

A tribute to Vadim Rogovin: "A passion for historical truth"

By Galina Rogovina-Valuzhenich
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Galina Rogovina-Valuzhenich, the widow of Russian Marxist historian and sociologist Vadim Zakharovich Rogovin, spoke at a May 15 meeting in Moscow to commemorate what would have been the sixty-fifth birthday of her husband, who died in September 1998. Also attending the meeting were surviving children of Russian Left Oppositionists murdered by the Stalinist regime, scholars who worked with Vadim at the Institute of Sociology in Moscow, representatives from several socialist tendencies in Russia and many friends. David North, editorial board chairman of the World Socialist Web Site, delivered the principal address on the significance of Vadim's life and work. Galina Rogovina's remarks are reprinted below.

I am pleased to welcome all those who have come here in order to honour the memory of Vadim Zakharovich Rogovin, a great man and great scientist. With complete justification, I can recall his words today: "I have done my duty to the past, the present and the future." And I have fulfilled my obligation to Vadim.

Today is one of the most wonderful days of my life, because the cause to which my husband dedicated his life has been completed: The last, final volume of his historical treatise—*Was there an alternative to Stalinism?*—has been published.

Mikhail Illarionovich Voeikov noted before me that Vadim had already developed an interest in this topic in his youth. And that is correct. In his memoirs, however, Vadim went back even further. His first conscious memory of the time he began to be interested in this problem was when he was 13. It was a public holiday to celebrate Stalin's seventieth birthday. All around was jubilation and enthusiasm, when he turned to his father and asked, "Daddy, why are all the Bolsheviks dead who carried out the revolution and no more are alive today?" His father's response did not satisfy him. And he recalled how, although only 13 years old, he was seized by a thought: "Isn't Stalin perhaps a criminal?"

This thought became the spur to his creative life. He spent his youth predominantly in libraries, as he later recounted, and studied old newspapers and journals in order to piece together material about the Left Opposition, which had fought against Stalin and the Stalinist regime.

He dedicated his entire life to studying the Left Opposition. Even as a sociologist in his studies about social relations in Soviet society, he succeeded in taking up topics from the platform of the Left Opposition, with which he was intellectually very close—problems of social equality, social justice and unearned incomes.

The publication of his articles in newspapers has been an enormous success since 1985. His writings have appeared in many editions, and he was full of enthusiasm when he came home and told me of the colossal numbers of letters about his articles that had been received.

He was proud that as a scientist he had found a reaction in the population and his ideas, for which he burned and lived, were in agreement with these popular tendencies. I believe this contained a certain impulse, which gave him hope to carry out the most important task of his life. Until then, his interest in Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition had existed in a vacuum. He had absorbed the tragic destruction of the Bolshevik Party by Stalin, experienced it internally and bore it in his heart and his soul and in his intellect. All that was inside him.

Only very few documents remained with us at home that formed the actual basis of his work. It is amazing what a soul and what a heart he must have had to be able to carry all that inside himself, moreover, without any possibility of discussing the very thing which moved him so passionately. He did not have friends, and there were no co-thinkers. That was the tragedy with which he lived.

It was in 1986, Vadim told me for the first time of his intention to write a great scientific work. At this time, there was still no possibility of putting such a thought directly into practice. But like a prophet, he felt the changes in social relations and recognised that it was precisely at this time that his books had become necessary, when the ideas of social equality and justice were so close to the population and came into accord with his own strivings.

Vadim began to work on the first volume of *Was there an alternative to Stalinism?* in 1990. This volume was written literally within a year. Vadim took it to the Panorama publishing house, where the book was taken up with enthusiasm and was scheduled to be printed in 1991. There were also positive reviews. But then came the putsch, and Panorama came under the control of Poltoranin's (one of the Russian "democrats") Ministry of Press and Information. A revision took place and Vadim received a letter from the publishing house.

It contained formulations that made him furious with indignation. He said: how is it possible, these are Stalinist formulations—"in connection with changes in public opinion regarding this question, the editor considers the publication of your books to be impossible." In other words, it was being suggested that a scientist should subordinate himself or herself to public opinion, instead of trying to shape it. Moreover, this letter contained such pearls as, "ideologically harmful," "inappropriate," "old-fashioned" [ideas], etc.

Vadim naturally took this very much to heart. Soon afterwards, however, we found a possibility of publishing the book at a new commercial publishing house, Terra. The book appeared, and Vadim started working immediately on the second volume, which he also completed within a year. But the author's voice remained unheard beneath a wave of anti-Bolshevik propaganda. With all the means of

mass communications, the Soviet past was groundlessly reviled, Bolshevism was dragged through the dirt and equated with Stalinism. The values with which we and the entire society had grown up were trampled underfoot. The books did not find any resonance, and not one review appeared. Vadim felt completely isolated and feared that he might succumb to depression, because it was very difficult to deal with this psychologically.

