p. 42)

Rabinowitch highlights the importance of the tenuous but ultimately decisive victory for Trotsky's conception of the building of a highly disciplined Red Army with the involvement of military specialists. It was, Rabinowitch writes, "a critical step toward ultimate victory in the civil war. The congress's final resolution on the military question reenforced Trotsky's image as the architect of the Soviet republic's success in the Russian civil war and, along with Lenin, its preeminent hero." (p. 50)

In his biography of Stalin, Trotsky devoted considerable space to discussing the conflict with the Military Opposition. He distinguished between two groups: One, headed by Stalin, was centered on nationally and parochially oriented layers within the party that resented political control and discipline from the central military command. But, Trotsky notes, there were also "many advanced workers, militant elements with fresh reserves of energy, who trembled with political apprehension when they saw yesterday's engineers, officers, teachers, professors, once again in commanding positions." This sentiment among workers, Trotsky continued, "reflected, in the final analysis, a lack of confidence [of the working class] in its own powers and uncertainty that the new class which had come to power would be able to dominate and control the broad circles of the old intelligentsia." [1]

Meanwhile, Trotsky attributed the social and political outlook of the layers that grouped around Stalin to the "...centrifugal tendencies, which were aroused by the Revolution, the provincialism of a vast country made up of isolated communities and the elemental spirit of independence that had not yet had the time or the opportunity to mature."[2]

The conflict that erupted at the Eighth Congress was to a significant extent prepared by Stalin and his so-called Tsaritsyn group, which included figures such as Voroshilov, who would go on to play a sinister role in the Stalinist reaction against October. In Trotsky's recollections, it was Stalin who had been "pulling the strings behind the scenes" of many of the conflicts leading up to the Eighth Congress.

Rabinowitch's discussion of tensions between the Petrograd and Moscow organizations and the role of Grigory Zinoviev, the head of the Petrograd Party organization, sheds further light on the conflicts within the Bolshevik leadership. A long-time close collaborator of Lenin, Zinoviev belonged to the right-wing of the Bolshevik Party leadership in 1917, when he led the opposition to Lenin's insistence on a socialist seizure of power, arguing that it would be "premature." As Trotsky would later note, Zinoviev was instrumental in Stalin's rise to power, especially his appointment as General Secretary. In *The Bolsheviks Survive*, Rabinowitch provides important background to the consolidation of Zinoviev's role in the party in the post-1917 period.

Whatever his significant political weaknesses, Zinoviev enjoyed significant popularity among Petrograd workers and became the head of the newly formed Communist International in 1919. That year, he also took over many of the organizational responsibilities from Yakov Sverdlov, the brilliant and highly principled secretary of the Central Committee who died in early March 1919. Despite Zinoviev's growing international and national role, Rabinowitch's research makes clear that his outlook in this period remained shaped by parochialism. He always resented the move of the "revolutionary capital" to Moscow in 1918. However, as is the case in the discussion of the Military Opposition, the broader political and historical significance of the tensions between Petrograd and Moscow beyond the immediate civil war period are not explained. This is due to Rabinowitch's intense focus on the specific period covered in the book. He tends to avoid broader political judgments that are not supported by direct empirical documentation. He does not attempt to draw a connection between the events of 1919 and the inner-party conflicts that were to erupt four years later.

Nevertheless, Rabinowitch's narrative definitely contributes to an understanding of the political background of the later alliance between Zinoviev and Stalin in 1923 against Trotsky. In one pointed remark, Rabinowitch calls Zinoviev "an Old Bolshevik among the Old Bolsheviks," indicating that Zinoviev's positions were symptomatic of a broader tendency among a layer of the Old Bolsheviks.

His account also helps understand both Trotsky's initial hesitations about and eventual endorsement of a bloc with Zinoviev in 1926 within the "United Left Opposition." First, whatever his role in the campaign against Trotsky in 1923-1924 and his persistent, significant political weaknesses, Zinoviev wielded substantial authority in the Petrograd working class. His turn away from Stalin, thus reflected broader political shifts within a critical section of the Soviet proletariat. Secondly, Zinoviev represented a tendency among Old Bolsheviks, who, while never fully accepting permanent revolution, were deeply troubled by Stalin's opportunist policies in 1924-1926 and increasingly considered the struggle of the Left Opposition, initiated in 1923, to have been justified.

The civil war, Stalinism and the international revolution

Rabinowitch places a strong emphasis on growing discontent with the Bolsheviks among Petrograd's working class. He observes that many of the most reliable working-class Communists had been drafted to the front and offers staggering figures on the cadre shortage in Petrograd. As he writes, "virtually every remotely competent party leader still in Petrograd had multiple duties in the party, government, and/or trade unions. Many of them were also either editors or regular contributors to the party and government press." (p. 17) This situation increased the need for extreme centralization and rigid, military-style control.