The year 1993 changed everything, when fate united Vadim and me with David North and the representatives of the American Socialist Equality Party. Vadim found co-thinkers who shared his opinions and who were close to his internal convictions and moral values. He said that these were very special people, and I agreed with him. I had never seen Vadim so uplifted and inspired, as when he was in discussion with these people.

They helped him in many respects, morally and also materially. They organized a world trip with lectures in many countries. The lectures were an unbelievable success. I say this not without reason—each lecture was recorded on video. I would like to tell you about one episode, which in my opinion illustrates very well what these lectures were like.

We drove to the largest university in Sydney, Australia, whose dean was baroness Golitsina (descendant of the Russian Golitsins, who emigrated to Australia through China in 1917). We were offered a lecture room with 40 seats. The topic was “Trotskyism in today’s world”. In the university’s opinion this topic would not enjoy any great popularity. “Shortly before your arrival, we had such prominent Russian speakers as Affanassiev and Gaidar here. They spoke to a full hall—with 40 people,” the baroness explained to us.

But our friends—the organisers of this meeting—insisted that the university should provide the largest available hall. People sat on the ground, on the stairs and around the podium from where Vadim spoke.

When baroness Golitsina entered the overcrowded hall she could not believe her eyes. She could not understand why this topic would interest people in a land so remote from Russia. Vadim was a great success.

Anyone who heard Vadim’s lectures will never forget. He was a great speaker, who not only enchanted his listeners with the vast knowledge he possessed, but also with the passion of his words. This passion came from the fact that he identified himself with the supporters of the Left Opposition, through which he sought to bring the truth back into the historical memory of our people. He was close to them intellectually and morally.

It was during this upturn, this raising of his moral and emotional forces and creative enthusiasm, that misfortune occurred. Vadim was diagnosed with advanced cancer, with metastasis in the liver. In the Kremlin hospital, where he was treated, the physicians’ prognosis was that he would only have one, or at best three months to live, but they did not want to relay the news. I had to tell Vadim this cruel verdict.

I would like to make a small digression, and recall an episode. We walked through the hospital garden, and I asked Vadim, “Do you believe me, do you believe I love you, that I can save you?” He continued with lowered head, raised it, looked at me and said simply, “I believe.” And because there were still no subjectively perceptible symptoms of this illness, we came to the following arrangement. We agreed that the illness was my concern and his task consisted of dealing with the most important thing in his life.

This is how we carried on for the next five years. I did everything to

fight the illness, and he was not distracted. There were no discussions about the illness. Everyone who knew him will remember that he never raised a complaint, there was no groaning. When he occasionally inquired about the results of the blood tests, I answered him, “Vadim, why you want to worry about that? You have far more important things to do—the book. Go into your study and work.” He went and continued to work calmly.

After this dreadful verdict, Vadim lived another five years. That was fantastic. In all the countries in the world to which we travelled, we went to well-known specialists, to oncologists. All said that it was impossible for people with such a diagnosis to still be alive. I believe that his creative spirit, which was in the ascendancy; his friends (he had found very many friends abroad) and the discussions with them, which gave him such a joy, had a most important therapeutic effect and helped him.

Vadim always knew that he was condemned, and worked feverishly in order to leave us, and through us all of mankind, what he knew. He tied himself to his desk and worked with such determination and passion as none of us could work. “Only geniuses can work like this,” were the words of James P. Cannon about Trotsky. But believe me, I cannot find worthier words to characterize Vadim’s work in the last years and days of his life.

I never saw him resting. He worked right up to his last hour; and he worked after the heaviest operations, right after coming around from the anaesthetic, even before he could get out of bed. He worked while undergoing chemotherapy. We lived in separate hospital rooms, and each morning he sat down at his desk with a cigarette in one hand and a pen in the other. He still worked on his last day.

When his hands became weaker and the pen kept falling out of his hand, I kept putting the pen and cigarette back in them again.... In this book there is a facsimile of the last pages written by him, on which a cigarette has fallen and singed several pages.

Others will be able to speak better than I about the significance of his contribution to science. I would only like to speak about the fact that Vadim was an extraordinary person. Everyone who knew him will acknowledge that. He was not one like us; he was not like the majority of us. Therefore, many did not understand him, and so he had so few friends and co-thinkers in his country. But he was a person, without whom the world would be smaller and poorer by a head. I say this, however, not only because of my unbounded love for him, and worship for him. I know it because I had the great fortune to be his wife and to know this person from all sides: in everyday life and at the high point of his success. I know that he was a pure and sublime person, who is worthy of veneration. I would ask you all to rise and observe a minute’s silence in his memory.

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