Rabinowitch also stresses that the unions were many times larger in terms of their membership than the party and that they played a central role in the defense of Petrograd. In his assessment, the majority of workers felt loyalty to the Revolution but resisted recruitment to the party.

Rabinowitch contends that the growing isolation of the Communists within the working class combined with the pressures of the counterrevolution explains the turn toward authoritarianism. He writes, "To much of the local and national Communist leadership, such potentially fatal circumstances coupled with their continuing belief in the

approach of egalitarian socialist revolutions abroad justified ever tighter and more rigid centralization and authoritarianism within the party and soviets, top to bottom, accompanied by bloody terror and increasing repression in the name of political and physical survival." (p. 267)

Rabinowitch highlights the role of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, with whom the Bolsheviks had temporarily formed a coalition in 1917-1918, in organizing major strikes in 1919. He also pays significant attention to what he calls, somewhat confusingly, the "Left Opposition" in the Bolshevik Party, centered around the Democratic Centralists, who were led by Timofei Sapronov and Vladimir Osinskii. Four years later, the Democratic Centralists would enter a bloc with Trotsky, signing the founding document of the Left Opposition, the Declaration of 46 in October 1923. However, in this period, they were bitterly opposed to the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, challenging, at times extremely adamantly, their leadership of the party.

Like many historians, Rabinowitch has considerable sympathies for the arguments of the Democratic Centralists who insisted on more inner-party democracy. It should be stressed that Lenin did recognize that the Democratic Centralists expressed legitimate concerns among workers about the bureaucratization of the party. But he was also wary that such concerns could be easily manipulated by counterrevolutionary forces. From a political standpoint, the Democratic Centralists represented a confluence of a more nationally oriented section of the intelligentsia in the party and among workers who were afraid that, as a class, they would prove unable to hold on to the gains of the Revolution. But the Democratic Centralists' fundamental weakness was indifference to issues of international strategy.

Rabinowitch indicates that narrow national sentiments were relatively widespread in the city's population when he notes that by 1919 there was "...continuing grassroots dissatisfaction with *Petrogradskaia pravda*'s [the leading local Bolshevik newspaper] continuing emphasis on broad international and national issues at the expense of the everyday concerns of ordinary factory workers." (p. 258)

Rabinowitch shares some of this outlook. He pays considerable attention to the social and economic grievances of Petrograd's working class. Yet his book does not mention at all the formation of the Communist International in March 1919, even though, from the standpoint of the development of the revolutionary movement and the October Revolution, it was the single most important event of that year. Many of the key protagonists of his book—including Trotsky but also Zinoviev—devoted a considerable amount of their political energy to the Communist International, even as they feverishly worked to defend the Revolution in Petrograd and beyond.

Rabinowitch's great strength—an extraordinary attention to detail and commitment to exacting primary research—becomes a weakness when the details "on the ground" cloud an understanding of the broader picture. At times, the larger situation—above all the international course of the revolution—gets lost in the myriad, admittedly fascinating, details about the course of events in Petrograd. This impedes an understanding of some of Rabinowitch's most important findings about the changing relationship between the Bolsheviks and the working class and the immense tensions building up within the Bolshevik leadership.

By 1919, the civil war was at its height and the Bolsheviks asked workers who had already sacrificed so much to sacrifice even more. Throughout this period, the Bolsheviks saw their principal task in defending the gains of a seizure of state power which they regarded as only the beginning of a world revolution. In Germany, the revolutionary movement had suffered significant setbacks with the defeat of the 1918/19 revolution and the murders of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Nevertheless, the period of revolutionary uprisings was not over, and their ultimate defeat was not predetermined. In 1923, a revolutionary situation again emerged in Germany. If any of these revolutions had succeeded, the socioeconomic position of the Soviet republic would have been altered dramatically—shifting moods within the working class as well.

When this did not happen, disillusionment and conservative moods gained the upper hand. Under these conditions, the national tendencies within the Bolshevik Party, which reared their heads in the Military Opposition and other critical episodes during the civil war, were strengthened. From this standpoint, Rabinowitch's discussion of the different tendencies within the Bolshevik Party during the civil war is far more important for an understanding of the emergence of Stalinism than individual decisions and mistakes that were made in 1919 *per se*.

Despite these shortcomings, Rabinowitch has written an exceedingly important work. It deserves emphasizing that he did so at a very advanced age with the assistance of his wife, the renowned editor Janet Rabinowitch. This effort demonstrates an extraordinary degree of scholarly commitment and integrity. His final book—as his preceding ones—deserves careful study by anyone interested in the fate of the socialist revolution of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Leon Trotsky, *Stalin*, ed. by Alan Woods and Rob Sewell, Haymarket Books 2019, pp. 384-5.

Ibid., p. 383.

---

[1] Leon Trotsky, *Stalin*, ed. by Alan Woods and Rob Sewell, Haymarket Books 2019, pp. 384-5.

[2] Ibid., p. 383.